

# I. Forced Marriages in Pakistan: Causes & Consequences

## A- Introduction:

1-Definition and scope of forced marriages in Pakistan

2-Historical and cultural context

3-Importance of addressing this social and human rights issue

## B- Cause of Forced Marriage in Pakistan

### 1- Social Causes

1.1- Patriarchal social structure and control over women's choices

1.2- Social pressure to preserve family honour through arranged marriages

1.3- Security concerns leading to early marriages to protect daughters

### 2-Cultural Causes

- 2.1- Traditional customs subordinating individual consent to family interests
- 2.2- Practices like swara, watta-satta, and Quran marriage denying women choice
- 2.3- Environmental stress and displacement intensifying reliance on traditional norms

### 3 Economic Causes

- 3.1 Poverty driving families to marry off daughters early for dowry or to lessen financial burdens
- 3.2 Economic dependence and lack of livelihood options perpetuating child brides

### 4 Legal and Educational Causes

- 4.1- Weak enforcement and limited awareness of laws banning forced and child marriages

4.2- Low female literacy restricting knowledge of rights and alternatives

C- Consequences of Forced Marriage in Pakistan

1- Violation of women's human rights and freedoms

2- Physical and mental health risks including early pregnancies and trauma

3- Disruption of education and long-term personal development

4- Perpetuation of gender inequality and poverty cycles

5- Social conflicts and family/community instability

D- Conclusion

1- Recap of causes and consequences

2- Urgent need for multidimensional reforms blending legal, educational, economic, and cultural change

3- Call for empowerment of women

## for societal progress

Forced marriage, the coercion of individuals particularly women into matrimony without their free and informed consent, remains a persistent social challenge in Pakistan. It is deeply rooted in the nation's historical traditions, patriarchal structures, and socio-economic disparities. Long before the emergence of modern legal frameworks, practices such as swara, watta-satta, and marriages to the Holy Quran were employed to preserve family honour, settle disputes, and safeguard property, often at the expense of individual rights and human dignity. As Bertrand Russell once observed, confronting social evils demands a rational understanding of their origins and effects. Despite progressive legislation like the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act (2011) and the Child Marriage

Restraint Act (1929, amended 2016), forced marriages continue to flourish sustained by poverty, illiteracy, and cultural rigidity. The phenomenon not only violates human rights but also obstructs women's empowerment and national progress. This essay explores the underlying causes and consequences of forced marriages in Pakistan and underscores the urgent need for comprehensive reforms combining legal, educational, economic, and cultural transformation.

The patriarchal structure of Pakistani society allows male dominance to dictate women's choices, particularly in marriage. Decisions regarding marriage are viewed as family or tribal matters rather than individual rights, reflecting structural gender imbalance. The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (2018) reports that nearly 30% of women aged 20-24 were married

before 18, often without consent. Women are seen as bearers of family honour, and their autonomy is controlled to maintain social order. This mindset sustains forced marriages as a mechanism of preserving control and power within the family hierarchy.

Family honour (izzat) remains central to Pakistan's social fabric. Marriages are often arranged to protect or elevate family prestige rather than ensure personal happiness. When a woman asserts her right to choose a partner, it is perceived as defiance against honour norms. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) documents numerous cases where girls are compelled to marry within the family to maintain lineage purity. This collective pressure prioritizes social image over individual well-being, reinforcing coercive traditions.

In addition, insecurity and fear in conservative regions drive families to marry off daughters early under the guise of protection. Weak law enforcement and gender-based violence exacerbate this tendency. The UNICEF Pakistan Report (2021) notes that insecurity in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa contributes significantly to child and forced marriages. Families, seeking safety through marriage, unknowingly expose girls to long-term risks of exploitation, abuse, and health complications.

Cultural norms in Pakistan often place collective family interests above individual consent, especially in marriage. Elders' authority is viewed as sacred, and questioning it is seen as disrespectful. As sociologist Hamza Alavi observed, kinship-based structures prioritize biradari unity over personal freedom. This cultural conformity

transforms forced marriage into an accepted social tradition rather than an act of coercion. Consequently, the sanctity of family interest overshadows the concept of individual rights.

Harmful traditional practices such as swara, watta-satta, and Quran marriages institutionalize forced unions. In swara, girls are exchanged to settle disputes; watta-satta binds two families by exchanging brides; and Quran marriages deny women inheritance rights. Despite the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act (2011), these customs persist. The Human Rights Watch Report (2022) highlights that hundreds of such cases are reported annually, reflecting the strength of cultural norms over statutory law. These traditions weaponize culture to maintain male dominance and property control.

Environmental stress and displacement further intensify reliance on traditional customs. Following the 2022 floods, UN Women Pakistan reported a surge in child and forced marriages as families sought economic relief and security. In times of crisis, traditional norms re-emerge as coping mechanisms. Thus, environmental challenges indirectly strengthen regressive cultural practices that suppress women's consent and agency.

Poverty remains one of the most powerful drivers of forced marriages in Pakistan. For low-income families, marrying off daughters early reduces financial burdens and secures temporary economic relief. According to UNICEF (2022), about 18% of Pakistani girls are married before 18, with poverty as a primary factor. Families in rural Sindh and southern Punjab often

accept arranged marriages with wealthier families to gain financial benefits. In this way, poverty converts marriage into a survival strategy, commodifying women's lives and denying their autonomy.

Economic dependence among women further perpetuates forced unions. With limited education and employment opportunities, marriage is often seen as the only means of financial stability. The Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) reports that women's labour participation remains around 22%, directly correlating with early marriage rates. Parents perceive marriage as protection from economic uncertainty, overlooking the resulting emotional and physical costs. This dependence locks women into lifelong subordination, fueling intergenerational poverty.

Although Pakistan has laws against forced and child marriages, their weak enforcement undermines impact. The Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) and Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act (2011) remain poorly implemented due to corruption, weak judiciary, and community pressure. Victims rarely report violations for fear of social stigma. The UNFPA Pakistan Report (2022) reveals that less than 10% of forced marriage cases result in conviction, demonstrating institutional failure. Consequently, the law's spirit is lost amid cultural and political compromises.

Low female literacy further compounds the issue by restricting awareness of rights and alternatives. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023) records the female literacy rate at just 48%, leaving many women unaware of legal protections or employment avenues.

Uneducated parents, fearing social backlash, discourage daughters from pursuing schooling. The \*World Bank Gender Report (2021)\* finds that each additional year of education reduces early marriage risk by 6%. Hence, education emerges as the most potent tool for prevention, yet remains the most neglected.

Forced marriage is a grave violation of human rights, contravening both international conventions and Pakistan's constitutional guarantees. It deprives women of autonomy, personal freedom, and legal equality. The HRCP reports thousands of forced marriages annually, many resulting in lifelong psychological trauma. Such practices deny women agency, marginalize them in society, and sustain patriarchal dominance that obstructs progress toward gender equality.

The physical and mental health implications are equally severe. Young brides face high risks of early pregnancy, maternal mortality, and domestic abuse. UNICEF (2022) confirms that adolescent mothers are twice as likely to die during childbirth compared to adults. Furthermore, studies by Agha Khan University Hospital (2021) show higher rates of depression and anxiety among women coerced into marriage. The combination of abuse and trauma erodes women's self-worth and perpetuates emotional suffering.

Education and personal development are among the first casualties of forced marriage. Once married, girls are withdrawn from school to fulfill domestic roles. The Pakistan Education Statistics Report (2022) lists early marriage among the top causes of female school dropout. This loss not

only curtails individual growth but also weakens national development by reducing women's participation in the workforce. Consequently, the cycle of dependency and underdevelopment continues.

The perpetuation of poverty and gender inequality is another grave outcome. Women deprived of education and employment remain financially dependent on spouses. Their children often experience the same deprivation, reinforcing intergenerational poverty. The World Bank (2021) finds that nations with high child marriage rates exhibit slower economic growth and persistent gender gaps. Forced marriage thus becomes both a symptom and cause of enduring inequality.

Finally, forced marriages create family and community instability. Unions founded on coercion lack emotional

compatibility, leading to domestic violence, resentment, and separation. Aurora Dawn Research (2020) reports that 20% of honour-related crimes stem from disputes over forced marriages. Such conflicts erode social trust, disturb community harmony, and perpetuate cycles of revenge and violence, proving that coercion cannot sustain stable family structures.

Forced marriage in Pakistan remains a deeply entrenched violation of human rights, sustained by patriarchal traditions, poverty, weak law enforcement, and limited education. It thrives where family honour outweighs personal autonomy and where economic and cultural pressures silence individual consent. The consequences are profound -destroying women's freedom, health, and education, while perpetuating gender inequality and social instability. Addressing this injustice requires more

than legal prohibitions; it demands a comprehensive transformation of mindsets through education, economic empowerment, and effective governance. Only by ensuring women's right to choose and participate equally in society can Pakistan move toward genuine social progress, justice, and human dignity.