

Structural Override and Bounded Agency: The Limits of Maternal Influence on Girls' Educational Exclusion in Pashtun Society Mardan KP Pakistan

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Abstract: Despite global efforts to achieve universal primary education, girls in rural, patriarchal societies remain disproportionately excluded from schooling. While macro-structural barriers are well-documented, the micro-level intra-household power dynamics that finalize girls' educational exclusion remain underexplored. Utilizing a mixed-methods design (N = 420 households; 15 key informant interviews) in rural Mardan, Pakistan, this study investigates how child gender and maternal education moderate family decision-making regarding school dropout. Drawing on Amartya Sen's Intra-Household Bargaining Theory, the study employs Hayes' PROCESS macro for moderated regression analysis. Results reveal a profound gendered asymmetry in household governance: Patriarchal Authority exerts a 32% stronger effect on the dropout of daughters than sons (Interaction B = 0.51, $p = .009$). Furthermore, the study identifies a "Structural Override" effect, wherein pro-education family values protect boys three times more effectively than girls (Interaction B = -0.954, $p < .001$), as external structural barriers neutralize positive family intentions for daughters. Crucially, while a mother's education fails to moderate final patriarchal authority ($p = .489$), it significantly moderates household rules ($p = .005$) and family discussions ($p = .035$). We conceptualize this as "bounded agency" educated mothers cannot veto the patriarch's decision, but they strategically negotiate harm-reduction at the margins. We conclude that interventions targeting maternal awareness are fundamentally insufficient without dismantling the patriarchal veto power and structural barriers that render girls' educational aspirations unviable.

Keywords: Intra-Household Bargaining Bounded Agency, Educational Exclusion, Pashtunwali Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

The challenge of keeping children in primary school deeply disadvantage girls in particularly. Comparable the phenomenon of dropout is not gendered neutral. Universally primary education is regarded as a foundation step for sustainable human capital development. (Becker, 1993; Siddiqui, 2015), millions of girls in the Global South are disproportionately affected and excluded from the basic foundation of primary education. In Pakistan, which faces one of the world's most severe educational crises, the gender gap is stark; approximately 26.09 million children are out of school. At the primary level alone, the national data highlights 39% of school-aged girls are excluded compared to 32% of boys (Pakistan Education Statistics [PES], 2022–23). Similarly in the in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan, District Mardan this education disparity intensifies radically. Where approximately 230,969 out-of-school children, operating within a socio-cultural setting that is profoundly administered by the rigid Pashtunwali code of conduct (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [PBS], 2023). Within these rural areas of strong social norms, male literacy stands at 67.2%, while female literacy falls to just 40.5% (PBS, 2023). Consequently, girls constitute a disproportionate 58% of the district's overall out-of-school population, a figure that approaches 70% in the most deeply rural tehsils of District Mardan (Aziz et al., 2023; Gul et al., 2023). Prior literature

has comprehensively recognized the macro-structural and cultural barriers to girls' education in Pakistan, repeatedly citing poverty, lack of female teachers, early marriage, and mobility restrictions as the primary drivers of education marginalization (Ali et al., 2021; Khattak, 2025; Sabates et al., 2020). However, these macro-level factors are exclusively treated as direct causes of dropout. What remains hidden is the black box of the family the specific intra-household mechanisms through which these external structural pressures are translated into the micro-level decision to withdraw a daughter from school (Huisman & Smits, 2015; Chen & Khoso, 2025). Poverty and poor school infrastructure do not alone pull a girl out of a school; they act as triggers that must be negotiated, contested, and finalized within the domestic sphere. Therefore this paper shifts the analytical focus from structural determinism to the gendered mechanics of household governance. Grounded in Amartya Sen's (1990) Intra-Household Bargaining Theory, this paper conceptualize the family not as a unified entity, but as a site of cooperative conflict where power asymmetries dictate whose educational preferences are honored and whose are sacrificed (Doss, 2013; Hossain et al., 2023). By analyzing moderation effects across different dimensions of family decision-making specifically Authority, Rules, Values, and Discussion this study draws the

meticulous limits of maternal agency and the intense structural vulnerabilities of girls in patriarchal agrarian contexts.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Notwithstanding constitutional guarantees and international commitments to universal primary education (United Nations, 2015, Suyuhan et al., 2026), Pakistan continues to face disproportionate educational challenges, with approximately 26.09 million children out of school (Pakistan Education Statistics [PES], 2022–23). Furthermore this challenge is acutely gendered and geographically concentrated. In the rural tehsils of District Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), girls constitute approximately 70% of the out-of-school population, as they operate operating within a highly restrictive agrarian economy that is governed by the strict patriarchal codes of Pashtunwali, which strictly control family life (Aziz et al., 2023; Jan, 2023; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [PBS], 2023). Within this context of agrarian and patriarchal settings, current educational policies and the literature often misidentified the actual process of this education exclusion, particularly for girls. Prevailing models frequently treat macro-structural obstacles such as household financial instability, seasonal child labor demands during the peak seasons, and unavailability for female teachers in schools, and crumbling school infrastructure as the fundamental cause of dropout (Ali et al., 2021; Glewwe, 2002; Sabates et al., 2020). Therefore, policymakers and researchers neglects the black box of the family, failing to identify that external hardships do not autonomously pull a girl out of school. Rather, these structural deficits act as external triggers that are processed, negotiated, and finalized within the deeply asymmetrical power structures of Pukhtun household (Huisman & Smits, 2015; Shahidul, 2013). In rural Mardan, the family is not a democratic or amalgamated decision-making entity. Decision-making power is tremendously holds in the hands of male elders, whose authority commands the allocation of resources and labor (Agha & Agha, 2021; Karim, 2025). While qualitative research has progressively noted the impact of this strict patriarchy control on girls (Jan & Azeem, 2024; Rehman et al., 2020), there remains a precarious quantitative gap in understanding how this authority operates conditionally. Specifically, it remain unclear exactly how much more destructive patriarchal authority is to a daughter's education compared to a son's, and under the conditions in which genuine

pro-education family values are systematically neutralized by external structural constraints a phenomenon termed the Structural override. Moreover, while recent gender studies research highlighted that mothers in patriarchal societies are not entirely passive (Ahmed et al., 2024; Khalid, 2020), their real statistical capacity to prevent dropout remains unclear. Universal interventions regularly target mothers with educational awareness campaigns (Banerjee et al., 2013; Ying et al., 2024), however if a mother only possesses bounded agency (Mawa, 2020; Saaka & Luginaah, 2025) allowing her to negotiate daily rules but denying her the power to override the patriarch's final veto these maternal-focused interventions are intended to fail to prevent dropout. Consequently, the main concern in this study discourses is the critical lack of empirical, micro-level data regarding how intra-household bargaining mechanisms (Authority, Rules, Values, and Discussion) mediate macro-structural pressures differently for boys and girls. Without opening this black box, to map the exact limits of maternal agency and the conditional nature of patriarchal power, interventions aimed at retaining girls in rural primary schools will continue to treat the symptoms of dropout rather than the domestic governance structures that ultimately execute it.

Research Questions

To analytically identify the gendered mechanics of the household black box and assess the precise limits of maternal influence, this study states the following research questions:

How do distinct dimensions of family governance mechanism (Patriarchal Authority, Household Rules, and Daily Survival Routines) function differently in driving the primary school dropout of daughters compared to sons?

To what extent do external structural barriers neutralize genuine pro-education family values, and does these neutralization impact girls significantly more than boys?

How does a mother's educational capital moderate the normative environment of the home (Rules and Discussion), and does this capital possess the statistical capacity to disrupt the final patriarchal mandate of educational exclusion?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed mix method approach to figure out how the micro level educational decision are made within the household and to

meet the statistical magnitude of structure barriers that act as a triggered force for the family final decision to dropout out the child. Moreover to captured the live realities of mother role and the range of influence in the family decision. Therefore quantitative phase was prioritized to establish the precise conditional boundaries of patriarchal authority and family values via moderated regression. Afterwards, the qualitative phase was employed to explicate the statistical

paradoxes such as the stopping point by exploring the deeply entrenched narratives of cooperative conflict within the households.

Study Area and Sampling Strategy

The research study was conducted in District Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), a predominantly agrarian region strictly governed by Pashtunwali cultural codes.

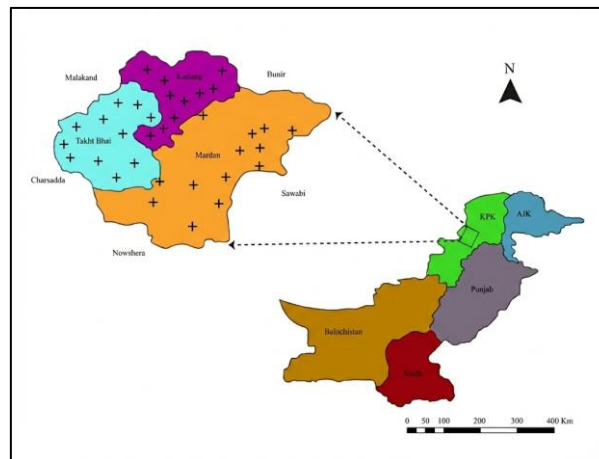


Figure 1: Map of study area

A multi-stage cluster sampling technique was utilized to capture a highly representative sample of the rural demographic. In the primary stage, three tehsils (Takht Bhai, Katlang, and Mardan Rural) were selected. Subsequent stages involved the random selection of union councils and specific villages, ultimately yielding a robust analytical sample of 420 households containing primary school-aged children.

Instrumentation and Measures

Quantitative data was collected using a structured, culturally validated survey instrument. To capture the nuanced gradients of intra-household bargaining, all primary constructs were measured using a 10-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 10 = Strongly Agree). Prior to the main analysis, construct validity and scale reliability were rigorously confirmed via Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and robust Cronbach's alpha coefficients.

Dependent Variable: School Dropout (DO), operationalized to measure the finality and execution of a child's educational withdrawal.

Predictor Variables (Family Governance): Family Authority, Household Rules, Educational Values, and Family Discussion.

Moderating Variables: * *Child Gender:* Coded as a dichotomous variable (0 = Boys, 1 = Girls) to test the asymmetric application of household rules and values.

Mother's Education: Measured on an ordinal scale (ranging from uneducated to higher education) to quantify maternal human capital and evaluate the extent of her bounded agency.

Quantitative Analytical Strategy

To test the conditional dynamics of family governance moderated regression analyses were performed utilizing Andrew Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 1). This econometric approach allowed for the precise estimation of interaction effects between the family governance mechanisms and the demographic moderators.

Qualitative Phase

To provide narrative depth to the statistical interactions, purposive sampling was utilized to conduct 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Participants included the parents of dropped-out children, local teachers, and community elders to ensure a triangulated perspective on domestic power dynamics. Interviews were conducted in the native Pashto language to preserve cultural nuances, translated verbatim into English, and

subjected to rigorous thematic coding using NVivo 12 software.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis and Sample Characteristics

Prior to conducting the moderated regression analysis, descriptive statistics were generated

using SPSS to establish socio-demographic baseline of the 420 respondents residing in the rural Mardan. The demographic summary of the respondents is presented in Table 1, and the comparative characteristics of the parents are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic and Household Characteristics of Respondents (N = 420)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender of Respondent	Male	358	85.2
	Female	62	14.8
	Total	420	100.0
Household Size (No. of Children)	1–3 children	266	63.3
	4–6 children	114	27.1
	7–9 children	26	6.2
	10+ children	14	3.3
	Total	420	100.0
Out-of-School / Dropout Children	No Dropouts (0)	330	78.5
	1 Child	71	16.9
	2 Children	19	4.5
	Total	420	100.0
Family Structure	Nuclear	205	48.8
	Joint	154	36.7
	Extended	61	14.5
	Total	420	100.0
Monthly Household Income (PKR)	25,000–30,000	71	16.9
	31,000–50,000	160	38.1
	51,000–75,000	104	24.8
	76,000–100,000	71	16.9
	Above 100,000	14	3.3
	Total	420	100.0

In the table 1, the preliminary analysis of the socio-demographic data establishes a critical foundation for understanding the structural and cultural boundaries within which educational decisions are made in rural Mardan. This demographic statistics of 420 respondents corroborates with theoretical boundary of patriarchal and resource-constrained agrarian society. As noted (85.2%) of the survey population were male, compared to (14.8%) females, as the control context of pastunwali male elder as

definitive gatekeepers of the household and preliminary interface with the public sphere. Furthermore the sample highlight the structure and financial vulnerability as shown in the table approximately half of the survey population is belong to the below middle income (below 50,000 PKR monthly). Whereas is such financial constraints environment 36.6 % of the household possess four or more children, within this constrained environment, 21.4% of households already made the final decision of dropout.

Table 2: Parental Socio-Economic Characteristics (N = 420)

Variable	Category	Father (f)	Father (%)	Mother (f)	Mother (%)
Age Group (Years)	25–30	69	16.4	53	12.6
	31–35	72	17.1	65	15.5
	36–40	56	13.3	103	24.5
	41–45	85	20.2	89	21.2
	46–50	95	22.6	67	16.0
	51–55	43	10.2	43	10.2
Total		420	100.0	420	100.0

Educational Attainment	No Formal Education	119	28.3	135	32.1
	Primary	98	23.3	48	11.4
	Secondary	74	17.6	92	21.9
	Higher Secondary	66	15.7	87	20.7
	Graduate & Above	63	15.0	47	11.2
	Total	420	100.0	420	100.0
Occupational Status	Retired / Housewife	34	8.1	326	77.6
	Farmer / Agriculture	133	31.7	40	9.5
	Government Job	69	16.4	14	3.3
	Private Job	41	9.8	24	5.7
	Self-Employed / Business	84	20.0	12	2.9
	Daily Wages / Jobless	59	14.0	4	1.0
	Total	420	100.0	420	100.0

Table 2 clearly reveals the demographic and socio-economic asymmetries between parents, indicating how age, human capital, and economic agency compound to reinforce patriarchal authority. The age distribution show traditional marital norms in the study area, with the highest concentration of fathers falling in the older 46–50 bracket (22.6%), whereas maternal age peaks significantly earlier in the 36–40 brackets (24.5%). This generational age gap within marriages consolidates domestic power, layering age-based seniority on top of gender-based authority. Moreover, a significant proportion of fathers lack formal education (28.3%), but this shortfall is even more prominent among mothers (32.1%). Male university graduates (15.0%) also outnumber female graduates (11.2%). The most profound disparity, however, lies in occupational status and labor force participation. Only 8.1% of fathers are detached from the active labor force, compared to 77.6% of mothers who are designated as housewives. On the other hand, nearly a third of

fathers (31.7%) are engaged in agriculture, driving the seasonal agrarian labor routines that frequently pull male children out of the classroom. This severe gender disparity in economic participation and educational attainment confirms the mother's exceptionally weak fallback position within the Pashtun household context. Due to the lack of economic capital mother's independent decision are compounded in the authority of older male spouses, whereas their intra-household bargaining power is structurally restricted.

Prior to hypothesis testing, the internal consistency of all primary measurement scales (Authority, Rules, Values, Discussion, and Dropout) was evaluated. All constructs demonstrated robust reliability, yielding Cronbach's alpha coefficients of alpha 0.70, thereby confirming the mathematical suitability of the data for advanced conditional process modeling.

Table 3: Moderated Regression of Family Authority on School Dropout by Child Gender)

Model	Predictor	B	SE	t	p	ΔR ²	Sig. ΔF	df
1	(Constant)	10.58	2.45	4.32	.000	.218	.000	(1, 417)
	Authority	1.23	0.09	13.79	.000			
	Gender (Dummy)	3.42	1.10	3.11	.002			
2	(Constant)	1.32	4.30	0.31	.760	.319	.009	(1, 416)
	Authority	1.59	0.16	9.67	.000			
	Gender (Dummy)	6.76	2.19	3.08	.001			
	Authority × Gender	0.51	0.20	2.55	.009			

Dependent variable Dropout

The moderated regression results in table 3 highlight the perfectly the supremacy of the father's authority in implementing educational decisions, illuminating that the dictatorial equilibrium within the home operates with distinct, highly gendered logics. While patriarchal power is unconditional, it does not exert a uniform pressure across all children. Analyzed through the lens of

Sen's (1990) framework of Intra-Household Bargaining, the data shows that for a son, a father's authority is typically tied to calculations of future breadwinning and agriculture workforce demands. On the other hand the same authority for the daughter is shaped by the external cultural anxieties regarding social honor (*Izzat*), physical safety, and traditional marital roles. This gender

distinction reveal broader regional dynamics as highlighted by Ragheed and Mar'iyah (2024) in KP, and Agha, Rind, and Issani (2021) in rural Sindh, both of these studies identified the prevalence of strict patriarchal authority that systematically hindrance girls education in particular across Pakistan. Similar further evaluating whether gender of child moderated the relationship between domestic authority and dropout the moderation regression analysis was performed in SPSS. The Family Authority variable was mean-centered and multiplied by the gender dummy variable (0 = Boys, 1 = Girls) to create the interaction term. Model 1 of the moderation analysis established the baseline relationships without the interaction term and was highly significant, explaining 21.8 percent of the variance in school dropout ($R^2 = .218$, $p < .001$). Family Authority appeared as influential, independent predictor of school dropout ($B = 1.23$, $p < .001$), confirming that as traditional domestic authority increases, the likelihood of educational exclusion increases significantly. Furthermore, the gender variable ($B = 3.42$, $p = .002$) revealed a profound baseline disparity, confirming that girls in rural Mardan face high risk of education exclusion than boys. This baseline disadvantage finding for the girls in the model are is parallel with the findings of (Listiani et al., 2025; Ovejas, 2024) international research, which proves that girls face higher dropout risks due to intersecting institutional barriers. Similarly, (Mendoza Cazarez, 2019; Moore, 2008) notes that girls' educational agency is frequently constrained by structural forces operating independently of standard household logic, reinforcing the presence of a systemic, gender-based vulnerability. Therefore the combination of these structure barriers and strict authoritative control carries high probability for girl to dropout.

The most important contribution of this model lies in model 2, where authority \times Gender interaction term was introduced in the moderation analysis. The inclusion of this term resulted in a statistically significant increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 =$

.101, $p = .009$), and the interaction coefficient itself was highly significant ($B = 0.51$, $t = 2.61$, $p = .009$). This confirms that child gender fundamentally moderates the relationship between domestic authority and school dropout. To interpret this interaction into theoretical finding domestic outcomes, conditional effects were calculated for each gender. For boys (the reference group), the direct effect of authority on dropout is strong and significant ($B = 1.59$, $p < .001$). For girls, the effect is calculated by adding the interaction coefficient to this main effect ($1.59 + 0.51 = 2.10$). This reveals an obvious reality that a one-unit increase in patriarchal authority increases the dropout risk by 1.59 units for boys, but by 2.10 units for girls. Consequently, the destructive effect of patriarchal authority on educational retention is 32 percent stronger for boys than for girls. This finding provides an insightful understanding into the underlying mechanism of household power as the positive interaction proves that girls are more-sensitive to increases in patriarchal authority. When a father or other male authoritative figure exercises his veto power, it accelerates a daughter's educational exclusion far more drastically than a son's. This heightened sensitivity is the result of what Ahmad, Sher, Batool, and Ali (2024) term cumulative disadvantage. Because girls bear the weight of structural barriers such as a lack of female teachers, distance to schools, and strict mobility restrictions their educational pathways are highly fragile. When patriarchal authority is layered on top of these pre-existing constraints, it does not simply add to the barriers; make it more complex for girls. For boys, the pathway from authority to dropout operates predominantly on economic judgment, devoid of the restrictive honor codes that amplify the patriarch's effect on girls. Thus, while both genders are subject to the father's power, the mechanisms through which that authority translates into dropout are qualitatively different, exposing girls to a convergence of structural and domestic pressures that boys simply do not face.

Table 4: Moderated Regression of Family Authority on School Dropout by mother education

Model	Predictor	B	SE	t	p	R ²	ΔR^2	F	df	p (F)
1	(Constant)	12.702	2.578	4.928	.000	.222	—	47.134	(2,417)	.000
	Authority	1.261	0.089	14.104	.000					
	Mother_Edu	-0.253	0.340	-0.744	.457					
2	(Constant)	9.705	5.042	1.925	.055	.225	.003	28.744	(3,416)	.000
	Authority	1.375	0.187	7.360	.000					
	Mother_Edu	0.831	1.603	0.518	.605					

	AU × Mother_Edu	-0.041	0.059	-0.692	.489				
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*Note: N = 420. Dependent Variable: School Dropout

Following the findings of Patriarchal authority on gender that intensify dropout, a subsequent moderated regression (Table 4) was conducted to determine if a mother's education could influence this dynamic. Particularly the moderation was tested to see whether mother education moderated the relationship between the patriarchal authority and school dropout. For this analysis mother education was coded categorically variable that range from (no formal education to Graduate or above) whereas Family Authority predictor was mean-centered. An interaction term (Authority × Mother's Education) was computed to test the buffering capacity of maternal human capital. Model 1 assessed the direct effects without the interaction term and was statistically significant, $F(2, 417) = 47.134, p < .001$, explaining 22.2% of the variance in school dropout. Reliable with previous findings, Family Authority emerged as a tremendously strong positive predictor of dropout ($B = 1.261, p < .001$). Crucially, mother's education showed no significant direct effect on preventing dropout ($B = 0.253, p = .457$), this statistical findings show that mother education alone does not have the capacity to prevent dropout as far the traditional household authority structure are manage by the male counterpart. Similarly in Model 2 the interaction term (Authority × Mother's Education) was introduced and performed to see if highly educated mothers could control the patriarch's power. While the overall model remained significant, the inclusion of the interaction term produced a negligible

change in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .003$). Most importantly, the interaction coefficient was completely non-significant ($B = -0.041, p = .489$). This statistical reality confirms that a mother's education does not moderate the relationship between patriarchal authority and school dropout. In the light of Sen's (1990) cooperative conflict model, this non-significant finding shows the absolute inflexibility of patriarchal power at the top of family decision-making. While educated mothers may possess the capacity to influence daily household rules or routines base family decisions the fundamental authority structure governing serious life events such as terminating a child's education remains completely impermeable to her educational attainment. These statistical findings are similar with Khan and Biao's (2025) application of the patriarchal bargain framework in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which suggests that educated women operate under strictly bounded agency. Their educational capital allows them to negotiate within the patriarchal system, but it does not grant them the power to transform or override the system itself. Correspondingly, this finding also corroborates with Shahidul's (2013) research on rural household decision-making, which found that regardless of a mother's awareness or preferences, her desires are systematically subordinated to the father's final authority. Eventually, this analysis defines the specific statistical limits of maternal agency in rural Mardan.

Table 5: Moderated Regression Analysis of Family Values on School Dropout by Child Gender

Model	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	R ²	ΔR^2
1	(Constant)	27.067	2.362		11.461	.000	.138	—
	gender_dummy	5.208	1.245	.190	4.182	.000		
	Value_TOTAL	-0.697	0.099	.320	-7.030	.000		
2	(Constant)	11.949	4.197		2.847	.005	.175	.037
	gender_dummy	25.659	4.891	.337	5.246	.000		
	Value_TOTAL	1.402	0.190	.243	7.380	.000		
	Value × Gender	-0.954	0.221	-0.334	-4.317	.000		

*Note: N = 420. Dependent Variable: (Dropout).

While the previous section of the analysis shows that strict patriarchal authority pretense high risk to girls education exclusion, whereas in (table 5) the family values discover more multifaceted phenomena that is structure override. Which explain that in a situation where family really desires to provide education to their daughters is face by the gender base limitation in the

community. That is how the outside world influences the internal household mechanism. It highlights the troubling gap between parents' hopes for their daughters' futures and the reality of their education a gap that development experts often see but struggle to explain (Carvalho & Cameron, 2023; Ying et al, 2025). To explore this phenomena a statistical tests were performed to see

As demonstrated by the most frequently repeated terms in the word cloud, the statistical abstraction of cumulative disadvantage is not merely an econometric concept; the qualitative data reveals exactly how patriarchal authority and maternal agency operate on the ground. It demonstrates the prevalence of rigid ideological forces within the household. This qualitative findings from the interviews show that how exactly the patriarchal authority and maternal agency is operating in the rural households

The Ideological Architecture of Dropout: Future Earners vs. Domestic Mastery

The gender dichotomy that how the father authority accelerates the daughter dropout has been found in the household valuation system for education; One participant, respondent 1 explained the deep cultural roots of this gendered treatment: *“There is clear difference between the treatment of boys and girls within the household, and specifically the education decision is characterized by systematic bias that always prioritizes boys or girls on multiple dimensions of household life. Mostly family perceive that the boy is the future earner are regarded as the primary financial pillar for the family. While girls are limited to the domestic role and seen as being made for household responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Furthermore, in our cultural norms, the girl's value is tied to her mastery of domestic chores, as one day she will need to get married.”* This narrative reveals the distinct, gender logics of patriarchal authority, as identified in the model 2 in the regression analysis in table 1, boys dropout is basically the economic calculation while girls educational exclusion is the ideological pushing force.

Cumulative Disadvantage

This ideological devaluation of education is compounded by the structure barriers and physical constraints That create a trap, where external environment triggered the internal patriarchal mandate shared by another respondent 1 that how this translates into concrete daily practices; *“The patterns of favoritism extend beyond education into basic resource allocation, where boys are often provided with better nutrition and enjoy unrestricted mobility to travel freely to school. In contrast, strict mobility restrictions are placed on girls, making school attendance appears as an 'unsafe action' in the eyes of the family.”* Respondent 1 observation directly demonstrates the phenomenon of "cumulative disadvantage"

(Ahmad et al., 2024). There is no restriction of mobility for boys their educational survival relies solely on the family's financial capacity. A daughter, however, is heavily constrained by Purdah (gender segregation). Because her mere transit to school is perceived as an unsafe action that threatens family honor (*Izzat*), the father's authority is constantly primed to withdraw her at the first sign of structural friction (e.g., a missing boundary wall or a male teacher). The physical environment is thus weaponized by the patriarchal structure, creating the compounded 32% statistical disadvantage observed in the moderation analysis.

Strategic Resilience: The Bounded Agency of Educated Mothers

The second quantitative model established the non-significant value for mother education, which shows that woman Education act as a paper shield that is powerless to amend the final decision that has been taken by the patriarch authority. But however, in the qualitative data it has found that mother are not entirely passive, they use their bounded agency and cognitive capital to negotiate for education in the household An example of responded 2, where an uneducated mother share her story *‘that it was my dream to get education but due to the culture norms and poverty I couldn't receive the education but I dream it for my daughter. So first I discuss with my brother and I told him that I want to provide education to my daughter, and I told my brother that I will cover all of expenses by myself. Further I discuss it with my husband and I convince my husband that the teacher is female, the school is near because my husband has the final authority to make decision after some struggle he can he permitted to let her go. Although my husband is approved but I personally cover her school expenses because I value her education, my husband doesn't feel girls education is important’* Similarly another respondent 3 the mother of dropout daughter shared that *‘I really want my all children to be educated but sometimes it's very difficult for us to manage the education expenses of all together, I always insists my husband that both our sons and daughter need to treat equally but he decided to drop out our daughter Meena, as he said why should I invest my limited money on the education of my daughter as in our community after 5th grade girls are switched to domestic responsibilities that is an acceptable practice in our community.*

Both narrative perfectly summarizes the mechanics of Sen's (1990) cooperative conflict and breathes

life into the statistical reality of bounded agency. In first narrative as an educated mother she first persuade his brother (a male proxy) frame her argument, as well convince his husband that the teacher and female and their in not distance barriers. In the second narrative it can be noticed that the mother struggle for her daughter education but the acceptable practice that the girls in community switched to domestic work this perception play a vital role in dropout.

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to understand the mechanism of household decision making at micro level, that how the external macro level pressure triggered the decision of dropout. Further by assessing these phenomena the study open the black box of family decision and identified that who and how the final decision of educational exclusion are made. This research produces two profound insights; the gendered asymmetry of patriarchal authority and the rigid boundaries of maternal agency.

Firstly, the moderated regression analyses resolutely confirmed that while patriarchal authority drives dropout, its solicitation is basically asymmetrical. As it was found the father or other male dominant figure decision making power accelerates girls educational exclusion 32% more than boys, exposes a deep ideological divide within the household. Grounded in Sen's (1990) Intra-Household Bargaining Theory, the data indicates that boys and girls are subjected to entirely different logics of dropping out from schools. A son's dropout is typically tied to the economic rationality the perception of the future earner model a redirection toward agrarian labor. Conversely, a daughter's dropout is dictated by cultural mandates surrounding Izzat (honor) and domestic mastery. The structure barriers saturation already pose high risk to girls in such a culture sensitive environment, barriers like lack of female teacher availability in school, limited permission of mobility and long distant to school, where girls are in cumulative disadvantage (Ahmad et al., 2024; Sana et al., 2021; Tabassum, 2023).. These external institutional failures do not directly contribute to female dropout girls; rather, they act as the exact triggers that patriarchs use to legitimize the defensive withdrawal of their daughters. The physical environment is catalyzed by the patriarchal structure, making girls more-sensitive to the father's final veto.

Secondly, the study highlights the assumption that mothers alone protect children from educational exclusion. The non-significant interaction between maternal education and patriarchal authority mathematically proves that a mother's education functions merely act as a paper shield. Mother education can use as cognitive tool that use various strategic discussions but altemelty lack the capacity to dismantle the power of distatirail equilibrium.

The qualitative data intensely validate this statistical borderline. Educated mothers exhibit significant bounded agency (Khan & Biao, 2025; Saaka & Luginaah, 2025; Zulfiqar et al., 2025).recruiting male proxies, framing arguments within culturally acceptable parameters, and captivating financial penalties to keep their daughters in school. However, because they lack an independent economic fallback position, their successes are transactional and localized, leaving the overarching patriarchal value system entirely intact.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that primary level school dropout in rural Mardan KP, is not random incident, nor is it the direct consequence of poverty or direct inadequate school infrastructure. It is the logical, executed outcome of a hierarchically governed social process. This study identified the specific intra-household mechanisms through which educational exclusion is finalized, demonstrating that the family is not a unified, altruistic entity, but a site of profound cooperative conflict. The findings confirm that external economic and institutional hardships supply the pressure, but patriarchal authority serves as the executioner. This authority operates with devastating efficiency against daughters, whose educational trajectories are systematically overridden by the convergence of cultural honor codes and institutional failures. Furthermore, while educated mothers deploy immense strategic resilience to protect their daughters, their agency remains strictly bounded by the hegemonic power of male elders. Ultimately, this research demands a paradigm shift in the sociology of education: to solve the dropout crisis, interventions can no longer afford to bypass the domestic power structures that ultimately dictate who belongs in a classroom and who belongs to the fields or the domestic hearth.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively interrupt the mechanisms of educational exclusion identified in this study, policymakers and non-governmental organizations must move beyond treating the symptoms of dropout and begin engaging directly with the architecture of household governance.

Targeting the Patriarch (Beyond Maternal Awareness): Educational campaigns historically target mothers, assuming they are the primary architects of child-rearing. This study proves that without addressing the father's veto power, maternal awareness is statistically insufficient. Interventions must engage fathers, grandfathers, and local *Jirga* (community council) leaders to dismantle the ideological devaluation of girls' education and decouple a daughter's worth from strict domestic mastery.

Neutralizing the "Structural Override": Fathers continuously utilize unsafe routes and a lack of female teachers as legitimate justifications for executing a daughter's dropout. The state must neutralize these triggers by strictly enforcing the provision of localized middle schools, secure boundary walls, and female instructional staff. Removing these institutional deficits eliminates the patriarch's primary rationale for defensive withdrawal.

Strengthening the Maternal Fallback Position: Because a mother's bounded agency is tied to her lack of independent economic power, interventions should implement targeted Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) specifically disbursed to mothers, contingent upon their daughters' school attendance. By placing financial capital directly into the hands of women, policies can artificially strengthen their intra-household bargaining power and disrupt the dictatorial equilibrium of the home.

Redefining the Economic Utility of Girls' Education: To counter the "future earner" bias that heavily favors boys, educational curriculums in rural areas must integrate viable, culturally acceptable vocational and digital skills for girls. Demonstrating the tangible economic return of female education provides mothers with a stronger, rational bargaining chip to use against patriarchal mandates.

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