

CULTURAL PORTRAIT OF WOMEN IN A PUNJABI VILLAGE (PERCEPTION OF PEOPLE REGARDING GENDER ROLES AND LITERACY)

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ABSTRACT

This paper "Cultural Portrait of Women in a Punjabi Village" focuses on the local perception of parents regarding the gender roles and their daughters' education in the Village Dasuha, District Faisalabad in the province of Punjab. In spite of the fact that the people are aware of the importance of education, they are reluctant to send their daughters to the schools due to which there is gender gap and the roles assigned to them are different. Parents deal with their male and female child separately. Preference is given to the sons because they are supposed to be the helping hand for the parents. Girls are generally limited to the domestic activities. Education is also aimed at fitting them into gender roles as prescribed by their society. This study identifies the impact of gender roles on female literacy. The focus of study is to find the actual reason of low participation rate of female education with reference to their role and duties. The efforts have been made to find out the culture perception of parents regarding their daughter's education and gender discrimination between female and male children as far as the role assignment and access to literacy is concerned. The data presented in this paper has been collected by using qualitative anthropological research techniques.

Keywords: gender role, literacy, discrimination, inequality, role imbalance, socialization,

INTRODUCTION

Many books and articles have been written about female gender, the woman, the girl. In particular, the girl's life goes through various shades of paradoxes, discrepancies, and conflicts till she ultimately conforms to the role model of a woman in accordance with the dictates of prevailing culture. Most of the times 'Gender' is confused with 'sex'. 'Sex' refers to the biological and physical differences existing between men and women, in terms of physiques, genes and hormones. 'Gender', however, refers to men and women as, two types of people, and has more to do with the social and cultural construction of ideas about masculinity and femininity and the roles

assigned to them. Oakley (1981)¹ in her work refers to “Sex as the biological division into female and male; and parallel and socially unequal division of men and women into femininity and masculinity.” The sex roles are assigned to a person on the basis of gender. Gender is the sexual classification (i.e. the classification of being male or female). According to Britannica CD 2000 Deluxe Edition, (Copyright 1994-2000)² “Gender identity is not fixed at birth...is modified and expanded by social factors as the child matures...gender identity develops by means of parental example, social reinforcement and language.”

In our society, generally the parents deal with their male and female child separately. The sons are preferred over the daughters because they are supposed to be the helping hand for the parents. According to Klein and Renate (1992)³ "The preference for sons, who are obviously better fed and nursed, is based on the distribution of tasks and roles according to sex. It is the responsibility of the son for example to support his parents in old age and to ensure the survival of the family by linking the living and the dead. Men are also regarded as stronger and intellectually superior, a view that many women themselves hold." Parents tend to think that whatever they spent on sons is an investment where as spending over daughters is a waste, because they are considered as liabilities. Low-income family cannot afford enough money to educate their children, so they choose their son for higher education. It is fact that the bringing up a child by an educated mother is superior to by an uneducated mother. Awareness about the importance of female education is not a new phenomenon. But there is gap present between male and female child in literacy. Literacy rate vary from region to region as well as in case of sex. For instance, literacy rate in rural areas are lower as compared to urban areas. Similarly, female literacy rates are lower as compared to those of male (Ghafoor, 1994)⁴.

According to Census Report of 1998 the literacy rate in Pakistan is 45%. Among the males it is 56.5% and among the females it is 32.6%. Among the females in rural areas this rate is 20.80%. The lack of education among females especially in the rural areas creates many serious problems. The females being half of the population cannot play their roles in the national development because of low literacy level. They cannot find jobs, they cannot make decisions, they are not aware about their health; they cannot contribute in educating their next generation.

Table 1: Literacy Rate in Pakistan

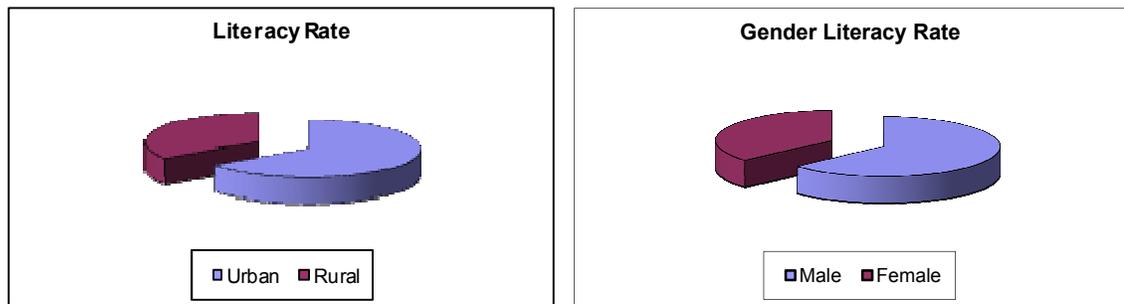
Literacy rate in Pakistan	Urban	Rural	Male	Female
45%.	64.70%	34.40%	56.5%	32.6%

¹ Oakley, A. (1981). On wome. Book plan Worcester.

² Britannica CD (2000). Deluxe Edition, Copyright © 1994-2000 Encyclopedia Britannica.

³ Klien, H. G. and N. Renate. (1992). Women in Pakistan. Lahore: Vanguard Books.

⁴ Ghafoor, A.(1994). Quest For Adult Literacy. Islamabad: National Book Foundation.

Figure 1: Literacy Rate in Pakistan

The process of child education is also aimed at fitting the boys and girls into gender roles as prescribed by their society. People believe that the girls are different from boys so they try to ensure that this difference is maintained through adopting some distinct patterns of social training for boys and girls. Commonly, it is assumed that strength, self-assertiveness, valour, confidence and interest in matters outside the house are exclusively male characteristics. On the contrary, a girl is kept in narrow bounds and is supposed to be docile, shy and sociable.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

By “methodology” we mean the philosophy of the research process. This includes the assumptions and values that serve as a rationale for research and the standards or criteria the research use for interpreting data and reaching conclusions. Whereas by “method” we simply mean the research technique or tool used to gather data. Methodology of the current research was based upon qualitative anthropological research methods which include socio-economic survey, participant observation, key informant interviews, interviews, case studies and focus group discussions were used to collect empirical data. For socio-economic survey 100 households were selected through simple random sample. We choose two key informants in the village on our personal judgment basis, which knew most of the people in the village and their socio-economic conditions. Participant observation was used in order to get first hand and accurate information about the respondents. We participated in the daily activities of the village. In-depth interviews were conducted with the elder members of society to get detailed information. Structured Interviews were used to collect information from the teachers and other working women because they take the interview more seriously and give reasonably accurate answers. Case studies were conducted to get a detailed presentation of data related to different events. The first visit was conducted in 1996, and the second in 2006.

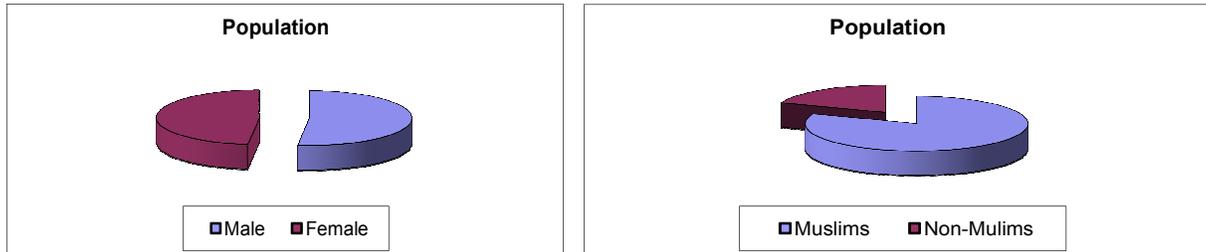
LOCALE OF STUDY

This study was conducted in Village Dasuha (242-R.B.), District Faisalabad. The village is situated at a distance of 15 km from Faisalabad city in South West direction and 2 km from Samundri road from where a branch road leads to the village. According to 1998 population census report of district Faisalabad the total population of Dasuha is 9,557, which includes 4952 males and 4605 females. This total figure includes 7721 Muslims and 1838 Non-Muslims.

Table 2: Population of the Village

Total Population	Male	Female	Muslim	Non-Muslim
9557	4952	4605	7721	1838

Figure 2: Population of the Village



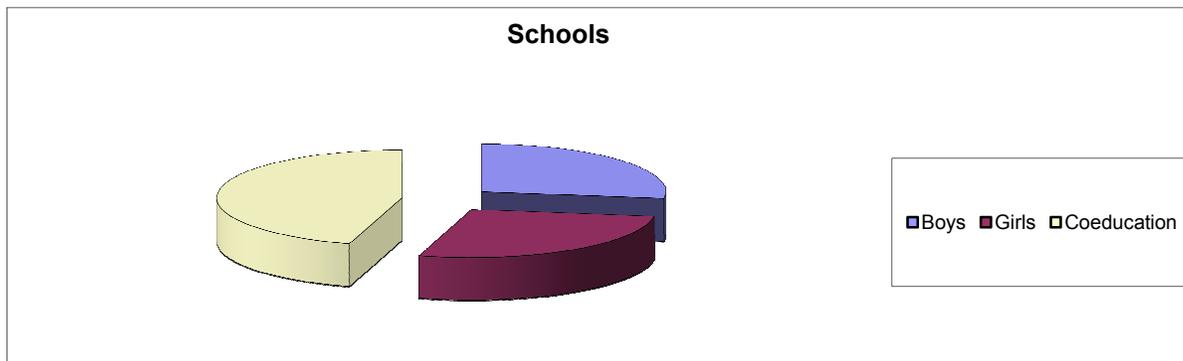
Educational Facilities in the Village

The educational facilities are present in the village both for boys and girls. The total number of schools present in the village is 11. There is one high and two primary schools for boys, one higher secondary and two primary schools for girls provided by the government. There are two middle schools, two primary schools and one nursery school in the private sector where there is coeducation. The schools in private sector are providing both Urdu and English medium education to the students. The number of male students in English medium sections of the school is more than females. Computer education is also present in Kinder Middle School. For the higher education people send their sons to the colleges and universities in Faisalabad.

Table 3: Position of the Schools in the Village

Schools	For boys	For girls	Coeducation	Status
Higher secondary School	-	1	-	Government
High School	1	-	-	Government
Middle School	-	-	2	Private
Primary School	2	2	-	Government
Primary School	-	-	2	Private
Nurseries	-	-	1	Private

Figure 3: Position of the Schools in the Village



THE GENDER ROLES

Kessler (1978)⁵ pointed out that "A gender role, then, is a set of expectations about what behaviors are appropriate for people of one gender... someone is "born into" the category "male" or "female", and by virtue of her or his birth becomes obligated to perform the male or female role... Most writers agree with this definition, although they sometimes call it "sex role".

Zanden and Wilfred (1990)⁶ pointed out "It seems that all societies have used the anatomical difference between men and women to assign gender roles, sets of cultural expectations that define the ways in which the members of each sex should behave. Gender roles represent the earliest division of labour among human beings. We all are born into societies with well-established cultural guidelines for the behavior of men and of women."

According to Kazi and Sathar (1991)⁷ "The primary role of women is viewed as mother and wives and most often women in Pakistan derive their status from their male kin. There is a conventional division of responsibility between men and women: economic provision is the responsibility of the men while women must procreate and raise children."

Girls are generally limited to the domestic activities like assisting their mothers in doing the household chores and looking after their younger siblings. In free time they learn to make handicrafts which include embroidery, stitching clothes and crochet work from the elderly women of the family. This is a socialization phase for them wherein they learn their female role. They actually learn to contribute to the household economy directly and indirectly. Through household chores they save money which otherwise may have to be paid for hiring these services and through handicrafts they could earn money.

Devasia and Devasia (1991)⁸ pointed out "From the childhood, girls are encouraged to take to traditional female roles. Their play material is dolls and kitchen material, while the boys play with aero planes and battle tanks..... girls are encouraged to take up needle work and cookery while the boys take to hobbies like wood work, metal work, etc. Thus even in the socialization process in a family, sex stereotypes play their part. Girls are expected to be docile, modest, less talkative and submissive, thus closing the doors of creativity and innovation for girls." At another place it has been pointed out, "The process of socializing of children starts in the family and women in a family are partners to deep-rooted female bias, whereby girls and women are given secondary status than the boys and male members. When a girl sees her mother looking after household chores like cleaning, washing, cooking, baby-care etc. being the last to eat food and to deprive herself of all comforts of life, she also imbibes these values...."

As the girls grow up, especially when they reach the stage of puberty, they are discouraged from going outside the house unaccompanied and from mixing with male relatives. The "honor" of the family is the main reason

⁵ Kessler, S. J. (1978). *Gender; An Ethnomethodological Approach*. A Wiley Interscience Publication.

⁶Zanden, V. and J. Wilfred. (1990). *The Social Experience, An Introduction to Sociology*. (ED), USA. McGraw Hill Publishing Company.

⁷Kazi, S. and Z. A. Sathar. (1991). *Women's roles: education, health and reproductive behavior in Finding our way*. edited by Fareeha Zafai., ASR Publications.

⁸Devasia, L. and V.V. Devasia. (1991). *Girl Child in India* (ed). New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House.

for the segregation and differentiation between the two sexes. The daughters are isolated from the main society to a certain extent to protect the *izzat*⁹ (and repute) of the family. Their chastity has to be protected, and for this reason confining them to the house and keeping them under the watchful eyes of the family is considered to be an important. This is especially true for the girls who have reached the stage of puberty.

Boys, on the other hand, are allowed to play outside. Their work is mostly related to the outside world like bringing things of everyday needs for the family, working outside to earn money etc. They are not responsible for taking care of younger siblings and doing household chores. The food is served first to the male members of the family; they are given the best part of the serving, as they are considered to be worth great respect. The rest of the food is for the children and female members of the family. The girls are trained to be more self-sacrificial, helpful and considerate of their brothers, fathers, husbands and sons. They have to control their voice, behavior, emotions, whims and wishes. According to Zafar (1991)¹⁰ "The Pakistani society encourages five year old girls to behave differently from their male counterparts in their outer behaviour as well as in developing inner control. They are discouraged from being noisy and rough in their play and trained to adopt an attitude of care and service towards male members of the society. They are also discouraged from spending time in outdoor activities."

In the village Dasuha, male is the dominant creature. In almost every household he is the head of the family. There is a complete differentiation in the male and female role. This differentiation is created right from the childhood. When a child is born, there is a differential childhood socialization of males and females. Both the boys and girls are educated to perform in different ways. Kumari, Singh and Dubey (1990)¹¹ stated, "These girls, as we have seen, are socialized to play expressive roles, i.e. social roles within the private domain of the family, unlike their brothers who are trained to play the instrumental roles, i.e. to take up the responsibility of productive functions in the public domain. May be this role expectation leads to discrimination vis-à-vis the "productive members' of the family". Girls are socialized to be more oriented towards people, to be other-directed and dependent, whereas boys are raised to be more independent, aggressive and achievement oriented. Girls develop a negative self-image when they accept society's more positive evaluation of males and masculine activities. The socialization of males and females are the inter-related set of problems. Different socialization of the sexes leads the girls towards dependency, other-direction and an inferior self-image. These characteristics lead them to avoid masculine occupations and to enter those, which are consistent with the traditional feminine image. If women do enter feminine field then they are likely to remain subordinate to men, since they lack the aggressiveness and the motivation necessary to achieve and high levels.

The social system, region, and class to which she belongs influence the life of a woman. She has no say in any aspect of her life, including her own marriage. The majority of womanhood belongs to the silent and unmentioned peasantry or a working class. It is a poor and virtually illiterate majority, which leads a life of physical hardship involving long hours at tedious chores, for which there is neither compensation nor recognition. Most of these women bear the double burden of housework and outside work. Consequently, they

⁹ honour, respect and repute

¹⁰ Zafar, F. (1991). *The Social Experience, An Introduction to Sociology*. (ed), USA: McGraw Hill Publishing Company.

¹¹ Kumari, R., R. Singh. and A. Dubey. (1990). *Growing Up in Rural India, Problems and Needs of Adolescent Girls*. New Delhi: Radiant Publishers.

are the first to rise and the last to sleep. They must light the fire, prepare breakfast, have the dishes washed and the house cleaned before setting out on their "working" day. After everyone else has collapsed in bed, these women are still cleaning, clearing and preparing for the following day. Not only do women have longer days than the rest of the family, but also being the last to eat, they eat less well and suffer from anemia and malnutrition. As a person, a woman is denied an identity of her own. She is seen as a commodity eventually owned by her husband. On the other hand, the roles of males are most highly valued-roles of warrior, elder, priest or chief.

The Girls: In the study area it was observed that the girls being females have to stay inside the house and have to do the household chores. The boys being males are allowed to stay outside the house and work outside the house. The girls who are in the early childhood (1-5years old) are told to do little household chores just to learn them. My key informant told me that, they are taught from the beginning, that these things are to be done by boys, these shouldn't be done and these activities are for girls and should be performed by them. The girls at this stage can go out in the neighbourhood, but they generally play inside the house. Their games include *pakran pakrai*,¹² *chuppan chupai*,¹³ *baraf pani*¹⁴, *kho kho*¹⁵ and *pithu garam*¹⁶ etc. They mostly play with dolls. They celebrate their marriages, cook food for them, make their clothes and houses etc.

The girls of 6 to 10 years of age can play games but their playing time reduces. Most of my respondents said that they are told by their elders that *hun tussi wadian ho gaiyan o*,¹⁷ *hun gudiyan patolay chad dao*¹⁸ i.e. now you have grown up so stop playing with dolls. It was observed in most of the houses that the girls usually stop playing with dolls when they are roughly 7 to 8 years old. Their mothers and grandmothers tell them to wash dishes, clothes, sweep floor and take care of the younger siblings. Paranjape (1999)¹⁹ also observed that one of the principal reasons which keep many girls out of school system especially in rural areas is that they are required to work at a very young age in various domestic chores. They are forbidden to speak loudly or shouting at their parents and elder brothers; and are told not to go near boys, not to shake hands with boys and men, even with their male cousins. They are made to wear veils on their heads. During this period they still meet friends in the neighbourhood and go to school. I observed that when they are roughly 9 to 10 years old they also start doing a little bit of embroidery etc. They keep on learning by trying to help their elder sisters and women of the household.

It was observed in most of families that the girls, who are roughly 11-15 years old, are put under complete restrictions. They have to be accompanied by their parents, siblings or relatives while going out. Some parents even stop their daughters from studying at this stage. Parents also start thinking about their proposals when they

¹² local game in which the children run and one tries to touch any of them.

¹³ Hide and seek.

¹⁴ Local game (Ice, water).

¹⁵ A local game.

¹⁶ A local game.

¹⁷ Now you are grown up.

¹⁸ Now leave playing with dolls.

¹⁹ Paranjape, S. (1999). Women's Education Status in Women Development. by R.K Sapru, New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House.

reach the stage of puberty (14-15 years). They are told that they'll be going to *aglay ghaar*²⁰ and should be respectful, obedient and tolerant towards their husbands and in-laws. The mothers are more relaxed and in comfort *araam wich hondian*²¹ when their daughters reach this age because they know that they will be working in their place. Now the daughter takes care of the house and the family. Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987)²² stated, "As the socially prescribed role of women is limited to raising a family, education is never a priority for girls. The result is that the literacy rate for women in Pakistan is one of the lowest in the world."

Economic activities of the girls are restricted due to *pardah*²³ limitation, which confines them within the bounds of the houses. Home associated work is then a convenient choice and with that comes the handicraft of embroidery and crochet work, appropriate expertise for which is adequately acquired by majority of the girls of Dasuha who utilize it for making their dowry items. Thus besides doing the household work the majority of girls, in particular from lower income group also help the family by earning money through the sale of crotchet work, embroidered and stitched items to the middleman who visits their homes and buys their out put at dirt cheap rates. Sheer exploitation of home bound girls of Dasuha.

The Boys: It was observed, and told by different respondents that 1-5 years old boys play with toy guns, sticks, *lattoo*²⁴ (yoyo), as they grow older they also fly kites called *patang/guddi urana*²⁵ and playing marbles *bantay khaidna*²⁶. Such games are not permissible to the girls. Boys bring things of everyday needs and requirements, *saoda*²⁷ from the shops etc.

Those who are roughly 6-10 years of age bring firewood, which are normally dried sticks called *ballann*²⁸ with their fathers and elder brothers for burning/heating *tandoor*²⁹ and *chulha*³⁰. They play games outside the house. They take lunch in the fields if they are working there or helping their elders. They take cows or goats out for grazing if they have. Those who go to school take their animals out for grazing in the evening and bring fodder for them. But it was also observed that majority of the families do not own cattle, therefore, boys are mostly free and spend most of their time in playing with their friends, roaming around and resting.

The boys 11-15 years old, who are not studying, start learning different works. Most of my respondents said that they are learning to do work *kamm sikhday*³¹, like that of motor mechanics etc. Sons of landowners work on the fields like doing *godi*³², making *kiyaray*³³, cutting crops etc. They are made aware of their responsibility

²⁰ Next home (husband's home).

²¹ To stay in peace.

²² Mumtaz, K. and F. Shaheed. (1987). Women of Pakistan. Lahore: Vanguard Books Pvt., Limited.

²³ Females hide themselves from stranger males.

²⁴ yoyo

²⁵ kite flying.

²⁶ playing marbles

²⁷ Grocery

²⁸ Any material for burning fire (firewood).

²⁹ oven

³⁰ stove

³¹ learning to do work.

³² clearing the fields by eradicating weeds and softening the soil.

³³ making flower beds/plant beds.

towards supporting their parents and siblings economically, specially their sisters in terms of dowry. Spare time after work is mostly spent with their cousins and friends of similar age groups.

Majority of the respondents said that they like their sons to be *daday*³⁴ as they have to go out and work, have to become the heads of the household, control the family and its matters. The girls are desired to be submissive *lissian*³⁵ as every girl has to go to her husband's house, has to obey and serve him and her in-laws. If she will be *munh zor*³⁶ then she will create problems for her younger sisters regarding their marriage proposals, so she has to be careful everywhere.

ROLE IMBALANCE

There is no balance between the work assigned to the males and females especially at the school going age. The boys at this age have very little to do. They have a lot of free time for their studies. On the other hand the girls of the same age have to do a lot of work at home. They have to help their mothers in household work. The household work though is apparently easy and light, but it is not so in reality. The girl child is supposed to help in all household chores, which is a full time job. In most of the households she takes care of the siblings and then doing embroidery, crochet work and stitching to earn money or making dowry. On the other hand the boy's responsibility is usually limited to earn money and to bring grocery etc. After that he is free from all responsibilities of the household and can spend rest of the time in the company of his friends or by watching movies, listening songs or resting in his room while her sister is working for his and the family's convenience. If he needs anything, he can just order her and his demands will be fulfilled. The males get a holiday on Sundays from work but there is no off day for the females, as the household work never ceases to exist. The males can skip work for a day or more from their labours if they are ill, but there is no rest for the females unless they are seriously ill and can't move. The greatest tragedy is that all this hard work goes unnoticed, unacknowledged, and unearned. This imbalance is a major barrier for the girls regarding education.

A change has also appeared in context of education too. In the past people didn't even allow their daughters to study, but now they have started getting their daughters educated. Most of my respondents said that it's because of media. People have been made aware that it is as important for daughters to get education as it is for boys. There are many girls who were not allowed to study in the past but now their younger sisters are being sent to school by their parents.

CONCLUSION

When babies come into the world, they are innocent, soft and totally at the mercy of their parents. Parents in Dasuha who are self reliant and world wise have their own ways and visions regarding their children's education. These ways have different sets of rules and regulations for the new comer. Male child is met with cheers and festivities moreover; he finds life an era of freedom to develop and grow in any direction of his desires and capabilities but arrival of girl child is met with a chilled hush. A life stuffed with suppressed sentiments and subdued existence awaits her. The stamp of second-class citizen is embossed on her soul in the name of love, concern and security.

³⁴ strict and aggressive.

³⁵ submissive.

³⁶ stubborn and self assertive.

In the family, parents differentiate among their children. Mother plays the major role in this differentiation. When a woman is expecting she says that a son should be born. If a son is born she thinks of herself as a great woman who has given birth to a man. This man will continue the lineage of his father. The females even managing the whole of household work are supposed as doing their routine work. The data shows that the males and females in the patriarchal Punjabi society are not rewarded for what they do. Females are the ones who suffer most. They do contribute in the family income in one way or the other but still their contribution is not considered as an extra work.

Then literacy level of the population shows that the women are the one who are less educated. Therefore, they are not given their due rights in the society as they cannot protest in getting their rights. The males do not accept this that the females are equivalent to them.

Despite the rigid customs and traditions which are being followed by the villagers, certain changes have also taken place, like *pardah*³⁷ these days is not as strict as it was in past. In the past the women had to wear a thick *burkha*³⁸ from very young ages and had to cover themselves with it even in summers, but now the girls have started wearing *chadders*³⁹ and veils although they still cover their faces and bodies with them. The girls and women only used to go out to meet their relatives during nighttime and that too with male companions, but now this practice is very rare. Now they can even go during the daytime. The girls go to schools and *madrassas*⁴⁰ etc, and women can also be seen as L.H.Vs and L.H.Ws so this trend has changed.

Changes have also been observed in the health issues, as the people are gaining greater awareness about health, family planning and related issues through the Lady Health Visitors and media. The people have started taking their females to the hospitals.

There was a time when girls were not allowed to speak against any order of their parents, especially fathers, uncles and brothers. But now it was observed that girls have started speaking against not being allowed to study further, I've seen some girls who are getting higher education by force. Some girls although are not educated themselves, but have made their parents send their younger sisters to schools.

Although these are only few of the aspects in which change was seen but these changes were seen in majority of the families. Although the pace of social change is extremely slow but it is happening, showing that the rural society is not static and exposure to media and interaction with the urban community has also affected the Dasuha society in some ways.

But the harsh reality still holds a strong position as the girls of Dasuha, which is a fusion point of Punjabi Culture, are living in a conservative patriarchal and partilineal society where they are assigned with the roles of a domestic worker expected to be submissive, chaste, *pardah*⁴¹ observing, dowry making and ready to be wed

³⁷Females hide themselves from stranger males.

³⁸A gown worn by the ladies to cover their head, face and body for purda.

³⁹ Shawl

⁴⁰ Institution for religious education

⁴¹Females hide themselves from stranger males.

off and to nicely settle down in the house of their in laws. A little education with full devotion to household works in order to care and look after the members of the family in a docile and submissive manner is the normal life schedule of most of Dasuha girls who are groomed to accept the dominance of men as father, brother and husband.

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