

MEDIA, SUSTAINABILITY, AND FEMALE EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN: A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK FOR SOUTH PUNJAB

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Abstract

Sustainability in all its forms is a major concern within the global development platforms especially in the countries like Pakistan. Equal opportunities of education for females is an issue that aligns with two of the seventeen 'Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)' of 'The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' adopted by all United Nations (UN) Member States in 2015. In countries like Pakistan the female education is a pertinent issue to look at from various angles. One of the key aspects is to explore and argue on the role and effectiveness of the media in the country. Sustainable educational outcomes for females in Pakistan in general and in South Punjab (one of the far-flung yet highly populated areas of the country) in particular is a multifaceted problem. Despite various efforts at government and non-government (NGO) levels, limited media involvement, weak communication strategies, and cultural conservatism hinder the sustainable educational outcomes for the girls in the region. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of political economy of media and communication for development, this paper attempts to explain why media is failed to meaningfully transform female education outcomes in South Punjab despite strong development rhetoric. In this paper we argue that political economy of media in this region limits its transformative capacity. Media disseminates education and sustainability discourses but at the same time it reinforces gendered digital exclusion, class privilege, and patriarchal hierarchies which ultimately restrict its developmental impact. By examining the historical gender-based education inequality in a structurally marginalised South Punjab and by analysing the media landscape in the region, we have proposed a sustainable communication framework for the region.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Sustainability in its all forms is a major concern within the global development platforms especially in the countries and areas where

institutions are fragile, socio-economic conditions are poor, and where the environmental vulnerability is at its higher side. South Punjab, a far-flung region in the densely populated province

Punjab of Pakistan, is one of such regions. South Punjab is the real picture of an area with high population, lower human development, poverty at its higher level, poor infrastructure, vulnerable to climate change effects such as severe heat waves and recurrent floods, with no to less literacy rates, and on top of that less media coverage. So, the southern part of the highly populated province of Pakistan i.e. Punjab is a classical case to study the sustainability, society and media (UNDP, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

In South Punjab the sustainability is basically a social and structural issue instead of just conventional environmental concern. For any society sustainable development across generations proper educational institution, functional health institution, basic human rights, equal economic growth opportunities, and access to information etc are the key requirements (Sen, 1999; UNESCO, 2023). For instance, rains and floods do not only destroy road infrastructure and crops but also hinder education system, increase gender inequalities, and increase poverty. Therefore, the sustainability question must be answered focusing on environmental vulnerabilities along with institutional infrastructures and social equality (United Nations, 2015).

Here, media as a social and communicative system holds a key position in terms of influencing the understanding of sustainability with a capacity to allow certain discourses disseminate in the society ranging from which policy decisions and recommendations are considered as legitimate and which voices are heard. Media has the capacity to challenge social hierarchies by producing various narratives around them, to spread information during disasters more quickly and effectively, and to promote and encourage educational participation (Norris, 2000; Servaes, 2008). But this is one side of the media as an institution. On the side of this institution, the media is part of a wider economic and political system which influence its content/narrative production and dissemination. What have been observed and noted around the world is that various factors such as ownership, advertising and commercialisation, regulatory systems, and the urban-centred contents stimulate

the visibility of the type of issues/problems, the social groups, and regions in the media (McChesney, 2008; Yousaf, 2021).

In this paper, we argue that, from a sustainable development perspective, the media in and for South Punjab play a controversial, contradictory, and dual role. Media has significant potential to increase civic engagement, effective risk communication during and after disasters, and to promote educational participation. On the other hand, from a political economy perspective, media usually promote regional marginalisation, digital exclusion, under-representation, and gender inequality. This aspect has limited media's potential transformative impact (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Pickard, 2020). Therefore, sustainable development in South Punjab requires serious attention on strengthening participatory platforms, localised media contents, and equal participation in and access to media along with effective communication techniques.

1.1 Sustainability Beyond Environment; Social Resilience and Human Development

Sustainability is no longer based solely on environmental questions and concerns. It has gone beyond that limit to encompass various social and economic aspects. The sustainable development framework put forth by the UN now covers goals including access to quality education opportunities, gender equality, reduced inequalities along with the climate action (Adger, 2000; United Nations, 2015).

Education is key catalytic factor in this process. There is plethora research evidence available that indicates the fundamental role of education in poverty alleviation, economic agility, demographic stability, and health-infrastructure improvement (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2018). However, educational disparities and other issues related to the access to quality education remains high in Pakistan. According to a report *Pakistan Education Statistics 2021-22* published by the Pakistan Institute of Education in 2022, there are significantly persistent gaps between access and retention of education in Pakistan especially in rural areas (Pakistan Institute of Education, 2022). The report discloses that a significant

number of children are out of school and that the girls in rural areas are disproportionately affected. These educational disparities and low female-literacy rates directly affect and undermine sustainability in Pakistan in general and in South Punjab in particular. Long term human development is affected when girls remain out of school or they leave school early because of poverty, early age marriage, social taboos, or because of the distance between home and school. An educated woman can take part in labor force, she can invest in child education more effectively, and she can espouse environment and health practices more quickly thereby strengthening household resilience (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). Therefore, female education is not just a gender issue but it is sustainability imperative.

Climate vulnerability, particularly in the form of frequent floods, has worsened the situation and exacerbated these challenges. According to the UNICEF report (2022) the 2022 floods in Pakistan destroyed thousands of schools across the country completely or damaged them partially. The situation was even worse in flood affected districts of South Punjab where education disruptions may have long term effects on the continuity of education for thousands of children. Such repeated and frequent disasters cause a high dropout rate from schools especially for girls who may not return to school because of the far away schools among other restrictions. Therefore, climate resilient education system is also integral to ensure sustainability.

In this way, sustainability in South Punjab must be understood and framed in terms of a social infrastructure problem including climate resilient schools, gender-equitable digital connectivity, inclusive media access, and accountable governance.

1.2 Media as an Institution and Infrastructure

Just like in other fields, the media in development policy and field is also considered as a channel that helps deliver messages. However, this notion overlooks and actually distorts its structural role. Media not only operates in a society as an institution that performs the function of meaning-making but also functions as

an infrastructure which is considered as responsible for uneven distribution of information in that society (Couldry, 2012; Servaes, 2008).

Within a communication-for-development perspective, media increases awareness among its users, mobilizes them for certain cause and thinking, and ultimately causes a behavioural change among them. Initial and conventional media theories such as diffusion of innovations argue that media helps the spread of new ideas among the target audiences (Rogers, 2003). However, recent participatory notions about media emphasize on the dialogue and community involvement rather than top-down persuasion for that sustainable change in a society (Servaes, 2008).

However, there is an important aspect to keep in mind that any media system operates within a particular socio-political and economic system that shapes whose voices are heard and dominated. With special reference to Pakistani media's political economy, there is research evidence that the factors such as regulatory oversight, commercial imperatives, and ownership concentration have a significant influence on Pakistan's electronic media landscape (Yousaf, 2021). The media content priorities in Pakistani media are highly influenced by these factors. Issues pertaining to the development often receive very little to no attention and that too during crises but lack sustained investigative coverage.

Because of the concentrated ownership structures Pakistan has been identified as a high-risk environment in terms of media pluralism (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). This factor of concentrated ownership impacts regional representation. In Pakistan, Urban-centred content production has been seen to marginalize peripheral regions such as South Punjab which result in limited visibility of such areas in national discourse.

Understanding media as an infrastructure in Pakistani society further complicates the scenario. Access to various media outlets and platforms such as mobile phones, internet connectivity, digital media platforms, traditional TV and radio, and newspapers is different for male and female,

for socio-economically haves and have nots and for people in different regions. There is a significant gap in mobile phone internet usage among male and females across South Asia including Pakistan (GSMA, 2024). Despite the fact that smart phones are readily available in the region, the females are less likely to own independently smartphones digital services than men. Therefore, in this whole region including rural South Punjab, this digital divide among men and women influences who receives sustainability-related messages and awareness.

Hence, it is evident that the developmental potential of media cannot be studied and evaluated without keeping in view the structural inequalities in ownership, content production, and its access to the audiences.

1.3 South Punjab; Structural Marginalization and Sustainability Pressures

The 'South Punjab', a densely populated part of the Punjab province is comprised of the divisions including; Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan. This region is generally known as socially and economically less developed as compared to the central and northern parts of the Punjab.

According to the *South Punjab Development Statistics 2024* report there are notable disparities in terms of health access, literacy, and infrastructure among various districts of the South Punjab (Punjab Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The report indicates that some districts significantly lag behind the others in terms of the provincial average literacy rates. While female literacy is even more significantly low than the male literacy in majority of the rural areas.

According to the *2023 Census Provincial Report* for Punjab the Saraiki-speaking population is more concentrated in the South Punjab (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Linguistic identity goes side by side with the regional issues such as development politics which shapes perceptions of marginalization and representation. Media outlets are Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad centred and the narratives produced through those centres are primarily in Urdu which may not completely and fairly reflect the lived experiences of the people living in the rural Saraiki communities.

Climate vulnerability is yet another disadvantage along with the structural shortcomings. Flood-prone areas such as Dera Ghazi Khan, parts of Multan and Muzaffargarh face infrastructure damages and public displacement in regular intervals on yearly basis. UNICEF's humanitarian reporting has evidently explained the disruptions and damages caused by periodic floods in essential services such as education and water systems (UNICEF, 2022). When schools are damaged by the floods or used as temporary shelters for the flood affected people the education and learning process suffers.

Heatwaves and energy crises are also significant threatening factors that endanger sustainability in the region even more. Reports have claimed that the defective energy supply system is directly linked to the broader public health and infrastructure challenges (The Guardian, 2024). Extreme heats and unreliable electricity system coupled with the absence of proper cooling systems in rural schools, cause attendance reduction and hinder learning outcomes.

So, such structural challenges explain why sustainability in South Punjab cannot be considered as an environmental management issue only. These structural challenges demand for a well integrated attention to all inter-related sectors ranging from the education systems to gender norms, and from infrastructure resilience to the fair media representations.

1.4 Media's Developmental Contributions to Sustainability:

As discussed above, there is no doubt that there are serious structural challenges but still media in South Punjab performs several significant developmental roles.

1.4.1 Risk Communication During Climate Events

Traditional media such as radio and TV serve as crucial information sources especially during disaster situations like floods and during emergencies in areas like South Punjab. Humanitarian agencies like UNICEF pay tribute to such traditional media outlets for their timely and accessible communication process to mitigate risk during disasters (UNICEF, 2022). FM radio

stations working in regional districts usually broadcasting guidance, awareness and warnings in local languages, perform key role by reaching populations who are otherwise with limited or completely without internet access. However, it is worth noting that the effectiveness of the communication depends on trust and reach. If such warning systems overly and only rely on digital platforms which are less/inaccessible to local women or low-income people then the vulnerable groups may remain less or completely uninformed.

1.4.2 Educational Promotion and Social Norm Change

Research evidenced that the media awareness campaigns can help increase school enrolment in areas like South Punjab. Media has the power to challenge and deter issues like gender stereotypes, and media can publicize by advertising scholarship opportunities. Citizen-led monitoring initiatives such as the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER Pakistan, 2023) produce data that impacts public debate on learning outcomes and access.

Similarly, TV talk shows and dramas can reshape social norms regarding women by occasionally portraying educated women in good and fruitful professional roles, the roles that help improve families and society as a whole. However, for now, the female representation in mainstream and local media remains unequal. Only symbolic inclusion of women may not help bring positive structural change unless there are sustained and localized narratives available about them in the local and mainstream media.

1.4.3 Accountability Journalism

Investigative journalism has a role to play in situations like this in areas like South Punjab. Investigative journalists need to expose infrastructural shortcomings in schools in such areas. Teacher absenteeism is another huge issue along with misallocation of development funds in such areas to be covered by the investigative journalists. Fair and honest investigative reporting can pressure policy makers to address such discrepancies and inequalities in their jurisdiction. However, commercial media

priorities usually limit long-term coverage of regional development disparities.

2.0 POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MEDIA AND REGIONAL INEQUALITY

There is no doubt that mass media has a serious potential in terms of playing role in sustainable development in the South Punjab, however given the political economy of the country and the region its structural constraints need to be elucidated and examined carefully. Political economy approach argues that media are not neutral institutions and that they cannot inform, communicate, and comment on events in a neutral way. Rather, their production, circulation, and priorities are influenced by power hierarchies, regulatory systems, and economic markets of the society where they operate (McChesney, 2008; Mosco, 2009).

Private electronic media in Pakistan expanded very quickly and significantly in early 2000 during Pervez Musharaf's liberalisation regime. However, media's dependence of advertising and the ownership concentration have continuously influenced and shaped their editorial policies. According to the *Reporters Without Borders* (2019) the ownership patterns in Pakistan have led media landscape to a position where media and journalists are unable to opt a policy that is considered as independent, pluralist, and regionally diversified. Sustained public interest-based reporting is superseded by commercial viability when media production is dominated by a limited number corporate owner group (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). The limited and episodic coverage also directly affects the visibility of female education issues in South Punjab, where structural barriers to girls' schooling remain underreported and under-discussed in national media narratives.

So practically, this implies that instead of sustained investigative attention to structural disparities and inequalities in the regions like South Punjab the sustainability coverage only happens when there are disasters such as floods or energy crises, or when there are international climate summits taking place in the big cities. Developmental stories always have to compete with urban-centric economic reporting, political

conflicts, sports, and entertainment. As a result, serious systemic issues such as water management challenges in Dera Ghazi Khan and unequal and insufficient school infrastructure in Muzaffargarh receive limited sustained media attention (Pickard, 2020).

Yousaf (2021) argues that Pakistan's electronic media sector functions within a political environment influenced by political influence, ownership concentration, and regulatory oversight. Such a working environment for the media can hamper and discourage critical regional reporting. "When sustainability challenges intersect with governance failures such as inadequate flood preparedness or uneven development allocation, media institutions may be cautious in framing these issues as structural problems rather than natural disasters" (Voltmer, 2013; Yousaf, 2021).

Urban control and bias are yet another major factor in marginalization of regions such as South Punjab. Media production centres in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad impact news values and narrative framing. Peripheral and far-flung regions such as South Punjab usually gets space and time only during crises situations. South Punjab is normally portrayed as an area overwhelmed by poverty or disaster rather than as a region with political agency and policy claims. This representational strategy influences how challenges pertaining to sustainability are interpreted and understood nationally (Couldry, 2012).

Hence, the political economy perspective suggests that the media can reinforce and replicate regional inequality by privileging commercial interests over structural accountability, by narrowing narrative frames, and by limiting sustained visibility (McChesney, 2008).

2.1 Language, Identity, and Recognition

Language is another significant ingredient that plays an integral role in effective communication for sustainability. According to the 2023 *Provincial Census Report* the Saraiki-speaking population is concentrated in the region of South Punjab (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Despite this fact, most of the mainstream programs and national news coverage are predominantly Urdu-

based. Such news coverage and programs are also supplemented by English-language elite discourse. There is no denying that Urdu is the national language and widely understood in the region of South Punjab but language also carries symbolic power. When sustainability discussions and serious political debates take place primarily in Urdu and English, the Saraiki is usually relegated only to the cultural programming rather than over all policy discourse. This kind of media commentary trends give rise to a feeling disassociation and lack of belonging and subtle hierarchy of recognition (Fraser, 2008).

Just like in other cases of the effectiveness of local languages, the Saraiki language in South Punjab can strengthen identification and trust during localized sustainability communication process. Radio and TV programs produced in local Saraiki dialects can resonate more effectively and deeply among the rural viewers and listeners instead of top-down campaigns which are usually produced in big cities in Urdu and English languages. Linguistic inclusion i.e. the use strategic use of localised language therefore can become a successful sustainability strategy by improving participation, comprehension, and legitimacy (Servaes, 2008).

If the linguistic diversity is ignored then there is always a risk of reinforcing center-periphery dynamics. Sustainability discourse must recognize the local communities as equal participants instead of just taking them as passive receivers of the messages (Habermas, 2006).

2.2 The Digital Divide and Gendered Access

Digital media usually considered as platform capable of democratising the information access across various audiences. However, there is a plethora of research evidence available that indicates that even the digital access is not equal and equally available across gender and to the audiences with different income and to the audiences from different regions (van Dijk, 2020).

According to the GSMA's *Mobile Gender Gap Report 2024* the "women in low- and middle-income countries remain significantly less likely than men to use mobile internet" (GSMA, 2024). Research evidence indicates that although such

gap has narrowed in a few regions but barriers still persist because of the digital literacy, affordability, and social norms. Same is the case in Pakistan. Reporting on the GSMA data, daily the *Dawn* indicates that “women in Pakistan remain less likely than men to access mobile internet services” (Dawn, 2024). In areas like rural South Punjab, the women’s independent phone usage, ownership or internet use remains restricted or prohibited because of gender norms. According to the reports, male members of a family may control access even where households possess smartphones (Norris, 2001).

This disparity in digital access and digital inequality has serious implications on sustainable development. For instance, women/girls may not receive information regarding disasters or educational opportunities spread through mobile phone and digital platforms. Online learning resources are less accessible to females/girls as compared to men/boys. The sustainability debates on digital public sphere in such regions usually do not include women’s voices as compared to men (van Dijk, 2020).

During disasters and crises situations such as floods, information and warning messages are usually spread more quickly through digital platforms such as WhatsApp or through other social media networks. If women do not have equal and independent access to such media platforms then they might lag behind as for as access to information and taking precautions are concerned. In such cases their dependency on intermediaries might increase vulnerability and cause harm (UNESCO, 2023). This digital exclusion particularly affects female education, as girls are less likely to access online learning platforms, educational information, and digital literacy resources compared to boys, thereby reinforcing existing educational inequalities.

Therefore, digital inclusion and equal access to digital platforms should not be taken as a technological goal only rather it must be considered as a sustainability priority.

2.3 Climate Vulnerability, Education, and Intergenerational Sustainability

Climate change deepens structural disparities and inequalities. “Pakistan’s 2022 floods affected

millions of people and damaged educational infrastructure across provinces” (UNICEF, 2022). South Punjab is a region which has been hit by floods periodically. Water systems, roads, and schools in the South Punjab districts have seriously been damaged by such floods repeatedly. When schools are damaged or destroyed or when they are used as shelters, the learning process and education continuity is affected. Such disruptions usually cause high dropouts from schools especially for girls as they cannot or may not travel to far away schools to continue their education. In such cases of economic survival, families usually prioritize immediate survival instead of long-term schooling. These disruptions disproportionately impact girls’ education, as female students are less likely to return to school after climate-induced displacement, further weakening long-term sustainability outcomes in the region (UNESCO, 2023).

The World Bank emphasizes that “barriers such as safety concerns and distance to school disproportionately affect girls’ educational participation in Pakistan” (World Bank, 2018). In flood-hit regions such barriers are intensified where schools are damaged and infrastructure is weakened. Hence, for sustainability in such areas the climate-resilient educational planning is a prerequisite and media can be helpful in this regard in terms of publicizing and following up the schools’ repair timelines, by emphasising the significance of returning girls to schools after disasters, by spreading awareness regarding temporary learning programs, and by playing a watchdog role over authorities for infrastructure investment (Servaes, 2008).

3.0 WHY AWARENESS ALONE FAILS:

One of the key limitations of development communication is the notion that awareness produces change. In areas such as South Punjab, sustainability challenges clearly explain the limits of this notion. This limitation is particularly evident in the case of female education in South Punjab, where awareness about girls’ schooling does not always translate into actual enrolment or retention (Sen, 1999; Servaes, 2008).

3.1 Poverty and Opportunity Costs

For poor people and families living near survival levels, economic necessity is much more prioritised as compared to the sustainability choices. Such families may lack resources to act no matter how effectively media stresses education or climate preparedness. Children, both male and female, are required to contribute to the family income when there are floods. Awareness merely does not effectively bring change in actions of such families to prioritise education over household income (World Bank, 2023).

3.2 Infrastructure Gaps

Media messaging only cannot compensate for structural shortfalls for instance media campaigns to emphasize girls' education will be ineffective if girls' schools are far away from their homes. Pakistan Education Statistics reports highlight infrastructural deficiencies in rural areas (Pakistan Institute of Education, 2022). Therefore, proper policy implementation is directly and effectively linked to the effective sustainable communication.

3.3 Patriarchal Norms

The interpretation of media messages is directly linked to the social norms. Families would accept and appreciate media messages regarding the importance of female education but the same families would resist if such messages are perceived to be challenging the socially established gender roles. So, accepting such messages merely symbolically cannot help increase girls' participation in education. Therefore, for sustainable change an effective and properly thought-out engagement with local authority figures and inclusive dialogues are required instead of just external and top to bottom messaging (Nussbaum, 2011).

3.4 Short-Term Campaign Logic

Time frame and the length of development communication campaigns also matter significantly. Development communication initiatives are usually time-bound as they are donor-funded or externally funded. Such campaigns may come to an abrupt end as soon as

the funding stops. Sustainable communication requires institutional embedding within provincial policy frameworks (Servaes, 2008).

3.5 Media Representation and Social Imagination

It is widely and scholarly accepted fact that media as an institution does not only give inform and awareness rather it shapes and influences imagination. Depiction of South Punjab in national media influences how citizens and policymakers understand the region's potential. If South Punjab as a region is persistently represented as a backward or disaster-prone area then the public imagination may consider inequality as something natural. Conversely, the perceived possibilities can be expanded through narratives highlighting resilience, by appreciating and including youth leadership and through local innovation (Couldry, 2012).

Television dramas and digital storytelling can help in normalizing professional roles for educated females. However, such representations may remain aspirational rather than transformative if there are no structural access to schooling and employment (Nussbaum, 2011). In this regard, representation of educated women and girls in media becomes crucial, as it directly influences public perception and acceptance of female education in conservative social settings. Therefore, media should move towards participatory storytelling based on local realities instead of mere symbolic inclusion (Servaes, 2008).

3.6 Sustainability as Governance Question

Eventually, the sustainability in South Punjab is actually a governance issue. Media can disclose, expose, and highlight policy drawbacks and failures, but it cannot replace institutional capacity (UNDP, 2022). Provincial governments must work to make sure the availability of climate-resilient school infrastructure, they should ensure reliable and continuous energy supply for such rural institutions, they should take initiatives of digital connectivity for women, and they should support and back local journalism and community media (World Bank, 2023).

In a nutshell, the relationship between media and sustainability must be institutional rather than episodic.

4.0 TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK FOR SOUTH PUNJAB

The previous analysis validates that mere media awareness campaigns or episodic crisis reporting cannot help in achieving sustainability in South Punjab. Instead, the communication campaigns and the overall development communication process must be inclusive, localized, participatory, and institutionalized (Servaes, 2008; Pickard, 2020). Drawing on both the political economy and developmental perspectives, this next section suggests a grounded framework for sustainability communication keeping in view the South Punjab's structural realities.

4.1 Institutionalization; Linking Media Policy to Sustainability Goals

Sustainable communication should be rooted within provincial policy instead of being dependent on short-term donor programs. Governments at province levels should align media incentives and regulations with sustainability objectives. This can be done through starting public-interest based programs on climate resilience, by encouraging gender inclusion and through education continuity. Provincial governments should provide grants or offer tax incentives to produce localised sustainability content. University-media collaborations in South Punjab must be supported and encouraged to produce evidence-based reporting (Servaes, 2008; UNESCO, 2023). Ownership concentration must be discouraged. Diversified production process should be encouraged. Ownership concentration and pluralism risks pointed out by media monitoring organizations (Reporters Without Borders, 2019) emphasize the significance of the diversified production spaces. In terms of countering urban bias and to enhance regional representation local journalism ecosystems must be encouraged and supported (Reporters Without Borders, 2019; Yousaf, 2021).

There should be an effective institutional coordination among disaster management authorities, information departments, and education departments. This coordination may ensure that communication strategies accompany infrastructure investments. For example, when schools are rebuilt following floods, media should publicize and keep an eye on reopening timelines, and initiate enrolment drives to reduce and ultimately prevent dropout (Pakistan Institute of Education, 2022; UNICEF, 2022).

4.2 Localization; Language and Cultural Grounding

Localisation is far beyond than mere translation. It means involving and mixing sustainable development narratives and media messages into local and indigenous culture. Considering the significance and relation of Saraiki-speaking populations in South Punjab (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023), sustainable development narratives through digital platforms and traditional media messages should be constructed in Saraiki language.

For an effective and result oriented culturally grounded storytelling local cable networks and community radio stations are particularly well-suited. Narratives featuring local female students, teachers, farmers, and health workers can make sustainability messages more effective and relatable. When sustainability messages are framed in terms of protection of children's schooling, water security for crops, and family wellbeing, they resonate even more deeply than abstract policy language (Servaes, 2008).

Localization also demands for recognising and acknowledging local knowledge systems. For instance, women managing households and farmers in flood-prone areas possessing experiential knowledge of climate patterns can be employed to develop coping strategies during crises. Participatory media can integrate such localised knowledge into sustainability discourse (Fraser, 2008; Servaes, 2008).

4.3 Participation; From Audience to Co-Producer

In traditional development communication process local communities are usually considered

and treated as passive recipients of information. However, for sustainable transformation the recipients need to be more participatory (Servaes, 2008). Women and youth in South Punjab should be encouraged and supported as content creators by providing them with the school-based media clubs, by trainings through community journalism training programs, by arranging digital storytelling workshops for rural girls and by creating and encouraging partnerships between local universities and FM radio stations (Coudry, 2012; UNESCO, 2023).

The more the participation the more will be trust and legitimacy. For instance, when women narrate their own disaster recovery experiences or educational journeys, they challenge stereotypes and expand social imagination (Nussbaum, 2011). Citizen monitoring initiatives such as ASER Pakistan (2023) validate how grassroots data collection can impact and shape public debate. Integrating such participatory models with media narrative dissemination strengthens accountability. Such participatory approaches are particularly important for promoting female education, as they allow girls and women to become visible actors in sustainability communication rather than passive subjects.

4.4 Digital Inclusion as Sustainability Infrastructure

Digital access is increasingly essential for civic participation, disaster communication, and education continuity. Still, there are huge gaps between male and females in terms of access and ownership of mobile phones and digital platforms (GSMA, 2024; van Dijk, 2020). To address these gaps there is dire need of subsidized smartphones for low-income women, Public Wi-Fi zones near community centres and schools, legal and social protection against online harassment, and women-only digital literacy centres in rural districts (Norris, 2001; UNESCO, 2023).

If there is no digital inclusion then there is always a risk that the sustainability communication, contrary to its original goal, reinforce inequality. Therefore, digital access needs to be considered as vital and integral infrastructure as

uninterruptable electricity and vast roads (van Dijk, 2020).

4.5 Climate-Resilient Education Communication

With the rise of frequency and severity of heatwaves and floods it is imperative to raise the standards of sustainability communication focusing on protecting education continuity in areas such as South Punjab. UNICEF's flood reporting is evidence of how disasters destroy and disrupt schooling at highest scales (UNICEF, 2022). Media strategies should include early-warning information dissemination system targeted at parents and schools. Media should increase the length and depth of the coverage of school repair progress. Media should highlight and reinforce return-to-school campaigns of girls after every flood and crises (UNICEF, 2022; World Bank, 2018). Media should effectively inform public about temporary learning spaces. For a long-term sustainability education resilience is the key. Media must frame and portray education continuity as a community priority instead of an optional service (UNESCO, 2023).

4.6 Integrated Discussion; Media Between Possibility and Constraint

In this paper we have tried to reveal a central tension i.e. media, both the traditional and digital platforms, in South Punjab functions simultaneously as an enabler and a constraint of sustainability. We argue that as an enabler, media spread risk information and awareness among public during floods and disasters. It helps connecting the rural communities to national and provincial discourses (Norris, 2000; Servaes, 2008). Media provide with a platform for public debate and accountability. And, most importantly, media emphasize gender inclusion and education narratives.

On the other hand, for an effective sustainability the media's ownership concentration i.e. media conglomeration limits pluralism. Media becomes a constraint when gender based digital access hinders and limits inclusion. Urban bias in media production marginalises far-flung and peripheral areas. And, media episodic coverage of the floods

and disasters diminishes structural accountability (McChesney, 2008; Yousaf, 2021).

Therefore, it is imperative that for an effective sustainability communication structural inequalities must be confronted and eliminated within the media system itself. Structural reforms require top-down policy support and most importantly the bottom-up participation (Pickard, 2020; UNESCO, 2023).

5.0 CONCLUSION

In this paper we have argued that while local and digital media have significant potential to promote sustainability through female education in South Punjab, their effectiveness is constrained by socio-cultural hierarchies, limited access, and underdeveloped communication strategies.

At the end of this paper, we would like to conclude that sustainability in South Punjab is not just an environmental concern. Going beyond the climate change boundaries, it is an institutional, social, and communicative challenge in South Punjab. We have argued that gender equity, education resilience, climate adaptation, and inclusive governance are integral and deeply interconnected for sustainability (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2023).

Media holds a key but ambivalent position within this landscape. There is no doubt that mass media has a serious potential in terms of playing role in sustainable development in the South Punjab, however given the political economy of the country and the region its structural constraints need to be elucidated and examined carefully. Political economy approach argues that media are not neutral institutions and that they cannot inform, communicate, and comment on events in a neutral way. Rather, their production, circulation, and priorities are influenced by power hierarchies, regulatory systems, and economic markets of the society where they operate (Coudry & Mejias, 2019; McChesney, 2008). In this paper we have tried to reveal a central tension i.e. media, both the traditional and digital platforms, in South Punjab functions simultaneously as an enabler and a constraint of sustainability.

For an effective and result oriented culturally grounded storytelling local cable networks and

community radio stations are particularly well-suited. Narratives featuring local female students, teachers, farmers, and health workers can make sustainability messages more effective and relatable. When sustainability messages are framed in terms of protection of children's schooling, water security for crops, and family wellbeing, they resonate even more deeply than abstract policy language. Localization also demands for recognising and acknowledging local knowledge systems. For instance, women managing households and farmers in flood-prone areas possessing experiential knowledge of climate patterns can be employed to develop coping strategies during crises. Participatory media can integrate such localised knowledge into sustainability discourse.

We also believe that there should be an effective institutional coordination among disaster management authorities, information departments, and education departments. This coordination may ensure that communication strategies accompany infrastructure investments. For example, when schools are rebuilt following floods, media should publicize and keep an eye on reopening timelines, and initiate enrolment drives to reduce and ultimately prevent dropout.

Conclusively, we argue that sustainability is subject to strengthening and solidification of social systems including information networks, schools, and governance apparatuses, that facilitate local communities to thrive and adapt. In particular, strengthening female education must remain central to sustainability efforts in South Punjab, as it directly shapes long-term social resilience and development outcomes. Media cannot replace structural reforms; however, it can influence and shape the accountability, imagination, and collective will which are rudimentary and integral ingredients for actual transformation. In South Punjab, where historical marginalization intersects with climate vulnerability, democratization of communication may be one of the most important sustainability investments of all.

6.0 REFERENCES

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