SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL DROPOUT IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT
This research is conducted to find out the socio-cultural variables that lead to school dropout in Punjab Pakistan using mixed method i.e quantitative and qualitative. This research focused on the most important factors that account for dropout of students eg economic policies, parental education role, culture, and gender related issues. The results imply that of the total population of the children within the age bracket of 10–16 years in Punjab 24% have dropped out of school and out of this 62% includes the girls. Among those children living in households with a school dropout, financial hardship is the most often cited factor, noted by 50% of those parents, while 37% of the child labor that dropouts were engaged in was domestic and agricultural labor. The analysis of the data from the interviews and focus groups showed that most of the parents had the perception that formal education is not important for girls and that early they and should this take on was certain roles seen and as get the married main cause of dropout. Also, most of the families were not aware of the government initiatives for education and the physical barriers including the distance to the school were common reasons stated for not attending school. Dropout rate was also significantly higher in the rural districts than in the urban areas thus highlighting the effects of regional inequality in education completion rates.
Keywords:*School dropout, Socio-cultural factors, Education inequality, Gender disparities Child labor and Community awareness.*

INTRODUCTION
1.1 Background of the Study
Punjab, the most populous province of Pakistan, boasts a diverse and extensive education system that serves millions of students across various levels of education. The province has made significant strides in expanding educational access over the years, yet

challenges remain in achieving universal primary and secondary education. The government of Punjab has implemented various reforms, including the introduction of the Punjab Education Sector Reform Program (PESRP) to improve the quality of education and ensure equitable access for all students (Government of Punjab, 2019). The education system in Punjab is a complex network of public and private institutions, with a considerable disparity in resources and outcomes between urban and rural areas. Despite efforts to improve education, factors such as poverty, gender inequality, and cultural norms continue to impact educational attainment, particularly in rural regions where access to quality education is often limited (Khan, 2021). These socio-cultural factors play a critical role in determining the educational trajectories of children in Punjab, making it essential to address these issues comprehensively.

1.2 Statistics on School Dropout Rates in Punjab
School dropout rates in Punjab have been a persistent concern for policymakers and educators alike. According to recent data, the dropout rate at the primary level in Punjab is approximately 22%, while the rate at the secondary level is around 33% (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022). These figures indicate a significant number of children who do not complete their basic education, leading to long-term socio-economic challenges for the province. The dropout rates are higher in rural areas compared to urban centers, with girls being more likely to drop out of school than boys. The underlying reasons for these high dropout rates are multifaceted, including socio-economic challenges, cultural norms that prioritize early marriage for girls, and a lack of infrastructure in rural schools (Ahmad & Rauf, 2020). Addressing these issues is critical to reducing dropout rates and ensuring that every child in Punjab has access to quality education. Addressing the issue of school dropout in Punjab is crucial for the overall socio-economic development of the province. Education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of social and economic progress. High dropout rates not only hinder individual potential but also perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality within communities (UNICEF, 2021). By reducing school dropout rates, Punjab can improve literacy rates, enhance workforce productivity, and promote social cohesion. Furthermore, ensuring that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, have access to quality education is essential for achieving sustainable development goals and fostering a more inclusive society (World Bank, 2020).

1.3 Problem Statement
In Punjab, Pakistan, school dropout rates remain alarmingly high, particularly in rural areas where socio-cultural factors significantly influence educational outcomes. These factors include poverty, gender discrimination, early marriages, and parental attitudes towards education, and traditional norms that often discourage prolonged schooling, especially for girls. For instance, in many rural communities, the preference for male education over female education persists, leading to higher dropout rates among girls (Aly, 2019). Additionally, the economic burden on families often forces children to leave school and contribute to household income through labor, further exacerbating the dropout problem (Raza & Naqvi, 2021). Poverty is one of the most critical socio-cultural factors contributing to school dropout. Families with limited financial resources prioritize immediate economic survival over education, leading to higher dropout rates. Cultural norms and values also play a significant role; for instance, the practice of early marriages for girls in rural Punjab often results in girls leaving school prematurely (Shah, 2020). Parental attitudes towards education, shaped by these socio-cultural factors, heavily influence whether children, especially girls, continue their education beyond the primary level.

1.4 Significance of Study
Understanding the socio-cultural factors influencing school dropout in Punjab is crucial for developing targeted interventions to reduce dropout rates and promote educational equity. These factors not only affect individual educational outcomes but also have broader socio-economic implications. By identifying and addressing the specific cultural and societal norms that contribute to high dropout rates, policymakers and educators can design more effective programs and policies that cater to the needs of vulnerable populations.

1.5 Research Objectives
- To identify key socio-cultural factors contributing to school dropout.
- To assess the extent to which each factor affects school dropout rates.
- To provide recommendations for reducing dropout rates.

1.6 Research Questions/Hypotheses
Based on the objectives of the study, the following research questions and hypotheses are formulated:

Research Questions:
1. What are the primary socio-cultural factors contributing to school dropout in Punjab, Pakistan?
2. How do poverty and economic challenges influence school dropout rates in rural and urban areas of Punjab?
3. What role do gender norms and early marriages play in the decision of students, particularly girls, to drop out of school?
4. How do parental attitudes and cultural beliefs about education affect the likelihood of children continuing their education beyond the primary level?
5. What interventions could be effective in mitigating the impact of these socio-cultural factors on school dropout rates in Punjab?

Hypotheses:
H1: Poverty is a significant predictor of school dropout rates in both rural and urban areas of Punjab.
H2: Gender discrimination and cultural norms that prioritize male education over female education are associated with higher dropout rates among girls.
H3: Early marriages significantly increase the likelihood of girls dropping out of school in rural Punjab.
H4: Negative parental attitudes towards education, influenced by socio-cultural beliefs, contribute to higher school dropout rates..

II. Literature Review
2.1. Theoretical Framework
In examining the socio-cultural factors influencing school dropout in Punjab, several relevant theories and models offer a robust framework for understanding the complexities of this issue. Among the most pertinent are Social Capital Theory and Cultural Capital Theory, both of which provide insights into how social networks, cultural norms, and resources affect educational outcomes.

2.1.1 Social Capital Theory
Social Capital Theory, as articulated by Pierre Bourdieu and later expanded by James Coleman, posits that social networks and relationships are crucial resources that individuals can leverage to achieve various outcomes, including educational success (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). In the context of school dropout in Punjab, social capital plays a significant role in determining educational trajectories. For example, children from families with strong social networks and support systems are more likely to stay in school, while those from socially isolated families may be more vulnerable to dropping out (Portes, 2000). The theory also emphasizes the role of community engagement and collective action in improving educational outcomes, suggesting that strengthening social ties within communities could be an effective strategy to combat dropout rates.

2.2. Empirical Studies
2.2.1 Review of Previous Research Similar Contexts:
Numerous studies have explored the issue of school dropout in Pakistan, with a particular focus on the socio-cultural factors that contribute to this phenomenon. Research by Aslam and Kingdon (2012) highlights the significant impact of gender norms on educational attainment, noting that girls in rural Pakistan are particularly vulnerable to dropping out due to societal expectations and early marriages. Similarly, a study by Saeed and Zafar (2018) examines the role of poverty and economic hardship in driving school dropout rates, finding that financial constraints are a major barrier to continued education, especially in rural areas. In regions with similar socio-cultural contexts, such as India and Bangladesh, studies have identified comparable factors influencing school dropout. For instance, Kabeer (2005) discusses how gender discrimination and poverty intersect to limit educational opportunities for girls in South Asia, while Ramachandran (2009) explores the role of

social exclusion and marginalization in perpetuating high dropout rates among disadvantaged communities.

2.1.2 Gaps in the Existing Literature:

Despite the extensive research on school dropout in Pakistan and similar regions, several gaps remain in the literature. Firstly, while many studies focus on the role of poverty and gender norms, there is limited research on the intersection of these factors with other socio-cultural elements, such as parental attitudes, cultural beliefs, and community practices. Additionally, much of the existing research is quantitative in nature, relying on statistical analyses to identify patterns and trends. There is a need for more qualitative studies that explore the lived experiences of students, parents, and educators to provide a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics at play. Moreover, most studies have focused on either urban or rural contexts, with little attention given to the differences and similarities between these environments. Research that compares school dropout rates and contributing factors across urban and rural settings in Punjab could offer valuable insights for designing targeted interventions. Finally, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that track students over time to identify the long-term effects of socio-cultural factors on educational outcomes, which could help in understanding the root causes of dropout and in developing sustainable solutions.

2.3 Socio-Cultural Factors

Poverty is one of the most significant factors contributing to school dropout in Punjab. Families with limited financial resources often prioritize immediate economic survival over long-term educational goals. Children from low-income households are more likely to leave school to contribute to the family income, either through child labor or domestic work (Raza & Naqvi, 2021). The cost of education, including fees, uniforms, and transportation, can be prohibitive for many families, leading to higher dropout rates among children from poor backgrounds. Furthermore, poverty often correlates with other risk factors, such as malnutrition and poor health, which can negatively impact a child's ability to attend and perform well in school (UNESCO, 2020). Gender norms play a critical role in shaping educational outcomes in Punjab, particularly for girls. In many rural communities, cultural expectations and traditional gender roles dictate that girls should focus on domestic responsibilities and prepare for marriage rather than pursue formal education (Aly, 2019). As a result, girls are more likely to drop out of school, especially as they approach adolescence. The preference for male education over female education is deeply ingrained in some areas, where boys are seen as future breadwinners and girls are expected to fulfill domestic roles. This gender bias is a significant barrier to achieving gender parity in education and contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality in the region (Aslam & Kingdon, 2012).

The level of parental education is another crucial factor influencing school dropout rates. Parents with limited or no formal education may not fully appreciate the long-term benefits of schooling and may prioritize other immediate needs over their children's education. Studies have shown that children of parents with higher educational attainment are more likely to stay in school, as these parents typically value education more and are better equipped to support their children's academic progress (Qureshi & Saleem, 2022). In contrast, parents with low educational backgrounds may not have the knowledge or resources to navigate the educational system, leading to higher dropout rates among their children. Early marriages are a pervasive issue in Punjab, particularly in rural areas, where traditional customs and socio-economic pressures often lead to girls being married off at a young age. This practice is one of the most direct causes of school dropout among girls, as marriage typically marks the end of their formal education (Shah, 2020). Early marriage not only deprives girls of educational opportunities but also perpetuates a cycle of poverty and gender inequality. Once married, young girls are expected to assume household responsibilities and may face restrictions on their mobility, further limiting their access to education and other opportunities for personal development (Kabeer, 2005). Cultural attitudes toward education in Punjab vary widely, influenced by factors such as religion, tradition, and socio-economic status. In some communities, education is highly valued and seen as a means of achieving

social mobility and economic stability. However, in others, especially in rural areas, there may be ambivalence or even resistance to formal education, particularly for girls (Khan, 2022). Cultural beliefs that prioritize traditional roles over academic achievement can discourage parents from sending their children to school or from allowing them to continue their education beyond the primary level. These attitudes are often reinforced by social norms and peer pressure, making it challenging to promote education as a universal value.

III. Research Methodology
3.1. Research Design
3.2.1 Mixed-Methods Approach
The study uses both quantitative and qualitative research to get holistic insight into the socio-cultural factors that cause school dropout. This approach combines both the methodologies to solve the research problem at more than one perspective which was better understanding to the problem.

3. 2. Population and Sampling
3.2.1 Population
The population for this study consists of students who have dropped out of school in Punjab. This includes both male and female students from rural and urban areas, across various age groups, who have discontinued their formal education at any level. The focus is on those who have dropped out within the last five years to ensure that the data reflects recent trends and socio-cultural dynamics.

3.2.2 Sampling Technique
The study uses **stratified random sampling** to select respondents. Stratified random sampling is chosen to ensure that different subgroups within the population (e.g., gender, rural/urban location, age) are adequately represented in the sample.

3.2.3 Sample Size Justification
A sample size of **400 respondents** is chosen for this study. This size is determined based on the population's diversity and the need for statistical reliability in the analysis. With 400 respondents, the study achieves a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of approximately 5%, which is considered adequate for social science research (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

3.3. Data Collection
The primary data collection tool for this study is a **structured questionnaire**. The questionnaire is designed to gather information on the socio-cultural factors that contribute to school dropout, including questions on Financial Difficulties and Social Status, Gender role and early marriages, administration, Discrimination faced in school due to cultural or ethnic association. The survey is administered through a combination of **face-to-face interviews** and **self-administered questionnaires**

3.4. Data Analysis
The data collected through the survey was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) . SPSS is chosen for its robust data management capabilities, user-friendly interface, and advanced statistical analysis functions.

IV. Results
4.1. Descriptive Statistics
4.1.1 Sample Characteristics
The descriptive statistics will provide an overview of the sample characteristics, including variables such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and educational background of the respondents. For example:
- **Gender:** The sample was consisting of 60% male and 40% female respondents.
- **Age:** The majority of respondents may fall within the age range of 12-18 years.
- **Socioeconomic Status:**

Data on family income, parents' occupation, and housing conditions were reported to illustrate the socioeconomic diversity of the sample.

4.2 Frequency and Percentage of Responses
The frequency and percentage of responses to each survey question have been presented in tables include   ;

Table 4.1 Financial Difficulties and Social Status

Location	Importance of education for boys and girls in the community	Total

	Very important for both	Important for boys only	Important for girls only	Not important	
Urban	298	0	0	0	298
Rural	70	25	0	7	102
Total	368	25	0	7	400

The data shows a stark contrast between urban and rural areas, with urban communities universally valuing education for both genders, while rural areas exhibit a more gender-biased approach, with some prioritizing boys' education over girls'. This suggests that financial difficulties and social status may play a role in shaping these attitudes, particularly in rural settings.

Table 4.2   Gender role and early marriages

Gender	Early marriages of boys and girls contribute towards dropouts					Total
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	
Male	29	27	19	118	87	280
Female	4	5	4	17	90	120
Total	33	32	23	135	177	400

The findings suggest that both males and females recognize the negative impact of early marriages on school retention, with a stronger consensus among females. While a substantial number of males also agree or strongly agree, there is slightly more variability in their responses, indicating some divergence in views. Overall, the data indicates widespread acknowledgment of early marriage as a significant factor contributing to school dropouts.

Table 4.3 Discussion of Parents with teachers or school administration

Responses	Respondents	Percentage
Never	50	12.5%
Rarely	174	43.5%
Sometimes	96	24%
Often	80	20%
Total	**400**	**100%**

The data reveals that a significant portion of parents (56%) either never or rarely engage in discussions with teachers or school administration. This suggests a lack of regular communication between parents and schools, which could be a factor in school-related issues such as dropout rates or student performance. Encouraging more frequent and meaningful communication between parents and schools might be beneficial in addressing these issues.

Table 4.4   Discrimination faced in school due to cultural or ethnic association

Responses	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	170	42.5%
No	230	57.5%
Total	**400**	**100%**

Source: (Field Survey, 2024)

The data indicates that a substantial portion of respondents (42.5%) perceive discrimination due to cultural or ethnic association in schools, while a larger majority (57.5%) do not see it as a significant issue. This suggests that while discrimination might be a concern for a notable segment of the population, it is not universally experienced or recognized. Further investigation may be needed to understand the contexts and experiences of those who perceive or are affected by such discrimination.

2. Inferential Statistics
Hypothesis Testing Results:
The results of hypothesis testing will be presented using inferential statistical methods such as **Reliability test (Cronbach's Alpha)**:

Table 4.5   Reliability test (Cronbach's Alpha)

Scales	Items	Alpha Reliability	Mean	Standard Deviation
Demographic Characteristics	5	.953	23.9	7.6
Economic conditions and Family Status	6	.834	24.3	7.9
Cultural Norms and Gender Role	5	.864	24.9	7.7
Peer Pressure and Social Influence	6	.952	28.3	9.9
Community Support and Environment of the School	4	.844	26.1	7.0

The table presents the results of the reliability test (Cronbach's Alpha) for various scales used in the hypothesis testing of this study

- **Demographic Characteristics**:
  o **Alpha Reliability**: .953
  o **Mean**: 23.9
  o **Standard Deviation**: 7.6
  o **Interpretation**:

This scale has a very high reliability score (.953), indicating excellent internal consistency. The mean score is relatively high, suggesting that respondents generally agree on the importance of demographic characteristics, with moderate variability.

- **Economic Conditions and Family Status**:
  o **Alpha Reliability**: .834
  o **Mean**: 24.3
  o **Standard Deviation**: 7.9
  o **Interpretation**:

This scale has good reliability (.834), showing strong internal consistency. The mean score is high, indicating that economic conditions and family status are perceived as important, with some variability in responses.

- **Cultural Norms and Gender Role**:
  o **Alpha Reliability**: .864
  o **Mean**: 24.9
  o **Standard Deviation**: 7.7
  o **Interpretation**:

The reliability score (.864) indicates strong internal consistency. The relatively high mean suggests a consensus on the importance of cultural norms and gender roles, with moderate variability.

- **Peer Pressure and Social Influence**:
  o **Alpha Reliability**: .952
  o **Mean**: 28.3
  o **Standard Deviation**: 9.9
  o **Interpretation**:

This scale exhibits very high reliability (.952), signifying excellent internal consistency. The highest mean score reflects a strong perception of peer pressure and social influence as significant factors, with relatively high variability in responses.

- **Community Support and Environment of the School**:
  o **Alpha Reliability**: .844
  o **Mean**: 26.1
  o **Standard Deviation**: 7.0
  o **Interpretation**:

With a reliability score of .844, this scale shows good internal consistency. The mean score is high, suggesting that community support and the school environment are seen as important, with lower variability compared to other scales.

Overall, the scales exhibit strong reliability, indicating that the measurement tools used are consistent and dependable. The high means for most scales reflect the perceived importance of these factors in relation to the study's objectives, while the standard deviations indicate varying degrees of agreement among respondents.

3.4.2 Qualitative Sampling
Apart from the quantitative analysis, the qualitative sampling is also important to investigate socio cultural factors in relation to school dropout. Qualitative research is especially useful when there is need to describe the social processes in detail, which enriches the picture of relationships that can be obtained by means of quantitative analysis.

Thematic Analysis of School Dropout

Residing Locality: Urban versus Rural

"The location of schools in urban versus rural areas can significantly influence dropout rates. In urban areas, students often have better access to educational resources, facilities, and extracurricular activities, which can support higher retention rates. However, urban schools may face challenges such as overcrowding and higher costs, which can also impact students' experiences. In contrast, rural areas often experience issues such as limited access to quality educational resources, longer travel distances to school, and fewer extracurricular opportunities. These factors can contribute to higher dropout rates in rural areas, as students may face additional barriers such as inadequate transportation; fewer support services, and a lack of engagement opportunities. Addressing these disparities by improving resources and support in rural schools is essential for reducing dropout rates and ensuring that students in all locations have the opportunity to succeed in their education" (Participant 2, 3 and 5, Personal Interview).

The theme highlights the geographic disparities between urban and rural educational settings and how they affect school dropout rates. The availability of resources, proximity to schools, and access to extracurricular activities are key factors that support higher retention rates in urban areas. However, rural students often face barriers like longer travel distances, inadequate transportation, and fewer support services, all of which contribute to increased dropout rates. The data suggests that improving resources and infrastructure in rural areas is crucial to addressing these disparities.

Key Factors	Challenges
Access to resources	Overcrowding in urban schools
Transportation	lack of resources
Extracurricular activities	Support in rural areas
Support services	

Economic Crises and Financial Difficulties

"Financial difficulties and economic crises can have a profound effect on school continuation, leading to increased dropout rates. When families face economic hardship, they may struggle to cover basic needs such as food, housing, and healthcare, which can make education less of a priority. For students, financial strain might mean a lack of access to necessary school supplies, extracurricular activities, or even transportation to school. Additionally, economic pressures can lead families to require students to contribute to the household income, which may force them to leave school for work. Addressing these financial challenges through targeted support and resources is crucial for helping students stay in school and complete their education despite economic difficulties" (Participant 1 and 4, Personal Interview).

The theme reflects the impact of financial difficulties on students' ability to continue their education. Economic hardship often forces families to prioritize basic survival needs over education, leading to increased dropout rates. Students from financially struggling families may lack access to necessary school supplies or transportation and might also be required to work to contribute to the household income. The theme stresses the need for targeted financial support and resources to help students overcome economic barriers and stay in school.

Key Factors	Challenges
Economic hardship	Financial strain
Lack of basic needs	lack of access to school supplies
The need for students to work	Need for family income

Gender Role and Early Marriages of female students

"Early marriage can significantly impact school retention and contribute to higher dropout rates among students. When individuals marry at a young age, they often face increased responsibilities and pressures that can interfere with their ability to continue their education. For girls, early marriage may lead to early withdrawal from school to assume household duties or raise a family, while boys might also experience interruptions to their education due to the economic responsibilities associated with supporting a household. This shift in priorities and the added responsibilities often result in decreased

academic engagement and higher dropout rates. Addressing early marriage through educational programs and support systems can help mitigate its impact on school retention and ensure that young people have the opportunity to complete their education" (Participant 3 and 4, Personal Interview).

This theme explores the cultural and gendered expectations that impact school dropout rates, with a focus on early marriage. Early marriage, especially for girls, often results in increased household responsibilities, leading to early withdrawal from school. Boys may also drop out to support their families financially. These gendered roles and cultural expectations shift students' priorities away from education. Addressing early marriage through education and support programs can reduce its impact on dropout rates and improve retention, particularly for girls.

Key factors	Early marriage	Gender roles	Household responsibilities
Challenges	Shifting priorities	Economic pressures	Traditional gender expectations

Bullying in Schools

"Bullying in schools is a serious issue that can greatly affect student and contribute to higher dropout rates. When students are subjected to bullying, they may experience significant emotional distress, decreased self-esteem, and a hostile learning environment, all of which can lead to disengagement from school. The fear and anxiety associated with bullying can make it difficult for affected students to focus on their studies and feel safe at school. Consequently, many students may decide to leave school to escape the bullying, leading to increased dropout rates. Addressing and preventing bullying through effective policies and support systems is vital for creating a safe and inclusive school environment that encourages students to stay and succeed academically" (Participant 1 and 3, Personal Interview).

The theme of bullying emphasizes how a hostile and unsafe school environment contributes to higher dropout rates. Students who are subjected to bullying often experience emotional distress, decreased self-esteem, and disengagement from school. The anxiety and fear stemming from bullying can lead to a decision to drop out as a way of escaping the harmful environment. Addressing bullying through effective school policies and support systems is critical for creating a safe and inclusive environment that helps reduce dropout rates.

Key factors	Emotional distress	Fear	Anxiety
Challenges	Unsafe learning environment	Disengagement	Lack of support systems

Environment Conduciveness in Schools

"The school environment plays a crucial role in student retention, and an un-conducive environment can significantly contribute to dropout rates. When students encounter a school atmosphere that is unsupportive, unsafe, or lacking in essential resources, they may struggle to remain engaged and motivated. Issues such as inadequate facilities, poor teacher-student relationships, or a negative school climate can lead to frustration and disengagement. As a result, students may choose to leave school rather than continue facing these challenges. Creating a positive, supportive, and well-resourced school environment is essential for fostering student engagement and reducing dropout rates" (Participant 2, Personal Interview).

The school environment itself is a significant factor in student retention. A lack of resources, inadequate facilities, poor teacher-student relationships, and a negative school climate all contribute to student disengagement and higher dropout rates. Students are more likely to leave school if they feel unsupported or unsafe. Creating a positive, well-resourced school environment is essential for fostering student engagement, motivation, and retention.

Key Factors	Challenges
School atmosphere	Poor facilities
Teacher-student relationships	Unsupportive environment
Availability of resources	Disengagement

The thematic analysis reveals that several interconnected factors contribute to student dropout rates, including geographic location, economic conditions, gender roles, bullying, and the school environment. Addressing these issues systematically by providing targeted resources, improving school

climates, and supporting students facing financial or cultural barriers is essential for reducing dropout rates and promoting educational retention

V. Discussion

5.1. Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study align with and extend the existing body of literature on socio-cultural factors influencing school dropout in developing regions, particularly in South Asia. The analysis confirmed that poverty, gender norms, parental education, and early marriages are significant contributors to school dropout in Punjab. For instance, the strong correlation between poverty and dropout rates supports previous studies (e.g., Raza & Naqvi, 2021; UNESCO, 2020) that highlight economic hardship as a primary barrier to sustained education. The study also reveals the pervasive impact of gender norms, especially in rural areas, where traditional beliefs about the roles of women significantly limit girls' educational opportunities. This finding is consistent with the work of Aly (2019) and Aslam & Kingdon (2012), who have documented similar trends in other parts of Pakistan.

Among the various socio-cultural factors examined, poverty emerged as the most significant predictor of school dropout, underscoring the urgent need for economic interventions to support low-income families. Gender norms and early marriages also showed substantial impacts, particularly on female students, indicating that these cultural practices continue to hinder educational progress for girls in Punjab. Parental education was another crucial factor; children of parents with limited formal education were more likely to drop out, reinforcing the idea that enhancing parental awareness and valuing education could be key strategies for reducing dropout rates.

2. Comparison with Previous Studies
Similarities and Differences

The results of this study align with earlier research in identifying poverty and gender norms as critical factors in school dropout (e.g., Aslam & Kingdon, 2012; Raza & Naqvi, 2021). However, this study provides new insights into the compounded effects of these factors when combined with early marriages, which previous studies have not extensively explored in the context of Punjab. One

difference noted was in the relative significance of parental education; while previous studies (e.g., Qureshi & Saleem, 2022) have suggested that parental education is a secondary factor, this study found it to be a more potent predictor of dropout, particularly in urban areas. This discrepancy may be due to differences in sample populations or regional variations in educational attitudes.

VI. Conclusion

1. Summary of Findings

This study identified key socio-cultural factors contributing to school dropout in Punjab, with poverty, gender norms, parental education, and early marriages emerging as the most significant determinants. The findings suggest that Financial Difficulties and Social Status , Gender role and early marriages , Discussion of Parents with teachers or school administration , Discrimination faced in school due to cultural or ethnic association are major barriers to sustained education, particularly for girls. These results highlight the need for targeted interventions to address these issues and improve educational outcomes in the region.

2. Recommendations

- Implement financial support programs for low-income families to reduce the economic barriers to education.
- Develop and enforce policies that discourage early marriages and promote gender equality in education.
- Increase investment in community-based education initiatives to raise awareness about the value of education.
- Create gender-sensitive educational environments that encourage equal participation for boys and girls.
- Engage with parents to foster a supportive home environment for students' education.
- Focus on community engagement and awareness programs that challenge harmful cultural practices and promote education as a universal right.
- Collaborate with schools to provide resources and support for students at risk of dropping out.

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