Article

Gender Construct for Sustainable Development in Pakistan: Evaluating Alignment of Education System with the Religious Ideology

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Abstract: Gender construct plays a role in activating or deactivating gender equality in society, which is an essential factor for sustainable development. An education system is a primary source of building and mainstreaming social values, especially gender constructs, and Pakistan's education system aims to provide equal access and un-discriminatory education to both boys and girls, aligned with religious ideology. The current research evaluates the alignment between the gender construct informed by religion in the education system of Pakistan and the gender construct informed by the local religious perception. To achieve this purpose, this research captures the perceptions of local experts on gender constructs, guided by the education system and underlining religious (Islamic) ideology via semi-structured interviews. The research identifies that the obsolete interpretation of religion, aligned with the local interpretation, guides biased gender constructs through the education system. The current research has identified the leverage points to transform the current education system of Pakistan into a sustainable education system by promoting religiously acceptable gender-inclusive education.

Keywords: education policy; gender construct; gender equality; Islam; Pakistan

1. Introduction

A country's overall development depends on the appropriate and maximum usage of its human resource (both men and women); therefore, achieving gender equality is being emphasized through every global platform (MDGs, SDGs) [1]. Gender is referred to as the social characteristics, the corresponding opportunities and relationships associated with being male or female. These characteristics, opportunities, and relationships are learned through the process of socialization as they are socially constructed [2]. Gender describes what is allowed, valued, and expected of women and men. Gender equality is defined as equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for men and women, and it is a central indicator for sustainable development. Gender equity, on the other hand, is about ensuring justice and fairness in the distribution of responsibilities and benefits between men and women based on their unique strengths.

In Pakistan, women comprise nearly half of the total population, but they still have fewer opportunities in health, education, income, and social status in society—which contributes to the continuously persisting gender gap [3]. While describing the current women's welfare condition, [4] identified that Pakistan lagged in most of the welfare indexes, especially women's economic empowerment. It is well-documented that empowerment is positively correlated with equal opportunity to access education for girls [5]. Conversely, it has also been reported that girls' access to education, even in the urban areas of Pakistan, accounts for two times less than boys, due to cultural, security, and educational return perception for girls in this society [6,7].

Furthermore, the disempowerment and disparity in access to education contradicts the ideology of Pakistan, which is also mentioned in its country name: the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The importance of knowledge and education in Islam can be seen in the first revelations of the Holy Qur'an commands as it states:

> "Proclaim! (or read) in the name of thy Lord and who created. Created man from a (mere) clot of a congealed blood. Proclaim! And thy Lord is most Bountiful. He Who taught (the use of) the pen. Taught man that he knew not" (Qur'an, 96:1–5).

The interpretation of religious texts (i.e., Quranic and Hadith), has well established that Islam obligates education, awareness, and independence to every human individual, without any distinction between male and female [8].

The education system is the most powerful tool for human resource development and for the heritage of local values and traditions. Therefore, every nation designs its education policy according to what the nation requires to nurture human resources for the national interest. Education for sustainable development is defined as education that intends to train individuals to achieve a just society, economic feasibility, along with environmental integrity [9]. Therefore, it is important to maximize the cultivation of enablers (both men and women), through educations system, who will achieve the overall development by acting independently and acknowledging their collective responsibilities towards social development in accordance with social norms. Depriving any gender from being an enabler or contributor to development can deprive the whole nation of sustainable development and prosperity.

In Pakistan, the educational policy was last updated in 2017, highlighting that the education system of Pakistan has to be based on three pillars: religion (Islam), the vision of Quaid e Azam (the founder of Pakistan), and the constitution of Pakistan 1973 [10]. Therefore, a considerable weightage of Islamic teachings is intended to be incorporated in the construction of the curriculum framework, national education policy, and textbooks. Research (e.g., [11,12]) has explored and demonstrated that Islamiyat (study of religion) as a mandatory subject in the education system of Pakistan is instilling a biased gender construct[1]. Furthermore, previous studies on the analysis of building gender construct via textbooks in Pakistan have identified gender-biased illustrations across primary and higher-level textbooks—which include professions, everyday roles, mobility, and disparity in the presentation of male vs. female role models [2,15,16]. The literature has identified that the religion element in the education system of Pakistan is informing gender constructs; however, there is a lack of research on evaluating the alignment between a gender construct informed by the religious values embedded in the education system of Pakistan and a gender construct informed by local religious perception. Exploring this gap will help in identifying the insights which may help in revising the education system of Pakistan to reduce gender biases and promote equality, peacefully, through social consensus.

Furthermore, this paper centers its focus on gender constructs within the context of a binary gender framework, encompassing male and female identities. This approach is chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the specific case study of this paper revolves around the integration of Islamic values in the education system of Pakistan, which necessitates a narrow emphasis on the traditional gender concepts of men and women, rather than a broader exploration of the gender spectrum. Secondly, in Pakistan and broader studies of Islam, discussions often revolve solely around women's empowerment. However, this paper contends that empowerment is not exclusive to women in the contemporary era and socio-global context; men too are susceptible to disempowerment and require attention in this regard to support sustainable empowerment for all. The primary objective of this paper is to illuminate the gender role divide between women and men within the Pakistani-Islamic context and shed light on the concept of empowerment for both genders. By identifying and addressing these disparities, this study aims to pave the way for integrating these insights into the education system, thus providing robust support for the foundational principles of education in Pakistan.

2. Islamic Ideology Informing the Education System of Pakistan and Gender Perception

2.1. Overview of the Education System of Pakistan

In the constitution of Pakistan, under article 25(A) [10], it is stated that all children aged 5–16 years in the country should be provided with free and compulsory education. In Pakistan, there are two parallel education systems: formal education and Madrasa education [17]. In this particular study, we only focused on formal education, that includes formal public and private schooling. According to [18], Pakistan's education system serves 51.19 million students, out of which 25.09 million are enrolled in primary and middle schools. The formal education system in Pakistan is comprises pre-primary schools (ages of 3 to 4+ years), primary schools (ages of 5 to 9+ years; up to 5th grade), middle school (10 to 12+ years; up to 8th grade), high schools (13 to 14+ years; up to 10th grade), and higher secondary schools (15 to 16+ years; up to 12th grade). The formal education institutions are public schools (dealing with 56% of total enrolment) and private schools (catering to 44% of total enrolment).

2.2. The Education Policy of Pakistan and Integration of Religion

Ref. [17] describes the background of the education policy of Pakistan as follows: Pakistan gained independence in 1947, adopting the ideology of a nation where Muslims can live their lives according to the teachings of Islam. This was translated into the 'Objectives Resolution' and embedded into the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1973. Education being a vital institution to construct national unity along the lines of ideology, Islamic ideology was also integrated into the national education system at Pakistan's first education conference in 1947. Thereafter, education policies ratified from 1959 to 2009 collectively emphasized the objective of delivering Islamic values through compulsory Islamic teachings and interpretation of selected Quranic verses in primary and secondary education, extended to the graduation level in 2009. The respective policies ensured that the curriculum and textbooks across all levels should be consistent with Islam's cultural and ethical values. The course of Islamiyat was put forth to integrate Islamic values into education.

The latest National Education Policy 2017–2025 (2017) [17] of Pakistan also mentioned Islamic teachings as one of the vital pillars of the education system of Pakistan. The major goal of education policy (2017) was character building and holistic development of children based on universal Islamic and ethical values through Taleem (seek, use, and evaluate knowledge), Tarbiya (social, technical, moral, and ethical training), and Tazkiya (purification of the soul). Moreover, the document itself identifies the issues and challenges regarding character building based on Islamic principles in the education system. The document stresses that studies on the interpretation of Quranic verses and Hadith are not properly introduced in the compulsory coursework of Islamiyat across all levels, and there is a lack of qualified and trained teachers. In addition, Tarbiya and Tazkiya are also highlighted, as they have not been given appropriate weightage in the curriculum, and implementation is also scarce. The document proposes that the Tarbiya/Tazkiya components in the education system should be integrated through extracurricular activities like scouting activities for boys and guide activities for girls. The objective of these activities includes the duty to Allah and self for both boys and girls. In addition, duty toward others is proposed for boys, and duty toward community and country is proposed for girls.

2.3. Looking into the Implementation of Framework and Policy

Implementation of the education policy of Pakistan and the corresponding curriculum framework can be seen through the content of the compulsory local school board textbooks. Although the education policy acknowledges equality in education among genders, as narrated in the Quran (96:1–5): "both male and female are supposed to seek Ilam (knowledge and awareness)", we can still identify differences between approaches to character building

and social skills development for boys and girls. Thus, it is critical to understand how the current education system of Pakistan is influencing these biased gender constructs.

Several studies have analyzed the impression of content and illustrations embedded in primary and secondary education textbooks on gender construct in Pakistan. Ref. [19] carried out a discourse analysis of Urdu and English textbooks published by the Punjab board, Pakistan, and claimed that they induce gender stereotypes by representing women mostly in domestic roles, dependent on men for mobility, and restrained to a few professions (26% of total professions presented). Furthermore, [16] also found that sports were mostly shown as an activity for boys in the textbooks published by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The sports illustrated for girls were limited to skipping, swinging, and playing with dolls. Another textual analysis of grade 5 textbooks conducted by [12], to identify how the curriculum influences national identity and gender construct, revealed that the boys identified themselves as active (i.e., playing, saluting the flag) and girls described themselves as passive (i.e., cooking, wearing national dress). Additionally, both girls and boys supported the traditional division of labor. The study [12] also highlighted that Islamic role models for boys were introduced for their wisdom and greatness and religious role models for girls embodied obedience, dutifulness, righteousness, and veiling. Another study [15] also reported that there were only a few female role models throughout the textbooks for different subjects—out of 251 personalities, 7.7% were female. Therefore, the current education system in Pakistan is responsible for promoting and reinforcing the patriarchal gender norms in the society of Pakistan by embedding biased gender constructs leading to gender hierarchies and disparities [15].

2.4. Purpose of the Research

The research aims to evaluate the alignment between the gender constructs informed by religious values embedded in the education system of Pakistan and the gender constructs informed by local religious perception. This will help in understanding the extent to which gender equality is mainstreamed in the education system and how it aligns to local religious perception. To achieve this purpose, this research captures the perceptions of local experts on gender constructs, guided by the education system and underlining Islamic ideology. The following research questions guide the research:

RQ1: is there cohesion in the content of gender construct illustrated through the education system (education policy and secondary findings from the literature on textual analysis) of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and by local Islamic and educational experts?

RQ2: Does the socially promoted gender construct actually reflect recent Quranic interpretation of gender in Islam?

2.5. Research Approach

The research used a qualitative case-study approach to investigate the phenomenon within the context, where it occurs [20,21]. The qualitative case-study approach can provide rich, in-depth, and extensive analysis of the situation within a context in real-world settings, covering both distinctive and associated characteristics. The current research explores the city of Lahore, Pakistan, as a case to evaluate the alignment between gender constructs informed by religion in the education system and gender constructs informed by local religious perception. Lahore is the capital of Pakistan's province of Punjab, and it is the second largest city in the country with a population of 11,126,285 [22]—52.4% of the population is male and 47.64% is female. Lahore was considered as a case study for this research because: (a) the enrolment rate is 97.2% among children between the ages of 6 and 16 [23], which indicates the accessibility of education; (b) the literacy rate among the male population is 80% and among the female population is 74% (10 years and older) [24], indicating comparatively low gender disparity as compared to the other provinces; (c) the Punjab textbook board's head office, which is the primary supplier designing and disseminating educational supplies aligned to the national framework and curriculum across Pakistan, is located in Lahore. The case study can be regarded as critical

case, as explained by [25,26]; as this case is of strategic importance and can permit logical and case-inspired generalizations and maximum application of information [25].

3. Methods and Data Collection

3.1. Data Collection

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with local religion experts (scholars) in Lahore, Pakistan, in May 2019. The language of the interviews was Urdu. The interviews were recorded with the participant's consent and then translated into English by the interpreter for analysis. The interview prompts were designed based on the education policy framework of Pakistan (2017) [17] and a review of the literature on 'Islam', 'education', 'textbooks', 'Pakistan' (see [2,7,8,12,15,16] for reference). The education policy of Pakistan (2017) narrates that the gender construct is built via the education system of Pakistan and Islam—referring to the Taleem (seek, use, and evaluate knowledge), Tarbiyya (social, technical, moral, and ethical training), and Tazkyya (purification of soul) components of the education policy framework (2017). The prompts were used to facilitate interviews, and some prompts were not used, altered, or extended on a case basis. Snowball sampling was used for data collection [27] to capture the local perspectives on gender constructs guided by religion. In Pakistan, topics involving gender and religion are socio-culturally and politically sensitive, requiring careful data and information handling; therefore, snowball sampling criteria were used to capture local perspectives from religious experts. Furthermore, considering the safety concerns, only known authorities were approached to start the sampling, who provided contacts in the field of experts willing to talk about the topics of religion and gender openly after reading the informed consent document.

In this study, the discourse analysis of the curriculum and textbooks in the Pakistani education system was not carried out, as there already exist plenty of such literatures in several subjects at several levels to analyze gender constructs in the education system of Pakistan (see [2,12,15,16,19,28–30], for the reference).

3.2. Participants

A total of nine interviewees participated in the study and all were located in Lahore, Pakistan. Among the religious experts, only male experts accepted the invitation to participate in the study. All of the experts were either local religious scholars or affiliated with a well-known local religious institute, or both. Only three female experts participated in the study. One of the main reasons for the lack of female participants is the shortage of female religious scholars in Pakistan, and unfortunately, the few women who have the religious scholarship were not comfortable with participating and sharing their views openly for a foreign research project. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Characteristics of the interviewees.

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Current Service	Service Period
ISL1	M	54	Imam/head of department in J-Z	26
ISL2	M	43	Imam/J-A	21
ISL3	M	32	Mufti/El-S	7
ISL4	M	68	Politician/U-Academy	40
ISL5	M	30	Private University J-A	7
EDU1	M	49	Director of education department	25
EDU2	F	51	Head of research and evaluation department	26
EDU3	F	32	School teacher	8
EDU4	F	32	School teacher	15

3.3. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was used to ensure that the research is compliant with ethical guidelines. Through agreement to the informed consent (both verbally and in writing) local religious experts agreed to their participation in the research, the research purpose, research

procedures, voluntary participation, measures used to maintain confidentiality, and the risks and benefits of the research. The collected data was anonymized before storage and kept in a password protected system accessible only to the authors.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analyzed using MAXQDA version 2020 software via thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data by organizing, identifying, encoding, and offering insights into the thematic patterns in the data set [31]. Coding was inductive and the data were analyzed in the steps shown in Table 2 using thematic analysis [31–34]:

Table 2. Steps of thematical analysis.

Step. No.	Step of Thematic Analysis	Brief Description
1.	Transcription and labelling	All the semi-structured interviews were transcribed to generate the transcripts, followed by labelling
2.	Familiarization	All transcripts were examined thrice to immerse in the data and prepare memos
3.	Initial coding	Systematic analysis of data by identifying codes (inductively) and recoding the definition of each code as a memo (in the codebook): 11 codes were identified initially
4.	Adding codes	Data were analyzed again to explore additional codes (inductively): 6 additional codes were added to the codebook
5.	Identifying themes	Patterns in the data were explored by connecting codes to one another and subsequently identifying themes. Initially 8 themes were identified
6.	Reviewing	Themes were reviewed in relation to the coded data and the whole data set. Upon review, 8 themes were collapsed into 5 themes
7.	Naming and defining themes	A total of 5 themes were finalized, named and defined as presented

The intercoder agreement was used in the study, where independent coders evaluated the message's characteristics and reached the same conclusion [35,36]. The first author analyzed the data, followed by independent analysis by the second author. There were no substantial differences, and minor inconsistencies were resolved through discussion to create the set of themes presented in the paper. The finalized themes are presented in Table 3. The bracketing technique was used during data analysis to mitigate the potential impacts of unconscious pre-conceptions and clarify biases [37]. Memos were prepared and discussed to reflect on and examine the engagement of the researchers with the data—as recommended by [38].

Table 3. Finalized themes and corresponding key concepts, codes, and the number of coded segments.

Theme	Key Concepts	Codes	Code Segments
Religion perceptions	Views on the gender divide and gender perceptions informed by Islam	Culture vs. religion	9
		Religion	4
		Surah	6
Education system	Experts' views on the current and expected status of education in Pakistan and how it is influencing gender perception-building	Current state	19
		Expectation	18
		Textbooks	8
		Impact of education	5
Upbringing	How the character-building of children is influenced by gender perceptions	Competences	10
		Gendered upbringing	8
		Responsibility of	11

Table 3. *Cont.*

Theme	Key Concepts	Codes	Code Segments
State of women		Gender role	25
		Women's mobility	6
	Experts' views on the public-private divide and the specifications of women's' role	Sports/leisure/activities	5
		Occupation	15
		Women Empowerment	11
		Rights	6
Externalities	Other forces that are influencing a socially inappropriate gender divide in the society	Media	5

4. Results

This section presents the prevalent themes in the data, probing experts' perceptions on gender norms guided by the education system and underlining Islamic ideology. The themes emerging from the data include: (a) religious perceptions; (b) the education system; (c) upbringing/character-building; (d) the status of women; (e) externalities. These themes are elaborated as follows.

4.1. Religious Perception

Most of the participants identified that culture and religion are two different concepts, where religion is based on moral values and culture is based on religion. According to the participants, in the context of Pakistan, gender constructs are predominantly shaped by the culture and religion takes a backseat.

"In our society, religion has its separate places and culture has its separate places. We cannot say that religion completely dominates…[ ]…we cannot say that whole Pakistan is following religion or whole Pakistan is following culture." (ISL5)

Furthermore, the participants acknowledged that religion (Islam) has discussed the role of women in an elaborated manner in the four main surahs of the Quran (the Islamic scripture) and, therefore, it is expected to inform gender constructs in Pakistan. More specifically, the scholars highlighted that the religion of Islam promises equity (not equality) and shuns discrimination between men and women. As a participant mentioned:

"It is told in Surah "Noor", Surah "Ahzab", Surah "Hujrat" Surah "Nisa"…[ ].. In the Holy Quran, Allah the Almighty decrees that all human beings, whether male or female, are descended from Adam and Eve (Surah An-Nisa 4:1)" (ISL2)

4.2. Education System

Participants understood the importance of education in nation-building and shaping gender constructs. Concurrently, they expressed dissatisfaction with the current education system in Pakistan, regarding it to be colonized (slavery-based), outdated and, hence, promoting biased gender constructs. Participants suggested: (a) revision of textbooks to incorporate moral, ethical, and social values; (b) alteration in pedagogy (active learning); and (c) focus on teacher training.

"This system is running from the era of English people. No alteration is made since…[ ]… They wanted people to serve them as required to run their machinery to rule over sub-continent. They made up a system that was literally for a slavery, not for a free civilization." (ISL4)

According to the participants, Islamic teachings are not embedded in their true sense in the education system of Pakistan, which is impacting the gender constructs. Scholars explained that Islamic teachings focus on nurturing social competences, which inform gender constructs in children, including communication, confidence, self, and stress management, along with ethical and moral values. Additionally, participants elucidated that the current

educational system in Pakistan does not embed these competences and nurturing them can enhance gender awareness and understanding of gender rights in accordance with Islam.

> "We should teach our children with the Holy Quran's interpretation. So that they know the code of living. They should know that Allah likes truth and dislikes lies, likes honesty and dislikes anger. Mocking at others, hurting others is disliked. We should also introduce some role models to children so that they have imagination of best being." (ISL4)

> "children's personality is not being groomed. And their senses about other people and sensitivity about humanistic matters are not being developed." (EDU2)

> "Tazkiya (self-analysis) is not even there... This is definitely a lacking point. We should develop the evaluation skills. For both teachers and students." (EDU3)

Participants frequently claimed that culture is embedded in the education system of Pakistan in the name of religion, which is promoting biased gender constructs.

> "At this time the education system of Pakistan gives more importance to the culture...Our school system is promoting culture more than religion." (ISL5)

However, scholars did not deny that the Islamic ideology explicitly defines gender roles based on the natural (physical) abilities of each gender. According to the participants' perspective, defining gender roles can lead to building individual capacities for fulfilling respective responsibilities and rights—which empowers each gender and does not imply oppressing any gender.

> "This is all about understanding human nature, and then to produce conducive environment for each gender, so that they can have their potentials to the upmost, and then they know about their obligations, and rights..." (EDU2)

Participants spoke about the need to empower women (mitigating oppression) through textbooks. They indicated that there is a lack of female role models in textbooks (from the religious/Islamic stories), which obstructs the possibilities for women's empowerment as exemplified in Islam.

> "It is our fault that these books are written by us, and we do not properly address the role of women. There are at least 24 women in the Holy Qur'an who are good characters and wrong characters...We have oppressed by not mentioning women in our books. We must present the role of women in our books." (ISL1)

The local experts highlighted the importance of sex education, aligned to the teachings of Islam, along with gender education to raise awareness and protect students from issues like harassment. Moreover, they criticized the co-education system because it becomes hard to teach and discuss gender and sex education openly in a mixed-gender setup. Participants also emphasized that the teachers should be of the same gender as students to ensure a comfortable environment in the classroom for teaching topics linked to gender and sexuality.

> "Then it is important in our education system to understand the needs of boys and girls at right time. It is important to make them understand gender and let them know about the difficulties they will face and it is important to keep yourself safe from such difficulties. It is very important to tell boys and girls about harassment. Similarly, it is important to tell them that there is a proper shariah and its detail is also present." (ISL5)

4.3. Upbringing/Character Building

According to the local experts, girls and boys are brought up differently in Pakistan, and most of the experts supported the difference in upbringing while emphasizing that character should be build based on gender equity, acknowledging physical differences between men and women. On the other hand, they also highlighted that practical and

essential skills for living (e.g., cooking, cleaning) should be taught to both genders—not specifically to girls only.

> "Unfortunately. . . There is a lot of gendered differences. Boys are training differently, and girls are differently. . . .. consider if man is left at some other planet they can't survive as we have established it as a fact there all the household chores are the work of a woman." (EDU1)

Most of the participants regarded a child's upbringing as the sole responsibility of the mother, except one Islamic scholar who mentioned that character building of a child is the responsibility of the society, system (including mosques and the education system), and parents collectively.

> "A mother. If mother go out to work, who will groom child? Why is coming generations spoiled? Because mothers don't have time to groom them. First responsibility of a mother is to groom child. If a man gets educated, one person get educated, but if a women get educated, the whole family get educated." (ISL2)

4.4. Status of Women

Local experts supported gender equity instead of gender equality, which constricts women to the private sphere and promotes the power hierarchy (men over the women) in household. Furthermore, the participants firmly reinforced the designation of gender roles based on gender equity.

> "Men and women in Islam have different roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities, as they differ in anatomy, physiology, and psychology." (ISL2)

The participants elaborated that, in the religion of Islam, each gender is provided with a different set of goals and responsibilities by God, according to their capability; therefore, they should have gender-specific roles. For example, women should stay at home as a sign of respect and men should be responsible for financial wellbeing; consequently, they have power over women in the household. Additionally, the experts defined women's empowerment as respecting and protecting women; hence, they identified that it is preferable for women to have a male as a guardian, as they have more social experiences (because women are constrained to the home).

> "If a woman gets into a problem, then her head will be on the field and the woman will not have to face any more problems. Therefore, it is better for a woman to make someone her head. And if she wants to make her own decisions then she has the power to do so." (ISL1)

According to the local experts, it is preferable for women to stay in the private sphere (in the home); however, a woman can work only if she is not ignoring her children and household, and if she has no financial support from the male member of her family. The participants added that if women want to work, they can pursue any occupation if they observe veiling. Furthermore, women can also participate in sports if veiling is observed and there are no men in the audience.

> ". . .she should step out obeying with the terms of veiling, second is she shouldn't ignore her children or household" (ISL4)

> "Currently many advance sports are appearing. Any sport in which hijab is vanished, is not allowed in Islam. Yes, if the sport allows to carry hijab, it can be played." (ISL1)

Participants highlighted that the gender roles according to the Islamic teachings put men responsible form the financial well-being of the family, contrarily, women are not responsible. Therefore, Islam offers men twice the portion of inheritance than women and women are entitled to receive inheritance rights from multiple sources, e.g., father, husband, etc., unlike men.

"the following verse in the Quran emphasizes this "There is a share for men and a share for women from what is left by parents and those nearest related, . . .[ ]. . . However, the portion or amount inherited by men is twice the portion or amount that is due women. The reason for this is because, in Islam, a woman's sustenance (provision of shelter, food, clothes) is required to be provided for by men." (ISL3)

According to the local experts, the gender roles are preserving a family system in the society and changing these roles can lead to the destruction of the society, which will cause women problems. The code co-occurrence model[2] extracted from MAXQDA, also explains that the gender role code is frequently co-occurring with other codes, defining the roles of gender in the context of occupation, responsibility, empowerment along with embedding these gender roles in the education system (see Figure 1).
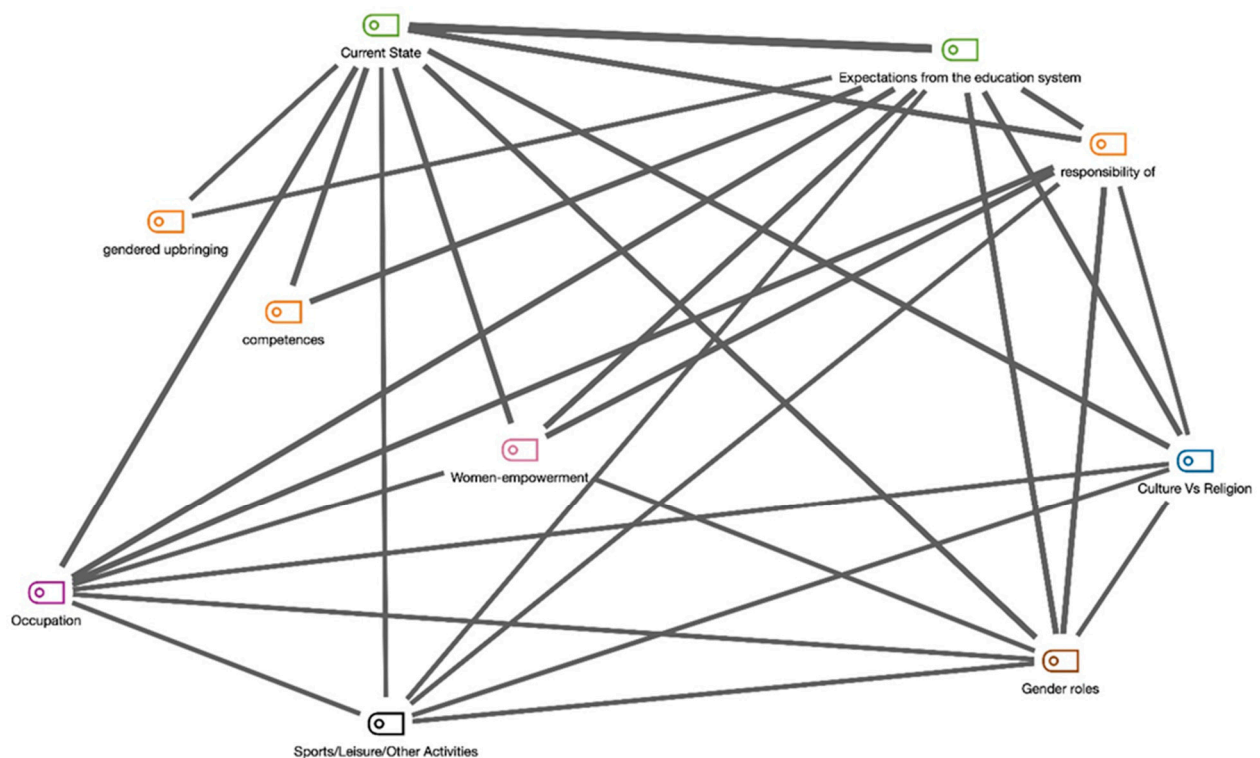
Figure 1. Code Co-occurrence Model.

The model describes co-occurrence of the gender role codes with other codes.

4.5. Externality

Multiple times, the experts highlighted media as an external force which is negatively influencing the gender constructs aligned to the Islamic point of view. It was mentioned that media and social media are misguiding women for empowerment, and most of the participants, multiple times, highlighted media as an external force which is negatively influencing the gender constructs aligned to the Islamic point of view. It was mentioned that media and social media are misguiding women for empowerment, and most of the participants indicated that it is a foreign (external) agenda to distance women from Islam. Therefore, they proposed to control the social media to enhance women's empowerment in the society aligned to the religion as experts mentioned:

"get attracted to western media. This is not aligned with the teachings of Islam." (ISL5); "social media should be controlled" (ISL4).

5. Discussion

The education system plays a critical role in cultivating gender equality by engraining certain gender mindsets among youth, thus, it also contributes to enable young people from any gender to contribute toward the sustainable development of the country. Therefore, the choices and decisions made in the education policy and frameworks of the country can pave a pathway towards accelerating, deteriorating, or stagnating the national economy and welfare. This study aimed to evaluate if Pakistan's current education system (based on the Islamic ideology) is building gender constructs aligned with the local perceptions of gender constructs informed by religion (Islam). To conduct this evaluation, we considered experts' knowledge and views on religion embedded in an education system that shapes gender constructs. The results suggest that the gender construct domains identified in Table 3 are mostly aligned with the gender construct informed by the education system of Pakistan (education policy and secondary textual analysis), except for the occupation domain for women. A possibility of normalizing gender equality through broadening the range of occupational choices for females was identified to be under the Islamic ideology pointed out by religious experts, which is currently underrepresented in the education system of Pakistan.

The findings from each domain are discussed in detail below, in the following structure. First, the cohesion among the content of gender construct illustrated through the education system of Pakistan and by the local Islamic and educational experts are discussed (i.e., RQ1). The findings are then discussed in reference to the recent Quranic interpretation, to address whether the socially promoted gender construct through education and local experts actually reflects the recent Quranic interpretation of gender in Islam (i.e., RQ2).

The interview analysis revealed that the current education system of Pakistan is mainly structured around cultural perceptions in the name of religion, which inform biased gender constructs. The curriculum framework and education policy (2017) narrated Islam as the major scale for incorporating and designing the backbone of the education system and what it delivers for building the nation. Unfortunately, most experts claimed that the education system is outdated, and cultural ideologies are embedded in the educational system, implanting biased gender constructs while misleading and contaminating the sacred doctrine of Islam. Contrarily, the religion experts highlighted that religion (Islam) focuses on gender equity (not equality) and advocates for gender role allocation as they quoted Quran (Islamic Scripture) (Surah Isra' 17:70 and Surah Nisa' 4:19, respectively):

> "O Humans! Surely, I have created you as males and females and have made you into [diverse] races and tribes that you may know one another. Verily, the most noble among you before Allah is the most pious of you. Truly, Allah is All-knowing, All-aware."
>
> and
>
> "And consort with them (your wives) in honor and equity [ma'ruf]."

Given that the experts supported gender equity rather than equality, they also endorsed entrenching gender role division through education while expressing that women should be constrained to the home (the private sphere) and men should engage in the public sphere. Therefore, according to the local perception, women's primary role is to take care of the household, which is also reflected in the school textbooks. The study [2] conducted thematic coding of pictorial and textual presentations of the textbooks for grades 1 to 5 in Pakistan. The study revealed that patriarchy prevails within the textbooks; women are presented dealing with household tasks and lack an identity of their own. Similarly, [39] highlights that the education system of Pakistan claims inclusiveness and equity, however, the analysis of textbooks and teacher's conduct, revealed female exclusion and social gendered stereotypes in the system. Limiting women to household chores means disempowering them financially and, hence, making them dependent on the family's male members, which automatically leads to power imbalances. From the Islamic perspective, as narrated by the experts, men have been granted superiority over women as they are

assigned the responsibility of guardianship, supervision, management, and being the provider of finances for the family. The experts specifically quote a verse of the Holy Quran (Surah Nisa' 4:34) which states:

> "Men are the protectors and supervisors of women because of the advantage Allah has given some over others and because they support them from their means. Therefore, righteous women are those who are humble and who guard (in their husband's presence and absence) his rights and secrets, which Allah has ordained to be guarded."

Furthermore, due to the prevalence of the biased gender constructs in the society where men are entitled to more power amid the financial responsibility—female students are either neglected or demotivated to pursue STEM subjects, limiting their professional choices to some selected professions [40]. Teaching and medicine (doctors) are the two professions represented as favorable for women in the textbooks [16,19,40]; however, the religious scholars regarded all professions as favorable for women if proper veiling is observed. Currently, the education system in Pakistan, being aligned with the local norms, is playing a pivotal role in defining biased gender constructs and wrapping women in traditional stereotypes; therefore, limiting their potential to engage in public roles as a significant portion of the citizens [28,29]. Additionally, the biased gender constructs have deeply penetrated Pakistan's society, and gender biases are openly accepted and practiced. Even teachers are usually unaware of gender bias in textbooks and acknowledge and exercise it as a norm [30]. Therefore, accepting the traditional gender role divide is associated with social norms and is not considered discrimination. The same phenomenon was observed when religious experts spoke about engagement of women in diverse occupations but at the same time, being unaware of their own biases, they kept emphasizing the restriction of women to their homes. The experts kept confirming their biases (unconsciously) by justifying their social (cultural) beliefs with religion instead of using religion to guide social beliefs.

Sustaining their opinion of the gender role divide, none of the experts spoke about the financial empowerment of women and equated empowerment for women with being respectful, honored, and protected. On the contrary, we argue that women cannot be empowered without financial empowerment—as this develops and increases women's decision-making power in the home and society [41,42]. Ref. [43] also emphasized that empowerment comes with having control over money compared to any other social or relational dynamics; hence, building earning opportunities is essential for empowerment. Researchers [44–46] also argued that in the old times, financial means (ways of earning money) were more muscle-based, but now they are more brain-based, and women can easily pursue diverse occupations. Therefore, school textbooks and the educational system should not hesitate to incorporate illustrations featuring women in all professions and appreciate financial stability among women. Promoting women's economic empowerment can help fix the biased gender constructs and reduce gender hierarchy in society.

The recent reinterpretation by religious (Islamic) researchers revealed that gender hierarchy is associated with the marital setting, and roles are divided among male and female partners [47,48]. The researchers explained that men are responsible for financial and family matters, and women are responsible for providing comfort and bearing children. Therefore, the gender hierarchy is developed to maintain the smooth operation of the household and does not apply to the broader society. This point of view has been expressed by the interview participants as well; however, in Pakistan, the school textbooks narrate gender hierarchy in both household and social settings by glorifying the gender of men in most of the public tasks represented. Moreover, pursuing diverse occupations and taking care of the home simultaneously is an unfavorable situation for women in Pakistan, and it overburdens women with dual responsibilities instead of empowering them [49]. Hence, it is essential to raise awareness regarding public sphere possibilities granted to women in Islamic ideology (through education and the social system) and devise measures to

channelize women's private sphere responsibilities so that female citizens of Pakistan can also contribute to the nation's sustainable development with dignity and social acceptance.

On the other hand, the local experts emphasized empowering men in the private sphere by expressing disagreement with marginalizing boys from learning skills essential for living, like cooking, cleaning, etc., through the education system in Pakistan and the subsequent social set-up. This prospect is religiously supported by the Hadith quoted, "Aisha said, "The Prophet (Muhammad) would do chores for his family, and he would go out when it was time for prayer." (Sahih al-Bukhari (676)). Similar trends were seen in the study based on Islamic-preaching households in the Gambia: if a woman engages in outdoor activities (preaching), their male partner does the household chores [50]. Therefore, men's contributions to household chores are valued from an Islamic (religious) point of view, which cannot be seen in the education system of Pakistan.

Further, many experts blamed the media for negatively influencing women. The media and new technology make information and credible knowledge more accessible, providing diverse perspectives on different topics from across the globe. This exposure may generate a sense of awareness and autonomy, leading to a call for liberation and transformation [51]. However, according to the experts, it can threaten the traditional gender role division by popularizing the western concept of women's freedom, which can refute Islamic ideology. Therefore, further research is required to explore collaboration between the education system and media for raising authentic and appropriate gender constructs for sustainable development in accordance with the Islamic ideology of Pakistan.

6. Conclusions and Limitation

The research concludes that the gender constructs informed by religious values embedded in the education system of Pakistan and the gender construct informed by the local religious perception are aligned. This alignment indicates that the biased gender constructs have penetrated deeply into the society, which explains the high level of the gender gap in Pakistan. The interviewees consistently focused on the segregation of gender roles based on religious ideology, which may lead to the economic disempowerment of women, power imbalances, and patriarchy. The research highlighted that the experts view the education system of Pakistan as outdated, which is why biased gender constructs are being implanted. However, the revisions suggested by the experts also entail nurturing traditional gender constructs (women in household/private sphere roles and men in public sphere roles). Simultaneously, the experts also realized that girls should be granted more occupational choices (public sphere empowerment) according to Islamic ideology, and boys should be provided with everyday life skills, as illustrated in Hadith (private sphere empowerment).

Therefore, although the experts kept highlighting the possibilities to promote gender equity through education, at the same time they also kept justifying their traditionally biased gender constructs through religion, due to the discomfort associated with implementing these possibilities. The research suggests that if Pakistan wants to achieve sustainable growth and development in the future, it must focus on using its human resources (both men and women) appropriately. It is understandable that the Islamic ideology of Pakistan permits gender equity rather than equality but the research highlights that, currently, even equity is not being promoted through the education system which is aligned to local perceptions. In order to do that, the education system should be updated (radically), revisited, and re-designed according to the modern interpretation of religion (Islam), as religion is one of the major pillars of the national educational framework. Using the latest Islamic research and inclusive interpretations will ensure that the education system is relevant to the need of the time while nurturing human resources with equitable gender constructs, which can contribute to the development of the society and country. The current research has identified the leverage points which can be used to guide improvement and transformations in the current education system of Pakistan.

Although much effort has been put into optimizing the quality of the collected data and its objective interpretation, we acknowledge that the study has limitations. Firstly,

this research is contextual, but this does not mean that the results cannot be generalized to other situations, as it will depend on the readers to identify which results are relevant to their context. Secondly, due to the topic's sensitivity, the researchers have used snowball sampling, and in such kind of sampling, it is difficult to omit the seeding bias.

Notes

1   Gender construct is defined as the configuration of the version of gender (i.e., what it means to be masculine or feminine) at a particular time and location (adapted from [13]. Gender construct is influenced by other factors like religion, ethnicity, race, social class [14]. This article focuses on influence of religion on gender construct.

2   The code co-occurrence model demonstrates how many documents have co-occurring codes. While building this model, the minimum co-occurrences were set at 5 (codes co-occurring in more than 5 documents were displayed). The width of each linking line represents the frequency of co-occurrence of codes in the data (documents).

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