

## THE DYNAMICS OF EARLY MARRIAGES IN PAKHTUN SOCIETY

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### Abstract

There are many causes of child marriages in Pakhtun society but these practices are mostly founded in rural parts of the province while in urban setup the practice of late marriages is still operative which has been contributing to promiscuity and other criminal activities among the young males and females alike. This research study is a secondary review of the causes of early marriages in Pakhtun society. There are numerous causes that contribute to early marriages in Pakhtun society in which the primary and most prominent factor that compel many families intend to early marriages is risk of dishonor. The risk factor of dishonor means indulgence of a girl in any kind of relationship with a boy and ageing of girls without marriages in their paternal families. In addition, most of the families prefer young girls for marriages which highly contribute to early marriages of girls. This practice has many impacts including negative risk of maternal health, incapability of child-bearing and chronic stress.

**Key Words:** Child Marriage, Lack of Education, Risk of Dishonor, Ageing

### Introduction

Marriage is a matter of a groom and a bride and is created by a sweet and beautiful relationship. On the contrary it may not always be in that manner as the following may happen. The desire to live a prosperous life is unattainable, and the idea of a fulfilling life is out of people's reach. This becomes a reality when a girl is married off at a tender age which is termed by UNICEF as child marriage that is marriage before the age of 18 (Raj, Saggurti, Balaiah & Silverman, 2009). Child marriage is a violation of children's rights and has the following impacts which are the long-term effects of child marriage for child brides and grooms. According to UNICEF's 2020 findings, child marriage is prevalent in the Asian countries, and the effects are felt by both boys and girls although the girls are most affected and likely to present early marriage-related challenges than boys. Sudden change in the roles and responsibilities as well as environment leads to stress and results in losing childhood fun and destructing her psychological health and the health of her offspring (Nour, 2009). In addition, the underage marriage takes girls to the violence, health risk, or death and may be other most of the serious health consequences of child marriage and also the

girl's education and future opportunities are eliminated and she has to face the health risk and her responsibilities are shifted.

### **Literature review**

Child marriage is one of the most prevalent practices in South Asia and Pakistan inclusive. Many young girls in this region are married off for social, cultural and religious reasons and they remain vulnerable and suffer physically, educationally, psychologically and economically throughout their lives. Child Marriage is defined as those where one or both of the spouses are below the age of 18 years, "Child marriage most affected and has a negative impact on the girl child more than the boy child" (Khanna, 2020). It is estimated that one in every five girls becomes a child bride and a young girl is married annually to a man before she is 18. This was the period when the incidence of child marriage especially in South Asia reduced sharply from 49% to 30%. Global efforts have ensured that 25 million child marriages have been avoided in the last decade. Within Sub-Saharan Africa 37% of the girls were married before their 18th birthday; 76% Nigeria, 68% Central Africa Republic, and 67% Chad. If the vice of sustainable action is not addressed now, more than 150 million girls will be child brides by the year 2030. (UNICEF, 2020).

### **Child Marriage in Pakistan**

Pakistan like other developing countries has been the Centre of cases of child marriage since its inception. From the following chart the incidence of child marriages has been depicted which shows that in the 1990s and before that time the incidences were rife but with the passage of time and the laws put in place; these incidences have been reduced to the bare minimum or eliminated altogether (UNICEF, 2018). However, in 2018 the cases are reported to be rare and a survey conducted two years later the percentage had increased more than 3 (Asif, 2021).

In Pakistan, majority of the cases for child marriage are reported in the provinces of Punjab and KPK, Sindh has also been noted to have some such cases. The two major provinces i.e. Punjab and KPK were recently researched (2019-2020). The output of the survey is presenting the percentage of incidence of child marriage in two prominent victim provinces of child marriage cases. According to Khan (2020), child marriage rate in KPK is 11 percent higher than the Punjab province.

### **Gender Discrimination**

It can therefore not be ruled out that gender discrimination is another factor that leads to the child marriage. The roles of women in Pakistan are well defined where most of them are expected to work within the homes. In child marriages, girls are taken to houses; this makes them quit school and other activities. Hence child marriage enforces gender discrimination and the affected females are subordinates to their male partners and are miserable throughout their lives. Sadiwa revealed, "Gender discrimination is the main cause of the negative traditional practices carried out on girls and young women and such practices are continued so as to ensure that men and boys have dominance over women and girls in the society that is biased towards men" (Sadiwa et al., 2007, p. 24).

In Pakistani society, in general, father chooses the time and place of the marriage of his children. But daughter will be married off at a young age than a son due to economic reasons. In fact, girls are a liability to the family socially and economically unlike boys who are supposed to provide for the family. The Pakistan situation as assessed by the UN Committee on CRC was worrying, noting that "pervasive patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted traditional and cultural stereotyping regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family, in the workplace and in

society remain serious obstacles to women's human rights" (UN Committee on CRC, 2009, para 28).

### **Poverty and Resource Deficiency**

Thus, most of the poor families consider a strategy in poverty for the economic survival of their family as one of the reasons that early marriage of their daughter means one less mouth to feed, one less person to educate and clothe. There are also some traditions that in some areas parents are forced to marry off their daughters early while in some areas some parents especially the financially challenged parents marry off their daughters early to get money. This case is most specifically utilized by individuals in African regions where parents are paid to marry off their daughters early in their adolescence i. e. around puberty (Malhotra, 2010). It has been noticed that in particular in Pakistan; poor parents marry their daughters at an early age to avoid spending a lot of money on dowry which is expected to be given in case the daughter is of marriageable age and of high value. When looking at all the cases of child marriage therefore, then one is put in a position to be able to see that poverty forms the basis of most of the child marriage cases. It implies that the poor child has higher prospects of being married off as a child than the rich child.

### **Maintaining Power Control**

Also, child marriage is widely employed as a tool of manipulation of power relationships and gender subordination. This has been associated with beliefs that lesser ages of the female children can easily be dominated in the manner the male senior's desire. It becomes Watta satta (exchange marriages) Also, the balance of power has to be maintained where the girls from the families are to be exchanged in marriages with daughters-in-law. Stereotypically, at least one of the companions if not the two are forced to be child marriages. Most of these marriages are arranged by fathers or elder brother of the family or any other close male relative. A special concern of females, the youth is excluded in decisions relating to their marriages. Furthermore, it is shameful to take an opinion of a female concerning her marriage according to their traditions.

### **Male Dominated Society**

The other cause of child marriage in the Pakistani culture is that the latter helps to sustain the male dominance and eliminate the potential options for girls. The position of a girl and woman in many developing countries is determined by the institution of marriage and is associated with the cultural and mandatory characteristics of a wife, sister, daughter and mother. People also claim that marriage is a device that assists females – particularly girls – to hold insignificant positions in families and society. To place control over women's sexual voyeurism is among the many reasons that young girls are married off. Sexuality of a girl is believed to belong to the husband once the girl gets married. Purity of a girl is the most important aspect in attempts, decisions, and goals set by the fathers, families and communities to control a girl's sexuality.

### **Job opportunities and Lack of Education for girls**

It is a tradition in many parts of the world that boy child is given priority in education not the girl child. This may be attributed to financial crisis or illiteracy of people but this is very much true; many people deny their girl-child education. Non-school attending girls are more likely to get married earlier. Others believe that since girls who ought to be wives and mothers in future are expected to take care of children and house of the husband, and if they are not going to work, then they don't need education. This is mostly evident in poor homes which parents have a preference of educating their young boys without giving any consideration to the education of

their daughters. When it comes to this they only think of one feasible solution, which is to make their daughters get married at an early age.

Since parents in poor families cannot afford the schooling of their young girls, they tend to want their daughters to get married in order to be 'free' from the responsibility. They do not envision anything for their future but educating their daughter to be sent to her husband's house. Thus, one can say that poverty is one of the most distinct and cordial factors that lead to child marriages. An illiterate couple may think that daughter is an expense that has to be shifted to another man at her tender age. Presently in many countries, it is still cheaper to marry off daughters at such an early age because the costs of marriage are cheaper at that age. Likewise, the costs of dowry may also seem to be lately lower for younger girls in many regions. Poverty is common in the rural areas of Pakistan and hence it is the main reason that is closely linked to child marriage. According to the Ministry of Finance Pakistan, the head count poverty in Pakistan for the last financial year 2005-2006 was 22.3 percent adding that, 27 percent of the total population living in rural areas are below the poverty line, while in urban areas this figure is 13.1 percent.

Besides, restricted stores of human capital, and being deficient in self-confidence, most girls are left with meager chances of being economically productive, hence, speeding up their early marriage cycle. In general, it can be concluded that girls and women are involved in the informal sector or home-based activities in the rural communities with very little wages. Some of these include seasonal works in the agricultural sector which do not require much skills at all, such as the picking of cotton, sowing among others, others include home-based production such as stitching, embroidery and production of handicrafts.

Girls or women are seen to be of low 'economic value' that any family holds in as far as being able to contribute towards the earnings of the family. Hence, they are taken especially in rural areas as 'non-earners' in economic sense of the word. "On a similar note, as marriage is viewed as a tool that is likely to help one heed their fortune and leave poverty behind in other developing countries, the results instead aggravate the cycle of intergenerational poverty." "Where income generation by women is considered as a poverty reducing strategy especially in the urban areas, they might delay early marriage due to the income earned." The insecurity or danger especially in a conflicting place.

### **Conflicts and Wars**

If the nature of other causes of child marriage in regions in Pakistan such as the tribal zone in the province of KPK are dissimilar than we can just say," The territorial issues". These are the regions where many children are married, and the nature of causes is quite different. These are regarded as the adverse areas and can be said to be continuously in a war like state. Because of these unsafe areas and danger that embrace on their mind all the times the families look for an army person, a landlord or a powerful man with an intention to protect their daughter even if their daughter has not attained the age of eighteen years or maturity. Hence, the families dwelling in such hostile territories take their female figure of a child to an authoritative figure or an influential personality for the reason that the girl and the family itself securely feel or are made to feel so (Mahato, 2016).

### **Fear of dishonor and traditions**

Pride and Prejudice Fear of dishonor and traditions Today spouses are likely to be chosen for love rather than birth, so the main character's concern with dishonor stems from personal pride, which would have been considered as a tradition in that era. Mass analysis of child marriage in Pakistan, we see majority of child marriage cases in KPK and Punjab. The main drivers of child

marriage in Punjab are sometime poverty and indication of low education of the girl child but for KPK and more specifically the tribal areas there is one more reason behind most cases of child marriage. It is due to these factors as traditions, convention, honor, and many more.

The girls who reach to puberty and they get not get married, it is considered as shame for the family and the relatives and it is usually considered a bad habit of not marrying her or letting her spend time at home. Thus, to attain this they get their girls married earlier to avoid such a disgrace. In some cases, it has also been seen that expenditure which the parent has to bear but they are unable, then the daughter is forced to get married with the son of the family to whom the parents of the girl have to pay their debts or loans (Malhotra, 2010). It is also based on some cultures or tradition of some places to have those children married. Another group also believes that the marriage of their child to be such a burden and they would wish to see their child wed as soon as possible so that they can be let off the hook. Indeed, in the modern world, this tradition has been noticed to be worst off, least or completely absent. But still this has been practiced in a few parts of tribal areas.

### **The Risk Factors**

The risk factors are not always associated with early marriages rather patriarchal social structure and the joint family system add more to the problem of vulnerability of children to health risks. Most of the women facing domestic or other acquaintance violence are usually found in joint families or they are the victims of joint family system. However, some of the factors that are considered as the risk factors associated with early marriages are discussed in the following passage.

### **Risk of child and maternal mortality**

Girls who marry and become pregnant before they turn adult or even before commencing maturity have a high mortality rate or risk of either maternal or infant mortality or high health risk (Malhotra, 2010). A report shows that girls who die during this period also constitute the highest proportion of child brides, and most of the children who are married before the maturity (UNICEF, 2007). The mortality rate at under 18 is higher than above 18 and it is because of the attainment of the age of maturity or adulthood.

There are also various issues that a mother encounters when she is giving birth to a child. She is threatened by many sorrows of health. That is the reason why the bags of the girl can also tear, that results in a very tremendous as well as sore situation that cannot be treated without surgery, for the bladder, vagina, rectum of the girl. This condition is known as Obstetric fistula (WHO, 2018), this severe condition is most likely to be seen in child brides since they have immature bodies, less ready to handle pregnancies.

### **Vulnerability to Sexually Transmitted Diseases**

There are humongous and devastating risks that the children married earlier are bound to catch or be exposed to risky sexually transmitted diseases. Sexually transmitted diseases are caused to young girls because of their carelessness or ignorance of maintaining their sexual health (Santosh, 2016). In addition, domestic violence gives birth to many health-related risks which results in severe health issues especially loss of child-bearing or fertility. In most cases, they are the vulnerable women who fall prey to either stalkers or batterers which causes physical and emotional harm and even depression or chronic stress. A report shows that among the domestic violence that girls and women go through most of them include; greatest percentage of child brides and out of every 100 girls who experience sexual abuse, 75 of them are child brides (Santosh, 2016).

## **Deprivation from childhood**

During the episodes of dolls and friends, on the girls, responsibilities are imposed; their childhood is taken away. On the other hand, the moment they are married, they cannot even finish their most basic primary education which leads to the destruction of their secured future. They never get to a point where they can be independent and they just turn to being a burden to people. Moreover, they are provided with severe burdens of responsibilities, beyond their capacities, which include home chills; motherhood at an age where they should be enjoying with dolls. A report demonstrates that when the girl reaches the age in which she receives education and awareness, the moment she gets married, she turns powerless (Malhotra, 2010). In this scenario they are collectively deprived of their rights to the simple necessities of life, education, a future that is secure and childhood.

## **Conclusion**

Early marriages or the factors that compel people to early marriages are not that much severe that result in health or economic risks. The main problem is basically domestic violence, which does not encompass only children rather every individual woman faces domestic violence in one way or the other. Domestic violence causes huge problems for the women including young and adults. The main factor of domestic violence is patriarchal mentality and joint family system that prevails in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In joint family system every woman is considered an outsider and she is treated less than a family member and huge burden of housework is put on her shoulders. This discriminatory treatment results in her vulnerability to health risks. Inaccessibility to health services and medicines and lack of proper care at home, gives birth to many health issues. Chronic stress and depression sometimes result in suicidal ideation in women living in joint family system. Infertility remains a curse for women in these destinations which most of the time results in divorce or suicide. A woman living in joint family never gets freedom to express herself or to carry out relationship with anybody either among the relatives of beyond the familial parameters. These factors add more to the problem of physical and mental health risks which are usually considered as issues related to early marriages, however, early marriages remain very successful provided the couple lives in a separate house with proper livelihood sources. It means that the problem is vested more in the patriarchal social structure and joint family system rather than the culture of early marriages.

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