

# FORCED MARRIAGES IN PAKISTAN

## CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

### OUTLINE:

#### 1. Introduction

- a. **Thesis Statement:** Forced marriages in Pakistan stem from deep-rooted cultural traditions, gender inequality & socio-economic pressures, resulting in severe psychological, social, and legal consequences that hinder individual freedom and national progress.

#### 2. Causes of Forced Marriages in Pakistan:

##### a. Cultural and Traditional Practices:

- (i) Customary practices such as watta satta (exchange marriages), suara and vani (girls given as compensation to settle disputes).

- (ii) Misinterpretation of religion and tribal honor codes

##### b. Patriarchal and Gender Norms:

- (i) Dominance of male authority in family decisions.
- (ii) Limited agency and voice of women in marriage matters

##### c. Economic and Social Pressures:

- (i) Poverty leading to marriages for financial gain or relief.

- (ii) Desire to preserve family wealth and property within family circles (e.g., cousin marriages)

#### d. Illiteracy and Lack of Awareness:

- (i) Ignorance of legal rights and human rights implication
- (ii) Weak enforcement of laws protecting individual consent

### 3. Consequences of Forced Marriages:

#### a. Psychological Consequences:

- (i) Trauma, depression, and feelings of helplessness.
- (ii) long-term emotional instability and domestic violence.

#### b. Social Consequences:

- (i) Breakdown of trust within families
- (ii) Perpetuation of gender discrimination and inequality

#### c. Legal and Human Rights Consequences:

- (i) Violation of constitutional rights and international conventions
- (ii) Challenges in reporting and obtaining justice due to societal pressure

#### d. Impact on Society and Development:

- (i) Suppression of women's education and career opportunities.
- (ii) Slower social and economic progress due to gender

imbalance.

#### 4. Preventive Measures and Solutions:

##### a. Legal Reforms and Enforcement:

- (i) Strengthening implementation of laws like Child Marriage Restraint Act.
- (ii) Punitive actions against those who force marriages.

##### b. Education and Awareness Campaigns:

- (i) Promoting gender equality and women's rights through education.
- (ii) Role of media, NGOs and civil society in spreading awareness.

##### c. Empowerment of Women:

- (i) Encouraging female education, economic independence and participation in decision-making.

##### d. Community and Religious Leader's Role:

- (i) Advocating interpretations of religion that emphasize consent and dignity.

#### 5. Conclusion

### 'The Essay'

In Pakistan, thousands of individuals—especially women—are forced into marriages every year under the guise of family honor, cultural customs, or

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economic necessity. A forced marriage occurs when one or both individuals are married without their free and full consent, unlike an arranged marriage where both parties voluntarily agree to the union after family involvement. This harmful practice remains widespread in many rural and tribal regions of Pakistan, where traditional norms and patriarchal control often outweigh individual rights. It not only violates personal freedom but also reflects the deep-seated gender inequality that persists in society. Forced marriages are not merely a social or cultural issue; they represent a serious violation of human rights and gender justice, trapping victims in lifelong suffering. Force marriages in Pakistan stem from deep-rooted cultural traditions, gender inequality, and socio-economic pressures, resulting in severe psychological, social, and legal consequences that hinder individual freedom and national progress.

Cultural and traditional practices play a major role in sustaining forced marriages in Pakistan. Customs such as 'watta satta' (exchange marriages), 'swara and sevavani'

where girls are given in marriage to settle tribal disputes or family conflicts - continue to exist in many rural areas. These practices are often justified in the name of preserving family honor or maintaining social balance, yet they violate basic human rights and individual consent. In 'watta satta', two families exchange brides, binding both women to marriages that depend on the success of other, leaving them powerless. Similarly, 'swara and vani' punish innocent girls for crimes committed by male relative, treating them as property rather than human beings. Moreover, the misinterpretation of religious teachings and the misuse of tribal honor codes reinforce these customs allowing patriarchal traditions to dominate over justice, compassion, and true Islamic principles that emphasize consent and dignity in marriage.

Patriarchal and Gender norms are among the primary causes of forced marriages in Pakistan. In a male-dominated society, men often hold absolute authority in family decisions, including those related to marriage.

Fathers, brothers, or other male elders typically decide when and whom a woman should marry, leaving little or no room for her consent. This dominance is rooted in long-standing beliefs that women are dependents who must obey family elders to preserve family honor and reputation. As a result, women's opinions, emotions and personal aspirations are frequently ignored or silenced. Many girls are married off at young age, sometimes to much older men, without understanding the meaning of marriage or their rights within it. This lack of agency not only deprives women of their freedom but also reinforces the cycle of gender inequality, limiting their opportunities for education, empowerment and participation in social & economic life.

Economic and social pressures significantly contribute to the persistence of forced marriages in Pakistan. Poverty often drives families to view marriage as a means of financial gain or relief from economic burden. In many poor households, daughters are married off early to reduce family expenses.

or to secure monetary benefits such as dowry or property. For some families, marrying their daughters to wealthy or influential men is seen as way to improve their social and financial standing, even if it disregards the girl's consent. Additionally, there is a strong desire among many families to preserve wealth and property within the family, leading to forced cousin marriages. These unions are often arranged not for emotional compatibility but to prevent the divisions of assets. Such economic motives turn marriages into a traditional arrangement, reinforcing inequality and depriving individuals—especially women—of the right to choose their ~~the~~ life partners freely and with dignity.

Illiteracy and lack of awareness are major factors that sustain forced marriages in Pakistan. In many rural and underdeveloped regions, people are unaware of the basic legal and human rights that guarantee individual freedom in marriage decisions. Due to low literacy levels, many families don't understand that forcing someone into marriage violates

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both national laws and international human rights standards. Women and girls, in particular, remain unaware of their right to consent, making them vulnerable to family and societal pressure. Even when laws such as 'Child Marriage Restraint Act' exist, their reinforcement remains weak due to corruption, social influence, and fear of dishonoring the family. As a result, cases often go unreported, and victims receive little protection or justice. Without education and awareness, harmful traditions continue unchallenged, allowing forced marriages to persist and depriving individuals—especially women—of autonomy, dignity, and the opportunity for a better future.

Forced marriages in Pakistan often lead to psychological consequences that leave lasting scars on the victims. Individuals—especially women—who are compelled into unwanted unions frequently experience trauma, depression, and feelings of helplessness. The loss of autonomy and the inability to make decisions about their own lives create

emotional distress and sense of entrapment. Many victims suffer from anxiety, low self-esteem and hopelessness as they are forced to live with partners they didn't choose. Over time, these emotional wounds can turn into long-term psychological instability, affecting their mental health and overall well-being. Moreover, forced marriages often expose women to domestic violence, as relationships built without mutual consent are more prone to abuse and neglect. Victims may endure years of emotional and physical suffering in silence due to societal pressure and fear of dishonor, leading to a cycle of pain that destroys their confidence and happiness.

Forced marriages in Pakistan also bring serious social consequences that damage family relationships and weaken community harmony. When individuals, particularly women, are compelled into marriage against their will, it often leads to a breakdown of trust within families. Victims may feel betrayed by those who were

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supposed to protect and support them, creating long-lasting emotional distance between parents and children. Such betrayal erodes the foundation of family unity and mutual respect. Moreover, forced marriages perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality by reinforcing the belief that men have right to control women's choices and futures. This practice normalizes the idea that women are secondary members of society, valued only for fulfilling traditional roles. As a result, gender inequality become deeply rooted in cultural norms, preventing women from pursuing education, careers, or personal independence. The continuation of such practices hinders social progress and obstructs the development of a fair and balanced society.

Forced marriages in Pakistan result in serious legal and human rights violations that undermine both national and international standards of justice. Such marriages directly violate constitutional rights guaranteeing individual freedom, equality, and the right to choose one's life partner. They also

breach international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to which Pakistan is a signatory. Despite existing laws such as the Child Marriage Restraint Act and the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act, implementation remains weak. Victims often face immense societal pressure, fear of family retribution, and social stigma, making it difficult to report such cases or seek legal assistance. Police negligence and community silence further worsen the situation, leaving many victims trapped in unlawful unions. Consequently, justice becomes inaccessible, and forced marriages continue to violate human dignity and fundamental human rights in Pakistan.

Forced marriages in Pakistan have a damaging impact on society and national development. By suppressing women's education and career opportunities, they prevent nearly half of population from contributing fully to country's growth. Girls who are forced into

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marriage at young age are often pulled out of school and confined to domestic roles, limiting their personal development and professional potential. This loss of female participation weakens nation's human resource base and perpetuates cycles of poverty and dependency. Furthermore, gender imbalance caused by such practices slows social and economic progress, as educated and empowered women are essential for innovation, productivity, and community well-being. When women's voices are silenced and their talents wasted, society loses valuable contributions to health, education and leadership. Therefore, forced marriages not only violate individual rights but also obstruct Pakistan's journey toward gender equality, sustainable development, and a more inclusive future.

Legal reforms and their strict enforcement are essential to combat forced marriages in Pakistan. Although laws such as Child Marriage Restraint Act and Prevention of Anti-Women Practices exist, their implementation remains weak due to corruption, social

influence, and lack of awareness. Strengthening these laws through proper monitoring, accountability, and awareness campaign is crucial. Authorities must ensure that every marriage is based on free consent and legal age requirements. Punitive actions, including fines and imprisonment, should be strictly enforced against those who arrange or facilitate forced marriages. Effective legal enforcement will deter offenders and protect victims' fundamental rights.

Education and awareness campaigns play a vital role in eliminating forced marriages in Pakistan. Promoting gender equality and women's right education helps individuals understand the importance of consent, freedom, and respect in marriage. When both men and women are educated, they become more aware of legal protections and human rights, reducing the acceptance of harmful traditions. Media, NGOs, and civil society can further strengthen this effort by organizing awareness programs, community workshops, and campaigns that challenge outdated cultural norms.

By spreading knowledge and encouraging open discussion, education and awareness can empower people to reject forced marriages and support equality.

Empowering women is one of the most effective ways to prevent forced marriages in Pakistan. When women have access to education, they gain the confidence and knowledge needed to make informed life choices. Education opens doors to employment, leading to economic independence and reducing dependence on male family members.

Financial stability allows women to resist pressure and assert their right to choose a life partner freely. Moreover, encouraging women's participation in family and community decision-making promotes equality and respect within society. Empowered women can challenge oppressive traditions, influence positive change, and contribute actively to Pakistan's social & economic progress.

Community and religious leaders play a crucial role in combating forced marriages in Pakistan. As influential figures, they can

guide people towards understanding the true spirit of religion, which emphasize consent, compassion, and dignity in marriage. By promoting interpretations of Islam that highlight importance of mutual agreement and respect between spouses, religious leaders can help correct widespread and awareness programs to educate families about rights of individuals in marriage. Their active involvement can foster social change & encourage communities to reject coercive traditions.

In conclusion, forced marriages in Pakistan, born out of cultural rigidity and gender inequality, continue to destroy individual lives and restrict societal growth. Deeply rooted traditions, patriarchal dominance, and poverty remain the key causes behind the violation of human rights. These factors strip individuals especially women - of their freedom to choose and trap them in relationships that often result in emotional trauma, social isolation, and long-term developmental harm. The consequences extend beyond individuals, affecting families, communities, and the nation's overall progress. Forced marriages

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perpetuate gender discrimination, suppress women's potential, and weaken Pakistan's social and economic fabric. Eliminating this practice demands a united national effort involving government institutions, educators, media, and community leaders. Through stronger legal enforcement, educational empowerment, and social awareness, Pakistan can move toward a future where every individual's right to consent and dignity in marriage is respected and protected, ensuring a more just, equal, and progressive society.

