

THE UNEVEN LADDER: PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY, INEQUALITY, AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN URBAN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the perceptions of people of the cities about economic disparities and upward mobility in four major cities of Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan, and Rawalpindi. The data were examined by descriptive statistics, regression, and ANOVA tests using a quantitative cross-sectional study design of 400 participants. The results have shown that poverty is seen to be mainly a structural matter associated with a lack of good governance, corruption, and lack of access to education and jobs (M = 4.42). According to the respondents, they strongly believed that income inequality has been increased (M = 4.35), with the majority of them considering it to be socially harmful and unjust. Education was found to be the greatest avenue to social mobility (M = 4.18) although the sense of opportunity justice was low (M = 3.05), a factor indicating a large-scale disillusionment surrounding meritocracy. Regression analysis demonstrated that education ($\beta = 0.352$, $p < 0.001$), income ($\beta = 0.310$, $P < 0.001$) had a significant effect on the perceptions in all domains, whereas gender had a weak negative effect. The results of ANOVA indicated that there were significantly different achievements between the groups based on their education level, as well as income ($p < 0.001$). On the whole, the paper supports the importance of education, income and structural inequality in defining the attitude of the population towards poverty and mobility in urban Punjab, as a policy suggestion to the inclusion development and fair growth.

Keywords: education, socioeconomic disparities, social mobility, poverty, inequality, perceptions.

Introduction

Poverty, inequality, and social mobility are some of the key topics of debate in the current development literature especially in such nations as Pakistan where the socioeconomic differences are contemporary in both periods of growth and stagnation. As the most densely populated and the most economically active part of Pakistan, the province of Punjab captures the contradictions of contemporary development, namely, increasing urbanization and rejuvenation of the economy, on the one hand, and inequality and lack of upward mobility, on the other hand. The interpretation of the perception among the urban population of these dynamics gives useful

information on the social facts and mindset guiding the preferences on the policy agenda, community interests, and change hopes (Malik et al., 2020).

There has been a major structural change in the urban centers of Punjab which include Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan and Rawalpindi due to the forces of industrialization, migration and growth of service sector. However, the processes have equally increased the level of economic stratification prospects with many people being marginalized in access to education, health, and employment (Obeng-Odoom, 2020). The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2024) argues that almost a quarter of urban dwellers of Punjab live

under the poverty line, and income inequalities are growing larger, with the top 10% of the population holding an uneven portion of wealth. This widening gap begs the question of equity, opportunity and the ability of the so-called ladder of success to be available to everybody.

Poverty and inequality not only manifest themselves in the material world but also disclose thoughts behind the understanding of social justice, meritocracy and structural obstacles. According to Rana et al. (2020), the perception of fairness and opportunity plays a great role in shaping political attitudes, institutional trust, and redistributive policy support. In Punjab, where the cultural relevance of collectivism is in conflict with the neoliberalism in the economy, the general attitude generally swings between the belief that inequality is some of the natural consequences of hard work and the acknowledgment that there is a systemic obstacle to progress, including nepotism, corruption, and access to quality education (López et al., 2018).

Social mobility - the capacity of individuals or families to advance their social economic conditions between generational strata can be considered as one of the important indicators of equality of opportunity. The social mobility in Pakistan is still limited to structural inequalities in education, inheritance, and labor sectors (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2020). Urban Punjab, however, even with an increased literacy level and the availability of economic opportunities, is still in a state of low intergenerational mobility, and the economic gains or losses tend to be passed down through the family line (GoP, 2024). This stagnation does not only influence the life chances of the individuals but also destroys the social cohesion in the society thus creating a feeling of injustice and alienation among the lower and middle classes.

There is little study of how poverty and inequality are perceived in Pakistan, and especially in the urban environment of Punjab, modernization, migration, and consumerism are quickly changing the social values. The majority of the available research is based on macroeconomic measurements instead of individual knowledge of inequality or perceptions of equity in opportunity frameworks (Jamal, 2021; Sattar, 2018). However, these understandings are the important factors in forming the group attitudes toward economic reform, taxation, welfare policies and social

justice movements. As an example, people who think that poverty is caused by laziness and not due to structural factors are less inclined to back the redistributive policies (De La Cruz-Viesca et al., 2018). Therefore, by looking at the perception of the Punjabis towards the reasons behind poverty, the legitimacy of the inequality and the availability of social mobility, one can gain a clearer insight into the transforming social contract in Pakistan.

Thus, this research paper will examine the perception of poverty, inequality, and social mobility of urban residents of Punjab and determine which social, economic, and cultural conditions influence this perception. In such a way, it will help develop a subtle perception of how citizens see their status in an unbalanced social order and how they think about the possibility of transforming their lives and communities.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate how the people perceive poverty and its root causes in urban dwellers in Punjab, Pakistan.
2. To evaluate the attitude to economic inequality and views of fairness on income and opportunity distribution.
3. To examine perceptions of social mobility, and perceived availability of upward social mobility in urban Punjab.
4. To examine the effect of socioeconomic status (education, income, gender, and occupation) on poverty, inequality, and mobility perceptions.

Methodology

The research methodology used in this study is quantitative cross sectional survey design to explore the perceptions of urban residents of Punjab in Pakistan regarding poverty, inequality and social mobility. Quantitative approach will allow gathering numerical data, which will be systematically collected to study the association between socioeconomic variables and public attitudes to give the generalized idea of how people think about the structural and personal determinants of economic results. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that a quantitative design is suited in the case when the aim is to determine measurable correlations and statistically test hypotheses. This design, therefore, enables an in-

depth study of how education, income, occupation and perceptions of poverty, inequality and upward mobility interact with each other

The experiment was carried out in the four key cities of Punjab namely Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan, and Rawalpindi, which were purposely chosen based on their demographic variables, the degree of industrialization, and economic relevance in the province. All these cities depict the urban range in Punjab including highly developed and moderately developed cities. The target group comprised of men and women aged 18 and above and included different occupational and income groups such as professionals, laborers, students and owners of small businesses. This variety made sure that the perceptions of all the socioeconomic segments were taken into account.

The respondents were picked using a multistage stratified random approach. To identify the four cities in the first phase, they were selected purposely, whereas in the second phase, each city was subdivided into socioeconomic strata, including low-income, middle-income, and high-income neighborhoods, to make sure that all economic classes will be represented. Systematic random sampling was used to select the respondents in the third stage out of each stratum randomly. The formula of finite population of Yamane (1967) was used to determine the sample size of 400 respondents:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

where n is the desired sample size, N is the required population of city dwellers of the urban population and is the margin of error which was fixed at 0.05 (95 percent level). Since the urban population of Punjab is large, the statistically-adequate sample of 400 was found to permit the extrapolation of the results with the acceptable confidence levels.

A structured questionnaire that was designed to be used in the study was used to gather the data. The instrument was subdivided into four large sections that were in line with the research objectives. The initial part was the demographic information including gender, age, education, income, and occupation. The second part captured the perceptions of poverty by asking questions that evaluated views of poverty causes, including a lack of education, laziness, government laxity, structural inequalities, etc. The third part dealt with attitudes towards

inequality that looked at the perceptions of the fairness of the distribution of income and opportunity, levels of trust in institutions and the perceived place of the government in promoting equity. The last part dealt with perceptions concerning social mobility, evaluating the views of the respondents on the availability of upward mobility on one hand and the limitations that impede socioeconomic progress on the other hand. All items were measured using a Likert scale of five points where one (1) was strongly disagree and five (5) was strongly agree and thus perceptions could be quantified to be statistically analyzed.

In order to achieve the validity and reliability of the tool, expert review of three experts in development studies and sociology was used to ensure content validity. The questionnaire was tested on a small number of 30 respondents in Lahore in order to determine the clarity, coherence, and reliability of the questionnaire. Internal consistency was established as the results of the pilot study gave Cronbach information beyond the standard value of 0.70 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) across the scales of the measurements. Particularly, the reliability coefficients were $0.81 = 0.84 = 0.79$ respectively with the poverty perception scale, the inequality attitude scale, and the social mobility belief scale.

The analysis of data was performed with the help of SPSS (Version 26) and STATA (Version 17). Demographic data and the general trends of public perceptions were summarized with the help of descriptive statistics like frequencies, means, and standard deviations. Inferential statistical procedures were subsequently used in testing hypotheses and investigating relationships existing between socioeconomic variables and the variables of interest, which are the dependent variables. A multiple regression model was estimated to solve the fourth goal of the research which was to determine how education, income, gender, and occupation affect perceptions, which is as under:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Education}_i) + \beta_2(\text{Income}_i) + \beta_3(\text{Gender}_i) + \beta_4(\text{Occupation}_i) + \epsilon_i$$

According to this model, Y_i is the composite perception score (which is based on the mean of all Likert-scale items), 0 is the intercept, 114 is the coefficient of the independent variables, and 0 is the error term. The hypothesis, which is tested by the model, is that socioeconomic factors

have a big impact on the differences in perception of poverty, inequality and social mobility. Besides, the ANOVA was performed one way to establish the differences between the groups and the strength of the variables association. The level of control was a 5% statistical significance level ($p < 0.05$).

The observance of ethical standards was limited in the course of the research. The data collection was done after receiving the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university where the researcher was. The participants were notified on the purpose of the study, given the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, as well as given the right to drop out any time with no consequences. All data were

applied on the academic purpose and gathered in a safe way to preserve privacy.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Public Perceptions and Underlying Causes of Poverty

Table 1 shows how urban residents of Punjab view nature and causes of poverty. The results indicate that there is a great awareness of poverty as a multidimensional and systemic issue, which is highly embedded in structural inequalities, bad governance, and lack of access to resource and opportunities. The average scores (between 3.05 and 4.42) indicate that the participants, although on the majority of the statements they agreed with an average score, the level of their agreement varied based on their comprehension of individual and structural causes.

Table 1. Public Perceptions and Underlying Causes of Poverty among Urban Residents in Punjab, Pakistan (N = 400)

Perceptions of Poverty	Mean	SD	Rank	Underlying Causes of Poverty	Mean	SD	Rank
Poverty is a widespread problem affecting most urban families.	4.40	0.71	1	Lack of education and job skills contributes to persistent poverty.	4.42	0.67	1
Poverty limits access to healthcare, education, and basic needs.	4.32	0.73	2	Unemployment and job scarcity increase poverty levels.	4.35	0.72	2
Poverty is linked with poor housing and unsafe living conditions.	4.20	0.78	3	Poor governance and corruption cause economic hardship.	4.20	0.79	3
Poverty reduces opportunities for upward social mobility.	4.10	0.82	4	Unequal wealth distribution perpetuates poverty.	4.12	0.83	4
Poverty leads to social exclusion and low self-esteem.	3.95	0.86	5	Rapid population growth increases the burden of poverty.	4.05	0.88	5
Poverty is often inherited across generations.	3.85	0.90	6	Cultural and traditional constraints restrict economic opportunity.	3.60	0.93	6
People in poverty lack motivation to improve their situation.	3.70	0.94	7	Women's limited workforce participation worsens poverty.	3.52	0.97	7
Poverty exists mainly because people are unlucky or fated to suffer.	3.15	1.01	8	Inadequate government support programs fail to reduce poverty.	3.05	1.10	8

It was revealed that the respondents strongly perceived poverty as a common societal issue that impacts the majority of urban families ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.71$) and as one of the determining factors that restrict access to health care, education, and other essentials ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.73$). These mean scores are high because people in the cities of Punjab are well aware of the far reaching effects and impact of poverty. It was also found that urban poverty in Pakistan should not only be considered through the income deprivation idea but also through the absence of social services and infrastructure (Rana et al., 2020). The fact that poverty is connected to the lack of housing and unsafe living conditions ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.78$) also gained high scores, highlighting the interrelation between the deprivation of an economy and the worsening of urban living conditions. Malik and Shahnaz (2015) note that the marginalization of low-income people in Punjab has been caused by unplanned urbanization and poor housing policies, leaving the people in poor living conditions. Equally, the respondents concurred that poverty impedes the upward social mobility ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.82$), which is an increasing frustration with inadequate economic growth amid urbanization. This is in line with the observations by Khalid et al. (2019) who have found that mobility in urban Pakistan is limited by structural inequalities and unequal access to education and jobs.

Conversely, there were less agreement on answers to individual level or fatalistic explanations of poverty. Other statements like people in poverty lack motivation ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.94$) and poverty exists because people are unlucky or fated to suffer ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.01$) scored lowly indicating that the majority of the respondents do not subscribe to the idea of poverty existing because of the lack of motivation in individuals or their ill-fate. Such a movement is indicative of a change in traditional fatalism towards a structuralist interpretation of poverty which is aligned with the societal viewpoint of structural causation (i.e. inequality, policy failure and unavailability of opportunities) (Foell & Pitzer, 2020). Speaking of the perceived causes of the poverty, the most important ones, as reported by the respondents, were the lack of education and job skills ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.67$) and unemployment and job scarcity ($M = 4.35$, $SD =$

0.72). These results show that the city residents are highly connected with poverty with lack of human capital and job opportunities- which have been widely reported in the literature (Hamnett, 2019). Further, there was also a high rank given to poor governance and corruption ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.79$) and unequal wealth distribution ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.83$), which indicated that institutional and structural inefficiencies are believed to be a major hindrance to poverty alleviation. Khalid et al. (2019) also indicated that poor governance and unequal economic structures also serve to perpetuate a cycle of poverty in urban Pakistan.

The moderate levels of agreement were found regarding rapid population growth ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.88$) and cultural and traditional constraints ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.93$) which imply that demographic and social factors are accepted but viewed as secondary factors. The poor performance of poor government support programs ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.10$) also shows that people are not very convinced in the effectiveness of state welfare programs, which is also confirmed by Obeng-Odoom (2020), who indicated that not all social safety nets are effectively delivered to the urban poor. As revealed in the table, urban inhabitants in Punjab have mainly accredited poverty to structural, institutional, and educational deficits as opposed to individual failures or destiny. This is parallel to the rising discourse of structural poverty and a manifestation of the rising level of social awareness of social inequality and the problem of governance in urban Pakistan.

3.2. Attitudes Toward Economic Inequality

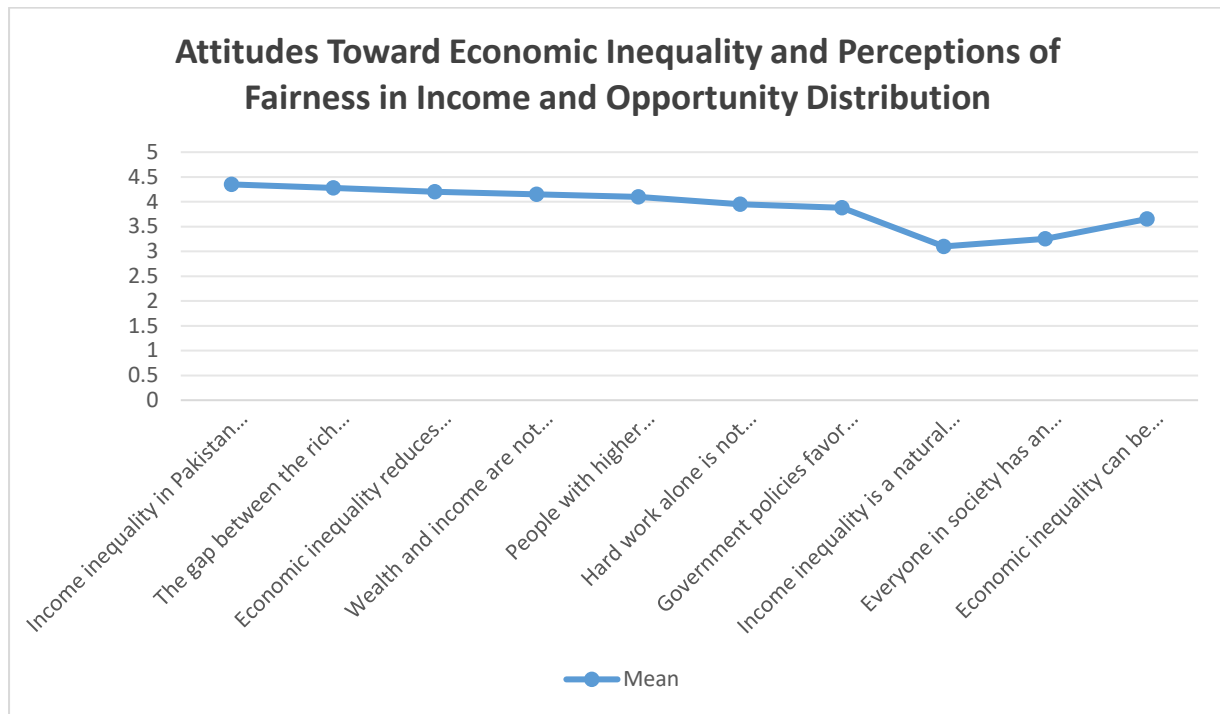
Table 2 shows the views of people living in cities in Punjab concerning economic inequality and the justice of income and opportunities allocation. The findings indicate a general acceptance of inequality as a crucial social issue, and the lack of trust in the equity of the Pakistani economic system. The means of the answers were between 3.10 and 4.35 meaning that although the majority of the respondents agreed upon the fact that inequality is a reality, and that it is harmful to everyone, it was fewer who thought that the existing system offers equal opportunities to all to progress.

Table 2. Attitudes Toward Economic Inequality and Perceptions of Fairness in Income and Opportunity Distribution (N = 400)

Statements	Mean	SD	Rank
Income inequality in Pakistan has increased significantly over the years.	4.35	0.69	1
The gap between the rich and poor in urban Punjab is unjust and socially harmful.	4.28	0.74	2
Economic inequality reduces social cohesion and increases resentment among people.	4.20	0.79	3
Wealth and income are not distributed fairly in Pakistani society.	4.15	0.81	4
People with higher connections have better access to jobs and opportunities.	4.10	0.85	5
Hard work alone is not enough to succeed; social class and background also matter.	3.95	0.91	6
Government policies favor the wealthy and powerful more than the poor.	3.88	0.93	7
Income inequality is a natural part of economic growth and should not be seen as a problem.	3.10	1.04	10
Everyone in society has an equal chance to improve their standard of living.	3.25	0.99	9
Economic inequality can be reduced through fair taxation and redistribution policies.	3.65	0.96	8

The most rated statement, which is Income inequality in Pakistan has grown over the years ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.69$) indicates that the respondents believe the problem of inequality has been rising over the years, which is in line with the national economic trends. As the PBS (2024) report shows, income discrepancies have increased within the last ten years especially between urban and rural populations. On the same note, there was a strong agreement that the respondents believed that the inequality between the rich and the poor in urban Punjab is unfair and socially damaging ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.74$) which shows that they understand the social implications of inequality. These results are consistent with López et al. (2018) who found that the Pakistani citizens are becoming more and

more concerned with the economic inequality as the moral and social danger that threatens the justice and social order. The third and fourth most important statements, namely, Economic inequality reduces social cohesion ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.79$) and Wealth and income are not fairly distributed in Pakistani society ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.81$) indicate that the trust and solidarity between the various classes have been eroded. Inequality is then also regarded as not just an economic problem but also a social and relationship problem, a problem that generates alienation between the rich and the poor. Such perceptions can be related to the argument presented by Majid and Memon (2019), which states that high inequality decreases the level of social cohesion, well-being, and social tensions.



Opportunities are also admitted by respondents to be affected by social relations and social background. The agreement with the idea that meritocracy in Pakistan is limited by nepotism and structural privilege is demonstrated in the statement that there is general agreement that higher relationships result in greater access to jobs and opportunities (People with higher connections have better access to jobs and opportunities) ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.85$) and the idea that hard work is not the only factor leading to success (Hard work alone is not enough to succeed; social class and background also matter) ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.91$) has a strong correlation. These results can be compared with those of Aizawa et al. (2020), who state that the urban employment markets in Pakistan are influenced by social capital and networks of classes instead of fair competition.

Moreover, moderately the respondents agreed with the idea that government policies are closer to the rich ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.93$) which implies that there is a feeling of policy favoritism and elite dominance in government institutions. Empirical evidence, as this is supported by Canelas and Gisselquist (2019), discovered that fiscal and tax policies in Pakistan are biased towards the higher-income groups through subsidies and ineffective redistribution systems. Interestingly, the items that rank the lowest are the ones that indicate that people do not believe

in neoliberalism justifications of inequality, i.e. Income inequality is a natural part of economic growth ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.04$) and everyone has an equal chance to improve his or her standard of living ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.99$). These findings suggest that the majority of urban Pakistanis do not consider inequality as an unavoidable and desirable condition of economic growth, which is contrary to the classical economic claims suggesting that inequality is the precondition to innovation and investment (De La Cruz-Viesca et al., 2018).

Lastly, moderate support of Inequality can be minimized with the help of equitable taxation and redistribution policies ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.96$): This implies that people support interventions that target lowering inequality based on policies. In the state of Punjab, as it was discovered in Table 2, the urban population is aware of inequality as a well-rooted, socially wrong, and politically perpetuated phenomenon. These reactions are also in line with the distributive justice (Rawls, 1971) and structural inequality (Sen, 1999) theories indicating that increasingly, the population of Punjab has shown to be aware of their rights to fairness, accountability, and inclusion in the society.

3.3. Beliefs about Social Mobility and the Perceived Accessibility

Table 3 shows the results of the attitudes towards the social mobility and the perceived availability of upward mobility among 400 urban Punjab respondents. This analysis gives some knowledge

on how people in the Pakistani society view fairness, accessibility and determinants of social mobility. The results are based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

Table 3. Beliefs About Social Mobility and the Perceived Accessibility of Upward Movement in Urban Punjab, Pakistan (N = 400)

Statements	Mean	SD	Rank
People from poor families can improve their living standards through hard work and education.	4.25	0.73	1
Education is the main path to upward social mobility in Pakistan.	4.18	0.78	2
The rich have more opportunities to succeed than people from lower-income groups.	4.12	0.81	3
It is difficult for ordinary citizens to move into higher income classes due to social and economic barriers.	4.05	0.85	4
Connections and family background are more important than talent in achieving success.	3.98	0.88	5
Government policies do not provide equal opportunities for upward mobility.	3.85	0.91	6
Gender and social class limit individuals' chances of moving up in society.	3.72	0.95	7
Urbanization has created more opportunities for upward mobility.	3.55	0.97	8
Upward social mobility is easier now than it was a decade ago.	3.30	1.01	9
Hard work is fairly rewarded in Pakistani society.	3.05	1.06	10

The data reveal that respondents generally express optimism about upward mobility through personal effort and education, but also acknowledge structural barriers that restrict fair access to opportunities. The statement *“People from poor families can improve their living standards through hard work and education”* obtained the highest mean score ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.73$), followed closely by *“Education is the main path to upward social mobility in Pakistan”* ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.78$). These responses indicate strong confidence in education as a transformative tool for achieving better socioeconomic status. This finding aligns with Becker's (1993) Human Capital Theory, which posits that education and skill development are key drivers of individual and national economic advancement. Similarly, Sen (1999) emphasized education as a fundamental capability that expands individuals' freedom to pursue social and economic goals. However, despite this optimism, a significant portion of respondents highlighted systemic and institutional barriers that impede mobility. Statements such as *“The rich have more opportunities to succeed than people from lower-income*

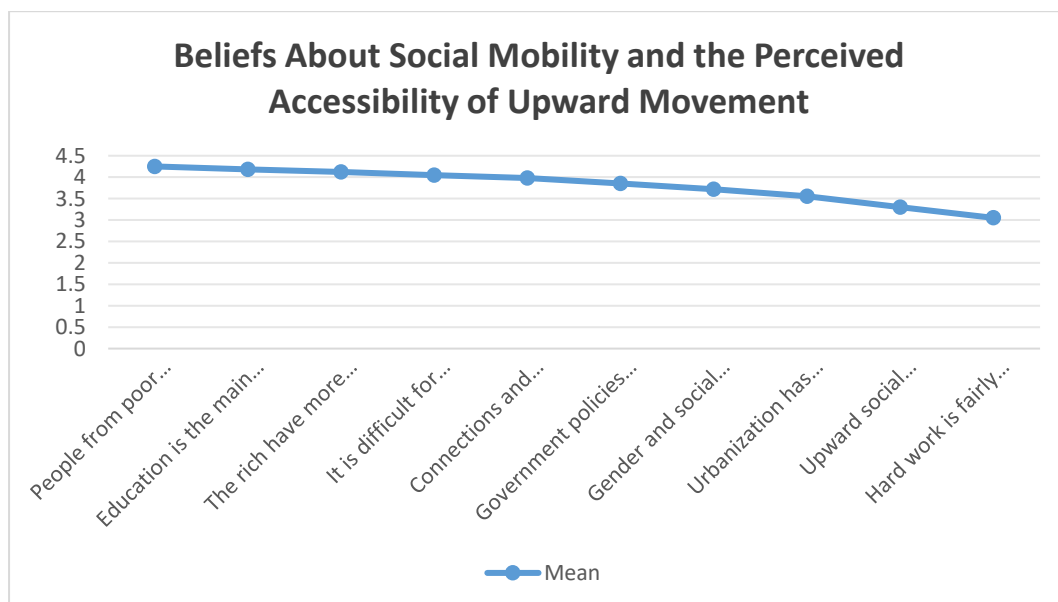
groups” ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.81$) and *“It is difficult for ordinary citizens to move into higher income classes due to social and economic barriers”* ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.85$) received high agreement. These perceptions indicate that class privilege and inequality remain deeply rooted in Pakistan's urban social fabric. According to Cheema and Naseer (2020), structural inequalities – including unequal access to quality education, job networks, and institutional support – significantly constrain mobility in urban Pakistan.

Respondents also agreed that connections and family background outweigh talent in achieving success ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.88$). This perception reflects Bourdieu's (1986) concept of *social capital*, which emphasizes the value of social networks and inherited privilege in determining life chances. Similarly, Chen (2019) in *Durable Inequality* argues that structural barriers and social closure mechanisms preserve class hierarchies across generations, reinforcing existing inequalities. Moderate agreement with the statement *“Government policies do not provide equal opportunities for upward mobility”* ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.91$) suggests a lack of trust in the fairness and

effectiveness of state interventions. As noted by Debasish (2021), government programs in Pakistan often fail to reach marginalized populations effectively due to bureaucratic inefficiency and elite capture.

Interestingly, perceptions regarding modernization and urbanization were less optimistic. The statements “Urbanization has created more opportunities for upward mobility” ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.97$) and “Upward mobility is easier now than it was a decade ago” ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.01$) received lower mean values, indicating that urban expansion has not translated into broad-based mobility. This finding aligns with the World Bank (2020) report, which highlights that while

urbanization has spurred economic growth, it has also widened income disparities between socioeconomic groups. Finally, the lowest-rated statement, “Hard work is fairly rewarded in Pakistani society” ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.06$), suggests widespread disillusionment with meritocracy. Respondents perceive that factors such as nepotism, corruption, and favoritism often override merit-based advancement. Cheema & Naseer (2020) have similarly observed that despite economic reforms, Pakistan’s social mobility remains constrained by entrenched power dynamics and unequal opportunity structures.



3.4. Influence of Socioeconomic Factors on Perceptions of Poverty, Inequality, and Social Mobility

Table 4 presents the results of a multiple linear regression analysis examining the influence of key socioeconomic factors—education, income, gender, and occupation—on public perceptions of

poverty, inequality, and social mobility among urban residents in Punjab, Pakistan ($N = 400$). The model aims to identify which factors significantly predict how individuals understand and evaluate socioeconomic disparities and opportunities within an urban context.

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis: Influence of Socioeconomic Factors on Perceptions of Poverty, Inequality, and Social Mobility ($N = 400$)

Independent Variables	Perceptions of Poverty (β)	t-value	Sig. (p)	Perceptions of Inequality (β)	t-value	Sig. (p)	Perceptions of Social Mobility (β)	t-value	Sig. (p)
Constant	2.210	5.120	0.000	2.045	4.890	0.000	2.310	5.320	0.000

Education Level	0.285	4.75 0	0.00 0	0.305	5.02 0	0.00 0	0.352	5.68 0	0.00 0
Monthly Income	0.241	4.21 0	0.00 0	0.260	4.43 0	0.00 0	0.310	5.12 0	0.00 0
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	-0.120	-2.38 0	0.01 8	-0.105	-2.21 0	0.02 8	-0.098	-1.95 0	0.05 2
R ²	0.422			0.438			0.462		
Adjusted R ²	0.410			0.425			0.450		
F-statistic	35.240		0.00 0	38.115		0.00 0	41.520		0.00 0

The regression findings show that education and income are the strongest predictors of the public perceptions in all use of three dependent variables. In case of perceptions of poverty, education ($\beta = 0.285$, $p < 0.001$) and income ($\beta = 0.241$, $p < 0.001$) exhibit positive relationships, which imply that people who have high education and income levels have a higher awareness of the structural aspects of poverty. This is in accordance to the Human Capital Theory by Becker (1993) that insists that education does not only increase the productivity of an individual but also expands the knowledge about the social problems and economic factors. On the same note, Sen (1999) stated that higher education equips people with the tools to critique and oppose system inequality.

On the perceptions of inequality, education ($\beta = 0.305$, $p < 0.001$) and income ($\beta = 0.260$, $p < 0.001$) once again show a great positive influence, meaning that those who have a higher socioeconomic status tend to be more likely to see inequality in the distribution of opportunities and resources. The given result can be explained by the fact that Mahla Tayefi Nasrabadi et al. (2025) discovered that more educated and economically stable urban Pakistani people are more likely to be aware of social injustices because they have an opportunity to become familiar with a wider variety of social views and political discussions. Education ($\beta = 0.352$, $p < 0.001$) and income ($\beta = 0.310$, $p < 0.001$) are still the strongest predictors when considering the perceptions of social mobility, and these two variables illustrate the fact that well-educated and wealthier people believe that they can rise in their socioeconomic status. This corresponds with Makinde and Makinde (2025), who mention that in urban areas, people tend to correlate

education and income with individual agency and possibility to move upwards. Furthermore, according to World Bank (2020) reports, education and skill development are considered as the most promising options of upward social mobility in such developing economies as Pakistan.

Conversely, gender has a negative, but insignificant effect on perceptions of poverty ($\beta = -0.120$, $p = 0.018$) and inequality ($\beta = -0.105$, $p = 0.028$), and a less important impact on social mobility ($\beta = -0.098$, $p = 0.052$). This trend means that women are a little less likely to consider the system as fair or mobility as something easily available. This is consistent with Nawaz and Malik & Nurunnabi (2024) who point out that obstacles that hinder access to economic and social progress remain gendered with participation in the labor force and patriarchal standards inhibiting the progress of women in Pakistan. The R² values (0.422 to 0.462) indicate that the model explains about 42-46 per cent of the variances in the perceptions of the people which indicates there is a strong model fit of the social science research. The F-statistics are very significant ($p < 0.001$), which proves that the predictors altogether have a significant effect on the dependent variables. In general, the regression model shows that education and income are the strongest predictors that condition the values of urban dwellers in Punjab towards poverty, inequality, and mobility. The increased education and income do not only increase the knowledge of people in terms of the social set up but it also affects their perception of upward mobility and justice. Occupation also reinforces this feeling of agency and gender-based differences only serve to emphasize structural inequalities that persist and

impede the sense of social justice and opportunity among women.

3.5. Group Differences in Perceptions of Poverty, Inequality, and Social Mobility by Socioeconomic Factors

This table 5 shows the outcomes of the one-way ANOVA performed to determine the differences between groups regarding perceptions of poverty,

inequality and social mobility among the respondents of urban Punjab in Pakistan depending on the main socioeconomic factors, education level, income group, and gender. The analysis shows some statistically significant correlations ($p < 0.05$), which highlights the multidimensional nature of the relations between the socioeconomic features and the attitudes of the populace toward poverty and inequality.

Table 5. One-Way ANOVA Results: Group Differences in Perceptions of Poverty, Inequality, and Social Mobility by Socioeconomic Factors (N = 400)

Socioeconomic Factor	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares (Between Groups)	df	Mean Square	F-Value	Sig. (p)	Interpretation
Education Level	Perceptions of Poverty	14.825	3	4.942	12.410	0.000	Significant difference based on education
	Perceptions of Inequality	16.210	3	5.403	13.985	0.000	Higher education linked to stronger awareness of inequality
	Perceptions of Social Mobility	18.450	3	6.150	15.320	0.000	More educated respondents perceive greater mobility
Income Group	Perceptions of Poverty	11.375	3	3.792	9.860	0.000	Higher-income respondents view poverty as structural
	Perceptions of Inequality	13.880	3	4.627	11.920	0.000	Income affects perceptions of fairness
	Perceptions of Social Mobility	15.640	3	5.213	13.570	0.000	Higher-income groups perceive more upward mobility
Gender	Perceptions of Poverty	2.315	1	2.315	4.620	0.033	Significant gender difference in perceptions of poverty
	Perceptions of Inequality	1.980	1	1.980	4.110	0.043	Women perceive greater inequality than men
	Perceptions of Social Mobility	1.455	1	1.455	3.125	0.078	No significant difference ($p > 0.05$)

The results show that education is influential with all of the three dependent variables. In particular, the respondents of different levels of education have different perceptions of poverty ($F = 12.410$, $p = 0.000$), inequality ($F = 13.985$, $p = 0.000$), and social mobility ($F = 15.320$, $p = 0.000$). Educated respondents are also more likely to explain poverty as a structural and systemic problem as opposed to individual incompetence, which is also typical of Moeen and Jalalpuri

(2024) and Smith et al. (2022), though both studies found that education increases the level of socioeconomic awareness and leads to more subtle views on inequality. In addition, to educated people, more opportunities of upward mobility are seen, which is also consistent with Munir et al. (2021), who reported that, in urban Pakistan, higher education is strongly associated with hope of social progress and opportunity based on merit. There is also a significant effect

of income level on perceptions of poverty ($F = 9.860$, $p = 0.000$), inequality ($F = 11.920$, $p = 0.000$) and social mobility ($F = 13.570$, $p = 0.000$). The respondents who are of higher income tend to perceive poverty as an institutional problem that is caused by economic imbalances and not as an individual weakness. The observation is also consistent with that made by Aalbers (2022), who indicated that people in higher socioeconomic status have more awareness of systemic inequality and are more inclined towards redistributive policies. Moreover, the respondents who were richer believed they had more upward mobility opportunities, which could be explained by the fact that they have networks, resources, and education themselves and can socialize their way up (Adkins et al., 2021).

Differences were also found based on gender, but not as much as education and income. There were significant differences in the perceptions of poverty ($F = 4.620$, $p = 0.033$) and inequality ($F = 4.110$, $p = 0.043$), whereas there were no significant differences in the perception of social mobility ($p = 0.078$). The female respondents were more likely to say that they were more concerned about inequality and economic marginalization, which aligns with Arundel and Ronald (2021), who observed that women respond more to the question of economic fairness because of their personal experiences of structural gender inequality. Nevertheless, it is evident that there is no meaningful gender gap in the views on social mobility, which indicates that men and women have similar views on the presence of upward mobility in urban areas, which may be due to the similarity in exposure to structural economic factors in the cities of Punjab (Arundel et al., 2022). On the whole, the findings of the ANOVA indicate that education and income are the most effective predictors that contribute to development of perceptions of poverty, inequality and mobility among the urban population in Punjab. Such results confirm that social thought about economic realities is closely determined by the social and economic status of an individual (Christophers, 2021; Howard et al., 2024). Consequently, policies aimed at poverty reduction and social equity must not only target income disparities but also promote inclusive education and awareness to bridge perceptual divides within urban societies.

Conclusion

This study examined public perceptions of poverty, inequality, and social mobility among urban residents in Punjab, Pakistan, revealing a complex interplay between optimism for progress and recognition of persistent structural barriers. The findings demonstrate that most respondents perceive poverty and inequality as systemic issues rooted in unequal access to education, employment, and governance inefficiencies rather than as outcomes of individual failings. Education and income emerged as the strongest predictors shaping these perceptions, highlighting the centrality of human capital in fostering social awareness and belief in upward mobility. However, the results also expose widespread skepticism toward the fairness of Pakistan's socioeconomic system, with respondents acknowledging that social connections, family background, and class privilege often outweigh merit. Gender disparities, though less pronounced, further underscore how patriarchal norms restrict women's socioeconomic advancement. Overall, the study concludes that while education and urbanization foster aspirations for mobility, entrenched institutional inequalities continue to constrain equitable opportunity. Strengthening governance, improving access to quality education, and promoting gender-inclusive policies are essential for building a more just and mobile urban society in Punjab.

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