

OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN ISLAMABAD CAPITAL TERRITORY
(ICT): TRENDS, DETERMINANTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONSDr. Syed Ghulam Haider Kazmi^{*1}, M. Tayyab Ilyas², Hina Kazmi³, Khuram Hussain Shah⁴^{*1}Ex Chief Economist & Development Specialist/Consultant, GoAJ&K /UNDP/UNICEF²Chief Statistical Officer, AJ&K Bureau of Statistics (AJ&KBoS),³Lecturer Computer Science Dept. of Education, Govt. AJ&K, and⁴Research Scholar Mirpur Azad Jammu and KashmirDOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21524135>

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Abstract

Out-of-school children (OOSC) remain a major educational challenge in Pakistan despite improvements in literacy, educational infrastructure, and policy initiatives aimed at expanding access to schooling. This study is designed to examine the patterns, causes, and policy dimensions of educational exclusion in the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) by analysing the secondary data obtained from different national and international resources. The study reveals that although ICT performs comparatively better than most provinces/areas of Pakistan in terms of literacy rates, school enrollment, and educational facilities, approximately 90,000 children—around 15% percent of the school-age population—remain outside the formal education system. This indicates that educational exclusion persists even within the country's most developed administrative territory. The research further highlights the demographic transformation of ICT, where rapid population growth from 340,286 in 1981 to more than 2.3 million in 2023 has placed increasing pressure on educational infrastructure and public service delivery. The findings identify poverty, migration, parental education, and rural–urban disparities as major determinants of OOSC in ICT. Peri-urban and rural areas such as Bhara Kahu, Tarnol, Nilore, and Sihala show comparatively higher educational vulnerability due to weaker infrastructure, transportation barriers, and limited digital access. In addition, migration from other provinces has led to the growth of informal settlements and katchi abadis where children are more likely to remain out of school because of poverty, overcrowding, unstable living conditions, and lack of documentation. Gender-related barriers, including safety concerns, mobility restrictions, cultural norms, limited access and domestic responsibilities, also continue to affect girls' educational participation, although the gender gap in ICT is narrower than in many other regions/areas of Pakistan. The study concludes that despite stronger educational indicators in ICT, structural inequalities and uneven urban development continue to sustain educational exclusion. It emphasizes the need for targeted policy interventions focusing on underserved peri-urban areas, secluded communities, migrant populations, girls' education, school quality, and non-formal education pathways in order to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4): Quality Education for All.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education and health are widely regarded as fundamental human rights and essential foundations for social and economic development. Education plays a critical role in strengthening economic productivity, improving public health, reducing poverty, and promoting social and political progress. Access to quality education contributes to better employment opportunities, higher living standards, improved health outcomes, and sustainable economic growth (Morris, 1979; Carrin, 1984; Lockheed & Verspoor, 1991; Sen, 1999a&b; Kazmi, 1998; Kazmi 2025; Kazmi, 2009 & 2010; Kazmi S.G.H et al., 2024, 2025a & 2026a). Consequently, expanding educational access has remained a major priority within global development frameworks, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly **SDG 4**, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable **quality education for all** (United Nations, 2015).

However despite substantial global progress in literacy and school enrollment, educational exclusion continues to be a major international challenge. Recent estimates indicate that more than 244 million children and adolescents worldwide remain out of school, highlighting persistent inequalities in educational access (UNESCO, 2015; WEF, 2022; UNICEF, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). Entrenched systemic challenges heavily obstruct universal education targets in low- and middle-income countries. Poverty, weak governance, conflict, limited access, inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, cultural norms, and a shortage of qualified faculty continuously hinder progress toward universal education targets (Kazmi S.W. 2015, 2024-2026; Tahir 2016; UNESCAP, 2017&2018; PAGE, 2021a-e; UNESCO, 2024a&b; World Bank, 2024c; Kazmi S.G.H. et al. 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a & 2026a).

Educational inequality is multidimensional and closely associated with gender, geography, and socio-economic conditions (Kazmi, S.M.A. 2015; Khan, 2017; World Bank, 2020 & 2022; Kazmi et al 2023a&b, 2024; 2025a&b and 2026a&b; Kazmi S.W., 2026). Girls often face greater barriers to education due to cultural hindrances,

security concerns, limited access, domestic responsibilities, and early marriages. Likewise, children living in rural and remote areas frequently encounter limited school access, poor infrastructure, and shortage of qualified teachers, transportation difficulties, and financial constraints. (Kazmi S.W., 2015, 2024-2026, Brohi & Kaepoto, 2016; Farooq & Kai, 2016; Khan, 2017; Pradhan et al., 2018; Mughal, 2018 & 2020; UNICEF, 2022; Baran & Bend, 2023; UNESCO, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a & 2026a). These overlapping disadvantages underline the importance of localized and context-specific analysis to better understand barriers to education and design effective policy responses

South Asia remains one of the regions with the highest concentration of out-of-school children (OOSC). Although countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Nepal have improved enrollment rates over recent decades, challenges related to retention, educational quality and gender inequality continue to persist (UNICEF, 2022; UNESCO, 2020&2023; ASER Pakistan, 2023; ASER India, 2023; Kazmi, S.K.H., 2024; Dato, et al., 2024; World Bank, 2024b&c; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024). Conflict-ridden countries such as Afghanistan continue to experience severe educational disruption, leaving millions of children excluded from formal schooling (WEF, 2022). Across the region, poverty, child labour, weak infrastructure, school expenses, manmade and natural disasters, war and migration, and difficult geographic access remain major barriers to long-term educational participation (Kazmi S.W. 2015 and 2026; Mughal, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018; WEF, 2022; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a & 2026a, b&c).

Pakistan faces one of the most critical education crises in the world. According to recent UNICEF and other national and international studies estimates, Pakistan has the world's second-highest number of out-of-school children, with approximately 25-26 million children aged 5-16 years not attending school, representing nearly 35 percent of the population in this age group (World Bank 2024a; UNICEF, 2025a&b and 2026; FMOE&PT, 2026). Educational exclusion in Pakistan is strongly associated with poverty, low

public investment, scarce school infrastructure, governance challenges, and rural and regional inequalities (Kazmi S.M.A., 2015; Tahir, 2016; Mughal, 2018 & 2020; Pradhan et al., 2018; PAGE, 2021a-e; ASER Pakistan, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024 & 2025a; Kazmi S.W. 2015, 2024-2026). Significant provincial disparities persist, with comparatively lower OOSC rates in Punjab and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K), while Sindh and Balochistan continue to experience substantially higher exclusion levels (Mughal, 2020; Pakistan Institute of Education, 2022; UNICEF Pakistan, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 & 2025a; Kazmi S.W., 2026). Gender disparities further intensify educational inequality, particularly in rural areas where girls face additional barriers linked to mobility restrictions, school with lacking facilities (toilet, female staff, boundary wall, etc.) early marriage, poverty, and socio-cultural norms (Khan, 2007; Khan et al., 2011; Kazmi S.W., 2015; Haq, 2016; Khan, 2017; UNESCO IIEP/ASER Pakistan, 2018&2019; Pradhan et al., 2018; Mughal, 2018; UNWOMEN, 2020; PAGE 2021a-e; World Bank, 2024a-c; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b, 2026a; Kazmi S.W., 2015 and 2026).

Within this broader national context, Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) performs relatively better than many regions/areas due to stronger infrastructure, better institutional capacity, and comparatively improved educational access. However, educational exclusion remains a serious concern. Approximately 90000 (0.09 million) children, representing nearly 15% percent of the school-age population in ICT, remain out of school. This indicates that despite its status as the Federal Capital, inequalities in educational access persist across socio-economic groups, gender categories, and geographic localities. Marginalized communities, peri-urban settlements, and low-income households within ICT like other areas of Pakistan continue to face barriers associated with poverty, migration, uneven educational facilities, and limited access to quality schooling (Kazmi S.W. 2015, 2024-2026; UNICEF Pakistan, 2020c and 2023; UNESCO IIEP, 2021; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024 and 2025a&b).

Most existing studies on OOSC in Pakistan primarily focus on national or provincial trends, with limited attention given to localized analyses of ICT. Furthermore, many studies fail to simultaneously examine gender, socio-economic, and spatial inequalities in educational access in the regional/area's perspective (Kazmi S.W. 2015 and 2024-2026; Imran, 2017; Khan, 2017; Pradhan et al., 2018; Mughal, 2018 & 2020; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b; 2024 and 2025a&b; Kazmi, S.M.A. 2025). In this context, the present study provides a focused analysis of out-of-school children in Islamabad Capital Territory using recent census and surveys data and comparative evidence. The study examines patterns of educational exclusion across gender and geographic groups, identifies key structural barriers affecting school participation, and contributes evidence-based insights for policy interventions aimed at promoting inclusive and equitable education in line with SDG 4.

1.1 Statement of Purpose

Despite notable improvements in literacy rates, school infrastructure, and educational policies in Pakistan, out-of-school children (OOSC) continue to represent a major challenge to achieving inclusive and equitable education (Kazmi, S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a and 2026a). While the Islamabad Capital Territory demonstrates comparatively stronger educational indicators than many provinces and regions of the country, significant disparities in access to education persist across rural, peri-urban, and marginalized communities. Rapid urbanization, migration, socio-economic inequality, and uneven development have further complicated efforts to achieve universal school enrollment and retention in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4): Quality Education for All (UNICEF Pakistan, 2020c; Baran and Bend, 2023; Dato, et al., 2023; ASER Pakistan, 2023). Previous studies have highlighted that poverty, parental education, gender disparities, urban-rural divide, difficult access, cultural norms and weak educational infrastructure remain key determinants of educational exclusion in Pakistan (Khan, 2007; Khan et al., 2011; Kazmi S.M.A, 2015; Khan,

2017; Pradhan et al., 2018; Mughal, 2020 PAGE, 2021a-e; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023 a&b, 2024, 2025a, 2026a; Kazmi S.W., 2015, 2024-2026). Although ICT is often considered a comparatively better-performing region in terms of literacy and educational access yet limited research has specifically examined the trends, determinants, and policy implications of OOSC within the territory. In particular, there is insufficient empirical evidence regarding the effects of migration, informal settlements, peri-urban expansion, and rural-urban inequalities on school participation in ICT. This study bridge this gap and investigate the OOSC in Islamabad and find factors such as cultural, social, economic and demographic responsible for education exclusion in ICT.

1.2 Objective of the Study

This study, titled “*Out-of-School Children in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT): Trends, Determinants and Policy Implications*,” therefore aims to examine the magnitude and patterns of educational exclusion in ICT using secondary data from national surveys, census reports, and international development agencies. The study seeks to assess ICT’s performance in reducing OOSC, identify the socio-economic and demographic factors associated with educational exclusion, and evaluate the effectiveness of existing educational policies and interventions. Furthermore, the research intends to contribute to the broader discourse on urban educational inequality in Pakistan by exploring how migration, poverty, gender, and uneven urban growth influence children’s access to education in the Islamabad Capital Territory.

2. Literature Review

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a key driver of social and economic development while access to quality education contributes to poverty reduction, social mobility, improved employment opportunities, and sustainable national development (Morris, 1979; Carrin, 1984; Kazmi, 1995 & 2005; Khan, 2007; Kazmi, 2010 S.G.H; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a & 2026a)). Despite global progress

in school enrollment, out-of-school children (OOSC) remain a major challenge worldwide. Recent estimates indicate that nearly 273 million children and youth are still excluded from formal education systems globally (UNESCO, 2024b; Borgen Project, 2025). In addition to exclusion from schooling, many enrolled children suffer from “learning poverty,” lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills (World Bank, 2020 & 2024c; PAGEa-e; WEF, 2022; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 & 2026a; Kazmi S.W. 2105, 2024-2026). This highlights that the education crisis is not only about access but also about quality, equity, and inclusion. Educational deprivation further exposes children to child labour, exploitation, trafficking, and abuse (Guarcello et al., 2014; Geoghegan, 2017; Gul et al., 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024). This stagnation and growth in exclusion are largely driven by rapid population growth, conflicts, and shrinking public budgets, leaving low-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central/Southern Asia the most severely impacted. Weak governance, and political instability also disrupt education systems through damaged infrastructure, population displacement, and insecurity, particularly in developing countries. Such conditions significantly increase children’s vulnerability to exploitation and long-term social exclusion (Mukherjee and Das, 2008; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2015; Geoghegan, 2017; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 and 2026b).

The literature consistently identifies poverty as one of the major determinants of educational exclusion. Poor households often struggle to bear direct and indirect schooling costs, including uniforms, limited access, transport, and educational materials, increasing the likelihood of dropout and child labour (Khan et al., 2011; Guarcello et al., 2014; Geoghegan, 2017; Khan, 2017; Kazmi S.W. 2015, 2024-2026; Gul et al., 2023; World Bank, 2024b; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a & b and 2026a). Gender inequality is another major dimension of educational exclusion and deprivation. Studies show that girls face greater barriers to education because of early marriages, domestic responsibilities, mobility restrictions, cultural norms, and safety concerns (Haq, 2016; Khan, 2017; Mohsin, 2023; Kazmi

S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a and 2026a). UNESCO (2024b) reports that millions of girls worldwide remain out of school, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Household preference for boys' education in many societies further reinforces these inequalities (Kazmi et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b, 2026). Consequently, educational exclusion is increasingly viewed as a multidimensional issue shaped by interacting economic, social, cultural, and political factors requiring integrated strategic and policy responses (Kazmi S.W., 2015; Khan et al., 2017; Mughal, 2018; Mohsin, 2023; Dato et al., 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a-c, 2024, 2025a&b, and 2026a; Rind, 2024; Kazmi S.W., 2015, 2024-2026).

South Asia remains one of the regions with the highest concentration of OOSC. Although countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan have expanded primary school enrollment, significant challenges persist regarding retention, educational quality, gender parity, and rural access. Structural barriers such as poverty, child labour, weak infrastructure, and geographic isolation continue to hinder universal education in the region. Afghanistan represents one of the most severe examples where prolonged conflict has devastated education systems and increased educational exclusion (Kazmi, S.W. 2015; Mughal, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018; WEF, 2022; Gul et al., 2023; Dato et al., 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a and 2026a&b; Kazmi, S.K.H, 2024).

Within South Asia, Pakistan faces one of the gravest education crises. According to UNICEF (2025 and 2026), Pakistan hosts the world's second-largest population of OOSC, with > 25 million children aged 5–16 years out of school, representing almost 35 percent of the school-age population. Provincial disparities are highly pronounced. Punjab accounts for the largest number of OOSC due to its population size, while Balochistan records the highest proportional exclusion rates. Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) also experience significant educational deprivation, particularly in rural areas and among girls (ProPakistani, 2023; Dato et al., 2024; Kazmi, S.G.H. et al., 2024).

Federal Ministry of Education and Professional Training (FMoE&PT) Islamabad along with national and international partners jointly prepared a report "Girls Education Statistics and Trends Report 2023-24 (GESTR)" using Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE) data and subsequently was launched by FMoE&PT on February 26, 2026. It [report] reveals that Pakistan is victim of extreme austerities in education with 25.37 million OOSC aged 5-16. UNICEF (2025) confirms that Pakistan hosts the world's second-largest number of OOSC. This kind of catastrophes happen due to inter/intra-regional disparities, harsh socio-cultural binding, scarce finance and security, a few schools, lacking faculty (particularly female), inadequate school infrastructure and lacking access with very high dropout rates (67%) of children (Chaudhury and Parajuli, 2006, Khan, 2007; Khan et al 2011; Kazmi S.W., 2015; Khan 2017; Imran, 2017; Gul et al., 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et.al 2023 a&b; 2024 and 2025a,b&c; World Bank 2024c). GESTR 2023-24 also finds wide variation in provincial/area's profile with Gender gap and urban-rural divide regarding OOSC wherein Punjab is in lead (9.6 million) followed by Sindh (7.82 million), KP (4.92 Million) and Balochistan (2.94 million) (FMoE&PT, 2026).

However, Recent MICS6 data also provides different scenario pertaining to provincial/areas standing but it do not include Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) for not happening of MICS6 in it. MICS6 provincial/areas results place Punjab as the 2nd best with total 11.9%, Male 11.1% and female 14.8% OOSC while KP is next to Punjab with OOSC total 33.7%, Male 28.3 and female 39.6. Sind follows KP having total OOSC 42.7% while Male and female 38.5 and 47.3 respectively. Baluchistan with total 69.7 male 67.5 and female 72.1 OOSC is least performer Unit. In Provinces areas, AJ&K stands the best with score of OOSC- Total 6.5%, male 5.7% and female 7.4%, which may be government commitment, better financial inputs and community unprecedented support. However GB adores different profile in OOSC – Total 25% male 22.29% and female 27%, which outstrip all the provinces except Punjab (Kazmi et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025, 2026a &c).

Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), despite having relatively stronger educational infrastructure and administrative advantages, still experiences notable educational exclusion. GESTER 2023-24 indicates that approximately 90,000 children in ICT remain out of school, including nearly 40,000 girls and 50,000 boys (FMoE&PT, 2026). The report also refers that rapid population growth, migration, and expansion of peri-urban settlements have intensified pressure on public education facilities and contributed to persistent inequalities within the capital territory. In areas, AJ&K performs relatively better while GB suffers from education apathy even though stands better than some regions. The former unit [AJ&K] enjoys promising score with a lead in regions/areas on education indicators - enrolment, literacy, Gender Parity GP: 1, **meeting the SDG 4.5.1 even in 1917-18 at primary level**, etc. Similarly, educational participation in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) has gradually improved through community-based and externally supported programs, although geographic isolation and infrastructural limitations remain serious barriers (PAGE, 2021a; Pakistan Institute of Education - PIE, 2022; World Bank, 2022; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a and 2026a; UNICEF, 2025 & 2026).

The literature also provides valuable on enrollment and dropout. It portrays an astounding picture of children persistent dropout across educational levels with Primary 20.815 million, Middle 9.207 million, Secondary 4.699, and intermediate levels 2.825 million. Gender disparities hurting girls' is also evident from the reported statistics at all levels including primary (10.906 million boys against 9.888 million girls), middle (4.877 million boys versus 4.33 million girls), High/Matric (2.545 million boys against 2.154 million girls) and Higher Secondary/Intermediate (1.476 million boys versus 1.349 million girls). However the completion rate for girls at primary level though increased (i.e. from 75% to 89%) yet the challenges like malnutrition/malnourishment has persistent implications for the school children enrolment and retention (Pakistan Institute of Education -PIE, 2022; FMoE&PT, 2026). Low budgetary provision for education sector in

Pakistan and its provinces is alarming, mainly due to its low GDP share (1.5% in 2020 and 2% in 2022) along with a persistent declining trend (from 13% to 11%) with only 6% budgetary allocations for development portfolio while 94% meant for recurring activities, mainly salaries, leaving little funds for development activities (PBS 2023 & 2024; UNESCO, 2024c, GoP Finance Division, 2025).

Existing literature identify poverty, parental illiteracy, financial scarcity, migration, weak governance, poor school quality, lack of infrastructure, and gender discrimination as major determinants of school exclusion in Pakistan (Khan, 2007; Khan et al., 2011; Tahir, 2016; Haq, 2016; Khan, 2017; Imran, 2017; Pradhan, 2018; Mughal, 2018 & 2020; PAGE 2021a-e; ASER Pakistan, 2023; Gul et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2024c; Kazmi et al., 2023a&b, 2024; 2025a&b and 2026a). Rural areas remain particularly disadvantaged because of inadequate schools, teacher shortages, transportation barriers, and socio-cultural constraints. Girls in rural Sindh and Balochistan face the greatest disadvantages due to early marriage, security concerns, and restricted mobility while in some urban districts of Karachi suffer for gender disparities hurting boys instead (Rashid, 2012; Baqi & Yousaf, 2019; PAGE 2021b&c; Mohsin, 2023; Baran and Bend, 2023; Ram, 2023; Rind, 2024; Maqbool, 2024; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 & 2025a).

The present study is informed by Human Capital Theory and the Capability Approach. Human Capital Theory views education as an investment that enhances productivity and economic growth (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964), while Sen's Capability Approach emphasizes education as a fundamental human capability that expands individual freedoms and opportunities (Sen, 1999a&b). Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of OOSC as both an economic and social development challenge.

Despite extensive literature, significant research gaps remain. Most existing studies focus primarily on national or provincial trends, with limited comparative analysis of ICT, AJ&K, and GB. Furthermore, gender and rural-urban disparities are often examined separately rather than through

an integrated framework (Mughal 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018; ProPakistani, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b, and 2026a). Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by providing a comparative and data-driven analysis of OOSC in Pakistan, with particular focus on Islamabad Capital Territory and regional disparities. Using recent datasets and regional comparisons, the study aims to generate evidence-based insights for more inclusive and equitable education policies in Pakistan and its regions/areas, particularly ICT. The study further proposes policy recommendations focused on improving rural educational infrastructure, transportation, teacher availability, girls' education, and governance mechanisms. Overall, the findings show that educational exclusion in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) like other areas of Pakistan is strongly associated with gender disparities, and rural disadvantage, requiring targeted and evidence-based policy interventions to achieve SDG 4 and universal education goals (Pradhan et al., 2018; UNWOMEN, 2020; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024; 2025a&b and 2026a).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative and comparative research approach to examine the issue of out-of-school children (OOSC) with particular focus on regional disparities, gender inequality, and rural-urban differences with more inference on Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) (Kazmi et al 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a&b). The analysis is based on secondary data obtained from different sources reports of provincial Bureaus of Statistics, Federal Ministry of Education and UNICEF/UNESCO publications, and education-related national datasets of BISP, PSLM, ASER, Pakistan Education Statistics (PES), Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE), Provincial MICS6, and different Population Census Reports. Comparative analysis was also conducted ICT and across provinces and regions including Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Balochistan, AJ&K, and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) (Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 and 2025a).

The study evaluates patterns of educational exclusion by comparing OOSC rates, gender gaps,

and rural-urban inequalities across provinces and regions. Descriptive statistical techniques, percentages, and comparative distributions were used to identify variations in educational access between male female and urban and rural residents. The study also benefits from SPSS, STATA and Microsoft Excel in calculating frequencies, percentages and comparative distributions (Creswell, 2014; Kazmi, 1995 & 2005; Kazmi et al, 2023a&b and 2024). The results were presented in tables and graphical illustrations to emphasize the inequality pattern in the regions.

The study has certain limitations. First, the analysis is primarily based on secondary data obtained from different datasets, Ministry of Education reports, UNICEF publications, Pakistan Institute of Education, and provincial education statistics rather than a single nationally standardized survey. Therefore, differences in reporting methods, definitions, and reference years across provinces and institutions may affect direct comparability of findings. Second, the use of cross-sectional and administrative data limits the ability to establish causal relationships between educational exclusion and socio-economic factors. Third, some regional indicators and disaggregated statistics, particularly for remote and rural areas, were either unavailable or incomplete, restricting deeper comparative analysis. Despite these limitations, the study relies on official government reports, recognized institutional datasets, and widely accepted educational indicators, which enhances the reliability and policy relevance of the findings across Pakistan.

4. Data Analysis, Results and Discussion

4.1 Historical Trend

The population profile of Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) provides important context for understanding the growing challenge of out-of-school children (OOSC). According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) Population Census Reports, ICT's population increased rapidly from 340,286 in 1981 to 805,235 in 1998, went further up to 2.01 million in 2017 and reached approximately to 2.364 million in 2023 (Table 4.1). This substantial population growth

has largely been driven by rapid urban expansion, migration (both affluent and Poor) from other regions of Pakistan, peri-urban development, and

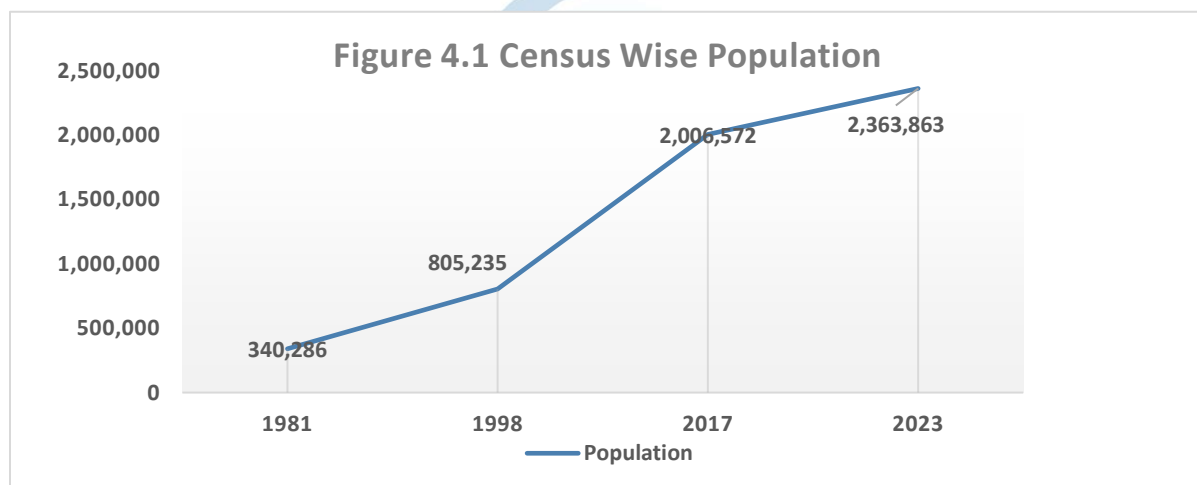
the concentration of federal employment and economic opportunities in the capital city, which may have implications for OOSC in ICT.

Table 4.1: Population Growth in ICT Since 1981

Census	Population
1981	340,286
1998	805,235
2017	2,006,572
2023	2,363,863
Source: Population Census Reports, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS)	

Figure 4.1 illustrates a particularly steep increase between 1998 and 2017, when the population grew by approximately 1.20 million people, representing nearly a 149 percent increase over two decades, reflecting the steepest rise in this period. Between 2017 and 2023, the population

further increased by around 357,291 people (17.8%). Although the growth rate slowed slightly after 2017, the overall demographic expansion has continued to exert significant pressure on ICT's educational infrastructure and service delivery systems.



The rapid increase in population has intensified demand for schools, teachers, classrooms, transportation, and educational facilities, particularly in underserved rural, peri-urban, and informal settlement areas. Many migrant and low-income families continue to face barriers related to poverty, overcrowding, inadequate school capacity, and unequal access to quality education, leading to mounting threat. Significant number of student's found incompetent in reading (English & Urdu) and solving simple mathematic questions, mainly due to schooling standards

dented by poor infrastructure, missing facilities, lacking faculty, female access, weak teaching-learning environment, low classroom inputs, and poor curriculum (Guarcello et al., 2014; Farooq and Kai, 2016; Kazmi S.GH. et al., 2024). Consequently, despite ICT's comparatively stronger educational profile, disparities in educational access and school participation persist, especially among disadvantaged communities and vulnerable children. This study therefore, identified the patterns, determinants, and spatial disparities of OOSC in ICT using

secondary data from different surveys - BISP, PSLM, PIE, ASER, Provincial MICS6, etc., - Pakistan Population Census Reports, UNICEF statistics, and FMOE&PT 2026 report.

5.2 OOSC Trends in Pakistan and ICT

Pakistan continues to face a severe educational crisis, with one of the largest populations of out-of-school children (OOSC) in the world. The *Girls Education Statistics and Trends Report 2023–24* (GESTR) details that nearly 25.37 million children aged 5–16 years remain out of school. Among them, approximately 13.41 million are girls (52.86%) and 11.96 million are boys (47.14%), indicating a persistent gender imbalance in educational access. The report further notes that

almost 67% of these children have never attended school, reflecting the impact of poverty, weak infrastructure, socio-cultural barriers, teacher shortages, insecurity, migration, rural–urban divide and poor governance in ICT like in other regions/areas of Pakistan (Kazmi S.M.A. 2015; Kazmi S.W. 2015; Pradhan et al., 2018; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 & 2025a; UNICEF, 2025a&b and 2026). Provincial disparities in educational exclusion remain highly significant. The data in Table 4.2 also displays that Punjab hosts the largest absolute number of OOSC (9.6 million), followed by Sindh (7.82 million), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (4.92 million), and Balochistan (2.94 million), endorsing the previous finding in this area (Imran, 2017; World Bank, 2024a). However,

Table 4.2: Out-of-School Children (OOSC) in Pakistan and Regions/Areas							
Province/ Area	Total Children (5-16) in Million	Out of School Children (5-16)					
		Total OOSC (in million)	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Urban(%)	Rural (%)
Pakistan	72.5	25.37	35	47.14	52.86	38	62
Punjab	35.5	9.60	27	49.69	50.31	35	65
Sindh	17.8	7.82	44	47.70	52.30	43	57
KP	14.5	4.92	34	53.46	46.54	32	68
Balochistan	4.3	2.94	69	47.96	52.04	26	74
ICT	0.592	0.09	15	56	44	79	21
AJ&K	0.850	0.210	24.7	47	53	32	68
GB	0.400	0.115	28.8	45	55	27	73

Note: i) As per Population and Housing Census 2023, ICT hosts 591,703 children aged 5–16 years, of whom 502,576 were attending school and 89,127 (15.06%) were OOS (PBS, (2024; NCRC, 2024); ii) The table contains the rounded figures - Total, OOS and Percentage

Source: GESTR Report (2023–24); UNICEF (2025); Pakistan Institute of Education PIE (2022); PBS Census Reports; Kazmi et al. (2024 and 2025a & b).

Balochistan records the highest proportional exclusion rate (69%), highlighting severe structural deprivation and weak educational access. Sindh also exhibits 7.82 million high educational exclusion with nearly 44% OOSC, particularly in rural areas (57%) while KP observes (4.92 million) about 34% exclusion rate. In comparison, Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) performs

relatively better, with around 90,000 OOSC, representing approximately 15% of the school-age population (Table: 4.1). Despite stronger infrastructure, higher literacy levels, and better institutional capacity, the persistence of 15% OOSC demonstrates that urban advantage alone does not ensure universal educational inclusion. Rapid urbanization, migration, peri-urban

expansion, overcrowded schools, and socio-economic inequalities continue to create educational gaps in ICT, particularly among low-income and informal settlements. Moreover, Islamabad's male and rural populations like other areas in developing countries remain disproportionately excluded from education (Kahn, 2007; Haq, 2016; Imran, 2017; Kazmi S.W 2015 and 2025-2026; Baran, and Bend, 2025; World Bank, 2024; Dattoo et al., 2024; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b, and 2026a). AJ&K and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) show

comparatively moderate educational outcomes. As per Table 4.1, AJ&K records nearly 210,000 OOSC (24.7%), while GB hosts approximately 115,000 OOSC (28.8%). In both regions, females and rural children continue disproportionately omitted from education due to geographic isolation, difficult terrain, manmade/natural catastrophes, limited infrastructure, shortages of schools and lacking teaching faculty (PAGE, 2021a; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 and 2025a).

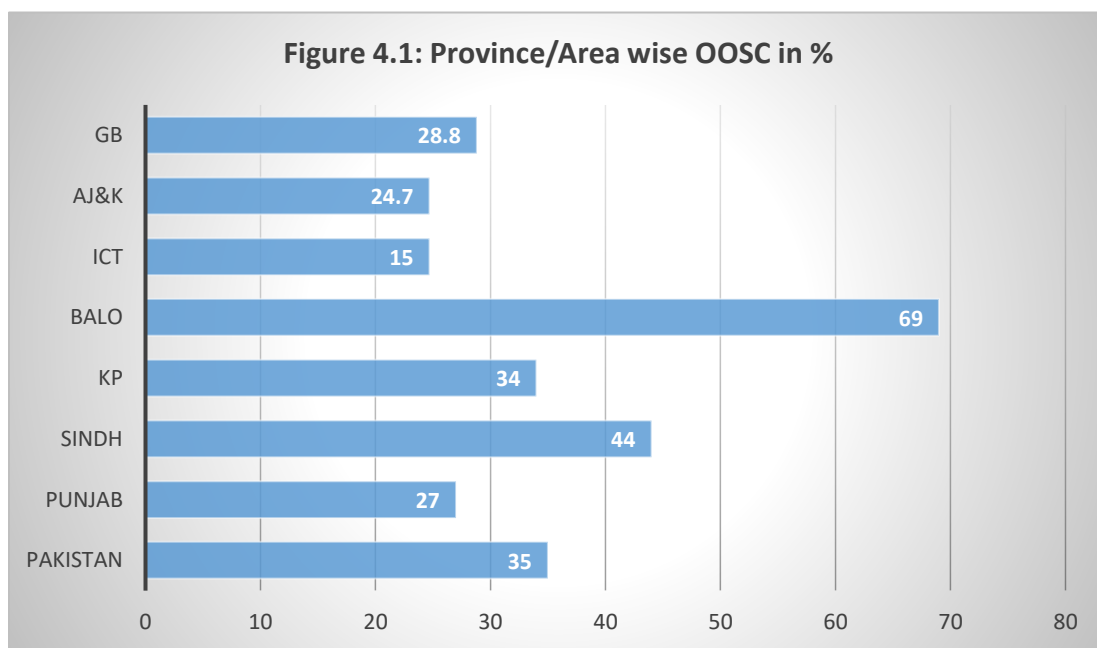


Figure 4.1 highlights substantial regional disparities in educational exclusion across Pakistan. Balochistan records the highest OOSC rate (69%), followed by Sindh (44%), indicating severe educational deprivation in these provinces. In contrast, ICT demonstrates the lowest exclusion rate 15% reflecting relatively stronger educational infrastructure and administrative capacity. AJ&K (24.7%) and Punjab (27%) also perform comparatively better than the other regions/areas (KP 34% and GB almost 29%). The

figures clearly show that educational inequality in Pakistan is strongly associated with regional differences in governance, socio-economic development, and access to educational facilities (Imran, 2027; Mughal, 2018; World Bank 2022; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a & 2026a; Kazmi S.W., 2015 and 2026). Nevertheless, these figures significantly different from recently held (2017-2025) UNICEF support the Provincial/areas MICS6 reports.

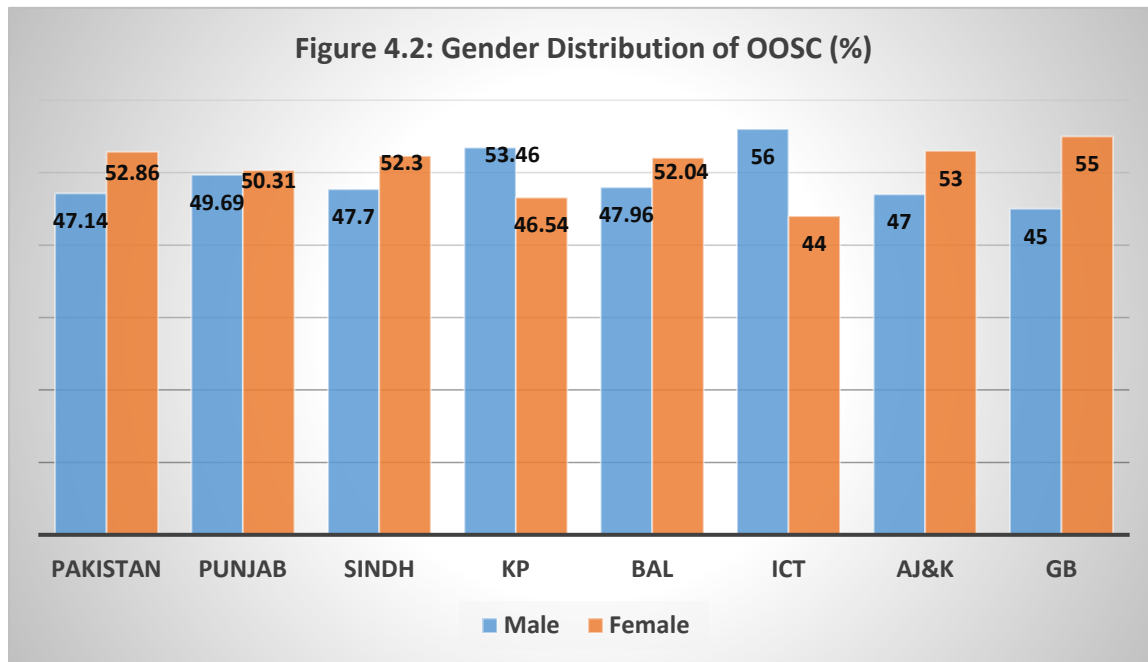


Figure 4.2 and Table 4.1 also illustrate gender disparities in educational exclusion. Female OOSC rates exceed male rates in most provinces and regions, especially in Sindh (female 52.3% versus male 47.7%), Balochistan (female 52.4% versus male 47.96%), AJ&K (female 53% versus male 47%), and GB (female 55% versus male 45%), indicating persistent socio-cultural and economic barriers affecting girls' education (World Bank, 2024a; Kazmi et al., 2024 and 2025a&b). ICT (female 44% versus male 56%) and KP (female 46% versus male 53%) show relatively higher male exclusion, which may be associated with child labour, migration-related work, and urban economic pressures (Kazmi, S.M.A. 2015; Geoghegan, 2017; Gul et al., 2023; Datoo et al., 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 & 2026a). Overall, the findings demonstrate that gender inequality remains a major determinant of educational exclusion in Pakistan (Brohi and Kaepoto, 2013; Haq, 2016; UNWOMEN, 2020; Baran and Bend, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a).

Similarly the Table 4.1 and Figure 4.3 demonstrate a strong rural disadvantage across Pakistan. Rural OOSC rates are substantially higher than urban rates in nearly all provinces and regions,

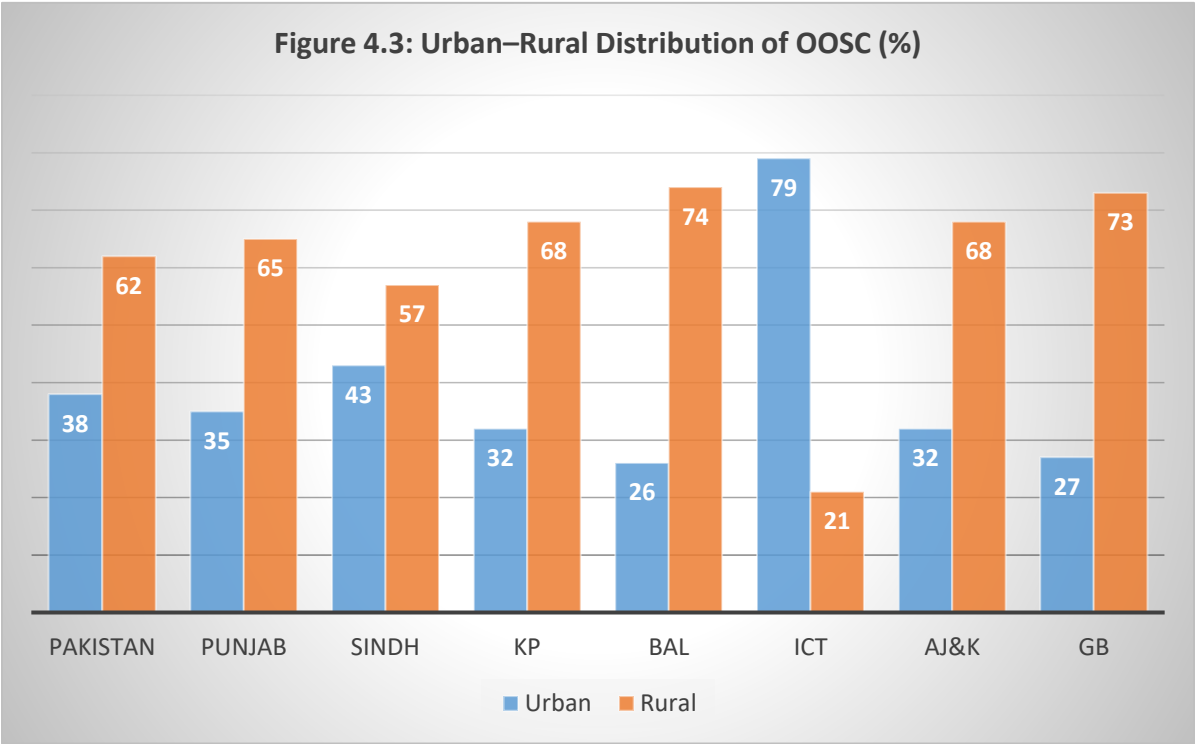
particularly in Balochistan (Rural 74% versus Urban 26%), GB (Rural 73% against Urban 27%), KP (Rural 68% versus Urban 32%), Punjab (Rural 65% versus Urban 35%), and AJ&K (Rural 68% versus Urban 32%). Geographic isolation, poor infrastructure, shortage of schools and teachers, transportation difficulties, and poverty continue to restrict educational access in rural areas (Kazmi S.W, 2015; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024 and 2025a&b). ICT (Rural 21% versus Urban 79%) remains an exception due to its highly urbanized population and greater concentration of educational facilities. The figure 4.3 confirms that rural inequality remains one of the strongest predictors of educational exclusion in Pakistan and its regions/area except ICT.

4.3 Urban–Rural Divide in Islamabad

Educational inequality within in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) and Provinces/areas is obviously demonstrated in figure 4.3. ICT is strongly influenced by the urban–rural divide and therefore, clear differences exist between urban and rural educational access. In ICT, the Rural and peri-urban areas such as Bhara Kahu, Tarnol, Nilore, and Sihala experience relatively higher levels of educational exclusion compared to the

urban core. Limited school infrastructure and quality schools, shortage of qualified teachers, weak transportation, and digital learning openings, contribute to lower enrollment and attendance in these areas of Islamabad Capital

Territory like other areas in Pakistan (Khan et al., 2011; Wasif et al., 2012; Imran, 2017; Mughal, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018; Kazmi S.G.H. et al 2023a&b; 2024; 2025a; UNICEF, 2025b & 2026).



In contrast, central urban sectors of Islamabad benefit from stronger educational infrastructure, better connectivity, stronger ICT integration, and

greater access to public and private institutions, resulting in comparatively improved enrollment and attendance rates reflected in Table 4.3.

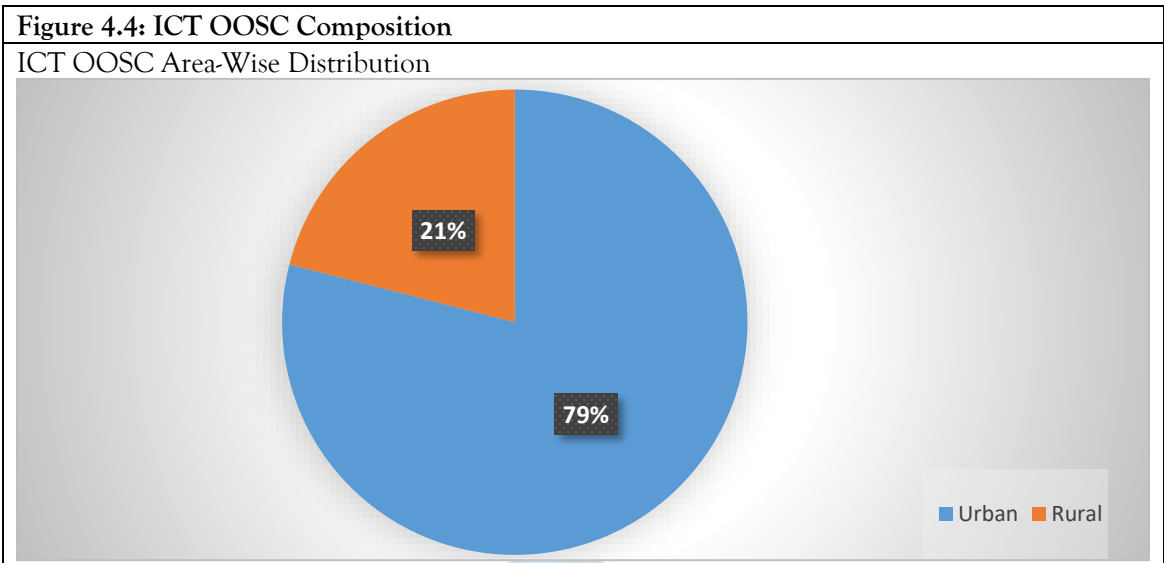
Table 4.3: Urban–Rural Educational Differences in ICT		
Indicator	Urban Core Sectors	Rural / Peripheral Areas
School Availability	Higher	Limited
Teacher Quality	Better trained staff	Teacher shortages
ICT & Digital Access	Strong internet and ICT facilities	Weak connectivity
Transportation Access	Easily accessible	Difficult travel routes
Enrollment Rates	Comparatively high	Lower participation
Risk of Exclusion	Lower	Higher

Figure 4.4 demonstrates that the urban share (79%) unprecedentedly remains dominant because ICT is largely urbanized; however,

educational deprivation is increasingly concentrated in peri-urban and low-income settlements (*kachi abides*) in urban zones (UNICEF

Pakistan, 2020c). These findings indicate that urban development alone is insufficient without equitable access to quality educational services for

marginalized populations (Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 and 2025a).



The figure 4.5 offers a segregated account of factors behind Urban–Rural Education Gap in ICT wherein urban areas have better schools, ICT facilities, qualified teachers, and higher enrolment

while rural/semi-rural areas and *kachi abides* have limited schools, poor connectivity, Transport issues and higher exclusion (UNICEF Pakistan, 2020c).

Figure 4.5: Urban–Rural Education Gap in ICT	
Urban Islamabad Areas	Rural Islamabad Areas (Bhara Kahu, Tarnol, Nilore, Sihala)
- Better Schools - ICT Facilities - Qualified Teachers - Higher Enrollment	- Limited Schools - Poor Connectivity - Transport Issues - Higher Exclusion

4.4 Gender Dimension in Islamabad Capital Territory

Although the gender gap in education within ICT is narrower than in many provinces/areas of Pakistan, girls still encounter several barriers that affect consistent school participation. Key challenges summarized in include safety concerns during travel to school, mobility restrictions imposed by social and cultural norms, and domestic responsibilities often reduce girls’ attendance and continuation in school (Kazmi

S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024 and 2025a). Despite these obstacles, Islamabad shows relatively better female educational participation, improved female literacy, due to higher public awareness, urban exposure, more schools and improved access to educational facilities compared to several rural regions of the country, endorsing the previous finding in this area (UNICEF, Pakistan, 2022c; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 and 2025a; UICEF, 2025a&b and 2026) Table 4.4 in column-1 outlines the Key Education Challenges faced by

the girls in ICT. It also recaps corresponding impact of these challenges on education in column-2

Table 4.4: Key Educational Challenges Faced by Girls in ICT

Challenge	Impact on Education
Safety Concerns	Reduced school attendance
Mobility Restrictions	Difficulty accessing distant schools
Domestic Responsibilities	Less study time and higher dropout risk
Cultural Expectations	Lower continuation to higher education

Figure 4.5 displays that although ICT has comparatively lower OOSC rates than other provinces, educational exclusion still persists. Boys claim a slightly larger share (56%) of OOSC than girls (44%), possibly due to labour market participation and migration-related economic pressures (Mukherjee & Das, 2008; Guarcello et

al., 2014; Geoghegan, 2017; Kazmi, S.M.A., 2015; Khan, 2017; Gul et al., 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2014 and 2026b). Figure 4.6 refers to gender wise distribution while figure 4.7 displays Factors Affecting Girls' Education in ICT. It also enlist Girls' Education Challenges steering their [girls] Lower Education Participation in ICT.

Figure: 4.6 ICT OOSC Gender-wise Distribution

ICT OOSC Gender-wise Distribution

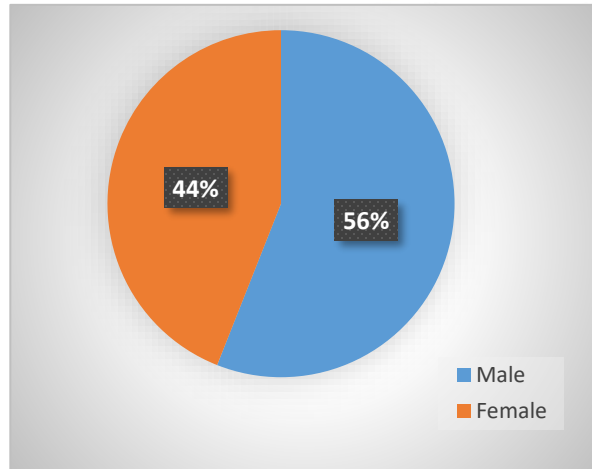
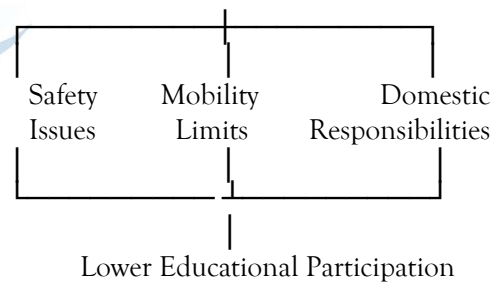


Figure: 4.6: Factors Affecting Girls' Education

Girls' Education Challenges



4.5 Migration and Informal Settlements

Rapid migration from other provinces into Islamabad Capital Territory has placed increasing pressure on educational services and infrastructure. Many migrant families settle in *katchi abadis*, temporary settlements, and low-income colonies where educational facilities are

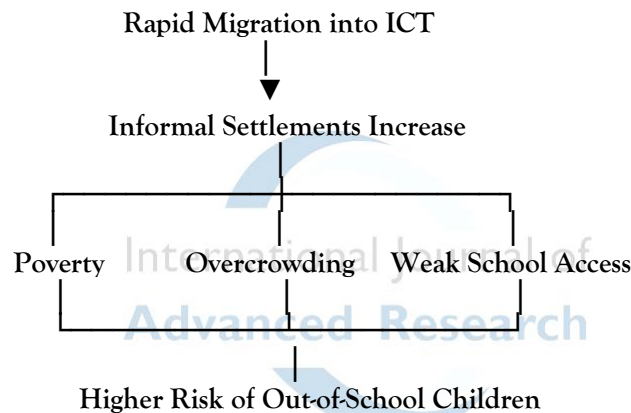
inadequate or inaccessible. Children living in these settlements are more likely to remain out of school because of poverty, lack of documentation, overcrowding, and frequent relocation of families. The issue highlights the importance of inclusive educational policies, expanded school infrastructure, and targeted support programs for vulnerable communities.

Table 4.5: Educational Issues in Informal Settlements	
Settlement Type	Common Educational Problems
Katchi Abadis	Lack of nearby schools
Temporary Settlements	Frequent relocation disrupts schooling
Low-Income Colonies	Poverty and inability to afford education
Migrant Communities	Documentation and admission difficulties

Table 4.5 summarized the common Education Issues in Informal Settlements in ICT while Figure 4.8 reflects the implications of rapid Migration

and Educational Exclusion in ICT, leading to Higher Risk of Out-of-School Children.

Figure: 4.8 Migration and Educational Exclusion



5. Key Finding

The analysis of educational conditions in the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) highlights several important findings regarding out-of-school children (OOSC) and educational inequality. Although ICT performs better than most provinces/areas of Pakistan in terms of literacy rates, enrollment levels, and educational infrastructure, educational exclusion and education quality still remains a significant concern (Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024). The findings indicate that socio-economic disparities, migration, and uneven urban development continue to affect children's access to education (UNESCO IIEP, 2018; UNICEF Pakistan, 2020c & 2023; World Bank, 2024b).

One of the major findings is that ICT has a lower proportion of out-of-school children compared with most provinces/areas of Pakistan. Better

educational facilities, stronger administrative systems, and greater public awareness regarding education have contributed to improved school participation in the capital territory. Urban sectors of Islamabad generally have easier access to both public and private educational institutions, resulting in comparatively higher enrollment and retention rates. According to UNICEF, ICT has approximately 0.09 million out-of-school children, representing nearly 15% percent of the school-age population, which is considerably lower than many other provinces (UNICEF Pakistan, 2023; NCRC, 2023). Despite this comparatively positive situation, nearly 90,000 children in ICT still remain out of school. This demonstrates that educational deprivation persists even in the country's most developed administrative region. Many of these children belong to low-income households where poverty directly limits

educational access. Financial constraints often force families to prioritize household survival over education-related expenses such as transportation, uniforms, books, and school supplies (Gul et al., 2023; Kazmi S.W., 2015; UNESCO IIEP, 2018; UNICEF Pakistan, 2020c ProPakistani, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024 and 2025a&b and 2026b). In some cases, children become involved in labor or domestic work, increasing the likelihood of school dropout (Guarcello et al., 2014; Geoghegan, 2017; Kazmi, S.G.H. et al., 2024 and 2026b).

Another key finding is that peri-urban and rural areas of ICT are more vulnerable to educational exclusion than central urban sectors. Areas such as Bhara Kahu, Tarnol, Nilore, and Sihala often face weaker educational infrastructure, limited transport facilities, shortages of trained teachers, and lower digital connectivity. In contrast, urban Islamabad benefits from better school networks and greater access to ICT-based educational resources. These inequalities create a clear urban-rural divide in educational participation and learning opportunities (UNESCO IIEP, 2018; UNICEF Pakistan, 2020c and 2025b; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024 and 2025a&b). Migration has also emerged as a major factor contributing to the OOSC problem in ICT. Islamabad attracts a large number of migrants from other provinces seeking employment and improved living conditions. Many migrant families settle in informal communities such as *katchi abadis*, temporary settlements, and low-income colonies where educational facilities are insufficient or inaccessible. Children living in these settlements frequently face barriers including overcrowding, poverty, lack of documentation, and frequent movement between locations, all of which disrupt continuous schooling (Kazmi S.W., 2015; UNICEF, 2022c; UNESCO IIEP Learning Portal, 2021; UNICEF Pakistan, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a&b and 2026b). Furthermore, poverty and parental education remain among the strongest determinants of educational participation in ICT. Children whose parents have limited educational backgrounds are often less likely to receive academic guidance and support at home.

Similarly, economically disadvantaged households may struggle to maintain regular school attendance for their children despite the availability of schools. These factors reinforce cycles of social inequality and educational deprivation (Wasif et al., 2012; Kazmi S.W. 2015, 2025 and 2026; UNICEF Pakistan, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b and 2026a&b). Overall, the findings emphasize the need for targeted policies focusing on vulnerable rural communities, migrant populations, and economically marginalized families in order to achieve equitable educational access for all children in ICT (Mughal, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018; Kazmi, S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a and 2026b).

6. Conclusion

The educational landscape of the Islamabad Capital Territory presents a relatively positive picture when compared to other regions/areas of Pakistan, particularly in terms of literacy rates, school availability, and overall infrastructure development. However, despite these advantages, educational exclusion remains a persistent challenge. Estimates suggest that around 15% of school-age children in ICT are still out of school, indicating that improved infrastructure alone is not sufficient to ensure universal access to education. This aligns with national evidence showing that structural inequality, poverty, and social barriers continue to limit educational participation even in relatively developed urban settings (Mughal, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018; World Bank, 2022; UNICEF Pakistan, 2023; Kazmi S. W., 2015, 2024-2026; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a&b, and 2026a)

A key implication of this situation is that policy interventions must go beyond general improvements in schooling facilities and focus on targeted areas of exclusion. First, peri-urban expansion remains critical, particularly in underserved localities such as Bhara Kahu, Tarnol, Nilore, and Sihala, where access to schools, transport, and digital learning facilities is still limited. These areas require additional school infrastructure, teacher deployment, and transport support to reduce dropout risks and improve

enrollment rates. (UNICEF Pakistan, 2020). Mushrooming Housing Societies in ICT area are rarely catering the children educational needs of children and thus contributing to the soaring OOSC problem in ICT, particularly in urban vicinities (Kazmi, 2026b).

Second, migrant settlements and informal housing communities such as *katchi abadis* require special policy attention. Rapid urban migration into ICT has created pockets of educational vulnerability where children face barriers including poverty, lack of documentation, and unstable living conditions. These challenges directly contribute to school non-enrollment and irregular attendance, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage. (UNESCO IIEP/ASER Pakistan, 2018; UNESCO IIEP Learning Portal, 2021)

Third, girls' access to education remains an important policy concern. Although ICT performs better than many other regions in reducing gender disparities, issues such as safety, mobility constraints, and domestic responsibilities still restrict full participation. Strengthening safe transport systems, financial support, school proximity, and community awareness/participation is essential to ensure sustained female enrollment. (UNWOMEN, 2020, Baran and Bend, 2023; Datoo et al., 2024; UNICEF Pakistan, 2023; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2024; Kazmi S. W. 2015 & 2026)

Fourth, improving school quality (missing facilities) and quality education are as important as increasing access. Issues related to teacher availability, learning outcomes, and classroom conditions must be addressed to ensure that children not only enroll but also complete meaningful education (Page 2021a-e; Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023&b, 2024 and 2025a). Finally, expanding non-formal education pathways is essential for children who are unable to attend regular schools due to socio-economic constraints. Flexible learning models, community-based education, and accelerated learning programs can help reintegrate out-of-school children into the education system (Kazmi S.G.H. et al., 2023a&b, 2024, 2025a&b and 2026b). Overall, the evidence suggests that ICT can serve as a useful policy model for urban educational inclusion in

Pakistan. Its relatively stronger governance and infrastructure provide a foundation for innovative interventions; however, sustained progress will depend on addressing localized inequalities, strengthening inclusion strategies, and ensuring that no child is excluded due to geography, poverty, or social barriers.

The previous studies found significant number of student's (3%) unable to reading (English & Urdu) and solve simple mathematic questions (Plus and Minus), mainly due to poor schooling standards, mainly due to poor infrastructure, missing facilities, lacking faculty, female access, weak teaching-learning environment, low classroom inputs, and poor curriculum (Guarcello et al., 2014; Farooq and Kai, 2016; Kazmi, S.G.H. et al., 2024, 2025a&b and 2016a). Some special inputs for improving quality education may also pay dividend in curtailing the number of OOSC in the ICT and elsewhere in Pakistan.

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