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## Out-of-School Children: Examining the Reasons in Semi-urban Setting in Pakistan

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### KEY WORDS

Out-of-school children,  
Primary education, Deh  
Chuhar, Sindh, Pakistan

### ABSTRACT

Globally, 57 million primary age children remain out-of-school. In South Asia, Pakistan has the highest (34%) out-of-primary school age children. This paper highlights the proportion of out-of-school children with reasons and children's educational attainment in the semi-urban community of Pakistan. A cross-sectional survey was conducted by using systematic sampling in a semi-urban town in Karachi, Pakistan. Chi-square was used to describe the difference in the educational achievements with age and gender of the children with p-value < 0.05, considered as significant. Among 254 surveyed households, 22.9% of the children (age 3-15 years) were found out-of-school, with no significant gender difference among boys (11.6%) and girls (11.1 %). A large group of young children (3-6 years of age) were found out-of-school with boys 71.6% (n=68) and girls 67.03% (n=61). Children's lack of interest in education was the major (42%) reason, followed by high school expenses (23%). Children's educational attainment was significantly (p<0.000) related to age and gender. At the local community level, teachers and Taluka Education Officers have a pivotal role to play towards increasing primary school enrollment and mobilizing the resources to overcome financial hardships faced by the parents for their children's education in early years.

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## Introduction

Education is a social determinant of health and a basic requirement for human capital. It fosters economic growth and development (UNICEF, 2014a). It is one of the fundamental human rights, and therefore its government's responsibility to provide universal education to its citizens (Colclough, 2014). Globally, 57 million primary age children are out-of-school (UN Sustainable Development, 2017). There is, however, a global decline in the out-of-school children (of primary school) from 99 million in 2000 to 59 million in 2013 (UNICEF, 2017). The out-of-school children mainly belong to the disadvantaged settings; unable to access education facilities and are forced to earn (UNICEF, 2014a; UNICEF, 2014b).

Despite of the efforts towards increasing universal primary education, South Asia is facing enormous challenges with regards to the staggering number of out-of-school children (UNICEF, 2014c). The household survey by UNICEF indicates that around 27 million children between the ages 5 to 13 are out-of-school in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Of which 17 million belongs to primary school-age and 9.9 million are of lower secondary school-age (UNICEF, 2014c). It is unfortunate that Pakistan has the highest (34%) proportion of out-of-school children (at primary level) in South Asia (UNICEF, 2014c). In this regard, Sri Lanka has made an appreciable progress for universal participation in primary and lower secondary schooling, leaving very few percentage (1.9%) of out-of-school children (UNICEF, 2014c).

Pakistan Demographic Health Survey (PDHS) 2012-13 reflects the net school attendance ratio for primary (the percentage of the children age 5-9 years attending primary school) and middle/ secondary (10-14 years attending secondary school) is approximately 60% and 37% respectively, indicating 40% of the children are out-of-school for primary education and 63% are out-of-school for middle/ secondary education (NIPS, 2013).

The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is a consortium of a number of institutions, and programs that work towards improving the quality of lives for underprivileged communities in the Asia and Africa (AKF, 2016). AKDN partners have revitalized a school at Deh Chuhar village (semi-urban location in Karachi) in collaboration with a local non-government organization (NGO), Rural Educational Promotion and Development Society (REPDS). The school started functioning in 2015. Project partners are investing efforts in revitalizing education and providing basic health care services to school children (AKF, 2016). The school is currently functioning as "Government Boys and Girls Elementary School, Haji Hussain Baloch Deh Chuhar" UC II Gadap Town (Education City). It is situated in Malir District, Karachi, Pakistan. The school offers education till grade six. A total of 200 students are currently enrolled at the school.

The chances of Pakistani children entering school and completing education till primary level are extremely low. The situation is also

relatively poor in comparison with other South Asian countries (Sathar & Lloyd, 1994; UNICEF, 2014c). Therefore, we hypothesized a high proportion of children not attending schools due to poverty and other associated factors in the semi-urban community, Karachi. The aim of this paper is to report the proportion of out-of-school children with underlying reasons by the households in Deh Chuhar village.

## **Methodology**

### **Study design and study setting**

The data for this paper was captured from demographic and health survey conducted in the Deh Chuhar area in Sindh, Pakistan (during December 2015 to February 2016). Deh Chuhar is a semi-urban site, located at the Gadap Town in Karachi, Sindh. The town has eight union councils with over 400 villages. It is spread over 12,000 kilometers with an estimated population of around 300,000. (Bhagwandas, 2005). The area is clustered into 34 villages. The total households in Deh Chuhar village are 2,052 with an approximately 10,750 population, predominantly Sindhi speaking. A total of 407 schools (including primary and lower secondary levels separate for boys and girls) are functional under District Education Gadap Town (Lynd, 2007). The net attendance ratio of school children at primary level in Sindh is recorded at 50% (NIPS, 2013).

### **Sample Design**

The sample size was calculated using Open Epi software. A sample size of 20% was inflated for attrition. The final sample size was rounded off to 254 households. We recruited households with women of childbearing age (15- 49 years of age) who agreed to participate in the study. Our exclusion criteria included, women of childbearing age with the absence of child (3-15 years) in the household. Household sample was drawn using a systematic sampling technique. A total of 678 households (N) from all the villages were included. We sampled every third house based on the number of households (n) to be sampled from the total households (N) in Deh Chuhar area.

### **Study Tool**

All study subjects were interviewed by the trained interviewers using pre-tested close-ended survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted from PDHS 2012-13 survey instrument (NIPS, 2013). The questionnaire captured information on demographics, health status, school enrollment status, maternal health, and domestic violence. The questionnaire was pre-tested in a nearby village on approximately (5-10 % of the actual sample) to assess the flow and clarity of the questions. Needed modifications were carried out in the questionnaire after pre-testing. The questionnaire was

administered in Urdu and Sindhi language (as per the convenience of the participants). All the children who have never been enrolled in school and/ have dropped out from school were considered as out-of-school.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was entered in Epi Data version 3.1 and analyzed using SPSS version 22.0. Descriptive statistics, mean and frequencies were used to describe the variables. The proportions for out-of school children, alongside the underlying reasons were analyzed. Chi-square test was also used to determine the difference between gender and age category with educational attainments of children, with  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ , considered as significant.

### **Ethical Consideration**

The study was approved by Ethics Review Committee, The Aga Khan University Karachi, Pakistan (3789- CHS-ERC-15). All study participants were provided with written informed consent.

### **Results and Discussion**

A total of 254 households were surveyed. The total population was 2117 (Mean  $8 \pm 4SD$ ). Children under the age of five years comprised of 15% of the total population, women in the reproductive age group constituted 22.9% with a very small (4%) proportion of older adults ( $\geq 60$  years). Gender distribution was found to be almost equal. Wood was the most commonly (99%) used fuel for cooking, and it was found that the cooking area was kept outside the houses to reduce the chances for indoor air pollution. (Table 1)

The majority (60%) of the households were found to be poor according to water and sanitation, assets, maternal education, and income (WAMI) index. This reflected low socio-economic status of the population (Pradhan et al, 2018). More than a quarter (37%) of the population never reported being into formal education system. An increased proportion of females (21.7%) were reported to be uneducated as compared to males (15.3%). Overall, very less proportion (0.8%) of the population has completed the university education, with majority of males ( $n=17$ ) than females ( $n=2$ ).

The ideal age break-up for school children for enrollment at school could not be related here, as in this underprivileged locality, children of older age such as six years or elder were found to be in grade 1. (Table 2). Educational status of children (age 3-15) was significantly related with gender and age break up ( $p$ -value  $< 0.001$ ). Almost a quarter (22.9%) of the children in 3-15 years of age was reported out-of-school. This comprised of large proportion of young children (3-6 years) across both genders (71.6% boys, 67.03% girls). Amongst elder age children ( $> 14$  years), only one child

was reported in the secondary grade. Across both genders, most of the children have completed their elementary education. (Table 2)

Figure 1 represents the reasons stated by the mothers for children being out-of-school in the study site. The most popular reason cited by 42% of mothers for child's non-school enrollment was lack of interest in studies/education by children, followed by high educational expenses (23%). It is also important to note that 16% of the households' representatives perceived that their children were too young to attend school. Admission related concerns (such as school denied the admission and other related issues etc.) were reported from few (7%) of the households. In addition, 5% of households reported physical and mental impairments in the children for being out-of-school. Children's requirement for earning and unavailability of transport were among the least cited reasons for children's non-enrollment at school. (Figure 1).

Findings in our study indicated that young children (age 3-6 years) constituted a high proportion of out-of-school children across both genders (71.6% boys, 67.03% girls). The reported reasons for children's non-school enrollment provided a typical glimpse of an underprivileged community. Child's lack of interest in the studies and high school expenses were cited as the major reasons for children's out-of school status.

Among the reasons reported for school dropouts in PDHS 2012-13, child's lack of interest in education and poverty occupied among the top three reasons (NIPS, 2013). In addition, Sustainable Development Policy Institute in 2011 also reported similar findings among primary school dropouts; with poverty (21.7%) and lack of child's interest (14.7%) as the major reasons cited by mothers (Gulbaz & Shah, 2011). Child lack of interest in studies could be possibly explained by the lack of parental attention on child's education. This requires qualitative exploration to further investigate this phenomenon. Despite the fact that government schools in Pakistan are not charging any admission fees, financial barriers were cited by the households for their children's out-of-school status.

PDHS 2012-13 depicts that a high proportion of (69.4%) females were deprived of education in rural areas of the country (NIPS,2013). Contrary to this, no remarkable gender difference was revealed in our study with regards to out-of-school children in the Deh Chuhar area. A study conducted in the rural area of Pakistan reflected parents' decision to enroll girl child at schools is based on the quality of school infrastructure (Lloyd, Mete, & Sathar, 2005). On the other hand, overall level of male child's enrollment remained unaffected by access and quality of the education system (Lloyd, Mete, & Sathar, 2005).

Financial barriers also remained the underlying reasons for primary school children dropouts in a state in India (Kishore & Shaji, 2012). Research from Bangladesh also reported poverty as one of the main reasons for children being out-of-school (Sabates, Hossain & Lewin, 2010).

Similarly, a study conducted in Brazil also reported financial reasons, alongside early parenthood and child labor as push-out factors for children from schools (Cardoso & Verner, 2007). Likewise, findings from Kenya also documented poverty and lack of resources for primary education (Lloyd, Mensch, & Clark, 2000).

Findings in our study also indicated mothers' perceptions of their child being too young to get enrolled in the school (rated as top third reason). Children were perceived too young if they were three years old. Surprisingly, findings from Tanzania manifested similar perceptions of a large fraction of parents of non-enrolled children (of age 7-9 years), who considered their children being too young to get enrolled in the school (Burke, 1998). Findings from Annual Status of Education Report 2015, also showed that over 90% of children of age three and nearly 70% at age five remained un-enrolled in schools across Pakistan (AbuBakar & Ahmad, 2015). Pre-school years of children (regarded as early childhood development (ECD)) are important for their physical, social, psychological growth and development (Al-Samarrai & Peasgood, 1998). There are multifold benefits of ECD. This includes healthy growth & development across all spheres of life with an increased productivity in adulthood (World Bank, 2015). Pre-primary education focuses on the early childhood education and development (Pianta et al, 2009). In the context of our study, parents' perception of their child being too young to attend school indicates their lack of awareness about ECD.

Child's overall health condition is also an important indicator for school attendance. Among the reasons cited for non-school attendance, few households (5%) also reported impaired health status of children; as a hurdle towards their school enrollment. This includes, physically challenged children (n=2), mentally unstable (n=1) and children with allergic reactions and other health issues (n=2). Likewise, health issues such as physical disorders (22%), and mental retardation (21%) remained the common concerns in a state in India among the underlying reasons for school dropouts (Kishore & Shaji, 2012).

In addition, there could be numerous explanations for the phenomenon of out-of-school children in Deh Chuhar village. Illiteracy in the community poses a major threat to the future generations, as it was found that 37% of the residents (inclusive of all age group) were illiterate. Also, poverty generally prevailed in the community, which has potentially restricted community's access to the education and other means to achieve a better quality of life.

The strength of our study was a representative sample from the community with a robust sampling methodology. To the best of our knowledge, limited studies are available in the local context for examining reasons for out-of-school children. In Sindh province, this remains the first study to report educational attainment of school children at a primary level

alongside the reasons for non-enrollment and school dropouts in a semi-urban area of Karachi. There are few limitations of our study. Findings of this study cannot be generalized to the province, as it was conducted in one semi-urban area of a megacity.

School enrollment among children can be improved by concentrated actions by all concerned stakeholders. At the local community level, teachers and Taluka Education Officers (TEOs) can encourage parents for their child's education which can potentially increase the primary school enrollment. In addition, community stakeholders can also mobilize resources to overcome financial hardships faced by the households. Furthermore, local religious and community leaders can motivate community residents towards the same cause.

### **Conclusion**

Lack of child's interest in studies and poverty are the two major reasons for out-of-school children in Deh Chuhar village, Karachi. There is a dire need to promote the concept of ECD among parents to increase school enrollment among young children. In addition, concentrated actions by multiple stakeholders (teachers, TEOs, community and religious leaders and health workers) to encourage parents towards their child's education can enhance primary school attendance. Furthermore, the identified stakeholders can mobilize necessary resources to facilitate the households in overcoming financial barriers. These proposed recommendations have the potential to increase children's school enrollment in Deh Chuhar village.

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Table 1: *Socio-demographic Characteristics of Households at Deh Chuhar, Sindh*

<b>Particulars of household members<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>n (%)</b>
<i>Total members in the households</i>	2117
<i>Number of household members</i>	8 ±4
<i>Minimum and maximum number of household members</i>	2- 24
<i>Total number of children</i>	813
<i>Mean number of children (aged 3-11 years) per household</i>	3 ±1.6
<b>Gender (n=2117)</b>	
<i>Male</i>	1075 (50.8)
<i>Female</i>	1042 (49.2)
<b>Household headship (n=254)</b>	
<i>Male</i>	244(96.1)
<i>Female</i>	10 (3.9)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
<i>Sindhi</i>	199 (78.3)
<i>Balouchi</i>	52 (20.5)
<i>Gaboli</i>	3 (1.2)
<b>Family structure (n=254)</b>	
<i>Nuclear</i>	155(61)
<i>Extended</i>	99 (39)
<b>Household construction (n=254)</b>	
<i>Pacca</i>	144 (57)
<i>Semi-pacca</i>	100 (39)
<i>Kaccha</i>	10 (4)
<b>Available rooms in household (n=254)</b>	
<i>One</i>	135 (53.1)
<i>Two</i>	67 (26.4)
<i>Three</i>	28 (11)
<i>More than four</i>	24 (9.4)
<b>Type of cooking fuel use (n=251)</b>	
<i>Wood</i>	248(99)
<i>Others (LPG &amp; Charcoal)</i>	3 (1)
<b>Availability of households possessing a bank account (n=254)</b>	
<i>Available</i>	42 (16.5)
<i>Unavailable</i>	212 (83.5)

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**Types of health service utilization (n=252)**

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<i>Private</i>	246 (98)
<i>Public</i>	8 (2)

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Table 2: Distribution of Gender and Education Status of Children Age 3-15 Years at Deh Chuhar, Sindh (n=813)

Gender and Age			Education category n (%)					p-value
			No education	Elementary	Primary (1-5)	Middle (6-8)	Secondary (9-10)	
Boys (n=403)	Age	3-6	68 (71.6 %)	97 (39.6%)	2 (3.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0.000
	(Years)	7-10	13 (13.7%)	106 (43.3%)	11 (20.8%)	2 (22.2%)	0 (0%)	
		11-14	11 (11.6%)	32 (13.1%)	33 (62.3%)	5 (55.65)	1 (100%)	
		>14	3 (3.2%)	10 (4.1%)	7 (13.2%)	2 (22.2%)	0 (0%)	
Girls (n=410)	Age	3-6	61 (67.03%)	81 (30.2%)	1 (2.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	
	(Years)	7-10	17 (18.9%)	134 (50%)	5 (11.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	
		11-14	11 (12.2%)	47 (17.5%)	26 (61.9%)	4 (44.4%)	0 (0%)	
		>14	2 (2.2%)	6 (2.2%)	10 (23.8%)	5 (55.6%)	0 (0%)	

