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Factors Leading to Dropping Out from the Perspectives of Pakistani Female Students from a Rural Area

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ABSTRACT
In Pakistan, the issue of female dropouts from secondary school in Pakistan remains a significant challenge, undermining gender equality, human capital growth, and national development. While existing studies have analysed the dropout issue from structural, socioeconomic, and cultural perspectives, they often overlook the personal experiences and perceptions of girls who leave school, especially those from rural areas. This research aims to fill that gap by exploring the reasons behind girls' dropout in Pakistan from students' own perspectives. The results indicate that girls are dropping out of school due to a combination of factors. Through the interviews, it was revealed that the factors are often related to nine major elements: Financial Issues, Misogynistic Culture, Geographical factors, Marriage and Pregnancy, Household Responsibilities, Health Issues, Lack of Teacher Support, Academic Issues, and Lack of Parental Support. In this study, these results are analysed from the lens of poor socialization and push-pull concepts. This study highlights the importance of incorporating students' voices to enrich academic discussions about the social foundations of secondary education for girls in Pakistan, thereby making a valuable contribution to the existing research on this topic. The results provide a solid foundation for developing rational policies, practical school-level strategies, and gender-sensitive educational plans aimed at enhancing the retention and completion rates of girls' education.

Keywords: female dropout, student perspectives, secondary education, Pakistan

I. INRODUCTION

In Pakistan, a large share of youth leaving school before completing their education. This has significant implications for human capital development and the country's overall advancement. As highlighted by Abid et al. (2021), the issue is complex, driven by socioeconomic, systemic, and individual-level challenges. The national literacy rate is 57%, and primary school dropout rates are estimated at 22.7%, underscoring the urgent need for educational reforms. This is compounded by dropouts of secondary school students with 15.6% of youth aged 14-16 leave school during 9th and 10th grades (Shahid, 2023). In total, almost 75% of children do not complete 10 years of education, highlighting a systemic problem with school retention (Tabassum & Tabassum, 2021).

These figures place Pakistan 50 years behind global standards in primary education and 60 years behind in secondary education (Ali et al., 2023). Furthermore, approximately 23 million children in Pakistan are out of school, a problem that disproportionately affects girls and marginalized groups, particularly in rural regions (Rao, 2025; Zamir & Wang, 2023).

Secondary school dropout rates are higher among girls, at 59%, compared to 49% for boys, thereby widening the gender gap in educational achievement (Sohail et al., 2023). Data show that girls comprise 54% of out-of-school children, with 75% of these girls residing in rural areas and not attending secondary school (Mughal et al., 2019; Barón et al., 2024). These gaps between rural and urban areas, as well as gender differences, highlight that rural girls in Pakistan face numerous challenges stemming from socio-cultural norms, economic limitations, and inadequate educational infrastructure (Khaskheli et al., 2023; Pasha, 2023).

The high dropout rate is linked to inadequate educational attainment, a problem that the government has yet to address. Only 67% of dropouts reach 5th grade (9-10 years old), and only 39% reach secondary education (Shaheen et al., 2023), underscoring that the issue remains unresolved. Moreover, female participation has declined notably, particularly given the alarming rate of female dropouts (Khan & Ahmed, 2021). The lack of economic opportunities and cultural restrictions significantly exacerbate this issue. Girls are often

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withdrawn from educational institutions to perform household chores, which limits their educational and employment opportunities (Ali et al., 2021).

Most educational advocacy efforts in Pakistan overlook the high dropout rate of girls in secondary schools. While existing research discusses the socioeconomic, cultural, and systemic factors behind school dropouts (Fatima et al., 2024), it often neglects school-related reasons and, crucially, girls' own perceptions. This oversight makes it challenging to understand the true causes of girls' disengagement from education. A greater focus is needed to explore dropout reasons directly from the perspective of female secondary students.

This research aims to improve the understanding of secondary school dropout rates and highlights the often-overlooked perspectives of girls. In Pakistan, girls' education is influenced by the complex interplay of socioeconomic conditions, cultural norms, school environments, and individual factors. These intertwined elements pose substantial obstacles in situations of dropout. To effectively address barriers to educational access, it is essential to prioritize students' voices, as their insights will underpin the development of targeted, relevant strategies to decrease dropout rates and enhance educational opportunities.

To understand these issues, this study employs a qualitative approach based on interviews with female secondary school dropouts. It aims to capture students' voices and understand the structural obstacles and sociocultural pressures they face, including financial and resource scarcity, school and institutional inequities, school disengagement and withdrawal, and family and gender responsibilities.

This study integrates the Poor Socialization and Push-Pull concepts. The Poor Socialization concept details how school disengagement increases due to factors such as limited family support, weak school connections, and social isolation. Conversely, the Push and Pull concept focusses on how students are pushed out of school often due to insufficient academic encouragement and support and pulled away by factors such as domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and financial hardship. Combined, these concepts shed light on the social and structural forces leading to school dropouts.

To address these issues, this study explores the following key question: What are the factors that lead to the decision to drop out of secondary schools based on the perception of the female students themselves

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A nation's constitutional or officially recognized duty should include prioritizing children, as outlined in the legal texts. When a state is legally obligated to educate its young residents up to a specific age but fails to offer sufficient and organized educational opportunities or to address their absence from school, these children are referred to as "compulsive out-of-school children." OOSC are defined as school-aged children who are not enrolled in school (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

Out-of-school children (OOSC) in Pakistan can be categorized into two groups: those who have never been enrolled in school and those who have attended school but subsequently dropped out (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The OOSC issue in Pakistan poses a significant challenge, with approximately 22.8 million children aged 5-16 not attending school, ranking it among the countries with the highest OOSC numbers globally (Ullah et al., 2021). This group encompasses children who have never attended school, those who have dropped out, and those who have left because of socio-economic factors. The problem is particularly acute in impoverished and marginalized regions, where educational access is severely restricted (Ullah et al., 2021; Asif et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2025).

Pedditzi (2024) examines psychosocial and academic factors that predict the intention to drop out, describing dropout as the result of intentions driven by dissatisfaction, low self-efficacy, and other academic and emotional factors, such as minimal school satisfaction and strained relationships with teachers and peers. This view treats dropout more as a risk behaviour arising from well-being issues during adolescence.

In Pakistan, Zada et al. (2021) define a dropout as an individual who discontinues school attendance before obtaining a secondary school diploma or an equivalent qualification. This aligns with Rehman and Malik's (2023) definition of a dropout as an individual who leaves school before completing their education. However, this broad definition lacks depth in understanding the experience of students who drop out, including those who fail or are expelled for reasons such as illness (Fatima et al., 2024). Other interpretations propose that dropping out is part of a complex process involving factors such as disengagement and other

persistent reasons over an extended period (Abid et al., 2021; Khurram et al., 2023).

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Pakistan 2023 highlights that dropout rates pose a significant challenge to Pakistan's education system, hindering progress in addressing this issue. Although there have been recent gains in literacy and student enrolment, the overall education system is not advancing, as dropout rates remain a concern. To reduce dropout rates, targeted strategies for enrolment and retention are essential in Pakistan's education system (Abideen et al., 2023).

Research indicates that economic inequalities worsen these issues. The lack of higher education linked to teenage pregnancy is also connected to socioeconomic disparities, with lower-income families often having limited access to educational resources and higher dropout rates (Okoli et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023). Additional studies from Malawi highlight economic barriers to education completion. Banda et al. (2024) explain that these barriers occur because families often prioritize immediate financial support for girls over the long-term advantages of education. Many countries have implemented school feeding programs as a strategy to address food insecurity; however, their effectiveness in reducing dropout rates varies across regions (Wang et al., 2021; Wineman et al., 2022).

The ASER 2023 report recently emphasized that Pakistan lacks systematic, evidence-based efforts to formulate and implement comprehensive strategies to reduce high school dropout rates. These strategies should include establishing proper school entry and attendance protocols, as well as ensuring quality education and support. Pakistan appears to be falling short in all these areas. Without addressing these challenges, improving education, increasing literacy rates, or advancing educational development in the near future will be nearly impossible (Abideen et al., 2023; Bagriacik Yılmaz & Karataş, 2022; Akmal & Pritchett, 2021).

Research has examined the causes of low enrolment and high dropout rates among girls in secondary schools in Pakistan. Khaskheli et al. (2023) employ regression analysis to investigate factors such as poverty, cultural norms, school safety concerns, and inadequate support from educational institutions, finding that these factors negatively impact girls' participation in formal education. The study concludes that the most pressing issue is the lack of support from educational institutions, compounded by economic and socio-cultural barriers. In contrast, Bibi et al. (2024) review the existing literature on the relationship between school distance and health issues, as well as the challenges arising from rural and socio-economic factors, in relation to girls' education. Surprisingly, they found that health issues and distance did not have a statistically significant impact on girls dropping out of school.

Despite these studies, gaps in the field exist. First, although qualitative research has expanded, there is a notable lack of focus on secondary education dropout compared with primary education, despite the former being a critical stage. Second, the literature often overlooks the relational, psychosocial, and emotional impacts of dropout, treating them as isolated factors rather than interconnected causes. Lastly, there is a pressing need for research that employs diverse qualitative methods to explore dropout as a complex social phenomenon from the perspectives of the girls involved and the relevant documents.

This research draws on insights from girls and document analysis to move beyond single-factor explanations and develop a more comprehensive, well-founded understanding of why students drop out of secondary school in Pakistan. It highlights how girls perceive and respond to structural barriers and how these experiences shape their self-identity, sense of agency, and future aspirations. The study underscores the importance of qualitative, experiential frameworks that prioritize the voices of marginalized girls in shaping educational policies and practices, thereby fostering more nuanced engagement.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study aims to understand the factors contributing to school dropout from the perspective of female secondary-level students, particularly those from rural areas in Pakistan. The site chosen is Muzaffargarh, a district of Dera Ghazi khan, situated in the southern part of Punjab. The study employs a qualitative case study methodology. This approach is suitable for examining the complexities of educational phenomena, as it aims to comprehend participants lived experiences in depth while taking into account their social and cultural contexts.

To identify participants who could provide information-rich data about the phenomenon of interest, the researcher used a purposeful sampling

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strategy. Purposeful sampling was appropriate in this case, as it enabled the selection of female participants who met specific requirements, including having completed secondary education but having dropped out of school.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary collection as it provides in-depth data direct from the participants' verbal responses. Each participant was personally interviewed for approximately 40 to 60 minutes and recorded with their consent. These interviews aimed to collect information about their school experiences, family background and socioeconomic status, cultural expectations, school-related challenges, peer influence, and feelings related to dropping out of school.

Additionally, document analysis was conducted to identify and contextualize the factors contributing to dropout. The relevant documents included school and educational policy documents, attendance reports, and other educational materials when available. The analysis of these documents provided valuable contextual background information that accounted for dropout data and educational practices, policies, and documents. The triangulation of data also strengthened the reliability of the students' statements, as reflected in their documents.

A six-step thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was used to analyze documentary data and recorded interviews, both of which were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. The analysis began with immersion in the data, followed by coding to produce an initial set of codes. These codes were then sifted through and curated into possible themes. The themes were articulated and described in sufficient detail to facilitate writing the findings and discussion sections of the report. With a focus on school dropout and girls' education, inductive thematic analysis was employed to derive themes from the data presented in the form of students' stories. Coding and data organization were facilitated using NVivo 12 software.

An appropriate ethical framework was applied during all phases of the project. Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant research committee. Participants were informed of the study's objectives. Participants were informed about confidentiality measures and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing negative consequences. They were required to provide written informed consent, and pseudonyms were used in all reports to further protect participant identities.

IV. RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of the thematic analysis of student interview transcripts and document analysis. The analysis identified a total of nine factors contributing to dropping out: Financial Issues, Culture of Misogyny, Geographical Factors, Marriage and Pregnancy, Household Responsibilities, Health Issues, Lack of Teacher Support, Academic Issues, and Lack of Parental Support. Figure 1 depicts the core reasons influencing students' decisions to discontinue their education.

Figure 1: Factors that led to dropping out

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These factors were identified based on repeated responses across the dataset. The results reveal an intricate interplay of economic, sociocultural, family, systemic, and personal factors that lead to school dropout. The analysis sheds light on female students lived experiences and challenges and reveals how institutional and individual factors converge to drive the discontinuation of education.

Factor 1: Financial Issues

Students reported that financial difficulties were the primary reason for their decision to leave the school. Their families struggled to cover the costs of tuition. This is highlighted by Student J who stated, *"I need tuition to improve my subjects, but my parents cannot afford the tuition fee. As my parents were unable to pay for tutoring..."* Other school-related expenses including uniforms and transportation became a burden due to limited income of the parents. As expressed by Student E, *"My parents told me that they were unable to cover textbook expenses, pick-and-drop services, school uniforms, and other school-related expenses."*

The interview data underscores the significance of financial difficulties in the decision to leave school. This is further corroborated by documents, school records, and communications that indicate financial hardships, such as unpaid school fees, transportation expenses, and the inability to purchase school materials, are primary obstacles. Students' perspectives emphasize how financial considerations significantly influence students' decisions to drop out.

Factor 2: Culture of Misogyny

A related sub-theme on dropout factors encompasses institutional, social, and cultural influences that shape how participants perceive and experience their education. Students noted that entrenched gender-based cultural norms significantly affect their educational experiences. These norms often devalue female education by emphasizing domestic responsibilities and early marriage or by giving precedence to boys' education. For instance, Student B noted, *"In our family's culture, boys' education is given more importance because girls' education is not considered very significant, just enough for basic literacy."* In a similar vein, Student E reported, *"Our family also held limited views on education, especially when it came to girls. They believed it was not very important for education, money mattered more, and girls were expected to go to their in-laws' house eventually."*

Interview data, along with document records, indicate a societal culture that favors male over female education. Additionally, the interview findings and documented evidence point to a prevalent misogynistic cultural element that contributes to higher dropout rates among female students.

Factor 3: Geographical Factors

A common barrier to education is the geographical challenge, characterized by long travel times, limited transportation options, and safety concerns, which often lead to cessation of schooling. Students reported that distance often prevents them from continuing their education. As highlighted by Student J, *"My house was far from the school, and my father's health was terrible, so he never took me to school. He was unable to pick me up and drop me off at school every day, as the transportation fee was high and we could not afford it."*

The distance is often compounded by inadequate infrastructure as highlighted by Student I, *"The school was very far away, and daily travel was very hard for a girl, due to security concerns as well as the lack of transportation."* . These long commutes and the scarcity of affordable, accessible transportation heighten safety concerns during travel.

Reviewing school records revealed that students in remote and inaccessible areas face considerable obstacles to obtaining an education. Distance to school and transportation issues were highlighted, and girls faced even greater difficulties due to safety and cultural concerns, which were identified as the main challenges.

Factor 4: Marriage and Pregnancy

Marriage and pregnancy are significant reasons for female students dropping out of school, often ending their education altogether. This pattern is evident in students' shared experiences. Many students identified marriage and pregnancy as the main reasons they leave school.

Some girls are withdrawn from school at a young age to be married, a decision often made by older family members. After marriage, further education is often viewed as unnecessary or unsuitable for women in their roles as wives, as shared by Student F who stated, *"It was a forced marriage because of family reasons. My parents arranged the wedding. They wished me to get married as soon as possible, which distracted me from my studies. After marriage, my in-laws did not allow me to continue my studies."*

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Additionally, many became pregnant after marriage, which makes it difficult for them to continue their studies as shared by Student B, "*I got married early, and after my marriage, I became pregnant. Due to pregnancy, I have health issues and feel unable to continue my studies."*

School records confirmed that early marriage and pregnancy significantly contributed to students leaving school. These records document the family decisions that led students to discontinue their education permanently. Additionally, they highlighted patterns of absenteeism among female students after marriage and health complications from pregnancies, both of which contributed to school dropouts.

Factor 5: Household Responsibilities

Many participants noted that household chores, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings, are often given priority over education. These expectations, deeply embedded in traditional gender roles, often restrict girls' time and energy for studying. This is clearly indicated by Student C who felt so overwhelmed by the burden that she made a decision to quit, "*As the elder sister, I had to cook, clean, and take care of my siblings. I talked it over with my parents because I was missing school all the time, so I decided to quit."*

In addition to household chores, some are conscripted to farm duties, farming being a major source of family income. As mentioned by Student E, *"At home, there is nobody to help with the parents in farming and other household chores. I am the oldest in the family. I usually work with the farms, and having attended school, I did not have enough time to participate in all the activities."*

The documents also highlighted challenges stemming from family responsibilities at home, such as attending school and managing household tasks. These records showed that many students missed classes or had unfinished assignments, often because of household chores.

Factor 6: Family Health Issues

Some students reported that their parents' health influenced their educational choices. When a parent fell ill, the student often had to assume additional household or caregiving responsibilities. As described by Student C *"As the elder sister, I have to look after my siblings, and my mother's health is not good. Due to this reason, I was often absent from school, so my parents decided to drop me out of school."* This obligation affected their school attendance, concentration, and academic performance, and often made it difficult for them to continue their education.

Likewise, Student J explained that *"My father was a poor man; he was sick as well, and he had a severe disease. My father was the only one who supported their family; due to his health condition, he could not manage my school expenses."* In this case, the poor health of the parent affected their financial ability to sustain the financial obligation towards school expenses of the student.

School records, student interview transcripts, and attendance logs reveal a significant correlation between parental health issues and student dropout rates. Interviews and supporting documents indicate that some students experienced frequent absences and prolonged disengagement from school due to the need to care for sick parents or attend to household chores.

Factor 7: Lack of teacher support

For some students, the attitude of teachers pushed them out of school. They reported that their teachers were often absent, hard to approach, or did not address their individual learning needs. Some felt invisible in class, especially when struggling with language barriers or speaking difficulties. They experienced a deep sense of isolation and lacked support, particularly in unfamiliar environments. For example, Student J: "*It was hard for me to ask the teachers because I had trouble communicating with them and expressing myself. Instead of advising me to continue studying, my teachers advised me to leave school. So, I dropped out of school."* In this case, the teacher literally asked them to drop out of school.

Student E was expecting the teachers to be more supportive and persuade her parents to let her remain in school but was ultimately disappointed, "*After all, teachers are just like parents; they could have persuaded my parents and convinced them, but they also advised me to do as my parents desired."*

An examination of school records revealed problems with teacher absenteeism, resulting in incomplete coverage of the syllabus. Documents also highlighted parental concerns about teacher performance, frequently noted in meeting records, while other documents emphasized the shortage of teachers. The systemic issue of inadequate teacher support leaves students' needs unmet, as both students and documents have highlighted. Student success relies

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on teachers, and their absence, whether emotional or physical, can be deeply discouraging. The lack of teacher support can act as a push factor, causing students to feel isolated and unsupported.

Factor 8: Academic Issues

Students cited their academic difficulties as a primary reason for feeling disconnected from their studies. Most reported struggles with core subjects, such as mathematics and English. These issues started early in their education, persisted over time, and slowly affected their confidence and motivation. This was expressed by Student J, *"After putting in a lot of hard work, I began to think that English and Mathematics were too difficult for me. I had a lot of trouble with certain subjects, and at home, due to household responsibilities, I could not concentrate fully on my work. Eventually, I decided to drop out of school*."

Some needed and wanted additional academic help as expressed by Student D who stated, *"I had been having a problem in English, but due to financial constraints, my parents were unable to arrange private tutoring.".* However, her parents were not in such financial standing to provide this additional tutoring.

Students faced academic challenges, and due to financial hardships and limited parental support, they viewed dropping out as a more viable option. Transcripts and school reports showed poor performance in English and Mathematics among those who eventually dropped out. Teachers often noted students' lack of participation and the number of unfinished assignments. The sub-theme of academic difficulties relates to unresolved learning issues, which, if not addressed quickly and effectively, lead to student dropout.

Factor 9: Lack of Parental Support

Students felt the absence of family support deeply, noting that their parents lacked motivation for their academic endeavours. Instead of encouraging further education, many parents emphasized marriage, which added to their sense of exclusion. Student B expressed that her parents, "*did not support me as I wanted to study".* Instead, her parents focussed on the need to get married, "*Due to these circumstances, I decided to leave school, as it is challenging to balance school and marriage."*

Similarly, Student G stated, *When I entered a new class, my parents got me married. They refused to let me study further and asked me to get married as soon as I could, to make life easier for them."* This lack of parental support for her studies is as expressed by her "*was an obstacle to my studies."*

Students reported that their families did not provide support for their academic challenges. Consequently, the lack of encouragement in their studies left them feeling neglected and made their education feel meaningless. Records showed that students from homes with minimal parental involvement experienced a decline in academic performance and an increase in absenteeism. Documentation from parent-teacher meetings highlighted sporadic parental engagement, further underscoring the weak connection between home and school.

V. DISCUSSION

This study investigates the reasons behind girls dropping out of secondary school in Pakistan from the students' viewpoint. Emphasizing students' perspectives helps to understand the context and insights of learners, revealing how structural, family, and school-related factors interact to influence girls' educational discontinuation. Instead of viewing dropout as a single event or personal failure, the findings suggest that it is a gradual process influenced by socialization, institutional factors, and other contributing factors.

One of the most significant findings of the study is the presence of family-related constraints. Students, in some cases, cited a lack of parental support for continuing education, expectations of early marriage, and home responsibilities as significant factors leading to dropout. From the lens of Poor Socialization, these trends indicate a lack of educational norms for girls, both within the family and within institutions. When families fail to place a high value on education, girls' attachment to it weakens; consequently, the imbalance in schooling will become even more pronounced as girls progress to higher levels of education.

Additionally, all participating students identified school-related factors as obstacles to their academic progress. Students described issues such as unsupportive attitudes of teachers, which include a lack of guidance and encouragement, leading to an inadequate supportive school environment. Poor socialization and minimal supportive adult interaction with students in a school setting can lead to increased social disengagement, irrational school dropout-related behaviour, and poor school integration at both the cognitive and affective levels. This aligns with the Poor Socialization concept, which holds that the less social interactive support

students receive, the more susceptible they are to school dropout.

At the same time, the findings strongly support the Push-Pull concept, which examines the competing influences and reasons behind girls' decisions to leave school. Push factors identified in the study include poor school quality, economic hardships, insecurity, and the belief that education is unnecessary. Conversely, pull factors include the demand for domestic work, the need to contribute economically to the family, and socially accepted marriage practices. The students' accounts illustrate how these factors operate and interact, collectively pushing girls out of the education system.

Most importantly, the study indicates that secondary school dropout seldom stems from a single cause. Instead, it arises from the interplay of poor educational socialization and influential external factors. When schools are unable to retain girls due to insufficient support systems, and when families value other roles over education, dropping out becomes the natural outcome given the social circumstances.

Ultimately, this highlights the need for coordinated measures to address the dropout of secondary school girls by enhancing school-student connectedness, increasing parental education, removing structural barriers, and strengthening school support systems. The study shows that dropout should be understood within social, relational, and institutional frameworks rather than as an individual failing.

VI. CONCLUSION

The research indicates that girls' dropout is the result of a combination of push and pull factors. These include financial constraints, the expectation that girls will assume household chores, early marriage, the absence of supportive parents, and poor relationships between the school and its students. These interrelated factors lead to decreased motivation and aspirations to continue education, ultimately resulting in dropping out of secondary school. Poor Socialization and the Push-Pull concepts provide a more comprehensive explanation for the interrelated lack of social support, institutional support, and dropout, aligning with the findings of this research.

The study also revealed that barriers at the school level, including inadequate guidance, lack of support, and an unsupportive environment, significantly contribute to girls' risk of dropping out. Students often feel that schools foster environments where girls do not feel a sense of belonging, opportunities for relevance are scarce, and guidance for their future is lacking. Consequently, girls become vulnerable to external pressures, increasing the likelihood of dropping out of the education system.

This study contributes to the research landscape by highlighting the voices of students, particularly girls at the secondary level, and addressing the scarcity of dropout research in Pakistan. While the results are specific to a particular context and sample, the design offers valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders seeking to develop gender-responsive interventions. Conducting further research across different regions, utilizing longitudinal data, or including a comparator, as suggested by the author, would significantly deepen understanding of girls' school retention and completion.

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