

Essay Forced marriages in Pakistan: Causes and consequences.

Outline

1. Introduction

Thesis Statement: Forced marriages in Pakistan stem from deeply entrenched cultural traditions, patriarchal control, economic vulnerability and weak legal enforcement, leading to grave social, psychological and human right consequences that hinders women empowerment and national progress.

2. Causes of forced marriages

2.1 Cultural and Traditional Determinants

2.1.1 Patriarchal family control

Case in point: HRCP (2023) reported multiple cases in Southern Punjab where fathers married off daughters to preserve honour.

2.1.2 Customary Practices: Vani, Sawara

Case in point: Sawara practice in KPK still exists despite the 2011 anti women practices act.

2.1.3 Honour and Social Reputation

Case in point: Sindh's jirga ordered

marriages continue under the guise of preserving tribal respect.

2.2 Socio-economic pressure.

2.2.1 poverty and financial Relief

Case in point: UNICEF (2022): Poverty stricken families in Tharparkar marry girls to reduce household expenses.

2.2.2 Dowry and Bride price system

Case in point: In Balochistan, Bride price remains a transactional norm.

2.2.3 Illiteracy and lack of awareness

Case in point: Only 48% female in Pakistan contributes to uniformed acceptance of customs.

2.3. Religious misinterpretation

2.3.1 Misuse of religion by local clerics

Case in point: Rural religious elders often falsely claim parental consent suffice.

2.3.2 Lack of religious literacy

Quranic reference: Do not prevent them from marrying their husbands when they agree among themselves (Al-Baqara)

2.3.3 Ignorance of Prophet teaching

Hadith reference: A previously married woman has more right to her person than her guardian.

2.4 Institutional and legal weaknesses

2.4.1 Weak enforcement of anti-women laws.

Casepoint: Existing laws like anti-women practices act 2011 and child marriages restraint act 2019 poorly implemented

2.4.2 Patriarchal law enforcement

Casepoint: Human rights watch (2021) noted that victims face hostility from local officers.

2.4.3 Lack of Safe Shelters

Casepoint: Punjab women crisis centers underfunded and underutilized.

2.5 Social and psychological conditioning

2.5.1 Family pressure and emotional blackmail

Casepoint: South Punjab case (2023) where a girl was forced into marriage to preserve family unity

2.5.2 Internalized gender roles

Casepoint: Women taught obedience from childhood, accepting marriages as destiny.

2.5.3 Fear of Social stigma

Casepoint: Girls rejecting arranged marriages often face isolation and violence.

3. Consequences of forced marriages.

3.1 Human rights violations

3.1.1 Denial of free consent and liberty

case in point: CEDAW (2022) criticized Pakistan for lack of women's consent enforcement.

3.1.2 Gender-based discrimination

case in point: Reinforces patriarchal dominance and subjugation.

3.1.3 Cycle of female subordination

case in point: Normalizes control over women's autonomy for future generations.

3.2. Psychological and emotional impact

3.2.1 Depression and Anxiety

case in point: Aurat foundation (2023)

linked forced marriages to rising self-harm among young women.

3.2.2 loss of identity and selfworth

case in point: women lose agency, viewing themselves as voiceless dependents.

3.2.3 Domestic abuse and violence.

case in point: UN Women (2024) found a direct link between forced marriages and spousal violence in South Asia.

3.3 Socio-economic consequences

3.3.1 Intergenerational poverty

Caseinpoint: Early marriages leads to school dropout and limited income potential

3.3.2 Weak family structure

Caseinpoint: Demographic Survey (2023) shows rising marital breakdown

3.3.3 Burden on Social welfare system

Caseinpoint: Increased dependency on governmental shelters and welfare institutions.

3.4 Legal Governance challenges

3.4.1 Justice system backlog

Caseinpoint: Courts face lengthy delays in resolving forced marriage cases.

3.4.2 Lack of reporting mechanism

Caseinpoint: Victims' silence perpetuates underreporting

3.4.3 International reputation damage

Caseinpoint: EU's 2024 human rights report listed Pakistan among nations with systematic forced marriage issues.

4. Way forward

4.1 Strengthening law enforcement

4.2 Education and awareness

- 4.3 Empowering women economically
- 4.4 Religious re-education
- 4.5 Role of media and civil society

5. Conclusion.

The Essay.

Marriage, in its true essence, is a sacred social contract based on mutual consent, affection and respect. However, when this consent is withdrawn or denied, marriage turns into a coercion, stripping it of its moral and religious legitimacy. Forced marriages defined as unions where one or both parties are married without their free and full consent, remain a pressing social challenge across many developing nations including Pakistan. Despite constitutional guarantees, Islamic injunctions and institutional human rights obligations that protect individual autonomy, the practice persists as a product of deep-rooted patriarchy, illiteracy, poverty, and weak institutional enforcement. The consequences are equally grave. Thus, forced marriages in Pakistan stem from entrenched cultural traditions, patriarchal control and institutional apathy, producing long-term socio-economic and psychological consequences that impede

women's empowerment and national development.

At the core of a patriarchal family structure that perceives women as subordinates with little or no agency over their personal choices. Decisions regarding marriage are made by male guardians who treat daughters as an extension of family honour or property. The cultural expectation of female obedience is so internalised that defiance is seen as rebellion. According to Human rights commission of Pakistan (HRCP) 2023 documented multiple cases from southern Punjab where young girls are compelled to marry arranged by fathers to preserve honour. Such acts are justified as safeguarding the family's reputation, but in reality, they strip off women constitutional rights.

- Moreover, customary practices like Vani, Sawara, and Watta satta are major contributors to forced marriages in rural Pakistan. In these traditions, girls are given in marriages as a part of tribal dispute settlement or in exchange of another bride within same

families. The Sawara Practices in KPK continues to this day, despite the prevention of Anti-women practices Act 2011. Young girls are often exchanged to end feuds between tribes, a cruel trade off that sacrifice individual happiness for collective peace.

Furthermore, the concept of izzat (honour) plays a decisive role in coercive marriages. Families, especially in conservative societies, believe that female Chastity and family's reputation are intertwined. Thus, to prevent dishonour arising from love affairs or rumors, parents rush to marry off their daughters. Sindhi's tribal jirgas have repeatedly ordered forced marriages to restore honour between conflicting clans. Despite judicial bans, these extralegal forums continue to dictate marital decisions under the guise of cultural authority.

The second cause of forced marriage is socio-economic pressures. Poverty acts as the structural driver of forced marriages. Families struggling with economic hardships often view marriage as a means to transfer the financial burden of daughters.

Girls are seen as 'economic dependents' whose early marriage reduces the household costs. UNICEF (2002) reported that in Tharparkar, India, many girls are married before 16 due to economic desperation and denying them education and health rights. It is not only violates their autonomy but also perpetuates a cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Moreover, Dowry and bride price transform marriage into transaction, turning women into instruments of economic exchange. In several tribal regions, marriages are arranged for financial gain rather than compatibility or consent that produces the unhappy brides and arose conflicts in marriages. In Balochistan, bride price remains prevalent, where girls' marriage is seen as commercial deal negotiated between male elders ignoring girls as whole individuals.

Finally, education plays a crucial role in empowering

individuals to make informed life choices. However, in Pakistan, low literacy rate, standing at only 48% (PSLM/2023), creates an environment where women neither know their legal rights nor possess the agency to assert them. Ignorance of the agency inherited customs as parents perpetuate their ethical or religious practices without realizing the implications. Educated women in contrast, are more likely to resist coercion and demand consent based marriages.

Third cause of forced marriages is religious misinterpretations. A distortion of religious teachings by unqualified clerics who equate cultural customs with Islamic law. Some even justify parental authority or overriding individual will. In rural Sindh religious figures have officiated marriages without the bride consent, falsely claiming paternal approval as sufficient. This contradicts Islamic principles of *Ijab-o-Qabool* (offer and acceptance) which required mutual consent.

Similarly, the absence of authentic

Islamic education contributes to misperceptions about women's marital rights. In Islam, marriage is a contract (nikkah) that demands the explicit consent of both parties. 'Do not prevent them from marrying their husbands when they agree among themselves in a lawful manner (Al-Quran)' Unfortunately, lack of religious literacy allows customs to override divine commandments.

Finally, The prophet Muhammad (PBUH) rejected marriages concluded without women's consent. When prophet (PBUH) was going to marry off Lady Fatimah he asked for her consent as it is obligatory to ask for consent from daughters to give respect and she is a sole decision-maker of her life. 'A previously married woman has more right to her person than her guardian and a virgin's consent must be sought' (Al-muslim). This shows that forced marriages not only violate human rights but also contravene the fundamental teachings of Islam.

The fourth cause of institutional and legal weaknesses Pakistan has enacted several laws such as the child marriages laws (2019) and the prevention of women practices act (2011). However implementation remains abysmally weak. Local police and administrative authority often treat as 'family matters' avoiding intervention. HRW (2024) observed that many cases of Sawara and early marriages in Sindh and KPK were settled informally, with no legal accountability for offenders.

Furthermore, Even when women attempt to escape forced marriages, they face social ostracism and lack of rehabilitation support. State shelters are underfunded and stigmatized. Punjab's women crisis centres, according to social welfare department (2023), operate with limited capacity, discouraging victims from seeking protection and even in shelters they are called off by the staff as the outcasts of society and as they don't have any worth living as a whole.

Finally, law enforcement agencies often reflect the patriarchal mindset of society. Victims who approach the police are frequently shamed, discouraged or returned to their abusers. In 2023, a girl in interior Sindh seeking refuge from a forced marriage was turned away from local police, who advised reconciliation with her family for 'honour's sake'. This institutional complicity perpetuates the cycle of abuse.

The fast cause of forced marriages is social and psychological conditioning. In many cases, coercion takes place in an emotional form. Families guilt trip daughters into submission by framing compliance as a duty and refusal as a betrayal. A 2023 incident in South Punjab revealed that a young woman was forced into marriage with her cousin under the threat of family disownment. Emotional manipulation, though subtle, can be as coercive as physical force.

Similarly, Generations of Socialization condition internalize submissive Patriarchal Childhood girls are taught to their destiny lies in obedience to their fathers first, then their husband. Schools, religious, and media perpetuates stereotypes, portraying gender as compliant and sacrificial. In rural Sindh, many girls told (2023) researchers that 'It is better to obey then bring shame' reflecting how deep internalized obedience can suppress the will for self-determination.

Lastly, Fear of Social stigma and loss of family honour drives parents and daughters into accepting forced marriages. Refusing family approved matches invites gossip, allegation of immorality or threats to family's reputation. Society equates female independence with dishonor while male control is celebrated as guardianship. Several reports by HREP (2022-2023) note that girls in KPK and Balochistan who opposed arranged marriages are either confined or attacked by relatives, accused of

bringing shame to the family

So far this essay has discussed the causes of forced marriage in Pakistan. Now the next session would present the consequences of forced marriages.

One of the most urgent area is the grave violation of human rights and constitutional guarantees of liberty and dignity. They contravene Pakistan's obligation under international treaties such as CEDAW and the universal declaration of human rights (Article 16), both of which emphasises consent as pre-requisite for lawful marriage.

Similarly, forced marriages reinforces patriarchal dominances, sustaining male control over women's bodies and choices. Such discrimination not only marginalizes women but also impedes Pakistan development goals under SDG 5 (gender equality). In these unions women lose decision making power, experience restricted

mobility and face economic dependence, all hallmarks of systematic gender oppression. Islam's principle of equality 'And to those against them rights similar to what is equitable' according to what is just is thus ignored. (Al-Quran)

finally, forced marriages perpetuate the cycle of subordination across generations. Daughters of coerced mothers grow up observing silence and submission as normal internalizing the same pattern. This transmission of equality sustains patriarchal power through psychological inheritance. Societies where women lack autonomy face slower socio-economic progress as half the population remains underutilized and dependent. The result is generational stagnation, not only moral but also developmental.

The second consequence of forced marriage is psychological and emotional impact. Victims of forced marriages face severe mental health disorders including anxiety, ~~and~~ depression and suicidal ideation. Continuous emotional

workion erodes self-esteem and
fosters helplessness. The Aurat
Foundation (2023) linked rising
self-harm among young women
in south Punjab and south to
forced or early marriages
where emotional isolation was
cited as the primary trigger

Similarly, women in forced
marriages often lose their sense
of self-worth, as personal
desires are suppressed under
collective expectations. They
see themselves not as individual
but extension of family honour.
This identity loss results in
emotional numbness and detachment
when women perceive survival
not happiness as their life goals.
In extreme cases, victims rationalise
abuse as fate, a sign of deep
psychological conditioning.

Finally, lack of consent breeds
incompatibility, resentment and
often domestic violence. Without
emotional understanding or
equality relationships turn
toxic. Many women face
physical or sexual abuse
but hesitate to report it due

to fear of social backlash.
UN Women (2024) reported
link b/w forced marriage and
spousal violence in South Asia,
noting that 60% of victims of forced
unions experience repeated domestic
abuse.

Third consequence of forced
marriage are intergenerational
poverty; Girls married early
or against their will often
abandon education and remain
financially dependent. This
dependency limits household income
and perpetuates economic vulnerability.
UNICEF (2023) findings show that
31% of Pakistani girls married
before 18 drop out of school
permanently, reinforcing cycle of
intergenerational poverty.

Similarly, unions built on coercion
lack mutual respect and
affection, often leading to
marital conflict, emotional
neglect and divorce. Children
raised in such environments
experience insecurity and
behavioural problems. The Pakistan
Demographic Survey (2023) recorded

Increase in divorce rates among couples married before 20, attributing it to lack of consent and psychological incompatibility.

Finally, last reason is burden on social welfare system increase reliance on state welfare, including shelter homes, and legal aid programs. This strain over limited resources from other development sectors. Overcrowded domestic violence centers in Punjab exemplify the cumulative burden created by systematic coercion in family structure.

The fourth consequence of forced marriages is legal and governance challenges despite several reforms, Pakistan justice system struggles to address forced marriages effectively. Courts face delays and procedural gaps, causing victims to abandon cases. Bureaucratic inefficiency and lack of specialized family courts worsen victims trauma.

furthermore, cultural taboos and fear of social ostracization prevent women from reporting coercion in marriage. Many victims remain silent due to shame, family pressure or fear of retaliation. Police officers often dismiss such cases as private family matters as deeprooted institutional apathy and gender insensitivity, absence of female officers and victim protection frameworks further discourages complaints and results in countless forced marriage cases remained buried in silence.

finally Pakistan's Persistent inability to curb forced marriages continue to draw global condemnation, tarnishing its human rights reputation international organizations link on this failure to weak legal enforcement and cultural complicity. The EU human rights report (2024) named Pakistan among countries with systematic forced marriage issues urging ~~for~~ stronger enforcement of protective legislation. Addressing this issue is thus vital not only for women rights

but also for national
Credibility.

As causes and consequences
are discussed now in this
section we will discuss the
future implications to curb
back forced marriages in
Pakistan.

Firstly, Pakistan must rigorously
implement the prevention of
anti-women practices Act 2011
and harmonize legal marriage
age across provinces to end
legal loopholes. Socialize
police units and women protection
cells should be expanded
to ensure swift justice.

Similarly comprehensive
gender sensitive education must
be institutionalized in rural and
tribal region, should emphasize
that forced marriage contradicts
Islamic values and constitutional
rights.

Moreover economic empowerment
remains the cornerstone of
autonomy. The state should
expand microfinance initiatives

vocational training and employment opportunities for women, especially in marginalized areas, where women contribute financially, thus gaining power within families and reducing their vulnerability. Also, scholars are critical to reinterpret cultural practices through the lens of Islam. Islam holds nikah (marriage) as a contract based on mutual consent, not ~~compulsion~~ compulsion. There is no compulsion in religion (Quran). Public seminars and madrassas must emphasize that forced marriage contradicts Islamic ethics.

Lastly, the media and civil society must jointly champion awareness and advocacy. Television, dramas, documentaries and social campaigns can humanize victim experiences, breaking societal denial.

To conclude, forced marriage in Pakistan epitomizes the tension between cultural traditions and universal human rights. Deeply rooted in patriarchal

conditioning, economic vulnerability
and weak governance that
erode women's dignity, fuel
domestic violence and national
protest. Pakistan can
eradicate this canker
old injustice and move
towards a future defined by
equality, humanity and
faithfulness to both Islamic
and constitutional ideas.