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Planting New Hope for Pakistan: Treating Roots

Pakistan's beautiful sights are scattered throughout bustling cities and quiet rural areas. Despite progress in recent years, many families there struggle to provide food for themselves, especially those in rural areas. The root cause behind this is gender inequality. Most girls do not have the opportunity to continue education after their first few years, if they were allowed to attend at all. These barriers restrict women from securing fair, protected employment or exclude them from the workforce altogether, often resulting in lifelong poverty and limited access to sufficient food.

Around 30.5 million hectares, or 47% of the land in Pakistan is used for agriculture, which is higher than the global average of 38% (FAO). As a result, 70 percent of Pakistan's exports are directly or indirectly derived from agriculture, and 37% of the workforce is employed in this area (FAO). The two main staple crops that are grown are wheat and rice, and the top two cash crops are sugarcane and cotton (FAO). Pakistan also has a large livestock population, estimated to be 225 million (FAO). They are the 5th largest milk producer, and because of their large animal population they are also the 4th largest exporter of leather apparel (FAO). Despite this, 37% of the population faces food insecurity, and families struggle to put food on the table (Mahmood et al.).

Pakistan's geographical features include coastal areas, lowlands near the Indus river, northern uplands and mountain regions - including the Himalayas (Climate Change Knowledge Portal). The country has many different climate types, depending on the region and geography. Weather patterns, such as monsoons can affect the mountain regions, as well as cause severe flooding along the Indus, and droughts throughout most of the country (Climate Change Knowledge Portal).

The average family size in Pakistan is six people, with three males and three females, one of the males being 18 or older, and one of the females being 16 and older (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [Table 1]). Families typically eat foods such as rice, lentils, wheat-based flatbreads, vegetables, yogurt, and fruit (Munyon). They also eat meat, the most common being lamb, mutton, chicken, beef, and fish. This food is bought from the market and Indian and Mughal influences can be seen throughout the cuisine in the country (Munyon).

The public education system in Pakistan is worrying, and the rising youth unemployment rate mirrors that concern. School for children between the ages of 5-16 is free and required by law (Hunter). Enrollment has increased over the past few years, however, 22.7 million children still do not attend school, 5 million are elementary level, and then increasing in middle and secondary schools (Hunter). Gender plays a large role in who attends school, with 32% of elementary school girls out-of-school compared to 21% of boys (Hunter). That number increases in secondary school and, by grade nine, only 13% of girls still attend school (Hunter).

In 2022, 36.43% worked in agriculture, 25.52% worked in industry and manufacturing, and 38.05% worked in services such as financial services, tourism, and telecommunications (O'Neill). The average monthly salary in Pakistan in 2024 was only 42,939 Pakistani Rupee, which amounts to 154 USD (Statista Research Department).

Currently, the level of hunger in Pakistan is cause for serious concern, with 20.7% of the population being undernourished. Between 2000 and 2016 this percentage was decreasing, but after the Covid-19 pandemic undernourishment has risen (Global Hunger Index). Another statistic that demands an immediate response is that 33.2% of children under the age of 5 are stunted, meaning they are not at the average height for their age due to undernourishment (Global Hunger Index). As well, 10.1% of children are wasting (Global Hunger Index). Tragically, the country also has a 6.1% child mortality rate (Global Hunger Index). For comparison, according to the CDC, the child mortality rate for the United States is 28 per 100,000 (0.028%) (National Center for Health Statistics).

There are many causes of food insecurity in Pakistan, such as climate change, poverty, and education. One that can, and must be, addressed is human rights in the form of gender equality.

Pakistan has the second largest number of out-of-school children in the world after Nigeria, a situation intensified by gender inequalities and socioeconomics (Hunter). In Pakistan, girls are less likely to enroll in school, attend school, or to receive the benefits from schooling even if they did attend (The World Bank). This restricts their ability to find well-paying jobs, if they can find one at all. Education for all genders affects kids more in rural areas, where families typically struggle with income. However, girls are more likely to be pulled from school to take care of household chores and to cook when both parents work to support their family (Hunter). According to The World Bank, one of the major barriers to receiving an education is poverty, and “Rural girls, who are more likely to be from low-income households, are also less likely to be enrolled than any other group” (The World Bank). Muqadas Zahra, a young girl living in Pakistan, speaks about her story of being pulled from her school, “After completing fifth grade, I lost hope of studying further as there was no elementary school for girls in our village or the nearby areas. My parents are poor and couldn’t afford to send me to the city for further education. I could not study for almost a year. I stayed home, helping my mother with household chores, but missed school a lot,” (ECW).

Concern also comes from the safety of a commute to school, during which the rape of young women is not uncommon (Hunter). Schools in rural areas are few and far between, and the long trip turns many away from the opportunity to be educated (The World Bank). These long travel distances affect the enrollment and attendance of all students, but especially young girls as they are “more susceptible to harassment, oftentimes daily, by men encountered on the streets, in and around the school gate, and on the vehicle taking them to school,” (The World Bank).

After school, women who move into the workplace face continued struggles with equality. According to research conducted by United Nations Women, women only account for 22.7% of the workforce in Pakistan, and only 5.7% of these hold managerial positions in their jobs (World Bank Group, UN Women). Females also spend around 19.9% of their time on unpaid domestic chores and care work, compared to only 1.8% of time for males (UN Women). According to the National Report on the Status of Women in Pakistan, 2023, Women are also taking the highest burden of unpaid work. The distribution of employed workers by employment status reveals that more than half (55%) of employed women were working as unpaid workers compared to 10% of employed men,” (UN Women).

While legal frameworks have been put in place to promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality in many different areas of life, women only represent 16.85% of seats in local government bodies, and only 20.47% of seats in national parliament, which are considered low and medium performance in the area of gender equality, respectively (UN Women). Low representation in government may decrease the likelihood of laws being passed that would actually benefit women and young girls, such as protections for women in the workplace and the promotion of education for girls.

The disparities between level of education, workforce employment, and representation in government both local and nationally, between men and women is concerning, and can be connected to food insecurity

in many ways. Girls who do not attend school have a harder time finding employment and cannot support themselves independently, preventing them from having access to food. The lack of representation in government slows the progress towards obtaining goals that create gender equality and protections for women, and can further prevent the ability of women to obtain good quality food for themselves and their families.

A program that has had widespread success in other countries, and has started developing roots in the province of Sindh is free lunches at public schools. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), free lunches at schools provide an incentive for parents to continue to send children to school, especially daughters, and can help girls remain in school even during adolescence (“School meals”). Continuing through secondary school can prevent marriage and pregnancy at a young age, both of which can prevent women from entering the workforce, causing them to fall into poverty and lose independence (“School meals”).

The Sindh government, partnered with WFP, will provide free lunches in public schools. The program will initially target high poverty areas, providing hot meals to 11,000 students in the first year (“Govt schools”). If successful in maintaining enrollment in school, it could also benefit other areas of the province.

The free lunch program in Sindh has a high chance of being successful, as similar programs in other countries have seen great benefits. According to the article *How school meals transform futures for children and communities in Cambodia*, the WFP’s school feeding programs require that 70% of the food used must be grown locally, which provides the community with jobs, and provides a secure income for farmers (Beltrami). This also encourages more villagers, especially women, to grow their own vegetables, which allows them to depend less on men (Beltrami). The head teacher at one of the participating schools commented, “School meals have changed things. More children are being enrolled in school, and fewer are dropping out. Many are continuing into higher education” (Beltrami).

Free lunch programs encourage parents to send their children to school and create more jobs, therefore, increasing positive impacts on the economy and the well-being of the community, especially for women. A program like this in Pakistan could foster an environment where gender equality can manifest and young girls and women are given opportunities for a brighter future.

It must be a goal to progress towards gender equality by offering more incentives for parents to send their older daughters to school, instead of keeping them home to take care of the house. School schedules could incorporate structured sessions in which girls collaboratively learn to prepare nutritious meals from available resources to share with their families, creating a tangible benefit that encourages parents to support their daughters’ education. Families would have access to a meal at night, and girls would be able to attend school because the parents knew they learned home skills in addition to the content of other academic classes.

Another activity that could work hand in hand with this would be a class similar to a health course, focusing on physical and mental well-being. Girls would learn: how to take care of themselves, what foods they should be eating in order to get proper nutrition, and good hygiene practices. Days for Girls is an international program, providing education to women and girls on menstrual health. Help from this program or a similar one would teach older girls how to better take care of themselves, and would provide them with the necessary hygiene resources that allow them to attend school. According to Days for Girls, “Menstrual health and hygiene are critical factors in improving education opportunities and livelihood outcomes for women, girls and people with periods worldwide,” (Days for Girls).

Team-building opportunities can offer the chance for girls to collaborate and make friends, so that they do not become socially isolated during adulthood and depend exclusively on male household members. One model could be collaborative work on a school garden, so they can learn how to grow some simple foods, such as vegetables and fruits. With this opportunity, the girls could also learn business skills and potentially sell the produce from the garden to community members. Girls can also cultivate small gardens at home, providing an enriching, fulfilling activity as well as some additional food for their families.

Working within the cultural views of the community is paramount. While Pakistan has shown great progress towards gender equality in recent years, any shift in perspective on girls' education will likely happen gradually, and the implementation of any solution regarding gender equality starting in schools must follow the same track in order to be successful. Sending girls to school does not mean the elimination of current culture, but rather the opening of a door through which the community can thrive. This can be accomplished through the inclusion of women in the workforce and economy.

One organization committed to improving health, promoting education, alleviating poverty, and developing social institutions for community empowerment is the Health and Nutrition Development Society (HANDS) Pakistan, one of the leading non-profit organizations in the country. HANDS is already doing great work in Pakistan and has helped almost 7,000 villages with food security services ("Food & Security Services"). Funding could come from this organization, local governments and WFP. Centered around the local community, people in the community would be running programming with assistance from the local government and any additional funding available. Gardens for school girls are a good investment as, after the first few years, produce that comes from the garden will save money that would have been spent on importing foods, since seeds from the food can be planted again for the following year.

Work towards improving gender equality, and fostering a sense of community between women that starts at a young age, can impact food insecurity and poverty in the country of Pakistan. If the causes of food insecurity are treated at its roots, the effects will spread outwards, allowing the country to grow to its full potential.

Recent Developments

During May of 2025, Pakistan and India once again saw conflict over the disputed land of Kashmir. While the direct threat only lasted four days, one major concern is that India conducted missile strikes further past Pakistan's border than before, underscoring the extreme vulnerability of Pakistan to Indian air strikes (Clary). While the situation has since de-escalated, tensions remain high between the two countries. This presents additional risk to food security in Pakistan if conflict breaks out again. War means the disruption of food production, distribution, and access. For a country already facing food insecurity, war would put the nation farther behind in the success of any programs working towards providing food to communities.

Summer in Pakistan brings the monsoon season. The monsoons, which used to provide renewal for water resources, have become increasingly devastating in recent years (Ur-Rehman and Peltier). As of late August 2025, the monsoon season has only brought rising death counts and destruction. Mudslides and flash flooding have swept trees and houses downstream, claiming an immense number of lives (Ur-Rehman and Peltier). Since the beginning of the season in late June, the monsoons have killed over 700 people (Ur-Rehman and Peltier).

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