ISSUE BRIEF

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PAKISTAN'S EDUCATION LANDSCAPE SINCE 2000: ADDRESSING INEQUITIES AND ADVANCING TOWARDS SDG 4

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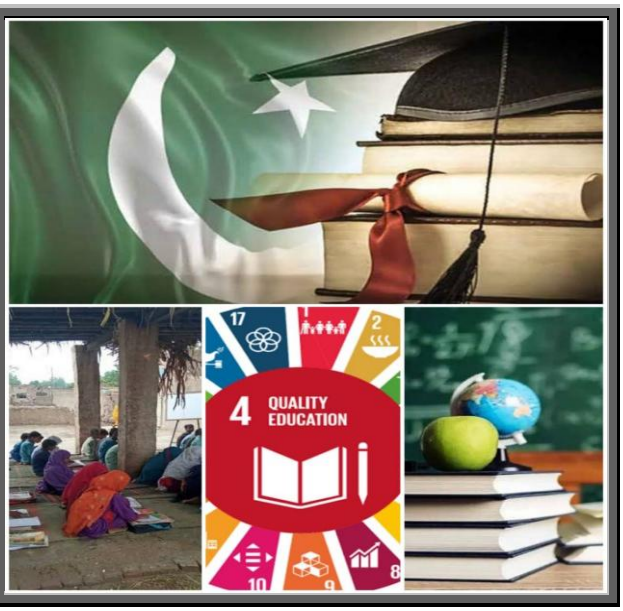

Introduction

Despite twenty years of reforms, Pakistan's education sector continues to be trapped in enduring structural difficulties. Minor advancements in literacy, accessibility, and infrastructure have occurred; nonetheless, the overall progress remains constrained in both scope and impact. The nation has yet to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to ensure universal access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities.[1]

The 2023 Census indicates that Pakistan's national literacy rate is 60.65%, reflecting a modest increase from 45% in 2000.[2] Fig 01 also highlights, a significant disparity in literacy between men and women: 68% of males are literate, whereas just 53% of women are literate. In 2023, the number of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Pakistan has risen to 26 million, positioning the country as having the second-largest OOSC population globally, following Nigeria. Furthermore, expenditure on education has declined to a mere 0.8% of GDP in 2024–25, much below the UNESCO-recommended range of 4–6%.[3]

1 "Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development. Accessed July 29, 2025. https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4.

2 "Insights From the 2023 Census Report," *State of Children*, April 17, 2025. https://stateofchildren.com/insights-from-the-2023-census-report/

3 "Govt spending on education 'hits new low'," Dawn, June 20, 2025. https://www.dawn.com/news/1918310

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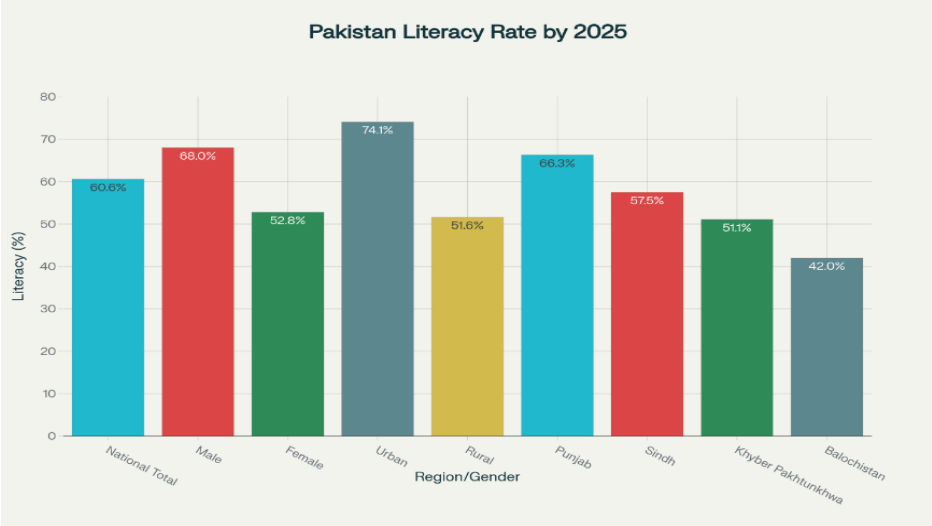

Fig # 01

In the past, education has not been a high priority for Pakistan's development. Article 25-A of the Constitution guarantees free and compulsory education, but low public investment, poor coordination between provinces, and deeply ingrained social and gender norms have made it hard to put this into practice. There are five levels of education: primary, middle, high, intermediate, and tertiary. However, the education system is held back by outdated curricula, bad infrastructure, and unfairness based on region and gender.[4] Private schools tend to use English more than public schools, which mostly use Urdu. This dual-track system exacerbates inequality and undermines learning outcomes. Despite constitutional guarantees, this obligation has yet to translate into coherent and effective national education policies.

Based on past data, the literacy rate in 2000 was between 60% for people aged 15 to 24 and as low as 30% for people aged 55 to 64. Some tribal areas said that only 9% to 22% of women could read and write, and there was a 45% gap between men and women. Pakistan now graduates almost 445,000 students from college every year, but it still has one of the highest rates of illiteracy and out-of-school children in the world.[5]

Key Trends and Indicators (2000–2025)

Figure 02 illustrates the trend from 2000 to 2023, indicating that the literacy rate in the country increased from around 45% to 60.65%. Male literacy increased from 58% to 68%, while female literacy

4 Sohail, R. A. O. "The State of K-12 Education in Pakistan: Challenges, Reforms, and Prospects." Innovapath, 2025. https://innovapath.us/index.php/IN/article/view/4.

5 Dr. Muhammad Arshad Javaid, abc, "Barriers to Female Literacy in Tribal Areas of Pakistan: Qualitative Cum Quantitative Analysis," Annals of Human and Social Sciences 3, September 30, 2022, https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2022(3-ii)34

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rose from 32% to 53%.[6] This resulted in a disparity of 15 to 20 percentage points between the two genders. By 2022, 72% of individuals aged 15 to 24 were literate, however girls lagged behind boys.[7] Data from other regions reveals significant disparities: in Punjab, around 93% of urban women are literate, whereas just 43% of rural Sindh and 38% of rural Balochistan are literate. Only 80% of Pakistani children complete elementary education due to insufficient schools, inadequate quality of existing institutions, and a lack of qualified educators. Net attendance rates remain low at 66%, much below the global average of 90%.[8] An excessive number of pupils in a classroom, a curriculum mismatched with student requirements and practical applications, and academic dishonesty further undermine the quality of education. The national curriculum encompasses courses such as Urdu, English, Mathematics, Social Studies, Islamiyat, and Science; yet, adherence to it varies significantly.

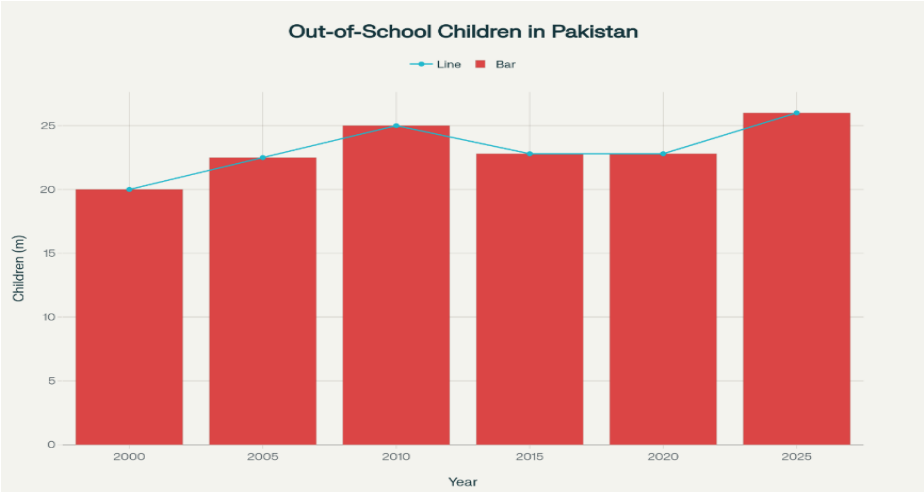

Fig # 02

There were 19 million kids aged 5 to 16 who weren't in school in 2005. By 2023, that number had grown to 26 million, which is now more than 44% of kids in that age group.[9] In this group, 59% of girls in Balochistan and 51% of girls in Sindh are not in school. There are still more than 80,000 children in Islamabad who are not in school. Contributing factors include early marriage, security concerns, and poverty, not having enough school facilities, and climate changes like floods and heat waves. COVID-

6 Insights From the 2023 Census Report," State of Children, April 17, 2025. https://stateofchildren.com/insights-from-the-2023-census-repo

7 UNESCO Institute for Statistics. "Pakistan: Literacy Rate, 2000–2023." Accessed July 29, 2025. https://uis.unesco.org/en/country/pk.

8 "Pakistan Primary school completion rate - data, chart." TheGlobalEconomy.com. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Pakistan/Primary_school_completion_rate/.

9 Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. "Insights From the 2023 Census Report." State of Children, April 17, 2025. https://stateofchildren.com/insights-from-the-2023-census-report/.

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19 showed even more problems with infrastructure, since most areas couldn't set up effective remote learning.

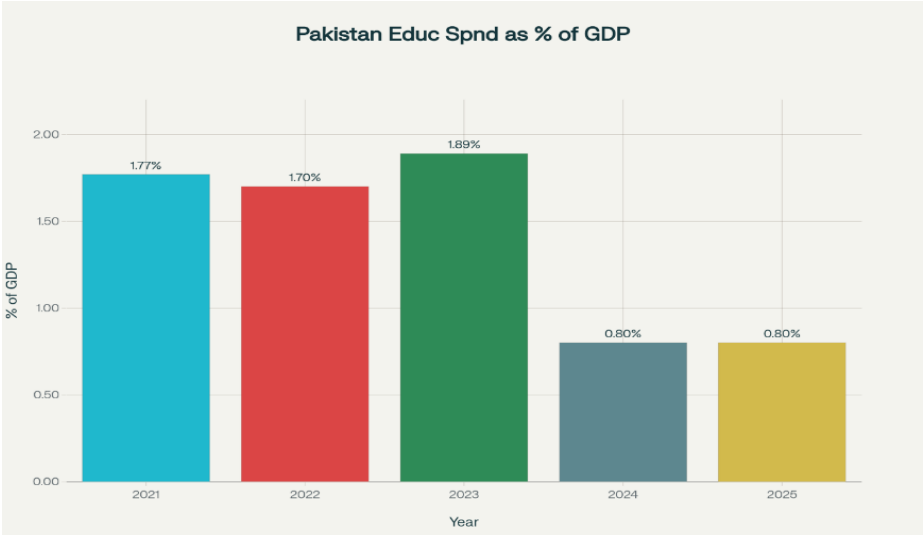

Fig # 03

Pakistan's education budget has always been lower than it should have been. In the early 2010s, spending was about 2.2% of GDP. By 2020–21, it had dropped to 1.77%, and by 2024–25, it was only 0.8% (partial data).[10] Most of the money goes to higher education, but the primary and secondary sectors need the most investment. Because of this long-term lack of investment, the public education system is under severe strain. Classrooms are too full, teachers aren't paid enough, and the infrastructure is poor.

The World Bank says that 77% of 10-year-olds in Pakistan can't read and understand a simple text, up from about 70% in 2015. Boys (78%) are more likely than girls (71%) to learn about poverty. ASER also says that more than 65% of Grade 4 students don't meet the minimum standards for reading and writing. According to UNESCO's SDG 4 performance index.[11] Pakistan is 128th out of 166 countries. This lack of learning shows that graduates still don't have the skills they need, especially in science, computers, and vocational training.

The results of education are very different in different areas. AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan do better than the national average because NGOs and communities are very involved. On the other hand, women in interior Sindh, rural Balochistan, and ex-FATA areas have a literacy rate of less than 10% and an

10 Dawn. "Economic Survey 2024-25: Education spending plummets..." June 10, 2025. https://www.dawn.com/news/1916136

11 "Education Spending in Pakistan Hits New Low with More than One in Three Children out of School – Save the Children," Save the Children International, 2025, https://www.savethechildren.net/news/education-spending-pakistan-hits-new-low-more-onethree-children-out-school-save-children

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OOSC rate of more than 60%. More than 18 million people speak English, and proficiency is growing. However, this does not mean that national quality standards are being met, since there is a lot of inequality.[12]

Climate vulnerability has become a big problem for keeping up with school. Floods in 2022 damaged more than 30,000 schools and forced millions of students to move.[13] In the same way, heat waves in 2023 and 2024 caused many schools to close in southern Punjab and Sindh.[14] Even with these problems, education policy mostly doesn't include climate resilience, emergency learning frameworks, or ways to protect infrastructure.

Policy Recommendations

Pakistan's education system requires immediate reform. The allocation for public education must be increased to a minimum of 4% of GDP, with distinct funds designated for girls and underfunded regions. Secondly, provincial autonomy must be enhanced to enable each province to establish its own curriculum and implementation strategies. Third, we ought to utilize a greater variety of educational institutions, such as community schools, accelerated learning programs, and blended formats. Fourth, we must expand monitoring and data systems (such as EMIS and DEPIx) to enhance their capacity for real-time accountability. Fifth, comprehensive strategies are necessary for the training and retention of teachers, particularly in rural and conflict-affected regions. Sixth, educational institutions and planning must incorporate climate resilience as an integral component of their operations. Seventh, curricula must be revised to align with market demands and reduce the skills gap.[15]

Conclusion

Between 2000 and 2025, Pakistan's education system has had gradual advancement, characterized by moderate increases in literacy rates, expanding disparities, and insufficient governmental funding. The national education system is fundamentally misaligned with Pakistan's socio-economic requirements. The country has implemented numerous policies and modifications; nevertheless, few have significantly impacted outcomes. To achieve SDG 4, we must prioritize inclusive investments in

12 Kashif Abbasi, "Single National Curriculum Launched," Dawn, August 17, 2021, https://www.dawn.com/news/1641105

13 VSO International. "Getting children back to school in Pakistan." Accessed July 29, 2025. https://www.vsointernational.org/our-work/inclusive-education/back-to-school-pakistan.

14 Daily Times. "Schools to shut for summer in Sindh, K-P, and Punjab amid heatwave." May 22, 2025. https://dailytimes.com.pk/1305017/schools-to-shut-for-summer-in-sindh-k-p-and-punjab-amid-heatwave/.

15 "2024 Termed Transformative Year for Education," Dawn, 2025, https://www.dawn.com/news/1882341

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education that are regionally adaptive, ensure quality, withstand calamities, and revise the curriculum.

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