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# Booni Valley women's perceptions of schooling: Hopes and barriers<sup>1</sup>

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*Schooling for girls is a relatively recent process in Booni Valley, a remote mountainous village in Chitral District, Pakistan. It is impacting greatly upon the lives of the women. This study has taken an ethnographic perspective and has assumed that an understanding of women's schooling requires a detailed, in-depth account of women's actual experiences in a specific cultural setting. The women in the study perceive their local language, Khowar, as having little value and place great importance upon learning Urdu and English, the official languages of Pakistan. The women also perceive schooling to increase their mobility and independence and to gain access to employment. However, gender structures are deeply rooted. The women encounter many barriers which restrict them from participating in many activities in the community.*

Women, schooling, ethnographic research, Pakistan

## INTRODUCTION

A full understanding of women's schooling requires detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings. Studies need to take into account how women themselves actually think about schooling, their access to schooling, and how they apply their schooling skills in their daily lives. Rockhill writes that it is "important to look at schooling, both in terms of its symbolic meaning and the material realities in women's lives" (1992, p. 172). Ethnographic studies on literacy by Kulick and Stroud (1992), Farah (1992) and Rockhill (1993) are examples of a shift in the literature toward an understanding of people's perceptions of literacy and, to some extent, schooling in their lives. This paper on the women's perceptions of schooling in Booni Valley, Chitral District, Pakistan, is part of the shift in the literature on gender and schooling.

Southern nations' women have not benefited proportionally from economic growth and have not gained equal access to education as a result of gender biases within the traditional and modern sectors (Beneria and Sen, 1997; UNESCO, 2003). The withdrawal rate of girls is much higher than for boys, and girls do not enter school as frequently as boys (United Nations, 2004). Despite policies to ensure equal opportunities for education for all, women still continue to form the largest disadvantaged group in terms of access to education (UNESCO, 2003). Their difficulties are also affected by gender, class and ethnic bias (Jacobson, 1993).

Current research on women's schooling in the developing world has brought out the complexity of women's experiences with regards to schooling. However, most research reinforces the same gendered practices through which women are oppressed in their everyday lives (Rockhill, 1993).

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This research often presupposes Southern nations' women to be passive recipients of schooling who, in some instances, experience the same problems as women worldwide. Mohanty (1997) has criticised the construction of "third world woman" as a singular universal subject and the descriptions of these women which attempt to develop a common explanation and analysis. Although a pattern of the issues affecting women's participation in schooling is evident throughout most of the developing world, the way this pattern is perceived at different periods in history and in specific cultural situations needs further documenting (Kulick and Stroud, 1992; Street, 1992). Limited research on the way people perceive and apply schooling and literacy in their daily lives leads to a downplay of the creativity and cultural concerns of those people being taught to read and write (Kulick and Stroud, 1992). This paper provides an ethnographic account of Booni Valley women's perceptions of schooling in relation to language use, mobility, independence to read and write, and work. Furthermore, it describes the barriers which women face in meeting their gender needs.

### CULTURAL CONTEXT

Booni Valley is located in Chitral District, the northernmost district of the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan, and has a population of approximately 7500. The local language is Khowar, a language originally without script. Urdu, the national language of Pakistan and the language of instruction, is spoken by many. Some people also speak English. Islam is practised by most Chitralis and most Chitrali children learn to read the *Holy Quran* in Arabic. Subsistence farming is the predominant source of livelihood.

The terrain in Chitral District is characterised by rugged, barren mountains. A road network connects valley roads to villages, but it is poorly developed. During the winter months, the entire district is virtually cut off from the rest of the country as the Lowari Mountain Pass which makes vehicular access possible into and out of the district is blocked by snow. Although air travel is still possible to and from Peshawar, the provincial capital of the North West Frontier Province which lies 400 km south of Chitral, this link is also severely affected by the weather. The only so-called 'all weather' route available is through Afghanistan, but sensitive borders make travel through this route dangerous. Chitral's geographic position and topography make it isolated from the rest of Pakistan. The "dry and cold climate, paucity of agricultural land, inaccessible nature of the terrain, fragile environment and marginalised nature of its resources [have] made human existence here an extremely difficult task" (Mulk, 1990, p. 4). Women, in particular, face many challenges as a result of the harsh conditions. They work 16 to 18 hours a day collecting fodder, cooking, cleaning, caring for cattle, and caring for their children. Many young girls even miss days from school to help their pregnant or sick mothers.

### *Schooling in Chitral District*

Over the past two decades, various initiatives by the Pakistan government and non-government organisations have been undertaken to improve the access to schooling for girls in Chitral District, Pakistan. Nonetheless, in this region girls are still at a disadvantage compared to boys. Of the significantly low overall literacy rate in Chitral District, the issue is worse for women. The female literacy rate in Chitral District in 1992 was 4.1 per cent and the male literacy rate in the same year was 14.3 per cent (AKES, 1994). These were among the lowest female literacy rates in rural areas of Pakistan. The enrolment rates for girls compared to boys in Chitral District were also much lower. In 2002, at the primary school level, 30,870 boys compared to 9,777 girls were enrolled in school; at the high school level, 9,340 boys compared to 1,609 girls were enrolled in school (ASC, 2002). In 2002, the number of girls' schools was also significantly lower than the number of boys' schools. There were approximately 190 girls' primary schools, 39 girls' middle schools, and five

girls' high schools in the district (ASC, 2002). In comparison, there were approximately 473 boys' primary schools, 45 boys' middle schools, and 42 boys' high schools in the district (ASC, 2002).

### **METHOD**

Ethnographic research methods were used to learn from the local people about their culture and their conceptions of formal schooling (Haig-Brown, 1992; Spindler and Spindler, 1987; Spradley, 1979). The data were gathered through in-depth unstructured interviews, participant observation, and conversations with the local people.

In total, 27 women between the ages of 15 and 55 years were interviewed. They were of various backgrounds and included women who had been to school and women who had never been to school, either because schooling was unavailable to them or because their family did not allow them to go to school. Contact with these women was established through a research collaborator, Zarina<sup>2</sup>, who also assisted with translating most of the interviews which were conducted in Khowar and with making sense of culturally specific data. Six interviews with school-going girls were conducted in Urdu with the help of the researcher's mother who speaks Urdu and who visited the researcher while she was in the field. In addition, statistical data and historical documents were collected from government and non-government organisations in Chitral District and Karachi, a major urban city in the south of Pakistan.

The interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. In order to validate the accuracy of translation, two interviews were checked with a second translator. The translations done by both the translators yielded similar results. The data were analysed using domain analysis (Spradley, 1979). After completing the domain analysis, cultural themes were identified to find the patterns that made up the culture. A cut and paste method to categorise the data under thematic headings was used.

## **BOONI VALLEY WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOLING**

### *Language Use*

Schooling has brought about a shift in values about language among the local people in Booni Valley. Khowar is becoming increasingly devalued and is perceived to limit opportunities for the women in the sample. It was not unusual for the women who only spoke Khowar to see themselves as ignorant and to exclaim scornfully to the researcher, "What is Khowar? We cannot do anything with this language." A motivating factor for the women to pursue schooling is to learn Urdu and English. These languages are perceived to be valuable and to allow the women to interact with non-local people. As Sultana, a woman with no schooling, said, "Education is good for [my daughter] ... at least she can talk with the guests" (interview). This confirms findings by Branson and Miller (1990), Kulick and Stroud (1992), and Street (1993) that local knowledge and local languages are devalued as people go through the schooling experience.

The researcher was probably one of the first women from outside the valley ever to visit these women in their homes and to speak with them about their life experiences. The women with no schooling would wonder why the researcher wanted to speak with them and not the men in their homes who usually had some schooling and were able to speak some Urdu. When the researcher told the women with no schooling that their experiences were rich and valuable, they would often tell her, "I am not an educated one. I cannot read and write. [I don't speak English]. I have nothing

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<sup>2</sup> Zarina is a local Chitrali woman who was one of the few women to have had an opportunity to go to Karachi, a major, urban city in Pakistan, for higher education. She learned Urdu and English in Karachi. She is one of the few women in Chitral to have had the opportunity to pursue higher education outside the district. Pseudonyms have been provided to protect confidentiality.

valuable to tell you” (field notes). One woman also expressed, “If I had gone to school, I would have been able to talk to you” (interview). The women with no schooling often felt that they had nothing valuable to contribute to the study because they could not read, write, and speak in Urdu or English. The researcher also sensed that the women were embarrassed because they were dependent on the research collaborator to communicate with the researcher. The researcher, too, felt awkward at times to depend on Zarina to cross the boundaries of communication that were separating the women and herself. Not being able to communicate with the researcher, an ‘outsider,’ was a concrete experience that likely made the women feel even more limited by their own language.

### ***Barriers to Language Use***

An observation that the researcher made was the reluctance amongst women who had learned Urdu to communicate in this language. Although the researcher did not speak Urdu fluently, she had functional knowledge of it. Despite this, the researcher observed that the women were hesitant to communicate in Urdu with her. She perceived the women’s hesitation to be a result of gender and schooling barriers.

Gender barriers prevent women from interacting with non-local people. The data showed that many girls are discouraged from speaking at home once they reach puberty. The young girls’ mothers tell them that “they are grown up...so they should not speak a lot” (interview). One young woman with schooling felt that she would be able to speak confidently and to the guests “when [she] is old like [her] mother” (interview). Whenever the researcher visited women in their homes, she observed that when Zarina and the older women of the household were speaking, the younger women generally sat and observed silently, only interjecting with a few comments.

Generally, only school-going girls and women with employment have the opportunity to meet non-local people. Most of the women in the village who have finished school are unable to be absorbed into formal sector work. They remain at home and virtually never come into contact with people who speak Urdu or English. Their movements outside the household are restricted by family decisions, time constraints, and *purdah* – the institutionalised system of seclusion and veiling of women in some Muslim cultures. Aisha, one of the women with schooling, described her situation:

I have been to school ... I can talk with others. I can understand other languages like Urdu. I can also use Urdu to speak with others. No one at home speaks Urdu. I never speak Urdu at home. I do not get to speak it with others. No one comes in the house and I do not go outside. (interview)

Only one woman from the study sample with schooling mentioned that she was able to speak in Urdu with the wives of her husband’s business partners from other parts of Pakistan.

At school, women learn Urdu and English through memorisation and rote learning methods. This does not allow them to build conversational skills. Furthermore, they rarely get a chance to practise speaking Urdu and English outside the classroom setting or workplace. As a result, most of them do not speak Urdu or English fluently. Therefore, even those women with some knowledge of Urdu or English are reluctant to converse in these languages because they feel limited by their knowledge of them.

### ***Mobility***

A striking change in Booni Valley has been the shifting cultural boundaries with respect to gender relations. Cultural space in the valley is divided into public and private areas. Public space, that outside the household, is perceived to be different from private space, that within the household.

Previously, only men have participated in activities in public spaces; rarely have women been permitted to leave the household and most of their work has been centred in the private realm. Today, however, with schooling, healthcare, and rural support programs coming into the valley, it has become more acceptable for women to participate in certain areas of public space.

The women whom the researcher interviewed perceived schooling as allowing them to increase their mobility and enter into public spaces. Women with schooling thought that they would be able to travel out of the district, get training for paid employment, work in villages outside the valley, and speak with their children's teachers if they had any concerns. Women without schooling often compared themselves to the researcher and said that if they had been to school they could have left the valley, the district or the country to pursue other interests. Fatima, a woman with no schooling, compared herself to her daughter and to the researcher:

Of course, if a person becomes educated, she can go here and there, she can do everything like you; you got an education that is why you have come here. I have not got any education. I cannot go anywhere. My daughter has passed her matriculation so at least she can go somewhere; an uneducated person can't go anywhere. (interview)

Women without schooling saw themselves as prisoners confined to life around their home. A statement by Sultana illustrates this view: "In my time, if there was school, then I would have liked to go ... now I am living in a dark house and I don't go out" (interview).

### ***Barriers to Mobility***

While women have gained some form of freedom, they were still fairly restricted by traditions of accepted space that had been culturally embedded into their society for generations. For women, with or without schooling, to go anywhere, they first had to get permission from men. Unless they were going to school and, in some cases, to a paid employment position, this was usually denied. Moreover, in the unusual likelihood that they are permitted to leave their homes, the women needed to be accompanied by a male family member. Even within the village, women with schooling and women who had paid employment were not free to go everywhere. For example, girls who had to pass through the bazaar, the local market area which divides the village in half, took detours to school to avoid walking right in the middle of this space where only the men gathered<sup>3</sup>. In some instances, it meant walking twice as far to get to school. Even the researcher had to take detours through the bazaar when she was conducting her research. She also had to be accompanied by a man when she visited the women in their homes. Although some girls wondered what it would be like to have the freedom to enter the bazaar, none of them would attempt this on their own. To do so would risk their families' respectability. Moreover, they would feel very embarrassed to be in the presence of hundreds of strange men. Though the women expressed a desire for schooling for reasons that included increasing their access to the modern world, deeply embedded cultural traditions were creating a dichotomy between what the women desire and what they could actually have.

### ***Independence to Read and Write***

The ability to read and write was valued by the women as a means to independence. Mothers wanted their daughters to go to school and learn how to write so that they did not have to depend on anyone, especially men in the household, to read and write letters for them. Girls with schooling also valued the independence and practical benefits that literacy had given to them. Being able to read and write made it possible for Yasmin, one of the school girls, to live at the

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<sup>3</sup> One of the observations that I made in the village was that only the men enter the bazaar. They did all the household shopping, including buying the women their clothes, shoes, and other personal items.

Aga Khan Girls' Hostel<sup>4</sup> in Booni. She did not have a father so her older brother who worked outside the district made the household decisions. She shared an example of this:

We can write letters... Our mothers depended on others, especially the educated sons to write or read a letter for them. My desire was to get registered at the hostel. I wrote a letter from here to my brother and told him about the hostel. He wrote back to me and gave me permission to go. (interview)

Being able to read and write had opened up communication for the women with schooling.

### ***Barriers to Independence to Read and Write***

Despite women's desire to be literate and despite the independence that some women had gained from acquiring this skill, gender barriers still made women dependent upon men. Zehra had completed Class 11 through distance education and had to fill out an application form to write the examinations. She said that her older brothers were very busy so no one was able to bring a form for her. Being a woman she could not go to the bazaar to get a form for herself. Zehra applied too late and did not get an admission to school:

No one brought any forms for me to fill out. We are not allowed to go out. We are not allowed to go to the bazaar. We are not allowed to go [wherever we want to], so I could not get any forms in time. (fieldnotes)

Therefore, even with literacy skills, women still relied upon men as women could not go into the public space of the *bazaar*. This restriction of space cost Zehra the opportunity to continue her studies.

In some households, women were dependent on men not only to bring the forms, but to fill out the forms. Aisha wanted to complete her Class 12 through distance education, but her husband did not want her to continue her studies. She explained, "My husband does not want me to do more schooling... He says he will [bring the forms] and fill [them] out for me [when he thinks I should do more studies]" (interview).

### ***Schooling and Employment***

Most women in the study viewed schooling as an opportunity to get employment. As women's space within the community had extended to school and to the wage sector, school girls were being exposed to other formally educated women with employment and they aspired to become like them. This was described by Shahnaz:

I started to take more interest in middle school because I started to think about my future employment. I really wanted to be a teacher...I used to see other teachers, my teachers, and I wanted to become like them. (interview)

Most young women who went to school hoped to get employment as they perceived this to be a way to progress. They perceived schooling as the key to earning an income and having an easier life. This was reflected in Naseema's thoughts on women's income: "Women who [work] earn and control their earnings ... they can buy anything ... women who do not earn money have to wait for the men" (interview). Sultana added: "I have too much work to do in the fields. The job is easy for teachers ... If I was a teacher, I would have sat on a chair" (interview). These findings suggested that the spread of schooling was perceived to be a way to gain access to opportunity and progress.

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<sup>4</sup> The Aga Khan Girls' Hostel in Booni Valley houses approximately 50 girls from neighboring villages where high schools for girls were unavailable.

### ***Barriers to Paid Employment***

Most women who completed their schooling in Booni Valley were joining the large pool of the educated unemployed. The valley's economy was unable to absorb the increasing number of women with schooling who expected to get into the paid labour market. Gulshan described that when she was looking for work, she was one of "200 women who recently applied for four teaching positions at the government school" (interview). The areas of paid employment open to women were also limited. Women were streamlined into the teaching and health professions<sup>5</sup> as well as into women's organisations as these areas of work were perceived to be culturally acceptable. Because their mobility was restricted, many women could not leave the valley to look for work. This led to much disappointment for them. Shahnaz wanted to teach, but there were no jobs available in Booni Valley. She did not ask her father if she could look for employment outside the valley. She knew that he would not permit her to leave the valley.

I have not asked my father if I can get employment [outside Booni Valley] ... I would have to go far away to teach. I would have to transfer out of Booni. He does not want me to leave Booni. (interview)

Many young women in Booni Valley experienced frustration because they were unable to or were not allowed to get paid employment. This was expressed by Rabia:

I have tried to look for employment ... I applied at the social welfare office ... There were many girls who applied and I felt very bad when I was not hired ... I feel my future is *thabar* (ruined). If I remain this way, my future will be destroyed ... I feel bad for myself when I am at home and the other women are going to work. I feel bad to do all the housework. (interview)

Although women in Booni Valley with schooling hoped to find employment, their opportunities were limited both economically and culturally. This led to much disappointment and frustration for the women.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

In the extremely isolated community of Booni Valley, women's goals and values are shifting as a result of schooling. Language shifts are resulting in cultural change where women have placed great value on Urdu and English, and have devalued their local language, Khowar. Over the years, women in the village have become more mobile in terms of going to school and having employment. However, gendered space which divides the public and private realms limits women from leaving the village to pursue opportunities of higher education and paid employment. While women's independence has also increased in that they are able to read and write and, therefore, communicate with others, they are still dependent on men to some extent to facilitate this communication. The women perceive schooling as an opportunity to get employment, yet economic and cultural barriers prevent them from having their hopes met. Therefore, despite schooling, most women are unable to be absorbed into formal sector work.

There are two important implications of these findings for research on gender development. First, as stated above, this study is an example of the shift in literature toward an understanding of women's perceptions of schooling in their lives. It supports Rockhill's (1992) view that it is important to take into account how women themselves actually think about schooling, their access to schooling and how they apply their schooling skills in their daily lives. Previous studies have often assumed that Southern nations' women are passive recipients of schooling who experience

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<sup>5</sup> Most women who were in the health profession worked as lady health visitors (LHVs). LHVs are female paramedics based in the field.

similar problems as women worldwide. These studies have not explored women's perceptions of schooling in their own particular cultural context, which is critical for an understanding of their specific needs. This paper has attempted to study women's perceptions of schooling in their own cultural context, and the women's experiences reveal how schooling has met or has fallen short of meeting their needs.

This study also has implications for the development of girls' schooling in areas where schooling has never existed for them. Schooling must be rooted in the realities of these women's lives and must take into account job opportunities for the women. The curriculum content should be expanded so that the learning is linked to the realities of the women's lives, particularly as cultural and economic barriers often prevent women from working outside the home. In order for the deeply rooted gender barriers in Booni Valley to be removed so that gender equity in schooling is achieved, specific policy interventions will also be required.

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