

## CHILD MARRIAGE: CHANGING TRENDS IN PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

*Child marriage is a problem which exists and continues in many parts of the world although commitments have been made to discourage it. Earlier research work shows that the incidence of child marriages varies globally. Many factors affect the choice of marriage and age pattern such as globalization, modernization, urbanization; in-country migration, social transformation, gender relations; changes in the family joint to nuclear patterns; amendments in laws regarding the institution of marriage and divorce process; and increased involvement and contribution of women in paid labor. This research aims to explore experiences of women who were married at an early age. The universe of this research was Karachi city. The researchers used convenience sampling method and purposive and snowball sampling technique to interview 100 female respondents married at the early age of 12-17 years. The study shows that majority of child marriages/early marriages are due to traditional practices. Most of them belong to low-income families and were illiterate. Although these women got married in early age, they intend to marry their daughters after 18 years of age. Findings conclude that however there are significant steps taken to demotivate child marriage worldwide, the Government of Pakistan and other organizations working toward women wellbeing, need to create an enabling environment and de-motivate not only the parents, but the community members against child marriages.*

### INTRODUCTION

The world faced many changes at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of twentieth century leading to considerable changes in the economic and social landscape of the developed world. These changes influenced the world culture and traditions and further led to some legal changes as well. One of the changes is a rise in the minimum legal age to

18 years, at which individuals decided to get married. Despite all the development, the practice of early marriages continues around the globe with specific variations. Early age marriages effect on the physical and social life of young girls leading to many complications in their lives.

Marriage is an important decision of one's life while child marriage contradicts the legal and social decisions whom and when to marry. Picking one's life partner is a grown-up choice, one that ought to be made freely and without pressure. Research shows that although marriage patterns are changing but marriage is still practiced according to the culture and norms. The factors influencing the choice of marriage and age pattern are mainly globalization, modernization, urbanization and corporal mobility; in-country migration, social transformation, gender relations; change in family patterns from joint to nuclear; amendments in laws regarding the institution of marriage, divorce process and increased involvement and contribution of women in paid labor. These changes, however, not only differ from country to country and region to region but also within smaller geographical divides of a country. One important aspect of marriage is age. Although in the contemporary world, the formal age of marriage is 18 years old, child marriages or early age marriages are common in some parts of the world. To understand the problems associated with child marriage, first, we need to understand its prevalence in historical perspective.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Historically, people were permitted to be bound by a marriage contract at an exceptionally youthful age. For instance, in ancient Rome, suitable minimum age was viewed as 12 for females and 14 for males. These age essentials were implemented in the clerical law of the Catholic Church. The age prerequisites of 12 and 14 were at the end composed of English common law. Of course, these procurements turned into the base marriage ages in Colonial America. Specialists and policymakers in the twentieth century perceived that youngsters may be particularly severely affected in order to expect the familial obligations and financial pressures related to marriage. Gradually the minimum legal age raised in America and other parts of the world. However, the young age marriages continued as a common practice. The minimum age of marriage increased in the West, but it remained low in South Asia, Africa, and Middle Eastern Countries. Thus, a conventional thought emerged that it is practiced in Muslim communities and countries (Dhal, 2010).

Gemignani and Wodon (2015), analyze and suggest that child marriage does have deep socio-cultural and religious roots. The prevalence of this practice is supported by religious laws, gender roles, social expectations and fear of pregnancy before marriage. Therefore, they suggested, for successful policy and awareness programs local context should be taken into account, including faith and culture. Studies show that child marriage is deeply rooted in culture and interpretation of religion. Islam sees marriage as a most sacred establishment and makes it officeholder on every Muslim man and lady unless avoided by substantial physical or monetary insufficiency, to lead a wedded life. In the views of some Muslim scholars, Islam does not outrightly put a ceiling on marriage age. There are two arguments refraining low age in marriage. First, Islamic traditions confirm the consent of woman in marriage. Ibn ‘Abbas reported that a “virgin grown-up girl came to the Prophet of Allah and narrated that her father had given her in marriage to a person whom she disliked. The Prophet gave her option” (Siddiqi, 1952). Moreover, Naseef (1999), argued that despite clear teachings of Islam, many fathers still force their daughters into, marriages. She analyzes the Islamic sources and concludes that marriage of Hazrat Aisha at the age nine is an “exclusive practice,” and no marriage can be compared with her marriage. Therefore, giving a young girl in marriage, without her knowledge and permission conflicts with the primary goals of marriage in Islam. Commonly accepted practice and belief in Muslim societies is that marriage at any age below puberty though allowed is not particularly encouraged. For most of the Muslim scholars, the age of marriage is puberty (Chaudhry, 1987).

Early age or child marriages have cultural reasons as well. Young age marriages were common in the subcontinent in history. In India it is mentioned in their religious books “The Manu,” “Mahabharata” and the “Vishnu Purana,” that the wife should be three times younger than her husband; therefore a girl age is ten years at the time of marriage, but her husband’s age should be thirty years. This tradition of girl child marriage practice between the age of two and eight years was practiced among Hindus, Muslims and Parsees (Yadav, 2006).

In some societies, child marriage is often thought of a way to strengthen the family in number so that children can do labor on family farms to provide help to their elders. In South Asia; many parents arrange the early marriage of their daughters so that they can get rid of marriage expenses such as Dowry. Chastity is another primary reason, rather a socially constructed expectation, that forces many parents to have their daughters

get married at an early age so that their daughters do not have a child outside marriage. Whiting (2011), in his research, covers the causes of child marriage existing in different cultures. In the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, it is a popular belief that girls should get married after puberty. Some societies in Amhara region of Ethiopia have a belief that menstruation begins after practicing sexual intercourse. A false concept of people is that if girls get a higher education than they will rebel against fulfilling their traditional gender roles as wife and mother. The ratio of child marriages often is found higher in humanitarian settings whether wars or natural disasters, because families try to find shelters for their daughters or money for themselves to survive (Whiting, 2011).

Although many international commitments have been signed to eliminate child marriage, however statistics in developing countries show that many girls are still married at a young age. According to UNFPA report (2012), almost 33 percent of girls in the world (excluding China) are married before getting to the age of 18, and 12 percent get married before their 15th birthday. The same report stated that in 2010, over 67 million women aged 20-24 reported that they had married when they were still girls, half were in Asia, one-fifth of them were from Africa. The report suggests that in the next decade, 14.2 million girls under the age of 18 years of age will be getting married annually; this translates to 39,000 girls married each day. Fifty million girls could be at risk of being married before their fifteenth birthday (UNFPA, 2012). The same report confirms that ratio of marriage has not changed during the period 2000-2010. It draws three main conclusions; first that child marriage is still high in many developing countries. Secondly it is constantly high in rural areas and comparatively low in urban areas for the decade, and thirdly lack of complete data about its prevalence leading to inappropriate policies and programmes to address the issue (UNFPA, 2012).

When it comes to the issue of early age marriage, Pakistan is facing similar complexities like other regions. Child marriage is not legitimate in Pakistan but rather because of poverty and lack of education and awareness, 70 percent of young girls are married by the age of 18, and 20 percent by the age of 13; particularly in rural areas. Mostly, girls are pressurized by their families to wed older men. In some rural parts of the country, customary practices also play a role in the prevalence of child marriage where brides are bought and sold (UNICEF, 2012).

Several international instruments outlaw child marriage such as the

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The world nations were approached to dispose of child marriage through the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994. Although, these international commitments have been agreed by many, evidence shows that it still has a long to go. In Pakistan, laws were formulated to fight against child marriage. The Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 was one of those laws existed for the protection of the child. It explains that a girl below the age of 16 years may not be allowed to marry. However, if the marriage does occur then, it could not be annulled. The Act set down punishment and fines, ranging from imprisonment up to a month, a fine of 1,000 rupees (approximately US\$12), or both. For that reason, child marriage under prescribed age is not legal but considers valid marriage; therefore, it not only approves child marriage socially and religiously but provides legal protection (UNICEF, 2012).

The situation has changed so far, as UNICEF agree in the report of 2014 which shows that child marriage prevalence has slightly decreased as compared to the past few decades. However, continuous efforts are required in those countries where it is more common. Further, the study also reveals that increase in age of marriage is restricted to young women with higher income. In any case, without much escalated and maintained activity, now from all parts of the society, many younger ladies will endure significant, changeless, and entirely pointless damage. As indicated by an international report, more than 700 million ladies today were married in their adolescence. More or less 1 in three ladies was married before coming to age 15 (UNICEF, 2014) on the contrary; early marriage is far less common among young men; (Santhya, Jejeebhoy, & Ghosh, 2008).

The causes of child marriage are multifaceted, interconnected, and strongly interwoven with social and economic conditions in the cultural context of different regions. Mainly, the driving forces of child marriage practices are poverty; gender discrimination, and insecurity due to war and conflict (Walker, 2012). The practice of child marriage has many causes. It is typical for low-income groups. Financial problems make girl child conditions more vulnerable. Most parents think that marriage will protect their daughters as well as they also consider their daughters as a burden due to dowry. Child marriage also affects girl's health and reproductive lives. In developing countries, complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the main cause of death among adolescent girls 15-19 (UNFPA, 2012).

Child Marriage affects girls' reproductive health badly. Adolescence, malnutrition, anemia and the extra nutritional demands exacerbate health risks during pregnancy (Yadav, 2006). Girls who marry early, face many physical and psychological issues. Often child marriages happen without girls consent, and they are not prepared for a marital relationship which creates fear in them towards their husbands and in-laws, their reproductive organs are not fully developed which also causes physical problems. Girls who marry early become pregnant, and early childbearing increases the risks for both mothers and their newborns (Mustafa, Zakar, Zakar, Chaudhry, & Nasrullah, 2017). Premature childbirth can cause severe health problems, including fistula, a debilitating condition that causes chronic incontinence (ICRW, 2005).

Another major factor is unawareness or unavailability of contraceptives, and the child brides are more at risk of repetitive pregnancies. Child brides are more at risk of pregnancy-related complications than a mature woman because their body organs are not fully developed that is why obstructed labor and eclampsia are common complications and can be fatal (ICRW, 2005).

Adolescent mother's newborns are usually weak due to low birth weight which has long-term effects, undernutrition and late physical and cognitive development (WHO, 2014). Child brides suffer mental and social stress and fear more than women married after the 20s. They lose their decision-making power, freedom; become a victim of violence, abuse, and hostility (UNICEF, 2014). Another risky condition often child brides face is the threat of sexually transmitted infections and reproductive tract infections. Due to unawareness and lack of education, they are not aware of the use of contraceptives and also have less access to primary health care services. Sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS are more common in married girls than unmarried girls (ICRW, 2006).

Child brides often poor and belonging to rural areas experience domestic violence and abuse due to many reasons including less dowry and old age husbands which cause many psychological disorders specifically post-traumatic stress and depression. Empirical evidence shows that culturally, young girls and married girls have difficulties to access information related to marriage, laws related to marriage and child custody because of considering this information 'not necessary' for them. This problem is also identified in programs related to family planning because their husbands or mother-in-law have the decision-making power (Shahabuddin, Delvaux, Abouchadi, Sarker, & De Brouwere, 2015).

The study aims to explore the experiences of women married in their early ages. The objective was to know the reasons for marrying at a young age, its effects on physical and psychological health and their level of satisfaction with married life.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research study investigates the causes and effects of early/child marriages. Purposive sampling technique was used to interview 100 female respondents married at the early age of 12-17 years. The respondents were selected from various areas of Karachi. The interview schedule was based on open and close-ended questions to encourage the respondents to narrate their story. Baseline information was also collected on the family background and socio-economic category of the respondents such as age, marital status, literacy level, and other relevant household details, working conditions, effects on their health, family and household activities. The raw data obtained from the questionnaire filled by the respondents was converted into simple frequency tables. The open-ended questions were compared for similarities and differences.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Child marriage is practiced in many parts of the world because it has continued from generations. People avoid straying from what their earlier generations have done because they do not want to lose their place in their community. However, the situation is changing with the time. This study was aimed to explore the reasons for early marriages and based on the experiences of these females what is their perception for future.

It is difficult to explain the context of child marriage in Pakistan because of its complexity. We are living in a patriarchal society where males hold the decision-making authority of the family and determine all matters. Child marriage (before 18 years) is prevalent in Pakistan, which disproportionately affects young girls in rural, low income and low education households. In the past decade, changes in marriage pattern are seen due to increasing economic pressure, globalization, urbanization, the influence of media on marriage patterns and decline in the joint family system.

The study observed that 59% respondents were illiterate. Illiteracy is a major issue in Pakistan, especially women, are more exploited due to this issue. The study confirms the findings of a study by Pakistan Demographic Health Survey 2012-13, according to which 61% women think that early marriage is an obstacle

to attaining education (Mughal & Aldridge, 2017). Child marriages occur in less educated families and rural and urban areas. Early marriage and the patriarchal dogma to preserve a girl’s purity lead to widespread dropout of girls from school at puberty, especially if they attend coeducation institutions. Those girls who belong to poor income groups get engaged in paid work, helping their mothers at home or assisting her in the workplace such as maids. Most of these families prefer to marry their daughters at a young age merely following their traditions or assuming that this will reduce economic burden. In urban areas due to economic condition, poverty and gender inequality in many poor households, parents believe that marriage will protect and fulfill their daughters’ needs as another family will be responsible for everything. Most of these women shared that when they were girls and got married in their teenage, they were unable to attend their school. Many families of the rural Sind practice child marriage as a tradition, for instance during the research study many parents asserted that it is their family norm to marry their daughters after first menstruation. It is also a misconception among parents that marriage will provide their daughter’s social protection from sexual violence and harassment. Religion and ethnicity also play a significant role in child marriage as many respondents shared that according to teachings of Islam we should marry our daughters at a young age.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage distribution of Respondent’s Age at the time of Marriage

<b>Specialties</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Respondent’s Age at the time of Marriage</i>		<i>12-14</i>	<i>15-17</i>	<i>18</i>	
	<b>n</b>	16	49	35	100
	<b>%</b>	16	49	35	100

Nearly 50 percent respondents belonged to the age group of 15-17 years at the time of marriage;

Table 2. Frequency and percentage distribution of Respondent’s Age at the time of Marriage

<b>Specialties</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Respondent husbands’ age at the time of marriage</i>		<i>16-20</i>	<i>21-25</i>	<i>25+</i>	
	<b>n</b>	26	44	30	100
	<b>%</b>	26	44	30	100

Respondent’s husband’s age at the time of marriage was 21-25 years which shows that they were more mature as compared to their wives. The study confirms the marriage at a younger age. While age at marriage for

women has undergone a secular increase, marriage at a young age often deficient physical and mental health — affects their ability to make decisions about their lives. Research studies covering the health aspect of child marriage indicate that married teenagers whether women and men are a victim of many sexual and reproductive health consequences; indeed, these consequences may result from risky practices applied previously and after marriage. However, the consequences of adolescent marriage can be different for both female and male.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage distribution of Reasons for Early Marriage

Specialties	1	2	3	4	5	Total	
	<i>Own Decision</i>	<i>Parents pressure</i>	<i>The pressure of husband's family</i>	<i>Family tradition</i>	<i>Good proposal</i>		
<i>Reasons for Early Marriage</i>	n	01	25	10	40	24	100
	%	01	25	10	40	24	100

40% of respondents said that the reason behind their early marriage was their family tradition. In their families, girls are preferred to be married at a young age. Culture is potent in Pakistan, and early marriage is rooted in the culture, and it is not easy to eliminate it.

Table 4. Frequency and percentage distribution of Opinion about marrying girls at an early age

Specialties	1	2	Total	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>		
<i>Opinion about marrying girls at an early age</i>	n	29	61	100
	%	29	61	100

Although all of the respondents were married at an early age, their perception has changed with the time about early marriage because 61% were not in favor of child marriage now. They thought it hinders girl's education and girls are not mature at that time. It also creates problems in an adjustment in a new family with their in-laws. The rise in the age of marriage is viewed as a positive sign because it protected against early childbirth and associated with higher educational and employment opportunities (Tremayne, 2006). 29% respondents were in favor of early marriage and held that it's better that parent should fulfill their responsibility of marrying their girls at a young age. Some also thought that

[Translation] According to our religion it is better to marry a girl early and given the environment these days it is better to marry them earlier.

Table 5. Frequency and percentage distribution of first pregnancy.

Specialties		1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
<i>First pregnancy Month/s</i>		<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	After 1 year	
	<b>n</b>	12	32	20	05	02	29	100
	<b>%</b>	12	32	20	05	02	29	100

Table 5 shows 12% respondents expression that they became pregnant within a month while 20% conceived within three months. Early marriage and early pregnancy develop hazardous effects on women's health. In Pakistan, early marriage is more common in rural areas, and immediate pregnancy considers as a reason for pride. Though girl child is not prepared mentally and physically for marriage and gets pregnant soon, therefore often they suffer more from reproductive diseases and pregnancy complications than mature women. In the majority of rural areas, Primary Health Care Services are not available, and *Dais* (Midwives) handles the cases. This study was conducted in the urban area, in this study no fistula case was reported, but studies show that fistula is more common in rural areas. According to a recent report up to 5000 cases of fistula are reported every year in Pakistan (Daily Dawn, 2015).

Table 6. Frequency and percentage distribution of Nikah Naama (Marriage Contract) filled by the respondents

Specialties		1	2	3	Total
Nikah Naama (Marriage Contract) filled by the respondents		<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	Don't know	
	<b>n</b>	76	22	2	100
	<b>%</b>	76	22	2	100

Table 6 shows that 76% respondents filled *Nikah Naama* (Marriage Contract) at the time of marriage. It shows that registration of marriage has increased with the time. They also informed that their age was mentioned in it while few of them said that their age was mentioned higher in it.

Table 7. Frequency and percentage distribution of satisfaction with married life

Specialties		1	2	3	4	5	Total
<i>Satisfaction with married life</i>		<i>Very much</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Just living</i>	<i>Not Satisfied</i>	<i>Average</i>	
	<b>n</b>	15	40	30	09	01	100
	<b>%</b>	15	40	30	09	01	100

Experiences change perspectives of people, and this explanation is confirmed through this research. 40% of the respondent women answered

in an open-ended question that they were satisfied with their married life. However, when they were asked if they would marry their daughters at a young age, majority replied negatively. 61% were not in favor of early marriage. They rather liked them to get educated first. It shows that people change their minds after their life experiences which create long lasting and stable impressions in their minds.

International Center for Research on Women (2006), identified multiple ways of addressing the issue of child marriages. For this purpose, programs and strategies were evaluated and categorized into five categories: service-oriented programs which provide information; trainings; support networks and space; programs focusing on improvement in education in terms of quality and quantity; programs offering incentives and economic support to parents to delay their marriages; and creating enabling environment through political commitment and focus on education and mobilization of parents and community members. These multiple strategies focus on the decisions makers of marriage in the society. Parents are identified as decision makers in areas and regions of high prevalence; therefore, these strategies also need to include them to be successful. The decision of early marriage is generally in the hands of family heads and sometimes community elders, who are expected to safeguard these traditions, therefore contacting these people may help in creating enabling environment for addressing the issue effectively (Karam, 2015).

### **CONCLUSION**

The research findings show a changing trend of perception about early/child marriage among those who were married as a child. Their experiences have changed their attitude and mindsets, persuading them to think differently than their earlier generations. Changing trends in influencing factors such as economic, social and cultural and to some extent political has further triggered this change. Though the change is slow, but persistent in the society. Furthermore, the approach to adolescent health programs is also an essential factor to the success of reproductive health programs. The awareness and approach to health programs need to be culturally formed and should not appear 'threatening' to people because, as most of the time people resist to social change because they are unaware of its positive future outcomes.

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