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Abstract

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**Keywords:** Women's Higher Education, Cultural Barriers, Gender Discrimination, Early Marriages, District Mardan,

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Cite Us



## Title

### Cultural Constraints and Women's Education: A Case Study of Women's Higher Education in District Mardan

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to explore deeply rooted cultural issues responsible for women's failure to pursue higher education in District Mardan, Pakistan. For this purpose, a qualitative research approach is employed and data is collected through semi-structured interviews with male household heads. The research pinpointed major issues that surfaced as early marriages, family responsibilities, and discrimination on the basis of gender, poverty, and stigmatization of women rather than men. These barriers do not only stifle the growth of women but also the development of the region in terms of economic incorporation and human resources development. The thematic analysis technique is utilized for qualitative data analysis. This study focuses on equal opportunities for all, irrespective of gender identity, and aims to generate awareness among all relevant stakeholders: family members, community, and policymakers.*

## Keywords:

[Women's Higher Education](#),  
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## Introduction

Pakistan is a country in the South Asian region encompassing different ethnic groups, and languages and has a historical heritage of over a thousand years. Despite a long history of significant cultural and geographical diversity, Pakistan is facing numerous profound issues, primarily gender inequality. Of these challenges, the lack of access to education for women is a major problem. This inequality is mainly a result of cultural beliefs that have been embedded in society. They stipulate sets of behaviors and beliefs where women are confined to certain roles and are denied equal opportunities that are important and

fundamental to women's growth in terms of personal and professional goals (Yaqoob, 2012).

In the context of Pakistan, it can be argued that cultural factors such as gendered cultural norms and values, and religious and historical influences have an impact on gender attitudes towards the education of women. Traditionally, the role of women has been confined to household responsibilities, domestic duties, caregiving responsibilities, and also with maintaining and keeping family honor. In particular, they have very limited opportunities to get education, especially at graduate and post-graduate levels. It is not only socially conditioned but is also an



economically aggravated limitation. More often, poverty, the absence of infrastructure and transportation, and other socio-economic factors deepen the gender disparity in education. Girls from poor backgrounds are the most affected since they cannot afford to go to school, especially in rural areas where culture imposes restrictions on girl child education (Ullah et al., 2021).

In this regard, the Pashtun tribal law of conduct known as Pashtunwali is a culture-specific practice that tends to pale the advancement of women's education, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and its districts including Mardan. Pashtunwali is a cultural code that is followed by Pashtun people and it has traits which are hospitality, bravery, and loyalty. That is true; however, at the same time, it puts much emphasis on the preservation of social order that strongly adheres to the traditional codes of purdah – the seclusion of women – and of family honor – izzat. These norms do not only regulate the behavior of women, but they also regulate their interaction with public spaces and education. Within the social order of Pashtunwali, the families consider women's education as unnecessary and should be avoided as it becomes a liability for them. Moreover, they also consider the education of women is threatening the social order and the tenants of Pashtunwali (Amin et al., 2021).

Besides cultural and religious values, early marriage practice also limits girls' education across the Mardan and other districts in KPK. Due to cultural and social pressures, young girls are married early and therefore have no access to basic education as the main role assigned to them is to be wives and take care of the households. This expectation stems from a traditional culture that sees her role as a wife, mother, and caregiver that does not afford her the opportunity to acquire a formal education. Therefore, it becomes very common to find families not willing to educate their daughters. These are further supported by ethno-cultural expectations that press for compliance to typical conventional roles thus resulting in conspicuous gender differential in educational achievements (Jalal ud din & Khan, 2008).

Women's education affected by the social and cultural norms is starkly reflected in the statistics mentioned below. The overall literacy rate for males stands out to be 73 according to the Economic Survey of Pakistan (2021-22), and 51 percent for females respectively. In KPK, the gap is even more highlighted; being 72 percent is the male literacy rate. Whereas the female literacy rate in KP is 37 percent. The situation in Mardan is even more severe: the general literacy rate in the district is 36 percent only. Among them, the Male literacy rate is 53 percent and the female literacy rate is 18 percent (Government of KPK, 2023). Moreover, According to ASER in 2013 among all the people who are 10 or over, 70% of the male population in Mardan is literate, while only 35% of the female population is literate. 371364 students are currently studying in the government schools in Mardan and among them 45 percent are girls while 55 percent are boys which makes the position of Mardan 10 in the literacy index out of 25 districts. These statistics depict the paramount importance of focusing on the eradication of gender disparity in education (ASER, 2013).

The objective of this study is to explore the cultural barriers that have restricted women's opportunities for education in the district of Mardan. Thus, in order to contribute to understanding the factors that cause high female drop-out rates beyond the primary education level, the study aims to uncover the effects of one or many cultural norms, specifically Pashtunwali. In order to counter these difficulties the research provides several potential and directed interventions. These include conducting awareness campaigns in the community for a change of attitude towards the education of girls, the establishment of more schools for girls, employment of qualified female teachers in schools, and providing other physical facilities like transportation. Also, the study called for community involvement activities to help parents support their daughter's education.

In this way, this research sheds light on the cultural limitations, and potential practicable solutions, which will be of value in advancing knowledge and understanding the structural impediments to women's education in Pakistan.

Nonetheless, this study underlines the importance of policy approaches and community mobilization toward the achievement of a constructive political environment that can advance the status of women's right to education so as to enhance the achievement of an inclusive equitable society. Since gender inequality remains a significant issue in Pakistan, especially in rural areas, this study is relevant in revealing factors that hinder women from accessing education and other opportunities for enhanced personal and national development. The findings will help policymakers, NGOs, and educational institutions about these barriers and will make a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge in feminist theory and cultural studies.

### Research Objectives

The main purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss cultural factors that impede women from higher education in the district of Mardan. Besides, the study aims to analyze the implications of these barriers in general and how cultural norms regarding gender roles define female education and hinder their opportunities for personal development in the academic sphere. Furthermore, the study seeks to analyze the impact of education on social dynamics and gender relations within the community. This means to highlight the role of education in emphasizing and enhancing gender equality.

### Research Questions

Following are the research questions that are to be studied and analyzed in this research.

1. What are the specific cultural factors that provide impediments to acquiring women's higher education in district Mardan?
2. What are the cultural stereotypes social norms and behaviors that restrict women's education specifically higher education?

### Literature Review

Women's education is universally regarded as one of the crucial elements of the development of a person as well as the most essential and powerful means for the attainment of gender equality and the growth of the

economy. Nonetheless, such aspirations are sometimes limited particularly in developing countries such as Pakistan by cultural barriers. Such a literature review is concerned with female educational empowerment examining the existing literature dealing with cultural barriers to women's education in higher education context in District Mardan, Pakistan.

Studies have found that cultural practices and policies greatly reduce women's chances of going to school. Noury and Speciale (2016) looked at the impact of the Taliban regime on Afghan women's education, women's employment, and birth rates. These gender apartheid measures such as the banning of girl education from 1996 – 2001 significantly rolled-off women's education. In particular, the average female schooling attainment falls by about 2 percentage points for every year of Taliban rule, especially in the rural and the Pashtun zones.

Moreover, Mahmood (2012) explained that in Pakistani women's education faces challenges due to cultural, social, and economic barriers. To date, women's education has remained limited and not well valued even when they make up more than half of the population as this has resulted in more dependence and slower growth in economies. Mahmood also points out that cultural values are the biggest determinants of women's education. He is bitter with various Pakistani governments as they come up with education policies, but they are deficient due to sociocultural factors that hinder gender equity.

More specifically, Ahmad et al. (2014) build upon this logic and pay attention to the socio-cultural and political factors that create perceptions of prohibited co-education in rural areas. She lists the major barriers as including; the dominance of male and patriarchal attitudes, traditions and social ethics, state of poverty, and conservative attitudes. The above factors are further worsened by other constraints that include the "Pardah" which creates segregation and limited political freedom for the female gender. Mehmood et al. (2018) provide an insight into how women's higher education has been overlooked in Pakistan. Despite the increased enrollment rates, women are still suffering from gender inequality in every sphere of

life. Socio-cultural factors and gender disparity are found from the primary data collected from 601 respondents selected across the country as the main hurdles to women's education. Out of this study, it is therefore clear that these barriers need to be overcome in an effort to reduce the gender gap in education and enhance women's socio-economic status.

Maqsood et al. (2012) also examine cultural barriers such as stereotypes and the patriarchal culture of society in influencing the struggles faced by girl children in accessing higher education. From their studies, they find that despite some women relapse and fight hard to overcome their family's rejection in order to be admitted to university, their grim experiences benefit others by pushing other girls in the family to follow suit and pursue university education. This fact proves that the sheer number of universities has recently increased mainly in large cities, however, numerous barriers remain for girls to attain higher education.

Shaukat and Pell (2017) have discussed women who are facing harassment in the Workplace specifically for women who have graduated. From their research, they conclude that educated women also face challenges involving an organizational culture that is male-dominant and which supports socio-cultural perceptions thereby creating feelings of demotivation and frustration amongst women. They categorize women into four groups based on their response to these norms: Elizabeth Fox categorizes the world's women into "system successes," "system fighters," "motivated realists," and "neutral acceptors." This categorization is a demonstration of the variety of ways in which women respond to social and cultural demands in the attainment of professional careers and equality in education and employment.

Jalal-ud-din and Khan (2008) also take into account the social and economic impediments faced by women. They make the conclusion that the low level of literacy, education, and skills, and the conditions unfavorable for working women make women's lower socio-economic status. They advocated for quality education and employment such as setting up of cottage and agro-based industries in the region in order to empower women. Sameer and

Jan (2018) identify the cultural barriers that limit the lives of women in the Pashtun region of Malakand Division and are equally applicable in Mardan. They described some antecedent cultural practices as obstacles to higher education; including early sexual maturity, conservative culture, the 'Pardah' system, patriarchy, restricted individual freedom, early marriage, and limited roles in decision-making. Regarding the advancement in women's education, they suggest the following governmental interferences like awareness programs, education facilities, and employment chances.

Jamshaid's (2020) study is based on a case study between Dera Ghazi Khan in Punjab, Pakistan, and the problems that hinder women from furthering their education. Through a structured questionnaire with 400 female respondents, this research also recognizes some of the barriers as distance, lack of awareness, domestic work, early marriage, and security issues. The study therefore calls for the need to address these factors in an effort to enhance the chances of women getting into universities, especially in the rural areas where traditional practices upheld by men result in the domination of women. The study of Ullah et al. (2021) with female students in District Mardan analyzed barriers by conducting semi-structured interviews. Cultural constraints, family demands, gender prejudices, marriage, financial considerations, and shortage of universities are the main obstacles to higher education according to their thematic analysis. The study urges the authorities to endeavor to ensure girl child receives a better education to develop a sustainable society.

This literature review clearly states that barriers like patriarchal culture, poverty, and socio-cultural factors affect women's education in Pakistan and basically in District Mardan. From different studies, cultural prejudices, male chauvinism, rigid culture, and minimal political privileges appear to be the major factors that hinder women's education. There have been some improvements in the standards for example improved enrollment rates, and the establishment of new universities, these efforts are however deficiently provided that the cultures that hinder women from accessing education are not being addressed.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research 'Culture Constraints and Women's Education: A Case Study of Women's Higher Education in District Mardan' has been acquired from the theory of feminism which describes the plight of women in society and how the gender factor impacts their interactions, particularly in the aspects of education (Hill, 2001). This theory further brings out how gender policies perpetuate gender differences and come up with discriminating measures against women, especially in education. According to the feminist theory, education for women is critical in enabling women to fight for their rights and be marred once and for all by the culture of subordination of women to men. Concerning this theoretical framework, it is necessary to mention that it derives particularly from liberal feminism associated with the works of Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, which appeared in the first wave of the feminist movement (Malinowska, 2020). This wave contested the male-dominated outlook on women in society, and their rights such as education. Targeting the educational rights of women and their problems in claiming them, this study also seeks to promote the awareness of gender inequality in District Mardan and the need to do away with cultural impediments to education.

## Research Methodology

Employing a qualitative technique, this investigation sought to analyze the sociocultural constraints that affect women's educational attainment within the Mardan District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. In particular, a qualitative approach is chosen so as to explain the nature and effects of these barriers without measuring their extent which makes it possible to do justice to sophisticated social issues. The research was based on primary sources, and semi-structured interviews conducted with fourteen men, the heads of families from the villages of the Mardan area. This approach helped in getting appropriate and adequate responses while providing the needed freedom to follow different issues and ideas that arose during the interviews.

The aim of the interviews is to elicit experiences and feelings about cultural factors that inhibit or prevent women from obtaining higher education. The questions are designed to provide appropriate meaning as they are open-ended and do not shy away from culture; they include but are not limited to such themes as patriarchal society gender norms, the disgrace of the family, and culture among others. The interview pro forma was subjected to pilot tests to remove ambiguity and unnecessary aspects, and the instruments and the questions were cleared by a proposer to avoid biases against participants and unnecessary discomfort.

The sampling strategy was designed to employ a purposive sampling approach to reach respondents who possess an in-depth understanding of the cultural construct with regard to women's education. The sampling particularly focused on male relatives of young women who have not gone to or have dropped out of higher education in the Mardan district, especially in rural areas. This method was used in order to capture information-rich cases as they were compelled by the particular circumstances to understand how strategies help mitigate the relevant barriers to the women in such circumstances, considering the conservative cultural attitudes in the district.

Amassed data is through face-to-face, in-depth interviewing which was designed in a way that took the participants' time and convenience into consideration. The interviews give a chance to ask questions that solicit in-depth responses from the respondents in a bid to explore their experiences more. It is worth mentioning that all the interviews are recorded, transcription done, and all manner of details that can be used to identify respondents are removed. All ethical issues are taken into account and the participants' informed consent is obtained along with their right to withdraw during any phase of the research with full awareness of the study lies in the processes.

The process of analyzing the data included the use of thematic coding so as to extract patterns and themes that were related to the objectives of the study. Initially, a mixed method with an inductive approach

was adopted, where there was an application of existing literature in coming up with deductive categories and explaining themes that arose from the interviews. The totality of these perspectives generated a comprehensive perspective on the interplay between culture, economy, and socio-political factors that determine women's participation in education in Mardan. Lastly, to improve the study's reliability, triangulation was performed comparing the interview results with relevant published materials and reports. Moreover, member checking was performed whereby respondents were allowed to read and approve the accuracy of their transcribed responses, enhancing the credibility of the data collected.

### **Thematic Analysis and Discussion**

The discussion section of this research paper mainly covers the thematic analysis of all the interviews conducted and the literature studied to identify the potential barriers to women acquiring education in the case study of district Mardan.

### **Early Marriages: A Persistent Cultural Constraint**

Among all the socio-cultural barriers one of the most understandable barriers to women's higher education in District Mardan is early marriage. The northwest part of Pakistan which is the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province has particularly high figures for early marriage. From the participants' perception, this cultural norm results in the denial of young women's right to education, particularly to attend university. According to one of the participants, "Pashtoon households often indulge in rivalry of cousins and one form of rivalry is early marriages and thus the denial of higher education to women" (Respondent 14). This observation brings out how most cultures reinforce the inequality between males and females in the realization of literacy as well as access to education.

Also, there is a problem of male-dominated structures in the region that aggravate this problem. In environments where education is mostly a preserve of a select few the gap is compounded by gender whereby females are even more locked out of education systems (Jan et al., 2018). Many participants

expressed concern with attitude toward female education and coeducation showcasing that it's against the Pashtun culture. Combined with the pressure on young women to marry early, this perception dramatically reduces a woman's opportunity to continue her education, especially if in a co-educational institution (Respondent 3).

### **Poverty and Financial Barriers: A Major Impediment**

The economic factor also plays a major role in limiting women in District Mardan from accessing higher education. Currently, there are lots of families with problems with finances, and a majority cannot afford transport fares, accommodation, and school fees. Citing 'poverty' as a major factor, as has been said by Respondent 10, 'the biggest hurdle in women's higher education in District Mardan...' Another respondent also echoed similar sentiments saying: 'Other barriers could include- poverty, culture, transport and absence of University' (Respondent 8).

These economic predicaments are worsened by the patriarchal understanding of the society where the education of women is considered unnecessary. Gender inequality is created by the current societies' structures that do not give women the same chances as men in economic pursuits. Jalal-ud-din & Khan (2008) have also endorsed this view that woman in Mardan has low socioeconomic status due to low literacy rate, job inequity, and poor economic standards that hinder their education (Jalal-ud-din & Khan, 2008).

### **Social Stigma: The Role of Patriarchy and Cultural Norms**

Another major hurdle that has been identified for female higher education in Mardan is social stigma. In the Pashtun culture, there is a clear line of patriarchy where men make the decisions and control many aspects of the lives of women including education policies. Some of the participants mentioned that female education is looked down upon by male members of society who ridicule families that support their female members to go to school. As it was said by Respondent 8, "In the Pashtoon community

relatives use social pressure on females not to pursue higher education." This kind of social pressure stops families from investing in the education of their daughters, so the cycle of low education among women remains unbroken.

The community they come from has been one that is very much entrenched in the patriarchal system and whenever women are seen stepping out of the household duties, the society reprimands them. Male family members, especially the father or elder brother, have the prerogative to decide whether women should go to school or not, which perpetuates male domination and control of women's educational rights (Noury & Speciale, [2016](#)).

### **Lack of Educational Institutions: A Structural Barrier**

Poor facilities and infrastructure of educational institutes in District Mardan are the major factors that hinder women's higher education. As for the government's constant encouragement of education, education resources, and facilities are highly uneven between men and women. In general, as responded by Respondent 8, there is a 'gap in the number of educational facilities between males and females in KPK.' Due to the lack of nearby educational facilities, and due to traditional restrictions on women traveling alone or outside the village, women have almost no way of getting education further [in KPK] (Respondent 9).

The terrain in this region is hilly, and this makes transport and movement in the general sense very difficult, more so, for women. Therefore, due to the problem of inadequate quality education opportunities for women, education for women becomes inaccessible in the smaller towns in which women are forced to drop out when most of them desire to further their education.

### **Socio-Cultural Constraints: The Interplay of Religion and Culture**

Cultural and religious values and beliefs still play a major role in determining women's education in Mardan and act as a major hindrance in that process. Pashtun is highly perceptive of the tentatively

translated idea of "Haya" which is often used to subordinate and justify limiting women's education. Consistent with Respondent 12's social narrative, "Pashtun culture and our society do not encourage modern co-education because of Haya," this view is supported by religious perspectives which tend to act as a barrier to women's education because it is associated with a culture that dislikes Haya. Such cultural and religious barriers develop a strong force that retards the progress of women's education, even if the obstacles are noticeable. These are still so rooted in the sociocultural features that it would take a long time and possibly a good deal of effort to bring the change (Mehmood, et al., [2018](#)).

### **Lack of Transportation: A Practical and Cultural Hurdle**

Another challenge to women is the difficulties of transportation in the course of trying to further their education and attain a college degree. Very often women's mobility gets pushed aside by the patriarchal norms that exclude and state that women's movement is less important than men's. Respondent 2 said, "Absence of transport and cultural norms and restrictions, no university, no money, early marriages: these are the hindrances," Another barrier was rooted in a cultural belief that women should not go out alone and thus they are restricted and cannot move as they wish, hence, cannot get to universities.

Furthermore, Mehmood ([2012](#)) opines that families do not send women to educational facilities if there are no safe means or improper transitional facilities. This failure to provide an adequate means of transport compounds women's limited educational chances still further – especially in rural areas to which, as noted earlier, public transport is scarce (Mehmood, [2012](#)).

### **Financial Constraints: A Reinforcing Barrier**

In District Mardan financial limitations play a role in limiting women's access to higher education even further. According to respondent number 13, "This is because; tuition fees as well as other charges associated with higher education put pressure on families financially." The pressure arising from the

conservative attitudes towards women discourages families from investing in the education of their children, especially the girl child.

### **Consequences for Pursuing Higher Education: Stigmatization and Migration**

Education is a very important aspect in the lives of every individual though women in Mardan who opt to further their studies are seriously socially disgraced. According to Respondent 1: "She will suffer societal, relatives and neighbors. Potential embarrassments and stigmatization keep many guardians away from sending their daughters for higher education as they prefer to limit them so as to avoid social backlash. Along with, in a few cases where families encourage their daughter's education, migration results in being the only way. According to Respondent 4, the family will receive negative reactions from neighbors and relatives and may have to move closer to schools. The need to move indicates that there is a social barrier to women's education and the rigidity of the culture in the region.

### **Symbolic Power and Moral Authority: The Role of the Clergy**

Religious leaders in KPK are the influential authority that holds powerful rhetoric regarding women's education. The clergy has a moral influence over women back home and this they use by making women drop out of school by arguing that education is against cultural beliefs (Respondent 6). Therefore, women have been faced with a lot of pressure to adhere to traditional roles and thus were restricted in the number of years in educational institutions let alone suffering and continuing the gender unequal disparity in the region (Shaukat, [2017](#)).

### **Improved Pashtunwali Perception**

By analyzing the recent changes in Pashtunwali, it can be concluded that there has been a shift in the support for female higher education over the years. According to respondents, a few years ago Pashtunwali was a major issue which is why there was a change in attitudes concerning the education of women. Respondent 4 agreed that Pashtunwali is not in

conflict with women's education, but narrow-minded people have made barriers (Respondent 4).

From this perspective, the dynamics of changing perception associated with the Pashtunwali code can be seen as an illustration of the general trends in the Pashtun region toward the increased regard for and acceptance of the education of women, while the obstacles to this process remain in place (Respondent 8).

### **Society Pressures and the Future Prospects**

The social restrictions and pressures are the challenges, however, the resistance to changes these restrictions and approaches are the major impediments in altering society. As pointed out by Respondent 1 the societal norms that women should not be educated are rigid and any attempt to pull down the barriers court confrontation with conservative forces. Nevertheless, expectations for future change exist since people's attitudes toward the education of girls have been changing. The possibility of positive change becomes possible by eradicating barriers in society and culture by providing education, advocating, and placing supportive policies. The prospects for gender equality can be increased by improving female students' enrollment rates in higher education institutions in Mardan, addressing financial and infrastructural concerns, and increasing inclusivity.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, this study outlined the cultural constraints to women's higher education and its social implications in District Mardan. From the study of 14 household head respondents highlight key issues that hinder access to higher education were early marriage, poverty, stigma, and transportation. Family-related financial constraint was also seen as a barrier. This study revealed the consequences of higher education including stigmatization and migration. Moreover, the impact of Pashtunwali which is misjudged and is changing in a positive direction regarding female education, is highlighted in the study. The research also pointed out the efforts that are being taken by society to dismantle hurdles and the changing mindset with regard to the importance of education of women

in the family. However, cultural and religious misinterpretations persist, and they certainly perpetuate problems in female education. Hence, it is suggested that a multi-faceted intervention in terms of policies from the government along with the support from NGOs will be helpful in providing more educational opportunities to women.

## Findings

The findings of this research paper are:

1. **Cultural and Patriarchal Norms as Key Barriers:** The main barriers to women's education in District Mardan are of a cultural nature where culture and patriarchy as well as tribal values like Pashtunwali have restricted women from getting education.
2. **Lack of Infrastructure and Resources:** Lack of facilities and inadequate educational infrastructure in the rural setting, for instance, schools and transport hampers females acquiring higher education.
3. **Gender-Based Discrimination:** The gender-based discrimination is clearly evident in the social structure in that women are domesticated and are kept at home. This is discrimination against women, which hinders their development and hampers their contribution to the development of society and the economy.
4. **Perception of Education as Unnecessary:** In the context of local communities, few consider the

seriousness of the problems that women face in access to education and the quality of education. Women's education is considered less important and hence further hampers inclusion in development and economic prosperity.

5. **Shift in Attitudes but Persistent Barriers:** While there has been a shift in the perception towards women's education in the recent past, the patriarchal narratives are still there. Religious and culture misinterpretation is still used to justify keeping women out of higher education.

## Recommendations

The following are the recommendations of this research:

- Educational campaigns need to be organized by not only the government but also the NGOs in order to sensitize society regarding female educational practices.
- In addressing the physical limitations of the schools, especial concern must be given to guaranteeing the buildings are well designed to accommodate the female students.
- Girl's education can be made more accessible and safer by providing services like transportation within the district and across the province to encourage school attendance even amongst distant female students.

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