The Challenges of Out-of-School Children (OOSC)

Sadaf Anees Sheikh
Sindh Education Foundation, Government of Sindh, Pakistan
Email: sadafanees@yahoo.com

Received on: 25-10-2023 Accepted on: 30-11-2023

Abstract

Sindh has the second-highest number around (6 million) of OOSC. More than 50 percent of children drop out at the primary level, and 27% drop out while transitioning from primary to elementary. This Paper investigates segregation across different fields of study. The provincially representative data and literature are used to understand the situation. Analysis showed a positive correlation between access and basic facilities. The Paper conclusively proves that improving access to education, infrastructure, allied services, and provision of teachers will decrease dropouts, hence a reduction in OOSC. It is also essential to address other challenges.

Keywords: primary education, literacy rate, dropout, challenges

1. INTRODUCTION

According to United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), an estimated 22.8 million children between the ages of five (05) to sixteen (16) are out-of-school in Pakistan, which is the second highest in the world [4]. The 5 million children are enrolled in schools in the five (05) to nine (09) age bracket. Almost 10.7 million boys and 8.6 million girls enrolled at the primary level, and the numbers drop to 3.6 and 2.8 million, respectively, when children reach a lower secondary level [1]. Even though education budgets have increased, accounting for 2.8% of the total GDP, it still does not reach the 4% target. Girls, unfortunately, hold the largest share of Out of School Children (OOSC) in Pakistan.

After the passing of Article 25-A of the constitution, the state has to ensure every child gets access to education. Following the 18th Constitutional Amendment, the subject of education was devolved to the provincial governments, providing an opportunity to apply solutions in the peculiar socioeconomic context of the province. But also shifted more responsibility to them, for which they need to equip themselves fully.

Sindh's population is approximately 47 million, making it the second-largest province in Pakistan [2]. Sindh is also rich in resources and is the country's second-largest economy and financial hub. The overall literacy rate in Sindh is 61.8% (Pakistan's average literacy rate is 62.8%). The upward trend is observed in both males and females and in rural and urban [23]. The breakdown of school levels in Sindh is 88.4% primary schools, 6% middle/elementary schools, and 5.6% higher secondary schools [1].

The province of Sindh has developed the legal framework through the passage of the "Right to Free and Compulsory Education (RTFCE) Act" in 2013, targeting to improve access and quality of education across Sindh. Other initiatives of the Government of Sindh (GoS) include the legal framework and evolution of the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) law in 2010 and

the launching of the flagship Public-Private Partnership (PPP) programs for education. It enabled the government to partner with the private sector and address the issues of different sectors, including education. But still, the number of OOSCs has remained around six million in Sindh over the last many years.

This Paper focuses on OOSC as an educational problem. The Paper is organized into four sections. Section I elaborates introduction and disaggregates the challenge of OOSC and situational analysis. Section II deals with results and discussions, presenting estimates of the number of OOSC and the challenges in reducing the number of OOSCs. Section III explains the methodology used in the Paper and literature Review. In section, IV author has discussed the conclusion and policy recommendations that the state can initiate in the short, medium, and long run to address the challenging issue.

1.1 DISAGGREGATING THE CHALLENGE OF OOSC

It is vital to disaggregate the problem of OOSC to understand the phenomenon more clearly and suggest appropriate, workable recommendation to resolve the issue.

The geographic spread of OOSC in Pakistan, estimates of total OOSC vary from 22.8 to 26 million children, as figure 1 depicts the highest number, which comprises 13.7 million

Figure 1: OOSC Gender-wise break up in Pakistan [21]

girls (55%) and 11.5 million boys (45%), show that girls are more likely to be out of school than boys.

Figure 2 shows OOSC age-wise break in Pakistan**.** Children above eleven (11) years and more than 50% of children of age fifteen (15) and sixteen (16) years are out of school, which is very alarming.

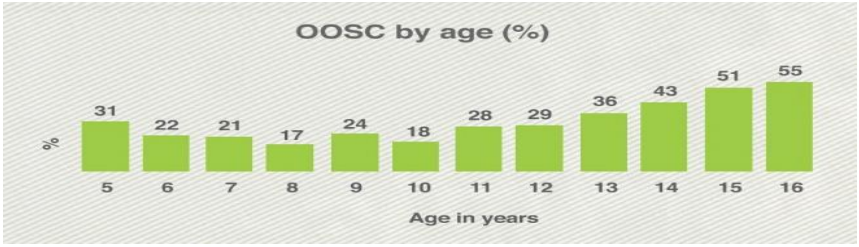


Figure 2: OOSC by Age [21]

Regarding the breakup of the OOSC in terms of gender in Pakistan, more girls are out of school than boys. Except in Punjab, where only 6% more girls are out of school, the difference is in double-digit in other provinces. In Sindh, 58% of OOSC are girls, and 45% are boys showing gender disparity.

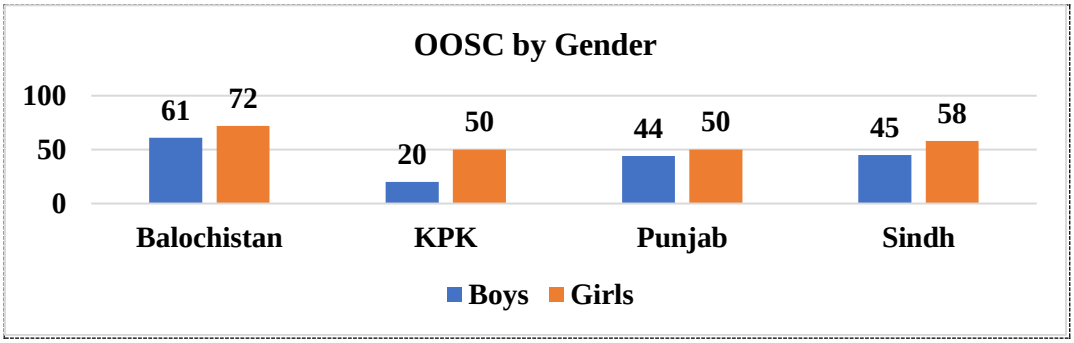


Figure 3: OOSC Gender and Province Wise [21]

Alif Alan [21] has estimated that 30% were unable to be retained in school and 70% had never been to school.

Regarding the economic background, the reports showed that 57% of the poorest, 37% of the poor, 26% in the middle class and 10% in the rich income categories ended up as OOSC. It shows that the issue is predominantly economic but not entirely, as 16% of upper middle and 10% of the rich group also end up being OOSC.

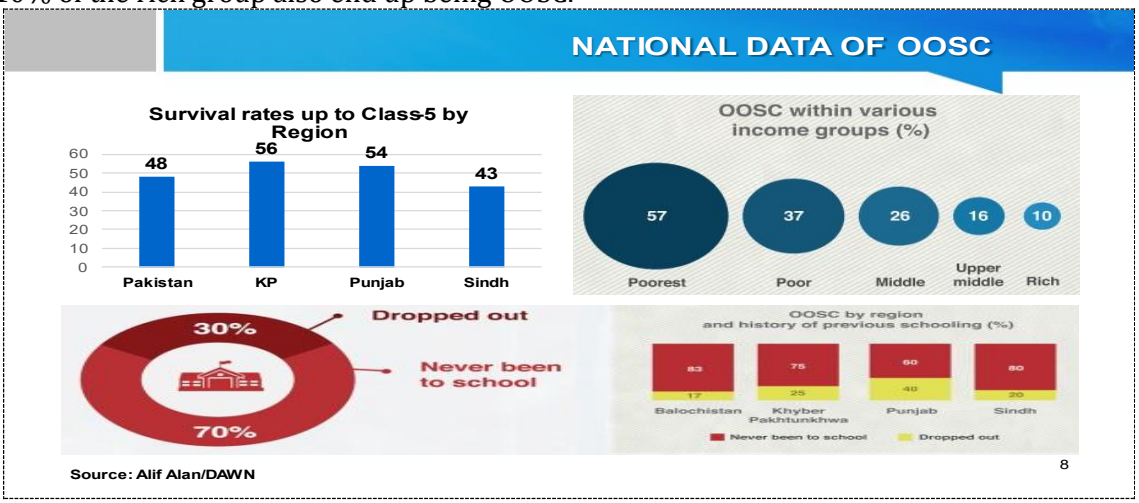


Figure 4: Survival rates and Socioeconomic Background [21]

Sindh has provided access to elementary education to only half of its population aged 5-14 years (49% enrolled in public and private schools under elementary education) [5]. It is estimated that six million children in the elementary education age group are not in schools in Sindh. The most vulnerable group of this population of set of children are girls, who have a 48% share in the population census of the same age set in Sindh. Still, only 19% of girls in the total population and 39% of girls in the total female population of age group 5-14 have the opportunity to access elementary education till 2018-19 [2].

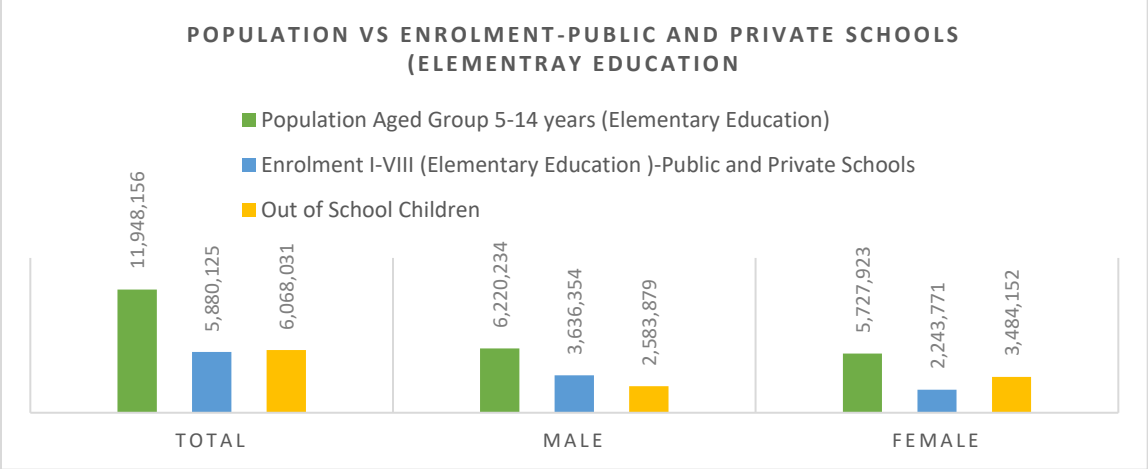


Figure 5: Population, Enrolment and Out-of-School Children- Public and Private Schools (Elementary Education) Age Group [1]

Figure 5 shows data on Population, Enrolment, and Out-of-School Children- Public and Private Schools (Elementary Education) Age Groups. According to this, only 26% of children, i.e., one-fourth of the total population of the elementary education age group, have access to post-primary institutions through the public sector school system.

In Sindh, almost 50 percent of those students enrolled in school drop out at the primary level, followed by 27 percent dropping out at the time of transition from primary to middle school. It shows that the survival rate during these transitions makes it more crucial to ensure retention at middle school. The breakdown of school levels in Sindh is 88.4% primary schools, 6% middle/elementary schools, and 5.6% higher secondary schools [1]. If we see the gender perspective, the number of boys' schools, i.e. 17.55% is higher than the girls' schools, i.e., 13.61; however, the highest percentage of schools is mixed, i.e., 68.84 in the province.

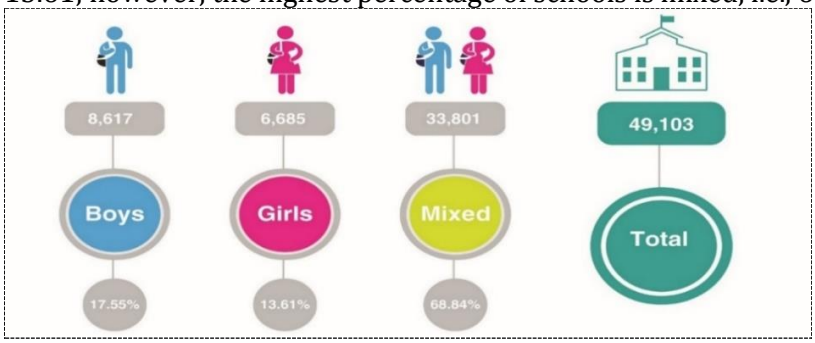


Figure 6: Gender-Wise Distribution of Schools [3]

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Estimating Out-Of-School Children (OOSC) in Sindh

Population estimation in the OOSC has been challenging, given that no exact data is available. It is tough to identify which district or taluka has the highest number of OOSCs and at what locations, in terms of households, are out of school. Therefore, we have to rely on population estimates. For this study, the number of OOSC children has been estimated by extrapolating

the recent 2017 Census data to 2020. Table 1 shows the Estimation of Out-Of-School Children (OOSC) in Sindh.

Table 1: Estimating Out-Of-School Children (OOSC) in Sindh [6].

Sindh Population Statistics	
Total Population as per Census 2017 (Estimated)	**47,886,051**
Projected Population 2020 (as per Growth Rate 2.41%	**51,514,512**
Target Project population for enrolment age group 5-16	**15,098,902**
Literacy Rate *	**57%**
Gross Enrolment Rate (Primary) *	**78%**
Gross Enrolment Rate (Middle) *	**53%**
Gross Enrolment Rate (Matric) *	**46%**
Out of School Children (5-16) Years *	**42%**

In Table 1, Out-Of-School Children (OOSC) in Sindh statistics are shown according to EMIS RSU and PSLM (2018-19) [6]. As per the National Institute of Population Studies (NIPS), an estimated 29% of the population should comprise of age group five to sixteen (5 to 16 years) in Sindh, which means 15 million of the total population of Sindh should fall within the age bracket. In an ideal situation, 15 million children should enroll in the education system in the province. However, data suggests that 4.56 million children are enrolled in public schools in the province, around 3 million more students have enrolled in the private sector, and an estimated 0.547 million children are with the Madrassahs. In total, 8.1 million children were admitted to different education systems. Therefore, an estimated 6.9 million children are missing from enrollment in different education systems suggesting that these missing 6.9 million children are OOSC [22].

Figure 7 shows the break-up of the population of the elementary education-aged group into two categories primary education-aged group (5-10 years) and the middle education-aged group (11-14 years)

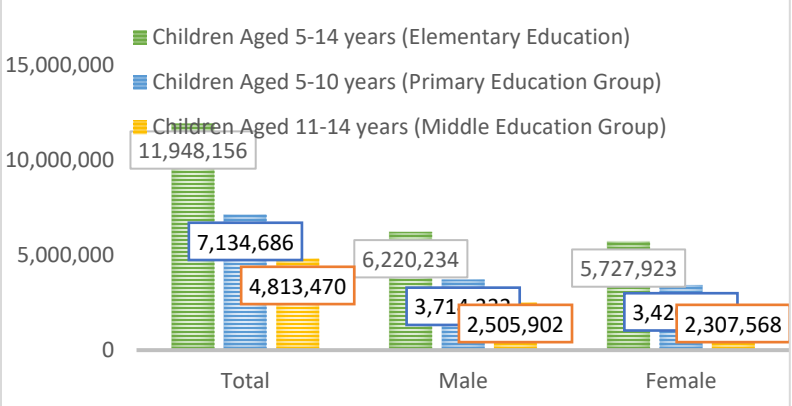


Figure 7: Break-up of Estimated Population of Elementary Education Age Group (2018) [1]

2.2 Challenges in Reducing the Number of Out-of-School Children

Around 21 million people are affected by poverty [7]. In Sindh, 52% of the poorest are OOSC, of which 58% are girls. Sindh's children suffer from moderate to severe stunting [1]. This story state of health of the younger population contributes significantly to the rising number of OOSCs. Lack of good nutrition impacts the proper development of children's brains, affecting their ability to learn. In the last ten years, the population in Sindh has increased by 60%. Rapid population increase has led to increased poverty, health care, and education challenges. Fifty percent, or 23 million people, live in rural areas of Sindh [7]. Inaccessibility to a primary school in remote areas significantly impacts enrolment and attendance. In terms of geographical factors, this plays a very important role as educational services are challenging in mountainous and desert areas.

Although the overall number of schools is well above the existing requirement, the number of classrooms available is deficient. The vast majority of schools are one to two-room schools, and they can hardly be called schools by world standards. One of the significant reasons behind transition dropout is the non-availability of elementary/middle schools within walking distance which contributes towards the higher transition dropout and, consequently, OOSC. In addition to a lack of middle and elementary education, there is a shortage of proper early childhood education and hence no attraction for the children to join schools at proper age. Consequently, children join the school after missing the initial crucial years of schooling, resulting in drop out.

The migration pattern to Sindh's urban centers has also multiplied the government's problems. This has seemingly resulted in variable ages of out-of-school children & adolescents in Sindh, making it even more difficult for the government to bring out-of-school students & learners into schools because these children are over-aged.

Apart from population and geographic dynamics, the practices and culture of this region have also caused problems as far as OOSC is concerned. Early marriages, discouraging practices for educating girls, crop picking, and child labor are some of the significant reasons behind many students being out of school in Sindh.

Poor governance and management within education are the key determinants contributing

to the rising OOSC and effective handling of the issue. Even though several policies have been initiated, successful implementation is a challenge. There is no proper accountability for the lower hierarchy to increase enrollment, increase retention and improve services.
Financial provisions are considered an instrumental source of the implementation of policy reform. The education budget in Sindh has increased steadily since 2011, reaching Rs. 191 billion in 2017-18. In 2017, the current education budget represented about 20% of the total government budget, and the share of the development budget for education over the total development budget was 5.5% [7].

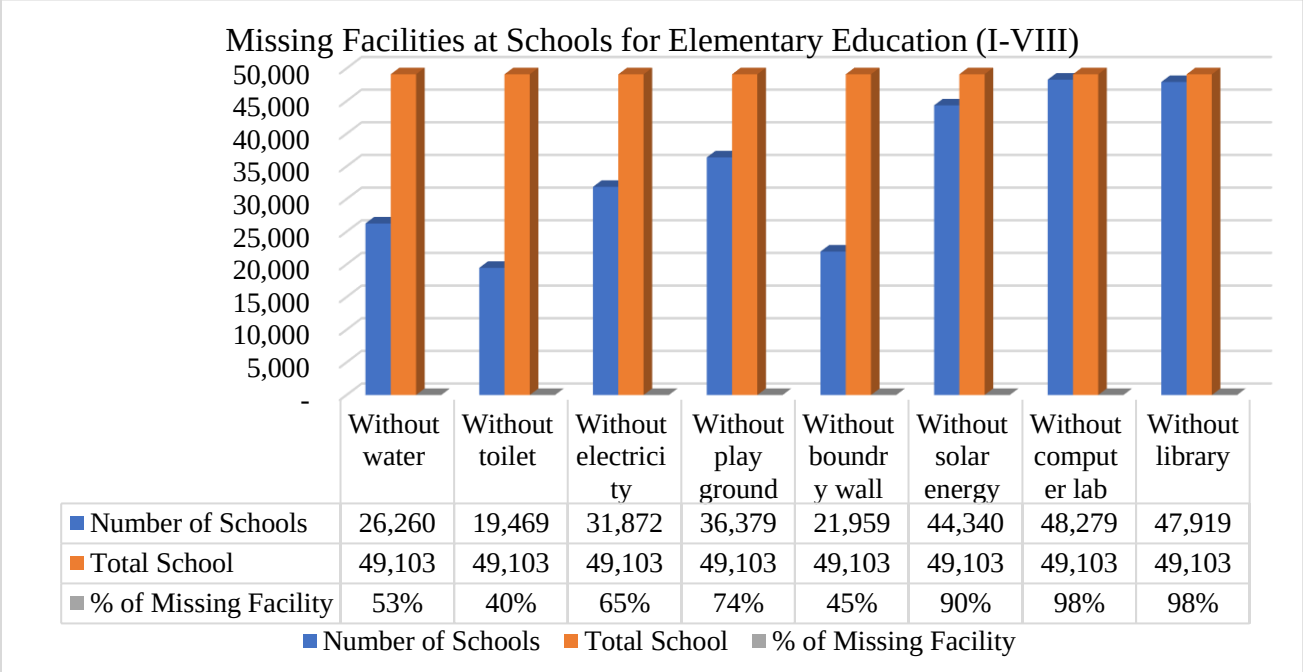
2.2.1 Root Cause: Poor Access to Education

To check the access issues, the author reviewed different indicators, such as classrooms and missing facilities, with a particular focus on toilets, boundary walls, electricity, and drinking water. Also, the availability of predominantly female teachers is being done in this section, examining the contributing factor of dropout of students, which keeps adding to the total OOSC.

2.2.2 Lack of Access to Infrastructure

Out of an estimated population of 11.9 million children in elementary education, i.e., 5-14 years age group population in Sindh, the private sector provides approx. 2.7 million children of the same age access to elementary education. In contrast, the remaining 9.2 million children need 230,806 classrooms at 40 Student Per Classroom Ratio (CSR) to access elementary education. Public sector schools in Sindh have around 86,294 available classrooms for grades I-VIII, containing the CSR of around 37 present enrolments of 3.2 million children [8]. And if we add 885,243 nursery class students, this ratio increases to 41 students per classroom (with total classrooms being 110,517).
It is noted that more than 12000 schools are dysfunctional, and if we keep only functional schools in mind and the available classes, the SCR increases drastically. It shows there is an acute shortage of classrooms to adequately accommodate the students; additionally, there are more than 5025 shelterless schools in the province. This lack of classroom availability contributes to multi-grade teaching, which affects the quality of learning and significantly contributes to dropout, especially at the early grade level.
An additional 150,000 classrooms are estimated to be required, which requires substantial financial resources and dedicated efforts. Missing facilities in the primary, middle and elementary schools [5], clearly indicate the gloomy picture hindering the school readiness, attraction, and retention of young children.

From primary to higher secondary schools, 47% have facilities for drinking water in the whole school system. If we take up to the elementary level, only 40% of the schools have a drinking water facility. Similarly, only 60% of the schools have toilets, and till the elementary level, 40% of the schools for both gender or mixed do not have toilets.



	Without water	Without toilet	Without electricity	Without play ground	Without boundry wall	Without solar energy	Without computer lab	Without library
Number of Schools	26,260	19,469	31,872	36,379	21,959	44,340	48,279	47,919
Total School	49,103	49,103	49,103	49,103	49,103	49,103	49,103	49,103
% of Missing Facility	53%	40%	65%	74%	45%	90%	98%	98%

Figure 8: Missing Facilities in Public Schools for Elementary Education [5]

Figure 8 shows that more than 45% of schools do not have a boundary wall, and 65% do not have electricity. These missing facilities are one of the major reasons behind the high drop out from school, contributing to the increasing OOSC in Sindh. Imagine a girl's school without a toilet, where girls have walked for a few kilometers to attend, and in a case where they need to use toilet facilities, they have no option. Similarly, given the climatic conditions of Sindh, schools without electricity are a push factor where a conducive learning environment does not exist. These missing facilities are the major culprit behind the higher number of OOSC children.

Moreover, these missing facilities adversely affect the girl students who do not feel safe in a school without a boundary wall, and with rising age and increasing concerns for privacy, families discourage girls.

The ratio of Government Primary Schools to Government Elementary Schools or Middle Schools (Grades 6-8) is 16 to 1 (44,296 Primary Schools and 2,712 Middle or Elementary Schools), meaning that there is currently minimal space in government schools for students in grade 6 and onwards. This likely affects retention rates in primary schools and the transition to grade 6.

In terms of geographical spread, the issue of OOSC children is much more severe and alarming in certain districts. In the southern and central districts of Sindh, the issue is more severe and prevalent than in the northern districts. In a few districts, such as Thatta, most children (more than 50%) are out of school. Only 43% of the children attend school, and the remaining 57%

are OOSC.

Likewise, 40% of children in Sujawal, Sanghar, and Umerkot are out of school. Only five districts have more than 80% of children attending schools: Karachi, Sukkur, Larkana, Shaheed Benazirabad, and Hyderabad. None of the rural districts has more than 80% of children attending schools showing an enormous urban and rural aspect of the issue.

One of the distinguishing factors among the lagging districts suggests that OOSC is predominantly observed in those rural areas where teachers, adequate classrooms, boundary walls, and toilets are missing. It is supported by the fact that the number of schools in rural areas is higher than in urban areas. Still, the number of OOSC is higher in rural areas.

2.2.3 Non-Availability of Teachers

In the school system, the teacher plays a crucial role in delivering quality education to the children; without teachers, any school cannot be termed a school. Non-availability of teachers is one of the primary reasons behind the massive dropout in enrollment. For public sector schools, the number of teachers at the primary level seems appropriate with a Student-Teacher Ratio (STR) of 32, but STR is higher for girls' students i.e., 46 at the primary level, which is indicative of the gender gap. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) favors boys in Sindh. On the other hand, STR at the post-primary level is evidence of problems in the transition to high classes as it is 57 for the middle education level, which should have ideally been lower than primary education STR.

Around 7,682 overall and 2598 girls' schools are closed due to the non-availability of teachers. Around 50,000 students, with time, will become part of out-of-school children.

This challenge can also be observed during the comparison between enrolment and the number of teachers at both elementary education levels, i.e., primary and middle grades (I-VIII). The number of teachers for post-primary is only 16% of the total teachers at the elementary level. In contrast, the enrolment share of post-primary, i.e., VI-VIII grades, is 22% of the total enrolment at the elementary level. This shows the scarcity of appropriate teachers for the grades mentioned above.

The availability of female teachers during Early Childhood Education & Care (ECCE) plays a vital role in the retention of children. If we analyze the districts with a high rate of OOSC and districts with an acute shortage of teachers and schools being closed, we observe a positive correlation. Southern and Central Sindh districts have the highest dropout impact of the non-availability of teachers on OOSC. It is found that ECCE is a priority area in the Sindh Education Sector Plans (2013/2014-2018). The SESP&R 2019-2024 [5] notes that almost 33% of enrolment has increased at the pre-primary level since 2013. However, intervention at ECCE remains weak, mainly due to the unavailability of teachers or trained teachers.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this Paper, the challenges in reducing Out of School Children have been reviewed, along with determining if improving access to educational facilities will help reduce student dropout. The problem lies internationally, especially in third-world countries. For evaluation purposes, public schools in Sindh, Pakistan, are analyzed. The following research questions were formulated:

Research Questions

- What are the challenges in access to education in Sindh at the primary and elementary levels?
- Will improving access to school decrease the number of OOSC in Sindh at primary and elementary levels?

For this research, different databases were accessed of published material at provincial, national and global levels. The websites of multilateral agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, UNDP, and DIFID were also searched, and identified evaluation reports. The resources and websites of the Sindh Education & Literacy Department, Reform Suppost Unit (RSU), GoS, Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Pakistan, Bureau of Statistics for the Statistics of Pakistan, Sector Need Analysis, and Alif Ailaan were thoroughly analyzed. The data examination was done on the title and keywords. Furthermore, Sindh constitutes the population for this research. Therefore, the data was to analyze the children of school-going age who are going to school, particularly at the primary level and elementary level, and drop out during different primary school grade levels as well as while transitioning from primary to elementary level from the public school system. It focuses on children who drop out of the public school system.

3.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

With more than six million children out of school in Sindh [10] increasing rather than declining during the last few years, the targets set out in the 'Sustainable Development Goals' for Pakistan seem to be more & more challenging. The 18th constitutional amendment has devolved the subject of education and its management at the provincial level [1], which, at that time, did not have governance frameworks.

Even though enrollment has been increasing, reducing the number of OOSCs remains challenging [1]. Several factors contribute to OOSC in Pakistan, including poverty, household size, and others [11]. Girls tend to have a higher dropout rate based on global experience, access to nearby schools [12], socioeconomic factors [13], poor educational outcomes and increased dropouts [12], and parents' preference for boys' education. Since girls also have to contribute towards taking care of their siblings and the household work [15], if school is not near, the chances are less to continue their education likely to drop out. The lack of female teachers [16], parents prefer to take their girls out of school once a girl reaches adolescence if the female teacher is unavailable [16]. We have already examined the existing situation of the availability of teachers and their impact on dropouts.

A literature review reveals that access to all education levels is a significant issue for the increasing number of OOSC in Sindh. It anticipates that almost 54 percent of the total OOSC haven't entered primary school. Those who joined are at a higher risk of being over age. Though access to the pre-primary level has improved over the last few years, access to primary schools remains an issue.

The school environment plays a vital role in the retention of children; if the facilities, such as toilets, are missing or not clean, it contributes to dropout, primarily among girls [18]. There is a strong negative correlation between poor sanitation conditions of toilets and students' attendance [19]. Lack of boundary walls and toilets, which provide a sense of privacy to girls, also contribute to the retention and dropout of girls [20].

So, the question arises whether improving access to these basic facilities will help reduce OOSC in Sindh?.

CONCLUSION

This research examined and analyzed an extensive repository of literature and data. It has become clear Sindh has the second-highest OOSC; despite numerous interventions by SE&LD, and GoS, access to education is still beyond the reach of many children (6 M) in Sindh. Unfortunately, the number of OOSC has consistently increased over the last few years. The OOSC fall into two categories. First is that group of children who have never been to school and those who drop out after joining.

The government faces many challenges in Sindh in reducing the number of OOSC. Poverty is the biggest challenge, and so is the rapid population growth. Geographical factors add to the problem as Sindh has a scattered population. Lack of ECCE and post-primary facilities are big challenges. Migration patterns only add to the challenges of providing access to school as people migrate to urban areas or seasonal migration. Poor governance, budgetary allocations, and resource utilization are also significant bottlenecks. The analysis further shows that access to schools remains a major issue in reducing the number of OOSC. Access includes but is not limited to the availability of the school in the vicinity, the level of the school, the lack of predominantly female teachers, and basic facilities in the school such as classrooms, toilets, drinking water, boundary wall, and electricity.

It has been further examined whether improving access to education reduces the OOSC. Analysis shows that improving access to ECCE will help to improve retention in the higher grades. The districts with a high number of ECCE classes in schools and quality teaching address the dropout better, like Khairpur Mir's, than Thatta and Sajawal.

With respect to facilities, 53% of the schools are without water, 40% are without toilets, 65% are without electricity, and 45% are without boundary walls. The twin issues of lack of toilets and boundary walls are significant dropout issues for female students, especially in rural areas. District-wise comparative analysis shows a positive correlation between the availability of these facilities and improved enrolment and retention. The second significant dropout occurs while transitioning to post-primary classes from grade 5, where around 35% of children drop out, contributing to the increasing number of OOSC. The ratio of government primary schools to middle or elementary schools is 16 to 1. The same goes for the availability of teachers for post-primary classes. The number of teachers for post-primary classes from grades 6 to 8 is 16% of the total teachers, whereas the enrollment from grades 6 to 8 is 22%. Data analysis shows that improving access to post-primary classes will help reduce dropout. As discussed above, teachers' non-availability is one contributor to increasing OOSC in Sindh. Resolving this issue will help increase enrolment and hence lower the OOSC. Therefore, it is concluded that improving access to education, including infrastructure, allied services, and provision of teachers, will decrease dropout, hence a reduction in OOSC. It is also essential to attend to other challenges, including poverty, population growth, and lack of post-primary facilities. It is recommended that further research may be carried out on the impact of poor Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) on dropout of students so that the OOSC can be addressed effectively and in a holistic manner.

4.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Infrastructure should be improved, prioritizing the provision of missing facilities. Toilets should be provided first, especially in girls' schools, followed by boundary walls for post-primary classes. Electricity should be provided, and solar panels should be provided if it is unavailable. Drinking water should be available in all schools.

2) Ensure that every union council has Middle or Elementary schools within 2 or 3 km of the cluster of a primary school. In rural areas, the distance of Middle/ Elementary school should not be more than 2 km from the primary schools.

3) Provision of either additional classrooms or arranging double shifts in Middle/Elementary schools with higher STR or SCR. For double shifts, morning shift teachers may be allowed to teach during 2nd shift, and they should be compensated for it.

4) Phase out existing 02 rooms in primary schools within the next 05 years with 05 or 06 classroom schools.

5) Provision of adequate ECCE infrastructure, appropriate furniture, and learning material in all primary schools should be made. Female teachers should be posted, preferably to teach these classes.

6) The process for recruitment for the vacant seats of teachers must be completed. Suppose an adequate number of trained, qualified teachers are not available in remote areas. In that case, mechanisms may be devised for filling those seats, including lowering qualification criteria or hiring from adjoining districts.

7) SE&LD must encourage other organizations like SEF to open schools in far-flung areas under its PPP modality. SE&LD may also partner with organizations like TCF or Beaconhouse to establish and operate schools under PPP modality in areas with a high number of OOSC.

8) The performance of DEOs, TEOs, and head teachers must be linked to bringing OOSC back to school and retaining those children.

9) Encourage organizations working in the education sector to conduct local surveys to identify OOSC and collect their details for subsequent interventions and linkages with cash transfer programs such as Benazir Income Support Program (BISP).

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The guidance provided by Mr Abdul Khaliq Sheikh, faculty advisor at National Institute of Management, Karachi is acknowledged. Similarly, the support provided by Mr Mubashir Mirza, Deputy Director in Sindh Education Foundation and Ms Shazia Solangi, Assitant Director, Research & Publishing Unit at Sindh Education Foundation is acknowledged.

FUNDING

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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