How Caste and Gender Affect schooling in Rural Pakistan

Where high-caste groups dominate, low-caste children—especially girls—may face high barriers to attending a local school

In developing societies stratified along caste, clan, or ethnic lines, social hierarchies can be particularly salient, yet their consequences for durable inequalities in opportunity have been only lightly explored. In a recent paper Jacoby and Mansuri combine novel data from rural Pakistan on the caste composition of village hamlets and the location of primary schools to investigate the impact on school enrollment of two interacting social barriers.

The first of these is the caste boundary effect. The caste system in large parts of rural Pakistan operates much as the one in neighboring India does, though it remains virtually unstudied. Caste identity is embedded in occupational differences, which are associated with status and notions of purity and pollution. Various exclusionary norms follow from these hierarchies and are exercised in relationships of mutual assistance, in social networks, and in the establishment and maintenance of political power within and outside the village economy. To the extent that a high-caste group dominates a community, it may be able (and willing) to exclude or at least discourage the low-caste group from accessing local public services. Thus for low-caste households, sending a child to a school located in a high-caste-dominant settlement, where he or she is stigmatized, may be more costly.

The second social barrier is the settlement boundary effect. The custom of *purdah* (female seclusion), which restricts female access to public spaces, is far more rigidly enforced outside the immediate community—the hamlet or settlement—than within it. Thus all else being equal, sending a daughter to a school located outside her settlement (even though still within her village) may be more costly than sending her to an equally distant school within her settlement. This social barrier does not apply to boys.

Since not every rural habitation has its own school, let alone multiple facilities catering to each ethnic, caste, or religious group within it, access to education invariably requires many children to cross settlement or caste boundaries to reach the nearest school—not only in rural Pakistan but elsewhere in the developing world. Does the need to make such crossings deter school enrollment, and can these effects thus help explain the persistent and large caste and gender differences in educational attainment in rural Pakistan and throughout much of South Asia?

In investigating these questions, the authors use representative household survey data from 165 villages supplemented with information from a village census and a school census undertaken in Punjab and Sindh, the two most populous provinces of Pakistan. The school census has detailed information on all schools inside and along the perimeter of each of the sample villages. GPS coordinates are also available for both households and schools, so that the distance between each can be calculated. Village census data provide landholdings and the caste or clan (*zaat* or *hiradari*) affiliation of every household in each of the 165 villages, from which a settlement-level measure of landownership-based caste dominance is constructed.

After ruling out endogenous school placement, the authors uncover a large settlement boundary effect in a sample of 9- to 15-year-old children. The propensity to ever enroll in school is substantially higher for girls who do not need to cross a settlement boundary to attend the nearest school, with household distance to this school as well as household wealth controlled for. There is no such effect for boys.

Caste status, however, strongly conditions this result. Low-caste girls (and boys) appear to gain little from the presence of a school in their own settlement. But the reason is that many low-caste children live in settlements dominated by high-caste households and thus face particularly high barriers to attending a local school, if one exists. Indeed, low-caste children are much more likely to enroll when a school is available in a low-caste-dominant settlement. For low-caste girls, who are also less mobile, this caste boundary effect is about twice as large as it is for low-caste boys. Overall, where social barriers are absent, parents of differing caste status make similar schooling choices for their children, suggesting that they face similar returns to education.

The quantitative importance of caste-based stigma is further demonstrated by a policy experiment that looks at the enrollment impact of school location within villages. Since more than three-fourths of elementary schools are public, government decisions on school allocation are central in determining access to education. The analysis shows that building schools in low-caste-dominant settlements would boost enrollment by almost twice as much as placing a school in every currently unserved settlement—and would do so at one-sixth the cost. Given the difficulty of designing policies that raise the returns to education on a large scale, these findings provide hope that suitably targeted supply-side interventions can substantially mitigate educational inequities.