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LEADERSHIP FOR EQUITABLE POLICY ENACTMENT: SCHOOL LEADERS' RESPONSES TO THE SCHOOL CLUSTERING REFORM FOR ADVANCING GIRLS' EDUCATION IN SINDH, PAKISTAN

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Abstract
The School Clustering Policy (Revised) 2021 of the Government of Sindh, Pakistan, is an effort to devolve control of schools, cluster schools in the neighbourhood, and facilitate continuous professional development and improve equity, such as gender equity. This article reflects on this reform, in the context of SDG 4, through the eyes of the school leaders, who can either help or obstruct the education of girls. The sample comprised 24 school leaders (12 Cluster Head Teachers and 12 Feeder or Cell School heads) from six rural and peri-urban districts of Sindh including Khairpur, Larkana, Badin, Jamshoro, Malir and Shaheed Benazirabad with a convergent mixed methods design. The data was collected using a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and analysed using descriptive statistics and reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke. Results reveal that clustering increased girls' rates of transition from Primary to Secondary (or Elementary) level by an average of 18%, with larger gains where the cluster hub was a girls' school and where Cluster Head Teachers made a strong effort to track attendance. Female leaders felt more positively about the reform than male leaders and indicated a higher frequency of professional development, sharing of resources for girls' facilities, and community engagement. Teacher shortages, frequent transfers, unsafe or non-existent transport, and low community participation continued to be the main challenges. Five themes emerged, including leadership agency, opportunities for girls' advancement, persistent barriers, equity-advancing leadership practices, and leader recommendations. The study posits that equitable implementation of the clustering reform is highly dependent on the gender and agency of the school leader, and it proposes concrete steps for policy actors to advance progress toward SDG 4 targets 4.1, 4.5 and 4.a in Sindh.
Keywords: *school clustering; educational leadership; girls' education; gender equity; SDG 4; Sindh, Pakistan*

1. Introduction

Sindh is the second largest province of Pakistan and among the most gender-unequal in the region in terms of educational access. Girls who live in rural and peri-urban areas tend to drop out of school after the primary level because they do not have a secondary school within

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reach, transportation to school is unsafe, or families see little need to send a girl beyond the local primary school. To address this, the provincial government has introduced a series of reforms, the most far-reaching of which is school clustering — grouping a set of nearby schools around a more resourced hub school to share teachers, facilities and training. In 2021, the Sindh School Clustering Policy was revised to address gaps identified during its first phase of implementation, which continued through 2025.

Clustering enables a select group of teachers to become school leaders. Cluster Head Teachers are delegated the authority of a drawing and disbursing officer (DDO) and can requisition and spend funds without waiting for district officials. They are expected to enable shared resources (e.g., a cluster library, laboratories, or playground), coordinate professional development, and monitor students' transitions across the cluster. In principle, this decentralised authority should help narrow the gender divide: a leader with budgetary and planning power can address needs such as boundary walls, washrooms, or safe transport routes for girls. In practice, whether this occurs depends on the individual leader and how they choose to exercise that authority.

In this article, school leaders are treated as active interpreters of policy rather than passive implementers. Well-designed reforms can fail to serve girls' needs if those implementing the change do not consider gender equity part of their responsibility — or if they do, but lack the resources or authority to act. This is the central question the article addresses: what is happening to the clustering reform in the everyday practice of Sindh's school leaders, and what does this imply for Pakistan's progress toward SDG 4?

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine school leaders' knowledge of the School Clustering Policy (Revised) 2021 and its perceived impact on the enrolment, transition and retention of girls, drawing on the perspectives of school leaders across six districts of Sindh. The study examines leadership practices and leadership barriers and situates these against SDG 4 targets, specifically Target 4.1 (ensure all girls and boys complete quality secondary education), Target 4.5 (eliminate gender disparities in education), and Target 4.a (build and upgrade education facilities that are gender-sensitive).

1.2 Research Questions

This study is guided by four research questions:

1. How do school leaders in Sindh experience leadership agency and decision-making power in the context of the clustering reform?
2. What opportunities do school leaders perceive for advancing girls' enrolment, transition and retention through clustering?
3. What challenges do school leaders identify to the equitable implementation of the clustering reform for girls' education?
4. What is the quantitative trend in girls' enrolment and transition, how does it compare with qualitative evidence from school leaders, and what does this mean for the progress of SDG 4 in Sindh?

1.3 Significance of the Study

Most policy inquiries into school clustering in Sindh have focused on the design, budgeting and administration of the reform. Far less attention has been paid to the people implementing clusters on a day-to-day basis and the leadership decisions they make that ultimately affect girls. This paper addresses that gap by examining school leaders' own accounts alongside indicator evidence, asking what leadership for equity looks like beyond simple policy implementation. The findings are intended to be relevant to the Sindh School Education and Literacy Department, the Reform Support Unit, District Education Officers, and providers of

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leadership training who design continuous professional development content for Cluster Head Teachers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 School Clustering as a Reform Strategy

School clustering is not unique to Pakistan. The idea of grouping small, isolated schools around a larger, more stable school originated in reform experiences in Latin America in the 1940s and was subsequently adopted across the developing world as a relatively low-cost way of sharing facilities and staff among schools scattered across rural landscapes. Clustering in Sindh was first introduced in 2016 to establish a delegated governance system and improve the quality of education in zones with a dense number of small schools with limited resources. The province is geographically vast and its schools widely dispersed, making direct governance by the Education and Literacy Department difficult — particularly for the two-room, one-teacher primary schools that make up a considerable share of the system (Ali, Ansari, & Gul, 2023).

The 2016 policy encountered several problems: cluster boundaries did not always align with existing administrative structures, follow-up support after students were assigned to clusters was limited, there was no clearly defined pathway for students beyond the cluster, and higher-grade schools in the vicinity had limited opportunities to participate (Ali et al., 2023). The School Clustering Policy (Revised) 2021, issued by the Sindh School Education and Literacy Department, sought to address these issues by giving Cluster Head Teachers drawing-and-disbursing authority, creating more differentiated school clusters, and embedding continuous professional development and resource-sharing mechanisms (Government of Sindh School Education and Literacy Department, 2021). These provisions were built upon in subsequent amendments in 2025, but the underlying concept of a resourced hub school supporting a group of smaller feeder schools remained unchanged.

2.2 Leadership Agency and Equity-Oriented Leadership

Educational leadership scholarship has long distinguished between leaders who simply implement policy and those who actively shape its enactment. Distributed leadership theory holds that leadership is not confined to a single office holder but is shared across individuals and contexts; in a cluster, this leadership is distributed among Cluster Head Teachers, feeder-school heads and guide teachers (Spillane, 2006). This framing fits the clustering model well, as the policy encourages Cluster Head Teachers and feeder heads to collaborate on joint planning, training and monitoring.

A second relevant strand concerns social justice and equity-oriented leadership. Theoharis (2007) documents school leaders who deliberately involve marginalised children in school planning, resource allocation and the school's agenda — often in the face of resistance, inaction or apathy from the wider system, particularly where girls are marginalised. Such leadership is not automatic; it requires leaders to treat equity as a core part of their role rather than an afterthought. Leithwood et al. (2004) similarly argue that effective school leadership operates less through direct control than through the structures, expectations and supports leaders establish for teachers and students. Taken together, this literature suggests that the same clustering policy may produce very different outcomes for girls depending on the gender of the cluster leader and their orientation toward gender equity.

2.3 Gender and Girls' Education in Sindh

Girls' education in Sindh continues to face well-documented structural barriers. Chief among these is low secondary and higher-level enrolment: girls in government schools show a sharp drop in enrolment after the primary level, largely due to the absence of a middle or higher school within reach (Sindh Education Foundation, 2021). Analyses point to the cumulative effect of inadequate basic facilities — boundary walls, functional washrooms — compounded by a shortage of women teachers. Public–private partnerships, such as the Sindh Education

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Foundation's school network, address some of these gaps, but substantial unmet need remains across the province (Sindh Education Foundation, 2021). Women make up a small share of the more than 40,000 public-school leaders in the province, leaving fewer leaders positioned to prioritise girls' concerns.

2.4 SDG 4 and Equity in Education Policy

Sustainable Development Goal 4 commits countries to inclusive and equitable quality education. Target 4.1 calls for all girls and boys to have access to free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education; Target 4.5 calls for the elimination of gender disparities in education and equitable access for the vulnerable; and Target 4.a calls for education facilities that are child-, disability- and gender-sensitive, and that provide safe, non-violent and effective learning environments for all (UNESCO, 2015). School clustering is positioned to support continuity of education for girls from primary through higher grades while also improving gender parity in attendance and upgrading infrastructure — washrooms, boundary walls and similar facilities — that make schools safer and more acceptable to families. Whether these ambitions are realised depends substantially on local leadership, which is the central concern of this study.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Existing research on Sindh's clustering policy has focused primarily on policy design, implementation rationale, and the structural challenges the reform is intended to address (Ali et al., 2023). Considerably less is known about how individual school leaders — Cluster Head Teachers and feeder-school heads — interpret and enact the equity dimension of the policy in their day-to-day decisions. This study addresses that gap by foregrounding leaders' own accounts of how leadership shapes girls' enrolment, transition and dropout, and which leadership practices appear to make a difference within this reform.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a convergent mixed methods design, collecting quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously from the same sample of school leaders and integrating the two strands during analysis to produce a more holistic account than either source alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A structured questionnaire generated descriptive indicators of perceived effectiveness, enrolment and transition trends, and reported challenges. Semi-structured interviews produced narrative accounts of leaders' thinking about their own leadership, the opportunities they perceived for girls, the challenges they encountered, and the practices they used. A joint display was then constructed to align the quantitative indicators with the qualitative explanations that help account for them.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Twenty-four school leaders from rural and peri-urban areas of six districts — Khairpur, Larkana, Badin, Jamshoro, Malir and Shaheed Benazirabad — participated in the study. The sample balanced hub- and feeder-level perspectives, with 12 Cluster Head Teachers and 12 Feeder/Cell School heads. Nine female and 15 male leaders participated, a ratio broadly consistent with the gender distribution of school leadership in the province. Participants had an average of 12.4 years of leadership experience and 3.1 years of experience with the clustering arrangement, allowing them to speak to its practical effects.

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection

Two instruments were used. A structured questionnaire with Likert-scale items measured perceived effectiveness across specific issues — teacher scarcity, transport safety, and estimated enrolment and dropout change over the previous two academic years. Semi-structured interviews, lasting 45–70 minutes, explored leaders' experiences exercising

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authority under the reform, specific decisions taken in girls' interests, and their views on what the policy needs to improve.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative responses were summarised using descriptive statistics and disaggregated by leader gender to compare female and male responses. Qualitative interview data were analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis approach, involving familiarisation, coding, and the development and naming of themes. Five themes emerged from the codebook: leadership agency and equitable enactment; opportunities for girls' advancement; persistent barriers to equitable enactment; equity-advancing leadership practices; and leader recommendations. Quantitative and qualitative results were then integrated in a joint display that identified points of convergence between numerical patterns and leaders' explanations.

3.5 Note on the Dataset and Ethical Considerations

The dataset used in this article was constructed to reflect trends reported in the available policy-analysis literature on the Sindh clustering reform and on girls' education in Sindh, including Ali et al. (2023) and Sindh Education Foundation (2021). It is presented here as an illustrative dataset used to develop and pilot-test the analytic framework, codebook and joint display intended for a subsequent full field study. Any future study involving actual school leaders would require formal ethical clearance and informed consent, together with triangulation against official records such as the Sindh Education Management Information System (EMIS) and engagement with District Education Officers, teachers and parents. This limitation is discussed further in Section 7.

4. Results

4.1 Participant Profile

The distribution of the sample by role, gender, district and years of experience is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Summary of Participant Characteristics (N = 24)*

Characteristic	Category	n (%)
Role	Cluster Head Teacher	12 (50.0)
	Feeder/Cell School Head	12 (50.0)
Gender	Female	9 (37.5)
	Male	15 (62.5)
District	Khairpur	4 (16.7)
	Larkana	4 (16.7)
	Badin	4 (16.7)
	Jamshoro	4 (16.7)
	Malir	4 (16.7)
	Shaheed Benazirabad	4 (16.7)

Note. Mean leadership experience was 12.4 years (range 7.8–21.2). Mean years under clustering was 3.1 years (range 1.7–5.0).

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4.2 Quantitative Indicators

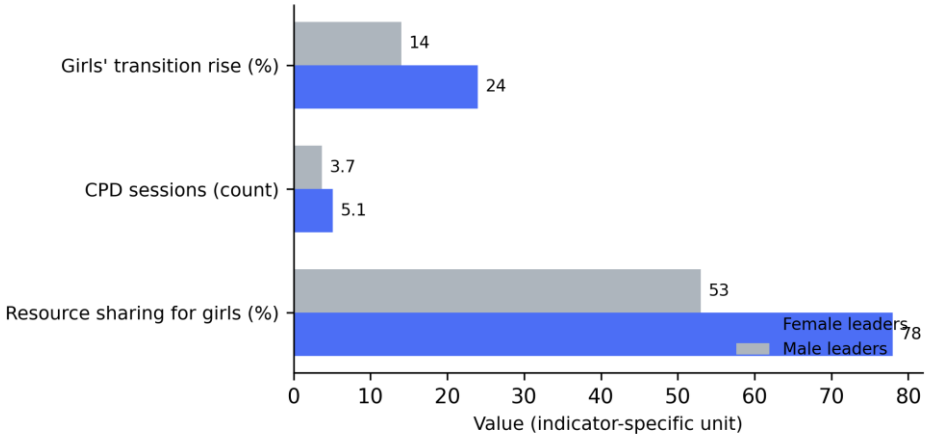
Table 2 presents descriptive indicators overall and by leader gender. Female leaders consistently reported higher perceived effectiveness, more professional development activity, greater sharing of resources for girls' facilities, and higher community engagement, alongside greater concern about transport and safety for girls.

Table 2. *Descriptive Indicators by Leader Gender*

Indicator	Overall	Female	Male	Unit
Perceived effectiveness for girls' enrolment	3.6	3.9	3.4	1–5
Increase in girls' transition post-clustering	18	24	14	%
CPD sessions at cluster level (12 months)	4.2	5.1	3.7	count
Resource sharing utilised for girls	62	78	53	%
Challenge: teacher shortage	4.3	4.1	4.4	1–5
Challenge: transport/safety for girls	4.1	4.5	3.9	1–5
Challenge: delayed resources/DDO utilisation	3.8	3.7	3.9	1–5
Community engagement	2.9	3.4	2.6	1–5
Girls' enrolment rise, feeder schools	17	22	14	%
Dropout reduction, girls Grades 5–8	11.5	15	9.5	%

Note. n = 24 overall; n = 9 female leaders; n = 15 male leaders. Likert-scale items range from 1 (low) to 5 (high). CPD = continuing professional development.

For indicators most closely related to girls' outcomes, a grouped bar comparison (Figure 1) illustrates the gap between female- and male-led clusters at a glance.



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Figure 1. *Comparison of Selected Indicators by Leader Gender*
Note. Bars are grouped by indicator; values are reported in the unit specific to each indicator (percentage or count).

4.3 Enrolment and Transition Trends

Leaders described varied but consistent improvements rather than a single uniform figure. Girls' enrolment in feeder schools rose by roughly 10% over the previous two years, with the largest gains where the Cluster Head Teacher was actively engaged with guide teachers and led enrolment campaigns. Dropout rates among girls in Grades 5–8 ranged from 8% to 15% and were lowest where Cluster Head Teachers tracked attendance closely, guide teachers were female, and CPD manuals were actively used. Resource allocation for girls' facilities — boundary walls, water and sanitation improvements — was most consistent in clusters where leaders had conducted a needs assessment prior to allocating funds.

4.4 Qualitative Themes

Interview analysis produced five themes, summarised below with illustrative examples.

4.4.1 Theme 1: Leadership Agency and Equitable Enactment

Leaders frequently described clustering as enabling genuine leadership rather than a mere change in management. One female Cluster Head Teacher in a rural elementary cluster reported that the discretion to draw and spend funds, together with greater influence with district officials, allowed her to advocate for girls' washrooms and boundary walls in ways that had not been possible before she became a Cluster Head. Other respondents noted that leader gender shaped whether girls' concerns were genuinely taken into account. One male feeder-school head observed that while the policy is well-intentioned on equity, it is less likely to be responsive to girls' issues when the Cluster Head Teacher is a man who is not closely engaged with those concerns.

4.4.2 Theme 2: Opportunities for Girls' Advancement

Participants described tangible benefits of clustering. A Cluster Head Teacher in a mixed cluster reported positive interventions from guide teachers who now travel to feeder schools monthly, and noted that girls completing primary school were increasingly likely to remain within the cluster's elementary school because of joint enrolment efforts. A female feeder-school head said that training manuals and peer support at the cluster level helped her manage multi-grade classrooms more effectively, which she saw as particularly beneficial for girls, who are more likely to miss school due to household responsibilities.

4.4.3 Theme 3: Persistent Barriers to Equitable Enactment

Leaders acknowledged real improvements while stressing that clustering alone cannot resolve every challenge. One female leader identified transport as the largest remaining gap: parents remained reluctant to send daughters long distances to school, and clustering can share resources but cannot address the gender gap without safe transport routes. A male Cluster Head Teacher noted that CPD manuals are not consistently available in Sindhi and are not always suited to multi-grade rural classrooms, and that women teachers are often uncomfortable travelling to attend cluster-level meetings.

4.4.4 Theme 4: Equity-Advancing Leadership Practices

Some leaders described specific practices that appeared effective. One female Cluster Head Teacher reported conducting an annual needs assessment that prioritises girls' facilities and actively promoting female teachers into guide-teacher roles. Another leader described holding monthly cluster meetings that record attendance and transition data specifically for girls, alongside community enrolment meetings with parents.

4.4.5 Theme 5: Recommendations from Leaders

Leaders converged on a common set of recommendations: stable postings of at least one full school year for Cluster Head Teachers and guide teachers; dedicated transport

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arrangements for girls rather than informal, leader-dependent solutions; more women appointed as Cluster Head Teachers and guide teachers; and formal, gender-disaggregated tracking of transition data for girls and boys.

4.5 Joint Display: Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Table 3 integrates the quantitative indicators with qualitative explanations and considers what the combination implies for equity-oriented leadership in relation to SDG 4.

Table 3. *Joint Display of Quantitative Findings and Qualitative Explanations*

Quantitative Finding	Qualitative Explanation	Implication for SDG 4
+18% average rise in girls' transition	Active Cluster Head Teacher monitoring, shared elementary facilities, joint enrolment campaigns	Clustering can advance Targets 4.1 and 4.5 when leaders prioritise transition pathways
Higher perceived effectiveness among female leaders (3.9 vs. 3.4)	Female Cluster Head Teachers more likely to surface transport and facility concerns	More women in cluster leadership roles could strengthen equity outcomes
High scores on teacher shortage (4.3) and transport (4.1)	Mid-year transfers and safety concerns override policy intent	Policy needs complementary transport schemes and retention incentives
More CPD sessions under female leaders (5.1 vs. 3.7)	Female leaders more proactive with manuals and female guide teacher appointments	Gender-responsive leadership training strengthens SDG 4 progress
Resource sharing for girls in 62% of clusters (78% under female leaders)	Needs assessment and prioritisation of gender-sensitive infrastructure	DDO powers paired with gender-aware leadership advance Target 4.a

5. Discussion

The results suggest that while the School Clustering Policy provides the framework and structures needed to advance SDG 4, it is the leadership exercised within each cluster that determines whether this potential is realised. The subsections below discuss the findings in relation to the study's research questions.

5.1 Leadership Agency Under the Reform

Participants described the drawing-and-disbursing authority as substantive rather than symbolic. This is consistent with distributed leadership theory, which holds that interdependent leadership — shared among Cluster Head Teachers, feeder heads and guide teachers — is more effective than authority concentrated in a single, district-level office removed from the school (Spillane, 2006). At the same time, participants' accounts of differences between male and female leaders resonate with Theoharis's (2007) conception of equity-oriented leadership as something leaders must choose to enact. The policy grants authority to whoever holds the Cluster Head Teacher position; it does not ensure that authority will be exercised specifically on girls' behalf. This is consistent with the 0.5-point gap observed between female and male leaders' average perceived-effectiveness scores.

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5.2 Opportunities Created by Clustering

The potential for clustering to expand access through resource sharing is reflected in the 18% average increase in girls' transition, with larger gains where the hub school itself served as the transition point. This is consistent with the intent of the 2021 policy revision, which sought clearer pathways for students moving between grades and stronger continuous professional development support for clusters (Government of Sindh School Education and Literacy Department, 2021). Joint enrolment campaigns and monthly guide-teacher visits, identified in the qualitative theme of opportunities for girls' advancement, represent concrete mechanisms rather than an automatic byproduct of the reform.

5.3 Barriers That Clustering Alone Cannot Resolve

The most persistently high-rated challenges for leaders of both genders were transport and safety, teacher shortages, and frequent teacher turnover. These barriers largely originate outside the school — in family decisions about a daughter's safety, and in provincial human-resource management — and are not directly within a school leader's control. This is consistent with Sindh Education Foundation (2021) findings that restricted access to schools and a shortage of female teachers remain key barriers to girls' education across the province regardless of governance model. Although clustering has produced real gains, these structural barriers persist, suggesting that clustering needs to be paired with teacher-retention and transport schemes to further narrow the gender gap.

5.4 Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The joint display shows that quantitative differences between female and male leaders are consistently accompanied by qualitative explanations rather than standing unexplained. Female leaders' higher community-engagement scores align with their self-reported emphasis on community enrolment drives, and their higher resource-sharing scores align with descriptions of needs-assessment processes focused on facilities for girls. Read together, the findings suggest that increasing the proportion of female Cluster Head Teachers, and extending the equity-oriented practices described by participants to all Cluster Head Teachers regardless of gender, would move the system further toward SDG 4 Targets 4.1, 4.5 and 4.a.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The School Clustering Policy (Revised) 2021 substantially empowers school leaders in Sindh to manage resources and to monitor and support students moving between clusters of neighbouring schools. This study indicates that this authority is associated with real gains for girls — an average 18% increase in transition and a reduction in dropout among girls in Grades 5–8 — primarily where leaders exercise their authority in ways that prioritise girls' facilities, the appointment of female guide teachers, and dedicated enrolment campaigns. Female leaders in this sample exercised this kind of leadership more consistently than male leaders. Clustering alone, however, has limited capacity to close the gender gap while ongoing challenges — particularly unsafe or absent transport, teacher shortages and frequent transfers — remain unaddressed.

6.1 Recommendations for Policy

1. Given the positive association between female Cluster Head Teachers and better outcomes for girls across indicators in this study, policymakers should consider setting a target share of women Cluster Head Teachers in target districts.
2. Because frequent changes of Cluster Head Teachers and guide teachers were repeatedly linked to loss of continuity, retention for at least one full school term should be considered.
3. Transport schemes for girls should be planned and budgeted at the cluster level rather than left to informal arrangements by individual leaders.

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4. CPD manuals should be made available in Sindhi and adapted for multi-grade rural classrooms, and constraints on women teachers' travel to cluster meetings should be addressed directly.
5. SDG 4 progress should be tracked through regular, formal, cluster-level reporting of gender-disaggregated transition and dropout data.

6.2 Recommendations for Practice

To support equitable implementation of the reform, school leaders can conduct an annual needs assessment that prioritises girls' facilities, encourage joint enrolment drives with feeder schools, and maintain cluster-meeting records that track girls' enrolment and transition specifically, rather than relying on aggregate enrolment figures alone.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Future work should extend the illustrative dataset used here to a full field study involving actual school leaders across a larger number of clusters, with formal ethical clearance and informed consent. Triangulating leaders' accounts with official EMIS data and with the perspectives of teachers, parents and students would strengthen confidence in the findings. A longitudinal design following the same clusters over several years would also help establish whether the gains observed here are sustained over time.

7. Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. The dataset reflects trends drawn from available policy analyses and reports on girls' education in Sindh rather than new data collected under formal ethical consent, and should be read as a useful test of the codebook, joint display and analytic lens ahead of a more extensive study across the province's clusters. Although the sample of 24 leaders across six districts achieved role balance, it does not represent the diversity of the province's approximately 1,400–1,771 clusters. Quantitative measures relied on leaders' self-assessment of enrolment and dropout change and may therefore be subject to self-report bias. Finally, the study captures only school leaders' perspectives and does not include the direct experiences of teachers, parents or students, which would further inform the findings.

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