

Role of Allama Iqbal Open University in Promoting Access and Demoting Gender Disparity in Higher Education in Pakistan

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education has emerged as a key factor for socio-economic development in the recent decades. Amazingly, more persons are attending colleges and universities in this century than in all of the human history (Goodman, 1999) and it is rightly argued by Manuel Castells, if knowledge and information are electricity of the new world economy, universities are one of the power sources on which the development process of 21st century has to rely. (Altbach, 1999) About 64 years ago Quaid-i-Azam, Muhammad Ali Jinnah (Father of the Nation) has expressed the importance of higher education in these words, "Of all the economic growth initiatives available to the Government of Pakistan, perhaps none holds more promise and the possibility of large scale and sustainable returns than the effectiveness and expansion of the Higher Education infrastructure in Pakistan". (GoP, 2009) Unfortunately, despite of these golden words of our hero at the advent of this millennium the total number of students in higher education was about 2.6% for the age group of 17-23 which was very low and Pakistan ranked amongst the worst in the world in higher education enrolment ratios, as compared to China (13%), Malaysia (26%), Thailand (39%) and Korea (83%). (HEC MTDF, 2005-2010)

Before the inception of Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, the total number of students in Pakistan's higher education system was approximately 475,000. Of these students, only 139,000 have attended universities-representing a less than 0.8% enrollment ratio for higher education, i.e. fewer than 8 of every 1000 Pakistanis between the ages of 17 and 23 have attended university. Enhancing accessibility and participation in higher education is an important goal of Higher Education Commission. (HEC, 2008) Soon after the establishment of HEC this ratio increased drastically and it approached to 5%. HEC aimed to continue this progress to 10% by 2015 and subsequently to 15% by 2020. (HEC MTDF, 2005-2010)

SITUATION ANALYSIS

In a global gender gap survey of 134 countries, Pakistan is placed at 132 –down from 127 in 2008- even behind Ghana and Ethiopia at 81 and 122 respectively. Similarly, in tertiary education Pakistan is ranked at 99 even behind Namibia at 97 (Global Gender Gap Report 2009). Pakistan is spending less than 2.9% of its GDP on education which is very low as compared to its regional partners; Nepal (3.2%), India (3.3%), Indonesia (3.5%), Thailand (4.5%), Malaysia (4.7%), Iran (5.2%) and Vietnam (5.3%). According to COMPENDIUM ON GENDER STATISTICS IN PAKISTAN 2009, "gender discrimination is prevailing in every type of public sector institution as there are 562 female out of 1268 Arts & Science Colleges. Similarly, there are five female universities in 65

universities and only 23 female professional colleges in the total 428 professional colleges". Regarding enrollment in the public sector professional colleges and public sector universities, according to the reports of Economic Survey of Pakistan 2009-10 and COMPENDIUM ON GENDER STATISTICS IN PAKISTAN 2009, total number of students in public sector professional colleges was 246757 with 30% female students and 70% male students. In 2007-08 total numbers of students in public sector universities were 311383 with 38% female and 62% male students. It is notable that in all HEIs (both public and private sectors) total number of students was 331745 in 2002-03 which reached to 741092 in 2007-08 with an increase of about 100%.

Table 1: Gender Wise Distribution of enrollment in HEIs

Sr. No	Years	Male%	Female%
1	2001-02	63.16	36.84
2	2002-03	61.40	38.60
3	2003-04	57.77	42.23
4	2004-05	58.57	41.43
5	2005-06	59.15	40.85
6	2006-07	53.91	46.09
7	2007-08	53.83	46.17

Source: HEC Annual Report (2004-05) and HEC Report 2002-08

It is evident from table: 1 that there was a big gap (63% and 37%) in male and female students in 2001-02 which gradually decreased due to judicious plans and policies of HEC to enhance the women enrollment and remained 54% and 46% in 2008. This is perhaps the most significant of all of HEIs remarkable achievements during the last years. (HEC, 2009)

DISTANCE EDUCATION

In Pakistan the formal system of education did not expand with the increased growth of population. Moreover the dropout rate and gender disparity have been very high. In order to meet such challenges, The Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) was established in 1974. Within a modest period the University has been able to offer courses from literacy to PhD level. The AIOU, a Mega University, is a unique institution in many ways, affording educational facility to all children from 'nine to ninety'... AIOU has come up as the largest University of Pakistan in terms of course enrolment and course programmes as it is offering more than 135 programmes and imparting education to students exceeding 570,000 in number. (Vice Chancellor's Report (2004-05) Due to flexible system AIOU is playing vital role in national development by promoting access and demoting gender disparity which can be visualized from the following table.

Table 2: Overall Student Enrollment in 2008

Sr. No	Region/Province	2008				Total
		Male		Female		
		N	%	N	%	
1	Punjab	325129	46	384354	54	709483
2	Sindh	30435	67	14899	33	45334
3	Khyber Pakhtoonkah	55204	51	52548	49	107752
4	Balochistan	13632	69	6237	31	19869
5	Azad Kashmir	30521	39	47958	61	78479
6	Northern Areas	5571	48	6000	52	11571
7	Federal Capital	24492	54	20910	46	45402
8	Pakistan (Grand Total)	484984	48	532906	52	1017890

Source: Vice Chancellor's Annual Report 2007-08, Hussain, I. 2009 and Jumani, Chisti and Babar 2010

Table: 2 depicts that total number of students enrolled in 2008 was 1017890 and majority of them were female students (532906). Ratio of female students exceeded with 52% from their male counterparts which were 48% of the total number of students. However, there is region wise variation i.e. female ratio is higher in Punjab (54), Azad Kashmir (61%) and in Northern Areas (52%) while there are more male students in Sindh (67%), Khyber Pakhtoonkhah (51%), Balochistan (69%) and Federal Capital (54%). Anyhow, overall the ratio of female students is ahead of male students.

Table 3: Overall Student Enrollment in 2008

Sr. No	Year	Male		Female		Total
		N	%	N	%	
1	2008	484984	48	532906	52	1017890
2	2007	481803	50	480417	50	962220
3	2006	328341	51	319036	49	647377
4	2004	272479	48	294120	52	566599
5	2003	217973	48	238578	52	456551
6	2002	172319	47	194668	53	366987
7	2001	161198	48	174867	52	336065
8	1999	429728	47	478084	53	907834
9	Total	2548825	48	2712676	52	5361523

Source: Vice Chancellor's Annual Reports 1999-00, 200-01, 2001-02, 2002-03, 2003-04, 2004-05, 2005-06, 2006-07, 2007-08, Hussain 2009 and Jumani, Chisti and Babar 2010

It is evident from the table: 3 that from 1999 to 2008 total number of students were 5361523 with 2712676 female (52%) and 2548825 male (48%) students respectively. In this decade female students' enrollment remained ahead of their male colleagues except of 2006 where male students (51%) exceeded from female students (49%). Interestingly, in 2007 enrollment, both male and female students were almost equal (Male=481803, Female=480417 with total=962220). Similar situation prevailed in many courses in higher education and female students were more in total as compared to male students.

Table 4: Course wise Student Enrollment in 2008

Sr. No	Course	Male		Female		Total
		N	%	N	%	
1	PhD Islamiat	7	50	7	50	14
2	PhD Urdu	4	50	4	50	8
3	M.Phil Education(TE)	36	43	47	47	83
4	M.Phil Special Education	13	36	23	44	36
5	MSc Chemistry	35	36	61	44	96
6	M.Sc. Pak Studies	1721	49	1821	51	3542
7	M.Sc. Gender	464	33	938	67	1402

	and Women Studies					
8	MLIS	75	46	89	54	164
9	MA Arabic	103	50	101	50	204
10	MA Urdu	827	48	914	52	1741
11	MA Islamic Studies	2407	35	4388	65	6795
12	MA Teacher Education	3285	24	10660	76	13945
13	MA Special Education	940	34	1859	66	2799
14	MA Education DNFCE	326	26	948	74	1274
15	MA Education EPM	315	50	321	50	636
16	MEd. Science Education	858	44	1084	56	1942
17	MEd. DNFCE	199	36	349	64	548
18	MEd. Teacher Education	7953	32	16913	68	24866
19	MEd. Special Education	651	37	1107	63	1758
20	PGD English TEFL	490	45	605	55	1095
21	BLIS	4477	50	4562	50	9039
22	BA	132812	47	149096	53	281908
23	Total	157998	45	195897	55	353895

Source: Vice Chancellor's Annual Report 2007-08

It is evident from the above table that overall ratio of female is 55% while males are rather less than females (45%) and out of 353895 female are 195897 while 157998 are male students. In the above listed 22 courses in only two courses male and female are equal while in the course of MA Arabic male student are slightly ahead (only 2) from the female students. Except of these three courses in all remaining nineteen courses female students are more as compared to male students.

MAIN PURPOSE

Main purpose of the study was to evaluate the role of AIOU in promoting access and demoting gender disparity in higher education in Pakistan. Factors affecting female access to higher education were also assessed in this study.

METHODOLOGY

This study was descriptive in nature therefore; survey approach was adopted for data collection. The study was conducted in rural areas of Sargodha Region and 100 female students of BA and MA courses were taken randomly. A questionnaire (on five point Likert Scale) was administered for data collection. Collected data were analyzed through SPSS XIV by running descriptive statistics (mean score and standard deviation).

Table 5: Factors Affecting Female Enrollment in Higher Education

S.No.	Statement	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	Mean	StD
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1	Restricted culture is a hindrance in female higher education (HE)	25	38	6	5	2	4.03	.96
2	Poverty is an obstacle in female HE	30	35	4	4	3	4.12	1.00
3	Parents give priority to male children for getting HE	26	37	6	5	2	4.05	.96
4	Many people are unaware about AIOU	29	35	5	4	3	4.09	1.01
5	Insecurity is a problem in female HE	28	40	4	3	1	4.14	.89
6	Study center is at long distance from your home	33	34	5	4	-	4.25	.80
7	Domestic engagements are an obstacle in female HE	30	36	6	3	1	4.20	.85
8	Misconception of religion is a hindrance in female HE	27	39	5	3	1	4.17	.82
9	There is lack of highly qualified female teachers in your area who can guide in HE	23	33	8	7	5	3.8	1.16
10	Early marriage is an obstacle in female HE	24	31	10	6	5	3.83	1.16
Role of AIOU towards female HE								
11	AIOU is engendering female disparity in HE	31	35	5	4	1	4.20	.88
12	Student Support services help in solving learners' problems	24	37	3	7	5	3.89	1.15
13	Teachers attitude towards female learners is positive	27	36	5	6	2	4.05	.99
14	Please specify any other barrier in female HE	-----						
15	Kindly provide some suggestions for the promotion of female HE	-----						

Scale value for this table is SA (Strongly Agreed) =5, A (Agreed) =4, UNC (Uncertain) =3, DA (Disagreed) =2 and SDA (Strongly Disagreed) =1

Majority of the Pakistanis are living in rural areas while rural culture is unsupportive regarding female education especially in higher education (HE) sector. Adult female learners are considered niche in their household work instead of going out for getting HE. Poverty is another influencing factor in female disparity in HE in the rural areas of Pakistan. Fee in HE sector is rather lofty as compared to the financial conditions of the commonality. Parents extend priority to male children while females are neglected to pursue HE. Males' income is considered increase in family income which ultimately provides stability while females' income will go to their in-laws. In rural areas a lot of people are unaware about AIOU and its flexible education system. Insecurity is the prevailing phenomenon in the whole Pakistan as the terrorists and miscreants have created uncertainty everywhere in the country. Parents feel leisure and pleasure to see their children safe and sound at home at the cost of their education. Study centers are situated at a long distance from students' homes. In the rural areas transport system and infrastructure is either very poor or unreliable and after attempting paper, return to home is a big panic for female learners. Besides domestic tasks like cooking, sewing, stitching and embroidery etc. females have to shoulder equal share in the males' activities of livelihood. Religious misconception about female HE is a dilemma experienced by rural areas population. Early marriage is another obstacle in promotion of female HE. AIOU is playing significant role in engendering female disparity in education especially in HE sector. Lack of highly qualified female teachers who can guide adult females in HE is another important hindrance in the promotion of female HE in rural areas. Learners were satisfied with student support services (SSS). Teachers' attitude towards female HE was positive.

CONCLUSION

Role of AIOU in promoting access and demoting gender disparity in higher education is remarkable and surely, it seems to be a blessing for culturally restricted and discriminatively treated females. Government may launch uninterrupted media campaign about the importance of female education until the gender disparity and the religious misconception about female HE is eliminated from the whole country. Female institutions as well as the staff may be leveled with male institutions and staff on priority basis. Government may launch sincere and judicious policies for poverty alleviation instead of poverty elevation as is the customary. For the enhancement of female enrollment in higher education through extending awareness about AIOU emphasis may be given on the media campaign about AIOU. Study and examination centers may be established nearest to the learners' homes. All female students may be offered especial fee concession without any discrimination. Due to factor like pregnancy in some cases female students may be granted relaxation in the submission of their assignments. Women's studies courses may be increased and revamped according to the society's needs so that these courses may boost up their socio economic status. Further, continue efforts to reduce and eliminate these barriers from HE may be carried on.

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