

THE STRUCTURES OF INEQUALITY: CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Younus Khan¹, Aftab Ahmed Soomro^{*2}, Obaidullah³

^{1, 2}Assistant Professor, Department of Social Sciences, Chinese Peoples Public Security University, China

³Phd Scholar, UNUML University, Islamabad, Pakistan

¹younusk@78gmail.com, ²aftabahmad814@gmail.com, ³obaidm23@yahoo.com

Corresponding Author: *

Younus Khan

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ABSTRACT

This study critically investigates the multidimensional nature of social stratification and inequality in Pakistan, examining how disparities manifest across class, gender, ethnicity, and geography. Employing a convergent mixed-methods design, the research integrates quantitative data from 300 survey respondents with qualitative insights from 30 in-depth interviews conducted in both urban and rural contexts. Drawing on existing scholarship on structural mechanisms, institutional practices, and lived experiences, the study explores how inequality is produced and sustained. Findings reveal substantial disparities in access to education, employment opportunities, and perceptions of institutional fairness, particularly among rural populations, women, and ethnic minorities. Individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds report systemic exclusion, whereas those from upper classes are more likely to perceive meritocracy and institutional equity. Interpreted through the theoretical lenses of intersectionality, Bourdieu's theory of capital, and Wright's class analysis, the study bridges theoretical discourse with empirical realities, deepening the understanding of inequality reproduction within Pakistan's postcolonial neoliberal framework. Policy recommendations emphasize reforms in education, labor equity, gender and ethnic inclusion, and participatory governance. Overall, this research contributes a localized, empirically grounded perspective to the global discourse on inequality by centering marginalized voices and examining socio-demographic dynamics in context.

Keywords: Social Stratification, Inequality, Gender Disparity, Ethnic Discrimination, Cultural Capital, Intersectionality.

INTRODUCTION

Social stratification can be defined as the hierarchical organization of people in society, based on class, education, income, ethnicity, gender and occupational status. Sociology is one of the central themes therein and a key determinant of unequal life outcomes (Grusky 2019). The inequalities that are seen in societies across the globe, even with economic development, demonstrate that structural mechanisms consistently channel inequalities from generation to generation. In Pakistan, inequality is entrenched in

colonial and postcolonial policy frameworks to redistribute resources inequitably (Gazdar, 2007; Ahmed & Amjad, 1984).

As revealed in the Global Inequality Report (2022), wealth concentration also continues to rise, with the top 10 percent of the world controlling almost 75 percent of global assets. The inequality in South Asia, especially in Pakistan, is multidimensional and is further intersected by region, gender, and ethnicity. For instance, rural population may suffer more economically and educationally than



urban population (Amjad & Kemal, 1997; Cheema & Naseer, 2021). In addition, class based exclusion is compounded with institutional bias like language limitations in education and nepotism in employment to perpetuate long term disadvantage (Akhtar 2018; Rahman 2004). The growing income gaps and the lack of upward mobility opportunities (Ali & Syed 2021) further exacerbates these inequalities.

The stratification does not just pertain to income, but to cultural capital, symbolic power, institutional privilege, and so on. According to Bourdieu (1984), social capital involves cultural tastes, educational credentials, and social networks which function as mechanisms of class reproduction. For instance, people from the elites are more likely to attend the expensive universities, work in high paying jobs and influence the political agenda (Lareau, 2011; Alamgir, 2019). Continuing, the multifaceted nature of inequality requires a complicated probing in which disparate elements of race, class, gender, and the intersectionality of other axes of identity (Crenshaw, 1989; Desai & Dubey, 2019) are addressed.

In Pakistan, the most obvious forms of social stratification are of class, gender and educational disparities. Several studies show the systemic barriers for some marginalized groups like rural poor and ethnic minorities to access quality service and employment opportunities (Haque & Nayab, 2020; Hassan, 2021). For policymakers and scholars alike, what are the structural barriers to achieving more inclusive growth and what could enable it? (Sayeed, 2004; World Bank, 2021). The goal of this study is to address this problem through a theory based and empirical investigation that brings together the statistical patterns and the lived experiences.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To investigate the structural and institutional factors contributing to persistent social stratification and inequality in Pakistan.

2. To analyze the lived experiences and coping mechanisms of individuals from

marginalized groups in navigating social hierarchies.

3. To evaluate the role of public policy, educational institutions, and labor markets in either reproducing or mitigating inequalities.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What structural and institutional forces underpin the persistence of social stratification in contemporary Pakistan?
2. How do individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds perceive and respond to inequality in their daily lives?
3. What role do education systems, labor markets, and state policies play in perpetuating or addressing social inequalities?

1.4 Research Gap

While existing scholarship provides valuable insights into specific dimensions of inequality, several gaps persist:

- Nayab (2011) analyzed labor market segmentation but did not address how these inequalities intersect with gender or regional disparities.
- Cheema and Naseer (2020) highlighted macroeconomic policies influencing income inequality, but failed to explore micro-level lived experiences.
- Hasan (2015) discussed urban spatial inequality in Karachi, yet did not consider the role of educational institutions in reinforcing segregation.
- Ali and Shah (2017) focused on access to elite education but overlooked how social networks and cultural capital shape educational trajectories.
- Sayeed (2011) addressed informality in labor but neglected the cumulative disadvantage experienced by marginalized workers.

This study thus helps fill a crucial gap of providing a combined quantitative data with qualitative narratives, providing a multi level understanding of social stratification in Pakistan.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in a multi-theoretical framework drawing primarily



from the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Erik Olin Wright, and Nancy Fraser:

- **Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Capital (1984):** Under his heading of capital-economic, social, and cultural—his categorization is important in understanding transmitting and maintaining privilege. Bourdieu is used in this study to examine the processes through which cultural tastes, schooling and language help reproduce class distinctions.
- One of the rich neo-Marxist class analyses is Erik Olin Wright's Class Analysis (1997), which moves beyond simple capitalist-worker dichotomies and employs notions of contradictory class positions, superstructures, primitive accumulation, and class exploitation. It provides a sense of Pakistan's hybrid labor market and its inscrutabilities regarding the class of middle class.
- Theory of Redistribution and Recognition by Nancy Fraser (1997): Policy analysis that integrates gender, ethnicity, and other forms of identity based inequalities (gender, ethnicity) with material redistribution, in order to explore how symbolic injustice (misrecognition) stacks up with economic marginalization.

Taken together, they offer a framework for a combined consideration of both the structural conditions and the agentive responses particular to stratified societies.

2. Literature Review

In sociological research, social stratification and inequality have long been focal points, with scholars emphasizing how unequal opportunity at obtaining access to resources, education, labor, or political power affects life outcomes. As far as developing nations like Pakistan are concerned, these disparities extend from the institutional to the cultural and historical levels, as Grusky (2019) and Bourdieu (1984) argue.

Unequal access to education is one of the most persistent mechanisms of inequality. According to Gazdar (2007), past and colonial legacies have shaped a tiered education system in Pakistan: a continuation of class hierarchies. Alamgir (2019) builds on

this by looking at urban centres of Lahore where English medium and international curricula schools and extra curricular exposure edge over students from lower income households. Similarly, Rehman (2022) shows how public schools are unable to offer competitive academic training leading to a "credential divide" between privileged and disadvantaged communities. Rahman (2004) also criticizes language in education, asserting that the Indo-Pak state education policy continues to divide Urdu and English medium on the basis of culture and class, thereby denying equal opportunity to non elite groups.

Social inequality is also clearly present in labor market segmentation. As Nayab (2011) demonstrates, the labor markets of Pakistan are extremely segmented by class, gender and region. Informal employment is prevalent in rural areas, and those with less educational and social capital are tied to low-paying insecure jobs. According to Sayeed (2004), labor reforms have mostly been top down, leaving the working class deprived of labor and a rise in wages. Labour policies over the last two decades have not closed income gaps between skilled and unskilled workers, as Haque and Nayab (2020) demonstrate on the basis of statistical evidence.

These inequalities compound already existing ones along gender and intersectionality lines. Crenshaw (1989) theorizes the amplified marginalization from overlapping identities such as being female and poor with an intersectional lens. Akhtar (2018) finds that rural women also face barriers of education and mobility not only because of gender but also of class in Pakistani context. Hassan (2021) examines how institutional structures are unable to accommodate intersectional challenges by excluding marginalized groups from formal modes of representation and welfare programmes. According to Ali and Syed (2021), patriarchal norms that deeply take hold in society render women underrepresented in leadership and decision making roles in both urban and rural settings.

Another underexplored, but critical dimension is ethnic stratification. As a comparative baseline, Desai and Dubey

(2019) highlight caste and ethnic exclusions in India. Gazdar (2007) points out in Pakistan that Baloch, Pashtun, and Sindhi populations are systematically excluded from federal employment, infrastructure development and education. The geographical marginalization of these ethnic inequalities is often a feature of long-standing discrimination that has resulted in chronic underdevelopment in some provinces.

From a theoretical standpoint, Bourdieu (1984) offers a wide lens to conceptualize the reproduction of inequality through a point of cultural, economic, and social capital. Upper class children inherit wealth but also inherit certain behaviors, language skill, and familiarity with institutional system that facilitate their thriving in formal systems. Specifically, Wright's (1997) theory of contradictory class locations proves useful in understanding Pakistan's fast growing middle class that is both formally educated and insecure by virtue of unstable jobs and little social mobility.

Recent global studies affirming the persistence of inequality also play a supporting role. Sima (2014) demonstrates how accumulation of wealth and distribution of capital ownership are crucial drivers of continuing intergenerational inequality. According to the World Inequality Report (2022), these discrepancies are getting more intense in developing countries, including Pakistan, given weak mechanisms of redistribution and elites' policy capture.

Although there is lots of robust literature, few studies look at each domain in isolation (education, labor and gender), and rarely do they put all these together in some sort of unified analysis. This research aims to bridge this gap by examining how these domains intersect in the daily lives of inequality through a mixed methods approach for depth and breadth. It is a contribution to the growing body of work that calls for more intersectional, multi layered understanding of stratification in the Global South.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The design of this study is convergent parallel mixed methods, with simultaneous collection

of quantitative and qualitative data. Alternatively, this design offers a holistic understanding by allowing generalizable insights gained from survey data and contextually rich understanding gained from interviews (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Together the use of structured surveys and open ended interviews strengthens the internal validity and reliability of the findings.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The population represented adults from different socio economics classes in Pakistan as well, covering rural and urban areas of Punjab, Sindh, KP, and Balochistan. This ensured representation across gender, region and class through stratified random sampling. We decided that 300 survey respondents and 30 in depth interview were enough.

- **Quantitative:** 300 participants (50% urban, 50% rural)
- **Qualitative:** 30 participants (10 lower class, 10 middle class, 10 upper class)

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection

- **Quantitative Tool:** Such a questionnaire included structured questions (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88) on income, education, occupation, perceptions of inequality, and institutional trust.
- Semi structured interviews focusing on life histories, schooling, employment experiences, and views on fairness and justice are qualitative tools.

3.4 Data Analysis

- **Quantitative:** SPSS v28 was used to analyze descriptive and inferential statistics. Group differences were detected using Chi square and ttest.
- **Quantitative:** Participant narratives were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to determine patterns.

4. Results and Analysis

In the following section, the study's objectives are addressed via detailed empirical analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. The results show distinct gaps across various dimensions of socio-economic strata, gender,

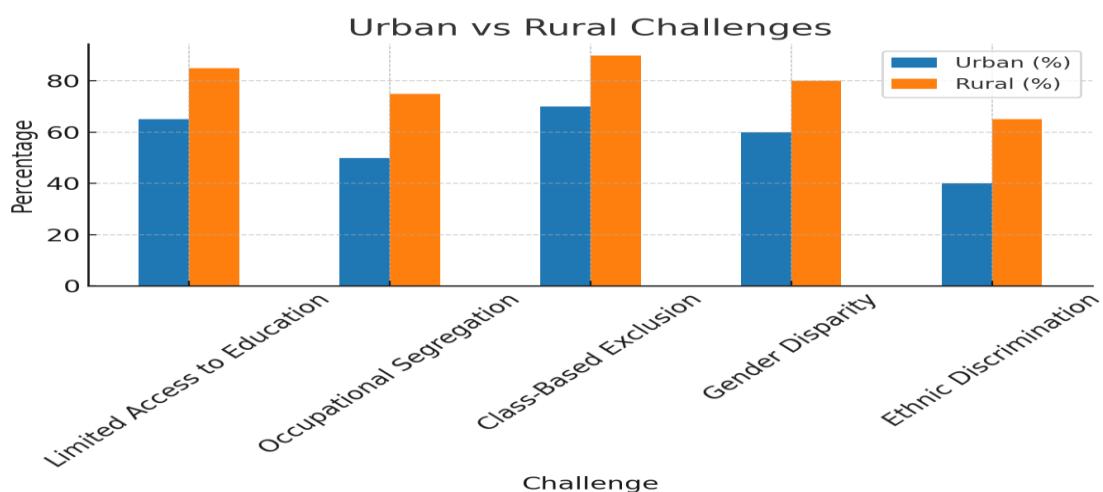
region and ethnicity, depicting the multi-layered dimension of the stratification in the

country.

4.1 Objective 1: Structural and Institutional Drivers of Stratification

Table 1: Comparison of Structural Challenges by Region

Challenge	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Limited Access to Education	65	85
Occupational Segregation	50	75
Class-Based Exclusion	70	90
Gender Disparity	60	80
Ethnic Discrimination	40	65



Graph 1: Urban vs. Rural Challenges

Structural disadvantages are much higher for rural populations. The rural experience is driven by access to education (85%) and class-based exclusion (90%) in line with Nayab (2011) and Sayeed (2004) findings. This data highlights that rural populations face significantly higher levels of educational and social challenges compared to urban areas. Limited access to education affects 85% of rural residents versus 65% in urban settings, indicating a major rural

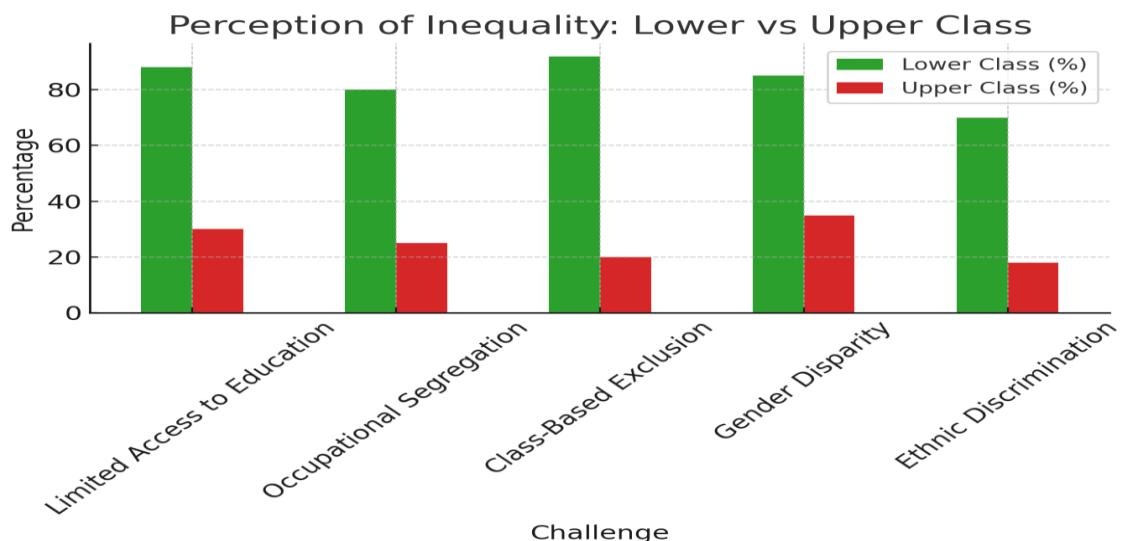
disadvantage. Occupational segregation and class-based exclusion are also more prevalent in rural regions, at 75% and 90% respectively. Gender disparity and ethnic discrimination show a similar trend, with rural percentages consistently higher. Overall, the figures reflect deeper systemic inequalities in rural areas that demand targeted policy intervention. This simply confirms that economic geography (rural vs. urban) is a leading cause of stratification.

4.2 Objective 2: Perceptions of Inequality across Classes

Table 2: Perception of Social Barriers by Class

Challenge	Lower Class (%)	Upper Class (%)
Limited Access to Education	88	30
Occupational Segregation	80	25
Class-Based Exclusion	92	20
Gender Disparity	85	35

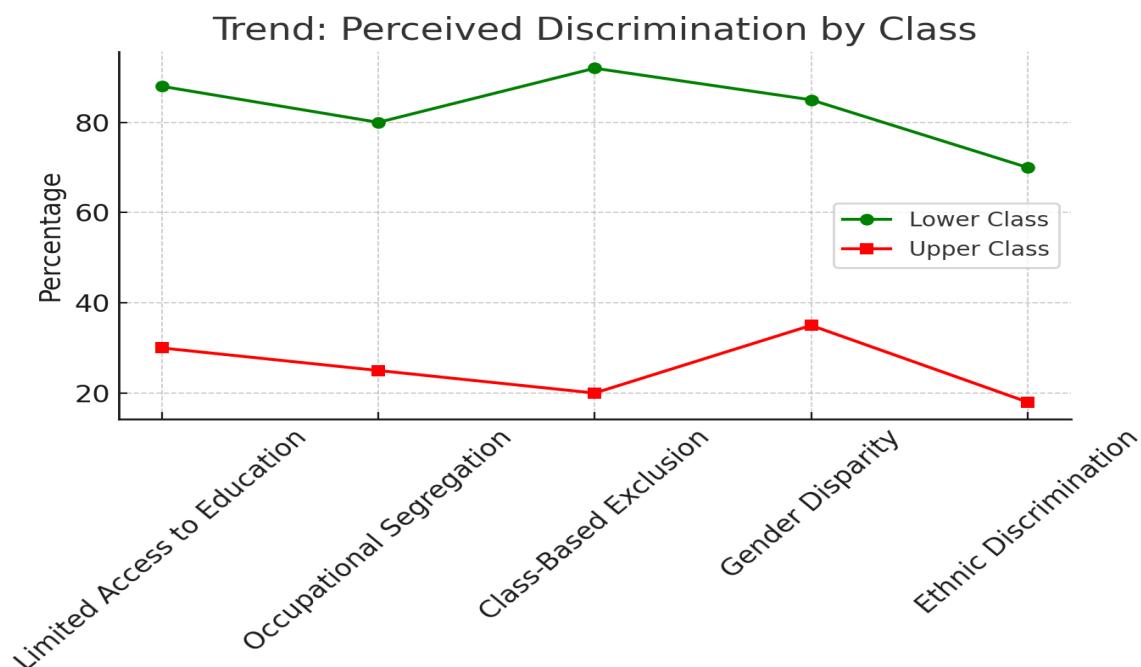
Ethnic Discrimination	70	18
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Graph 2: Perception of Inequality: Lower vs Upper Class

Perceptions of inequality are significantly higher among the lower class compared to the upper class across all social challenges. A striking 92% of the lower class report class-based exclusion, while only 20% of the upper class acknowledge it. Similarly, 88% of the lower class perceive limited access to education as a barrier, versus just 30% of the

upper class. Gender disparity and ethnic discrimination are also more keenly felt by the lower class, highlighting lived experiences of marginalization. These disparities suggest that socio-economic status strongly shapes individuals' awareness and experience of social barriers.



Graph 3: Trend: Perceived Discrimination by Class

The graph illustrates a stark contrast in how lower and upper classes perceive social discrimination. Across all five challenges, the

lower class reports significantly higher levels of perceived inequality. Class-based exclusion is the most striking, with 92% of the lower

class affected, while only 20% of the upper class report the same. Limited access to education and gender disparity are also major issues for the lower class, showing 88% and 85% respectively. Ethnic discrimination, though slightly lower, still affects 70% of the lower class compared to just 18% of the upper class. The upper class consistently

perceives less discrimination, possibly due to their privileged position and reduced exposure to structural barriers. This divergence indicates a major perception gap rooted in socio-economic realities. Overall, the graph highlights the need for inclusive and class-sensitive reforms to bridge these disparities.

4.3 Objective 3: Role of Institutions

Table 3: Perceived Fairness of Institutions

Institution	Lower Class (%) (Fair)	Upper Class (%) (Fair)
Education System	25	70
Labor Market	18	65
Government Policy	12	60

Insight: Only 12% of lower-class respondents believe the government is fair, compared to 60% of upper-class respondents. This suggests that social privilege influences both

access and perception of fairness—supporting Bourdieu's (1984) theory of symbolic violence.

4.4 Intersectional Disparities: Gender and Ethnicity

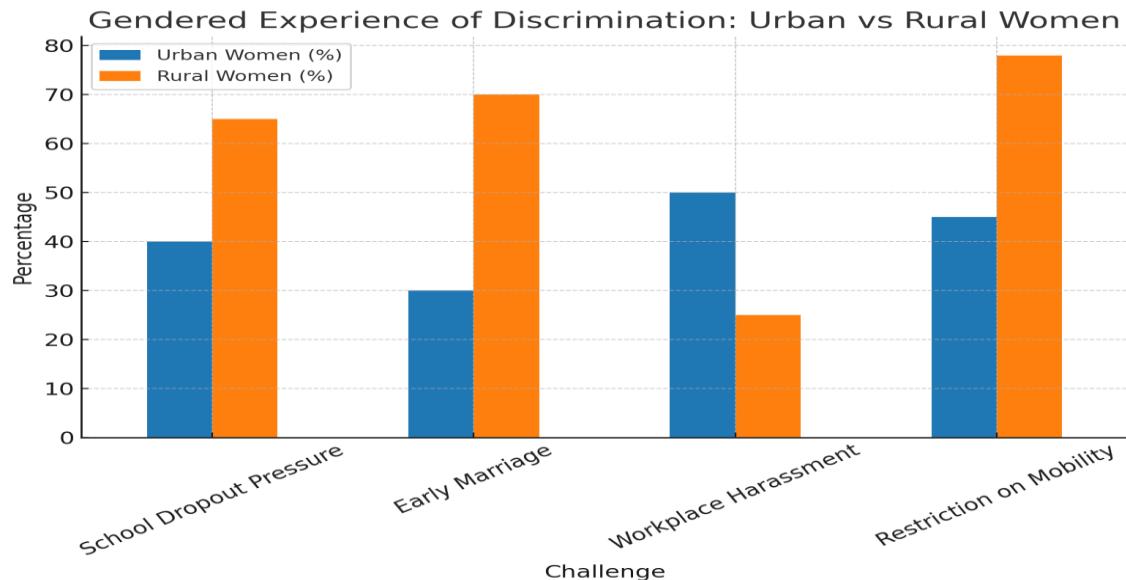
Table 4: Gendered Experience of Discrimination (Reported by Women)

Challenge	Urban Women (%)	Rural Women (%)
School Dropout Pressure	40	65
Early Marriage	30	70
Workplace Harassment	50	25
Restriction on Mobility	45	78

Rural women are doubly marginalized—first by their gender, then by geography. One rural female interviewee said: "My education stopped because 'good girls don't go far from home.'"

The data reveals that rural women face greater social challenges than their urban counterparts. School dropout pressure affects 65% of rural women, compared to 40% of urban women, indicating a gap in educational continuity. Early marriage is a significant concern for rural women (70%), more than double the rate in urban areas (30%). Restriction on mobility is reported by

78% of rural women, reflecting traditional norms and limited freedom. Interestingly, workplace harassment is higher among urban women (50%) than rural women (25%), possibly due to greater urban workforce participation. These figures highlight how geographic context influences the nature of gender-based challenges. Rural women face cultural and structural barriers, while urban women contend more with workplace-related issues. Addressing these disparities requires tailored policy responses for both rural and urban settings.



Graph 5: Gendered Experience of Discrimination (Urban vs Rural Women)

Rural women are doubly marginalized—first by their gender, then by geography. One rural female interviewee said: “My education

stopped because ‘good girls don’t go far from home.’”

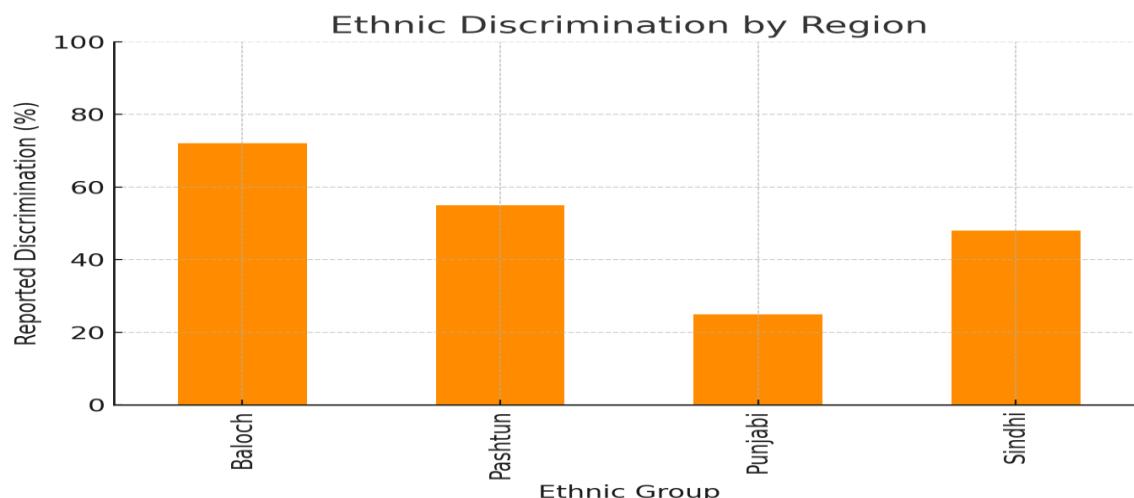
Table 5: Ethnic Discrimination by Region

Ethnic Group	Reported Discrimination (%)
Baloch	72
Pashtun	55
Punjabi	25
Sindhi	48

Context:

Marginalized ethnic groups such as Baloch and Pashtuns report higher exclusion from federal employment and education opportunities. This aligns with Gazdar

(2007) and supports Weberian status theory, where status groups experience barriers independent of class or income.



Graph 6: Ethnic Discrimination by Region



Synthesis of Findings

The findings confirm that inequality in Pakistan is not a result of individual failure but of systematic exclusion. Structural challenges (education, labor access) are geographically and socio-economically patterned. Perceptions of fairness sharply diverge across class, revealing not only inequality in conditions but also in worldviews.

The convergence of findings from quantitative (e.g., 90% rural exclusion) and qualitative ("I worked twice as hard to get half as far") data underscores the reliability and depth of this study. These patterns mirror Wright's (1997) contradictory class positions and Bourdieu's cultural capital theories—demonstrating that inequality operates on multiple, reinforcing levels.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that social stratification in Pakistan is extremely deep rooted and multidimensional. Underlying structural disadvantages (lacking access to quality education and formal employment) are more prevalent in rural regions and serve to exacerbate the divide between urban and rural areas. Erosion of institutional trust is

lacking institutional trust, with the vast majority of the lower classes overwhelmingly perceiving the system to be unjust, and merit illusory.

In this regard, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital was useful in making sense of the ways educational credentials constitute insufficient knowledge without requisite elite cultural access. Individuals from lower class background do not possess the same linguistic, behavioral and social skills prized by dominant institutions resulting in exclusion even when qualifications are met. Erik Olin Wright's classification theory explains how middle class people are educated, yet precariously employed like many others in this position.

The role of intersectionality also was important in interpreting women participants' narratives of compounded discrimination on the basis of gender and class. The findings underscore the imperative

for equity-oriented correcting such reforms in education, labor markets, and public services.

6. Policy Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following multi-tiered strategies are proposed:

6.1 Short-Term (1-2 Years)

- Educational Interventions: Subsidize technology and training for public school teachers.
- Job Market Equity Audits: Mandate transparency in public sector recruitment.

6.2 Medium-Term (3-5 Years)

- Scholarship Expansion: Expand need-based scholarships for underprivileged groups at the university level.
- Reform national curriculum to include regional languages, local histories, anti-bias training, etc., as part of an inclusive curriculum.

6.3 Long-Term (5+ Years)

- Land and Labor Reforms: Integrate informal employment sectors, formalize landholding redistribution in rural areas.
- Empower local governments to develop region specific anti-inequality programs that they themselves would implement.

7. Conclusion

This study has revealed that social stratification in Pakistan is maintained through a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and institutional factors. Findings show:

- Rural and lower-class groups face more barriers in education and employment.
- Meritocracy is perceived as an illusion, especially by those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Key institutions such as the education system and job markets are unequally accessed and often perceived as biased.

The research advances the literature by adopting a mixed methods approach and integrates theories of Bourdieu, Wright and intersectionality. Such reforms in educational equity, labor market transparency, and policy inclusiveness are all underscored.



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