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Confronting Educational Inequality in Pakistan

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Foreword

Education lies at the heart of social democracy. It is not only a means of individual advancement but a public good that enables social mobility, democratic participation, and economic justice. In Pakistan, however, deep and persistent educational inequalities continue to shape life chances along lines of class, gender, geography, and income. These inequalities do not merely reflect social divisions, but they also reproduce and entrench them.

This study, *Confronting Educational Inequality in Pakistan*, offers a timely and critical examination of how unequal access to quality education undermines youth potential and weakens prospects for inclusive development. By situating educational disparities within broader socio-economic and governance frameworks, the study moves beyond technical discussions of schooling to highlight education as a question of rights, equity, and public responsibility. It underscores how fragmented education systems, underinvestment in public education, and unequal learning outcomes are closely linked to labour market exclusion and intergenerational poverty.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Pakistan is guided by the values of social democracy - freedom, justice, and solidarity. In this spirit, the study seeks to contribute to informed policy dialogue on building an education system that serves the many, not the few. Its focus on youth is particularly significant, as Pakistan's demographic future depends on whether young people are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and opportunities needed to participate meaningfully in economic, social, and political life.

We hope that this publication will serve as a resource for policymakers, parliamentarians, educators, trade unions, civil society actors, and researchers committed to reducing inequality and strengthening democratic governance in Pakistan. At a time when social cohesion and economic resilience are under strain, investing in equitable education is not an option, but it is a necessity for a just and sustainable future.

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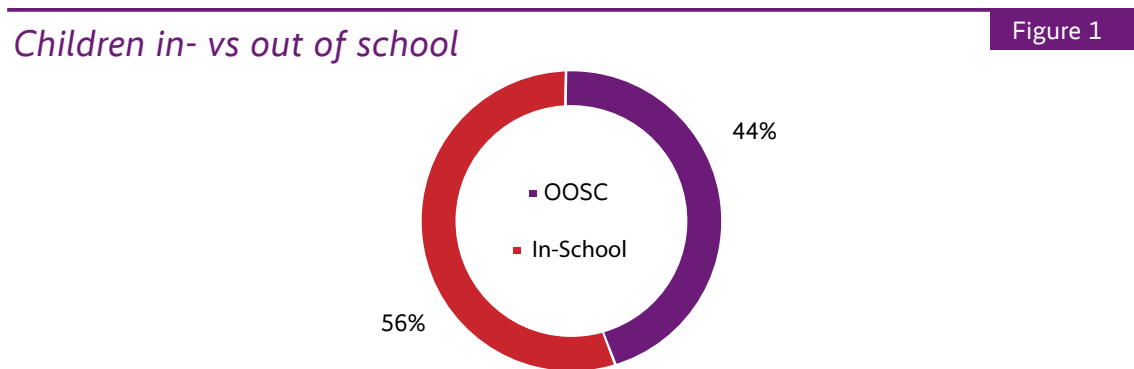
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1. Introduction

Pakistan is a young country, with over 64% of its population under the age of 30 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). It represents both an opportunity and a warning. If equipped with equitable, high-quality education, this generation could power social mobility and democratic renewal. However, this potential is critically undermined by a deep and persistent crisis in education. Low literacy, poor learning outcomes and educational inequalities on the bases of geography, gender and family income not only have deep consequences for the poverty and economic growth, but also for the strength of democracy in Pakistan. This paper presents an analysis of the prevailing educational inequalities in Pakistan and examine its implications for social democracy. We aim to highlight how unequal access and quality of education undermine democratic participation and social cohesion and propose policy measures grounded in social-democratic principles to address these challenges.

Currently, Pakistan has the world’s second-largest population of out-of-school children (OOSC), with an estimated 22.8 million children aged 5-16 not in school (Pakistan Education Statistics 2021–22). This huge percentage of OOSC, as represented in figure 1, shows that Pakistan’s education system re-produces inequality instead of mitigating it, generating what observers call an “educational apartheid” (Barron’s, 2025).



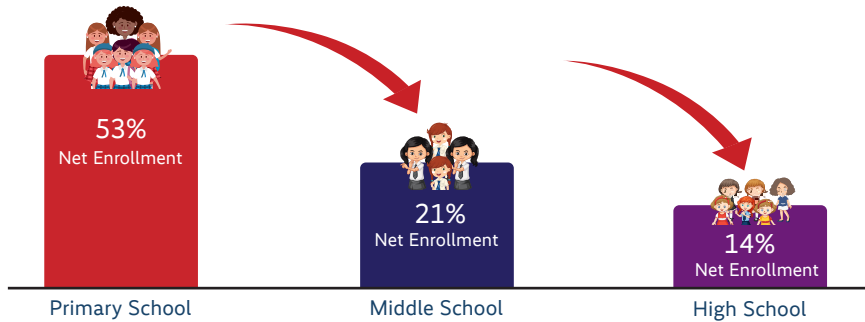
This crisis is not evenly distributed; it is a crisis of inequality that disproportionately affects girls, the poor, and rural populations. Girls are the most affected, making up 53% of this OOSC population. In Baluchistan, half of all girls, aged 5–16, are out of school (Pakistan Alliance for Maths and Science, 2023). The net enrolment of girls also drops at middle and high school levels, as shown in Figure 2, due to non-availability of schools.

Moreover, the secondary completion rates remain 68 percent in urban areas versus only 38 percent in rural areas. Public spending on education has hovered between 1.7–2.4 percent of GDP for decades, well below the UNESCO benchmark of 4–6 percent, limiting progress in infrastructure, teacher quality, and curriculum reform (Sain, 2023; Government of Pakistan, 2022).

These systemic deficits are compounded by structural stratification where parallel education systems are starkly divided along class and regional lines. The system is fragmented into “at least 10 different systems”, including elite private institutions for a small minority, a struggling and “underfunded” public sector catering to the masses, low-cost private schools (LCPSs) of varying quality, and a large network of Madaris (Benz, 2012; Naviwala, 2016).

Figure 2

Girls Education in Pakistan: An Alarming Drop-Off



Source: Pakistan Alliance for Maths and Science, 2023

A central mechanism of this apartheid is the “language divide”. English medium schools who often charge high fee have become a symbol of quality. The fluency in English opens door to corporate employment and joining civil service, thus it institutionalizes the class privilege. This effectively excludes 58% majority by from the better opportunities by labelling them as less talented and more inefficient (Sain, 2023; Rehman, 2005). Such exclusion weakens the foundations of social democracy in Pakistan.

Alongside, socioeconomic and gender inequities intersect sharply. Studies show that low-cost private schools (LCPSs), often presented as a “cost-efficient” solution for poor communities, in fact reflect the same class and gender patterns as elite institutions. Bizenjo (2020) shows that once socioeconomic background is controlled for, the quality difference of these schools from public schools becomes marginal. However, from a public economics perspective, LCPSs generate significant negative externalities. By fragmenting the student body along class lines, they fail to produce the essential “public goods” of social cohesion and shared civic values, thus eroding the foundations of a unified citizenry.

Empirical work confirms that unequal schooling perpetuates exclusion, diminishes civic engagement and collective efficacy, weakens trust in public institutions, and narrows political agency among youth (Sain, 2023). When the majority perceives that quality education, and thus opportunity, is reserved for a privileged few, alienation deepens. Social democracy, on the other hand, emphasizes equality, solidarity and universal access to public goods – which include education. In this sense, Pakistan’s education crisis is not only a developmental challenge but a democratic one.

The social-democratic vision considers education not a private commodity but a public good which is essential for upholding values like equality, citizenship and solidarity. Sen (1999) argues that capabilities expand freedom and Dewey (1916) contends that education underpins democracy itself. Therefore, building a cohesive and just society requires universal access to quality education. Unless Pakistan reverses the logic of exclusion embedded in its schooling system, the country’s demographic dividend will remain unrealized. and its democratic foundations increasingly fragile.

This paper argues that addressing this educational apartheid requires a social democratic response. In local context, this does not merely mean providing free education but rather removing the schooling from the market logic where quality is determined by purchasing power. Grounded in Amartya Sen's "Capability Approach", our vision treats education as a primary vehicle for expanding human freedom. It posits that a function democracy, based on youth inclusion and social cohesion, requires citizens who have more than just the human capital. Social democracy is strengthened when citizens have capabilities to reason, deliberate, and participate as equals in civic life. Thus, the paper will suggest some policy measures on these lines.

2. Mapping Educational Inequality in Pakistan

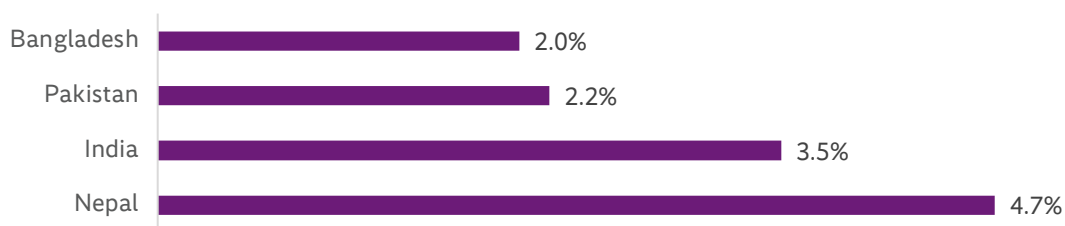
Educational inequality in Pakistan is multidimensional cutting across class, geography, gender, and language. The result is a fragmented system where access and quality are determined by birth rather than merit.

2.1 Class and the Public–Private Divide

The most visible fault line is between elite private schooling and the neglected public system. Public spending on education remains critically low at 2.2% of GDP. It is lowest in South Asia and far below the UNESCO benchmark of 4–6%. This chronic underfunding has entrenched a dual system: elite private schools for the affluent and under-resourced public schools for the majority.

Public Expenditure on Education (% of GDP)

Figure 3



Source: World Bank, 2024

Private schools now enrol around 42 percent of students nationwide (Pakistan Education Statistics 2021–22), while government schools face chronic underfunding, teacher absenteeism, and decaying infrastructure. Sain (2023) observes that this neglect has produced two distinct “educational economies”: one globally competitive and English-speaking, the other barely functional.

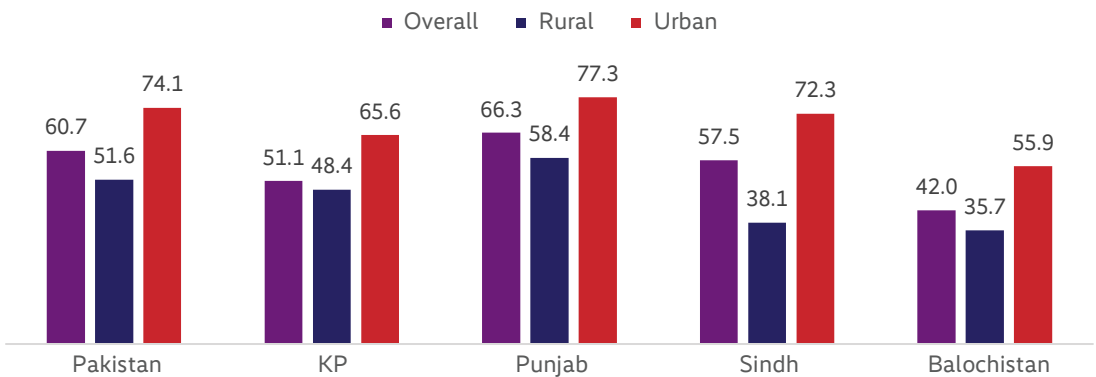
The gap manifests early. ASER (2023) finds that only 37 percent of grade-5 students in rural public schools can read a grade-2 story in Urdu or English, versus 66 percent in private schools. Yet private schooling is itself stratified: elite chains charge up to PKR 25,000–40,000 per month, while low-cost private schools charge less than PKR 1,000, often employing untrained teachers. Using LEAPS (Learning and Educational Achievement in Punjab Schools) data from Punjab, Bizenjo (2020) shows that the quality advantage of these low-cost schools is marginal once socioeconomic background is controlled for, challenging the notion that privatization ensures better learning outcomes.

2.2 Regional and Urban–Rural Disparities

The “region of residence (province)” has been identified as the most important factor explaining inequality in schooling, reading, and numeracy skills, and therefore, geography compounds class. Figure 4 given below shows that based on literacy rate, there is not only a significant disparity among provinces, but within the provinces, there is also a rural urban difference. Other than this, Baluchistan has nearly 40 percent of schools without boundary walls and one-third without toilets (MoFEPT, 2023). Floods, smog, and heatwaves have also forced recurring school closures, particularly in Sindh and South Punjab, underscoring how climate vulnerability intersects with educational deprivation (Baron’s, 2025).

Figure 4

Literacy Rate in Provinces based on Rural-Urban Differences



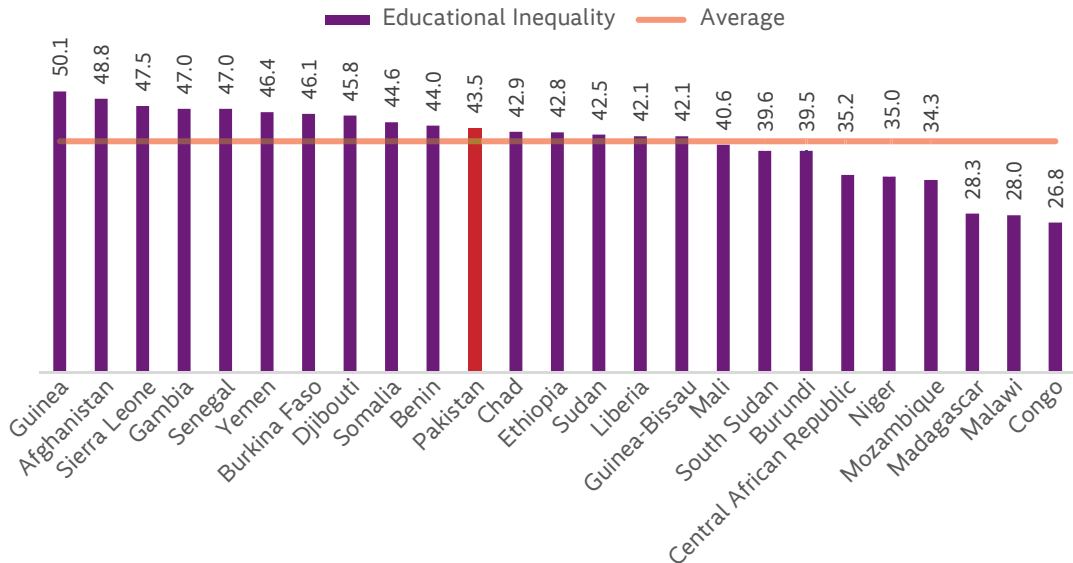
Source: PBS (2024), National Census Report

Infrastructure gaps mirror these divides. Education in rural and periphery areas is plagued by inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, a lack of digital access, and long, often hazardous journeys to school.

2.3 Gender Inequality

The gender based educational inequalities are common among the countries falling in bottom of the Human Development Index (HDI). Among those countries, Pakistan is among those countries in which this divide is higher than the average. This can be observed by looking at Figure 5 below:

Gender based Educational Inequality Among Low HDI Countries (2023)



Source: UNDP, Human Development Index

The Pakistan Alliance for Maths and Science (2023) reports 12 percent fewer girls than boys enrolled at the primary level and 22 percent fewer at secondary. In Baluchistan, 78% of girls are excluded from education.¹ Data also shows that urban girls are more likely to complete secondary education (68%) as compared to the girls living in rural areas (34%)². Moreover, extremist attacks on schools have specifically targeted girls' education³.

Research by Salik and Zhiyong (2014) confirms that rural women face compounded disadvantages of poverty and patriarchy. Even where access improves, gender stereotypes in curricula and teacher expectations limit agency. Bizenjo (2020) finds that boys are 10% more likely than girls to attend LCPS (Low-Cost Private Schools), and that parental education, especially the father's, strongly predicts private school enrolment. While girls who do attend LCPSs outperform boys academically, their overall participation remains low due to cultural, financial and safety constraints. Girls face specific "social norms", the burden of domestic responsibilities, the threat of child marriage.

2.4 Linguistic, Ethnic and Curricular Hierarchies

Language is another axis of exclusion. Rehman (2005) describes this linguistic dualism as "the reproduction of class through language." English-medium schooling, rooted in a colonial legacy, functions as the "de facto prerequisite" and "gatekeeper" for access to higher education, civil service exams, and well-paying jobs, 'efficiently' converting language into a form of capital that determines life chances. This system caters to roughly 42 percent of the students nationwide, however, it constructs an "im-

1 <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/education>

2 PSLM 2019-20

3 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1198105-gender-disparities-in-education-a-persistent-challenge-in-pakistan>

aged privileged monolingual centre” where English is the only norm. This effectively disenfranchises millions of youths educated in Urdu or regional languages leaving them with limited resources and outdated curricula (Sain, 2023; Rehman, 2005).

Students from Urdu-medium or regional-medium schools encounter barriers in universities and the job market, perpetuating intergenerational privilege. Analyses show that Balochi, Sindhi, and Siraiki communities are significantly more deprived in educational and health outcomes compared to other ethnic groups. Attempts at a Single National Curriculum have struggled to reconcile linguistic diversity with quality; critics note that uniform content without addressing resource disparities risks deepening inequity.

2.5 Governance and Institutional Fragmentation

The 18th Amendment devolved education to provinces, but coordination failures persist. Provinces differ in curricula, teacher training standards, and monitoring systems. Sain (2023) notes pervasive corruption, from “ghost schools” to politicized teacher appointments, that undermines efficiency. Only half of enrolled students complete primary education on time, and learning outcomes remain among the lowest in South Asia (World Bank, 2023).

The governance failure adds to the problem of inadequate public funding. The scarce funds remain underutilized or are inefficiently utilized because of persisting implementation gaps, limiting progress toward equity⁴.

2.6 The Structural Gaps: A System Not Built for All

The crisis is also one of supply. The system is simply not designed to retain students, especially after the primary level.

2.6.1 The Post-Primary Bottleneck:

There is a dramatic rise in school dropouts post primary level. This is a direct consequence of a significant shortage of schools beyond primary level. For every 100 primary schools in Pakistan, there are only 24 secondary schools. This bottleneck is even worse in rural areas (22 secondary schools for every 100 primary schools) and in provinces like Sindh (only 16 secondary schools for every 100 primary schools).

2.6.2 The Quality Crisis:

Beyond quantity, the quality of education in state-run schools is a core problem. Besides suffering from inadequate public expenditure on education and weak governance, the schooling system itself is very obsolete. This relies on “outdated teaching methods”, an examination system that promotes “rote memorization” over critical thinking, and political influence in teacher appointments.

This results in poor learning outcomes, the World Bank’s Learning Poverty metric shows that three out of four Pakistani children cannot read a simple text by age 10, a figure worsened by 2022 and 2025 floods and prolonged school closures due to smog and heatwaves. These crises disproportionately affected girls and rural children, amplifying pre-existing inequalities⁴ (Isa et al., 2024).

⁴ <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/dataviz/girls-education-pakistan/>

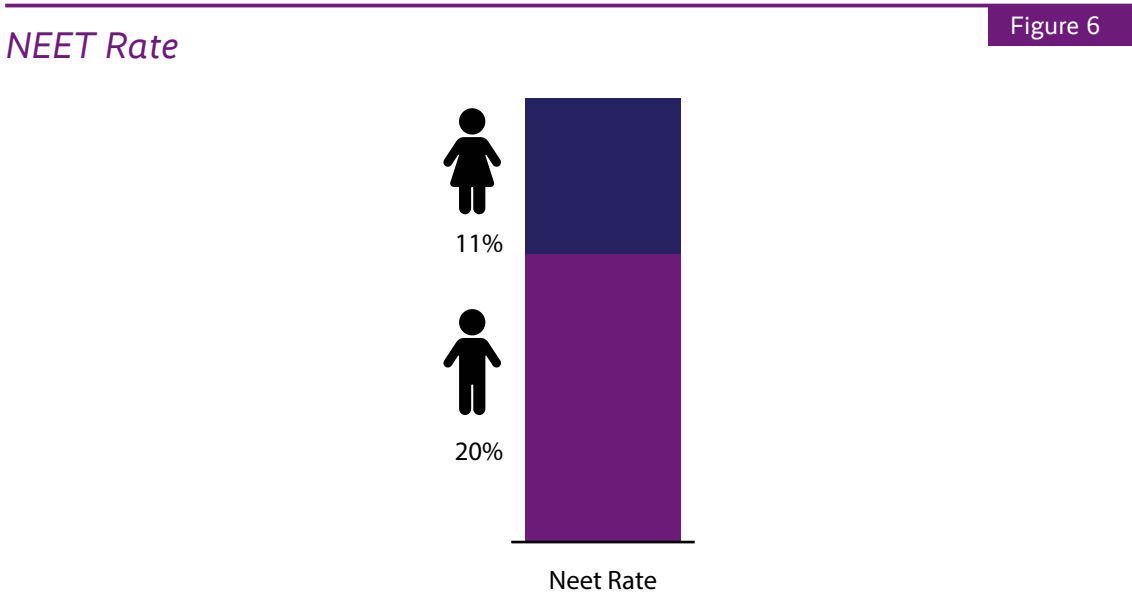
The economic cost of the exclusion caused by all these factors extends beyond individual poverty; it stunts national growth. When millions of talented children and youth are excluded from the high-productive, innovation led economy because of linguistic, regional, gender based or financial barriers, the result is a massive misallocation of human capital. Economically, this translates into a loss of Total Factor Productivity (TFP). This is one of the core reasons behind Pakistan trapping into a low-equilibrium growth path. Beyond economic numbers, these different and disconnected social and cognitive outcomes erode the idea of a shared national identity. For a social democracy premised on equality of opportunity, this structural segmentation of learning is both morally indefensible and economically unsustainable.

3. From Educational Divide to Social Exclusion

Education in Pakistan does not merely mirror inequality, it reproduces it. The stratified schooling system shapes life chances so early and so rigidly that it functions as a mechanism of social sorting rather than mobility. The consequences extend beyond the classroom: they define who participates in the economy, who feels represented by the state, and who believes in democracy itself.

3.1 Unequal Schooling and Economic Exclusion

Economic consequences of education inequality are severe. Poor educational quality and access translate directly into labour-market marginalization. Nearly 31 percent of young people aged 15–24 are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) (ILO, 2023). Its gender-wise breakdown is given in the Figure 6. Youth with secondary or higher education are twice as likely to find formal employment as those with only primary schooling (World Bank, 2023), yet such education remains accessible primarily to urban and affluent families. The result is an economy segmented by schooling: graduates of elite institutions dominate high-productivity, English-speaking sectors, while the rest are absorbed into informal or precarious work. This fuels in the feelings of exclusion among large majority leading to weakening in the trust in state, and institutions. This also discourages people from participating into democratic process.



Source: ILO, 2023

3.2 From Economic Precarity to Social Alienation

This educationally produced inequality reinforces a broader sense of exclusion. Survey data show declining youth confidence in public institutions and a growing perception that effort no longer guarantees mobility (Gallup Pakistan, 2024). When young people experience the state only through dysfunctional schools, they interpret inequality as betrayal rather than misfortune. Bizenjo (2020) links this erosion of faith to “learned helplessness,” a psychological condition in which structural disadvantage is internalized as personal failure. It contributes to disengagement, apathy, and, at times, attraction to populist or extremist narratives that promise recognition and justice.

3.3 Educational Deficits and Democratic Weakness

Empirical research consistently shows that education is one of the strongest predictors of democratic engagement. A recent panel analysis finds that attending college leads to a substantive increase in voter turnout, reinforcing the view that education sustains democracy by creating an engaged citizenry (Jensen, 2025). Cross-national evidence also shows that individuals with higher education exhibit greater political interest, support for democratic principles, and participation (Kudrnáč & Davenport, 2025).

Beyond attainment, the experience of democratic practices within schools—such as student councils and participatory decision-making—has measurable effects on later political trust and activism. Evidence from nine European countries shows that students who experienced democratic governance in school were more likely to vote and engage politically (Kiess, 2022).

In South Asia, studies link education quality to democratic resilience: systems emphasizing participatory teaching and inclusive curricula report higher youth civic engagement and tolerance (Byker & Witenstein, 2024). Conversely, rote-dominant systems correlate with low political efficacy and trust in institutions.

Educational inequality amplifies democratic fragility by creating unequal citizenship. In Pakistan, youth from low-income and rural backgrounds report lower confidence in public institutions and reduced participation, trends linked to poor schooling experiences and limited access to quality education (Gallup Pakistan, 2024; HRCP, 2020).

Empirical studies across South Asia show that education quality, not just enrolment, correlates strongly with civic participation and tolerance (Sain 2023; UNDP 2024). When learning environments promote rote obedience instead of critical reasoning, they fail to produce citizens capable of deliberation or dissent. In Pakistan, schools rarely cultivate civic literacy or collective responsibility; textbooks often reinforce gender stereotypes, religious uniformity, and narrow nationalism. Such curricula discourage questioning and pluralism, the very habits a democracy requires.

3.4 Intergenerational Consequences

The divide also reproduces inequality across generations. Children from low-income or rural households inherit the same structural disadvantages their parents faced: under-resourced schools, poor English proficiency, and limited social networks. By contrast, elites pass on not only wealth but also linguistic and institutional capital, ensuring their dominance in higher education and governance. Over time, this creates what Esping-Andersen (1990) called a “stratified welfare state,” where opportunity is inherited, not earned.

3.5 The Psychological and Social Costs

The most profound consequences of this systemic exclusion are social and psychological. The system creates a “chain reaction of many socio-economic problems like poverty, inequality, violence, psychological issues, etc.”. This is further explained as follows:

3.5.1 Alienation and Stigma

For students from low-income backgrounds who do gain access to higher education, the exclusion is not just cognitive but “social and psychological”. The term “Urdu medium” is used as a “stigma”. This generates a powerful “sense of inferiority, isolation and alienation”, with reports of even top-achieving students from public schools becoming “a college joke” due to their accent or English skills.

3.5.2 Mental and Physical Health

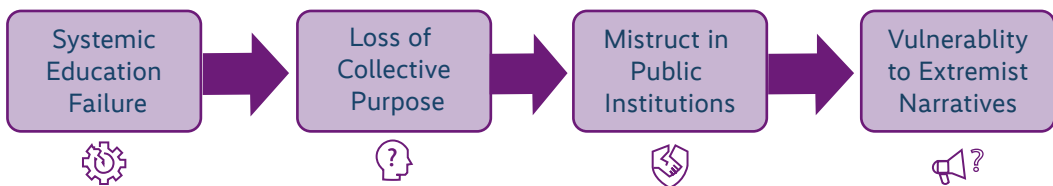
This deprivation is linked to severe health consequences. Women in Pakistan, in particular, suffer from “Mixed Anxiety/ Depressive Disorder” at higher frequencies than men. While the psychological toll of the COVID-19 pandemic—including anxiety, fear, depression, and loneliness due to school closures and isolation—was a global phenomenon, its impact was particularly acute for Pakistani girls. In a context where schools often provide the only socially sanctioned space for peer interaction and personal development outside the home, their closure meant a total loss of social agency, compounding the stress of pre-existing gendered restrictions (UNICEF, 2024; WHO, 2023).

3.5.3 Erosion of Social Cohesion

On a macro level, this inequality “weakened social cohesion, political instability, and socio-political conflicts.

The Chain of Problems

Figure 7



In essence, Pakistan’s education crisis is no longer just about literacy or enrollment; it is about belonging. A divided education system produces divided citizens—economically insecure, politically alienated, and emotionally detached from the collective good (Sen, 1999; Dewey, 1916; UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2023; FES, 2023). Recent global analyses emphasize that education is not merely a technical service but a social contract essential for solidarity and democratic resilience (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2023). Addressing this requires more than incremental reforms: it demands a social-democratic reimagining of education as the foundation of equality, trust, and inclusive citizenship (FES, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

4. A Social Democratic Vision for Education

A social democracy treats education not as a market commodity but as a social right—a foundation for equality, dignity, and collective progress. In Pakistan, reclaiming this principle is essential to reversing decades of fragmentation and exclusion. The goal is not merely to expand access but to rebuild the moral purpose of education: to nurture citizens capable of reason, empathy, and shared responsibility.

4.1 Education as a Public Good, not a Private Investment

Under a social-democratic approach, the state guarantees free, high-quality education for all as part of a universal social contract. This contrasts with the current logic where families “buy” quality schooling if they can afford it. International evidence is clear: countries with strong public systems—such as Finland, Sweden, and Uruguay—combine excellence with equality through progressive taxation, universal access, and continuous teacher training (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). Pakistan, by contrast, spends just over 2 percent of GDP on education, half the South Asian average, and relies on private provision for nearly half its students.

A first step toward restoring equity is fiscal: raising public investment to at least 4 percent of GDP by 2030, prioritized for early-childhood, primary, and lower-secondary education. Financing should be tied to governance reform, transparent teacher recruitment, and school-level accountability. Education must be recognized as a social wage, an entitlement of citizenship, not charity.

However, achieving this requires confronting the political economy of reform. A primary barrier to repairing the public sector is “elite capture”. Pakistan’s decision-makers including politicians, bureaucrats, and ruling elites, seem to have no “skin in the game” regarding the quality of public institutions. A social democratic strategy must therefore aim to rebuild the social contract by gradually making public schools high-quality enough to attract the middle class back into the system, thereby creating a powerful political constituency for sustained investment.

4.2 Rebuilding Public Institutions of Learning

Public universities and vocational institutes, once engines of mobility, now suffer from neglect and bureaucratic capture. Reinvesting in them is crucial for both youth employment and social cohesion. Sain (2023) and Bizenjo (2020) emphasize that underfunding tertiary and technical education forces graduates into informal jobs or migration, draining talent and weakening trust in national institutions. A social-democratic strategy would:

- Restore merit-based hiring and research funding in public universities.
- Expand vocational and technical programs linked with local industries, especially in smaller cities.

→ Strengthen teacher education, professional autonomy, and career progression to attract talent into public service.

4.3 Democratic and Inclusive Curricula

Curriculum reform is central to democratizing education. Current syllabi reinforce hierarchy and conformity; they must instead cultivate civic competence, empathy, and gender equality. Dewey (1916) envisioned education as “a mode of associated living”—a space where individuals learn to deliberate, respect difference, and act collectively. In Pakistan’s context, that means integrating civic education, human rights, and environmental awareness across all levels.

Gender inclusion must also be curricular, not just numerical. Comprehensive sexuality education—age-appropriate and culturally sensitive, can address early marriage, reproductive health, and gender-based violence, aligning education with empowerment (UNFPA, 2023).

4.4 Bridging the Language and Class Divide

Language policy is perhaps the most entrenched barrier to educational justice. English proficiency remains the gateway to higher education and state employment, creating a class-based apartheid. A social-democratic framework must replace linguistic exclusion with linguistic pluralism: teaching in mother tongues at early stages, transitioning gradually to national and global languages. Evidence from UNESCO (2021) shows that mother-tongue instruction in early grades improves literacy and retention without limiting later proficiency in English.

Pakistan can draw valuable lessons from India’s “Three Language Formula,” reaffirmed in its National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This model mandates that students learn three languages: the regional language (mother tongue), the federal language, and English (Pandey & Ozarkar, 2025; Singh, 2025). By prioritizing the mother tongue as the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, India aims to decouple cognitive development from linguistic privilege while ensuring global competitiveness through English. Pakistan’s Single National Curriculum could be similarly repurposed into a plural, equitable framework. Instead of subordinating regional languages, it should institutionalize them alongside Urdu and English, ensuring that a child’s first language is a bridge to learning, not a barrier to entry.

4.5 Regulation and Integration of the Private Sector

Private schools will remain part of Pakistan’s education landscape, but their role must be regulated to serve public objectives. Social democracy does not abolish private provision; it aligns it with equity. This entails:

- Setting and enforcing minimum wage, infrastructure, and quality standards.
- Introducing progressive taxation on high-fee institutions to cross-subsidize low-income students.
- Encouraging partnerships between elite schools and under-resourced public schools to share curricula, teacher training, and learning resources.

4.6 Education for Social Health and Empowerment

A social-democratic curriculum must serve the whole person and the well-being of society, not just economic productivity. This includes the progressive and necessary step of incorporating comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health awareness. In a country grappling with rapid population growth and high rates of gender-based violence, these subjects are not “taboo” but essential tools for survival and empowerment. By equipping youth with age-appropriate, culturally sensitive knowledge about their health, rights, and bodily autonomy, education can directly challenge the patriarchal norms that fuel early marriage and disempower women, thereby catalysing a virtuous cycle of smaller, healthier, and more educated families. Global evidence shows that such curricula improve health outcomes and support inclusive development (UNFPA, 2023; UNESCO, 2022).

Ultimately, a social-democratic vision of education in Pakistan is about reimagining the classroom as the cornerstone of democracy itself—a place where privilege is levelled, empathy is taught, and trust in collective institutions is rebuilt. Without this reorientation, no amount of economic growth or technology reform can deliver social justice.

5. Learning from International and South Asian Models

Social-democratic education systems are built on the conviction that equality and quality are not competing goals. Countries that have institutionalized this principle, across Scandinavia, Latin America, and South Asia, offer useful lessons for Pakistan. While no model is directly transferable, their underlying philosophies highlight how state commitment, teacher empowerment, and inclusive curricula can transform education into an engine of social cohesion.

5.1 The Scandinavian Experience: Equality through Universalism

Finland, Sweden, and Norway exemplify the social-democratic ideal of education as a universal public good. In Finland, all schooling, primary through tertiary, is free, and private schools make up less than 3 percent of total enrolment (OECD, 2023). Teacher education is highly selective and fully state-funded, with autonomy to design lessons rather than follow rigid curricula. This trust-based system produces both high learning outcomes and minimal achievement gaps.

Crucially, Scandinavian states treat schools as social institutions rather than competitive marketplaces. Education policy is coordinated with welfare, healthcare, and labour policy, ensuring that no child's learning is undermined by poverty or social exclusion. The lesson for Pakistan is not replication but reorientation: quality and equality can coexist when the state prioritizes fairness over fragmentation and teachers over testing.

5.2 Latin America: Education as Democratic Reconstruction

In Latin America, countries like Uruguay and Costa Rica have used education reform to strengthen democracy after periods of inequality and authoritarianism. Uruguay's Plan Ceibal—a public digital inclusion initiative, provided every student and teacher with a free laptop and internet access, bridging rural–urban divides (UNESCO, 2022). Costa Rica abolished its military in 1948 and redirected resources toward education and health, sustaining one of the region's highest literacy rates and strongest democratic institutions (World Bank, 2023).

These cases illustrate that educational reform can serve as political reconstruction, building shared civic values and reducing class barriers. The emphasis is not only on resources but also on purpose: education as a means of democratic participation and equality of dignity.

5.3 South Asian Parallels: Reform within Constraints

Closer to home, South Asia offers pragmatic lessons for Pakistan, particularly in contexts of limited fiscal space and uneven governance. Some of the examples from South Asia countries that Pakistan can follow onto are:

- **India’s Right to Education Act (2009)** made education a fundamental right for all children aged 6–14, mandating 25 percent reserved seats for disadvantaged students in private schools. Implementation has been uneven, but studies show improved enrolment of marginalized children and modest gains in gender parity (Brookings, 2021). Pakistan can draw from this framework to enforce socioeconomic diversity in elite private schools through regulation and quotas.
- **Bangladesh’s Girls’ Education Initiatives**, notably the Female Secondary School Stipend Program, significantly increased female enrolment and delayed early marriage. By linking cash transfers to school attendance, Bangladesh raised the female-to-male enrolment ratio above parity by 2015 (BRAC, 2022). The program demonstrates that gender equity in education requires targeted social policy, not just curriculum reform.
- **Sri Lanka’s Education Model**: rooted in free public schooling since 1945—achieved near-universal literacy despite lower income levels. The state’s continuous investment in teachers, textbooks, and nutrition programs has kept learning gaps relatively narrow (UNDP, 2024).

These regional examples show that progress does not depend solely on wealth but on political will and redistributive policy. South Asian countries that embedded education in broader social welfare frameworks achieved faster gains in inclusion and trust.

5.4 Relevance for Pakistan

For Pakistan, the comparative evidence suggests three priorities:

- a. Universalism before privatization** — build a credible public education baseline before expanding private options.
- b. Teachers as reform anchors** — invest in training, autonomy, and accountability to raise standards system-wide.
- c. Equity as design, not afterthought** — integrate social protection, gender policy, and linguistic inclusion into education strategy.

Adapting these lessons requires contextual realism: Pakistan’s fiscal constraints and political fragmentation differ from Nordic welfare states. Yet the moral principle is transferable, the state must guarantee that the circumstances of one’s birth do not dictate one’s chances to learn, work, or participate in democracy. Crucially, this investment is not merely a moral imperative but an economic necessity. Without a skilled and educated workforce, Pakistan’s economy will remain stagnant, unable to innovate or compete globally, and the very fiscal constraints that currently limit education funding will continue to persist in a vicious cycle of underdevelopment.

A 2024 study on Pakistan finds that a 1% increase in workforce education leads to a 0.62% increase in real GDP per capita over the long term, underscoring that investment in education translates directly into economic growth (Kausar et al., 2024). Global research reinforces this: long-run growth in GDP per capita is largely determined by population cognitive skills, with education quality, measured through international assessments, explaining about 75% of differences in economic performance (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2021).

6. Policy Roadmap for Pakistan

To make education the foundation of social democracy, Pakistan must move from piecemeal reforms to a coherent national strategy grounded in equality, universality, and citizenship. The following roadmap outlines actionable measures across fiscal, institutional, and curricular dimensions to address the foundational, systemic, and social barriers that currently exclude millions of youth, particularly girls and marginalized groups.

6.1 Fiscal Commitment and Public Investment

The core problem of the public system is its chronic underfunding and “meager” resource allocation, which has remained below 2.4% of GDP. This must be the first line of attack.

- **Mandate a Significant Increase in the Education Budget:** The government must follow through on its political promises to increase the education budget to the internationally recommended benchmark of at least 4% of GDP by 2030, prioritizing early and secondary education. This is the foundational requirement for all other reforms.
- Mandate provincial education budgets with ring-fenced allocations for girls’ education, teacher training, and school infrastructure.
- Develop a transparent education expenditure dashboard for citizens to track budget execution.

To make this happen, there is a need to work on broadening the national tax base and reforming federal-provincial fiscal transfers to ensure needs-based allocation, moving beyond the current ‘aspirational’ pledges.

Rationale: Education financing must be treated as a redistributive policy tool, not an administrative expense. Fiscal credibility is central to restoring public confidence in the state’s social contract.

6.2 Strengthening Public Education Systems

- An adequate number of public schools, providing quality education, can make the education inclusive and for-all.
- Launch a National Teacher Professionalization Program, modelled on Finland’s system, ensuring pre-service training, merit-based recruitment, and competitive salaries.
- Establish local school councils with parent–teacher representation for transparency and community oversight.

- Rebuild public schools as the universal baseline—safe buildings, digital access, and trained teachers in every union council.
- Revive public universities and vocational institutes through competitive research grants, transparent governance, and industry partnerships.
- Hire More Female Teachers: Address the stark gender imbalance in the teaching force, especially in rural areas. In rural Sindh, for example, there are only 21 female primary teachers for every 100 male teachers. Actively recruiting and deploying female teachers is a proven strategy to overcome socio-cultural barriers to girls' enrolment.

Rationale: A credible public system is indispensable; without it, privatization entrenches inequality.

6.3 Regulation and Integration of Private Education

Alongside funding, the very structure of the education system must be reformed to prioritize equity and inclusion.

- Enforce minimum standards for infrastructure, teacher pay, and curriculum across all private schools.
- Require cross-subsidization quotas (e.g., 10–15% of seats reserved for low-income students) in high-fee institutions, financed through tax credits.
- Establish a National Council for Educational Equity to regulate private schooling and madrassa integration under unified quality benchmarks.

Rationale: The goal is not to abolish private schooling but to align it with public objectives of inclusion and fairness.

6.4 Curriculum and Language Reform

- Develop inclusive curricula that emphasize civic education, human rights, gender equality, and environmental literacy.
- Incorporate critical thinking and problem-solving rather than rote memorization as assessment criteria.
- Implement mother-tongue instruction in early grades with gradual transition to Urdu and English, following UNESCO's multilingual education model.
- Integrate comprehensive sexuality and reproductive health education to address early marriage, population growth, and gender-based violence.

Rationale: Curriculum reform must create citizens, not just workers—capable of empathy, inquiry, and participation.

6.5 Governance and Accountability

- Create an Interprovincial Education Coordination Forum to harmonize standards post-18th Amendment.
- Digitize school records and performance data to reduce ghost schools and absenteeism.
- Link education policy with youth employment strategies to ensure school-to-work transitions.

Rationale: Governance failures—not lack of ideas—are the core bottleneck. Coordination, transparency, and citizen engagement are the corrective mechanisms.

6.6 National Dialogue on Education Justice

- Convene a National Youth Dialogue on Education and Democracy under parliamentary oversight to align reform with public aspirations.
- Engage teachers' unions, student associations, and civil-society coalitions as co-creators of reform, not passive recipients.
- Frame education policy within Pakistan's democratic renewal agenda, emphasizing equality of opportunity as the foundation of social cohesion.

Education reform is not just a technical fix but a political project—to rebuild trust, reduce inequality, and strengthen democracy. A fair and unified education system is Pakistan's most powerful instrument of nation-building, capable of turning its demographic majority into a democratic majority.

Financing the Reform: Expanding Fiscal Space The target of 4% of GDP is ambitious but fiscally feasible if decoupled from the current austerity paradigm. It requires specific revenue-generation measures:

- **Broadening the Tax Base:** The education emergency provides the political capital needed to tax historically undertaxed sectors, specifically real estate and large-scale agriculture. Earmarking a "Have-Not Tax" on luxury real estate transactions could directly fund school infrastructure.
- **Tax Expenditure** - Sarwar & Shabbar (2025) estimate tax expenditure to nearly Rs. 3.9 trillion in a single year. Ending tax expenditures will not only make this amount available for education but will also simplify tax system.
- **Reforming Fiscal Federalism:** The 18th Amendment devolved responsibility but fractured accountability. The National Finance Commission (NFC) award should be restructured to include "matching grants", where federal transfers are tied to provinces meeting specific education targets (e.g., girls' secondary enrollment), ensuring that increased flows result in tangible outcomes.
- **Innovative Finance** – exclusive bonds for financing education etc.

For more concrete recommendations, figure below gives high level summary – picking the most important reforms:

High Level Summary of Most Critical Reforms



Increase the education budget to at least 4% of GDP by 2030



Launch a National Teacher Professionalization Program ensuring pre-service training, merit-based recruitment, and competitive salaries.



Enforce minimum standards for infrastructure, teacher pay, and curriculum across all private schools.



Create an Interprovincial Education Coordination Forum to harmonize standards



Convene a National Youth Dialogue on Education and Democracy under parliamentary oversight to align reform with public aspirations.



Develop inclusive curricula that emphasize civic education, human rights, gender equality, and environmental literacy.

Conclusion

Educational inequality in Pakistan is not only a policy failure—it is a structural injustice that undermines the very foundations of democracy. A system that sorts citizens by wealth, language, and geography cannot produce a cohesive or fair society. For Pakistan’s young majority, unequal schooling translates into unequal citizenship: it limits opportunity, breeds mistrust and weakens faith in the collective good.

A social-democratic approach reclaims education as the state’s moral responsibility—to guarantee every child, regardless of origin, an equal right to learn, think, and participate. This is not merely an investment in human capital but in social trust. Rebuilding the public education system, regulating private privilege, and democratizing curricula are political choices that determine whether Pakistan’s demographic youth bulge becomes an asset or a liability.

The evidence from Scandinavia, Latin America, and South Asia shows that equality and excellence can coexist when education is treated as a public good rather than a private entitlement. For Pakistan, the challenge is not to replicate these models but to recover their principle: that democracy flourishes only when learning is shared, not stratified.

If Pakistan is to fulfil its promise of social justice and democratic renewal, the path begins in the classroom. Equal education is not merely the reward of a functioning democracy; it is the condition for it. It is the primary means of building the capabilities that Amartya Sen identifies as the essence of freedom: the capability to live a healthy life, to participate in the community, and to influence one’s own destiny. By investing in these capabilities, Pakistan invests in the only future it has: its people.

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Confronting Educational Inequality in Pakistan

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