

CASE STUDY:

# The Citizens Foundation — Best Practices in Girls' Enrolment in Pakistan

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### KEY FINDINGS:

- Supply side factors play a stronger role in girls enrolment than demand side factors. Therefore, given good quality, cultural sensitivity, and affordability, Pakistani parents will enroll girls.
- The typical schooling model does not work for girls enrolment in Pakistan; changes have to be made to make schools accessible to girls.
- Education is the only hope for girls from deeply disenfranchised communities to have a different life.
- An advocate for girls education is critical for enrolment. Typically mothers play this role.
- Community engagement plays a critical role in building community trust, allowing for girls enrolment.

### Introduction

Pakistan has the second highest out-of-school population in the world and a female literacy rate of 48 percent (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2013). Girls cannot access schools— only 42 percent have completed primary school or higher, as compared to 60 percent of boys (ibid.).

The Pakistani non-profit The Citizens Foundation (TCF) provides access to high-quality, low-cost education for poor children in Pakistan, with a special focus on girls. Starting from 5 schools in 1996, by 2015 TCF has grown to 1,060 schools, 165,000 students, and 12,950 employees. TCF believes that its model is socio-culturally sensitive and economically appropriate for the challenges of education delivery for the poor in Pakistan.

Historically, TCF has managed to maintain girl's enrolment at 40 to 50 percent in a majority of their schools; in 2015 more than 20 percent of TCF schools achieved girls' enrolment greater than 50 percent. Potential contributing factors, as confirmed by findings of this research,

are an all-female staff; locations within walking distance of homes; security through boundary walls, a gate, and on-campus toilets; a flexible fee system; and strong monitoring and evaluation systems.

This case study summary examines the role of TCF's strategy in increasing and retaining girls' enrolment by tackling the structural roots of weak girls enrolment and retention rates.

Qualitative research was conducted with principals, teachers, and parents of girls enrolled in TCF schools, as well as with key informants in relevant communities to develop this case study, supplemented by desk research and quantitative monitoring and evaluation data shared by TCF. This summary explores the impact of TCF's strategy on girls enrolment and the impact of the program from the perspective of the community.

## Intervention

TCF is a non-profit organization founded in 1996 in Karachi, Pakistan with the vision to create agents of positive change through formal education. In 2015, TCF is the largest privately-owned network of low-cost formal schools in the world, spanning more than 100 towns across Pakistan and maintaining a presence in some of the most marginalized, low income neighborhoods.

TCF has developed an innovative, self-learned model of providing formal, high-quality education at low cost to the poor. TCF's success is based on (a) enabling access to education and (b) robust head office training and support.

## Enabling access to education:

- **Security:** Each TCF school unit is purpose-built on standardized designs so that all essential facilities are available (including toilets, drinking water, boundary walls and wheelchair accessible ramps) and children do not have to leave during school hours. Additionally, the schools are located within walking distance of children for security purposes, even if this means constructing two schools in the same slum divided by two rival migrant settlements or a large industrial road, for example.
- **Female-only environment:** TCF maintains a women-only faculty, who are trained annually to ensure that good quality is not compromised. Free door-to-door transport is provided for teachers to prevent absenteeism and as an incentive for qualified women to join the workforce. This allows conservative families to be



comfortable sending their daughters to school, since the concept of purdah (isolating women from associating with men to whom they are not directly related) is not violated. Because TCF schools are co-educational, boys also benefit from the all-female faculty (the concept of purdah only applies to adult men) by getting positive female role models.

- **Affordability:** TCF ensures schools are affordable, so that all children can attend. Since empirical evidence shows that high fees make parents compromise on the number of children sent to school, such as by sending only the brightest of all siblings or only the sons, TCF subsidizes the cost of education through donations from individuals, foundations, and corporations in Pakistan and through registered support chapters in seven countries. The subsidized fee is therefore imminently affordable at PKR 385 (US \$3.85) for primary and PKR 465 (US \$4.65) for secondary school, with fees increasing around 10 percent annually. Additional scholarships are available bringing fees to PKR 10 (US \$0.10) and including free books and uniforms. The goal is not to turn away anyone who cannot afford tuition, but also charge a fee to foster a sense of ownership.

On the whole, TCF is cost effective as compared to public sector expenditure on primary education. The annual cost per student for TCF in 2014 was US \$180 (Pak Rs 18,057). The Government of Sindh utilized an annual budget of US \$92 million (PKR 92 Billion) to educate 4 million students in 2013, at an average annual cost of US\$ 230 (PKR 23,000) per child, which is almost 30 percent higher than the comparative cost at TCF.<sup>1</sup>

1 These figures come directly from TCF.



percent of TCF children manage to do the same, out of which almost half are girls. More than 70 percent continue to study in Class 11 and 12 versus the national average of 40 percent, while 35 percent of TCF students study beyond Class 12 versus a national average estimated to be 5 percent (TCF 2013, 6). TCF's girls' enrolment at the primary level is above or equivalent to national, provincial, and district level statistics, achieving 40-50 percent girls' enrolment within 3 years of school operations.

A fundamental component of the TCF primary school model is a priority organizational goal of ensuring that 50 percent of students in every classroom are girls, with various administrative levels responsible for ensuring that schools strive for gender parity in their enrolment. Principals are responsible for logging monthly enrolment, admissions, and withdrawals, and the data can be tracked centrally by TCF management.

**Mothers as key stakeholders:** Respondents across all sites reported that mothers are key drivers of putting their girls into schools. Principals develop a relationship with mothers through home visits to advocate girls' education, and participation in school activities, a vital component of strengthening the family's commitment to educating their daughters.

“We don't want the life of our girls to be like ours so we are sending them to school. We were also interested in getting educated but because there were no schools nearby.”

Mothers' focus group discussion, Dhamial, Rawalpindi

**Quality of education:** All respondents referred to the local TCF school as offering the best education available in the community. Where government primary schools existed in their communities, respondents identified the following problems: absent or abusive teachers, low standard of education, and ill-equipped buildings. “A bad education and a bad environment,” said Dr. Bilal Ahmed, a community member and key informant in KII, Dhamial, Rawalpindi.

Respondents said that TCF focuses on children's discipline and neatness, is more stable and trustworthy, with its building and investment in the community, and clearly has a long-term presence, whereas other private schools are not reliable in the same way.

## Head office training and support:

- TCF has established strong control systems to ensure quality of service delivery. This robust school management has a two-pronged approach with a strong regional team overseeing day-to-day operations, which helps avoid problems ubiquitous in the public sector such as teacher absenteeism and corruption.
- The second prong of control is through the headquarters, where quality of learning is closely monitored by the education technical experts and the Quality Assurance Unit. The central education unit has developed textbooks and learning materials in line with the requirements of the teachers and students, and ensures quality of teaching through more than 100 hours of training, classroom observations, and centralized examinations. TCF's management model oversees operations through a well-designed organizational structure to meet execution challenges and high internal standards of performance set by the Board and senior management. This robust governance has led to global and regional awards enabling TCF to build credibility amongst donors, ultimately contributing to financial and operational sustainability.

## Impact

This study identifies certain components of the TCF program structure that were key to achieving the goal of parity in girls and boys enrolment at primary school, including:

**Successful Girls Enrolment:** In a country where only 60 percent of children successfully complete Class 10, 96



// I like to read and do the role play during class, like how the planets move around the sun. //

Girl in a focus group discussion, Vohra Campus-I Machar Colony



There are five core pedagogical values teachers are trained to follow: confidence building, conceptual knowledge building, critical thinking skills, creativity, and ethics.

**Monitoring and follow-up of attendance:** School faculty closely monitor attendance patterns and home inquiries are made for unexplained absenteeism. If there is any cause for concern about the student, the principal visits the home to provide support to encourage the child to return.

In one site a community member interviewed<sup>22</sup> said TCF does not make it easy for a student to withdraw, which he believed was a good strategy. For example, the Principal seeks inquiry from the family about the reason for taking the child out of school and takes some time before completing the paperwork, in an effort to show reluctance to lose the student. Parents sometimes change their minds while they discuss their decision with the principal. Generally withdrawals of girls at TCF primary schools remain below 50 percent across provinces and across grades.

**Gendered impact:** The TCF model has had a broader and more subtle positive effect on the structural causes of gender inequality itself. Women's inequality is evident in every sphere of development in Pakistan, from child mortality rates and maternal health ratios to ratios of boys to girls in education (Shirkat Gah, 2005).

Although TCF has never marketed or branded itself as such, it is essentially a women-centered program. At the front-line of its ongoing interface with the community are dedicated female staff and principals, often working in localities that pose a security risk. They reach out to mothers and build lasting relationships with them to ensure that they send their daughters to school. These girls, in turn, not only become educated but see their teachers as role models and discover new possibilities for their futures through their exposure to them.

Currently, the number of principals and teachers, all female,

2 Key Informant Malik Niaz Kot Qasba, Muzaffargarh, February 9, 2015.

employed across TCF schools nationwide is 8,900, making it a major employer of women in the non-profit sector. This has ultimately led to their improved status in their homes and communities.<sup>33</sup> To date, more than 30,000 women have benefited from its Aagahi adult literacy program, their lives transformed because they have acquired literacy. In the last three years (2011-2014) alone, the total number of female students at all levels in TCF schools grew from 31,011 to 51,538, all of whom will enjoy more opportunity and choices in their lives because of their education.

**TCF's impact on the home:** Mothers reported that whatever manners they had learned in their lives were taught to them by their daughters, through their TCF education. They come home from school telling their parents how one should greet strangers with respect, refrain from gossip and harsh language, speak in a soft voice and without interrupting, and keep oneself neat and clean. For these families, most of whom work in the fields or with livestock, these lessons open a window into the world of the educated.

**Changing gender norms:** Change in community attitudes toward girls' education can take place over a 3-5 year period while strong links between the school and families are developed. Data trends and interviews in TCF school sites show that communities that were previously not predisposed to girls' education are now more motivated. However, it is an ongoing task to maintain a positive focus on girls' enrolment in schools in Pakistan's diverse communities, because there are so many other forces that persist to counter the changes in community attitudes that are taking place.

Amongst communities in which TCF has a long-term presence, their influence has helped to tip the balance

3 For a detailed review of studies that show how paid work is linked with women's empowerment in Pakistan see Khan (2010). TCF may wish to conduct a study on how paid work has impacted the decision-making power in the lives of its female employees.



Mothers also expect that their daughters' marriage prospects will improve due to their schooling. Marriage norms appear to be changing as part of the secular social transformation underway in Pakistan, and mothers spoke about boys and girls who study delaying marriage until 18-20 years of age or later.

**Tackling gender preference in education:** In the Muzaffargarh campus in southern Punjab, staff members told us that there were no longer any social or cultural constraints to sending the girls to school, only economic constraints.

where there is a combination of resistance to and pride in educating girls. Key informants reported that in their communities the cultural norms were changing as a result of girls' education. There were more girls working, particularly as teachers, which was unknown before. Educated girls were having fewer children and the home environment had improved as a result, according to community member and key informant, Dr. Bilal Ahmed in Dhamial, Rawalpindi.

**Delayed age at marriage:** The need to complete studies is used as a reason for mothers to delay their daughters' early marriage. In Karachi West mothers reported that they themselves were married off at ages 13-14, but if they can keep their girls in school beyond Class 5 and until Class 10/Metric and then get them to work as teachers, they will be able to marry significantly later. One principal recalls that when she worked at a TCF secondary school in Karachi, she persuaded families to let their daughters complete Class 10 because with that degree they could go on to qualify as teachers and thus earn higher salaries. Thus the temptation of having a daughter earning for the family was used to overcome the desire to see her married off early. In Rawalpindi, girls used to get married after secondary school but now the trend was to wait until after they had completed their Metric.

“ In one household I noticed that they sent the boy but not the girl. I enquired and found that the mother would go in the morning in the fields to work, so she had held back her daughter to take care of her younger siblings and manage the house. I encouraged the mother to let the girl also come, they are both now in Class 5. ”

Principal Rizwana Nosheen,  
AES Lal Pir Campus, Muzaffargarh

Poverty forces parents to choose which children to educate, and that usually means only boys have a chance to study. Here the principal has played an essential role in helping communities realize that sending their girls to school alongside boys is valid and important. She recalls, “In the beginning I had to do a lot of convincing, but now I have a waiting list all the year round for primary.” Her concern now is to ensure that the poorest households in the community are informed about TCF and its subsidized fee structure.





When girls do enroll in a TCF primary school, the staff makes a concerted effort not to treat them differently because of their gender. Teachers are trained to show boys and girls how they can work together. There are subtle yet effective methods to challenge gender norms, such as ensuring they sit together around their tables, take equal turns at the blackboard and perform classroom tasks together.

## Lessons for good practice

TCF has developed certain key practices that may guide other organizations working to improve girls' education rates in difficult contexts around the world.

**Sustained community engagement:** TCF engages with communities before a new area is selected for an intervention, ensuring buy-in of influential community leaders through dialogue. The community then identifies school sites and relationships are sustained through outreach programs such as adult literacy classes for community women, monitoring of girls' attendance and following-up on absences, counseling of families, parent-teacher meetings, school events, and flexible fees. Community members feel a sense of ownership of the school and believe their children are secure there, often more so than in their own homes.

**Strong administrative support structure:** Individual primary schools need to be overseen and monitored closely by an engaged administrative system that keeps their targets on track, particularly with respect to ensuring 50 percent girls' enrolment, monitoring absenteeism and withdrawals in order to reduce them, and ensuring quality of the school infrastructure and operations.

**High quality education:** Low-income families care about quality education, which remains essential to building credibility and building a society that believes investing in girls' education will lead to better lives and livelihoods for families.

**Commitment to TCF mission:** The principal is the key element in the school who can build the school's credibility and must therefore be trained and motivated. Motivation can come from building a strong connection between the faculty, community, and service to the country, and to the cause of educating the poor which goes beyond personal employment gain, compensation, or benefits and is necessary for sustaining commitment.

**Strong female role models:** In order to build support for sending girls to school, families need to see that girls'



education creates employment options. Other players can support this by creating work opportunities for girls with varying degrees of education, to increase enrolment levels and benefit from the social development outcomes.

**Infrastructure** is critical for ensuring successful girls enrolment, including a location recommended by the local community within walking distance of children's homes, accessibility in terms of security and local customs, and an environment conducive to learning.

**Faculty:** An all female faculty in schools, supplemented by teacher transport and teacher training, is key.

**Scholarships and affordability:** A subsidized fee with further scholarships is important to avoid limiting enrolment or causing parents to prioritize education for a limited number of children.

**Replicability of the model:** The cost of building and running TCF schools will likely affect the replication and scalability of this model in its entirety and so more research would be needed to determine whether the TCF model could be replicated at a lower cost in other areas. In 2014- 2016, TCF is undertaking a pilot program to use its training program with teachers from other low cost private schools in Pakistan and the results will speak in part to the replicability of the model's teaching practices.

## Challenges

**Lack of security:** Since law and order is a problem in Pakistan and violence against women and girls takes place with impunity, it is difficult to disabuse people of this ongoing



perception. Girls' education suffers as a consequence, since they are only able to attend schools that are nearby.

**Poverty** is a major obstacle to sending children to school because their labor is required to earn money to run the household. The very poorest families do not send their children to any school at all. Some families do not believe education leads to better job prospects or is worth the investment.

**Cultural norms** across ethnicities in Pakistan vary in terms of the restrictions on girls' decision-making, mobility, and access to services once they reach adolescence, but they all impose some level of prohibition upon their freedom of movement. This includes their mobility to access schooling. This affects the attendance rate of girls in secondary school more dramatically.

**High costs of building and running TCF schools:**

There is a growing demand for secondary schools to build upon TCF's successful primary school infrastructure. TCF's next five-year plan is one of consolidation; to ensure secondary schools exist wherever there is a presence of TCF primary schools. This will require developing

a long-term sustainability plan and global fund-raising strategy to support these goals.

## Conclusion

The gender impact of the TCF program includes the following:

- TCF offers a program that is women-centered, providing employment for women teachers and administrators, bringing literacy to thousands of women, and educating thousands more girls (and boys). This education will provide them opportunities for employment that would be closed to them otherwise.
- Women's ill-health in Pakistan is linked to their early marriage, unwanted and unplanned child-bearing, and lack of access to services. TCF primary schools are tackling head-on the practices of early marriages, empowering girls to make healthy choices regarding their bodies, and teaching them how to access resources for health care.
- Political empowerment of women is built upon a bedrock of citizenship rights that must be claimed. TCF is enabling girls and their mothers from deeply disenfranchised communities to start the process by obtaining basic documentation and the education needed to exercise these rights fully.

There are challenges facing TCF as it seeks to expand further in an environment filled with many unpredictable scenarios and socio-political constraints, but it will no doubt continue to be a leader in the movement to achieve universal girls education in Pakistan. ■





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