

Understanding the spatial heterogeneity of women empowerment in Pakistan and the key socioeconomic drivers

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Introduction

Gender equality and women's empowerment are key to achieving the fifth sustainable development by 2030 globally. Pakistan is currently ranked 139th in the gender inequality index, which represents the high level of disparities and discrimination in the country (UNDP, 2019). The level of education has a huge impact on women's empowerment as it gives them more awareness, power, and knowledge regarding their rights and makes them independent and self-reliant (UN, 2023). Ethnicity significantly contributes to the segmentation of society in Pakistan, where socio-economic disparities among various ethnic groups are deeply ingrained. Differences in ethnicities and early migration can provide women with greater access to work and educational opportunities (Wissen, 2004), by enhancing gender parity and standards and fortifying agency by opposing discrimination and systemic injustices based on gender. Different ethnicities across different regions may tend to alter the social and cultural norms conducive to women's empowerment. (Chowdhory & Ali, 2022).

This research aims to capture variations in women's empowerment in Pakistan and the role of education along with varying levels of ethnic inequalities affecting the level of women's empowerment in Pakistan. This also focuses on the impact of the high level of women's empowerment on reducing domestic violence in Pakistan.

According to the Human Development Index, some key socioeconomic drivers playing a role in improving women's empowerment level are education, ethnicity, migration, and ownership of property. Domestic violence is one of the consequences of lack of power, low levels of empowerment, and lack of education in different societies (Zahra, 2021). The study analyses the significance of women's empowerment in decreasing domestic violence as more empowered women will file/report more cases as they feel more powerful as compared to women who are not economically and socially empowered. Moreover, when women migrate from rural to urban areas, they get more exposure in terms of education and employment opportunities, and the women's empowerment level increases. Moreover, when women get higher education, it gives them more independence and confidence and therefore leads to a positive change in women's empowerment levels. Hence, it is important to investigate the spatial variations in women's empowerment caused by socioeconomic variables across regions.

Research Question

- Are highly educated women more likely to exhibit higher levels of empowerment compared to women with lower levels of education?
- Do women from different ethnic backgrounds have different levels of empowerment in Pakistan?
- Are empowered women more likely to report domestic violence cases compared to those who are not empowered?

Data & Methodology

The data collected for this research is for the years 2018 and 2019 from UNDP, HDI, HDX, and Pakistan Bureau of Statistics to conduct the spatial and hotspot analysis. The data represents different levels of women's empowerment across provinces based on the effect of different levels of education, and ethnicity. It also examines the relationship between women's empowerment and reported domestic violence cases. The maps provide an overview of women's empowerment based on four provinces in Pakistan. Choropleth maps are extracted in order to show the different levels of reported domestic violence cases in different provinces and how the key variables of education and ethnicity affect the levels of women empowerment. A hotspot analysis is conducted to show high and low levels of women empowerment across Pakistan.

Findings

The hotspot analysis in Figure 1 shows that Balochistan is a hot spot for women's empowerment, particularly with 99% confidence levels in dark red areas. This indicates a strong clustering of regions where women empowerment indicators (e.g., literacy rates) are significantly higher than in surrounding areas. There are no visible cold spots in Balochistan suggesting the province does not have clusters of regions lagging in empowerment at statistically significant levels. Other provinces like Punjab and Sindh show mixed results, with both significant hot and cold spots. In contrast, parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Azad Kashmir show blue shades, indicating cold spots where women's empowerment is statistically lower.

Figure 2 shows that the percentage of reported domestic violence cases is the highest in Balochistan as compared to other provinces because empowered women are more likely to be aware of their rights and feel encouraged to report incidents of violence. The correlation between Figure 1 and Figure 2 represents that the high levels of women empowerment (hot spots) in Balochistan and the high level of reported cases of domestic violence have a positive relationship which shows that women who feel empowered report incidents of violence as compared to districts in KPK and Sindh (cold spots) indicating low women's empowerment level and few reported incidents for domestic violence.

Figure 3 and Figure 4 illustrate the comparison of education levels in Balochistan and other provinces. Although primary level education is the highest in some parts of Balochistan, a lot of clustered data is found in the northwestern parts of Balochistan, showing the improvements in the education level of women in rural areas. However, in Punjab, Sindh, and KPK, girls are not getting high education due to socio-economic factors. This is why, women's empowerment levels are also low in KPK and Punjab.

Figure 5 illustrates inequalities women face regarding different ethnicities across regions across Pakistan, with varying percentages represented by color-coded dots. Higher levels of inequality are concentrated in certain regions, particularly in Sindh, while lower levels are more dispersed in Balochistan, Punjab, and KPK.

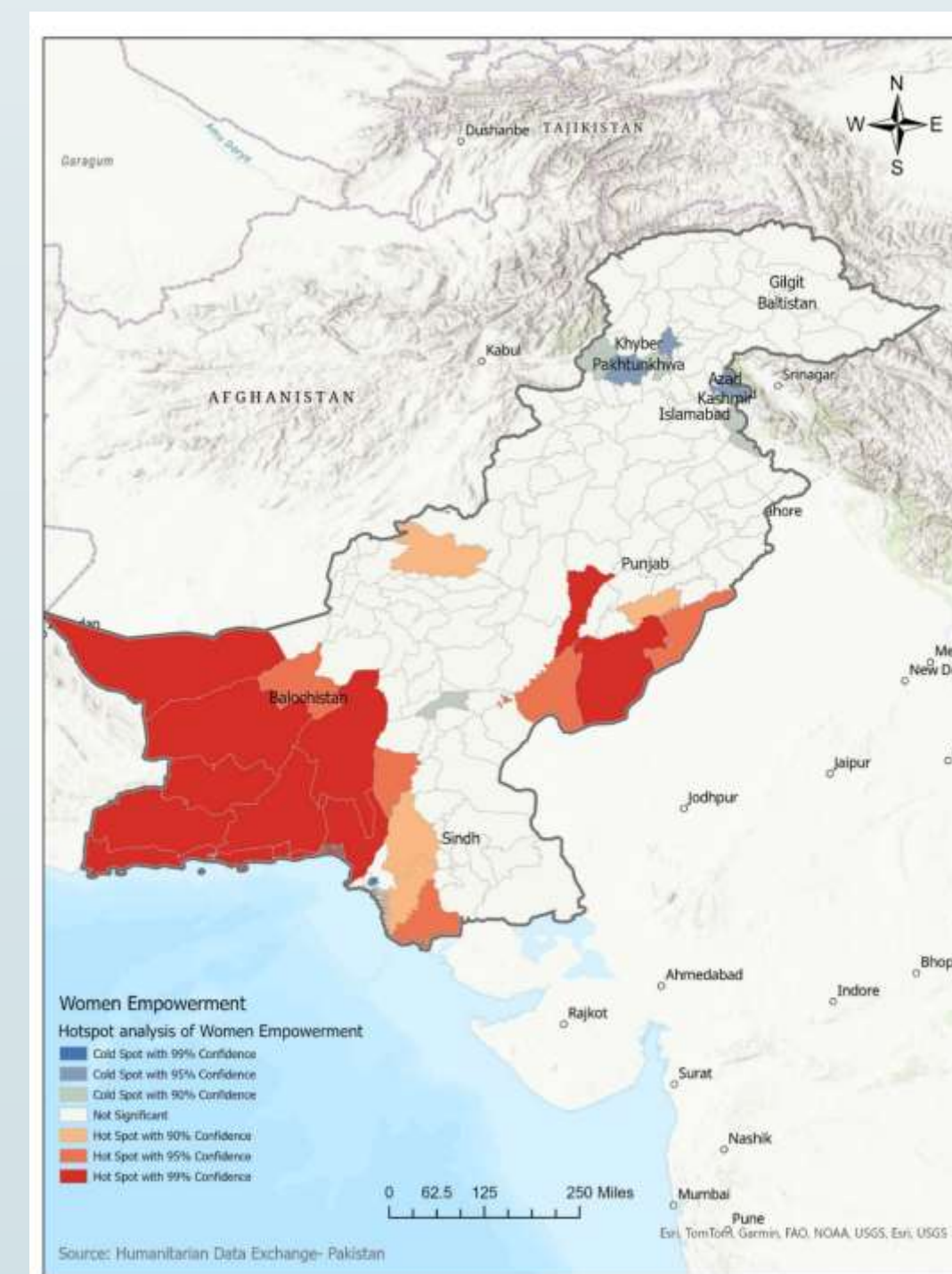


Figure 1: Hot spot analysis for the level of Women Empowerment in Pakistan

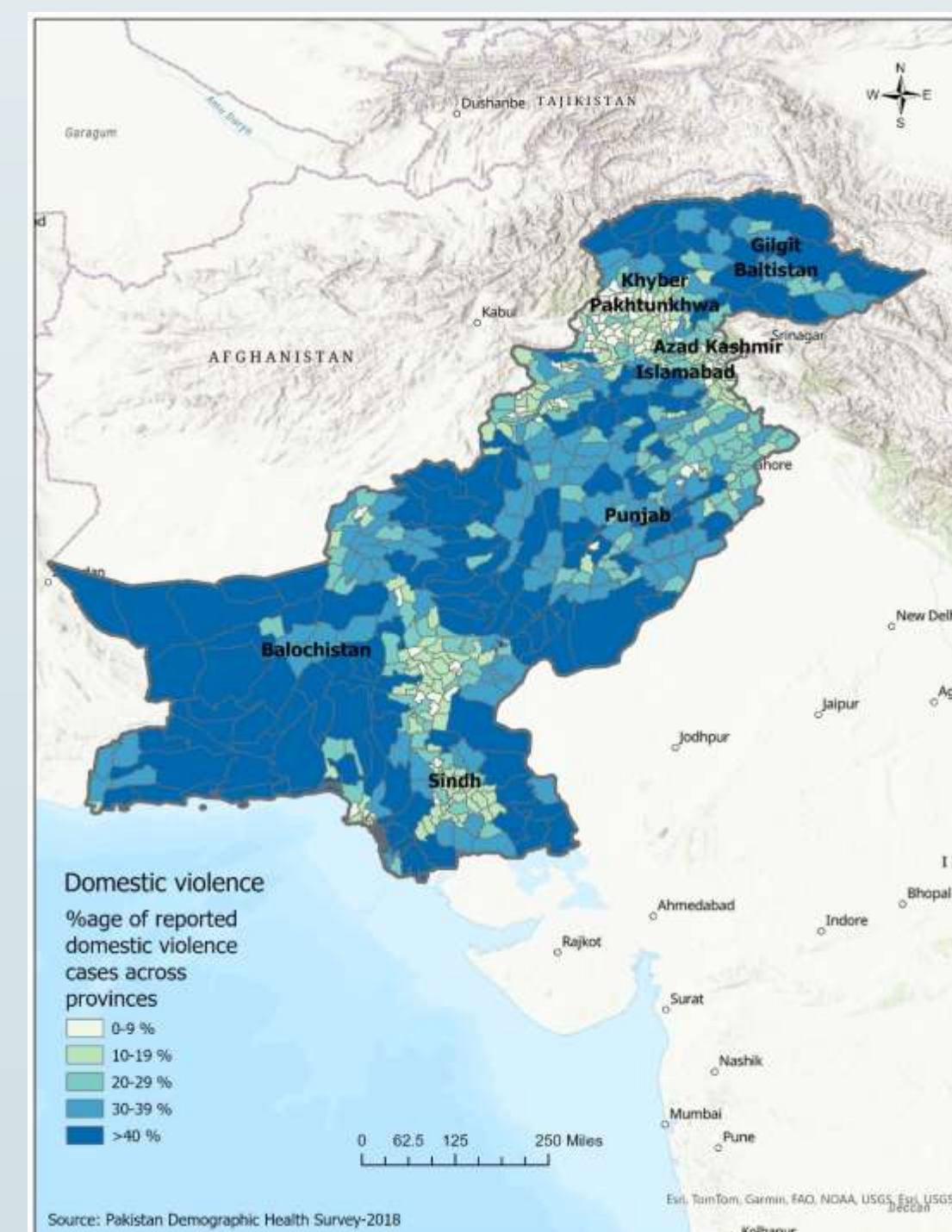


Figure 2: %age of reported domestic violence cases across provinces

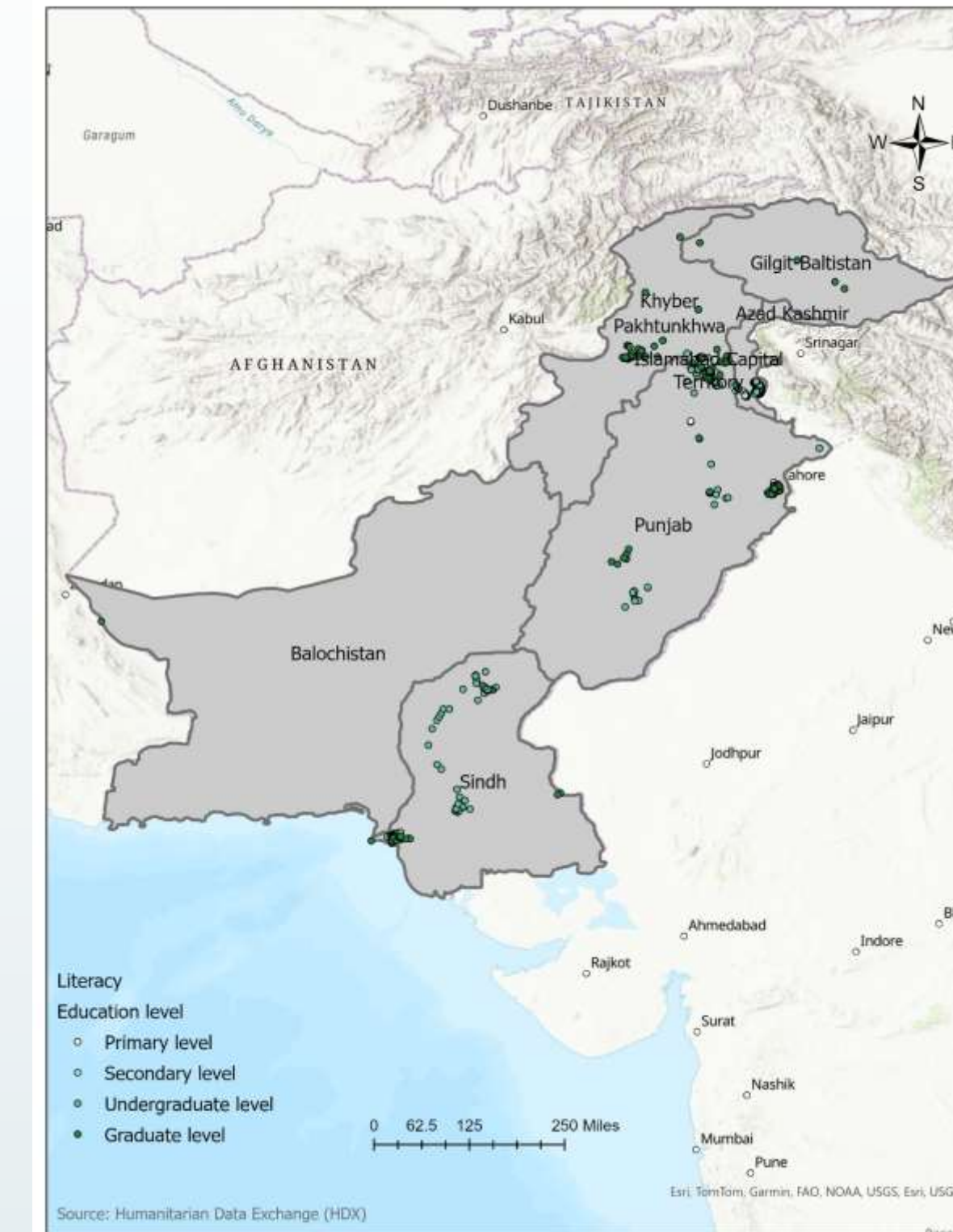


Figure 3; Map A: Women's Level of Education in Rural Areas in Punjab, Singh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

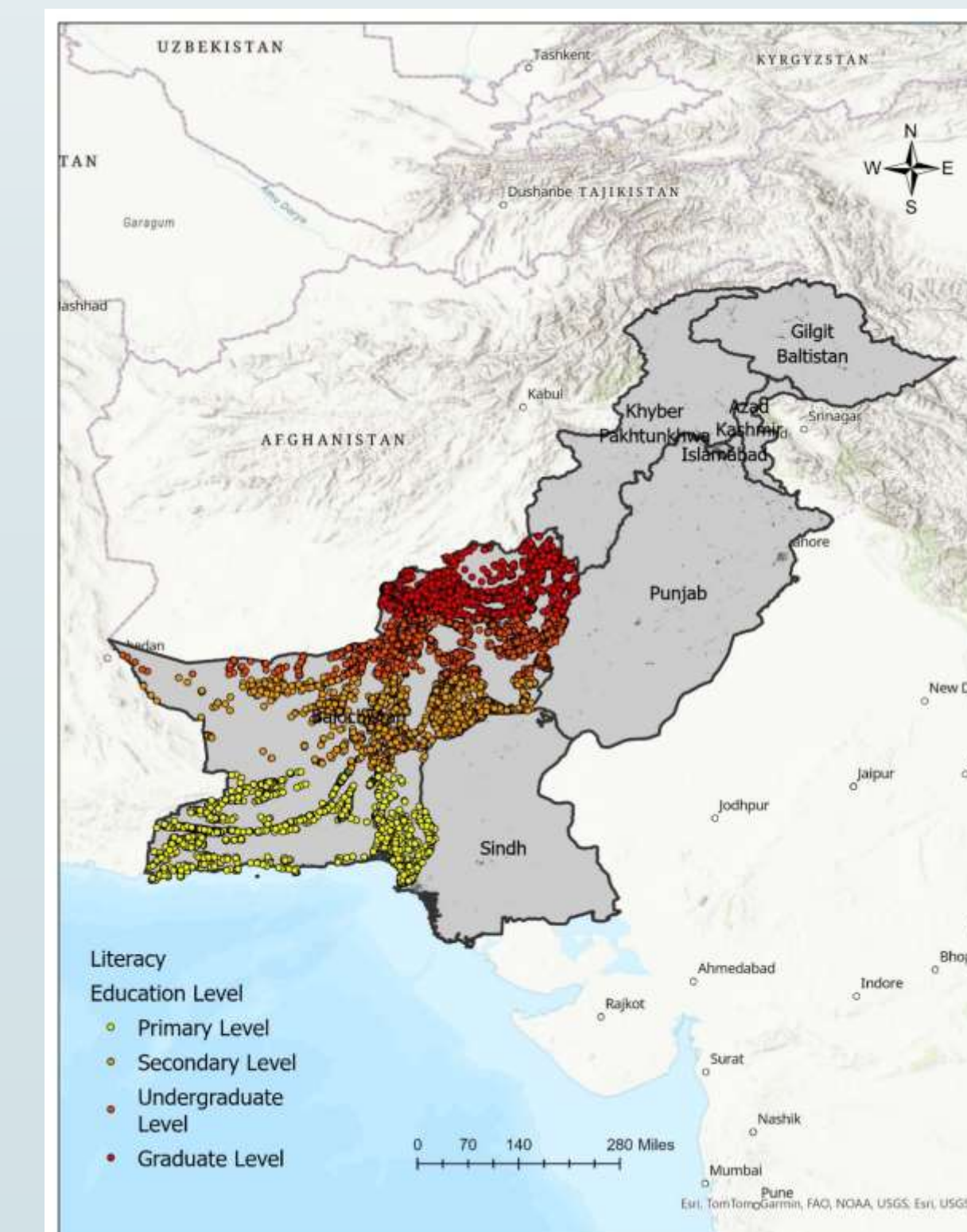


Figure 3; Map B: Women's Level of Education in rural areas in Balochistan

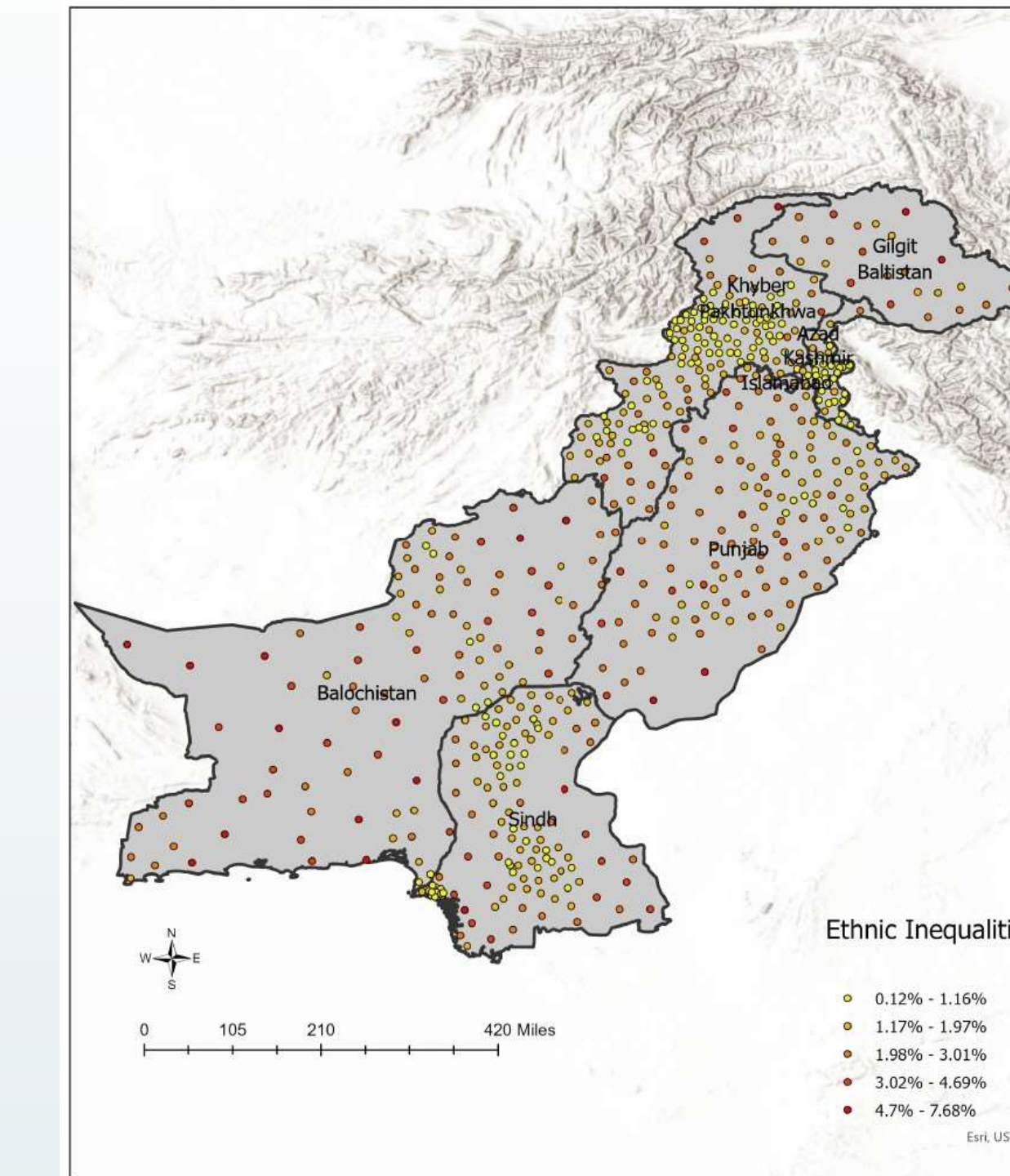


Figure 5: Inequalities varying across all provinces

Policy Recommendations

The study recommends various policy actions to improve the level of women's empowerment in Pakistan. More economic, social, and infrastructural resources should be provided in rural areas in Sindh and Punjab to overcome the challenges faced by women and to make them more independent, safe, and empowered. Women who are living in rural areas in Punjab and Sindh do not have access to high levels of education and facilities which hinders them from becoming empowered. Therefore, more schools specifically for girls should be established to promote their education and empowerment. The law stating the rights of women should be passed in other provinces to help them achieve the same rights and facilities as men.

Limitations

The study has some limitations; a lot of data remains missing, and its collection is crucial to achieving the desired outcomes because of social and cultural restrictions that affected the reporting of the answers by women. The answers of women might be biased as they reside in patriarchal households and might have to answer in the presence of husbands or other male family members of the household. The omitted variable bias exists too which could have enabled policymakers to design and implement policies tailored to specific provinces and regions.

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