

# Policy Dialogue

Lahore

## Dialogue Report

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POLICY DIALOGUE ON  
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: LEVERAGING  
POTENTIAL OF RELIGIOUS AND THOUGHT LEADERS

Lahore, 14 October 2020

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### **Inclusive Education**

Initiating discourse for achieving  
inclusion & diversity in education

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**Institute of  
Social and Policy Sciences**  
*Informing Policies, Reforming Practices*

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## Introduction

In recent decades, Pakistan has witnessed increased polarization and radical transformations in social values resulting in rapidly declining levels of acceptance of diversity, tolerance and harmony. A significant feature of the current landscape is diminishing spaces for diverse voices and perspectives. The value of an education system that is responsive to these challenges can hardly be overemphasized. The education system in Pakistan has yet to be responsive to the needs of marginalized, minority ethnic and religious groups, girls and poorest of the poor.

This lack of responsiveness is perpetuated by the deep-rooted social biases, taboos, negative stereotypes and violent-extremist narratives. The challenge of considering all the students as part of the education system regardless of their diverse social, religious, and ethnic backgrounds remains a serious challenge for the country. These barriers frequently result in the exclusion of children particularly from the marginalized groups and girls from the education system.

Though Pakistan in general and Punjab in particular has made a steady progress on gender parity index, the gap between educational attainment of girls and boys remain substantial. In terms of literacy in Punjab 57% females are reported literate in comparison to the 73% literacy of males. In terms of access, there are an estimated 22.8 million out-of-school children in Pakistan, 53.4% of whom are girls. The challenge is exacerbated by the fact that a major segment of society still does not see utility for girls' education. Apart from socio-

cultural constraints, religious conservatism also comes into play discouraging women's active role in different spheres of life. Poverty and economic variables also remain key obstacles which force the marginalized sections to employ their daughters in home-based industries such as sewing, embroidery, beading, or assembling items. Others are kept at home to do household work or are employed as domestic help. The challenge has been compounded by the outbreak of COVID-19, making the children from the marginalized sections of the society and girls more vulnerable of being out of school.

The available evidence suggests that public health outbreaks have varying impacts for boys and girls. Evidence from Ebola recovery informs that girls had to bear additional domestic and caring responsibilities which not only resulted in limited learning during the closure but also to increased barriers to school for the girls. A recent report estimated that "20 million more secondary school-aged girls could be out of school after the crisis has passed". During the on-going crisis, it is likely that prolonged closure will feed into the existing inequalities in educational attainment and may result in higher rates of absenteeism and lower completion rates particularly in case of girls.

The Covid-19 has compounded the educational challenges faced by the country, as there are serious concerns that it may lead to exclusion of children from the marginalized groups and in particular girls from the education system. The situation necessitates a response at various levels. Besides other policy measures, response

to the situation requires an informed engagement with the religious scholars and thought leaders for creating an enabling environment for a robust and effective discourse on inclusion and necessity of girls' education.

In developing and traditional societies like Pakistan, religion and culture has a defining role in daily lives of people. The religious scholars and thought leaders play a critical role as they have strong following and enjoy confidence and trust of people as the custodians of religious and social values. The religious scholars and thought leaders are one of the principal elements which can help alleviate and navigate through the barriers to equitable access to quality education. However, the moderate and progressive voices of religious scholars and thought leaders are on the distant margins of the mainstream discourse. The role of religious and thought leaders remains fundamental to initiate and shape the discourse to address the challenge of exclusion of marginalized groups of society especially girls from education system.

Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) in collaboration with Institute of Social and Policy Sciences (I-SAPS) initiated an informed dialogue on the meaningful role of religious scholars and thought leaders on addressing the challenge of exclusion of marginalized groups of society especially girls. In view of the challenges discussed above, a policy dialogue titled *Inclusive Education: Leveraging Potential of Religious and Thought Leaders* was organized with leading religious scholars, educationists, and select media professionals on October 14, 2020 in Lahore.

## Overview of the Policy Dialogue

Over 20 participants from Lahore, Islamabad, and other areas met in Lahore on October 14, 2020 to exchange ideas and discuss the topic *'Inclusive Education: Leveraging Potential of Religious and Thought Leaders'*. The occasion was a policy dialogue session organized by Pak Institute for Peace Studies in collaboration with the Institute of Social and Policy Sciences. Leaders from the religious community, government, and intelligentsia and experts and professionals from education sector and media came together to discuss the issues of inclusion and diversity in the education system in Pakistan.

The dialogue particularly focused on the challenges to girls' education which has aggravated in the developing world including in Pakistan due to the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent closures of schools. The policy dialogue platform was built on the understanding that the progress and prosperity of a culturally and religiously diverse nation like Pakistan depend on inclusive education that accommodates students from diverse ethnic, religious, gender, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Discussions centered on addressing discriminatory attitudes and behaviors, and misperceptions that hamper girls' access to education.

The dialogue session discussed the critical roles the state, clergy, and opinion makers can play in bringing positive change in the society's



behavior towards girls' education, and removing social barriers that widen gender disparity in the education system.

The dialogue was moderated by Muhammad Amir Rana, director Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), who apprised the speakers of the challenges to inclusive education especially in the context of the Covid-19 lockdowns. A brief background of the challenges to inclusive education in Pakistan was given by Ahmad Ali, Research Fellow at the Institute of Social and Policy Sciences (I-SAPS), at the inauguration of the dialogue session.

## Session 1:

# Public Discourse on Girls' Education in Pakistan

The dialogue session began with a discussion of the prevalent discourse on girls' education in the society, and the social factors that have traditionally discouraged girls' access to education. A summary of the speakers' main points is given below:

**Mr. Muhammad Jawwad** drew lessons from ancient history about the significance of girls' education, explaining how educating girls was considered important even in the ancient Greek states where most fields of life were exclusively dominated by men. In the ancient Greek culture and traditions, women were excluded from public offices but were still accorded equality in education. No social barriers were put to stop women from getting education parallel to men. Mr. Jawwad said that on the other hand, Islam emphasized justice and equality for women not only in education but also in almost all fields of life. He questioned that how could a religion that stressed equality discourage girls' education, and underlined the need to bring change in society's behavior towards educating girls. He said the ongoing pandemic has aggravated student dropout rates, and that effective policies and strategies were needed to counter the negative impact of the pandemic on education.

**Dr. Tahira Sikander** admitted that substantial social and economic barriers to girls' education existed in Pakistan, but she highlighted the brighter side of the ongoing pandemic with regard to the education sector. She said the Covid-19 while disrupting children's education

has also brought new learning opportunities both for the teachers and students. The lockdowns and compulsions of social distancing pushed many educational institutions to switch to online mode of education. The situation has placed the teachers as well as students in a position where they are compelled to learn computer skills and new communication technologies in order to be able to undertake their online classes. She said



public sector educational institutions were making utmost efforts within their available resources to reduce the risks of children being deprived of education due to the pandemic. Dr. Sikander said girl students were self-motivated and needed only a little support and push from their families to excel in education.

**Maulana Zia Naqshbandi** drew attention to the financial impact of the Covid-19 on low-income families and the societal discrimination towards women in general. He said due to the pandemic-related financial hardships, many

families were withdrawing their daughters from schools permanently while allowing their sons to continue their education. Parents are unambiguous in their choice when left with choosing between sons and daughters. He was of the opinion that this discriminatory attitude was also in display in the job sector. Women were hit hard by the job losses and layoffs due to the pandemic. He said many organizations and companies have fired their female employees, pushing them and their families into financial crises. Maulana Naqshbandi also highlighted the government's alleged inability to check the skyrocketing tuition fees at private schools. Ever growing and unchecked costs of education lead many families to send only their sons to schools.

**Sahibzada Amanat Rasool** touched upon some of the less talked about issues relating to girls' education. He said gender discrimination in education had deep roots in our social values and culture. Mr. Rasool said our society's outlook on girls is reflected in our culture that terms girls '*Paraya Dhan*' which literally means an item or wealth that belongs to others. He said the society as a whole was in a state of denial on the question of girls' education. Parents prefer to invest in their sons' education for future economic reasons because sons are expected to stay with parents while daughters go to their husbands' homes. The struggle for girls' education was a battle against this mindset of the society. He emphasized on the need for the society to come out of its state of denial, and learn to view their daughters as equal to their sons. Without a drastic change in the society's attitude, the goal of inclusive education would remain unrealized.

**Marie Gill** discussed the factor of religious faith and its relationship with access to opportunities

including education. Religious and ethnic minorities and other vulnerable social groups are backward socially and politically in comparison with the mainstream groups. She cited the example of Pakistan's minority Christian community whose members are often associated with menial jobs like cleaning and sweeping. People affiliated with this lowest class of the profession carry social stigmas that push them away from opportunities. The society's discrimination against citizens on the basis of faith also permeates the education system. Ms. Gill said the state could make education more inclusive by providing quotas for members of the marginalized and vulnerable communities. She also added that there was a need to remove the stigmas associated with citizens' faith or social status in the society.

## Session 2

### **Role of Religious & Thought Leaders in Promoting Inclusive Education**

**Samia Raheel Qazi** explained the Islamic viewpoint on girls' education and its significance in the history of Islam. She said Islam does not discriminate against girls regarding education. The Prophet (PBUH) and his Companions educated their daughters and women, and it was education that enabled Bibi Zainab to deliver the historic speech in front of Yazid following the incident of Karbala.



Ms. Qazi also quoted examples from her own personal life, saying that her father late Qazi Hussain Ahmed, a religious scholar and leader of Jamaat Islami, always supported her in her education and career. She said religious scholars should take advantage of the many Islamic events throughout the year to highlight the importance of girls' education, and advocate for inclusion for all.

**Habib Akram** pointed out the intrusion of television sets into contemporary households, and discussed the media's role in educating children. According to him, media content has become a part of the educational syllabus for children. He said the children's excessive exposure to media give the latter undeniable influence over the former. Mr. Akram also talked about what he called the compartmentalization of the education system. He said there was a glaring disconnect among various institutions of education. For instance, the public sector education was detached from the private sector, and these two together were detached from the madrassah sector. He said the financial crisis due to Covid-19 could aggravate the state of girls' education in Pakistan, and therefore, he stressed on building the professional and technical skills of girls so as to enable them to become productive members of the society. He cited the example of Bangladesh which Pakistan could emulate to empower its girls and women.

**Yasir Peerzada** was upbeat about the future prospects of girls' education and empowerment in Pakistan. He said religion and culture were embedded together, and both help shape the society's attitude towards girls' education. Mr. Peerzada, however, cautioned that education must not just be a source of literacy for girls. Education must empower girls' to have social

and financial independence, because dependent females are prone to exploitation and abuse at the hands of their male relatives. He said the country was witnessing a slow yet positive change in people's attitudes towards womenfolk which is evident from the fact that more and more girls are joining professions which were previously considered male domains. He said thought leaders should make efforts to reshape the society's attitude and behavior towards women as a whole. There is no shortcut to women empowerment because social change comes slow and steady.

**Saira** mentioned her life story to drive home the point that a change in attitude on the part of men towards women can do wonders for girls' empowerment. She mentioned how her father's unconditional support for her education helped her come out of a small Sargodha village and achieve freedom and career for herself. She credited her father's support for her empowerment as an independent and successful woman. She said girls' education should be part of government policy, and a permanent fixture on the manifestoes of the political parties.

**Maulana Raghieb Naeemi** said the Covid-19 had substantial impact on student enrolment in madrassahs, saying that there has been 15-20% reduction in enrolment due to the pandemic. He said many families were struggling financially, and putting their children of school-going age into works for additional income. He said the clergy needed to convince people to send their children for education. Similarly, Maulana Asadullah Farooq said that the importance of girls' education was undeniable because educated mothers produce great generations. He, however, underlined extreme



poverty as a major of children being deprived of education.

**Khurshid Ahmad Nadeem** pointed out some basic contradictions in the society's narrative towards girls' education. He said it is frequently repeated that there is no concept of gender-based discrimination in education in Islam, but then the society in general and the clergy in particular go on to oppose girls' education. He said the society may be supporting the idea of girls' education, but in practice it was not yet prepared to accept leadership roles for women. Mr. Nadeem said many religious leaders reject women's role in politics, and that such a negative attitude towards women trickle down to education. A positive transformation in society's attitude towards women as a whole can help improve the status of girls' education in the country. He also highlighted the poverty factor which he said was denying millions of children access to education. There are extremely poor families that cannot afford even the cheap public education, he added. He said girls' education should be a policy priority for the government.



**Dr. Khalid Masud** discussed the relationship between culture and girls' education. He said culture has a forceful influence in shaping people's attitudes and behaviors. He lamented

the society's negative mindset about womenfolk. Citing the tragic case of a rape on the Motorway a few weeks back, Dr. Masud said the incident brought the society's misogyny to the fore. People began blaming the victim woman for travelling alone at night instead of the male predators who perpetrated the heinous crime. He also mentioned another example of misogyny in which a father had hired a criminal to murder his own daughter for allegedly bringing dishonor to the family. He questioned that would the father have done the same had it been his son instead of daughter? Dr. Masud said that in many cases the girls' education gets wasted after marriage because the girls are expected to take care of the household chores which often lead them to discontinue their education or profession midway. He termed it a great loss for the country.

**Maulana Tahir Ashrafi** put the question of girls' education into Islamic historical perspective, saying that the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) had never stopped women from professions. The first wife of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), Bibi Khadija, was a trader by profession. Likewise, Caliph Abu Bakar (RA) frequently consulted his daughter, Bibi Ayesha, on various worldly matters. Maulana Ashrafi said denying education to girls had absolutely no basis in Islam. He said daughters are God's blessings, adding that he fully supported his own daughters in their choice of education and career. He lamented that many parents preferred to invest in their sons' education for economic reasons. He stressed on the need to remove people's misperceptions that girls' education was secondary in importance to sons' education.

**Dr. Qibla Ayaz** discussed the rural-urban divide in terms of access to education in Pakistan, explaining how the pandemic had made the educational situation in the rural regions worse. He said that even before the onset of the pandemic, the rural girls had only limited access to education as many families did not take sending their daughters to schools seriously. The pandemic has further deteriorated the situation. He said while students in urban areas were taking online classes, their rural counterparts were deprived of virtual learning opportunities due to absence of internet and other technologies in far flung rural villages. Dr. Ayaz expressed dismay over the fact that even in contemporary world girls' education was frowned upon in the society. He said even educated men have been seen to be looking down upon women as inferior beings. Misogyny is reflected in almost every aspect of life including in the Covid-19 crisis.



He criticized the role of the state with regard to the overall state of primary education in the country, claiming that the state has gradually been abandoning its most basic responsibility of educating the children. Starting with the era of Musharraf regime, the public education sector has consistently been in decline. He said the state has shifted the burden of its educational responsibility to the substandard private sector

where children are at the mercy of ill-trained and low-paid teachers.

### Session 3

## **Recommendations and Way Forward**

In the last session of the policy dialogue, the speakers provided insights on future course, and recommendations for improving the state of girls' education and achieving inclusion in education in Pakistan. The summary of the main points of the last session is provided below.

- Religious scholars and leaders should use public platforms available to them such as mosques, Friday sermons, and airtimes on television, etc. to promote girls' education.
- Religious leaders should make conscious efforts to help change the society's negative attitude towards education by invoking examples from the life of the Prophet (PBUH).
- Thought leaders and academicians are social change makers. They should capitalize on their readership, audience, and following, and use their far-reaching voice to address negative behaviors and misperceptions about girls' education.
- There should be more dialogue and debate among the stakeholders on the question of girls' education, and the wider issues of inclusion in education system.
- The government must prioritize girls' education separately as a policy, and make long-term commitments to and investments in enhancing girls' enrolment and retention in schools.
- Private schools are no alternative to public sector education in terms of resources, infrastructure, physical reach as well as the

qualification and professional training of teachers. Therefore, the state must actively resume its nearly-abandoned responsibility of educating the children.

- The Covid-19 crisis is going to stay in the foreseeable future. Therefore, the government must devise strategies for enhancing students' access to virtual classrooms. This can be achieved by expanding the internet coverage in the country particularly in the backward and rural areas, and producing economical and affordable technological equipments such as computers, etc.
- The deplorable state of education is also part of the wider issues of economy and extreme poverty. The government must make concerted efforts to improve the economy, and lift people from disabling poverty by

generating economic activities and creating jobs.

## Conclusion of the Dialogue

Mr. Ahmad Ali, Research Fellow at I-SAPS, delivered the concluding remarks in which he reaffirmed the criticality of inclusive education for the true progress and prosperity of a culturally diverse country like Pakistan. He underlined the need for more discussions and debates on all critical national issues. Following Mr. Ali's concluding remarks, the dialogue moderator, Mr. Amir Rana, thanked the learned speakers for gracing the occasion with their valuable presence and input, and closed the session.

## List of Distinguished Participants

- **Dr. Qibla Ayaz:** Religious scholar, Chairperson Council of Islamic Ideology
- **Maulana Tahir Mehmood Ashrafi:** Religious scholar, Prime Minister's Special Representative for Religious Harmony
- **Dr. Khalid Masud:** Former Chairman Council of Islamic Ideology (CII)
- **Khurshid Ahmad Nadeem:** Scholar, media person, author
- **Samia Raheel Qazi:** Religious Scholar, Ex-member of Parliament and Council of Islamic Ideology, Director Foreign Affairs II (women wing)
- **Yasir Peerzada:** Columnist, Social Critic, and Public Policy Analyst
- **Dr. Allama Raghیب Hussain Naeemi:** Religious Scholar, principal *Jamia Naeemia*, Lahore
- **Maulana Asadullah Farooq:** Religious Scholar, Principal *Jamia Manzoor-ul-Islamia*, Lahore
- **Sahibzada Muhammad Amanat Rasool:** Religious Scholar, editor of monthly *Rooh-e-Buland*, Lahore
- **Shoaib Raza:** Scholar, academician, visiting faculty at Punjab University
- **Dr. Tahira Sikandar:** Educationist, Principal Jinnah Degree College, Lahore
- **Habib Akram:** Journalist, Columnist Dunya News
- **Muhammad Jawwad:** Assistant Professor Philosophy, University of Punjab
- **Najamuddin:** Researcher, Former member HRCP
- **Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq Naqshbandi:** Scholar, media person
- **Bilal Aslam:** Educationist, Research Analyst at Lahore Center for Peace Research