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The poverty trap: Leveling the playing field for young people

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Leveling the playing field for young people

The Poverty Trap

By Azeema Faizunnisa

Introduction

Poverty not only impacts on the current generation in terms of physical well-being but leaves indelible marks on their future generations. In the absence of strong welfare-oriented policies and unfavorable economic conditions, the institution of family plays a critical role in young people's lives and is key in determining the conditions under which young people make important transitions to adulthood.

This brief discusses the impact of family-level poverty on the educational attainment, economic activity and marriage patterns of Pakistani youth, and shows how strongly socioeconomic status¹ shapes the lives of our future generations.

Education

One of the striking findings is that 36 percent of young people have never attended school and are therefore unlikely to be able to read or write.

¹ SES denotes socioeconomic status. Several measures of wealth are used to construct the SES variable. To grasp the rural and urban diversity, the survey included a series of questions on consumer durables, amenities, livestock, land size of dwelling, education, etc. Principal Component Analysis was used to extract a component score and weight. Households were divided into quartiles of approximately equal size. The quartiles include: high SES, high-mid SES, low-mid SES and low SES.

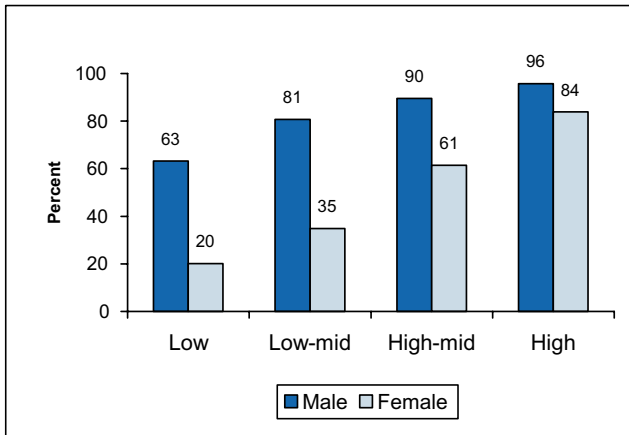
Adolescents and Youth in Pakistan

More young people aged 15-24 live in Pakistan now than at any other time in its history – an estimated 36 million in 2004. Recognizing the dearth of information on the situation of this large group of young people in Pakistan, the Population Council undertook a nationally representative survey from October 2001 to March 2002.

The analysis presented here comes from *Adolescents and Youth in Pakistan 2001-02: A Nationally Representative Survey* – the largest such survey focusing on young people. The survey sought information from youth aged 15-24, responsible adults (parents, where possible) in the household where young interviewees lived, and other community members in each of the 254 communities where the survey took place. A total of 6,585 households were visited and 8,074 young people were interviewed.

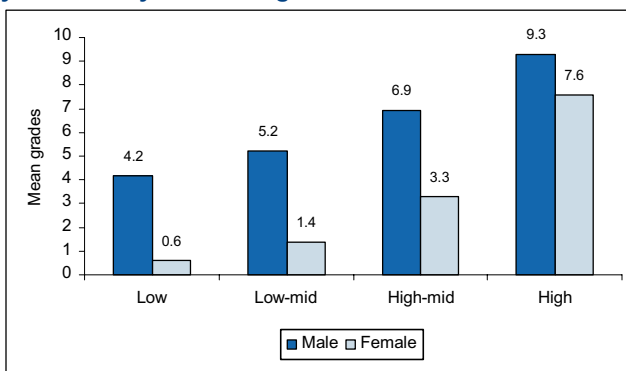
Not surprisingly, you find more young people in the higher economic strata who have attended school. At each income level, the gender gap invariably remains and we find more boys in school. However the gap is relatively smaller for the two highest income groups, particularly in urban areas. Looking carefully for the groups most affected by poverty, only one-fifth of the girls from the lowest economic strata have ever attended school. This illustrates that poverty has a greater adverse impact on females.

Percent ever enrolled in school by SES and gender



Poverty also affects the total number of years of schooling completed. As figure (below) shows, girls from the lowest economic strata are not able to complete even a year of schooling. Young people in the highest income group complete the highest years of schooling. The average for boys is 9.3 years for those from high-income households and 4.2 for boys from low-income households. For girls, the difference is even greater: 7.6 years of schooling on average for the highest-income group and less than a year for the lowest group. The gender gap between the numbers of years of schooling narrows with improvement in economic levels.

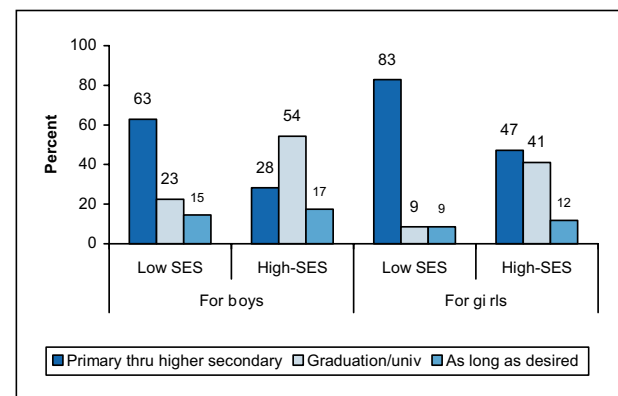
Mean highest class completed of all 20-24 year olds by SES and gender



However, it is heartening to see that despite low levels of actual academic achievement, young people in Pakistan have high aspirations for

schooling and want to stay more years in school. When disaggregated by gender and socioeconomic class, the aspirations of young people are amazingly close to their harsh realities. Among the lowest economic strata, a larger majority (63 percent for boys; 83 percent for girls) would like to acquire only primary to higher secondary education, while about one-half of their counterparts in the highest strata aspire to become graduates (54 percent boys; 41 percent girls).

Aspired level of schooling for boys and girls by SES and gender



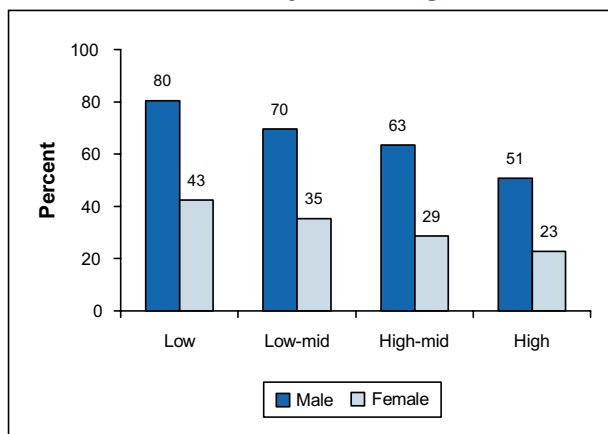
Poverty is clearly associated with earlier dropout, especially for girls. In the last year of primary school, 80 percent of girls in the highest income group remain in school, compared to only about 20 percent of girls from the lowest income group. Among boys, 60 percent of the lowest and 80 percent of the highest economic group remain in school by the end of primary level.

Economic Activity

Regardless of the economic status of the family, at least half of boys and a quarter of girls have ever worked for cash or kind. Young people belonging to poorer households are more likely to have ever worked for wages. About three-quarters of young males in the

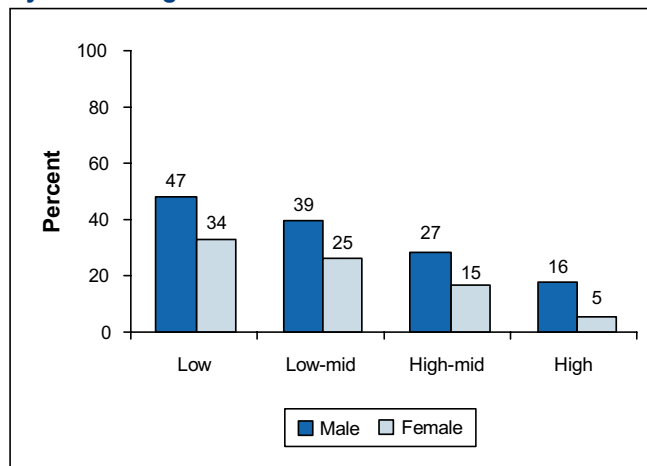
poorest households have ever taken up work, compared to about half of their counterparts in the richest households. The same is true for females, with 43 percent in the lowest income group and 23 percent in the highest income group having ever worked.

Percent ever worked by SES and gender



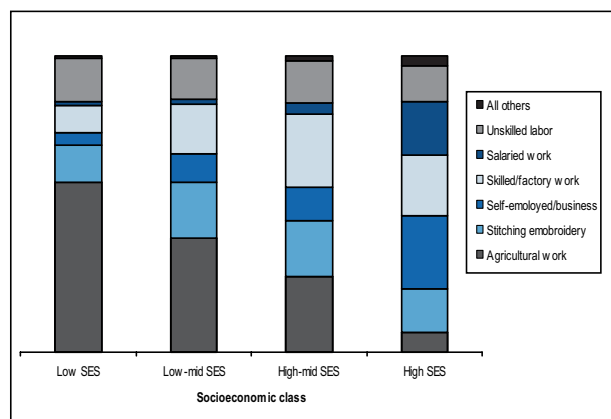
While analyzing work patterns, another important aspect to look into is the initiation of economic activity before the age of 15. This is a reflection of the compulsion of families to use child labor to supplement household income. The data clearly show that household poverty plays a defining role for young people. Nearly 50 percent of the boys in the lowest economic strata started working before the age of 15, whereas only 16 percent of their counterparts in the highest socioeconomic strata did the same.

Percent who have worked before the age of 15 by SES and gender



The distribution of economic activity highlights differences in opportunities for youth by socioeconomic strata. Pakistan is primarily an agricultural country, so a large proportion of young people are engaged in farm labor. The majority of people from the lowest economic group are involved in agricultural work. However, young people belonging to the higher strata are more likely to engage in salaried work and self-employment (including business).

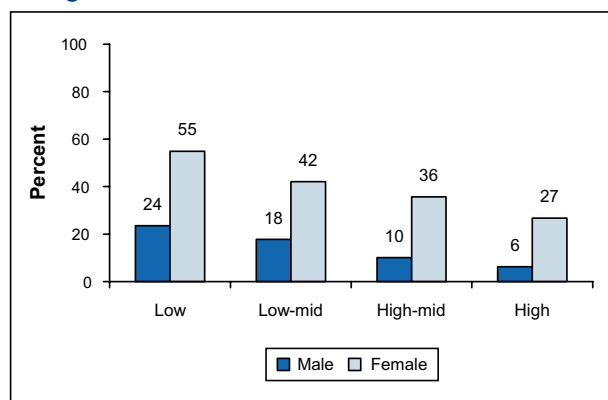
Distribution of type of work by SES for all young people who have ever worked



Marriage and Childbearing

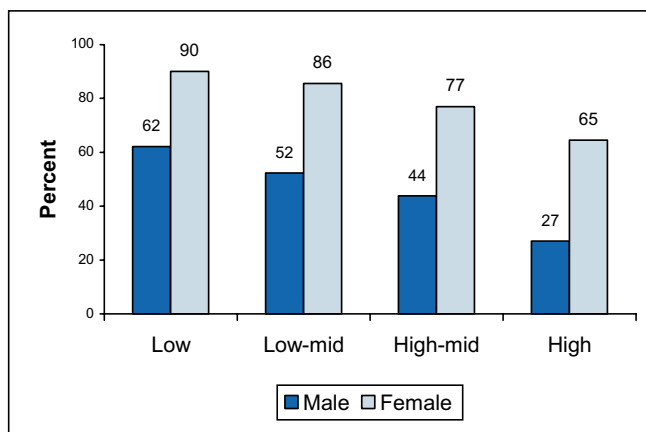
Data from the 1960s onward show a steady rise in the age at marriage for both girls and boys; but despite these changes, a substantial number of girls still get married in their teens in Pakistan. There is substantial evidence that early teenage marriage leads to early motherhood that in turn has severe implications for the health of the young mothers and their children. Hence, it is important to ascertain the extent and characteristics of teenage marriage. The data show that more than half of girls and almost a quarter of boys in the poorest households were married. Almost three-quarters of the girls and more than nine-tenths of the boys in the richest households were still single. The latter group of young people is more likely to be in school, which contributes to delays in marriage.

Percent who have ever married, by SES and gender



Teenage marriages are prevalent across all socioeconomic classes, but more so in the lowest economic strata. Ninety percent of girls from the lowest economic strata got married while they were still in their teens. About two-thirds of the boys in the same class also got married before age 20.

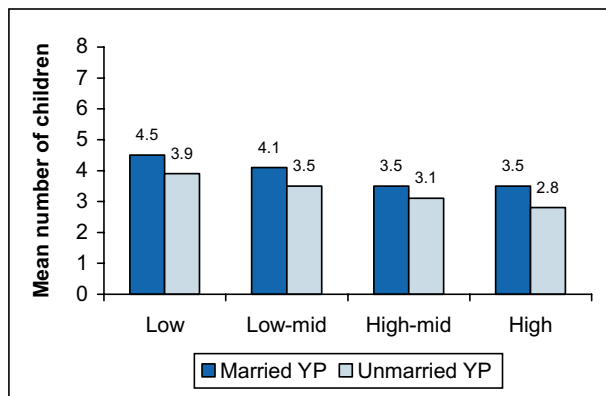
Percent who married before the age of 20 by SES and gender



Fertility preferences play an important role in family formation. Despite national media campaigns promoting a two-child family norm, a large proportion of young people want a 'medium sized' family comprised of 3-4 children. Socioeconomic status and marital status play a role in defining these choices. Married youth in the highest socioeconomic strata want an average of 3.5 children as compared to 2.8 children reported by unmarried youth in the same strata. Further, married youth in the highest socioeconomic group want to have 3.5 children as compared to 4.5 children in the lowest strata. The difference amounts to almost one child. However, even this difference of one child could have huge implications for future population growth.

² Census years are 1951, 1961, 1972, 1981 and 1998

Mean desired number children, by SES and marital status among 20-24 year olds



Conclusions

Socioeconomic class plays a pivotal role in determining the timing of transitions early in life. It should also be noted that while adverse consequences of poverty affect the whole family, females bear the largest brunt of poverty. The only way to level the playing field for all young people in the country is through increased access to opportunities, by specifically addressing the needs of the families who are at the bottom of the economic ladder. In this regard, it is important to identify the areas which are most affected by poverty.

Poverty is very strongly associated with educational attainment of young people and girls are more affected by resource depletion of the family and are usually the ones to never enter a school, or to drop out early. Pakistan already has programs focusing on girls' education, but these should be geared towards the most deprived areas of the country.

Young people, especially males, often choose to take up economic activity rather than schooling since it provides immediate income and is associated with empowerment and mobility. In the long run, this trend may lead to

a nation of uneducated workers who will be capable only of working as unskilled laborers or doing menial jobs. They will be ill prepared to take part in the knowledge and technology based global economy. Hence, there is a need to enhance skill building among youth to avert this trend.

In addition to the trap of falling into child labor, poverty encourages child or teenage marriage, especially for girls. This could lead to severe health and social implications, not only for young women but also for their children. Girls who marry early are more likely to not complete their education, have early pregnancies, and have unhealthy babies. Given the sociocultural setting in Pakistan, drastic changes in rising age at marriage are not possible; however, campaigns to delay first birth may promote better health for young women. Counseling newlywed couples for healthy child spacing is an obvious recommendation for couples in the lowest socioeconomic group.

Acknowledgments

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