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OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN PAKISTAN'S REGIONS/AREAS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BASED ON REGIOAL MICS 6 DATA FOCUSING AZAD JAMMU & KASHMIR

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Abstract

The present study analyses the presence of OOSC in Pakistan by using quantitative research of secondary data collected mostly by regional/areas Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS6). It is concerned with provincial/regions inequalities, gender disparities, and urban-rural variations in regions/areas, including Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). Comparative analysis of Provincial/areas' MICS6 data displays significant disparities between regions/areas as the OOSC rates 6.5% at primary school level (age 5-9) in AJ&K are much lower when compared to Baluchistan 69.7%, Sindh 42.7%, and KP 33.7%, GB 25%, and Punjab 12.9%. All these regions/areas also observe almost similar trend with some variations at middle (Baluchistan 61.2%, Sindh 41.1%, and KP 25.7%, and Punjab 20%) and Secondary level (Baluchistan 66.6%, Sindh 49 %, and KP 36.9%, and Punjab 33.3%). However, AJ&K again enjoys the lowest percentage of OOSC at Middle (8.8%) and secondary (19.2%) school level in Pakistan. Moreover, there are constant gender bias with girls always having more chance of being OOS than boys in all provinces/areas. In addition, children in rural areas are greater victim of exclusion than those in urban areas. Gender inequity and rural disadvantage also play leading roles in educational exclusion in Pakistan. AJ&K is more gender-balanced and observes lower rural inequality. Punjab ranks second and next to AJ&K among the Pakistan's regions/areas. The paper brings to the interplay between gender and geographic disadvantage whereby rural girls form the most disadvantaged group in terms of access to education. It adds value to the literature by delivering a detailed, geographically disaggregated quantitative study and making AJ&K a prospective example on how to enhance the quality of access to education, gender equality and literacy. The results highlight the necessity of political interventions specific to the gaps in regions, gender obstacles, and inadequate infrastructures in rural areas. Ensuring better education governance, establishing more school infrastructure in underserved regions and rural areas, improving teaching learning environment, removing missing facilities in schools, improving security, increasing budgetary provision, enhancing financial support for girls (book, school uniform, etc.), recruiting more teachers, especially female,

ensuring better access, and having gender sensitive educational policies will be essential in enhancing educational access and SDG4 realization in Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the fundamentals and human rights, essential factor to socio-economic progress and development. It is largely a key to the development of economic, social, scientific and political institutions in any area or a country (Morris, 1979; Carrin, 1984; Lockheed & Verspoor, 1991; Kazmi, 1995, 2005 & 2010). Quality education has a positive impact on job creation, health improvement, reduction of poverty and sustainable economic development (Sen, 1999a&b; Kazmi, 1995; Kazmi et al., 2024). Increasing access to education has thus been a key priority in international development agendas, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), most importantly SDG 4, which focuses on inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2005; Waage et al., 2010; United Nations, 2015). Despite fulfilling the above commitments, the educational exclusion continues to be a significant global issue as the prevalence of inequalities in access to education has persisted. The number of Out of School Children (OOSC) is surprisingly growing as against 121 million children Out Of School in 2015 increased to over 251 million worldwide in 2024. Another UNESCO 'Global Education Monitoring report' cites 275 million OOSC worldwide in 2025, indicating an astonishing increase of 24 million OOSC only in one year (UNESCO, 2015a, 2024b; 2025). Inequalities are especially stark in low and middle-income countries, where poverty, conflict, gender inequity, poor infrastructure, and a lack of public funding (< 2.5%) persist, affecting education achievement (Tahir, 2016; UNESCAP, 2017 and 2018; UNESCO, 2005, 2015a&b and 2024a; Kazmi S.K.H. et al., 2024; World Bank, 2024a-c; Kazmi S.W., 2025; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a$bm 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a)

Educational inequality is multi-dimensional and a result of the interplay of gender, geography and socio-economic status (Kazmi, S.M.A. 2015). Factors such as cultural norms, early marriage, poverty and insecurity are barriers for girls while children residing in rural and remote areas are facing the challenges of limited infrastructure, high travel time, lack of trained teachers and higher education costs (Mughal, 2018 & 2020; Pradhan et al., 2018, WEF, 2022; UNICEF, 2022a; UNESCO, 2023b; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a&b, 2026a&b). The overlapping disadvantages underscore the need to consider localised and context-specific analysis to comprehend educational exclusion and to plan and implement effective policy interventions (Brohi & Kaepoto, 2016; Farooq & Kai, 2016; Baran & Bend, 2023).

Out-of-school children (OOSC) remains a critical issue in third word counties, particularly in South Asia due to poverty, child labour, conflicts, poor infrastructure, and gender inequality, which continues to impede education participation. While there has been progress in primary school enrolment rates in countries like India, Bangladesh and Nepal, it still has the challenge of retention, gender parity and quality of education. Despite the progress made, millions of children remain out of school in conflict-affected countries like Afghanistan. Structural issues like poverty, school fees, lack of facilities, teachers, and cultural barriers are still a big challenge for long-term educational participation across the region (Herz and Sperling, 2004; ILO, 2021; UNESCAP, 2017; WEF, 2022; UNICEF, 2022a-c; UNESCO, 2024b and 2025; Datoo et la., 2024; World Bank, 2024a&b; Kazmi S.K.H. et al., 2024; Kazmi S.G.H. et al.2024 & 2025a&b; 2026a; Kazmi S.W. 2026).

Educational problems in Pakistan are amongst the worst in the world. In spite of numerous policy pledges to provide universal education, the OOSC rates at national level are very high (Mughal, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018; Kazmi et al., 2023a&b). UNICEF (2025) estimates show that over 25 million children between the ages of 5-16 are out of school, which is nearly 35% of the school-age

population. Educational exclusion is not evenly distributed among provinces and regions, and this can be attributed to the structural inequalities, weak governance, and low public investment in education. These are more prevalent in rural and underdeveloped regions, due to socio-economic deprivation, poverty, and inaccessibility of schools as well as weak infrastructure and financial inputs (Kazmi, S.M.A. 2015; Haq, 2016; Kazmi, S.M.A. 2015; Tahir, 2016; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a&b, 2026a&b; Kazmi S.W. 2025 and 2026). The regional inequalities continue to be one of the most striking characteristics of educational disparities in Pakistan. UNICEF (2023) and Pakistan Institute of Education – PIE (2022) indicate that generally, OOSC is low in Punjab and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K), and high in Sindh and Balochistan while KP is next to Sindh. Gender gaps are also still substantial, given that there are certain cultural restrictions, early marriages, domestic duties, difficult access and security concerns that hinder girls' opening to education, particularly in remote areas (Khan et al., 2011; Rashid et al., 2012; Haq, 2016; UNWOMEN; 2020; Mohsin, 2023; Datoo, et al 2023; Baran and Bend, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al. 2024 and 2025 a&b). The inequalities are further accentuated in **rural areas** due to poor infrastructure, mobility limitations, security and shortage of female teachers affecting females' participation in education (Pradhan et al., 2018; Mughal, 2018 & 2020; UNESCO IIEP/ASER Pakistan, 2019, UNESCO, 2023a&b; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a; Kazmi S.W., 2025&2026).

In this generalized sense among the regions/areas of Pakistan, **AJ&K's** case is a fairly successful one. OOSC rates are comparatively low in the region despite the challenging terrain and risk of natural hazards, when compared to many other provinces (BoS AJ&K & UNICEF, 202021; UNICEF, 2023). There has been a positive relationship between this enhanced performance and relatively better governance, improved access, healthier financing, higher level of community involvement, and greater percentage of female teachers. Despite the challenges of geography and infrastructure, there is moderate progress in **Gilgit-Baltistan** as well. These areas hold promise as a way of understanding the value of local governance, community participation and better institutional processes in improving educational outcomes even in challenging geographic contexts (Tahir, 2016; Farooq & Kai, 2016; PAGE, 2021a; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 and 2025a; 2026a; Kazmi S.W., 2026). While there is ample literature on the issue of educational inequality in Pakistan, its focus has been mostly on national or provincial trends and limited cross-regional analysis in the context of provinces, AJ&K and the Gilgit-Baltistan (Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a and 2026a). In the past, there has been inadequate research that has accounted for rural–urban, and geographic and gender gaps in the analysis of educational exclusion, which is relevant for policy making. Past research studies are often lacking of disaggregated analysis that has considered the gender, geographic, and rural–urban gaps as well. Furthermore, there are limited studies that compare relatively successful regions with non-performing provinces/areas to highlight the factors influencing educational outcomes in specific contexts and policy implications that can be cross-learned (Pakistan National Commission for UNESCO, 2021; Pakistan Institute of Education -PIE, 2022; UNICEF, 2023; Kazmi, S.G.H. et a; 2024, 2025a and 2026a&b; Kazmi S.W. 2025 and 2026).

In this backdrop, the present study compares out-of-school children across the provinces or regions/areas of Pakistan based on the latest Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (**MICS6**) data (UNICEF, 2022b). It aims to analyze and discuss the distribution and trends of OOSC by province and region, and to compare the performance between those provinces/regions and areas that are doing well and those that are not; to assess gender based disparities in the participation of OOSC; to examine the influence of rural–urban divide; and to identify factors associated with better performer AJ&K's comparatively strong educational performance. The comparative and regionally-informed approach of this study has added value to the existing literature on educational inequality in Pakistan and offers data-driven policy insights for targeted policy interventions. The findings are likely to contribute to the strategies for lowering educational

exclusion, tackling regional and gender gaps in education, and enhancing equitable access to education as per SDG 4 goal.

1.1 Statement of Purpose

Pakistan's Regions/areas with their inherited weak education system, have been facing significant challenges in attaining education targets including gender parity, universal access, etc. These challenges are further compounded by fiscal constraints, inadequate infrastructure, limited access, staff shortage, and natural and manmade disasters, which have hindered regions/areas progress in education towards OOSC at primary, middle and secondary school levels. Some concentrated efforts helped improve education indicators, including enrolment, literacy, gender parity but there is a scarcity of research to substantiate any encouraging outcome towards OOSC (Farooq and Kai, 2016; PAGE, 2021a; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 and 2025a & 2026a).. This study, therefore, intends to examine and ascertain Provinces/areas' including AJ&K performance in bringing OOSC to school corresponding to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4): Quality Education. It also identifies factors hindering regions/areas education sector working towards the stipulated goals.

1.2 Objective of the Study

The present study is planned to:

- Examine the provincial/areas' education - sector working towards OOSC at regional/ state/area levels with urban-rural as well as gender segregation using MICS 6 data
- Evaluate and compare the Provincial/areas' standing in terms of OOSC at primary, middle and secondary level
- Identify potential (socio-economic and dimorphic) factors restricting provincial/areas' to mitigate OOSC problem

1. Literature Review

Educational attainment has been widely considered as a human right and a major contributor to socio-economic development (Schultz 1961; Morris, 1979; Carrin, 1984; Kazmi, S.M.A. 2015; Kazmi, 1995; Kazmi, 2023a&b). Quality education helps deliver better employment opportunities, reduce poverty, advance social mobility and drive national development (PAGE, 2021a-e; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a&b). Although significant gains have been made in expanding access to education at a global level, out-of-school children (OOSC) continue to be a serious issue around the world. Nearly 250 million children and youth worldwide are still out of school (UNESCO, 2024b; Borgen Project, 2025). In addition to the low enrolment rate, many children attending school suffer from "learning poverty", which refers to children who do not acquire basic skills in literacy and numeracy (World Bank, 2020 & 2024c; Kazmi et al., 2024). This is a reminder that the global education crisis is not just a question of access but is manifesting in other areas such as quality, equity and inclusion, which may include child labour and child abuse, trafficking and exploitation (Guarcello et al., 2014; Geoghegan, 2017a&b; Gul et al., 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al 2024 and 2025a&b).

Poverty is a recurring theme in the literature as one of the most significant factors that hinder participation in education. Poor families are less likely to enroll their children in school due to both direct and indirect schooling costs such as school uniform, transportation and education materials, and are more likely to drop them out of school Poor economic prospects often entice children to join the labour market, trapping them and their families in a cycle of poverty and exclusion (Kham eta., 2011; Guarcello et al., 2014; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 &2025a; Borgen Project, 2025). Adverse impacts of conflict, displacement and political instability exacerbate educational inequalities through destruction of education infrastructure (due to natural and manmade catastrophe), disruption of education systems, displacement of families and more. Besides, in conflict-affected areas, children are especially at risk of being excluded from education and exploited for long periods of time. Such adverse environments often escalate children's vulnerability towards child labour, child abuse, sexual exploitation, trafficking, and many other forms of children mistreatment (Guarcello et al., 2014; Geoghegan, 2017a&b; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 202a&b, 2024, 2025a&b, 2026a&b).

Gender disparities are also a significant aspect of educational exclusion. In many developing countries, girls are still constrained from going to school due to socio-cultural factors, including early marriage, domestic duties, limited mobility, and safety concerns (Haq, 2016; Khan, 2017; World Bank, 2020; Ram et al., 2019; UNWOME, 2022; Gul et al., 2023; Mohsin, 2023; Maqbool, 2024; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b,2024, 2025a&b; 2026a&b). UNESCO estimates over 120 million girls worldwide are still not in school, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (UNESCO2024b and 2025). Boys' education is often prioritized over girls' education with regards to household decision-making in many societies, which further perpetuates gender inequities. Educational inequalities, thus, have been growingly recognized as a multi-faceted phenomenon, with multiple and interacting economic, social, political and cultural factors that demand multi-dimensional policy responses (Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023b, 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a&b).

South Asia is home to one of the highest proportions of out-of-school children. While some countries, like India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan and Nepal, have made strides in primary school enrolment, these are still facing issues of retention, gender parity, educational quality and access for children in rural areas (Mukherjee & Das, 2008; UNESCAP 2017; ILO, 2021; WEF, 2022; UNICEF, 2022c; UNESCO, 2023 and 2024b; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024; Kazmi S.K.H. et al., 2024; Datoo et al., 2024; Kazmi S.W. 2025 & 2026). Despite the progress made, the region still faces significant structural barriers, such as poverty, child labour and weak infrastructure, geographic isolation and lack of educational resources, which still hinder universal participation (Guarcello et al., 2014; Kazmi S.M. A. 2015; UNESCAP, 2017 & 2018; UNESCO, 2024a; UNICEF, 2022a&c; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 and 2026b; Kazmi, S.K.H et al., 2026). Socio-economic and regional disparities are well entrenched with educational exclusion in India, particularly for marginalised groups (Mukherjee & Das, 2008; ASER India, 2023). The high rate of drop-out due to poverty and informal child labour is a persistent problem in Bangladesh, and the mountainous topography in Nepal limits access to education in hard-to-reach areas. Afghanistan is one of the worst affected countries in terms of the impact of long periods of conflict and instability on educational systems (UNICEF, 2022a&c; WEF, 2022; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a &b, 2024; Datoo et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2024b).

Gender gaps are entrenched in educational systems globally in South Asia. Cultural constraints, safety issues, and domestic labour, combined with early marriage, all disproportionately affect girls, especially in rural areas. Beside limited infrastructure, insufficient teachers and substandard education quality, and hidden school fees also restrict participation. The literature of the region, therefore, highlights the interrelatedness of structural inequalities and the need to tailor policy interventions to the local context for addressing OOSC (UNESCAP, 2017; ILO, 2021' WEF, 2022; Kazmi S. K. H. et al., 2024; Datoo et al. 2024; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024).

The education system in Pakistan is one of the worst in South Asia. Nearly 35% of the school-age population (25.1 million children aged 5-16 years) are out-of-school (UNICEF, 2025). Although policy improvements and greater focus on education have been made, the rate and level of progress towards universal enrollment has been slow and uneven. According to the literature, the current crisis can be attributed to structural inequalities, governance problems, lack of public investments, and socioeconomic deprivation (UNESCO, 2005, 2015a & 2024a; Tahir, 2016; UNESCAP, 2017; ASER Pakistan, 2019 and 2020; PAGE, 2021 a-e; ILO, 2021; Pakistan Institute of Education, 2022; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024; Kazmi S.W., 2026).

The level of educational inequality is much regionalized in Pakistan. Overall, enrolment, infrastructure and institutional capacity are comparatively better in Punjab but there is significant absolute number of OOSC in Punjab because of its population size (Imran, 2017, PAGE, 2021d; ASER Pakistan, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a and 2026a&b). Education is highly underdeveloped in Sindh, especially in the rural areas, which has been associated to poverty, poor governance and lack of

proper infrastructure. Girls' enrolment issues are even more pronounced in rural Sindh, where these also face socio-cultural barriers which hinder their school attendance (Chaudhury & Parajuli, 2006; Mughal, 2018 & 2020; Ram et al., 2019; PAGE 2021e; Rind, 2024; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 and 2026b). However, boys are also at an educational disadvantage in some urban areas, e.g. few Urban Districts of Karachi (Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 & 2025a). Quality Education is also big concern in almost all provinces and areas of Pakistan as more than one third students could not read even a simple sentence in English and Urdu and solve simple mathematic (plus or minus) (ASER, 2020; Kazmi, et a., 2024). This situation emerges because of very poor infrastructure, missing facilities, lacking faculty, female access, weak teaching-learning environment, low classroom inputs, and poor curriculum (Guarcello and others, 2014; Farooq and Kai, 2016; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2025a).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is a mixed bag. While there have been some gains, barriers to education remain, especially for girls, including geographic constraints, the impact of conflict and lack of infrastructure (Haq, 2016; UNWOMEN, 2020; PAGE, 2021e; ASSER, 2022;mGul., et al 2023; Kazmi et al., 2024, 2025a & 2025b). The education sector in Balochistan still suffers from significant challenges, evidenced by gender disparities and the very high OOSC rates, primarily due to the shortage of schools, teachers and basic facilities, along with social-cultural constraints (Rashid et al. 2012; Baqi & Yousaf, 2019; PAGE, 2021d; Mohsin, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 & 2025a). The 18th Constitutional Amendment has also contributed to the provincial disparities as the provinces vary in governance capacity, funding and effectiveness in implementing policies (UNESCO, 2023; Kazmi, S.K.H et al., 2026).

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In this overall scenario, the educational pattern in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K) is slightly different from the one in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) as well as from the regions. There is existing evidence that literacy and school participation outcomes are comparatively better in AJ&K, while the rates of OOSC are relatively lower, and there is precise gender parity (GPI 1.00) in primary school enrolment (Kazmi, et al., 2023a&b). The reasons behind this performance are a greater degree of community participation; more development and recurring funds for education; effective governance; increased accessibility to schools; more teachers, including female teachers; and comparatively higher availability of schools (Alif Ailaan, 2015a&b; Tahir, 2016; Farooq & Kai, 2017; PAGE, 2021a; UNESCO, 2023a & b; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a, 2026a). There is also a gradual improvement in GB through community-based programs and external support programs. However, geographic and infrastructural problems are still holding up both AJ&K and GB. Access to education (particularly in GB) in these mountainous areas is difficult, especially for girls, due to sparse population, winter roads that are impassable and severe weather. Policy implementation and service delivery is also hindered by institutional capacity, natural and manmade disasters and resource constraints and financial austerities (Tahir, 2016; Nawab & Malik, 2018; World Bank, 2022; UNICEF, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 & 20025a). Furthermore, studies specifically targeting these areas are limited in number, leaving an important gap in the literature.

The current research is based on two parallel theories: 1) Human Capital Theory, and 2) the Capability Approach. Human Capital Theory has education as an investment that improves productivity and economic development (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964), which means that high OOSC rates are considered a lost human and economic asset. Sen (1999a&b), on the other hand, defines education as a basic capability, which broadens the individual's freedom and life opportunities. As such, from this point of view, the education exclusion stands as an economic deprivation and a denial of basic human capabilities.

Despite the vast amount of literature on a global and national scale, there are still a number of gaps in research. Most of the current studies are on national or provincial level and have limited comparative study of provinces and areas including AJ&K and GB. Likewise, gender and rural-urban gaps are analyzed in isolation, and not

treated within a comprehensive framework. There is also little empirical evidence from the region and the recent past that corresponds to the existing state of education exclusion (PAGE a-e; UNESCO, 2023 & 2024b; World Bank, 2024a-c; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a &2026a). In this context, the present study compares and analyses OOSC data-driven analysis in the context of Pakistan, specifically in regions, AJ&K and GB. The study draws from the most recent datasets of the MICS6 and focuses on both regional and gender as well as rural-urban disparities to provide a more holistic picture of educational exclusion. It [this study] is expected to present evidence-based results for more successful areas and make recommendations for specific education policy interventions for Pakistan in these areas that are more targeted and equitable.

2. Methodology

This is the first-ever research work attempting to examine provincial/areas working towards out of school children (OOSC) at primary, middle and secondary school level with gender and urban-rural segregation. It also explore potential factors soaring OOSC in the regions/areas. For analysis of data, this research effort uses secondary data accessed from different reports of Provincial Bureau of Statistic, UNICEF, Federal Ministry of Education Publications, Pakistan Institute of Education, Pakistan Education Statistics; Provincial/areas education and children related data sets (Multiple Cluster Indicator Surveys (MICS6) Punjab 20217-18, Sindh 2018, AJ&K 2020-21; KP 2022, Balochistan 2022, and GB 2024-25), Pakistan Alliance for Girls Education, PAGE 2021; and World Economic Forum (WEF) 2022; UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank, AJ&K At A Glance and AJ&K Year Book., etc.).

Comparative analysis has also been conducted across provinces/regions including Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Balochistan and areas including AJ&K, and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). The study examines the patterns of educational exclusion and compares Out of School Children rates, rural–urban inequalities and gender gaps across regions/provinces and areas. Descriptive statistical techniques, comparative distributions and percentages are used to find variations in educational accessibility between male and female, and urban-rural inhabitants. STATA, SPSS and Microsoft Excel are utilized to calculate percentages, frequencies, and comparative distributions (Creswell, 2014; Bryman, 2015; Field, 2018; Kazmi S.G.H. et al, 2023a&b and 2024). The results are exhibited in tables and graphical illustrations to highlight the inequality pattern among the regions/areas limitations.

The study is not free from limitations. First, it uses the secondary data collected from different national and international datasets, mainly Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS6) held during previous decade (2016-2025). Consequently different survey years across provinces/areas, differences in reporting methods and definitions may have implications for direct comparability of these surveys findings. Second, the use of cross-sectional along with administrative data confines the ability to find causal relationships between educational exclusion and socio-economic factors. Third, disaggregated statistics and some regional indicators, particularly for remote and rural areas, are either inaccessible or inadequate, restricting deeper comparative analysis. Lastly, it does not include Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) due to lacking MICS6 Survey in ICT. Skipping most developed area in Pakistan may have implications for overall results of this study. With these intense limitations, this study relies mainly on government reports/provincial MICS surveys, broadly accepted institutional datasets, and widely recognized educational indicators, which enriches the reliability and consistency along with policy relevance of the results across provinces/areas of Pakistan.

3. Analysis Results and Discussions

This research study aims to discuss in detail the subject of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Pakistan particularly in regions/areas including AJ&K and GB. In the primary (age 5-9) level of education, the analysis is carried out at a provincial/area level and based on gender and urban/rural inequality. At the middle/lower secondary and secondary (ages 10-15) level, the analysis is also done at a provincial/area level and based on gender and urban/rural inequality. The

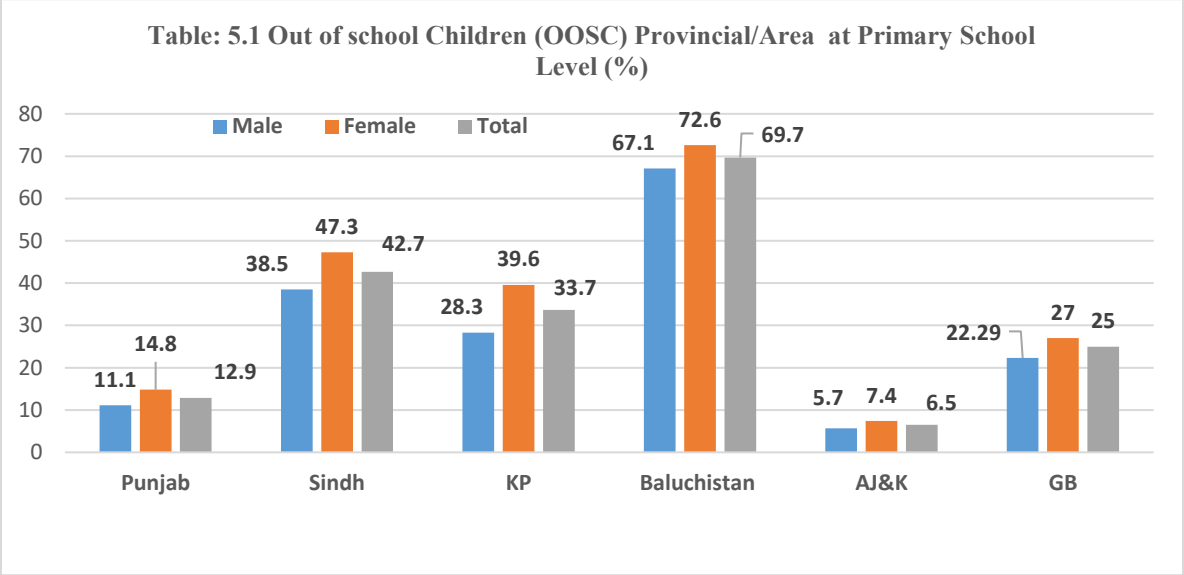
Table 5.1 indicates that there is a huge gap between the regions/areas of Pakistan in terms of educational access wherein AJ&K turned out to be the most successful among the regions/areas of Pakistan.

Table: 5.1 Provincial/Area Account of OOSC (5-16) at Primary School Level (%)				
Province/ Area	Total	Boys	Girls	Gender Gap Percentage Point (pp.)
Punjab	12.9	11.1	14.8	3.7 pp.
Sindh	42.7	38.5	47.3	8.8 pp.
KP	33.7	28.3	39.6	11.3 pp.
Baluchistan	69.7	67.1	72.6	5.5 pp.
AJ&K	**6.5**	**5.7**	**7.4**	**1.7 pp.**
GB	25	22.29	27	4.71 pp.
Source: Punjab MICS 2017-18 p.194-95; Sindh MICS 2018 p. 179-80; KP MIC 2022, p. 177-78; Baluchistan MICS 2022 p. 184-85; P&DD GB 2024-25 P-29; AJ&K MICS 2020-21 p.230-32				

Holding data from provincial/areas' MICS6, the Table 5.1 shows that there are significant provincial and gender gaps in the out-of-school children (OOSC) in Pakistan. Girls' OOSC rates are generally higher than boys in all provinces and regions, reflecting the continuing gender disparity in school enrolment. AJ&K has the lowest OOSC rate (6.5%) which shows that there is near universal access to basic education (male 5.7% and female 7.4%) and the least gender gap of 1.7 percentage points. On the other hand, Balochistan has the highest exclusion rate of almost 69.7%, in which girls (72.6%) are far more disadvantaged than boys (67.1%) due to severe structural, socioeconomic and infrastructural challenges. Punjab has a comparatively better overall OOSC of 12.9% (Male 11.1% and female 14.8%) having with a gender gap of 3.7 percentage points. Sindh has the highest OOSC rate of 42.7% with a gap of 8.8 percentage points between Male 38.5% and female 47.3%. While Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) observes an OOSC rate of 33.7% and the largest gender gap of 11.3 percentage points with 28.3% male and 39.6% female. The OOSC level in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) is moderate (25%) – male 22.29% and female 27%, demonstrating a gender gap of 4.7 percentage points.

The disparity in education access between AJ&K and Balochistan is more than 60 percentage points, indicative of deep regional disparities in educational access due to differences in governance, infrastructure and socioeconomic development. Overall, Figure 4.1 also indicates that girls are still under-represented in school, especially in rural and underdeveloped areas (Khan, 2017; Mughal, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024; Kazmi, S.K.H et al., 2026).

Figure 5.1 also reveals that the disparity however, increases by a great margin in most of the regions. In Sindh, the proportion of OOS girls is considerably higher than that of OOS boys. On the other hand Balochistan OOS girls are nearly 75% against nearly 65% of boys. Such inequalities indicate the impact of cultural beliefs, economic limitations, restricted access, security, and few schools along with gender biasness, having an unequal impact on access to education among girls (PAGE 2021a-e; ASER Pakistan, 2023; World Bank, 2024a&b; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024; Kazmi S.W., 2026).



AJ&K stands exceptional as the gender gap in the state is not high, meaning that society is more inclined towards education of females and their policies are more inclusive (Farooq and Kai, 2016; Tahir, 2016; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a and 2026a).

Table: 5.2 Provincial/Area Account OOSC at Primary School age (5-9) Urban-Rural Segregation

Province/ Area	Male		Female		Total	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Punjab	7.7	12.8	8.1	18.2	**7.9**	**15.5**
Sindh	25.7	49.6	27.9	64.1	**28.8**	**56.5**
KP	19.4	29.8	25	42.2	**22.1**	**35.7**
Baluchistan	54.1	71.2	57.6	77.8	**55.8**	**74.2**
AJ&K	2.9	6.2	3.6	8.1	3.3	7.1
GB	15.4	24.4	15	29.1	**15.2**	**26.8**

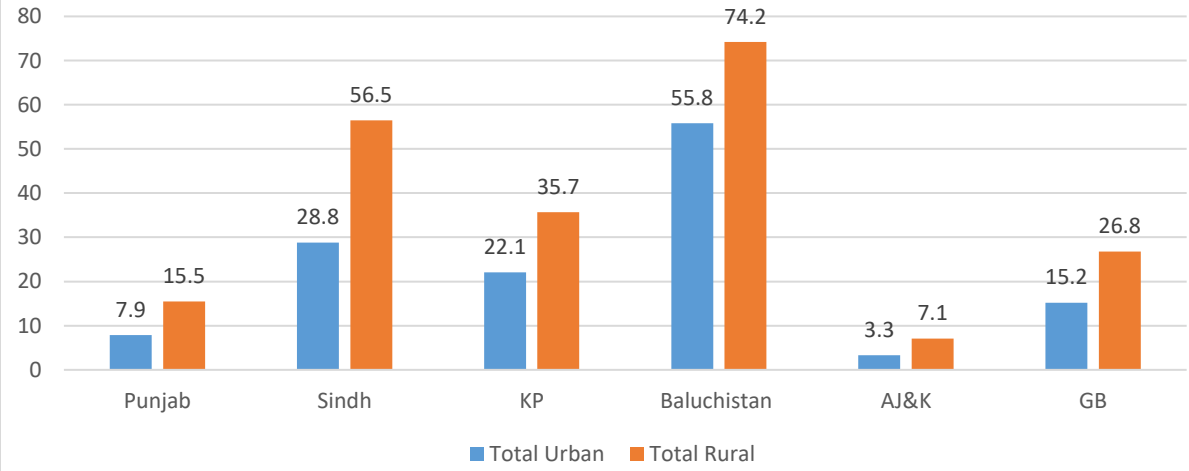
Source: Punjab MICS 2017-18 p.194-95; Sindh MICS 2018 p. 179-80; KP MIC 2022, p. 177-78; Baluchistan MICS 2022 p. 184-85; P&DD GB 2024-25 P-29; AJ&K MICS 2020-21 p.230-32

Table 5.2 containing provincial/area's MICS6 data clearly reflects the urban–rural divide in the out-of-school children (OOSC) statistics in Pakistan regions/areas. There are significant differences in OOSC rates between rural and urban areas in all provinces/regions and areas wherein rural areas observe higher OOSC rates due to differences in educational infrastructure, school availability, transportation, teacher shortages, poverty, and geographic accessibility (Khan, 2017; Mughal, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018; Kazmi S.K.H. et al., 2024; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a&b & 2026a; Kazmi S.W., 2026). Significant differences exist between total rural and urban areas in educational access, especially in Sindh (27.7 percentage points), Balochistan (18.4 percentage points) and Gilgit-Baltistan (11.6 percentage points) (Provincial/area's MICS6). Balochistan has the highest rural exclusion rate with over 74.2% of rural children out of school as compared to approximately 56% in urban areas (BoS Balochistan and UNICEF 2022). Likewise, the exclusion rates in rural areas of Sindh are very high (around 56.5%) while in urban areas the rates are nearly 29% (BoS Sindh and UNICEF 2018), showing high structural and socioeconomic disparities (Rashid et al., 2012; PAGE, 2021b&e; Ram et al, 2023; Mohsin, 2023; Rind, 2024;

Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024 & 2025a). The data in Table 5.2 also reveal that the rural disadvantages are significant but relatively low in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The OOSC rate in rural areas is approximately 15.5% in Punjab and almost 36% in KP, whereas in urban areas the figures are 8% and 22% respectively. Gilgit-Baltistan also has a relatively better performance with about 27% OOSC in rural areas as compared to 15% in urban areas. However, AJ&K has the smallest rural–urban gap with rural OOSC rates close to 7% and urban rates close to 3.3% ((BoS Punjab and UNICEF 2017-18; BoS KP and UNICEF 2022; BoS AJ&K and UNICEF 2020-21; P&DD GB and UNICEF 2024-25).

Girls from rural areas (provincial/area's IMCS6) are the most disadvantaged group in Provinces/areas in Pakistan with rural female OOSC rates at 64.1% in Sindh and 77.8% in Balochistan. KP and GB are next to these with 42.2% and 29.1% OOSC respectively in rural areas. In general, AJ&K (8.1%) and Punjab (18.2%) are relatively good performing regions. AJ&K take the leads and the best performer entity while Sindh and Balochistan are the least performing regions in terms of education. The results validate the geographical, gender and rural disadvantage dimension of educational inequality in Pakistan (Khan, 2007; Khan et al., 2011; Mughal, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018; World Bank, 2022; UNICEF, 2023; Datoo et al., 2024; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024).

Figure: 5.2 Provincial/Area's OOSC at Primary School age (5-9) with Urban-Rural Segregation



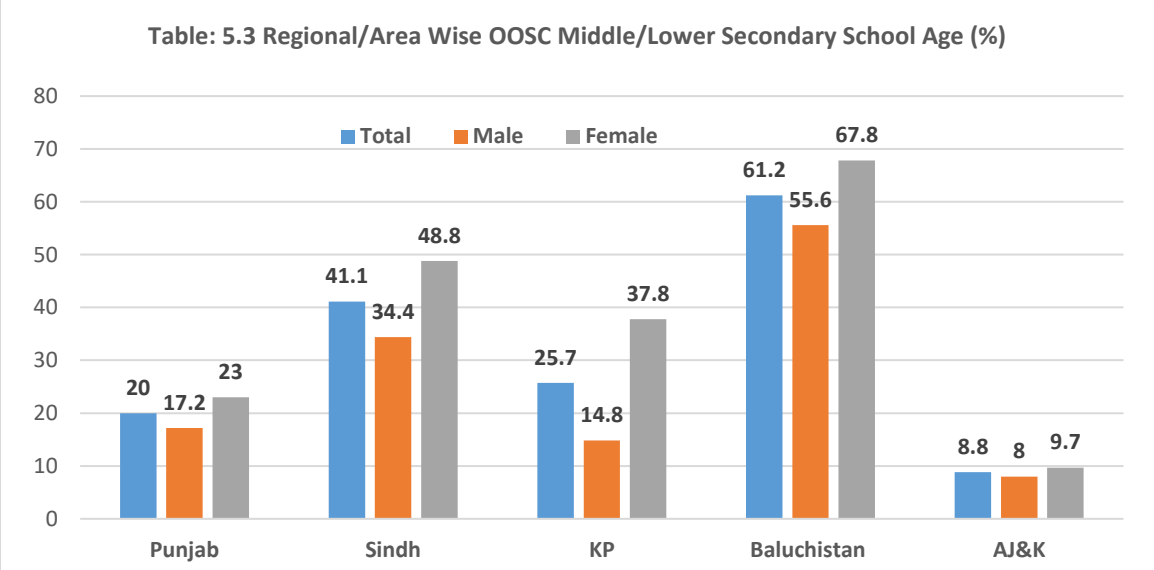
The urban–rural divide in out-of-school children (OOSC) in Pakistan is visually highlighted in Figure 5.2. AJ&K has the least disparity between rural and urban areas, which suggests that the educational access and distribution of educational resources in the area is relatively equal. Balochistan and Sind, on the other hand, have the highest rates of educational exclusion, especially in rural areas, due to inadequate infrastructure, long distance to schools, shortage of teachers, poverty, cultural norms and poor service delivery systems (UNESCO, 2023). Comparatively, the OOSC rate in AJ&K is relatively low, indicating that the educational access, community role, and budgetary provision, along with institutional performance is comparatively better in AJ&K (Tahir, 2016; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b, and 2026a).

The OOSC rates rise significantly at the middle/lower secondary level (ages 10-15) in all regions, reflecting significant issues in student retention and transition from primary to secondary school. The AJ&K figures of total 8.8% OOSC at middle/lower secondary level is relatively low, while the OOSC figures for Punjab and KP are around 20% and 25.7% respectively.

Sindh and Balochistan are in turn the most deprived with OOSC rates of 41.1% and 61.2%.

Table: 5.3 Regional/Area Wise OOSC Middle/Lower Secondary School Age (%)			
Province/Area	Male	Female	Total
Punjab	17.2	23	20
Sindh	34.4	48.8	41.1
KP	14.8	37.8	25.7
Baluchistan	55.6	67.8	61.2
AJ&K	8	9.7	8.8
Source: Punjab MICS 2017-18 p.195; Sindh MICS 2018 p. 180; KP MIC 2022, p. 178; Baluchistan MICS 2022 p. 185; P&DD GB 2024-25 P-29; AJ&K MICS 2020-21 p.232			

Table 5.3 not only shows that gender inequalities at the regional level are higher at the Middle/lower secondary level in all regions/areas but also reveals that there are widespread gender wise variations. The ratio of female OOSC to male OOSC is comparatively balanced at AJ&K level with 9.7 for females and 8 for males. Punjab stands 2nd with 23 per cent of boys and 17.2 per cent of girls. In KP, however, the female exclusion is 37.8% as opposed to 14.8 percent of the males, indicating the biggest gender gap (23.0%) harming girls among the Pakistan's provinces/areas badly, endorsing previous findings in this area (Khan, 2007; Haq, 2016; UNWOMEN, 2020, PAGE, 2021c; Baran and Bend, 2023; Datoo et al., 2024; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a & 2026a; Kazmi S.W., 2026)



The gap of girls and boys at Middle school level is also large in Sindh with 48.8 percent girls OOS and 34.4 percent boys OOS. The worst scenario is in Baluchistan, female OOS is about 68 per cent compared to 57 per cent among boys. These findings also suggest that the higher the OOSC, and the higher the level of education, the greater the gender gap. In Balochistan and Sindh, the gender gap in education is particularly high that confirms the previous finding in this regards (Rashid, et al., 2012; Brohi and Kaepoto, 2013; Pradhan, 2018; Ram et al., 2019; ASER Pakistan, 2023; Mohsin, 2023; Rind, 2024; World Bank, 2024; Datoo, et al., 2024). The trends illustrated in Figure 5.3 also depict that girls are more likely to drop out of school due to various reasons such

as poverty, access, transportation, absence of schools and female teachers, lacking community concern, insecurity, and socio-cultural norms/restrictions (Khan et al., 2011; Brohi and Kaepoto, 2013; Haq, 2016; Khan, 2017; Imran, 2017; Mughal, 2018 &2020; Pradhan et al., 2018; PAGE, 2021a-e; Gul et al., 2023; Baran and Bend, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a; Kazmi S.W. 2025 and 2026).

Table: 5.4 Region Area Wise Urban-Rural OOSC at Middle/Lower Secondary School Age (%)

Province/ Area	Male		Female		Total	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Punjab	14.2	18.8	12.9	28.6	13.6	23.5
Sindh	25.4	47.7	12.1	30.5	26.6	54.8
KP	11.3	15.4	19.3	41.6	15.1	27.6
Baluchistan	39.9	61.1	49.5	74.7	44.5	67.3
AJ&K	11	7.4	4	10.8	7.4	9.1

Source: MICS6 -Punjab 2017-18 p.194-95; Sindh 2018 p.179-80; KP 2022, p.177-78; Baluchistan 2022 p.184-85; P&DD GB 2024-25 p.29; AJ&K 2020-21 p.230-32

Table 5.4 highlights urban-rural differences in out-of-school children (OOSC) at the middle/lower secondary level across provinces. There is a significant increase in OOSC rates from primary to secondary education, with rural areas showing higher exclusion rates. Sindh and Baluchistan exhibit the largest urban-rural disparities, with rural OOSC rates exceeding 54% and 67%, respectively, compared to urban rates of 26.6% and 44.5% respectively. Other regions, such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and AJ&K, also show notable rural disadvantages. Gender disparities are also found more pronounced at the secondary level, with female exclusion exceeding male exclusion in all areas. Rural female exclusion is particularly severe in Baluchistan (74.7%) and KP (41.6%). The gender gap is widest in KP (26.2 percentage points rural while 8 percentage points urban). Cultural factors, domestic labor, early marriage, and inadequate infrastructure contribute to higher exclusion for girls. However, AJ&K shows a smaller gender gap, indicating a more supportive environment (Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a&b).

Figure : 5.4 Region/Area Wise Toal Urban-Rural OOSC at Middle/Lower secondary School Age (%)

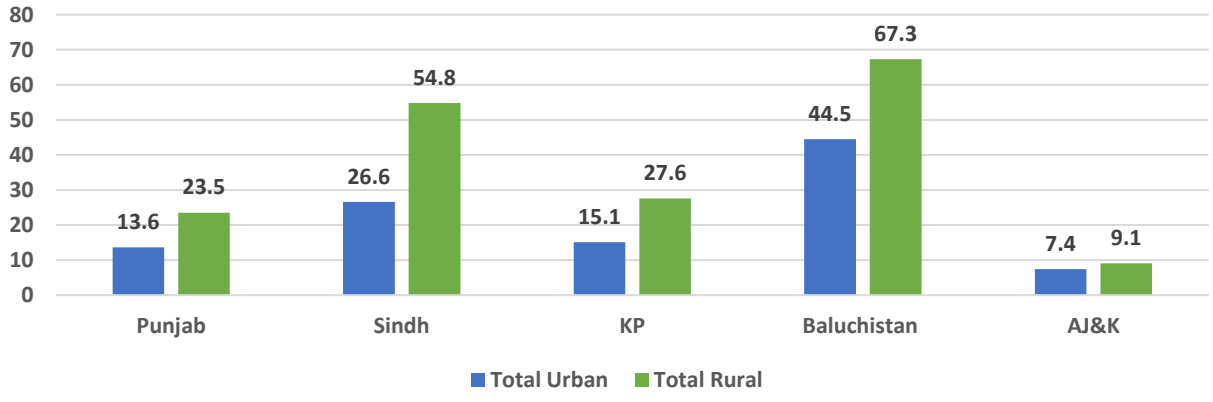
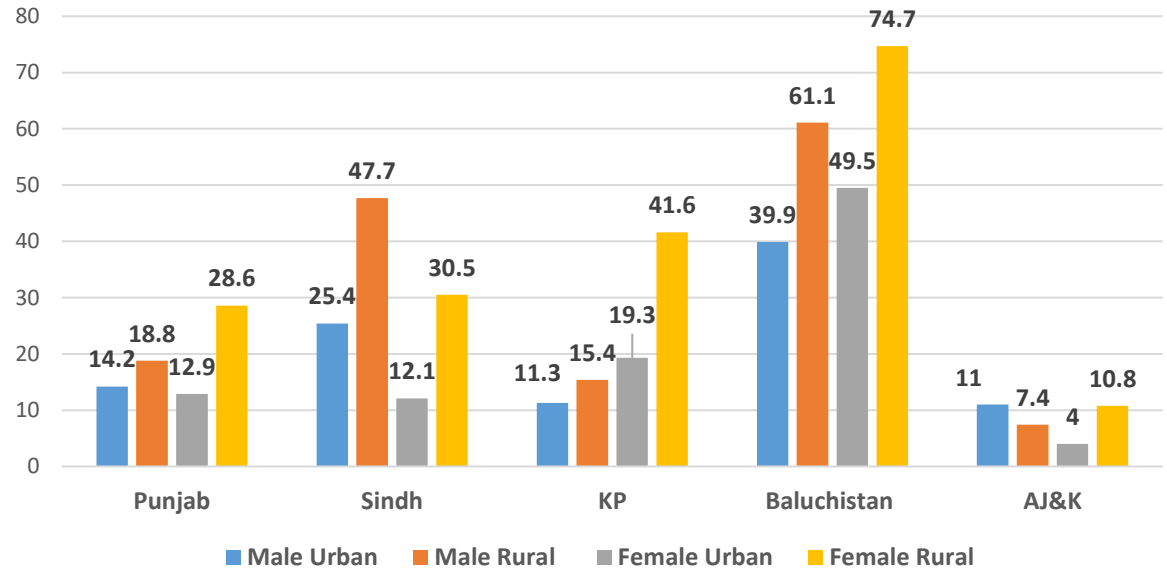


Table 5.4 also reveals significant regional and gender disparities in out-of-school children (OOSC) across Pakistan. In Punjab, rural girls face higher exclusion rates (28.6%) compared to boys (18.8%), with urban differences being smaller. Sindh exhibits severe educational deprivation,

with urban boys facing greater exclusion (25.4%) than urban girls (12.1%), creating a gap of 13.3 percentage points harming boys. In rural Sindh, both genders experience higher OOSC rates, but boys (47.7%) still face more exclusion than girls (30.5%). Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) shows pronounced gender inequality, particularly in rural areas, where 41.6% of girls are out of school compared to 15.4% of boys, leading to a 26.2 percentage point gap. Balochistan records the highest OOSC rates and gender disparities, with 74.7% of rural girls excluded from school compared to 61.1% of boys, due to socio-cultural and structural barriers. AJ&K stands out with the lowest OOSC rates with 10.8% of rural girls excluded from school compared to 7.4% of rural boys, showing more gender parity and better educational inclusion compared to other regions. Figure 5.4 further highlights the rural-urban divide, showing higher OOSC rates in rural areas across Pakistan. Baluchistan has the highest exclusion rates, followed by Sindh, with rural regions in Punjab and KP showing moderate disadvantages. AJ&K, however, has the lowest OOSC rates, reflecting greater educational access and less disparity. Overall, rural disadvantage is evident across the country, with AJ&K at the lowest and Baluchistan at the top (UNESCO IIEP/ASER Pakistan, 2019; Mughal, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a and 2026a; Kazmi S.W. 2026).

Figure : 5.5 Regio/Area Wise Gender Segregated Urban-Rural OOSC at Middle/Lower secondary School Age (%)

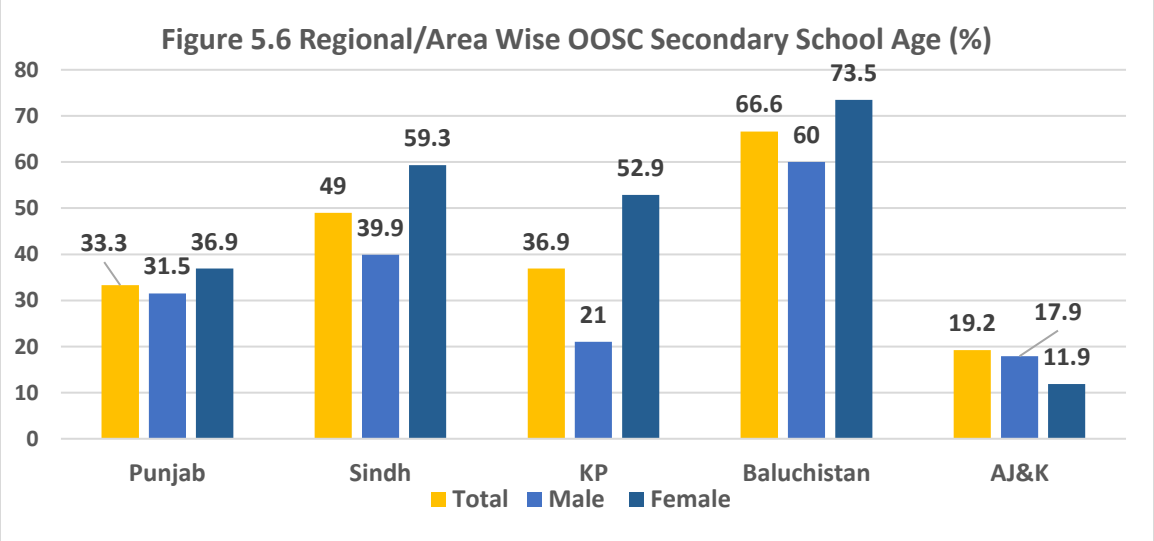


The count of OOSC at the Secondary School level portrayed in the Table 5.5 and Figure 5.6 shows that the girls once again stay more than the out of schools (OOS) boys due to a persistent gender inequality prevailing in the provincial/areas' education. However, in some regions/areas (e.g. Sindh- Karachi), the boys at this level experience higher percentages of OOSC in the cities as well as in the rural regions/areas, which may be due to: a) Early entry into labour/work; b) economic family pressure; and c) lowered grades of boys' retention. Besides, Baluchistan and Sindh have the highest gender gap in the province, in terms of OOSC, confirming that girls are more vulnerable and suffer from high disadvantage in both provinces (Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a).

Table: 5.5 Regional/Area Wise OOSC Secondary School Age (%)			
Province/Area	Male	Female	Total
Punjab	31.5	36.9	33.3
Sindh	39.9	59.3	49
KP	21	52.9	36.9
Baluchistan	60	73.5	66.6
AJ&K	17.9	11.9	19.2

Source: Punjab MICS 2017-18 p.197; Sindh MICS 2018 p. 181; KP MIC 2022, p. 180; Baluchistan MICS 2022 p. 187; ; AJ&K MICS 2020-21 p.233

AJ&K, on the other hand observes a more balanced trend, with comparatively minor gender disparities between boys and girls (Table 4.5 and Figure 4.6). However, in some cases, boys are slightly OOC (out-of-school), meaning that there are some differences in socio-economic dynamics (Kazmi, S.M.A., 2015; Kazmi, S.M.A. 2015; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b; Kazmi S.W. 2026). The gender gaps can be observed in both the Punjab and KP which have moderate discrepancies in between. In the holistic term, where girls disadvantage persists, the number also resulted in a significant change – in some other contexts (specifically with age), boys became more vulnerable to the drop-out, making it crucial to implement more gender-sensitive policies that cater to both boys and girls as different (Kazmi et al., 2024 and2025a).



AJ&K also outperforms regions in other education indicators such as gender parity, literacy, and enrollment by achieving primary school enrollment targets, a Gender Parity Index (GPI) of 1.00, SDG 4.5.1, and adult literacy rates over 78% (88.9% male, 68.2% female). It also has the lowest OOSC rates and the most equal gender participation, with little urban-rural disparity. Good governance, appropriate budget allocation, community participation, increased schools and female teachers are credited for these accomplishments (PAGE, 2021a; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023b, 2024, 2025a and 20026a). Even in regions with high performance, the increase in OOSC at the primary, middle and secondary levels however, suggests that there are challenges

in student retention. This underscores the fact that better access may not necessarily lead to continued enrolment at the various levels of education (Kazmi S.G.H.et al., 2024 and 2025a&b).

4. Key Findings

This study is significant because it helps in understanding the factors affecting educational inequalities in Pakistan. The most amazing finding is the relatively high performance of AJ&K compared to other parts of the country (Farooq and Kai, 2016; Tahir, 2016; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&d, 2024, 2025a&b, and 2026a&b). This is a fairly decent performance, due to a number of interrelated factors. First, AJ&K has relatively good governance, especially in terms of implementing and monitoring education policies, which are primarily federally prescribed. Second, it is also a smaller population which allows for more efficient allocation and management of development and recurring educational resources. Third, community-based schooling and centralised infrastructure to support comparatively better access to schools, even in rural areas. Furthermore, the region has a higher cultural value of education, including female education, which helps to achieve relatively equitable gender outcomes. Educational participation and retention is also sustained by community proactive support through School Management Committees (SMCs), healthier funding, better school accessibility (within < 2 km), higher proportion of female schools (2,833 schools, representing over 47% of the total 6,003 schools), improved availability of female teachers, and a favourable student-teacher ratio (26:1) (Tahir, 2016; PAG, 2021a; UNICEF, 2023; Kazmi et al., 2024; GoAJ&K, 2025; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b, 2026a&b).

However, Punjab's performance is average due to relatively good infrastructure and governance system. Despite this, there are significant educational problems in the rural areas of Punjab (Kazmi S.M.A, 2015; Chaudhury and Parajuli, 2016; Imran, 2017; PAGE, 2021d; Kazmi S.G.H. et al, 2024 and 2025a). Although some progress has been made, geographical barriers and the effects of previous conflicts continue to hinder educational development in KP (Rahman and Uddin, 2009; Haq, 2016; UNWOMEN, 2020; PAGE, 2021c; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 and 2025a&b). Sindh and Balochistan are the worst hit regions. The governance inefficiencies, poverty and significant gaps between urban and rural areas in Sindh education (CIET International, 1997; Brohi and Kaepoto, 2013; Baqi and Yousaf, 2019; Ram et al., 2019; PAGE, 2021e; Rind, 2024; Maqbool, 2024; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a and 2026a&b). However, Balochistan is suffering from deep structural inadequacies such as inadequate school infrastructure, high teacher absenteeism, especially of female teachers, low accessibility, security issues, and socio-cultural resistance to education (Rashid et al., 2012; PAGE, 2021b; Mohsin, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a and 2026a&b; Kazmi, S.K.H et al., 2026).

The study also shows that there is still a problem of gender inequality, especially in the higher education level. Rural disadvantage is also a major determinant, with children in rural areas being much more likely to be out of school. Moreover, there are significant disparities in educational performance among provinces, with some outperforming others (Haq, 2016; ASER Pakistan, 2020 and 2023; Mohsin, 2023; World Bank, 2018 & 2020; UNICEF, 2020a&b; UNWOMEN, 2020; PAGE, 2021a-c; Rind, 2024; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a&b). High drop-out rates at secondary level are identified as a weak link in the progression and retention mechanisms, indicating the structural weakness in secondary education (Khan, 2007; Khan, 2017; Baqi and Yousaf, (2019; Mohsin, 2023; Khan, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a&b).

The findings have important policy implications. The improvement of infrastructure, transportation facilities and better access to schools should be given priority in the rural areas (Imran, 2017; Mughal, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018; Mohsin, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024; Kazmi, S.W. 2025). Second, the education system should be strengthened by increasing the budget, providing financial incentives, awareness raising, improving the recruitment of faculty members, improving school infrastructure, increasing the participation of the community, and providing

safe learning environments (Tahir, 2016; UNESCO, 2024c; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a, 2026a). Third, targeted measures are required to support girls' education, such as increased funding, awareness campaigns, recruitment of female teachers, improved access to schools, better school facilities, more community engagement and adequate security measures (Brohi and Kaepoto, 2013; Khan, 2017; UNWOMEN, 2020; PAGE, 2021a-e; UNESCO, 2024a; Kazmi, S.W. 2025; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a&b, 2026a&b). Lastly, the relatively successful case of AJ&K provides valuable lessons for the other regions, particularly in the context of community-based educational support and resource allocation (Tahir, 2016; World Bank, 2022; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023 a&b, 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a&b).

The results of this study also suggest that the educational gaps in Pakistan increase significantly with the advancement of education. Progress and retention are significant structural problems, although there has been an improvement in access to primary education in some areas. The high rates of exclusion in Balochistan and Sindh highlight the entrenched nature of these inequalities and their association with weak funding, poverty, poor governance, poor infrastructure, teacher shortages (especially female, limited school access and security concerns (Kazmi, et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b). Secondly, the high number of girl's out-of-school in the middle and secondary school level suggests that gender is one of the key factors affecting girls' access to school. The gender gap is growing, suggesting that girls are more vulnerable to transition-related dropouts (Khan, 2007; Datoo et al., 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024). Third, the findings support the Human Capital Theory (HCT) that says that lack of education is a sign of underinvestment in human productivity and national development. Likewise, from the Capability Approach Framework (CAF) perspective, secondary school exclusion is a deprivation of opportunities, freedoms and social advancement in the long term. Fourth, AJ&K's relative success demonstrates that geography need not be a barrier to educational attainment. Instead, the effectiveness of the institutions, the involvement of the community and the support of the people have a significant impact on educational retention even in remote and mountainous areas (Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024 and 2025a). The findings of the study generally support the study's main argument that the educational crisis in Pakistan is basically defined by leakage, failure to progress and gendered dropouts at higher levels of education (Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a). Although these are important findings, there are some limitations with the study. The secondary data may also contain some inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the results due to the different methodologies used by the data sources. Also, there is no longitudinal data available to examine change and trends over time. Therefore, future research needs to be based on primary data and longitudinal analysis to get a comprehensive and objective understanding of educational disparities in Pakistan. Furthermore, the timing of the MICS6 surveys (2016-2022) may impact the comparability and consistency of data, and estimates and findings derived from data collected at different times may lead to discontinuities.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explores the issue of out of school children (OOSC) in Pakistan with a special emphasis on regional/area, gender and rural-urban disparities, especially in remote areas such as Balochistan, AJ&K and GB. The results indicate high levels of educational inequality, with Balochistan and Sindh having the highest OOSC rates, high gender gaps and ongoing rural disadvantage (MICS6 Balochistan 2022 and Sindh 2018). MICS6 Punjab (2017-18) and MICS6 KP (2022) report that although moderately performing, both regions have issues in ensuring access to universal education (BoS Balochistan and UNICEF, 2022; BoS Sindh and UNICEF, 2018). Compared to this, AJ&K has comparatively low OOSC rates, gender parity and smaller rural-urban gaps (Bos AJ&K and UNICEF, 2020-21; Pakistan Institute of Education, 2022; UNICEF, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a and 2026a).

The success of AJ&K is largely due to the effective governance, strong political **Will**, small

population, improved school accessibility, better teaching learning environment, healthier financial inputs (Recurring >10% and Development almost 20%), proactive community participation, social acceptance of girls' education, more girls' schools, more women teachers, and improved access are all benefits for the region (Tahir, 2016; Kazmi, S.W. 2025; Kazmi et al., 2023a&b, 2025a and 2026a; Kazmi, S.W. (2025). The increasing OOSC rates at the secondary level, however, indicate that there are continuing issues with student retention and progression.

The study makes key policy recommendations including prioritizing the provision of improved infrastructure, transportation and teacher availability in rural areas, improving girls' education through financial incentives, safer learning environments and more female teachers strengthening governance and accountability in Sindh and Balochistan (Khan, 2017; Mughal, 2018; Baqi and Yousaf, 2019; PAGE, 2021a-e; Mohsin, 2023; Rind, 2024; Maqbool, 2024; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a and 2026a&b). Finally, the study shows that OOSC in Pakistan is a regional and gender issue, which is more pronounced at higher education levels. Policies should not only target primary enrollment, but also retention, transition issues, increased girls' education, and increased accessibility to secondary school to achieve SDG 4 and universal education. The AJ&K is a good model of effective governance and community support for enhancing educational outcomes (Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023, 2024, 2025a and 2026a).

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