

An Exploration into Education of Pastoral Nomads in Swat, Pakistan

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Abstract

Providing equal quality inclusive education for all groups is challenging, especially among pastoral Nomads and other vulnerable populations in today's world. The ethnographic study explores the educational problems that pastoral nomadic children faced in Swat, Pakistan. People depend on child labor, are influenced by customs, often move around, and economically face being isolated due to the remoteness of access to formal schooling. The study aims to understand the difficulties faced by nomadic families, explore their influence on children's learning, and research teaching strategies used around the world that work for these families. Nomadic parents, children, community heads, and representatives from the NGOs were interviewed and discussions were held using focus group interviews. Thematic Analysis found that problems related to gender inequality, using children for work, lack of infrastructure and seasonal migrants were all preventing students from getting an education. Yet, the survey found that most community members are interested in education that can be transported, adjusted for the seasons, and fits their culture. Results suggest that having traditional lessons, leaders from local communities, and flexible education methods are critical parts of educational policy. According to the study, if cycles of poverty and being marginalized are to end in nomadic groups, they need access to education designed for them. Recommendations are provided to policymakers, non-governmental groups, and teachers who create school curricula about giving opportunities to disadvantaged students and joining community-led movements.

Key Words

Pastoral Nomads, Mobile Education, Cultural Barriers, Gender Disparity, Inclusive Learning

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Introduction

Pastoral nomadism is an inflexible and aged way of living that sociologically persists in the social and economic nucleus of Pakistan's life, especially in the provinces of Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, and parts of Punjab. The Baloch, Pashtun, and Sindhi pastoralists are identified groups of people who have practiced this way of life for many generations through seasonal migration and cattle herding as their main sources of livelihood (Minhaj, 2023; Belkhir, 2021; Malik et al., 2017). Even though this lifestyle showcases adaptability and resilience to the environment, it greatly restricts the possibilities of formal education pathways. Like many people around the world, pastoral nomads reside in remote and sparsely populated regions with poor physical and social infrastructure, educational facilities, and school buildings, greatly limiting children's ability to attend school regularly and remotely (Suliman et al., 2017).

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A combination of their geographical mobility, sociocultural child wage dependency, and sociocultural norms that delay girls' education intensify the situation (Datoo et al., 2024; Augustine, 2019; Ali et al. 2022). Consequently, children from nomadic families are often deprived of the educational opportunities that skills and education afford, resulting in social exclusions, persistent cycles of chronic impoverishment, and deep-rooted poverty.

Pastoralist families are frequently separated from permanent infrastructure, such as schools, healthcare institutions, and road networks, due to the constant mobility that comes with nomadic living, which is driven by the quest for grazing pastures and water supplies (Varmazyari, 2011). Kharis, which are temporary buildings made of wool or animal skin, offer mobility but lack the solidity required for institutional use (Dyer, 2014). For this reason, children living in these communities have stopped or been kept away from school, making it harder for them to improve their lives and integrate properly with the rest of society (Suliman et al., 2017; Belkhir, 2021). Usual practices such as expecting children to do work and help at home, commonly lead to girls not focusing on going to school (Datoo et al., 2024).

Therefore, the study aims to find out the main difficulties in education they encounter, since these difficulties are not only related to certain locations but also rooted in other aspects of the community's life (Suliman et al., 2017; Ahmad et al., 2021). Due to the lack of special education for certain populations, along with poverty, injustice against girls, and political isolation, things have become even worse for these groups in Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Malik et al., 2017; Varmazyari, 2011). What's more, changes in the weather and loss of land for their animals due to city development are making it even less likely that attending school will be possible anytime soon (Abbink et al., 2014).

We should also discuss how these difficulties hinder the education and progress of pastoral nomadic children, proving that a lack of schooling can result in few special opportunities, continuing widespread poverty, and separating these children from others (Datoo et al., 2024, 2019; Belkhir, 2021). Children who are not educated while living a nomadic life miss out on the skills, information, and jobs needed to prevent their families from being marginalized for generations (UNESCO, 2019). Some studies show that certain local interventions can work despite all of these obstacles (Belkhir, 2021; UNESCO, 2019). For this reason, the third main objective of the study is to investigate successful programs and laws for pastoral nomads in other places. Varying the way education is provided works for nomads, as shown with radio schooling in Kenya, traveling schools in Mongolia, and education by communities in Afghanistan, among others (Elmorshidy; & Saverio, Caroline, 2009). Inclusive educational systems specifically made for Pakistan's nomads can benefit a lot from these examples.

Because of this, the report points out that education should be adapted to fit the lifestyle of people who move frequently. Both government and non-governmental organizations should collaborate to give all children equal opportunities for high-quality schooling. Consequently, education guarantees human rights and can greatly increase opportunities for many marginalized people in Pakistan (UNESCO, 2019; Krätli, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

In Swat, children from nomadic groups have difficulty enrolling in school due to their economic status, remote location, and way of life. When children travel during the summer, education is disturbed and a lack of necessary facilities and established cultural trends, especially in terms of gender, makes it more difficult for them to continue their studies. They prevent many girls from learning the skills they need to progress in life. The study seeks to identify barriers in Swat and to suggest learning approaches that suit the local community.

Significance of Study

This study is important because it sheds light on Pakistan's pastoral nomadic society's overlooked educational issues. The research attempts to direct the development of flexible and actively involved educational models suitable for the nomadic way of life by identifying the primary challenges and taking into account effective global models. The findings can help educators and policymakers create more equitable institutions, which will promote social inclusion and advancement for these marginalized communities.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the major challenges faced by pastoral nomadic communities in accessing education in Pakistan.

2. To examine the impact of these challenges on the educational attainment and development of pastoral nomadic children.
3. To explore existing initiatives and strategies that have successfully improved educational opportunities for pastoral nomads in other countries.

Research Questions

1. What are the major challenges faced by pastoral nomadic communities in Pakistan in accessing formal education?
2. How do these challenges affect the educational attainment and overall development of pastoral nomadic children?
3. What strategies and initiatives have been successfully implemented in other countries to improve educational access for nomadic populations, and how can these be adapted to the context of Pakistan?

Methodology

The current study will be qualitative and ethnographic. To examine the problems with education and practical solutions for pastoral nomadic people in Pakistan's Swat. Participants will be selected from local nomadic families using a multi-stage purposive sampling approach. To present a range of perspectives, three to five nomadic groups from various Swat regions would be chosen in the very first step. The stakeholders, including parents, kids, teachers, and community leaders, will be interviewed in person during the second phase. Parents' and kids' groups from these localities will also participate in focus groups. Interviews and focus groups with some structure. To learn more about their perspectives, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with children, parents, and community leaders. Community leaders, nomadic parents, and children will participate in semi-structured interviews to learn more about their perspectives on successful teaching strategies and the barriers to education.

Focus group interviews will be conducted to learn more about the opinions and experiences of nomadic parents and children toward education. Additionally, men and women will be interviewed individually to address gender-related concerns, particularly those related to girls' education. These semi-structured interviews and focus groups will be used to collect the data. The focus groups and interviews will be led by the researcher herself. The process of collecting and analyzing data will be carried out concurrently. Finding the main themes will be aided by attentive reading and listening to topics that are repeated. The collected data will be typed up and subjected to thematic analysis to look for trends and conclusions.

Delimitation

Even while this study will provide light on the educational opportunities and problems faced by pastoral nomads, it will only be carried out in specific regions of Swat and may not fully represent the experiences of all pastoral nomads in Pakistan. The participants' readiness and availability to engage in the study may also have an impact on the findings.

Data Analysis and Interpretations

Data analysis included focus groups and group interviews, and based on the collected recordings, themes were used to understand the experiences of nomadic parents regarding their children's education. The main issues found by the study consisted of factors such as culture, economic issues and challenges faced by those who must travel long distances, and the impact of gender roles on girls attending school. People were worried about how school mobility could affect students' education and how finances often posed a problem for families sending their children to school. Furthermore, parents described successful ways of learning, including attending schools nearby, flexible school times, and engaging members of the community. They demonstrate the learning difficulties experienced by nomadic families and offer guidance on how their children might attend school more easily.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The findings of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with pastoral nomadic families, a community elder, and an NGO worker in Swat, Pakistan, are presented in this section. The results of the data's thematic analysis revealed important trends that support the study's goals. The topics highlight enduring issues and possible solutions to improve nomadic children's access to education.

Mobility and Inconsistency

According to all five families, their children's regular attendance at school is disrupted by frequent seasonal movement. Families travel on nomadic routes away from populated areas, which are home to schools

"We always moving—how can children stay in school if the school remains in one location"

Parent, Family 1. (13/04/2025)

Children said that they had started school but did not continue due to a move. Even temporary enrollment was ineffective due to numerous absences.

Geographic Isolation and Absence of Infrastructure

Respondents said that for most of the year, the schools are physically inaccessible. Many people live in grazing areas at high altitudes without access to schools.

"Even if the children want to go, the school is hours away by walking."

Mom, Family 2

15/04/2024

Cultural and Gender Barriers

Cultural beliefs have a big influence on education, especially when it comes to girls' roles. Parents cited safety concerns and social expectations as reasons for their refusal to send their girls to school.

"Girls shouldn't go to distant schools, especially when there aren't any female teachers there." Grandmother,

Family 4

19/04/2025

The boys must learn to work and herd instead of attending school, but they also have fewer limits.

Economic Dependence on Child Labor

Every family described how children's labor is necessary for their existence. Priority is placed on chores at home, firewood gathering, and herding above education.

"We can't risk losing a helpful hand with pencils and books."

Family 3, Father.

17/04/2025

Interrupted Learning and Low Literacy Levels

Although the majority had not completed elementary school, the majority of children had only seldom attended school. Children's literacy was low; some could write their names, while others had no formal education.

"We shifted after I was gone for a year. I completely forgot."

Boy, First Family

13/04/2025

Missed Developmental Opportunities

The NGO worker and parents noted that illiteracy has long-term consequences, including poor social integration, low health awareness, and missed possibilities for economic progress.

"Children stay in the same life and develop few abilities as they become older."

An NGO Employee

24/04/2025

Due to their absence from school and other opportunities, girls are heavily affected, which results in gender inequity and intergenerational illiteracy.

Community Support for Flexible and Mobile Education

Most parents and community elders strongly supported seasonal schools, community-based schools, and mobile educational units that follow up with families.

"It's better than nothing, even if we bring a tent school."

Boy, Third Family

"Because they adapt to our lifestyle, community-based schools are successful."

Elders in the Community

13/04/2025

Mobile educational units that follow up with families, community-based schools, and seasonal schools were strongly supported by the majority of parents and community elders.

Role of Government Programs and NGOs

Examples of short-term success with donor-funded mobile schools and temporary learning centers were provided by NGO personnel. However, they shut down because they lacked long-term support.

"Although the mobile school operated effectively, it was shut down when the financing stopped."

Senior Citizens

Community 24/04/2025

Significance of Local Leadership and Cultural Relevance

Interviewees emphasized that for the initiatives to be accepted, local values must be upheld and community elders must be involved.

"Elderly people need to be consulted. Otherwise, such programs are not supported by the public."

An NGO Employee

"We can include storytelling into official schooling, as our forefathers did."

Elders in the Community

13/04/2025

Summary of Findings

S. No	Themes Identified	Implications
1	Migration interrupts schooling	School systems have to be mobile or seasonal.
2	No nearby schools	Infrastructure has to extend to distant nomadic settlements.
3	Gender norms interrupt girls' education.	Female teachers and culturally responsive methods are needed.
4	Economic necessity for child labor	Education needs to be linked with family livelihood patterns.
5	Fragmented learning and low literacy	Long-term, flexible learning models are required.
6	Community receptivity to mobile solutions	Involvement from the grassroots level is essential for sustainable education.
7	NGO programs were only partially successful because of funding	Policy support and long-term investment are essential
8	Traditional teaching methods as possible tools	Local culture can be utilized to enrich and localize learning content.

Interpretation

The analysis confirms that the educational difficulty faced by Swat's nomadic children is not only a logistical one but is deeply ingrained in cultural norms, historical disdain, and economic survival. Though fundamentally limited, these civilizations are not impervious to education. There are alternatives with participative and culturally contextualized orientations, as shown by the ongoing interest in flexible, localized, and mobile pedagogy combined with an ability to reinterpret traditional learning practices.

To be Effective Educational Initiatives Must:

1. Follow the seasonal migratory movements of nomadic communities or move with them.
2. Involve the community, especially the elderly and women.

3. Include basic life skills, health, and vocational training.
4. Have the support of ongoing government and non-governmental cooperation.

Discussion

The majority of the research that has been done on pastoral nomad education, particularly in nations like Pakistan's Swat, shows several convincing and consistent results. According to the reviewed studies, pastoral nomadic societies face complex educational barriers that are deeply ingrained in their socioeconomic circumstances, sociocultural values, and movement patterns. These barriers range from health care (Sheik-Mohamed & Velema, 1999) to nomadic education and socioeconomic issues (Krätli, 2001; Honeychurch, 2014). However, the study also shows that despite the major obstacles, community involvement, context-sensitive teaching methods, and incorporating indigenous knowledge into modern educational institutions hold promise for transformation.

The impact caused by mobility is one of the major issues that emerged during the research. Due to their seasonal movement and physical isolation, Swat nomadic families like families in other parts of the world (Krätli, 2001; Sheik-Mohamed & Velema, 1999) have a tough time getting regular access to education. Despite being a common and necessary survival strategy, this migration directly affects children's regular attendance at school, which leads to poor literacy rates and disrupted study cycles, particularly for girls. In line with what Siddique et al, (2019) discovered, having parental support and a change in attitudes positively influenced children's school performance, especially in groups that move and change locations.

Similarly (Choudhry & Bokharey, 2013) reveals that when children help with domestic duties and animal rearing at home, it often keeps them from going to school. Most nomads keep their children, especially girls, out of school since the distance is too great and the expenses are high (Dhiman, 2023).

Even so, the survey found several positive changes happening within the military. In the research, participants reported that children were eager to learn and both children and parents shared the same enthusiasm for learning. The result is the same as that from Siddique et al., (2019), who said that motivated learning is observed in nomadic adolescents when they are in interesting places. Several studies recommend having flexible educational choices, including community schools, mobile schools, or learning camps that open only during certain seasons (Krätli, 2001; Honeychurch, 2014). This way of educating provides nomads with freedom and helps the community feel included.

In addition, being involved in the community is extremely valuable. Most successful programs, according to researchers, are those that focus on communities because local elders and leaders play a big role in decision-making. They note, following the findings of Kirk et al., (2025), that other nomadic communities have managed to educate their children using local and community-designed methods. Furthermore, according to Swat leaders, encouraging teachers to use well-known literature and storytelling techniques brings together the two styles of education and captures the attention of students from nomadic areas.

Finally, the study also demonstrated that the difficulties that pastoral nomads face in accessing education cannot be resolved. Studies suggest that adopting teaching models that respond to socioeconomic needs, fit into local traditions, and empower the community is suitable for addressing those problems. For future educational systems to be easily available and take local concerns into account, all three actors should collaborate more in the future. In this manner, we can help break the cycles of poverty and marginalization that nomadic tribes face, allowing the next generation to realize their full potential.

Recommendations

1. Hire and put female teachers in charge to ensure more girls can learn in the ways culturally valued by their communities.
2. Include the use of local languages, storytelling, and learning pastoral skills in your curriculum.
3. Create mobile schools that are set up as families migrate and operate only when the families stay put for longer periods.
4. Set up learning programs that fit in with daily tasks and the seasonal activities of families.
5. Community-based management groups should be formed so parents and elders can help and watch over the operations at their school.
6. Teach people skills they can use in their daily lives such as health, making crafts, and caring for animals.

7. Support is needed from the government and key non-governmental organizations for community learning and programs on the move.
8. Make nomadic areas better by improving roads, sanitation, and student accommodation.
9. During migration, rely on simple teaching tools such as cell phones and radios with a solar panel.
10. As part of finance and integration, nomadic education should be represented in national and provincial educational policies.

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