

Child Marriages in Pakistan: Causes and Consequences

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ABSTRACT

The culture of marrying off girls in childhood or in early adolescent age is a top line issue in Pakistan. The impacts of this issue are quite lasting because it leads to a host of problems in their further way of life. Among its adverse impacts, barrier on their education is immediate one. It makes them engage into practical familial household without sufficient mental maturity. Thus the early-wed girls are pressed under challenges of a difficult phase of life before they are suitably prepared for it. Another adverse effect befalls upon their physical health. They are vulnerable to various medical complications and suffer from serious health issues. There is strong association between marrying at later age and higher level of education along with better reproductive health. The early marriages are made upon various socio-cultural and socioeconomic grounds. Some of those reasons are exchange-marriages (watta-satta), recompense-through-girl (vanni), money-for-girl (Valwarr) and evading expenses on girls' brought-up and education. When girls are married in early teens, their right to education is plainly denied and because of too early exposure to conjugal living, their reproductive health and physical wellbeing is badly affected.

Key Words: Marriage, Early, Education, Barrier, Rights, Violation, Health

Introduction

“Let us become the first generation to decide to be the last that sees empty classrooms, lost childhoods and wasted potentials. Let this be the last time that a girl is forced into early child marriage. Let this end with us. Let’s begin this ending, together, today, right here, right now.” (Malala usofzai Nobel Peace Prize Lecture 2014)

In Pakistan, women are weak and depressed segment of society. Girls are married away quite early and are not freely permitted to use their years of adolescence in useful learning. Pakistan is one of those countries where girls in early-teens (below-16) are married away. There are different reasons and factors

interwoven in the socio cultural fabric of the country that cause or contribute towards marrying off children before attaining a suitable age. Such early marriages lead to abuse of girls. Marriages are planned and executed by senior members of the family and the actual couple-to-meet finds no opportunity to express their likes and dislikes. In making such arranged marriages (actually forced marriages, quite often), legal safeguards for the girl are often set aside. Minimum marriageable age and mutual consent are not ensured.

It has also been commonly noticed that wide-scale prevalent lack of education among the general public has chiefly contributed towards match making and marrying sons and daughters in early age. And upon this same act, lack of education is further perpetuated through the next generation because those who are married in too early in their age, stop schooling and stay uneducated through the rest of their life. Besides this, they are prone to engage into coupling too early which causes small married girls to be mothers. Ultimately they suffer from various diseases which retard their health and even in some cases cause their death.

Related studies

Since the cited issue is prevalent in all communities of the world, many studies exist on this topic with various dimensions. Lodhi and Haroon (2011) assert that early marriage pulls the girls out of schools (or colleges) and pushes them into an ever busy cycle of housekeeping and child bearing. The International Centre for Research on Women has highlighted that early marriage is a major factor for poor education of girls. Another study conducted in 29 countries has revealed that girls marrying at 18+ were more educated than those who married in younger age (i.e. below 18). On the other hand, the said report shows that longer continuity of education is likely to make the girls marry at later age. Higher level of education leads to mature marriages, strong partnerships, healthy living and greater gender equality (Awaz Foundation, 2010). Marrying at mature age (often in 20s) saves from HIV, AIDS and other serious diseases which are somehow caused by early exposing to sexual initiation.

Low educated elders tend to count physical development of girls, not sufficient mental preparedness and potential to enter into matrimonial relationship and family keeping (Zaman, 2012). It is usual that girls out-of-school are more likely to be married early and get impregnated before attaining a reasonable age (Nour, 2009). As asserted by Raj et al. (2009), girls can spend their phase of young age in gaining productive learning and skills to make their life more comfortable. But in actual situation, their years of adolescence are lost without developing necessary abilities required in their future life.

In a survey conducted by Nasrullah and Zakar (2014), fifty percent women told that they were married before they were 18 years old and that they were a prey to domestic violence. Such girls are under a strict control and they cannot enjoy natural freedom of life and partnership. Early age wives are fulltime yoked in

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household chores. They are supposed to prove their fertility traits and bear children (before they completely cross their own childhood). Familial crises are more likely to happen with child brides for not being able to handle many matters of married life. They often meet burden, isolation and dejection. As suggested by Le'Strat and Le'Foll (2011), differences of age, and a lack of communication between the spouses lead to ultimate separation.

Medically and physically early age brides are not suited for child-bearing. They are vulnerable to many sorts of complications in pregnancy. Health concerns are too serious to be set-aside. As Nour (2009) asserted that girls below 16 are 5-7 times more likely to meet death during childbirth. There are higher risks of transmissions of HIV.

Concept of marriage

Marriage is generally known as 'a union of two people formally and legally recognized as partners in a familial and personal relationship. It is 'the state of being united as spouses in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law' (Merriam Webster). Early marriage is referred to marrying in early adolescence. Early marriage is marked when one or both the marrying persons have not reached the permissible age to marry i.e. 16 years for girl and 18 years for boy. Marriage is a union with intimacy of personal and sexual relationships. Therefore it impacts the couple in emotional, psychological, physical and medical contexts (Nasrullah et al. 2013). Marriage marks accomplishment of one's life. But all accomplishments must be 'mature' because an immature accomplishment is indeed an adverse development.

Factsheet of early marriages

It has been recorded that 50 percent marriages in Pakistan are of those girls who are under-18 at the time of marriage. In many cases age of the actually underage bride is shown higher in the marriage documents. UNICEF reports (2017) from small sample surveys also reveal that 70 percent girls are married off before their 16th birthday. Many are married away even earlier before they complete 13th year of age.

Such customs and traditions contribute to childbearing before the girls reach enough maturity to discharge the responsibilities of mothers. Necessarily early marriage is chained with early motherhood. A Survey of Population Council of Pakistan (2002) highlights that 35 % women in country bear their first baby before they are 18 years old. This ratio is 69 % for women of 19 years. Choice of spouse is also out of culture like a taboo as only 4 % girls below-19 can express their willing choice for marrying. General tendency of families is to marry sons and daughters within their 'biraderi' (their own clan). So above 70 percent girls are married to a near or distant relative.

Contributory factors in child marriage

Although every marriage is carried out with its own familial scenario and mutual settlement between the parties, still there are in general certain factors that contribute towards marrying of children before they are sufficiently grown-up to hold the social unit (i.e. the family and the house). Such reasons are briefly counted here:

Recompense through girls (Vanni)

In the socio cultural frame of Pakistan, Vanni (or Swara) is a custom of compensation through girls. Daughters or sisters in any age (mostly early teens) are given over to another family against whom any offense or oppression was committed. Thus long pending and long lasting disputes are capped. Little girls are sacrificed as compensation of damages in clash. Even in order to level the pending debts (which a family is unable to return in cash), young girls are given in replacement of money (Khan, 2011).

Reciprocal marriage (Watta-Satta)

This is barter of brides between two families (locally called watta-satta). Age does not matter in such exchange. Many men in old age tend to marry young girls and to execute their own marriage they give away their daughter (or niece or sister) in marriage to any male relative of their would-be-brides. Reports reveal that in the rural belts of Pakistan; nearly 36 percent marriages are 'barter of brides'. In most cases, both or one of the brides is too young to marry (Hanan & Mansuri, 2007).

Elders' decisions

Forced marriages are contributory to tendency of early marriages in the country. The cultural practices of the tribe, good or bad, are glorified to the children of next generation. Match making of sons and daughters is altogether a domain of family elders. Quite often such decisions are made without much consideration of time and age of the couple. When the elders of the family decide to marry a daughter or a sister, there is nearly no chance to evade the decision or express an alternate opinion. The marriage has to take place – be it a fortune or misfortune.

Dowry ready – wedding ready

There is a strong culture of giving dowry to girls on their marriage. The dowry refers to various materials of necessity and facility needed to the new couple. Over the years, volume of dowry has become a competition in the families. Most families attempt to give larger and bigger dowry to daughters; and that poses a tough economic challenge for the family and the parents. Parents keep collecting

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dowry items for daughters since girls' childhood and when they find sufficient dowry managed they don't wait any longer to marry the girl. Many marriages are delayed because of no dowry and many marriages are executed early because dowry is ready (Zeba & Kazi, 2009).

Early engagement – early marriage

Parents are prompt to make their girls 'engaged' (betrothed; book for marriage, *mangni*) so as to secure the potential boy of their pleasure. Such matches within family relatives are 'booked' by parents on both sides, so that the opportunity may not slip outside the family. Usually such engagements are made without much consideration of a girl or even a boy present age. Quite often such matches are fixed among siblings or biraderi relatives when their kids are in quite tender age. Later on this engagement causes insistence from either of the sides to execute the marriage early (Jalal & Munir, 2008).

Shaking off economic load

In some tribes and territories, making expenses on girls is deemed useless because ultimately they would be married away to live and work for some other household. Such mindset believes that girls are economic burden and therefore they are prompt to execute their marriages too early (National Commission on Status of Women, 2007). Thus to shake off the economic load on family and to put it upon future households, girls are married off without taking much time and without 'wasting' much incomes.

Money against match (Valwaar)

This is like bride's price. In certain jurisdictions and tribes of the country, marriage is a monetary deal between the groom and parents of the bride. Daughters are given in marriage and a certain demanded amount is received by the parents. The groom pays money (valwaar) to parents of the bride for consent of marrying their daughters. That money serves a rescue and reward for the girl's family from years' long economic difficulties of her brought-up. The parents therefore tend to give their daughters in marriage as soon as they find a good offer. Such potential money is also a cause of child trafficking (Noor, 2004).

Preventive arrangement

Early marriages are arranged to save the immature youngsters of provocative years from getting involved into unacceptable emotional and sexual relationships outside. This is essentially associated with the sense of 'family honor' which has to be safeguarded at any cost (Ali, 2001). Early marriages are also executed because of mistake of adultery done. In such situations, to cover the mistake, the

daughter is made to marry right away (or the male is forced to immediately marry with that certain girl). That is some sort of solution of dispute between two families. In such cases, ages of the two are not considered much; rather coverage of family honor is in focus.

Stronger support in later age

Promoters of early marriage believe that bearing of children as early as possible would be beneficial because one would have a young son before oneself getting too old. Thus a young son would be able to support the family before the father grows weak. It is believed that bringing up children in very young age is more convenient than in later years of the mother or the father. So early marriage is believed to make a strong family with young sons and still young father (Plett, 2005).

Forced marriages

The tribal custom of Ghag is a form of forcible imposition of matrimony upon a girl. It is performed on part of the intending young man (i.e. the candidate). He publically demands the hand of a girl and that no one must dare to think marrying her. Such declarations are taken tribally serious. This act has negative impact to the honor of the family and the girl as well. Thereafter, no other proposals are expected for her because no other men are supposed to propose or marry her. Most of such girls are either killed or married off very quickly.

Marrying off idle girls

There are many girls who are not schooled at all, that is due to varying reasons, because schools are out-of-reach, or education is expensive or because of parents disinterested attitude. They do nothing other than usual household work. For such girls, parents find no alternatives (what to get them doing) and ultimately they turn to thinking about marrying their daughters as the only (or the best) option.

Effects of early marriages

Marrying early is a problem of socio cultural nature; it also harms personal physical wellbeing of youngsters. Couples wed in mature years are more closely attached in a bond of love and care. But child marriage has adverse consequences. Couple wed in early adolescence face immense psychological effects (Critelli, 2010). Results of early marriages are briefly accounted below here:

Stopping of education

All those who are married in early years stop or made to stop going to school. Child marriage is obviously a denial of a person's right to get education. Their ability to seek knowledge and develop necessary skills for leading a healthy and fulfilled life is crushed (Khanna, et al 2013). In pursuit of elders' preferences, schooling of the poor girls is sacrificed. Having left away their education (for marriage) makes them practically all time dependent upon their husbands. Their own economic security falls to nearly nil because of no education, no skills and no job. Education of women is not necessarily about getting them work in the employment market, rather it is about getting them bring-up a better generation. Educated mothers can infuse a culture of decency and honesty in the children.

Medical implications

Among the negative impacts of early marriage, health concerns are rated high. An early wed girl is prone to become an early mother. There are multiple medical risks in early- maternity and newborn. Marital relationship is liked with physical health of the couple (Siddiqi et al., 2006). Sexual and reproductive health is endangered in early marriages. WHO (2005) has pointed out that early mothers are stressed in pregnancy. Early mothers are feared to face malnutrition for themselves and their babies (Nasrullah et al. 2013). They are not educated to plan a delay in first pregnancy. Orthodox family mindsets want girls to be mothers without delay. Early wed girls are supposed to come up this expectation. Youngsters are prone to careless coupling. They find no proper advice to stay protective against sexually transmitted diseases and HIV.

Inefficient handling of household

Khan (1999) has elaborated those young girls who are loaded with heavy responsibilities at very early age which they are unable to handle properly. They are less able to plan their work and time. They are not educated about coupling and pregnancies. Most often, they fall a prey to psychiatric problems, depression, stress and mental disorders. They have to manage the kitchen, feed the animals, nurse the kids, work for farms, take care of the aged elders and still keep their partners and the entire family happy.

Familial disputes and separations

A large proportion of child marriages end in separations and divorces. It contributes to high rate of divorce. Statistics reveal that 55 percent marriage of couples below 18 ends in divorce. It suggests that there is a certain correlation between maturity of age and success of marriage. Those who marry in early ages are not pretty sensible to hold the familial system and most of them play in the

hands of relatives at both sides. Thus family tensions grow and most often ego of the relatives at both sides pushes the matters to worse side (Zaman, 2011). Ultimately damage befalls upon the girl who is stamped as 'divorced' in too early age.

Economic stress on couple

The early age couple struggles in economic insufficiency for running their house. They are dependent upon their elders to meet the domestic as well as personal expenses in everyday life. Eventually if they bear a child, they undergo even tougher situation of house economy. Continued inability to meet the rising expenses for the couple and the children causes irritation for the couple and they are either soon displeased in the tense circumstances or ultimately split apart (Shaheed & Khawar, 1990).

Youngsters' playfulness

The early-wed boy is more inclined to spend his time in street with friends. And the girl is less interested in housekeeping all the time. Resultantly, the interests of both start countering each other. They are not able to mould their interests and activities towards each other and towards the inner system of the house. Both of them are less efficient in time management between them as to how who will take care of the babies. So the playfulness of childhood is not complete gone when the boy and the girl are yoked in marriage. Obviously it takes long for them to settle in the life long bond and derive harmony and pleasure out of their life (Charsley, 2007).

Over business in earning

The young couple is almost always jobless. Both of them or at least the boy needs to seek work for earning. It is already unfortunate that both are not high qualified because of stopping to go to school after getting into marriage. So with low qualification, no high job is probable to wait for them. There is no way-out to earn except petty works and poor payments. Such situation demands the guy to do part time working in his free hours. That keeps him out all day and causes crisis of companionship between the couple. This struggle also causes serious neglect of children and their life is adversely affected for long (Zeba and Kazi, 2010).

Low sense of responsibility

Early marriage demands a sense of responsibility. Boy has to display responsible behavior before he develops even a reasonable behavior; same is true in the case of girl. Sayeed and Khattak (2011) describe that an educated youngster married to a sensible mature girl would make a responsible couple. They would display their spirit to embark a happy family life. Their attitude and approach towards running

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of the house would be far higher than the couple married otherwise. With a low sense of responsibility, an early wed-couple often makes an example of unsuccessful life.

Less harmony between families

In sociological contexts, early marriages cause to reduce familial harmony between the couple and between the two families. Unstable emotions, immature thinking, and flaming blood of youngsters cause to fluctuate the relationship seriously. Such familial disorders contribute to a disturbed society. With the disturbances between the couple or complaints between in-laws, the families involved at both ends are disharmonized. Eventually both families fall into further unpleasant relationship for future.

Islamic injunctions on marriage

Islam does promote timely marriage of sons and daughters but it does not promote early marriage (in childhood). It further emphasizes upon willingness of both partners to marry; it does not advocate forcible marriage of daughters or sons. Islam enjoins upon parents to treat the daughters on equal scale with sons; it does not permit any preference or priority assigned to sons to the detriment of daughters' interests. So anything, that hampers a girl's way forward in the life is discouraged and disallowed by the injunctions of Islam. Girls do have equality of choice and consent in marriage as is given to the males. Similarly, girls do have the right to education as have the males. Then, anything that obstructs delivery of right to daughters is not permissible in the eyes of Islam.

Generally tribal mindsets are pro-religious and anything contrary to Islam is discarded uncompromisingly. Then it is surprising that forced match making has no ground in Islam. According to Islamic provisions, women do have their right of free will and full expression of it in context of her marriage. No authority can manage her marriage against her consent (Badavi, 1980). It is also clear in sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) that women's consent is must for her marriage and her parents cannot forcibly impose any matching upon her. But the pro-religious elders of tribes and families ignore such provisions of Sharia when it comes to marriage of girls. Choice or opinion of the girl about her marriage is deemed as improper in context of family honor.

McDonnell (2017) has stated that Quran and Hadith both insist upon all for acquisition of knowledge for which no disparity has been witnessed in either of the sources. On the subject of educating the generation, girls are nowhere mentioned as inferior or sided. Islam is the first religion that relieved women from maltreatments and misfortunes. It is widely known that daughters were buried alive in tender age to avoid risks of expense and honor and Islam brought deliverance for them. The Prophet (SAW) said, "He who has a daughter and does not bury her and does not degrade her and does not prefer his son over his

daughter will enter in the Paradise.” (Jamey Tirmizi, Hadith No. 563). The Prophet (SAW) of Islam strictly instructed his followers to do justice (and equality) between his children i.e. sons and daughters –The Prophet repeated the same instruction thrice to emphasize it (Silsila-tes-Sahiha, Hadith 1909). Islam emphasizes that women must be educated, confident and decisive for a successful life. Their abilities and education can make them more honorable in the society as is the vision of Islam.

Legal preventions on child marriage

Ignoring consent of girl in marriage (given directly or through her vali i.e. guardian or parents) is contrary to Islam (Ashfaq, 2013). The evil customs of Vanni and Ghag have been outlawed through formal bill passing in parliaments of the country (Pracha, 2016). The parliament of Pakistan passed two bills in the year 2011, which raise protection of women from indecent treatments under excuse of customs and traditions.

The Government has enacted formally to declare that marriage of a boy below 18 and of a girl below 16 will not be recognizable and arranging such marriage would be a punishable act (UNDP, 2013). Besides this, as per Muslim Family Law Ordinance – 1961, the consent of the boy and the girl is mandatory. This ordinance permits marriage of girls not below-16. Similarly the Punjab Child Marriage Restraint Act (Amendment) 2015 has also defined ‘minor’ as the one who is under 18 years of age. This act sets punishment on arranging a child marriage contract. The Government of KP has brought forth an Act (Khyber PK Elimination of Ghag Act, 2013) to eliminate the malpractice of Ghag. Pakistan endorsed the provisions of United Nations Convention on Children’s Rights -1990 which emphasizes to stop / ban child marriages.

Conclusion

The issue is chronic as well as lasting. Therefore, literally and logically, it may not be expected to arrest this trend by mere lawmaking or prohibitions. The causes of it are woven into the social behaviors and individual mindsets. A wide scale awareness of public and facilitation towards continuous education plus good health can provide a startup towards the ultimately desired ends. The nation needs to realize at every level, from communal to individual, that marrying girls in early age is not solution to any problem; rather that is itself a problem which leads to lifelong difficulties of the generation.

It is worthwhile to assert that child marriage is an international issue, not merely in practice in Pakistan. Our girls are subjected to this problem through ages. The factors that contribute to this evil are multifarious i.e. social, religious, economic, cultural, familial and many more specific from case to case. Whatever be the factors behind it, the outcomes are pretty serious related to health of girls.

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There are risks of various medical complications for early wed girls. Obviously healthy mothers can bring up healthy kids and ultimately a happy healthy society.

Besides medical detriments, early marriages cause the lasting loss of education which adversely impacts the vision of the new couple for long. They are de-capacitated from thinking wisely and working honorably and living happily. Early wed girls and boys cannot complete their education. Resultantly then, low educated people face numerous inabilities themselves and cause further scarcities for their next generation.

Suggestions

Following points are suggested to discourage the trend / culture of child marriages:

1. Early marriage essentially damages education; so to counter it education itself must serve as weapon. Educate the present generation and thereby protect the next generation from suffering of early marriages.
2. Although huge resources are required to rebuild people's mindset, but fearing big size of the problem must not permit its continuity. A thoroughly coordinated campaign must be launched to discourage child marriage.
3. Laws framed to stop early marriages must be enforced and implemented throughout the country – in urban and rural belts – without any least leniency in pressure of political or social elements.
4. Large scale measure must be devised on state level to discourage this evil trend throughout the society. Early marriages must be portrayed as sorrow event instead of happy functions.
5. A large proportion of early marriages are prompted from visionless decisions of Panchayets. Government must approach and instruct them at local level to refrain from making any decisions which permit or promote early marriages.
6. Larger and wider activities for skill building must be managed for both genders to get engaged in learning & earning to benefit their families instead of getting married too early and burdening the household even further.
7. A thick network of Basic Health Units is functional in the country. Through these units, a full-force public awareness campaign must be run to highlight various medical risks or health problems involved in early marriages.

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