

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 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 honor.

2.1.2 Customary practices: Vani, Sawara

Case in point: Sawara practice in KPK still exists despite the 2011 antiwoman 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 Tharparker 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 religiously local clerics

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

2.3.2 Lack of Religious Literacy.

Case Quranic Reference: Don't prevent them from marrying their husbands when they agree among themselves (Al-Quran)

2.3.3. Ignorance of Prophet Teachings.

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

Case in point: Existing laws like anti-women Practices act 2011 and child marriage restraint act 2019 poorly implemented.

2.4.2 Patriarchal Law Enforcement

Case in point: Humanrights watch (2024) noted that victims faces hostility from local offices.

2.4.3 Lack of Safe Shelters.

Case in point: Punjab women crisis center underfunded and underutilized.

2.5 Social and Psychological conditioning

2.5.1 Family pressure and emotional blackmail.

Case in point: South Punjab case (2023) where a girl was forced into marriage to preserve family unity.

2.5.2 Internalized gender roles

Case in point: Women taught obedience from childhood, accepting marriage as destiny.

2.5.3 Fear of social stigma

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.

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 self worth.

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.

3.3.2 Weak family structure

Case in point: Demographic Survey (2023) shows rising marital breakdown.

3.3.3 Burden on social welfare system

3.4 Legal Governance Challenges

3.4.1 Justice system backlogs.

Case in point: Courts face lengthy delays in resolving forced marriages cases.

3.4.2 Lack of reporting mechanism.

3.4.3 International reputation damage

Case in point: 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 cultural traditions, patriarchal control and institutional apathy, producing long-term socio-economic and psychological consequences that impede women's empowerment and national development.

Forced marriages at the core of a family patriarchal family structures that perceives women as subordinates with little or no agency over their personal choices. Decision regarding marriage are made by male guardians who treat daughters as extension of family property. The cultural expectation of female obedience is so internalized 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 marriages arranged by fathers to preserve honors. Such acts are justified as safeguarding the family's reputation, but in reality they strip off women constitutional rights.

Moreover, customary practices like Vani, Swara 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 some 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 (honor) 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 dishonor arising from love affairs or rumors, parents rush to marry off their daughters. Sindh's tribal jirgas have repeatedly ordered forced marriages to restore honor 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 marriages is socio-economic pressure. Poverty act as structural driver of forced marriages. Families struggling with economic hardships often view marriage as means to transfer financial burden of daughters. Girls are seen as economic dependents whose early marriages reduces the household costs. UNICEF (2022) reported

that in Tharparkar Sindh many girls are married before 16. due to economic desperation denying their educational and health rights. This 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 gains. In Balochistan, bride price remains prevalent, where girl marriage is seen as commercial deal negotiated between the male elders ignoring girls as whole individuals.

Finally, education plays a crucial role in empowerment of individuals to make informed life choices. However, in Pakistan, low female literacy rate, standing at only 48 percent (PSLM 2023), creates an environment where women neither know their legal rights nor possess the agency to assert them. Ignorance perpetuates cultural traditions as parents repeat inherited customs without realizing their ethical or religious 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

6. Cultural customs with Islamic law. Some even justify parental authority as overriding individual will. In rural Sindh, religious clerics have officiated marriages without the bride consent, falsely claiming parental approval as sufficient. This contradicts Islamic principles of Ijab-o-Qabool (offer and acceptance) as which required mutual consent.

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

Finally, The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) rejected marriages contracts without women consent. ~~without women~~ When Prophet (PBUH) was going to married off lady Fatima 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 women has more rights to her person than her guardian and a virgin's consent must be sought. (Al-muslim) This shows that forced marriages not only violates human rights but also contravene the fundamental teachings of Islam.

The fourth cause of is. institutional and legal weaknesses. Pakistan has enacted several laws such as child marriage restraint act (2019) and the prevention of Anti women Practice Act (2011). However implementation remains abysmally weak. Local police and administrative authority often treats forced marriages 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 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 outcast of society and 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~~ ^{returned} to their abusers. In 2023, a girl in Interior Sindh

⑧ seeking refuge from a forced marriage was returned away from local police, who advised reconciliation with her family for honour's sake. This institutional complicity repatuates the cycle of abuse.

The last cause of forced marriages is social and psychological conditioning. In many cases, coercion takes place as an emotional from families, guilt trap daughters into submission by framing compliance as duty and refusal as 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, through subtle can be as coercive as physical force.

Similarly, Creneations of patriarchal socialization condition to internalize submissive roles. From childhoods girls are taught that their destiny lies in obedience to their fathers first, then their husband. Schools, religious institutions and media perpetuates gender stereotypes, portraying ideal women as compliant and sacrificial. In rural Sindh, many girls told Aurat Foundation (2023) researches that it is better to obey than 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 marriages matches invite gossip, allegation of immorality or threats of family reputation. Society equates female independence with dishonour, while male control in collaborated guardianship. Several reports by HREC (2022-23) noted 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 marriages in Pakistan. Now the next session would present the consequences of forced marriages.

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

⑦ Similarly, forced marriages reinforces patriarchal dominances, sustaining male control over women bodies and choices. Such discrimination not only marginalized women but also impedes Pakistan development goals under SDGs (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 woman shall have rights similar to those against them according to what is equitable (Al-Quran) is ignored.

Finally, forced marriages perpetuates the cycle of subordination across generation. 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 marriages is psychological and emotional impact. Victims of forced marriages face severe mental health disorder including anxiety, depression and suicidal attempts. Continuous emotional coercion erodes self-esteem and fosters helplessness. The Aurat Foundation (2023) linked rising self-harm among young women in South Punjab and Sindh to forced and early marriages where emotional isolation was cited as the primary trigger.

Similarly, women in forced marriages often lose their self-worth as personal desires are suppressed under the collective expectation. They don't see themselves as individuals but extension of family honor. This identity loss results in emotional numbness and detachment.

Finally, lack of consent breeds incompatibility, resentment and often domestic violence, without emotional understanding or equality relationship. Turn toxic many women face physical or sexual abuse but hesitate to report due to fear of social backlash. UN Women (2024) reported direct link between forced marriages and spousal violence in South Asia noting that 60 percent of victims of forced unions experience repeated domestic abuse.

Third consequence of forced marriage are

⑤ 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 problem. The Pakistan demographic Survey (2023) recorded increased in divorce rates among couples married before 20, attributing it to lack of consent and psychological incompatibility.

Finally, last consequence is burden on social welfare system increase reliance on state welfare, including shelter homes and legal aid programs; This strain diverts limited resources from other development sectors. Overcrowded Dar-ul-Aman centres in Punjab exemplify the cumulating burden created by systematic coercion in family structure.

The fourth consequence of forced marriages is legal and governance challenges despite

Several reforms, Pakistan's judicial 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' traumas.

Finally, Pakistan's persistent inability to curb forced marriages continues to draw global condemnations, tarnishing its human rights reputation. International organizations line its failures to weak legal enforcement and cultural complicity. The EU human rights report (2021) ranked Pakistan among countries with systematic forced marriages issues, urging stronger enforcement of protective legislation. According, this issue is thus vital not only for women rights but also for national credibility.

As causes and consequences are discussed now in this portion, 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~~ harmonize legal marriages across provinces to end legal loopholes. Socializes police units and women protection cells should be expended to swift justice.

⑨ Similarly, comprehensive gender sensitive education must be integrated in rural and tribal region, should empoweres that forced marriages contradicts Islamic values and constitutional rights.

Moreover economic empowerment remains the cornerstone of autonomy. the state should expand microfi microfinance loans and vocational training and employment opportunities for women, especially in marginalized areas. when women contributes financially their bargaining power within families increases, reducing their vulnerability. Also engaging ulema and Religious scholars is critical to reinterpret cultural Practices through lense of Islam. Islam holds nikkah as based on mutual consent-- not on compulsion. There is no compulsion in religion. (Quran). Public Sermons and madrassa curricula must emphasize that forced marriage contradicts Islamic ethics.

Lastly the media and civil society must jointly comaign regarding the awareness in masses. Television, dramas, documentaries and social campaign can harmonize victim experiences breaking social denial.

To conclude, forced marriage in Pakistan epitomize the tension between cultural traditions and universal human rights. Deeply rooted in patriarchal conditioning, economic vulnerability, and weak governance, they erode women's dignity, fuel domestic violence and national progress. Pakistan can eradicate this centuries old injustice and move towards a future define by equality, humanity and faithfulness to both Islamic and constitutional ideas.