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Name

Sabina

Essay

Forced Marriages

Causes and Consequences

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The Essay

"Marriage should be the choice made by two hearts not a decision imposed by many hands." But across the continents, thousands are forced into marriages they never consented to. What is celebrated as the sacred bond often becomes a lifetime of servitude and trauma. Forced marriage, unlike consensual arranged marriage occurs when one or both individuals are forced to

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many against their will, under physical, emotional or social pressure. According to UNICEF 2024 one 640 million women and 150 million men were married as children forcibly. In Pakistan Human Rights Commission and Aural Foundation document hundreds of such cases annually, particularly in Sindh, Punjab and tribal belts.

While defenders label it as a family matter or tradition the essay examines the root causes from patriarchy and poverty to religious misinterpretations — and explores the devastating effects on individuals, society and national development, concluding with actionable reforms to eradicate the centuries old justice.

Forced marriage is defined by UN as "a marriage where one or both parties have not given their free and full consent." It differs

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From arranged marriage, where families facilitate but individuals consent. Islam and international law both emphasize choice.
"Do not prevent them from remarrying their husbands if they agree between themselves in a lawful manner."

Legally, Pakistan's Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 sets the minimum marriage age at 18 for boys and 16 for girls but regional enforcement remains uneven. Globally, despite the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, millions still face coercion through social norms, family pressure, or economic need.

At the root lies patriarchy, a social order that privileges male authority over female autonomy. In many parts of South Asia and Africa, women's identity is tied to family honour, purity and obedience. Marriages are arranged to consolidate property, power, or alliances.

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father than affection.

In Pakistan, customs like Vani or Bwaa - where girls are married off to settle disputes - remain prevalent despite legal bans under the section 380-A of the Pakistan Penal Code. Similar practices exist in Afghanistan, where daughters are exchanged to restore tribal peace. These traditions reflect not religion but the deep-rooted gender control: women as family assets, not individuals.

Poverty and financial insecurity drive many families to marry off their daughters early. Marriage is seen as a means to reduce household burdens or gain financial advantage. After the 2010 floods in Pakistan, humani-
tarian organisations observed a sharp increase in child marriages in Sindh and Southern Punjab as families sought economic relief.

Across sub-Saharan Africa

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The bride price system commodifies girl as source of income. In countries like Somalia and South Sudan, families exchange daughters for livestock or cash. Poverty transforms marriage into transaction, making coercion as "necessity".

In many societies "honour" is a fragile social currency maintained through female compliance. When a girl is seen as violating family expectations by choosing her own partner, seeking education or rejecting marriage - forced marriage is used to restore the honour.

In Pakistan, honour-based marriages and killings remain intertwined. The murder of Qandeel Baloch (2016), though not a marriage case, revealed how patriarchal notion of honour police women's choice. Similarly, tribal jirgas and panchayats often decree marriages to settle disputes (sulah-e-Rasmi) ignoring human rights and constitutional

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safeguards.

War zones amplify women's vulnerability. Families, fearing sexual violence or insecurity, force their daughters into early marriages as protection. During the Syrian civil war, forced marriage among refugee girls in Jordan and Lebanon rose from 12% to 32% between 2011 and 2021 (UNHRC).

In Afghanistan after Taliban's 2021 takeover, many parents married off their girls fearing school closure and economic collapse. Similarly in Yemen famine and conflict have pushed child marriage rates 60% in some provinces.

Even when laws exist, weak implementation sustains the problem. In Pakistan, while girls' birth sets 18 as legal age to get married, Punjab and KP retains 16 - enabling loopholes. Police often treat forced marriages as "Family matters". In Nigeria, dual legal systems (customary and sharia) create

ambiguity about age and consent, allowing parents to justify coercion. The absence of enforcement mechanisms emboldens perpetrators and silences victims.

Education is the strongest defense against coercion. UNESCO (2023) reports that girls with secondary education are less likely to be forced into marriage. Yet in rural Pakistan, female literacy remains below 50%.

In areas like Tharparkar and Balochistan, early marriages correlate directly with dropout rates. Literacy strips the girls of awareness about rights, health and economic independence trapping them in life long dependence.

No religion sanctions forced marriage. Islam specifically demands free consent.

“A previously married woman shall not be married until her command is sought, and a virgin until her consent is sought.”

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Yet cultural practices often cloak coercion in religious legitimacy. Misinterpretation by local clerics or elders distorts faith into social control. Similar misuse occurs in Christian and Hindu communities, where "duty" to family overrides personal choice.

The first victim of coercion is mind. Victims of forced marriage experience chronic depression, anxiety and post traumatic stress. A UK Home Office (2019) study found that 80% of victims required psychological counselling. In Pakistan, NGOs like Rozan and Aural Foundation report growing cases of self-harm among young brides forced into marriages.

Early and forced marriages often result in premature pregnancies and mental health crises. According to WHO (2023) girls aged 15-19 are five times more likely to die

during childbirth than women in their 20s. In rural Sindh and Southern Punjab, child brides face malnutrition, domestic violence, and obstetric complications like fistula. The lack of agency also means no control over contraception or spacing of children, worsening maternal and infant mortality.

Forced marriage interrupts education, cutting off girls from future opportunities.

Save the Children (2020) found that additional year of schooling reduces the likelihood of early marriage by 6%. In Pakistan, female participation in the workforce remains below 22% largely due to early withdrawal from education. Economically dependent and socially confined, women in forced marriages become trapped in the cycles of poverty and disempowerment.

The consequences of forced marriage ripple across gener-

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alison. Children born into unions often witness domestic violence and intersexual harassment. A study by UNFPA (2021) found that daughters of child brides are more likely to be married early themselves.

When state institutions fail to protect victims, people turn to informal systems like jirgas eroding trust in rule of law. In Pakistan, several panchayat mandated marriages sparked national outrage after being upheld by local authorities. When law enforcement legitimizes coercion, it signals that justice is selective - weakening national integrity and governance.

Forced marriages violate fundamental human rights: freedom, dignity, education and health - guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 16) countries. Failing to curb it risks diplomatic criticism.

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and international sanctions.
Under Sustainable Development
of goal (SDG) 5, nations are
obliged to eliminate all harm-
ful practices.

ISIS and Boko Haram
institutionalized sexual slavery
and forced union as strategies
of terror. In conflict regions, such
practices deepen ethnic and
sectarian tension, dispute
education, and destabilize
community.

Forced marriages exist despite
legal and moral opposition. In
Pakistan they are hide behind
the label of "arranged marriages".
This issue is rooted in patriarchy
and misuse of tradition rather
than religion. Laws exist but
weak enforcement and social
silence sustains problem.

Forced marriages violate
human dignity and Islamic
principles of free will. They
breed misery, injustice and
gender inequality. The solution
lies in education, strict
law enforcement, and community

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awareness. As the Queen reminds
There is no compulsion in
religion - the same truth
applies to marriage. Only a
consent-based society can
ensure harmony and justice