

The Silent Suffering: Social And Psychological Consequences Of Child Marriage

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Abstract:

The phenomenon of child marriage is a global issue deeply rooted in various cultures and remains a critical and sensitive problem. Approximately 700 million women who are living now were wed by the age of 18. The present study was designed to explore the social and psychological impacts of child marriage on girls who married at the age of 17 and below. The study was conducted in Rural areas of KP and Punjab, Pakistan under a quantitative approach while primary data were collected from only 350 girls who were married before the legal age through convenient sampling. The findings of the study show that early and largely unregistered marriages are predominate¹ly decided upon by female fathers and guardians in families where the educational level of the female is low. The study also noted that early marriage has a significant negative impact on education, personal growth, and psychological well-being. Child marriage can lead to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. The study recommends that comprehensive approaches that include community awareness campaigns, educational opportunities, legislative reforms, and economic empowerment are needed to eliminate the practice of child marriage.

Keywords: Child marriage, Social, Psychological, Impacts.

Background of The Study

The phenomenon of child marriage is a global issue deeply rooted in various cultures and remains a critical and sensitive problem. Define early female marriage, also known as "child marriage," is still a prevalent practice across the world specifically in developing nations often practicing without the consent of girls. The official report of UNICEF shows that without greater efforts to prevent the practice of child marriage, about 120 million additional girls will be wed as children by 2030. Approximately 700 million women who are living now were wed by the age of 18. One of the most common violations of human rights is child marriage. It stems from gender inequality and is a barrier to social progress. Moreover, child marriage poses severe negative threats to the health, and overall well-being, of females worldwide. (Javed & Mughal, 2021; John et al., 2019; Lee-Rife et al., 2012; Nour, 2006; Parsons et al., 2015; Raj,

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2010; UNICEF, 2021). In this empirical work, we shed light on the multifaceted nature of child marriage, and its detrimental effects on girls' psychological health and social life within the context of Pakistani society. In Pakistan, where extreme gender inequality is prevailing, a large proportion of young girls are victims of child marriage, specifically females of poor families, and low-educated households dwelling in rural regions. More precisely, in places like Sindh, the ratio of child marriage is 33%. Followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Punjab also have high prevalence, about 29%, 22%, and 20% respectively. It is also observed that the number of child marriages isn't officially registered, it's difficult to estimate the exact number of child marriages. The negative consequences of child marriage include rapid repeat childbearing, unplanned pregnancy, and pregnancy termination, which certainly puts young girls at risk for maternal morbidity and often leads to death (Javed & Mughal, 2021; Khan et al., 2009; Nasrullah & Bhatti, 2012; Nasrullah, Muazzam, et al., 2014; Nasrullah, Zakar, et al., 2014).

Negative Consequences of Child Marriage

The practice of child marriage and its relation to violence have been explored extensively. Previous empirical studies and existing literature, investigate physical, sexual, and emotional violence. Findings from these studies disclosed that violence indicators regularly revealed that child marriage triggered all types of violence (Begum et al., 2015; Erulkar, 2013; Gebrezgi et al., 2017). For example, the empirical work of John et al. (2019) explored that In Tigray, Ethiopia, a large portion of sampled women experienced physical violence from intimate partners during pregnancy, they further linked different factors including early marriage, rural residency, and low level of education to this violence. Likewise, different prior work also examined that females residing in rural areas and neglected backgrounds in underdeveloped countries experience and are more vulnerable to the hostile impacts of child marriage. Findings from this study also point out that these females possess minimal autonomy pertaining to the timing or choice of their marriage partners, thereby raising their vulnerability to domestic violence (Batyra & Pesando, 2021; Hindin & Fatusi, 2009; Male & Wodon, 2018; Nasrullah, Zakar, et al., 2014; Sarfo et al., 2022). Moreover, underage marriage is a harmful practice where both partners, especially females, are married off without their consent. Such practice can contribute to various social consequences, such as violence and abuse. It is also observed that when young girls are forced into marriage, mostly they face corporal, emotional, and sexual violence from their partners or in-laws. Likewise, child marriage denies them education and job opportunities, Keeping them in a circle of poverty and dependency (Anozie et al., 2018; Kidman, 2017; Mahato, 2016; McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Nguyen & Wodon, 2014; Nawal M Nour, 2009; Paul, 2019; Qamar et al., 2022). Similarly, child marriage represents one of the most common forms of violence against females because young married girls typically lack authority and status in marital relationships and household matters, making them prone to domestic abuse, sexual abuse, mental distress, and the separation from family, friends, and community. This contributed to ignorance, separation, and divorce of the wife at an early age, before a girl was strong enough to live independently. Child marriage restricts young girls' independence and reduces their ability to engage in healthful activities (Becker et al., 1977; Islam, 2022; James & Beattie, 2012; Nawal M Nour, 2009).

Child marriage is closely connected or linked to poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes and negative consequences among young married females. Furthermore, Child brides frequently have little or are illiterate, which limits their understanding of their rights and consequently their knowledge and confidence in negotiating safer sex or avoiding early pregnancies. Furthermore, females who marry early have their first children at a younger age, contributing to pregnancy-related fatalities and delivery difficulties, which are the top cause of death for girls aged 15 to 19. Infants of young mothers are also at a greater risk of low birth

weight, and a larger likelihood that the infant will not survive (Burgess et al., 2022; Irani & Roudsari, 2019; Nasrullah, Zakar, et al., 2014). Likewise, some recent studies show that child marriage is highly associated with maternal health problems, including a higher probability of early labor and difficulties after delivery as well as a major factor in recurrent pregnancies, premature deliveries, and unsafe abortion. The mental and social health difficulties associated with child marriage deny the girl growth chances and increase mental stress levels. Similarly, previous research on child marriage has found that it is associated with negative health behaviors and outcomes such as increased fertility rates, minimized modern family planning, more unsafe delivery, disorders of mental health, suicidal attempts and ideation, low socioeconomic status, morbidity, and mortality among children under the age of five (Ahinkorah et al., 2022; Paul, 2020; Raj et al., 2010).

Child marriage adversely affects girls' mental and emotional development in a variety of ways. Specifically, they are deprived of their youthful life. Little access to personal liberty, fewer possibilities to establish a sense of selfhood, denial of psychosocial and emotional well-being, reproductive health, and educational opportunity all have a detrimental impact on their psychological development (Burgess et al., 2022; John et al., 2023; Landis et al., 2018). Le Strat et al. (2011) also found that females married as children had a greater risk of considerably more mental illnesses than those married as adults, with nicotine dependency and phobias being the most frequent. Girls who married as children were also significantly more likely to be treated for any mental disorder in their lifetime with anti-social personality disorder being among the most prevalent. Slimier findings were also concluded by recent empirical work of Burgess et al. (2022) that depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and attempts, along with emotional distress triggered when accompanied by other factors such as poverty, intimate partner violence, social isolation, childbirth challenges, compromised self-esteem, and diminished autonomy, have been identified in the previous scholarly work as psychological repercussions associated with child marriage. Furthermore, when young girls marry, they are expected to play a variety of roles, including wife, daughter-in-law, housewife, and mother, which can be mentally and emotionally difficult for them because they lack the maturity and skills needed to deal with their personal, family, economic, and social relationships, resulting in the development of fears and complexes that last their entire lives (Aggarwal et al., 2023; Greene & Stiefvater, 2019; Morrow et al., 2023).

Current Focus

The phenomena of Child marriage continue a predominant socio-cultural practice in the rural areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, Pakistan, significantly affecting the well-being and psychological growth of young girls. Notwithstanding legislative measures by the Pakistani government as well as international law aimed at eliminating this practice, its prevalence remains surging, resulting in numerous social and psychological problems among newly young brides. Besides, it can also trigger a variety of psychological issues, including depression, anxiety, and poor self-esteem in these young girls. However, the precise mental health repercussions and severity among child brides in KP are not explored empirically. As was discussed above child marriage negatively affects girls' access to educational institutions, limiting their chances for personal and intellectual growth as well as worsening the social stigma and marginalization of young brides in their local communities, also restricting their social integration and engagement. To fill these research gaps is necessary to develop evidence-based strategy and policy recommendations with the aim of mitigating the negative psychosocial outcomes of child marriage in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Methodology

The present study was conducted in Rural areas of KP and Punjab, Pakistan under a quantitative approach while using a cross-sectional study design to investigate the social and psychological consequences of child marriage. Primary data were collected from only 350 girls who were married before the legal age. Moreover, convenient sampling, also defined as convenience sampling was adopted in the current study because due to local cultural and prevailing social norms access to these girls was not easy. The above-mentioned approach was a non-probability sampling method where respondents were selected based on their easy availability and accessibility. The structured questionnaire was used as a tool for data collection, measuring demographic profiles, and psychological and social consequences of child marriage on females resulting from their early marriage. The collected data was analyzed in frequency and percentage, as well as correlation analysis was conducted to root out the association between study variables. This analysis is helpful in how variables are quantitatively correlated to each other. In addition, informed consent was obtained from all the selected participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the entire research to ensure the protection of participants' identities and sensitive information.

Results

Participant characteristics married before the age of 18

Table 1 represents the demographic profile of the study respondents. The findings of the study revealed that the decision-making authority for marriages in the study area primarily lies with the father, as stated by more than half of the respondents (61.1%), followed by guardians such as grandfather, etc (28.3%). The table further shows that about two-thirds (71.7%) of the respondents were married between the ages of 10 to 14 years. In addition, more than half (55.4%) of the participants reside in Punjab. Information pertaining to education qualification respondents reveals a significant percentage (61.1%) of illiterate respondents. Likewise, (78.6%) of marriages were unregistered.

Table 1 Participant characteristics married before the age of 18

Item	Frequency	Percent
Decision maker Regarding Marriage in the family		
Father	214	61.1
Brother	37	10.6
Mother	0	0
Other Guardian	99	28.3
Age at the time of your Marriage		
07-09 Years	44	12.6
10-14 Years	251	71.7
15-18 Years	55	15.7
Province of Residence		
Punjab	194	55.4
Khybar Pakhtukhwa	156	44.6
Education Qualification		
Illiterate	214	61.1
Middle	99	28.3
Matric	37	10.6
Above	0	0
Marriage Registration Status		
Yes	75	21.4

No	275	78.6
Total	350	100

Social Impacts of Early Marriage

Table 2 shows results pertaining to the negative social impacts of early marriage. About two-thirds (72.9%) of the sample respondents believe that their education was negatively affected by early marriage. Likewise, (74%) acknowledge health-related issues for young brides during childbearing due to early marriage. Furthermore, a significant portion (73.4%) of the sample respondents stated that early marriage perpetuates cycles of poverty. More than two-thirds (82.6%) of the respondents disclosed that early marriage restricts personal development and autonomy. Furthermore, the majority (71.1%) of the respondents stated that child marriage negatively impacts gender equality and limits young people's future opportunities stated by more than half of the study participants (54.9%). In addition, most of the respondents (88.9%) revealed that child marriage denies individuals the right to make their own life choices.

Table 2 Social Impacts of Early Marriage

S#	Statement	Yes	No	Don't know
1	Education was negatively affected due to early marriage	255(72.9%)	35(10%)	60(17.1%)
2	Health risks for young brides, such as complications during childbearing caused by early marriage	259(74%)	22(6.3%)	69(19.7%)
3	Perpetuate cycles of poverty within societies	257(73.4%)	22(6.3%)	71(20.3%)
4	Restricts personal development and autonomy	289(82.6%)	15 (4.3%)	46(13.1%)
5	Negatively impacted gender equality	249(71.1%)	39(11.1%)	62(17.7%)
6	limits a young person's future opportunities	192(54.9%)	0(0%)	158(45.1%)
7	Child marriage denies the right to make their own life choices	311(88.9%)	39(11.1%)	0(0%)

Child Marriage and Its Psychological Impacts

The table represents findings about child marriage and its psychological impacts. Results of the study show half portion (50%) of the respondents stated that they feel like they've lost control of their lives due to their marriage. While more than half (56%) of the sample respondents disclosed that they frequently experience fear related to their marriage. Likewise, (56.3%) acknowledged that their marriage has negatively impacted their self-esteem. Furthermore, more than half (53.1%) of participant stated that they experience sorrow or hopelessness due to their marriage. In addition, the majority (64.9%) of respondents opined that they experience physical symptoms like headaches due to their early marriage. More than one-third (42.9%) of the sample in the study area strongly agree that they have thought about running away from their marriage and (55.4%) of respondents often feel isolated or lonely due to their marriage.

Table 3 Child Marriage and Its Psychological Impacts

S.no	Statement	Yes	No	Don't know
1	I feel like I've lost control of my own life.	175(50%)	132(37.7%)	43(12.3%)
2	I frequently experience fear associated with my marriage.	196(56%)	138(39.4%)	16(4.6%)
3	My marriage has had a bad effect on my self-esteem.	197(56.3%)	103(29.4%)	51(14.6%)
4	I experience sorrow or hopelessness as a result of my marriage.	186(53.1%)	114(32.6%)	50(14.3%)
5	I experience physical symptoms(headaches)	227(64.9%)	66(18.9%)	57(16.3%)
6	I had thought about running away from my marriage.	150(42.9%)	140(40%)	60(17.1%)
7	I often feel isolated or lonely	194(55.4%)	113(32.3%)	43(12.3%)

Correlation Coefficient Analysis

Table 4 revealed findings related to the correlation coefficient between Child Marriage and its social and psychological impacts on females. Results regarding the correlation coefficient between child marriage and its psychological is $r=0.677$. This shows a strong positive correlation between child marriage and its psychological impact. It also suggests that when the practice of child marriage surges, so does the negative psychological impact encountered by those females who married at an early age. Likewise, positive correlation, ($r=0.478$). show that child marriage is associated with significant social impacts. However, the p-value of psychological and social impacts indicates a significant relation with child marriage.

Tabl3 4 Correlation Coefficient Analysis

Independent Variable		Dependent Variable	
Child Marriage		Psychological Impact	Social Impact
	Pearson Correlation	.677***	.478***
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	Total	350	350

Discussion

The findings of the study explored the trend of early and largely unregistered marriages, predominately decided upon by female fathers and guardians in families where the educational level of the female is low. In Pakistan females who have not completed their elementary education are more likely to marry before their peers who have completed their education(Nasrullah, 2015). Davies et al. (2014) explored that education enhances people's options, prospects, and chances in life, allowing them to reach their full potential and make educated decisions about their well-being. But female early marriage not only restricts it from getting an education but also negatively affects their future opportunities. The study also investigated that early marriage has a significant negative impact on education, health, economic position, personal growth, gender equality, and autonomy. For example, the work (Nasrullah, Muazzam, et al., 2014) revealed that before girls have the necessary knowledge, skills, and self-assurance to exercise these and other important human rights, many of these girls are taken out of school due to early marriage and experience more social injustices as well as limited future opportunity. The findings also reveal a troubling trend of constraints and

obstacles encountered by those subjected to early marriage, particularly young brides. These results overall indicate that the majority of the sample respondents are undergoing negative emotions, psychological distress, and physical symptoms associated with their marriage. After getting married, girls are brought into their husbands' homes and given the roles of wife, housekeeper, and finally mother. Most of the time females experience rejection, loneliness, and depression as a result. Some females learn that in order to survive, they must accept their new surroundings and demonstrate their fecundity (N. M. Nour, 2009).

The findings also explored that child marriage has a strong positive relation with both psychological and social impacts. It could be linked to the fact that those females who married before 18 years old are more likely to experience adverse social and psychological consequences. Females who married before the age of 18 were more than twice as likely to report being beaten, slapped, or intimidated by their spouses as compared to females who married later. Additionally, the likelihood of their being coerced into having sex was three times higher. Moreover, married girls have less power to make decisions about their own life and well-being because of their inferior standing in the family (Shah et al., 2022; Speizer & Pearson, 2011).

Conclusion and Implication

Marriages involving children under the age of 17 are most commonly practiced in Rural areas of Pakistan. It has been inferred from our study findings that early marriages in the study area, are predominately decided upon by their fathers and guardians in families. It has been also explored that the majority of marriages are not registered. Furthermore, Child marriage directly affects girls' education, psychological well-being, social standing, and the health of their kids, constituting a violation of their human rights. Most women experienced verbal and physical abuse from the very beginning of their marriage, females who had experienced corporal abuse did not seek medical attention because their families and friends could not understand or support them. Child marriage can lead to profound emotional distress and mental health issues for those involved, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Furthermore, the lack of autonomy and agency over their own lives can have long-lasting psychological effects. Comprehensive approaches that include community awareness campaigns, educational opportunities, legislative reforms, and economic empowerment are needed to eliminate the practice of child marriage. We can strive towards a future where every child is free to develop and enjoy a life of dignity and fulfillment by tackling the social and psychological effects of child marriage.

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