

# Challenges Faced by Female Students in Accessing Higher Education in District Hangu

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## ABSTRACT

The study's objective was to identify sociocultural and economic challenges female students face to access higher studies in the district of Hangu, Pakistan. A qualitative research approach was employed. The purposive sampling technique was used to select 15 female participants who discontinued their education after qualifying secondary school certificate examination. Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was employed to determine and organize the main themes and patterns in the data. The study revealed significant challenges contributing to low enrollment rates among females, including societal attitudes, cultural norms, early marriages, family obligations, gender-based division of labor, inadequate higher education institutions, long distance, and various other socio-cultural and economic issues. The availability of scholarships, affordable tuition fees, convenient transportation, and a favorable environment can attract a significant number of female students for higher education in rural areas like Hangu in Pakistan. This study also has implications for policy planners, administrators, and the Higher Education Commission (HEC) for promoting higher studies for female students.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher studies serve an important role in a country's development and are related to the social, economic, cultural, and other aspects of human life. Advanced countries around the world provide equal opportunities for higher education to both males and females. However, in developing countries like Pakistan, female faces numerous challenges, including cultural, social, and economic issues to access higher education (Ali et al., 2015). In 2022, the literacy rate of males is 70%, compared to 48% for females. In remote areas, where the availability of education is often further restricted, the male literacy rate is still relatively high at 63%, whereas the literacy rate of female students drops substantially to 36% (Ahmad et al., 2024). Female student lives are often focused on the home, with predefined roles like homemaking, food preparation, and motherhood, which can hinder their pursuit of higher education.

In Pakistan, female students often face challenges such as harassment, lack of safety, obstacles to education and employment, societal constraints, and limited spaces on public transport. (Maqsood et al., 2012; Mehmood et al., 2018). Financial constraints, gender discrimination, negative views on co-education, early marriages, lack of awareness about education, household duties, extended family structures, sociocultural taboos, and the long distance to schools and colleges all create significant barriers to women's higher education taboos (Uddin et al., 2021). Numerous studies have explored the challenges of female education in Pakistan, but only a few have focused specifically on District Hangu. Pakistan faces various challenges that impact access to higher studies, with the female registration rate in the Hangu district being significantly lower in contrast to many other parts of KP (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). The district is encircled with extensive rural areas and agencies, and it has only two-degree colleges for girls and the Hangu Campus of Kohat University serving male and female students (Census Report (2020-21). In the Hangu district, only 30% of the 5 million and 28,902 citizens are educated. The literacy rate of males is 53.5% among the 2 million and 68,942 males, whereas the literacy rate of females is just 9.841% among the 2 million and 59,960 females. The educational attainment at higher secondary and degree levels is very low in both Hangu tehsils.

## 2. Literature Review

Education is essential for personal success, and it is a key driver of societal and economic progress. Prioritizing early education programs is crucial for promoting social equity and growth. However, gender inequalities in the educational system still hinder girls' access to education (Ali et al., 2015). Girls' education involves all forms of learning that empower them to become capable, respectful, and valuable citizens. This includes the cultural and behavioral education provided at home and the academic instruction and training received in higher education institutions (Egenti & Chidebelu, 2023). Discouraging female students from pursuing basic education today will result in future illiteracy while denying them access to higher education due to traditional practices will have serious long-term consequences (Chimombo, 2005).

Women's education play a significant role in their lives, families, and communities. Educated female students are also less likely to experience abuse and exploitation (Somani, 2017; Vaughan, 2010). Educating female students offers numerous financial benefits, including enhanced socioeconomic opportunities and greater female participation in administrative affairs (Monkman

& Hoffman, 2013). Herz (1991) reports that research in Thailand revealed that the return on Spending funds for educating girls is approximately 25% more compared to 10% for boys' education (Knodel, 1997). Well-educated women tend to be more attentive to their children's health and nutrition. In Kenya, a study shows that 40% of adolescent female students are married without a basic education. Higher education is linked to delaying to be married, and having limited children (Sifuna, 2006). In 2010 UNICEF found that investing in girls' education is the most effective strategy for achieving UN targets. Consequently, many countries have introduced initiatives and policies to promote girls' education.

Education benefits not just the individual girl but also her family, society, and future generations. Educating females leads to better economic growth, improved education for future generations, healthier girls, and lower illness-related mortality (Malik & Courtney, 2011). Etumabo (2016) found that providing female students access to higher education is a powerful way to reduce poverty. Educated women are more likely to enter the workforce and earn higher incomes, which helps to diminish gender inequality. Additionally, improved education results in better health and nutrition, reduced fertility, and lower infant and child mortality rates (Suleiman et al., 2017).

Girls' ability to attend school is significantly influenced by home-based factors, which can impact their educational attainment (Chinyoka & Naidu, 2014). According to O'Connor (2015), households generally view male education positively seeing sons as future investments for old age. Conversely, many mothers often prioritize their sons' education over their daughters', reflecting a negative attitude towards girls' education (O'Connor et al., 2015). Many societies oppressively believe that a girl's future success is dependent on her husband's achievements (Rössler, 2006). The internal environment of schools, including factors like the learning atmosphere, teachers' attitudes, and resource shortages, significantly impacts women's educational attainment and contributes to gender disparities, especially in poorer nations (Ahmad et al., 2022). Maqsood (2012) highlights that societal expectations, insecurity, and customs significantly impact girls' school dropout rates or their families' decisions to withdraw them. As female students reach adolescence, they often see themselves as adults and may view marriage as a natural progression (Maqsood et al., 2012).

Noori and Orfan (2021) found that gender stereotypes favoring boys' and female students' internalizing feelings of inferiority contribute to higher dropout rates. The patterns of socialization and the environment in which a girl is raised have a long-lasting effect on her motivation for school and her career ambitions. (Noori & Orfan, 2021). Poverty, early child marriage, and religious customs often hinder female students from pursuing higher education. As a result, uneducated female students suffer from reduced skills, poorer health, fewer opportunities, increased poverty vulnerability, and limited contributions to their communities' social, political, and economic development (Abuya et al., 2012). Ward and Penny (2003) report that many female students encounter violence and harassment in urban, rural, and remote areas. Additionally, they often bear significant household responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for siblings (Ward et al., 2003). Clarke (2011) emphasize that education is crucial for men, many societies, particularly in less developed regions, prioritize sons' education over daughters. They often view investing in girls' education as a waste of time, money, and resources. (Clarke, 2011).

Ashraf et al. (2015) argue that education is key to success, empowering individuals to understand the world, pursue opportunities, and achieve their goals (Naz & Ashraf, 2020). In Pakistan, significantly fewer female students pursue higher education compared to boys, primarily because of an inadequate understanding of the importance of educating female students (Shepherd, 2017). In District Hangu, women's higher education levels are notably low due to persistent social, economic, and security challenges, despite government efforts to enhance access. Education is vital for personal development and passing on knowledge across generations, as it empowers individuals with the awareness and skills needed to tackle various challenges (Arafat & Khan, 2022). In District Hangu, females encounter obvious and subtle difficulties in pursuing higher education. These challenges whether, internal or external can directly or indirectly hinder their educational aspirations (Arafat & Khan, 2022). Females pursuing education frequently face minimal support from their communities, encountering stigmatization misconceptions about their character, social exclusion, and taunting from boys. These negative social attitudes often lead to frustration and discouragement, causing many women to contemplate abandoning their education to maintain their social status (Gouleta, 2015).

In District Hangu, women's education is also hindered by several physical barriers. Additionally, high tuition fees, insufficient books and materials, and poor transportation contribute to the problem. Notably, 78% of female students report that inadequate and poorly maintained public transportation severely impacts their ability to attend school (Ullah, 2022). Mehmood et al. (2018) highlighted the detrimental effects of early marriage on female higher studies in Pakistan. Their study revealed that 74.9% of respondents believe early marriage prevents girls from pursuing higher education, significantly contributing to low literacy rates and gender inequality (Mehmood et al., 2018) Arafat and Khan (2022) emphasize that poverty and income disparities are major issues in District Hangu, with 49% of families earning less annually than their expenses. This financial strain directly affects female access to higher education. In District Hangu, inadequate infrastructure in educational institutions poses a significant challenge for female students (Ali et al., 2021). Insecurity and violence are prevalent, many parents fear for their daughter's safety and are hesitant to send them to colleges and universities. This concern is exacerbated by the belief that women need male relatives—such as fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons—to protect them. High-profile terrorist attacks on educational institutions, like the assault on APS, have intensified these fears, leading many parents to restrict their daughters from pursuing higher education (Jamal, 2016).

The literature on barriers to girls' higher education highlights a complex mix of sociocultural and economic challenges. Gender stereotypes and societal norms often prioritize male education, while economic pressures such as poverty and familial responsibilities push female students towards marriage or work instead of schooling. Systemic issues like gender-based violence, limited school access, and poor infrastructure further restrict educational opportunities for girls. Despite efforts by governments, communities, and scholarship programs, significant disparities persist, specifically in remote and underserved areas. Social standards, absence of female role models and early marriages also restrict girls' access to higher education. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies, including specific legislation, local involvement, economic

support, and efforts to challenge gender roles. While progress has been made, much remains to ensure equal access to higher education, promote socio-economic growth, empower girls, and advance gender equality in developing nations.

### 3. Research Design

The researcher adopted a qualitative exploratory mode of inquiry. 15 female students were interviewed for data collection. The sample consisted of female participants who had completed intermediate (Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education Kohat, 2022) but encountered many sociocultural and economic challenges that prevented them from pursuing higher education. Key informants were selected through a purposive sampling technique. The age group of these female participants ranged from 18 to 21. Among these 15, four participants were married, six were unmarried and five were engaged. The majority of them had uneducated parents, and only few participants had educated fathers.

#### Demographic Information of Participants

S. No	Name	Education	Discipline	Age	Marital Status	No. of brothers enrolled in University	* Distance (Km) from university
1	P1	FA	Arts	19	Engaged	2	5, 41, 117, 111
2	P2	FA	Arts	18	Engaged	2	7, 40, 114, 114
3	P3	FSc	Pre-medical	20	Married	1	5, 41, 117, 111
4	P4	FSc	Pre-engineering	18	Engaged	1	5, 40, 116, 111
5	P5	FA	Arts	18	Single	3	5, 40, 115, 110
6	P6	FSc	Pre-engineering	19	Single	2	5, 41, 117, 111
7	P7	FSc	Pre-medical	18	Single	1	5, 41, 117, 111
8	P8	FA	Arts	20	Married	3	10, 38, 119, 116
9	P9	FSc	Pre-medical	19	Engaged	2	3, 43, 119, 115
10	P10	FSc	Pre-engineering	18	Single	1	4, 43, 113, 110
11	P11	FSc	Pre-engineering	19	Married	3	5, 41, 117, 111
12	P12	FSc	Pre-medical	18	Single	2	6, 42, 118, 112
13	P13	FA	Arts	21	Married	2	7, 42, 115, 113
14	P14	FSc	Pre-medical	19	Single	1	8, 44, 118, 113
15	P15	FSc	Pre-medical	18	Engaged	3	7, 43, 112, 115

Source: Hangu Campus, KUST, KKKUK and UOP (2023)

#### 3.1 Interview strategy

For this research, a face-to-face semi-structured interview technique was used. This approach is ideal for situations where the interviewer requires in-depth information, explanations, and detailed responses from the participants. This open-ended interviewing style allows participants to recount their experiences in their own words and from their perspective, using a non-directive approach that includes probing for deeper insights. The informant-style interviewing approach offered valuable insights into the scope of our main questions and areas of focus while allowing the female students in our data collection process the freedom to discuss anything they considered important.

Each participant's interview was recorded and transcribed and the interviews were carried out under ethical principles that emphasized knowledgeable agreement, along with the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. We wanted to maintain a consistent question set for each participant to enable genuine comparisons of differences and similarities through their varied perspectives. Simultaneously, we aimed to maximize an opportunity for participants to express their individual and personal perspectives. We also focused on preventing our participant's accounts from being influenced in any way. Therefore, they were encouraged to elaborate on the personal meanings and interpretations they associated with their experiences and the challenges they faced in accessing higher education.

To achieve this, we invited each participant to share their experiences as female students through a set of common core questions, which included the following: could you please tell us a little about yourself? What motivated you to pursue higher education, and what challenges did you face in making this decision? How do cultural norms and expectations in your area impact your ability to pursue higher education? Can you describe any specific economic challenges you or your family have faced in supporting your higher education journey? How does your family's attitude toward education for women influence your educational aspirations and choices? What role do community perceptions play in your experience of seeking higher education? Are there any specific sociocultural practices in your community that have affected your access to higher education? If so, how? How do transportation and safety concerns in District Hangu impact your ability to attend college or university? How do transportation and safety concerns in your area impact your ability to attend college or university? Can you describe any instances where you felt discouraged from continuing your education due to your gender? How do peer and social networks influence your educational journey as a female student? Are there any support systems, such as scholarships or community programs, available to you that help mitigate some of these challenges? What challenges do you face in balancing your educational responsibilities with family and household duties? How do economic constraints within your family affect your access to resources like technology and study materials? What role does the availability or lack of female role models in higher

education play in your academic journey? How do you think the sociocultural and economic challenges you face in accessing higher studies can be addressed or improved?

To ensure the authenticity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the accounts provided by study participants, we employed a probing strategy to help them articulate their narratives. This approach was characterized by eliciting detailed context, examples, and clarifications of general or vague statements. We also sought further explanations to understand any points that seemed to contradict earlier statements in the interviews. Examples of these probing questions that we asked them included: Could you elaborate on that or provide more details? Could you give me one or two examples? Could you clarify what you mean? Could you help me understand what you are saying here? Earlier, you mentioned X, but now you seem to be saying something different; could you help me understand how these ideas are connected? It became evident that the female participants in this study were crafting accounts of their personal meanings and interpretations within a broader narrative framework, focusing on key individuals and events in specific contexts of time and place that each considered influential in their academic career progression. Within the structure of the common core questions, we ensured there was room for storytelling, allowing participants to share what was personal and significant to them.

#### 4. Processes and procedures of data analysis

The interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis, a technique frequently used in qualitative research, especially in studies based on interviews (Belotto, 2018). To analyze the data, we adopted the analysis technique recommended by Creswell (2018), which involved several general phases: organizing the data, conducting an initial review, coding, developing descriptions from the codes, and performing thematic analysis. In thematic data analysis, the process started with familiarizing ourselves with the data and its context. Next, comprehensive data coding was conducted to manage data reduction and address complexities. The third step involved identifying key internal themes relevant to the study. These themes were examined from two perspectives: one, about the coded data, and the second compared with the full data set, at the fifth step, themes were named and described for the final analysis. In the final step, reports were created based on the finalized themes.

#### 5. Findings

A significant aspect of our findings was the convergence of concerns about challenges faced by female students in accessing higher education by the study participants. Our analysis revealed that female students shared common concerns across several themes, which readily grouped into the broader categories of “sociocultural” and “economic” challenges. Therefore, we decided to present our findings within these two broad categories. In socio-cultural challenges, we discuss the social factors that affect females' higher education: like family expectations and support, safety, security and mobility, gender norms and rule model and early marriages and childbearing. While in economic challenges we will discuss economic challenges like financial constraints, poverty, income disparities and government and educational institutions' support.

##### 5.1 Socio-cultural challenges



Societal norms in rural areas greatly influence female students' educational opportunities, pressuring them to conform to traditional roles and limiting access to higher education. Social cultural challenges include security and mobility, early marriages and childbearing, cultural norms and expectations.

Participant P3 reported that

"Community expectations significantly shape my father's choice about my education, and I frequently feel pressure to conform to societal norms and standards. There is significant pressure on me to obey traditional gender roles. Pursuing further education to challenge these norms can provoke a social backlash and strained relationships within the community"

Participant P7 argued that

"Despite my strong desire to continue my education, my family's expectations often come first. They believe that my primary role should be at home, and their lack of support for my academic ambitions is a constant hurdle".



Participant 11 reported that

"My education receives less attention compared to my brothers' because my father supports their educational pursuits more. There is a belief that the family will benefit more from their son's education."

Despite the declaration of gender equality in Pakistani legislation and the constitution, the reality in District Hangu is starkly different. Cultural and social norms favoring males reinforce their dominance, leaving females without prominent role models who have achieved success in higher studies and employment. This entrenched hierarchical perspective perpetuates the belief in female inferiority across various aspects of district Hangu culture.

P8 stated that

"Few visible role models are available for girls, who are commonly seen as inferior but have succeeded in both higher education and employment. The lack of inspiring examples makes it difficult to envision such a path. There is significant pressure to conform to traditional gender stereotypes. Pursuing higher education against these norms can lead to social backlash and harm community relationships" (P10).

Participant P6 shared her thoughts

"Societal conventions may deter girls from entering certain educational or professional fields. Cultural stereotypes about specific fields restrict their opportunities and undermine their aspirations for a higher study degree.

Participant P10 reported that

"It is troubling that educational institutions lack strong anti-harassment policies. This can deter female students from pursuing higher education due to their concerns about harassment."

In addition, access to higher education female students also face security risks, while travelling to their institutions.

Participant P9 reported that

"My academic opportunities are constrained given the safety concerns in my community, specifically, linked to travelling to remote areas for higher studies which make it difficult for my family to support me for higher education."

P13 argued that

"Safety risks make accessing educational facilities more challenging. Even public transportation feels unsafe for female students, which makes reaching college a stressful experience and fear of harassment and lack of safe facilities make it difficult to pursue higher education."

A persistent concern is the threat of harassment and discrimination, particularly while travelling. This affects my confidence and motivation to pursue my studies in the environments where such risks are prevalent." (P11)

P1 argued that

"There is an underlying expectation that, as an elder daughter, my main responsibility is to marry and manage the household. Seeking higher education is viewed as straying from these traditional norms".

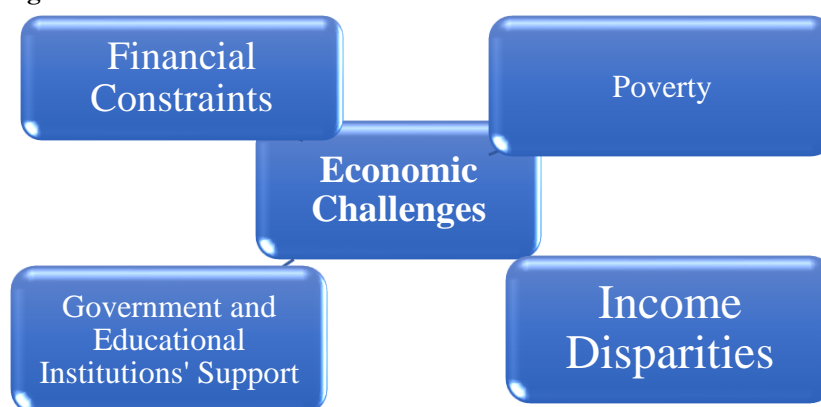
P5 reported that

"Society expects Female's to prioritize marriage over education. This expectation pressures females to prioritize marriage and family responsibilities over their educational and career goals, limiting their opportunities for personal growth and self-empowerment"

P11 further explained that

"As an eldest daughter, there is an implicit belief that my primary duty is to marry and handle household responsibilities. Attending higher studies is considered to diverge from these conventional expectations"

## 5.2 Economic Challenges



Financial restrictions encompass the issue of girls having access to fewer resources, reflecting a common tendency to prioritize supporting boys' education over that of daughters when financial challenges arise.

Participant P7 argued that

"My father is the only income provider in our family, His financial limitations make it difficult to afford my higher education expenses. That's why with our limited resources, my parents prioritize basic needs over my educational expenses." My family has limited resources, they cannot afford my further education. The costs of tuition, books, and other essentials are difficult to cover due to financial constraints." (P2)

P9 reported that

"My family values education, but we have limited financial resources. Balancing my pursuit of higher education with covering basic necessities is challenging, as those needs often take precedence."

P4 reported that

"The lack of government support for female's education impacts the availability of financial aid and scholarships, creating a substantial financial barrier that hinders many girls from pursuing higher education."

P11 explained about her father's income that

"My father is the only income source for our family, and his financial constraints make it challenging to afford my higher education. Due to our limited resources, my family prioritize basic needs over my educational expenses."

Participant P12 discussed her wish that

"Although I wish to attend university, my family's economic circumstances are a major obstacle. We are unable to afford the tuition fee, books, and other associated expenses."

The research participants also highlighted the importance of government and educational institutions in supporting girls from district Hangu in accessing higher education.

P1 argued that

"There is a lack of government and institutional support for females for seeking higher studies. We need inclusive programs, scholarships and mentorship opportunities to address economic barriers".

P3 maintained that

"Even when gender-inclusive policies are in place, they are often poorly implemented, leading to gaps in support services and equal opportunities for female students."

P5 reported that

"It is troubling that educational institutions lack strong anti-harassment policies. This can deter female students from pursuing higher education due to their concerns about harassment."

P11 argued that

"Institutions and the government need to work on increasing public awareness of educational opportunities. Many female students are unaware of the programs or scholarships available to support them in pursuing higher education."

P8 asserted that

"Growing up in poverty means every decision is about survival. Higher education becomes a luxury that many girls in rural areas can't afford, no matter how much they desire it."

P13 discussed that

"It's hard to think about higher education when we don't even have enough money for daily expenses. For many girls in our community, going to college feels like an impossible dream due to the financial burden."

P15 further explained that

"Coming from a rural area, the financial struggles are constant. Even when we want to pursue higher education, the lack of money for necessities like tuition and books often holds us back."

Significant barriers to higher education exist for girls from low-income households due to financial constraints. These girls often lack the funds needed for tuition, books, living expenses, and travel costs associated with attending college. Pursuing higher education also means sacrificing the potential income from a full-time job, which many low-income women cannot afford to do. As a result, they may choose to enter the workforce earlier to support their families.

P10 argued that

"Although I am eager to attend college, my family's financial situation is a major obstacle. We can't afford the expenses for tuition, books, and other fees."

P7 reported that

"I have been searching for scholarships to fund my education, but there's a lot of competition, and many are need-based. Unfortunately, my family's income often slightly exceeds the eligibility criteria, making me ineligible for financial aid."

P2 stated that

"While student loans are an option, the thought of accumulating significant debt is daunting. I'm hesitant to take on such a financial burden because I'm uncertain about finding a well-paying job after graduation".

## 6. Conclusions and implications

This paper has investigated the challenges that hinder female higher education. In rural areas of Pakistan, female students encounter numerous obstacles which are interconnected. The study found that traditional social and cultural norms and economic barriers play a significant role in shaping educational opportunities for girls in rural areas of district Hangu. Gender norms and narrow-minded customs often prioritize boys' education over girls', while a patriarchal family structure, where fathers heavily influence their daughters' educational opportunities, complicates matters further. Additionally, Financial constraints in middle-income families, restricted opportunities for girls, safety issues, and cultural norms discouraging female students from traveling alone intensify these challenges. The current study highlights that social and cultural obstacles, such as security challenges and sexual harassment, security risks, and fear of harassment are key barriers for girls seeking higher education. Distance from institutions is also significant obstacle to female students' access to higher education. This study also highlights additional challenges such as family norms, lack of support, and early marriages. These early marriages often driven by traditional family expectations, create substantial obstacles for female students. In such societal contexts, education is frequently deemed secondary to preparing for marriage and motherhood, resulting in limited family support for girls pursuing higher education. The study's findings highlight that inadequate institutional and governmental support severely restricts female educational opportunities, including insufficient educational facilities and limited financial aid. The lack of institutions is a significant barrier preventing female students from pursuing higher education.

This study also has implications for policy planners, administrators, and HEC for promoting higher studies for female students. Higher education can strengthen women's empowerment. It gives young girls the opportunity to become role models and empowers talented women to lead society. Additionally, it influences women's decision-making. Women with more education are better equipped to control their lives than illiterate women and possess greater authority over household resources. They obtain social recognition, which enables them to better understand their current situation. An educated woman sees the opportunity to attain a better job. She is able to comprehend how to make her circumstances better. Every young woman in rural areas of Pakistan must have an equal opportunity to pursue her higher education; therefore, these challenges must be addressed. Arranging workshops for parents and community leaders can emphasize the benefits of higher studies for females, showcasing successful women from similar backgrounds to inspire students and their families. Developing safe and inexpensive transportation options and advocating for financial aid and scholarships for students is crucial. The government may provide financial incentives to families while enacting supportive policies, such as lowering fees and supplying free textbooks for girls. Public awareness initiatives on social media, television, and local radio may reinforce the significance of higher studies for females. This awareness may engage parents, regional authorities, and academic professionals in discussions and workshops to strengthen support for female education. Furthermore, creating programs in local educational institutions in partnership with non-governmental organizations can inspire and prepare female students for higher education opportunities.

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