

# Women Empowerment through Higher Education in Gilgit-Baltistan

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## Abstract

The growing social awareness across the globe has brought a number of issues to the fore among which gender equality and empowerment of women are very significant. Discrimination against women in the form of male-female differentiation constitutes the core of the gender-biased system. Education is the biggest liberating force and rise in the levels of education, which nourishes progressive outlook, and the advent of industrialization and modernization have effected a sea change in the attitudes and thinking pattern of the people. The empowerment is not essentially political, in the fact, political empowerment will not succeed in the absence of economic empowerment. The scheme of higher education through the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) in Gilgit-Baltistan has transferred the real economic power to the hands of women and has considerably reduced their dependence on men. This has helped in empowerment of women and building self confidence, but lack of education often comes in the way and many a times they have to seek help from their husbands for day to day work viz; bank accounts, etc. Higher education provides an opportunity to these women to improve their knowledge and skills. The higher level learning will also help them to play an effective role in the whole society.

Experiences emanating from the AKDN help not only in the encouragement of women's education mechanism and processes but also provide opportunities for young girls to come forward, get higher education and play a vital role in the future in their respective families.

This paper attempts to illustrate the current status of women in Higher Education in Gilgit-Baltistan. It also relates success stories about the impact of Higher Education programs through the experiences of AKDN. Further it highlights the challenges faced and a lesson learnt in the process, and concludes with a suggestion for a possible and preferable way forward.

## Introduction

The growing social awareness across the globe has brought a number of issues to the fore among which gender equality and empowerment of women are very significant. Discrimination against women in the form of male-female differentiation constitutes the core of the gender-biased system. Higher education is the biggest liberating force and the rise in the levels of education, which nourishes progressive outlook, and the advent of industrialization and

modernization have effected a sea change in the attitudes and thinking patterns of the people. The empowerment is not essentially political alone in fact; political empowerment will not succeed in the absence of economic empowerment. Particularly the scheme of female human resource development through AKDN has transferred the real economic power in the hands of women and has considerably reduced their dependency on men. This has helped in empowerment of women and building self-confidence, but lack of higher education often comes in the way and many times they have to seek help from their husbands for day to day work viz; bank, accounts, etc. The higher education provides an opportunity to these women to improve their skill and vocations and play an effective role in the management of Gilgit-Baltistan.

This paper attempts to illustrate the current status of women in Higher Education in Gilgit-Baltistan. It also relates success stories about the impact of Higher Education programs through the experiences of AKDN. Further it highlights the challenges faced and a lesson learnt in the process, and concludes with a suggestion for a possible and preferable way forward.

### **Women Education**

Education is regarded as the key factor in overcoming the barriers that women face and the basic tool for empowering women and bringing them into the main stream of development. Education not only provides knowledge and skills to improve health and livelihoods, but it empowers women to take their right place in society and the development process. Education gives status and confidence in decision making. Educating women is the key to reducing poverty. The need for women education is emphasized all over the world. This fact is presented by Sharma,U and Sharma,M.B (2004) as:

*One of our greatest needs is to spread education among our women. As a matter of fact there is room for the extension of education even among men. The condition of women's education is, however, such that any attempt as its spread deserves help and encouragement from all quarters.*

Women status in the society and education are interrelated. All over the world movements have been carried on to reduce illiteracy as stated by Bhatt,D.B and Sharma, R.S (1992) "The movement for improving women's status all over the world has always emphasized education as the most significant instrument for changing women's subjugated position in society." Women's education has an important role in the development of nations. The literacy rate of women also has impact on the economic condition and reduction of poverty of the country.

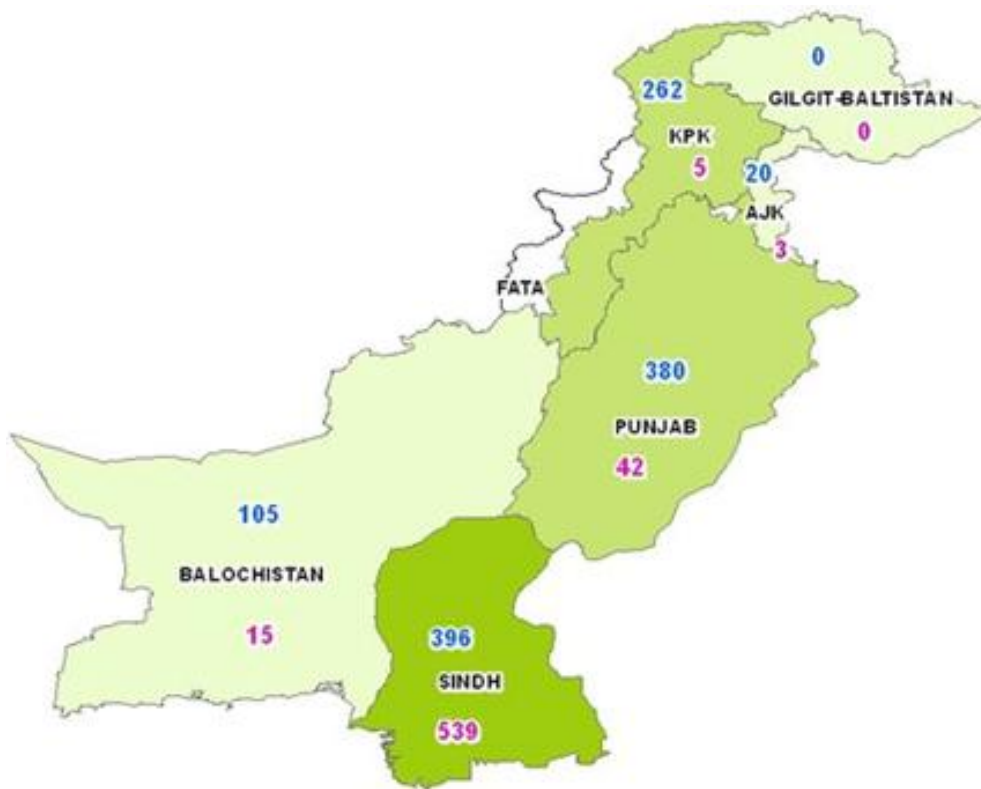
### **Higher Education of Women**

Higher education plays a vital part in national development and this includes the advancement of women. Higher education helps women in two ways. It enables qualified women to become leaders in society and allows them to become role model for younger girls. Inayatullah (1996) stated that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization accords the

greatest importance to the role of women graduates who, because of their training, constitute part of a country's skilled human resources and are therefore, in a position to make a significant contribution to the process of sustainable human development. They contribute in various ways-as professionals within their chosen domains of expertise, as decision makers through their influence on policy issues related to social, economic and cultural development and through their participation in family and community life.

Usha and Sharma (2001) contend that women play a vital part in the growth of a society. Their contribution has, historically, been very considerable throughout the rise and fall of civilizations. Their roles in social life are always numerous, diverse and highly valuable.

### The State of Education in Pakistan



No doubt education has a significant role in the development of any country but unfortunately in Pakistan inequalities across education are widespread and include gender disparities and the urban-rural divide. Literacy rates in Pakistan have increased from 45% in 2000 (Government of Pakistan 2000) to 52.5% in 2005 (Government of Pakistan 2005b), but there still exist significant gender gaps in this area. Overall figures for 2005 place literacy rates at 64.5% for males and 40.1% for females.

However, literacy remains higher in the urban areas where it is 71%, against a figure of 44% in rural areas (Government of Pakistan 2005b). Even though literacy rates are increasing, the goals

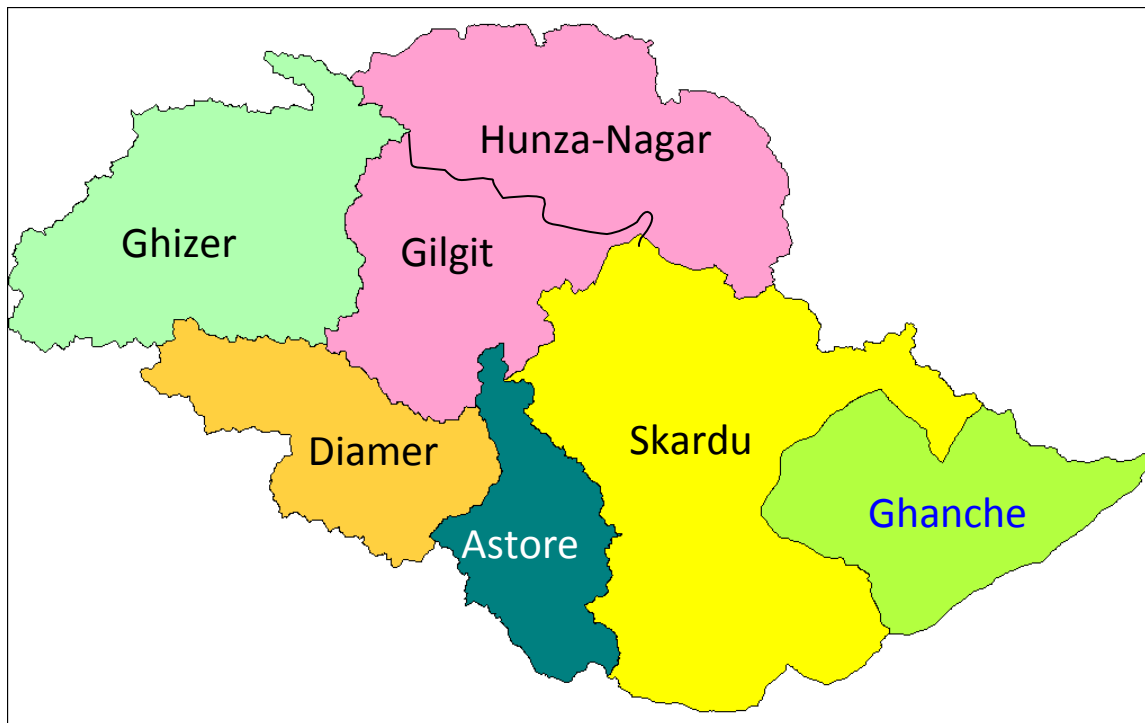
of universal basic education and gender parity remain distant targets for Pakistan (Government of Pakistan 2009).

Against this background of an education system full of challenges for educational planners and reformers, being additionally and further disadvantaged on the grounds of gender is of great concern. Dean (2007a, 2) points out that primary school enrolment rates for girls are amongst the 10 lowest in the world. Dropout rates for girls in schools much higher than those of boys (SPARK 2006). Gender disparities at secondary level are greater than at primary level (UNESCO 2003). The current political environment undoubtedly promotes women's educational opportunities, but cultural attitudes towards the education of girls remain strongly biased and largely unchanged. Although successive governments have announced various programmes to promote female education, they have been unable to translate their words into action because of deep-rooted political, social and cultural obstacles.

Thus, the educational status of women in Pakistan remains low and is in fact amongst the lowest in the world. Women in Pakistan do not form a homogeneous group, and their opportunities for education vary greatly, depending on the social system of which they are a part (Jayaweera 1997; Khan 2007). In rural areas, patriarchal structures often combine with poverty to limit educational opportunities for girls (Farah and Bacchus 1999). In contrast, girls and young women belonging to the upper and middle classes in urban areas have increasingly greater access to education and employment opportunities (Khan 2007).

The role of higher education as a powerful instrument and mediator of social change has been highlighted by Herz and Sperling (2004). But higher education enrolment in Pakistan is ranked amongst the lowest in the world; in 2005, it was just 2.9% of the population between the ages of 17 and 23. Compare this to higher education participation in other developing countries, such as India and Korea, which stand at 10 and 68%, respectively (Government of Pakistan 2005b). One of the major reasons for the lack of progress may lie in the fact that in 2006–07, Pakistan was spending only 2.5% of its GDP (Gross Domestic Product) on education (Government of Pakistan 2009), which is considerably below the South Asian regional average and UNESCO's recommendation of 4%. Other reasons include the rising cost of education and high population growth rates.

### The Position of Women in Gilgit-Baltistan



Gilgit-Baltistan is located in the north of Pakistan characterized by an isolated and harsh physical, mountainous environment. Weather conditions are severe, with cold winters and extremely hot summers. The area has the highest rate of population density per cultivated hectare in Pakistan. Travel and communications is generally difficult. According to the census of 1998, the educational indicators for Gilgit-Baltistan are below national average with a literacy rate of 37.85% (Male 52.62% Female 21.65%). Government is the main education provider in both the regions. AKESP as the second largest educational provider, supplements the efforts of the government by providing educational opportunities particularly to females in remote areas through community development initiatives.

It is distressing that preference of schooling for male children is still a pervasive phenomenon. Due to this there has been persistent dearth of qualified resources, especially who could take leading roles in development for the civil society. Cultural and religious sensitivities in the region denote that women's autonomy is severely limited. But increased emphasis on girls' education is spreading to areas within the region which were previously noted for their resistance to it. This is evident by the growing number of requests to AKESP and other NGOs for educational and community development support. Gradually, women are coming out of their home and taking their place in the wider community. Nevertheless, woman's lives continue to be circumscribed by the decision of men and these decisions can be crucial in determining the extent to which each woman is able to fulfill her potential.

The geography of the region also impinges on women's life. The region is in itself isolated, being 650 km distant from the nearest major urban center. But within the region there are areas of greater isolation. It is not uncommon for students to walk for several hours each day in order to be able to continue their education beyond primary school. For reasons already given, this is not an option for adolescent girls. A program which affords a package of both schooling and safe accommodation is necessary for girls coming from the remotest areas, who have to be away from homes (Field Research Series April 2008, p. 7).

### **Education Status in Gilgit-Baltistan,**

The literacy rate in Gilgit-Baltistan is 37.8%. Apart from the efforts made by the Government, NGOs such as AKES, Marafi Foundation and Pakistan Education Council (PEC); National Education Foundation (NEF); USWA Public School system and many other smaller NGOs, which are also working in the education sector through a number of school networks. "There are 441 schools, which are operating in the private sector, while AKES has set up 256 schools in Gilgit-Baltistan including four Higher Secondary Schools (DOE statistical abstract, 2007) in order to provide quality education." The Pakistan Army is also supporting the efforts to improve the education standards in Gilgit-Baltistan by setting up Army Public Schools.

- The female literacy rate is considered to be 100 percent in a few villages dominated by the Ismaili sect. The major factor contributing to this is the awareness and promotion of female education among the community members by their spiritual leader, late Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III. His contribution included setting up of a chain of Diamond Jubilee Schools in remote villages. Although there are some areas in the southern part of Diamer district which do not even have a single female school, owing to traditional norms regarding women's status in the society, the situation is slowly improving because of the initiatives taken by some local NGOs.
- There is only one University i.e., Karakorum International University (KIU) at the junction of River Hunza and River Gilgit about 3-4 kilometers from Gilgit town.
- Curriculum development is a Federal responsibility, particularly in the case of Gilgit-Baltistan, where only limited books on subjects such as social studies, geography and science are developed up to class five. However, there is growing awareness of the fact that unless contextual and environmental concepts are incorporated into the existing curriculum, it cannot fulfill emerging needs. The Education Department of Gilgit-Baltistan, has taken lead in this process by redeveloping the primary level curriculum by incorporating environmental issues, under the Northern Areas Education Project (NAEP).
- According to the annual census of 1999-2000, the Boys' participation rate for primary, middle and high classes for the years 1998 – 99 were 80%, 63%, and 39% respectively, while,
- Female participation rate for the same years were 56%, 28% and 17% for primary, middle and high classes.

According to the annual Statistical Report 2009 Directorate of Colleges a huge difference is found in establishment of colleges and universities in the following tables:

**Table A**

**Government Colleges by Gender and Level for 2009-10**

Gender	Intermediate	Degree	Total
Boys	07	05	12
Girls	03	03	06
Total	09	05	14

**Table B**

**Number of Government Colleges, Teachers, and Enrolment of Students**

	Institutions			Teaching Staff			Enrolment		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Male	Female	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Govt. Colleges	12	4	16	202	58	260	4263	2675	6938

Source: Annual College Census 2009-10

It is evident from the tables A and B that during the year 2009 and 2010 Government Colleges at Intermediate Level total nine including seven for boys and two for girls. At Degree Level five colleges are for boys and one college is for girls.

**Table C**

**Summary of existing students at Karakurum International University**

S.#	Subject/ Discipline	level of Education	2007		2008		2009		2010		Total M	total F	Total
			M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F			
1	Information Technology	Bachelor	17	4	15	7	3	9	6	4	41	24	65
		BBA IT	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	3	19	3	22
		Master	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	Communication Sciences communication (Self Support prog)	Bachelor	0	0	15	0	0	0	0	0	15	0	15
		Master	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	5	5	5	10
3	Management Sciences	Bachelor	47	12	65	12	70	13	46	7	228	44	272
		MBA	0	0	0	0	72	10	45	7	117	17	134



		MBA(P)	0	0	0	0	0	0	15	6	15	6	<b>21</b>
		MBA (E)Self	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	6	0	<b>6</b>
		MBA (R)Self	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	<b>1</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Education</b>	Bachelor	0	0	11	16	2	10	3	8	16	34	<b>50</b>
		Master	0	0	0	0	6	43	7	44	13	87	<b>100</b>
		M.Ed 1 Year	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>English</b>	Bachelor	9	6	14	5	11	7	7	3	41	21	<b>62</b>
		Master	0	0	0	0	22	22	27	42	49	64	<b>113</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Food Processing Technology</b>	Bachelor	16	9	12	6	5	5	7	2	40	22	<b>62</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Economics</b>	Bachelor	40	26	23	21	11	6	15	11	89	64	<b>153</b>
		Masters	0	0	0	0	33	24	31	21	64	45	<b>109</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Economics (Fin) S. Sport Prog</b>	Master	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	3	11	3	<b>14</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Chemistry</b>	Bachelor	0	0	7	13	0	0	1	6	8	19	<b>27</b>
		Master	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	12	4	12	<b>16</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Biological Science</b>	Bachelor	8	24	4	24	8	16	1	10	21	74	<b>95</b>
		Master	0	0	0	0	2	17	5	9	7	26	<b>33</b>
		M.Phil	0	0	0	0	2	5	4	6	6	11	<b>17</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>International Relation</b>	Bachelor	26	9	25	3	12	5	9	2	72	19	<b>91</b>
		Master	0	0	0	0	29	8	32	11	61	19	<b>80</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>Mathematics</b>	Bachelor	20	21	16	24	2	5	10	4	48	54	<b>102</b>
		Master	0	0	0	0	4	6	5	2	9	8	<b>17</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>Physics</b>	Bachelor	0	0	6	6	8	1	4	3	18	10	<b>28</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>Earth Science</b>	Bachelor	0	0	24	1	0	0	8	2	32	3	<b>35</b>
<b>15</b>	<b>Environmental Science</b>	Bachelor	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	5	4	5	<b>9</b>
		M.Phil	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	3	8	3	<b>11</b>
	<b>Total</b>		<b>183</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>302</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>346</b>	<b>241</b>	<b>1068</b>	<b>702</b>	<b>1770</b>



**Total Male and Female**

<b>Level</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Bachelor	692	396	1088
Master	362	292	654
M.Phil	14	14	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>1068</b>	<b>702</b>	<b>1770</b>

Source: Report from KIU Student Affairs & Alumni October, 2010

It is evident from Table C that during the last five years at Karakorum International University in different discipline at Bachelor level total students are 1088 including 396 female and 692 male students. Moreover, at Master Level there are total 654 students, among them 362 male and 292 female. At M. Phil Level the ratio is equal at 14 male and 14 female.

From the above tables we can see that there is a big difference between the numbers of male and female students at colleges and at university level. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage more females for higher education.

**Empowerment**

Providing a concise definition of women’s empowerment is not easy. A definition taken from the United Nations Population Information Network (POPIN n.d.) captures key elements of this complex concept:

“Women’s empowerment has five components: women’s sense of self-worth; their rights to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives; both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.” (POPIN n.d.)

It is interesting to see how many of the responses offered by participants in the study echo words used in the quoted definition of women’s empowerment.

In order to contextualize the findings and recommendations presented in this paper, a broad sketch of the state of education in Pakistan is provided. Clearly, from any individual, higher education can only come into play if there has been an opportunity to complete the earlier stages of education successfully.

Empowerment is not essentially political only; it is a process having personal, economic, social and political dimensions with personal empowerment being the core of the empowerment process. In fact political empowerment will not succeed in the absence of economic

empowerment. The scheme of AKDN and the addition of KIU as a higher education center create empowerment and promote conditions for women to move from positions of marginalization within household decision making process and exclusion within community, to one of greater centrality and inclusion of voice.

Empowerment is a state of mind. In order to empower a mind, it is necessary to build an environment that facilitates emotional liberation, nurtures intellectual development and encourages tolerance, sense of justice and humanity.

### **Empowering Women through Higher Education**

It is a fact that higher education at present is mainly catering to the needs of women. Particularly in rural areas women are totally dependent on men, as they do not have economic power to spend. The historical relationships with their husbands can be seen as influenced by historical factors that shape the social structures of how they are subordinated. It has been observed in several research studies that women experience a double day, as they return to study combined with their domestic roles. The policy planners must think to integrate the economic benefits with education.

It has been noted that education as such serves to empower women. This may be on the most basic level through literacy programs or on more advance levels through university study and even Ph.D. Programs. A UNICEF study (1998) on violence against women in South East Asia concluded that compulsory schooling for all girls would be a long term measure to reduce violence against women by providing them qualifications as the basis for getting a job which in turn will enable them to earn their own income and improve their status.

## **Findings And Discussion**

The experiences reveal that participation in higher education substantially increases women's awareness in the following areas:

### **Independence In Decision Making**

In Pakistan particularly in Gilgit-Baltistan women are affected by many factors. For the most part, their lives are governed by customs and traditions. In early ages, their fathers decide for them on all important matters, while after marriage, husbands and in-laws take over the reins and decide matters on their behalf. Most decisions pertaining to a woman's life e.g. decisions regarding their education and profession, who they marry, in some cases even how many children a woman should have are taken by the male members of the family. Weiss (2003) argues that one of the reasons for women's marginalised status in all spheres of Pakistani society is their exclusion from the decision-making process. It is inevitable that cases arise where women are trapped in marriages which are dysfunctional and where they may suffer violence and abuse. However, the practice of discouraging women from referring cases of infringement of their personal rights to courts is pervasive. Despite the fact that the Constitution of Pakistan states that all citizens are equal before the law and that there shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex, there exist widespread customary practices which violate these guarantees. These traditional structures are the chief obstacles to women's equal status in Pakistan (Government of Pakistan 2005c).

A fundamental problem is the lack of awareness on the part of women of the rights granted to them under Pakistani law. Thus, a survey conducted by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (Government of Pakistan 2002) established that in a sample population of females from all sections of society, almost 90% of the women questioned did not realize that they had rights at all.

It is because lack of education and awareness that women do not care about such things. Through formal and informal discussions faculty members came across and said that we know what our rights are ....In fact, it is the tragedy of our women that they are kept ignorant.....without education, how can they know their position? Interview quote faculty).

### **Economic Independence**

Another significant achievement in Gilgit-Baltistan through higher education is economic independence. It is a fact that in order to substantially change women's position in Pakistani society, it will be necessary to increase opportunities for them to achieve economic independence. Therefore, in this region many families encourage their women to work in various fields and contribute to a better living for a better status of the family. However, in most of the rural areas, young unmarried women are likely to be confined to their parental home, where they are expected to take care of their siblings and generally contribute to the running of

the home. Often, they are not allowed to engage in paid employment and therefore they have no means of achieving even a small measure of economic independence. Although some married women may go out and engage in paid employment but this is likely to be very low paid and in any case, their income will normally go towards boosting the family budget. Whilst women remain economically dependent on their families or husbands, they cannot hope to achieve equal status in society. During the last decades particularly through the services of AKDN, many young women now play a vital role in economic development of their families. They provide financial support for their children. Our observations and experiences indicate that currently, participation in higher education is one of the few ways for women in Gilgit-Baltistan to achieve this elusive goal. Most of the educated women have full control over their earnings. "I'm very glad that I am not dependent on any man for my living and I don't intend to be." (Interview quote, university student). "My earnings are my own, though I spend it mostly on household needs as my father's income is not enough and I want to give the best to my siblings." (Interview quote, student). Expectations for gaining economic independence amongst students were even higher, with 71% of students indicating that they expected to have control over their future earnings. "My education means a lot to me, it is a ladder to achieving what I want in life ... my income will be my own" (Interview quote, student). More generally, a rather smaller proportion of faculty members (70%) than students (87%) saw higher education as a means to increased economic independence. The figures may indicate that students' expectations are not totally realistic in this respect. However, overall responses suggest both that student participants' optimism is justified and that economic considerations play a significant role in women's striving to engage in higher education. "Nothing is more important in life than having your own money ... You can achieve this only by having a good degree and then a respectable job, which would eventually improve your social status in society"(Interview quote, student).

Survey results and interview data indicate that educated women gain considerable control over their earnings. This in turn increases their confidence and forms a basis for personal development and expression. Importantly, the results show that ultimately, women's financial independence benefits their family and especially their children.

Moreover, AKESP provides scholarships for many needy and talented young girls. AKES provides scholarship through providing Female Human Resource Development (FHRD) scholarship for higher education. The following tables show the results of the scholarships:

**Institute – wise breakdown of scholars during year 2005-2007**

<b>Institute</b>	<b>No of scholars</b>
KIU and Colleges in Gilgit-Baltistan	350
College in down country	35

<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>
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FHRDP Tracker Study (1997-2007).

This table shows the number of students enrolled through FHRDP scholarship in different colleges in Gilgit-Baltistan, at KIU and down country (Rawalpindi and Islamabad).

Some reflections from the scholars studying in down country colleges,

I am Samina (pseudonym) from Ghizer. We are 13 members in our family. My father is retired from bank and now running a small shop. I was always brilliant in my studies. After completing my schooling I faced lots of financing problems while I was studying at intermediate level. I was worried about my further education. Somehow I did pass intermediate and then I applied for FHRDP scholarship and I was so lucky to get it. I have completed my graduation and Masters from F 7/2 College Islamabad through FHRD scholarship. Now I am working as university faculty and support my family. FHRD award is a great blessing for many students like me who belong to remote areas of Gilgit-Baltistan. (Interview on August 23, 2010).

Another female medical doctor maintained,

“I am Ghazala (pseudonym) from Hunza. I am presently serving as a doctor in Hunza. I got FHRDP scholarship at HSSC level. I would say that FHRDP Scholarship Program is the best community service one can ever provide. It helped me a lot in carrying out my studies with full concentration and without any worries about expenses. I can proudly say that I have succeeded in achieving a standard of life that I have always wished for. This is my great achievement. I give a great deal of credit to FHRDP for providing me financial support in a very important academic year. This scholarship is a ray of hope for thousands of girls who are still seeking financial support. I greatly recommend this kind of programs to be continued.” (Discussion on August 10, 2010).

One more girl working as senior nurse said,

“ I am Salma (pseudonym) from Khaplu working as a senior nurse in District Headquarter Hospital Gilgit. I am one of the scholars of FHRDP award. I completed my studies from Karachi and am working as senior nurse. I support my whole family and now we are very happy.” (Discussion on September 4, 2010).

### **Participation In Civic Society**

Apart from any ethical considerations motivating the drive towards eliminating the gender gap in Gilgit-Baltistan’s culture, there are other pressing reasons which argue for change in the same direction. These include the establishment of a progressive civic society and the

attainment of greater economic wealth. It has indeed been shown that societies which maintain gender disparities cannot benefit economically to their fullest potential (Coleman 2005). In order to achieve such objectives, it will be necessary for Pakistan to make full use of the talents of all its citizens. Increased educational opportunities for girls and women will provide them with the skills and the knowledge base necessary to contribute more fully to society, both in an economic and a civic sense. Simultaneously, education will provide women with the confidence they need to engage at all levels in civic and economic aspects of life. The gender gap in Pakistan begins at home, with boys being valued over girls in all respects during their upbringing (UNICEF 2006; United Nations 2000b; Haque 2002). Parental attitudes limit opportunities for girls from an early age (Haque 2002). Data from Haque's (2002) study show that in general, parental attitudes in Pakistan result in girls having limited opportunities to participate in social networks. Women in Pakistan are subject to an array of social and psychological disadvantages that limit their mobility and prevent them from utilising opportunities to develop their natural capabilities. Haque's (2002) study reveals how societal patterns control women's mobility to a very large extent. Because women have generally been subject to restrictions throughout their upbringing, they lack both the skill and the confidence to promote themselves in a social context where they would have opportunity to do so. It is very relevant to the context of Gilgit-Baltistan too that many women are within the walls of their home. They do not come out from their homes.

The women who participated in the study were keenly aware of the effects of their upbringing on their levels of confidence:

Going out alone is not considered acceptable in my family..... and I believe in most families. Our parents care for us, I think this is the reason, but it is also true that this kind of protection keeps us dependent .. ... and lacking in confidence. (Interview quote, student).

However, there are indications that as women are enabled to contribute to society in substantial and relevant ways, attitudes towards women are changing and hence societal norms which currently form the strongest barrier to change. Women who are educated are more likely to be listened to; their views are increasingly respected, which means that they are able to make a contribution to society. This is like an upward spiral, resulting in greater opportunities for women's participation in all aspects of life. Ashraf's (2007) study, which focused on female teachers in Gilgit-Baltistan, illustrates how women can have an impact on their community, in spite of prevailing and deep-rooted social norms. This highlights the importance of social and economic investment in the education of girls (Ashraf 2007). Increasing girls' access to education will later empower them as women to play a greater role within the family as well as at community and societal levels. Our formal and informal discussions show that higher education enables women to have an impact at many levels. It changes their lives, but it also benefits their immediate family, the wider family, friends and the whole community. Ashraf's (2007) conclusions that educated women are given more of a voice are confirmed in the current study. One student commented:



A few years back, my opinion was not take into consideration ...now my parents call me when they need advice; they share their problems with me and want suggestions to resolve them. This really gives me confidence. I feel valued ... I'm not sure of the reason for this change ... but I think it's because of my education. (Interview quote, student).

### **Women's Ability To Claim Legal Rights**

Another significant observation is that higher education substantially increases women's awareness of their legal rights. Of greatest significance for women are the laws relating to divorce and inheritance rights. Whilst awareness of these laws represents a significant step forward, there remain substantial hurdles which prevent women from claiming these rights. It is the interrelatedness of different cultural and customary practices that affect women so pervasively and place them in a position of subordination and dependence. This makes it difficult for women to change one aspect of their lives without simultaneously and inevitably inviting repercussions in other spheres of life. Divorce is seen as an act of public defiance; a woman who has sought divorce is considered disobedient. Divorce is permitted by law in Pakistan, but if a woman claims this right, she is ridiculed and rejected by in-laws, by her birth family and all of society. From early childhood it is impressed upon girls that their parents' first priority is to get them married, and that obtaining a divorce is not an option for them. For a woman to appear in court is considered highly undesirable. Women who do go to court in order to obtain a divorce are likely to be subjected to humiliating responses from members of the wider family. This is intimidating and prevents most women from exercising their legal rights (Government of Pakistan 2003). Educated women in Pakistan generally and in Gilgit-Baltistan particularly may be aware of their rights as defined by the constitution, but cultural and societal pressures continue to substantially prevent them from seeking their rights. The study established that most of the people were of the view that even educated women are socially discouraged from claiming the right to divorce. Women often do not feel that they can go against the wishes of their family, because they continue to need their support. Even where women have a comparatively substantial degree of economic independence, they may not feel secure enough to let go of the support the family provides. In this regard some educated women share their feelings,

My husband doesn't live with me and doesn't divorce me either ... going to court, no way ... as I have no support in this from my family. (Interview quote, faculty member) Established attitudes are deeply entrenched and the stigma of a woman seeking a divorce affects the entire family and may entail negative consequences for other family members.

It is common feeling of people that when women want divorce they have to compromise and refrain from getting a divorce, as they are afraid that their sisters wouldn't get good proposals otherwise. (Interview quote, faculty member)

A similar picture emerges in relation to claiming inheritance rights. In Gilgit-Baltistan, a woman's dowry is considered to be compensation for her inheritance. Survey results indicated that 73% of faculty and 54% of students were of the opinion that educated women are socially discouraged from claiming their inheritance rights. Social pressures in this regard are very



strong and the fear of putting kinship relations at stake prevents women from claiming their share of an inheritance. Most women do not have an independent safety net when faced with a real crisis, such as a serious illness, a violent husband or financial hardship. Women are then forced to fall back on the support of the parental home or that of a brother and hence forgo their share in property, partly as insurance for the future. We know that our religion and constitution allow us to have our shares in property but it never happened before in my family so how could I ask for that. (Interview quote, faculty member)

I could have sought legal assistance for claiming my inheritance after my parents' death, but that would have meant giving up my family. (Interview quote, student) Nonetheless, higher education appears to have a significant impact on women's willingness to take matters to court in order to defend their rights; very few educated women, stated that they feel they would have the confidence to take matters to court, should this be necessary. Thus, higher education encourages women to agitate for their legal rights.

### **Reduce Violence**

Violence against women is not the issue of any particular region or group; it is an ugly universal, crossing the frontiers of ideology, social class and ethnic identity. At the individual level, violence disrupts the lives of women, limits their options, undermines their confidence and self-esteem, and impairs their health psychologically as well as physically. It denies them their human rights and hinders their full participation in society. Violence against women deprives society of the full participation of women in all aspects of development, not just in terms of hours of labour missed due to violence, but also in terms of the cost of services to the victims.

It is a fact that education serves to empower women. This may be on the most basic level through literacy programs or on more advance levels through university study. A UNICEF study (1998) on violence against women in South Asia concluded that compulsory schooling for all girls would be a long-term measure to reduce violence against women by providing them qualifications as the basis for getting a job which in turn will enable them to earn their own income and improve their status. Our experiences and observations reveal that after getting higher education in

Gilgit-Baltistan many young women get very attractive jobs with sufficient salaries which help them support their families in a better way. As a result the families are very prosperous and independent to live a high standard life which impacts a lot the community as well as the whole society.

In addition, they become aware about the significant role which their women play inside and outside their homes. They value their services and honor on the contribution of their women. In this regard some high educated women expressed their feelings:

“After getting higher education and doing a better job I realize that my family (particularly my husband and in laws value me. I also contribute very well in terms of my children's

education and providing them other facilities such as paying their fees on time, providing books and notebooks. Before my job my children always suffered in payment of fees because my husband did not have a good job. Now I pay it on time. Therefore, children go to school without any tension and play a vital role in their studies” (Interview quote, university faculty 20/4/2010).

### **Women’s Access To Higher Education**

It has been argued (Khalid and Mujahid-Mukhtar 2002) that education is a key to giving women more control over their lives. However, social norms continue to prevent women from having equal access to education. In the past there were serious issues e.g. educational inequality remains one of the major infringements of the rights of women and an important barrier to social and economic development (UNESCO 2003). Data from the study confirm that acute discrimination exists within the family with regard to provision for educational opportunities. Giving preference to sons is a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the patriarchal systems. Sons are the focal part of the family; it is up to them to ensure continuity of, and protection for, the family property and they also have economic obligations towards their parents.

My parents have money to spend on my brother’s education but not for me ... I give tuition to cover my university expenses ... but I’m still happy that they don’t stop me from studying (Interview quote, student 27/4/ 2010).

From various discussions it came out that parents do not spend similar amounts of money on educating their daughters as they do on sons. Furthermore, most of the women and scholars stated that they needed the permission of their family to participate in higher education. Interview data indicate that other family members may determine key choices for the women concerned, such as what subject they study, which university they attend and the kind of accommodation they may use at university. One student relates: Because I was not allowed to go to Lahore to study medical, I ended up here, studying Biology ... Being able to study was really important to me. (Interview quote, student) The study therefore indicates that whilst participation in higher education brings women many benefits, enabling them to make important strides towards a more emancipated way of life, significant restrictions on making choices for themselves still apply. What comes across from the study is that women are keen to accept a partial package, based on their awareness of the unique advantages that participation in higher education can purchase for them.

The reality is that women suffer a lot in their lives but gradually they will come forward if they get exposures.

## **Challenges Which Are Faced**

### **Harassment At Work Places**

There are certain types of difficulties and harassments for working women at their work places. Harassment, in different manifestations from staring and stalking to sexual advances, is a fear for many of them. Women do not generally feel intellectually challenged in their pursuits; rather they face psychological pressures, which restrict their active participation in work. Such annoying behavior is not limited to any specific society or any section of society; even the employers, highly educated bosses also cause concerns.

Moreover, most of the workplaces in Gilgit-Baltistan are also not often adequately designed where they could feel at ease during work and break timings. Such unfriendly and oppressive behavior of employers is not a peculiarity of our society; rather it is a worldwide problem. Some women employees mentioned, "In our work places we are not comfortable because every where people are teasing and joking with us. Therefore, we require a female friendly peaceful environment to work effectively." (Interview quote, university faculty 20/4/2010).

### **Work Load**

One more significant challenge with working women is that home is their original domain, which they have to sustain in all circumstances. Women generally prefer to stay at home, and normally do not opt for the job out of choice, but out of necessity. Because of multiple responsibilities they always have a feeling of guilt for sparing less time for family and maternal responsibilities. This dual responsibility is a double burden on them, and therefore, they have to fight simultaneously on two fronts. In this regard a nurse Arifa maintains,

For the whole day and sometimes even whole nights I am on duty. I have three young children below age six and nobody is at home to take care of them. My husband works in a bank with long hours' duty. Therefore, sometimes it is very difficult to manage all the responsibilities of home as well as of the hospital. (Translated from an Urdu Interview 25/9/2010).

Moreover, in certain sectors, women are taken as cheap labor and are paid fewer wages than their male counterparts. Therefore, it is difficult for them to arrange somebody at home for household work.

### **The Influence Of Current Educational Practice On Women**

Despite giving lots of attention many educational institutions in Pakistan and in Gilgit-Baltistan, still rooted as they are in traditional culture, contribute to women's subordination rather than helping to empower them. There is considerable evidences that in Pakistan educational institutions shape girls and boys very differently (Qureshi, Pirzado, and Nasim 2007). Our

experiences and people's responses show that gender biases in the education system are strong. They are aware that gender biases in our education system are deep rooted. Most of the educated people feel that they have such bias nesses in their own teaching practices too. Many participants revealed that they experienced gender biases in their school years where teachers only encourage boys to take leadership role rather than giving it to girls too.

I remember during my early schooling, our teacher always considered us girls less than boys and all main active responsibilities, like maintaining class discipline during teacher's absence, were given to boys ... but this is not the case at a higher level ... at least I never do this. (Interview quote, faculty member)

The content of textbooks and curriculum design were seen as strong contributors to the perpetuation of gender discrimination in the education system This has been noticed in previous studies ((Mattu and Hussain 2004). Dean (2007b) states that gender bias in textbooks is an important reason why existing curricula persistently fail to project women as full members of society. Participants made multiple references to the existence of gender bias in textbooks which commonly attribute active and prominent roles to men, while associating women with passive and subordinate ones. Our textbooks are full of references that attribute an active role to men, even though history is full of courageous and remarkable women who made tremendous contributions in different fields. But have you ever seen them mentioned in any text book? (Interview quote, faculty member).

Women have played a significant role in the development of our society. Therefore, our curriculum needs to draw attention to women's contributions to society and highlight women's activities as significant as well (Interview quote, faculty member). There is clearly a strong gender bias in schools, evidences suggest that differential treatment of male and female students at college and university level persists. A university student maintains, "We are very disappointed from our education system. We are treated very differently as compared to boys. Certainly there is nothing in our educational experience that gives us a feeling of equality. (Interview quote, student) Gender inequalities are therefore widespread in Pakistan's education system. There is substantial evidence that the education system fails to fulfill its potential as a change agent (Rarieya 2007). These findings point to the fact that there is an urgent need to address these issues in teacher education programmes (Rarieya 2007).

### **Lessons Learnt**

Women play multiple roles at homes as well as at work places. But their contribution is significant.

Developing girls through providing education is developing the families and the whole nation. Once the families and nations are developed, automatically there will be prosperity and progress. As a result human manpower increases.

Another significant learning is that females realize that in the society (home and school) people believe that male child is more important than a female child. Thus, most of the women do not raise their voices in any place because of lack of confidence. They also realize that this discrimination starts from early ages in their homes and continue their throughout the whole life which is an alarming situation for the whole nation.

There are lots of claims at policy level that women are empowered through providing basic rights but in reality these claims are limited to the paper. Therefore, we see very few examples of male and female equality in the society.

### **Recommendations**

Higher education has enabled many deserving young girls from remote areas to get education and achieve an honorable job. This has not only provided teachers and nurses to school in those areas where female teachers and doctors were desperately required, but also has inspired communities to educate their daughters.

Number of female institutions in the formal system of education needs to become equal the number of male education institutions.

At the moment mostly scholarships are provided for intermediate and graduate level. It is recommended to provide scholarships for higher education and professional education as well. This will help the women pursue leadership roles in various development sectors.

Scholarship should be provided for the technical education also, so that the girls, who do not have the intellectual capacity to pursue further education, can have alternative options for earning income to support their families.

The government of Gilgit-Baltistan needs to have a strategic plan in place to develop female human resources which is mutually beneficial for the development of the whole society.

To empower women in Pakistan, people will need to increase their efforts to change the social norms, practices and attitudes that prevent girls from going to colleges and universities and women for going to various jobs not only for teaching and nursing but others like banking, air force, engineering.

Educational institutions need to continue to build family and community support to ensure that girls enrolment and completion of schools equal that of boys.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that education has a great role in developing any society. Through it, social changes take place where males and females both participate equally in the development of the country, Although in Pakistan generally and in Gilgit-Baltistan particularly substantial efforts are being made to address the prevailing gender gaps, cultural norms and practices continue to mitigate against the successful introduction of change. Different organizations have played a significant role in providing facilities of higher education. But still the ratio is very less and it requires more work in future to make it equal.

Various research studies have made references to a catalogue of discriminatory practices which are portrayed as interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Discrimination starts in the home, where boys are preferred over girls and this continues throughout a woman's life. Largely excluded from the decision-making process, denied an equal share of things and, very importantly, denied opportunities to develop confidence in their abilities, girls are assigned a passive and subordinate role. The education system adds to these discriminatory practices and thereby reinforces the value system experienced by girls in the home. The effect of these prevailing cultural influences is that girls are not able to develop to their full potential. Having been denied opportunities to acquire confidence in their abilities, their sense of self-worth will be low. As women, they will not be equipped with either the knowledge or the skills that would give them economic independence. As a result, they cannot expect the kind of respect that would be given to an educated person. For similar reasons, they are largely prevented from assuming a rightful and responsible role within society. Through the discussions with the women who were consulted in this study, the paper demonstrates that participation in higher education by women in Gilgit-Baltistan brings them many benefits. Engagement in higher education equips women with the knowledge that forms the basis of their economic independence. Attainment of these achievements brings with it an increased status and recognition from their family and the wider community. Being educated, achieving economic independence, developing personal confidence, gaining status within the community and being given a voice, are all aspects of a tightly interlinked package of benefits.

*"We become more confidence through getting higher education. After completing my study I have started the job. Now my whole family has benefitted. I was the first women from my village to go to university and I now serve as an inspiration to the younger girls."* (Interview quote, medical doctor).

(Ashraf, 2007). In spite of the restrictions still imposed on women, including educated women, there is hope for the future. Participants in the study expressed a determination not to perpetuate the system within their homes and to treat daughters on an equal footing with sons. The importance of these female graduates as role models within their families and communities must not be overlooked.

Thus, it appears that women's participation in higher education is able to make inroads in the multiple dimensions implicated in hindering progress towards greater gender parity in Pakistan.

Various questions arise as to how empower young girls from early ages in our educational institutions as well as at home and what would be our role as professionals to empower these girls and women in our country.

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