



**EDUCATING GIRLS:**  
**INCREASING RETENTION**  
**FOR GREATER IMPACT**

**Policy Note**



## The Problem

**As many as 70 per cent of girls enrolled in Katchi dropout at some stage and do not complete their secondary education.**

Pakistan now has more young people that it has ever had, and this is forecasted to continue to increase until at least 2050<sup>1</sup>. A large proportion of this young population comprises of school-age children who are unable to complete their school education. Some estimates suggest that over 22 million children aged 5-16 years are not in school. Among these, 54 per cent are girls and 46 per cent are boys<sup>2</sup>. As many as 70 per cent of girls enrolled in Katchi dropout at some stage and do not complete their secondary education. The risk of girls dropping out of formal education substantially increases during the transition from primary to secondary school.

Education is vital for combating inequality and poverty as it can drive economic stability, create livelihood opportunities, and build human capital<sup>3</sup>. Apart from the economic case of education, every child has a right to a basic education as per Article 25-A. Pakistani girls do not get an equal opportunity to realise this right and struggle to complete a basic education due to many factors: social norms, school distance, lack of transport facilities, inability to cover out-of-pocket expenses, child marriages, etc. Furthermore, supply-side factors such as lack of qualified teachers and learning materials also play an important role in suppressing the demand for education.

This note presents evidence on the scale at which girls drop out from education and discusses demand as well as supply-side factors behind this issue. At the end, we make practice recommendations to increase retention of girls in the education system.

## Dropping Out: Dynamics of the Transition from Katchi to Secondary Education

Traditionally, focus of the provincial governments in Pakistan has been on improving access to primary education. Over the years, significant progress has been made, and now more girls are enrolled in primary schools and are learning better. However, the transition from primary to secondary schooling continues to be a point where most girls tend to drop out of the education system.

As the chart below shows, around 70 per cent of girls drop out of their academic journey between Katchi to Grade 10. This percentage varies across provinces. For example, 65 per cent of the girls enrolled in Katchi drop out of school before completing secondary education in Punjab. The problem is much bigger in Balochistan where 86 per cent of girls cannot reach grade 10. For Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh, the dropout rates between Katchi and grade 10 are as high as 74 per cent and 76 per cent, respectively<sup>4</sup>. Provincial charts are shown separately below.



### Drop outs from Katchi to Secondary

Pakistan	<b>70%</b>
Punjab	<b>65%</b>
Balochistan	<b>86%</b>
KPK	<b>74%</b>
Sindh	<b>76%</b>

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF (2020), *Generation Unlimited: Investing in Pakistan's Young People*.

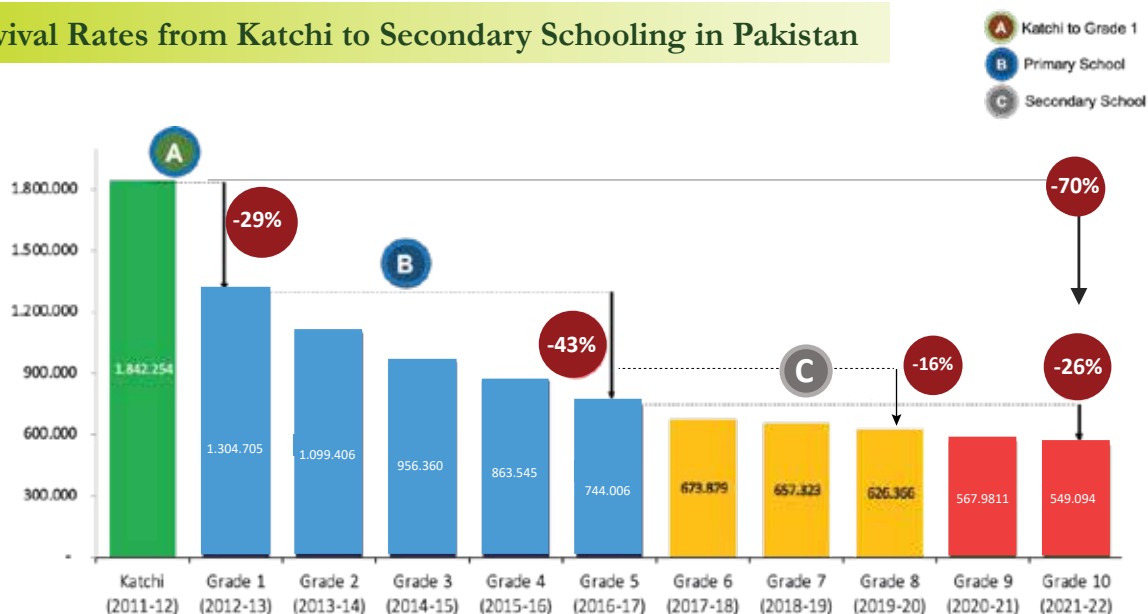
<sup>2</sup> Regional disparities are high. In Balochistan, for example, 78 percent of girls are out of school.

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2023). *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*.

<sup>4</sup> Analysis is based on enrolment data from the Pakistan Education Statistics reports for different years.

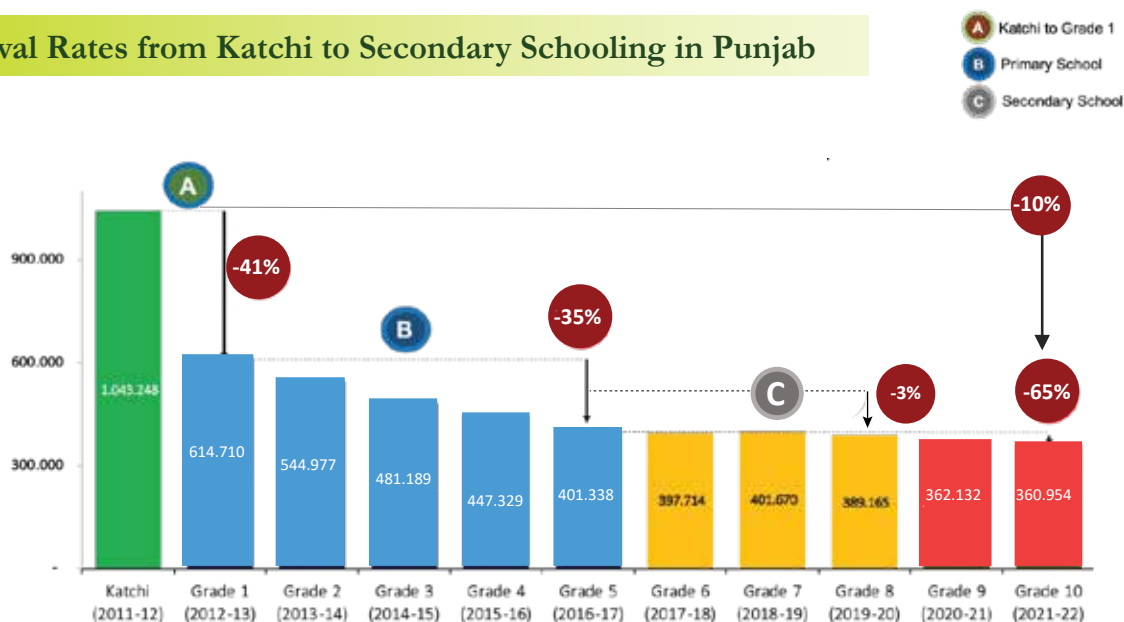
# Survival Rates

## Survival Rates from Katchi to Secondary Schooling in Pakistan



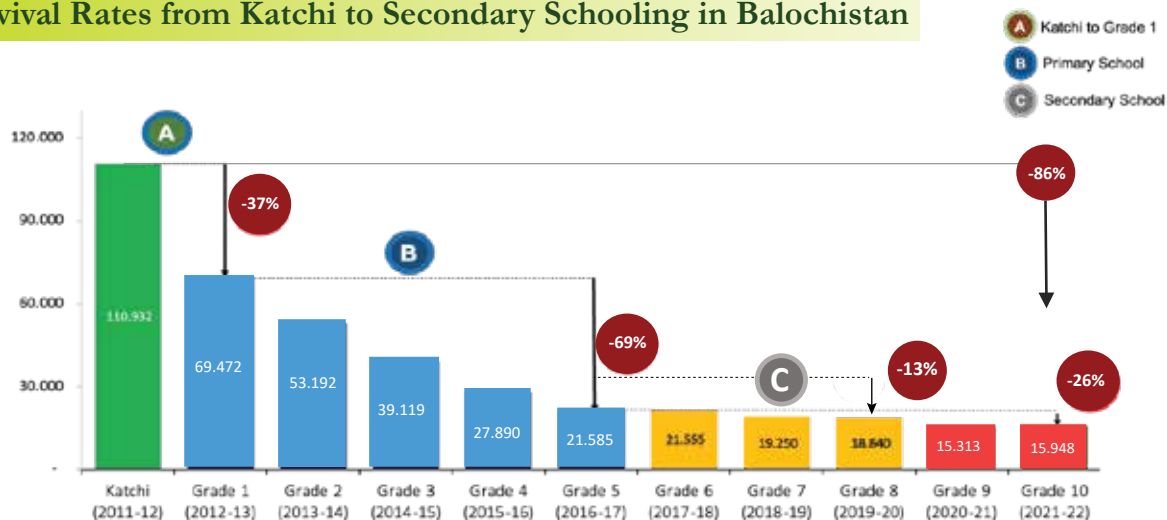
Source: Pakistan Education Statistics (PES)

## Survival Rates from Katchi to Secondary Schooling in Punjab



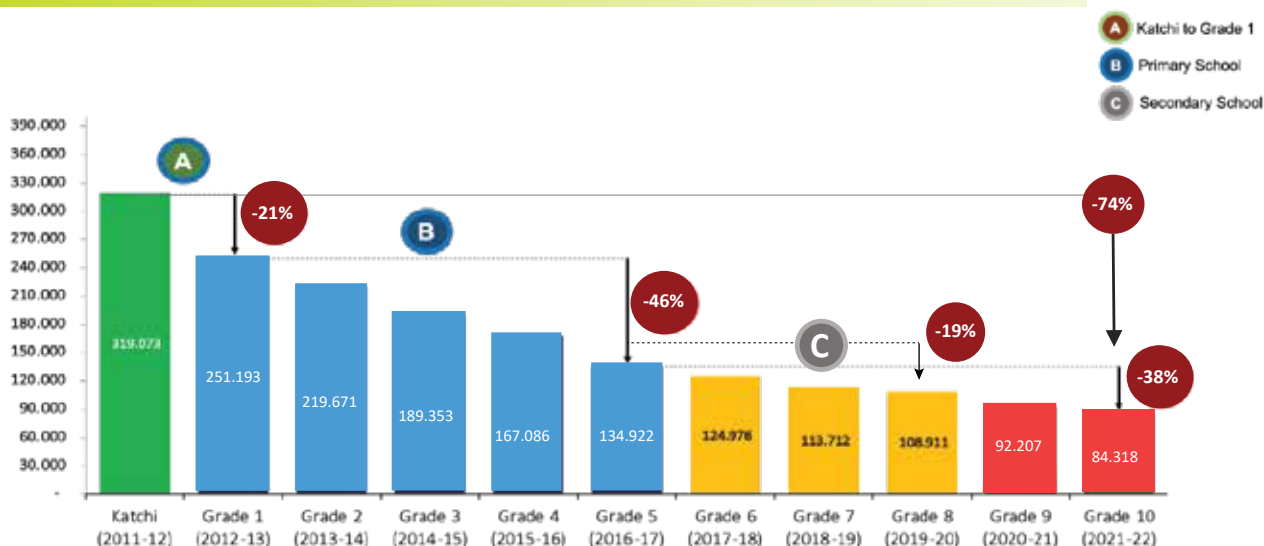
Source: Pakistan Education Statistics (PES)

## Survival Rates from Katchi to Secondary Schooling in Balochistan



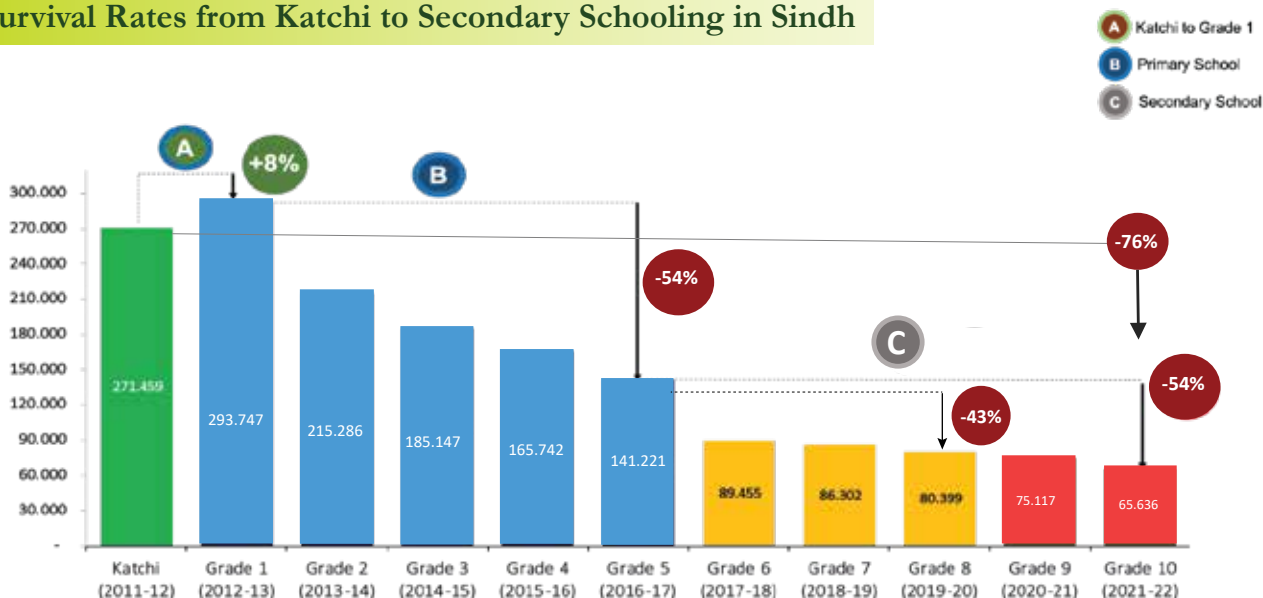
Source: Pakistan Education Statistics (PES)

## Survival Rates from Katchi to Secondary Schooling in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa



Source: Pakistan Education Statistics (PES)

## Survival Rates from Katchi to Secondary Schooling in Sindh



Source: Pakistan Education Statistics (PES)

## Why are girls dropping out of schools?

Many factors are responsible for the low transition and retention levels in Pakistan. Reasons such as a lack of middle and high schools for girls, lack of school transportation, poor quality of classroom instruction, lack of career prospects, and poor skills development conspire with demand-side challenges such as early marriages, fear of insecurity and inability of parents to meet out-of-pocket expenses<sup>5</sup> to contribute to low retention rates.

<sup>5</sup> These issues are documented in UNICEF (2013); Werunga, Musera & Sindabi (2011); Lloyd et. al. (2005); Alderman & King (1998).

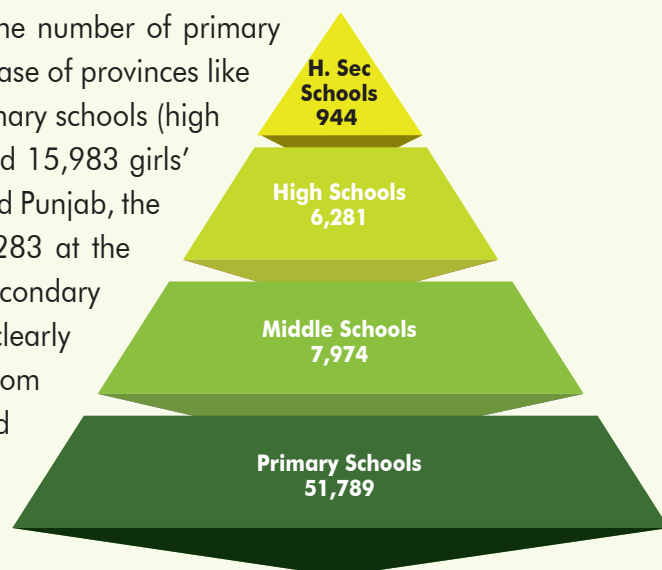
## These challenges are examined in more detail below:

### Demand-side Factors

- › Discriminatory social and gender norms often discourage girls from continuing education. Attitudes regarding girls' education vary across communities and geography. While there is a growing acceptance of its value, girls are often removed from school when they must travel a distance to join a middle or high school or when households must cope with financial pressures, such as in the wake of emergencies. The practice of early marriage also holds girls back from attending school.
- › A "Son bias" is widespread, backed by strong economic incentives. Boys' education is prioritised as they are considered to be the breadwinners of their families, while girls are seen as homemakers. In many rural settings, girls are often kept home to do unpaid housework or be the default caretakers of younger siblings.
- › Girls also face harassment on the way to school. There is a very strong perception among parents that girls are not safe in public spaces, transportation, and near schools. This undermines parents' confidence in sending their girls to school.
- › Financial constraints also bar parents from enrolling their girls in schools. Since the distance to schools increases at post-primary levels, they have to bear additional costs for transportation for their children. In the later part of secondary schooling, parents also incur tuition costs, in addition to the costs of transportation, and other materials such as uniforms, stationery, etc. Girls in poor families are 22 percentage points less likely to attend school than boys<sup>6</sup>.

### Supply-side Factors

› There are fewer secondary schools as compared to the number of primary schools in Pakistan. This issue is more pronounced in the case of provinces like Balochistan and Sindh, where only 452 and 709 post-primary schools (high and higher secondary schools) for girls exist for 3,587 and 15,983 girls' primary schools, respectively<sup>7</sup>. For Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, the number of girls' schools declines from 10,705 and 19,283 at the primary level to 1,199 and 4,277 high and higher secondary schools, respectively. This pyramid-type school structure clearly shows the disadvantage girls face as they transition from primary to secondary schooling. To access middle and secondary schools, girls must travel long distances. In many cases, transport facilities are either not available, or they are beyond parents' financial reach.



The School Pyramid of Pakistan (Number of girls schools in Pakistan)

- › There are also constraining social perceptions about the relevance of education for girls. This perception stems from the poor quality of education, unavailability of qualified female teachers in far-flung areas, as well as a lack of focus on skills. The absence of a dedicated focus on developing competencies and skills, such as financial and entrepreneurship skills, which could contribute towards employability is a major factor affecting retention.
- › The availability of school facilities that matter for menstrual hygiene and the safety of girls are highly important considerations for parents in making decisions. Among these, facilities such as functional toilets, drinking water and boundary walls are the most important ones. All provinces have made good progress in these areas however these issues still persist in some areas.

<sup>6</sup> Juan Baron, May Bend (2023, March 5). Facing the Challenges of Girls' Education in Pakistan. *World Bank Blogs*. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/facing-challenges-girls-education-pakistan>

<sup>7</sup> PIE, 2022. *Pakistan Education Statistics Report, 2020-21*. Pakistan Institute of Education, Islamabad.

## What can we learn from various initiatives?

Based on a systematic review of educational interventions, Evans & Yuan (2022) report interesting and relevant findings on using targeted versus not-targeted educational interventions and their impact on improving girls' retention at the secondary level. They found that interventions aimed at reducing the cost of schooling are the single most effective form of educational intervention to bring and keep girls in schools, including at the post-primary level. These interventions include both conditional and unconditional cash transfers.

Interventions that reduce the cost of travel to school – either through providing safe transport facilities or by building village or community schools – effectively increase girls' transition from primary to higher education levels. While providing public transport or building new schools in far-flung rural or peri-urban areas could be a long-term investment that governments need to consider, an alternate option is to involve local governments, school communities, and parents to innovate and plan cost-effective and group transport arrangements for children. This can be done in cost-sharing formats within the community or those available with the school councils.

The Sustainable Transition and Retention in Delivery Education (STRIDE) programme was one such initiative which had a dedicated focus on improving the transition of boys and girls from primary to secondary level. It used a combination of local planning, afternoon schooling in existing government buildings, provision of transport facilities, and community mobilisation to improve the transition and retention of children at post-primary levels. An independent evaluation<sup>8</sup> of the project showed that more children were in school, retention was higher, and the demand for girls' education increased in project locations. The pilot programme was run by the Institute of Social and Policy Sciences (I-SAPS). Based on the positive feedback from stakeholders, as documented in the independent evaluations, the solution was scaled up by the provincial governments of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa through government budgets. In addition, non-formal education (NFE) initiatives like the ongoing Alternate Learning Pathways (ALP) programme have been successful in providing better access to educational opportunities for out of school girls. Accelerated Education Programs (AEPs) are flexible, age-appropriate programmes that run in an accelerated time frame. The goal is to provide learners with a basic education that is certified and equivalent to the formal schooling system<sup>9</sup> (USAID ECCN, 2018). Similarly, in KP<sup>10</sup>, the goal of the ALPs is to allow boys and girls (who have been out of school) to complete their primary and elementary educations and hopefully move on to secondary school. In pursuance of achieving this goal, E&SED, KP has developed two different models for primary and elementary school children. At the primary level, the students who pursue ALP complete the primary level in 30 to 32 months as opposed to completing in 60 – 72 months in the traditional model. Whereas at the elementary level, the students who pursue ALP complete the primary level in 18 months as opposed to completing in 36 months in the traditional model. Upon the completion of their respective streams, they are mainstreamed at the Elementary and the High School level. This offers great promise for increasing the transition to higher grades for girls' education.

Different transport-focused initiatives have been implemented across the globe to alleviate distance barriers for school-going children. Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojna program is one such initiative implemented in Bihar, India. The programme focused on reducing gender gaps in secondary school enrolments by giving girls who have passed middle-level education money to purchase a bicycle. The programme showed great

<sup>8</sup> Coffey International (2019) – later called TetraTech

<sup>9</sup> Randall, J., O'Donnell, F., & Botha, S. (2020, February). Accelerated learning programs for out-of-school girls: The impact on student achievement and traditional school enrollment. In FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education (Vol. 6, No. 2).

<sup>10</sup> ALP initiatives in KP are being supported by GPE, Unicef, World Bank's ASPIRE and KP-HCIP. Please also see: UNICEF (2022). Formative Evaluation of Provincial ALP Models and Centres.

potential as girls' age-appropriate enrolment in secondary schools increased by 30 per cent in just one year and reduced the gender gap in age-appropriate secondary school enrolment by 40 per cent<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, World Relief, in collaboration with the Zambia Ministry of Education, implemented the Bicycles for Educational Empowerment programme in 2012. The objective of this initiative was to make better educational and development opportunities accessible for marginalised students through the provision of bicycles. Estimates based on different surveys show an increase of 27 per cent in students' attendance and 59 per cent in their academic performance<sup>12</sup> due to this programme.

The provincial governments of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab have provided stipends to girls enrolled in primary and secondary schools for over a decade. A previous study evaluated the impact of such cash incentives on completion and transition rates. According to Chaudhury & Parajuli (2010), the Female School Stipend Programme in Punjab increased middle school enrollment for girls by ten percentage points in just two years, increased completion rates by 4.5 percent, and saw better transition rates to high school. Similarly, cash transfer programmes across the globe have demonstrated positive impacts on school attendance and enrollment. Brazil's Bolsa Escola programme, Ecuador's Bono de Desarrollo programme, Turkiye's cash transfer programme, Bangladesh's Reaching Out of School Children Programme and Pakistan's Benazir Income Support Programme have all demonstrated significant impacts on the transition and retention of girls (Hussain & Schech, 2021).

The provincial governments in Pakistan have deployed Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) to leverage the private sector for improving access and learning outcomes. PPPs have been used by the Education Foundations in all the provinces and have demonstrated an overwhelming potential to support the government's efforts in expanding equitable access to quality education cost-effectively (I-SAPS, 2020, 2022).

Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa governments have also meaningfully engaged with the private sector through voucher schemes. These vouchers are provided to parents for enrolling their children in approved and nearby private schools. These vouchers also demonstrate improved enrolment for girls, as highlighted by Carneiro, Das & Reis (2022). According to them, a USD13 voucher for each student would increase private school enrolment for girls from 19 percent to 40 percent.

There are instances where contract school arrangements have improved learning outcomes, increased enrolment, and led to better management practices (Education Partnerships Group, 2017). In Pakistan involving private organization for managing public schools for effective delivery of education services is one of the key policy instruments under PPPs. The key objective of involving management organizations is to improve the functioning of public schools for effective education service delivery. This instrument is currently being used in Sindh and Punjab under the Public Private Partnership Unit and the Punjab Education Initiatives Management Authority respectively. The KP government is well advanced in finalizing outsourcing modalities to private management organizations under PPPs. Crawford & Alam (2022) evaluated the Public School Support Programme (PSSP) in Punjab and found that the contract schools in the province demonstrated significant improvements in girls' enrolment.

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<sup>11</sup> Muralidharan & Prakash (2016).

<sup>12</sup> Gase et al. (2014).

# Recommendations

The following are key recommendations for improving the transition and retention of girls at post-primary levels, based on the insights and learnings gained from previous interventions, literature review, and after deliberating with the education stakeholders.

- › **Design retention policies and programmes tailored to each distinct group of out-of-school girls and the concerns of their parents:** For example, girls who have completed primary education and now must go to secondary schools may require special transport arrangements to reach the nearest secondary school. Community-managed transport or provision of bicycles could solve this issue.

Girls who are vulnerable to the practices of early marriage will benefit from targeted community-level behaviour change campaigns and conditional cash transfers. Parents who are concerned about the safety of girls should be supported to find local solutions to make the journey to school safer. Girls with disabilities are more likely to attend school if school infrastructure, teachers and learning materials are disability-inclusive.

- › **Expand the provision of middle and high schools through afternoon schools:** The narrow top of the schooling pyramid is a major cause of girls dropping out of education. There are not enough middle and secondary schools for intake of all girls who complete primary education. Construction of new schools is expensive and takes a long time. Where middle and high schools are not available or are at a large distance, existing primary schools can be used as the afternoon schools to serve the same objective at a much lower cost. There is already a successful model in Punjab<sup>13</sup> and can be replicated in other places.
- › **Focus on skills education for girls at the secondary level:** It is essential to make education more relevant for girls, especially as they transition into post-secondary levels. Subjects and/or content on financial literacy, employability, and entrepreneurship should be included in the curriculum, either as standalone subjects or through infusion. This will increase parental motivation and ensure that the girls have the relevant skills and tools to transition from school to work life if needed.
- › **Civil society should support the government to boost girls' transition and retention:** This will involve interventions to change behaviours against harmful social practices such as son bias, child marriages, sexual harassment and violence. On the supply-side, complementary non-formal education programmes for overaged girls, and monitoring of educational outcomes and progression for girls in their localities can provide powerful pathways for change.
- › **Development partners and donors should promote best practices and evidence on what works:** Bilateral and multilateral partners have made major contributions to improve the transition and retention of girls in Pakistan. The learnings from these programmes must be documented and used to design retention policies and programmes.

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<sup>13</sup> STRIDE and Insaaf Afternoon Schools



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