

Impacts of Child Marriages on Girl's Health and her Children:

A Case Study of District Jaffarabad, Balochistan

By

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Abstract:

Early age marriages (before the age of 18) has been a common practice in many developing countries around the world. Most parents consider that marriage is a social security and a social responsibility towards their children. However, these early marriages can cause a number of social, physical, health and economic problems for the affected girls. Pakistan has high child marriage rates among developing countries. Despite many initiatives to address this practice in all provinces of Pakistan, little progress has been observed on the ground. The problem of child marriage is common in rural areas of Balochistan as well, especially in district Jaffarabad. This article examines the impacts of child marriages on child brides and their children in terms of their health. The study is qualitative in nature as it needed a deeper insight into the situation in district Jaffarabad. For that purpose, in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with affected child brides, psychologists, community elders, lawyers, religious scholars, civil society and women groups, and intellectuals. The findings of research suggest that the situation of child marriages is improving but with very slow progress. My analyses show that socioeconomic status of a family, religion and customs of the area are the main determinants of child marriages. In addition, poor health outcomes of both mother and child were common findings, which leads to severe health problems such as increased infant mortality, maternal mortality and sezophenia as well as other social issues such as psychosocial issues within the family. It also has been observed that family institution as a whole is at a greater risk because of unexperienced, less educated and early age brides who face challenges in upbringing their children. The research recommends targeted awareness creation in areas

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where this practice is common, especially on health issues, legislative reforms with strict implementation and monitoring mechanisms ingrained in legal instruments as well as institutional support through sustained capacity building of relevant departments, advocacy and other reforms to prevent the practice of child marriages.

Keywords: Child marriages, Health Impacts, Jaffarabad, Legal & Social Barriers etc.

Introduction:

Child marriage is a common practice in South Asia. It is prevalent in different parts of Pakistan especially the rural or sub-urban areas. Early marriage or child marriage is defined as “marriage before the age of 18.” (UNICEF, 2017). Child marriage is any formal or informal union where one or both of the parties are under 18 years of age (Bride, 2019). Each year 12 million girls are married before the age of 18 (23 girls every minute and nearly 1 every 2 seconds). If current trends continue, more than 140 million girls will marry early in the next 10 years nearly 39,000 per year (WHO, World Health Organization, 2019). According to UNICEF, marriage before the age of 18 is a violation of fundamental human rights. Furthermore, it limits the development of a child because in most cases proper health and education are compromised. There are many factors that aid early marriage but in most cases the reasons revolve around tradition, customary laws and social vulnerabilities (WHO, 2019) (T. Khanna, Verma & E. Weiss, 2011). Early marriage is purely based on the consent of the parent or guardian of the child whether male or female. It considered a choice, but that choice is not exercised in many areas of the world. The child is stripped of his/her innocence because his/her vulnerability is exploited (UNICEF, for every child, 2017). According to the World Health Organization, about 14.2 million child marriages occur every year. If the practice continues, there would be an estimated 140 million underage marriages from 2011 to 2020 (WHO, WHO, 2019). Child marriage not only affects girls physically, it has long-lasting impacts on their lives later on. There has been a little progress made on combating this cruel practice.

Child marriage has adverse physical, psycho-social and health effects on girls, impeding their overall development and well-being and it ends girls’ childhood as well as education and employment opportunities. Moreover, it increases their risk to violence and abuse. Despite these adverse consequences, child marriages continue unabated. This is indeed a matter

of grave concern and it requires legislation and serious action. South Asian countries are having the same

Environment and factors like poverty, illiteracy, backwardness and religious fundamentalism which are considered congenial for child marriages. Though some initiatives for the prevention of this practice have been taken by states and developmental organizations in South Asia high rates of child marriages in the region require a review of the problem, and more meaningful efforts are needed for its elimination. Child marriage affects women's health because of early pregnancies which in many cases prove fatal. According to the Demographic Health Survey births to adolescent girls aged 15-19 carry risks for mothers as well as newborns. There are high chances of maternal death and low infant birth weight (Countdown to 2015 (2000-2010) UNICEF and WHO). The World Health Organization has reported that adolescent mothers aged 10-19 are more likely to have unsuccessful births as compared to adults aged 20-24. Studies demonstrate that 88% of girls aged between 10 and 15 are likely to form an obstetric fistula; girls between 10-14 years of age are prone to die in childbirth 5-7 times more than adults (Nour, 2009). Child marriage is deeply rooted in the custom of Pakistan and is interwoven with family planning. Eight percent of girls in Pakistan who are in their adolescence aged 15-19 are already pregnant with their first child. Teenagers from poor families begin child-bearing before those from comparatively wealthy households (PDHS 2012-13). Pakistan faces the same problems of early child marriage. The institution of family is greatly affected by early child marriage. According to an economic survey of Pakistan 2012-13, it is the sixth populous country in the world with an increasing growth rate 2% per year. Out of 184.35 million people, 48% are children. A large number of these children are girls who are reported to marry at age of 7. In 2001, according to estimation, 37% of women were reported to marry before reaching the age of 18. The percentage may be the same after 11 years (UNICEF, 2001 Innocenti Digest) 1.6 Existing Laws in Pakistan on Child Marriage the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929

In Pakistan the legal age for females is 16 years old and for males is 18 years old according to the Pakistan restraint act 1929 (No xix). The deviance from this law is punishable and fine of Rs.1000 and sentenced to jail for one month. This punishment is for those adults who arrange a marriage and celebrates it. The founder of Pakistan, Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah was the member of British India Legislative council which introduced the child marriage restraint act 1929. This act was passed on October 1, 1929. The child marriage restraint act was effective from 1 April,

1930, in British India. The child marriage restraint act is still in practice in Pakistan for all its citizens whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims (Khawaja, 2015).

Nevertheless, the menace of child marriage continues in Pakistan. The purpose this act is to control this cruel practice against children. As the act is known by its name the child marriage restraint act means that a male below 14 and a female below 12 years of age would be allowed for marriage. The age was increased. The Muslim family Laws ordinance 1961 was effective from July 15, 1961, in which the age of girl was raised from 14 to 16 years and age of male decreased from 21 to 18 years for Muslim citizens. According to law parents, guardians and anyone who takes part in arranging child marriages are punishable according to law of Pakistan. (Zaman, 2008)

The weak point of the law is that the existing laws about child marriage in Pakistan are not strengthened. If a child marriage happens in a locale, the government does not take any step till a complaint is made by people. If there is no union council in the area, then the provincial government takes the steps but if one year passed during this period the government is bound by law to allow it or not take any action against it. The police are bound by law and do not take any action against this offence. There is a fine of 1000 rupees and one month's jail for people who are involved in arranging or facilitating a child marriage. The persons who are involved in arranging child marriage are given punishment but the marriage contract can't be void according to law. It shows the weak point of law. There are many flaws in the existing laws therefore, these laws are not applicable (Zama, 2008). The minimum age limit of marriage for girls in most countries of the world is 18, years but in Pakistan it is still 16. The Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 is still implemented today. No progressive steps have been taken. Although NGOs and the Government took steps to abolish the practice of child marriage from the country, figures are not satisfactory. Child marriage prevails in all provinces of Pakistan. Balochistan, an underdeveloped province with a huge population in rural areas, has an alarming number of early childhood marriages.

Literature Review:

There has been significant research done over the last few decades on this thematic area. The researches focused on some major factors that contribute the early child marriage and some of its consequences. The issue of child marriage is prevalent on the longitude and latitude of the globe and

especially in third world and developing countries. Child marriage has serious impacts on the family as an institution.

In most societies, marriage is among the most significant of life events for both men and women, signaling the emergence to adulthood. It sets in motion a variety of other life changes and is the beginning of building a new family (or new part of an extended family). Because of the huge impact marriage has on the lives of women in particular, researchers, advocates and policy makers have increasingly sought to consider marriage through a human rights framework, especially with regard to issues of consent and age at marriage. For example, Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses”, and that “Men and women of full age...are entitled to equal rights as to marriage...”. Correspondingly, the United Nations' 1962 Convention on the “Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration and an Associated Recommendation” calls on member states to establish a minimum age of marriage of no less than 15 years (Thornton, *Early Female Marriage in the Developing World*, 2003) Like in African countries, this issue is also prevalent in South Asia. For example, Nirantar Trust approaches the issue from feminist perspective and focuses on how sociocultural norms regarding gender and sexuality shape the prevalence and impact of the practice. In India, 58 percent of girls marry before reaching the legal age of 18; 74 percent are married before reaching 20 (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2005-2006). In 2006 India passed Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, which provided opportunity for the court to intervene and increase penalties. However, legal frameworks reflect the community and governments' concern but are not implemented often and have been insufficient in addressing it as a complex issue. They found that marriage at a young age prevents both girls and boys from exercising agency in making important life decisions and securing basic freedoms, including pursuing opportunities for education, earning a sustainable livelihood, and accessing sexual health and rights, among others. It also reinforces inequalities and discrimination between men and women among caste, religious and ethnic groups. These factors affecting child marriage cannot be understood alone because they are intersecting each other in various aspects. Furthermore, they are complicated by socio-economic connections related to poverty, globalization, migration (trust, 2015) 2 Early Marriage and Health:

As per the Economic Survey of Pakistan 2012-13, Pakistan is considered the sixth most populous country around the globe with a growth rate of 2 percent on its estimated 184.35 million populations. Pakistan will become

the fifth most populous country if it maintains the same growth rate by 2050. Of its total population, children are about an estimated 48 percent. A large number of these children are mainly girls who are married around the age of 7. In 2001, estimated 37 percent women were reported to be married below 18 years of age. In the span of the next 12 years, 2 percent are still believed to stay the same when it comes to child marriage (justice, 2013).

There are numerous negative health impacts due to early marriages. Dagne (1994) in a study on Ethiopia shows a number of negative health consequences. For example, before the proper development of their bodies for healthy pregnancies, they begin child-bearing. This results in high maternal mortality and increases the risk for obstetric fistula and obstructed labor. Fistula causes urinary and/or feces incontinence, and many women become social outcasts as a result. Treatments may improve the conditions but prevention would be more effective. Early marriage also affects a girl's physical growth in many ways as she is in developing phase, and she gives birth to children. This causes inner difficulties in her body and leads to different diseases. Giving birth a child in an early age causes pregnancy difficulties and mother child death sometimes. Mentally and physically a child bride is in growing phase. She is immature to take care of her own child. Even she is too young to understand family matters properly because her mental growth is incomplete. An early married girl can't rear a child properly. She is mentally immature for running of a household. (Dagne H. G., Nov,1994) A research conducted in Africa found that early marriage affects a girl's physical growth in many ways as she is in developing phase, she gives birth to children. This causes inner difficulties in her body and leads to different diseases. Giving birth to a child in an early age causes pregnancy difficulties and mother child death sometimes. Mentally and physically a child bride is in growing phase. She is immature to take care her own child. Even she is too young to understand family matters properly because her mental growth is incomplete. An early married girl can't rear a child properly. She is mentally immature for running of a household.

Rationale of the Study:

There has been a considerable study of child marriage and its effects done, in general. However, none focuses within the context of Balochistan province or district Jaffarabad to be more specific. Since the changing cultural norms and values are factors that should be seriously considered, the effects of early childhood marriage need also to be researched in the context of these changing norms and cultural values. Effects of early childhood marriage in Balochistan may not be the same as its effects in other countries or geographical areas.

In Balochistan, the effects of early childhood marriage may differ from region to region and district to district. The study has highlighted the issue, contributed towards better understanding of early childhood marriages. It will also propose some recommendations for improvement of girls, social conditions within the context of District Jaffarabad. This study will open new aspects of the issue and search for possible solutions. The study can also be beneficial for the government and NGOs for policy making and legislation. It will further provide a reference for other researchers working on child marriage and related issues and will facilitate future researchers for secondary data.

Research Question:

How do early marriages affect the health of child bride and her children?

Case Study Area:

Jaffarabad is one of the most populous districts of Balochistan. Its projected population was 611,367 in 2011 (Distt profile, Jaffarabad, June, 2011). Mostly male dominancy is prevalent there. Marriages are mostly arranged by their family. It is observed that an illiterate girl gets married in age of 14 years to 18years, and her consent has not been obtained for marriage (Distt profile Jaffarabad, June, 2011). The majority of the population resides in rural areas of districts where early child marriage is common. The lack of rules and regulations against early child marriages allows for less reporting. Child marriage has negative impacts on families in particular and on society in general. This acute problem in district Jaffarabad needs consideration by the Government and research scholars.

Child marriage causes early childbirth and the ill health of mothers. When a girl marries in early age, she gives birth to many children, and in this process of giving births, her own health is affected by many serious and infectious diseases. Mostly girls in the rural area of Jaffarabad are sold by their parents to older men. The purpose of child marriage is to fulfil their economic needs. Child marriage is considered an exchange (also called Watta Satta). Honor killing is another reason. If any male member in a family breaks societal norms and is found guilty by the tribe, he is supposed to be killed by the opposite party or must give his sister/daughter as an exchange to save his life. When a girl of 12 or 14 years is married in exchange for honor killing, she is subjected to psychological traumas. It affects her life and children. A family needs a strong base for a better future, but when the first step taken is wrong, all struggles go in an undesirable direction.

Limitations of the Study:

The research will only cover District Jaffarabad due to limited time and resources. Due to sensitive nature of the issue, people are reluctant to discuss this issue in detail. The number of respondents is limited due to long distances. Although there are a number of social and economic implications of child marriages, this article focuses only on the health implications of early marriages due to space limitations of the article.

Research Methodology:

The study was qualitative in nature as it needs a deeper insight into the situation/problem. For that purpose, the researcher got insights by direct interactions with the affected individuals and other groups of people who are indirectly affected and other experts in the area of study. Since this research is qualitative in nature, an explanatory approach was used for the collection of primary data. This study was conducted in district Jaffarabad. The focused population under the study was the communities residing in Jaffarabad including both male and female.

Sampling: as per the nature of the study and focused target group for the collection of the primary data, overall 40 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and six focus group discussions were conducted with male & female respondents, intellectuals, policymakers and educationist for the in-depth primary data collection.

Sampling Technique: Stratified sampling techniques has been adopted for the study. The study was divided into strata/sub-groups to get clearer thoughts from different angles. The sub-groups were comprised of early married girls and their children, the community heads, focus groups etc. The collected data was analyzed thematically by using the qualitative analysis techniques. Both primary and secondary data was collected for this research. Secondary data constituted collection and analysis of academic literature, earlier studies on the subject, review of different legal documents both at Pakistan level as well as some international laws on child protection and human rights. Primary data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups from the affected girls, their families, community members, social activists, women rights groups and NGOs and experts from the field.

Results and Discussions:

Responses from victims/their families/elders: The discussions with the young girls married in young age and their families revealed a number of negative and worrying repercussions in terms of their physical and mental

health. The physical development of young girls is not complete at this age and their bodies are not fully developed to bear to conceive and give birth to children. Many of the victims and their family members told their painful experiences. One of the girls told that she got many complications and her child died in infancy. Another told that she could not give birth naturally and had to go for cesarean. Each of the victims told a number of complications both for their newborns and for their own health during and after the pregnancy. For their own health, two of the girls told their issues in these words:

“My menstrual cycle was disturbed after my marriage. Getting married in young age has a lot of effects on gynecological health. I was unable to breast feed and did not have enough milk to feed my infant.”

In addition to physical complications, young girls face challenging circumstances after giving birth since they are not mature enough and lack proper awareness and knowledge about upbringing their children. One of the girls told her painful story, how her child died because she did not know about the signs of her child’s illness and consequently her child died in infancy due to her lack of knowledge and maturity. Another stated: “Conceiving when you are a child leads to child with abnormalities and they have very improper upbringing.”

One of the women who was married in young age told: “I did not know about how to take care of children when they are sick. My child had diarrhea but I did not know at that time that she needs to drink boiled water and to give her fluids. Later, after few years, someone told me about it. My child suffered a lot due to my ignorance”.

Similarly, a number of diseases can be preventive by taking simple preventive health measures (e.g. boiling water, cleaning hands with soap etc.). However, these young girls did not know about this kind of information due to which their children suffer a lot.

Response from doctors: The discussions with doctors confirmed most of the issues revealed by the victims. They told that physically it’s harmful for a child to get married because their bodies are not fully developed to bear it. They face a lot of complications especially during the delivery of their children. Once the children are born, they are not mentally grown up to take care of their children. There have been a number of Pelophalia cases reported in these young girls. The hormonal changes in their bodies due to the pregnancy further complicate their health issues. Most of girls interviewed were anemic and doctors confirmed that this can hamper

normal delivery of their children. Having fits in their body is another common issue. They also have a lot of blood and fatigue during their menstrual cycle and can become extremely weak after delivery of their first child.

In addition to physical health issues for these young girls and their children, the early marriage leaves a number of serious psychological issues, which are caused by physical issues as well as adjusting and dealing with a new life in a completely new environment and new people where they are expected to fulfill responsibilities of a wife, mother, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law and serve all the household responsibilities. Suddenly from a being a young girl, they are turned into a grown-up person with all these responsibilities. The discussions with doctors revealed that they can go in depression and schizophrenia due to these challenging roles in their new household. Their own mental condition also affects the wellbeing of their children.

Conclusions & Recommendations:

This article sought to answer the questions about health implications of child marriages on girls and their offspring with a case study in district Jaffarabad, Balochistan by adopting qualitative methods through conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with relevant stakeholders including the victims of child marriages. The research findings show that early marriages are a common practice in many areas of Pakistan including district Jaffarabad. The practice has a number of causal factors including misinterpretation of social and cultural practices, lack of awareness of parents and community members, lack of information about laws and challenges in implementation of existing laws that can prevent early marriages. My research findings indicate that early marriages have serious consequences not only for the child brides but also for their children, their upbringings and other social issues within their families and households. These marriages cause serious health problems for child brides, as mentioned in detailed in discussions section above. In their early age, they are likely to face more domestic violence, serious health issues including deaths during pregnancy and child birth. This practice needs to be stopped through a number of legal measures as well as sustained efforts at societal and policy levels where awareness creation among parents is needed to stop this inhuman practice. The awareness creation efforts need to be supported along with the strict implementation of laws through institutional building and capacity enhancement of relevant organisations that are responsible for ensuring implementation of laws to stop child marriages. Based on my research findings and the literature review on the

issues regarding child marriages, it would require a combined effort from different stakeholders to address causes and consequences of child marriages in Pakistan. It is the pre-requisite to ensure relevant health information, education and life skills education to girls, in addition to other steps, for eradicating child marriages in Pakistan. Some recommendations include:

- Advocacy for legal age of marriage from 16 to 18 years both for girls and boys
- To campaign for implementation of existing laws and policies in collaboration with other actors and stakeholders once they are approved by the parliament
- To initiate large scale programs to empower girls that are currently at risk due to child marriages, based on the existing research and identified geographical areas
- Enhance access of girls to education in general and targeted to specific geographical and ethnic groups where child marriage cases are reported.

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