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Date:

Topic:

Forced Marriages in Pakistan: Causes and Consequences

Outline

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Thesis Statement: Forced marriages in Pakistan are not merely a cultural anomaly but a complex socio-legal issue rooted in patriarchal norms, economic constraints, illiteracy, and weak law enforcement, resulting in profound psychological, social, and legal consequences that impede gender equality and human rights.

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- Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013
- Punjab Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act, 2015
- Domestic violence Acts (provincial level)

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- Lack of social awareness; social acceptance of jirga verdicts; victim intimidation undermine legal effectiveness.

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THE ESSAY

Marriage, in its true sense, is meant to be sacred union founded by mutual consent, affection, and shared understanding. It symbolizes companionship, emotional stability, and social responsibility. Yet, when marriage becomes an act of coercion rather than choice; it transforms from a bond of love into an instrument of control. In Pakistan, the practice of forced marriage remains deeply entrenched in social and cultural life despite legislative reforms and rising awareness about women's rights. Every year, thousands of young women, and occasionally men, are compelled into marriages against their will under the pretext of honour, customs and economic necessity. It is not merely a cultural anomaly but a complex socio-legal issue rooted in patriarchal norms, economic constraints, illiteracy, and weak law enforcement, resulting in profound psychological, social and legal consequences that impede gender equality and human rights.

To begin with the persistence of forced marriages in Pakistan can be traced to a deeply patriarchal social order that accords men authority and views women as custodians of family honour. Within this framework, a woman's choices are seldom recognized as legitimate. The decision of whom and when to marry is traditionally reserved for male guardians who perceive marriage as a transaction to safeguard family reputation and control female sexuality. In such households, a

women's refusal is considered rebellion not autonomy. This social conditioning, reinforced through generations, normalizes coercion and masks it as protection or duty.

Illiteracy and lack of awareness perpetuates this mindset. Education empowers individuals to recognize their rights and question oppressive traditions, but in many parts of Pakistan, literacy rate of women remain low. Families with limited education often see early marriage as a means to protect daughters from perceived moral corruption or to reduce financial burden. Even among the educated classes, social conformity and fear of ostracism discourage resistance against arranged unions. When individuals are raised in environments where obedience is equated with virtue, the line between consent and coercion becomes dangerously blurred.

Similarly, lack of education leads to poverty and poverty adds another layer to this problem. In a society where economic survival is precarious, marriage becomes a tool of financial security. Families struggling with poverty sometimes marry off daughters to wealthier men or exchange them in watta satta arrangements to avoid dowry costs. In extreme cases, girls are married to settle debts or feuds, their lives reduced to instruments of economic negotiation. Thus, forced marriages are not only expressions of gender dominance but also symptoms of economic inequality and

class disparity.

Moreover, poverty forces people to follow cultural and feudal customs also reinforce these practices. In rural and tribal regions, centuries-old traditions continued ~~key~~ to wield more authority than state laws. Customs like *suxara* and *vani* are sanctioned by informal assemblies such as *jirgas* and *panchayats*, where male elders impose marriage as a form of justice or reconciliation. Despite being legally prohibited, these customs survive because they are embedded with the local power structure. The absence of effective governance in such areas allows customary law to prevail over statutory law, perpetuating a parallel system of injustice under the guise of tradition.

Furthermore, the notion of family honour, or *izzat*, is another powerful driver behind forced marriages. In a society obsessed with preserving reputation, a woman's conduct becomes a measure of familial pride, to prevent supposed dishonour whether through love marriages, inter-caste relationships, or alleged impropriety families often force daughters into unions deemed socially acceptable. Refusal to comply can result in emotional abuse, physical violence, or even honour killings. Thus, forced marriages are often disguised as moral necessity but are, in fact, tools for the control of women's bodies and choices.

In addition, Religious misinterpretation also plays a role. Although Islam upholds consent and equality in marriage, patriarchal interpretations often manipulate

religion to maintain control. Some clerics promote the idea that parental consent supersedes individual choice, ignoring the Quranic principle of mutual agreement. This misuse of religion provides moral cover to cultural coercion, giving it an aura of legitimacy that shields it from criticism.

Institutional weaknesses compound the issue. Laws prohibiting forced and child marriages exist, yet enforcement remains feeble. Police officers often treat such cases as private family matters, reluctant to intervene due to social pressure or corruption. Victims who seek legal ~~resources~~ recourse face bureaucratic hurdles, intimidation, and social stigma. The coexistence of formal courts and informal *qisas* further undermines justice, allowing perpetrators to evade accountability. As a result, even when legal remedies are available they are inaccessible to the most vulnerable.

The consequences of forced marriages are as devastating as their causes are complex. On a psychological level, victims endure profound emotional trauma. Living in a relationship devoid of consent or affection leads to chronic anxiety, depression, and loss of self-worth. The constant sense of powerlessness fosters internalized fear and resignation. Many women suffer in silence, trapped between familial loyalty and personal despair. In extreme cases, the mental anguish becomes unbearable, resulting in self-harm or suicide.

Beyond personal sufferings, forced marriages represent a violation of fundamental human rights and constitutional guarantees. They negate personal liberty, equality and human dignity values enshrined in Pakistan constitution. The denial of consent transforms marriage into an act of subjugation rather than union. Such coercion also contradicts the moral foundations of Islam, which insists that no marriage is valid without free will. Hence forced marriage is both a legal offense and a moral justice.

The educational and economic consequences are equally severe. Forced marriages often mark the end of a girl's education, cutting off her access to intellectual growth and financial independence. Without education women remain trapped in economic dependency, unable to break free from patriarchal control. This dependency reinforces poverty and limits women's participation in the workforce, stunting both individual and national development. A country cannot achieve progress when half of its population is deprived of autonomy, education and opportunity.

Moreover, marriages without emotional or voluntary foundations frequently descend into conflict. The absence of mutual respect and understanding breeds resentment, domestic violence and marital rape. In households governed by fear instead of love, abuse becomes normalized. The victims, often women, face isolation and helplessness, while children raised in such environments internalize violence as a pattern of normal family life. This intergenerational transmission

of trauma ensures that cycles of abuse persist across generations.

Socially, forced marriages erode the fabric of family life. A union based on coercion rarely produces harmony or stability. Emotional alienation, mistrust, and conflicts are common features of such households. Children raised in these conditions often suffer from low self-esteem and psychological insecurity, perpetuating emotional instability in future generations. The result is society marked by fractured family and normalize violence.

On an international scale, the continuation of forced marriages tarnishes Pakistan's image. The global community increasingly judges nations by their human rights record, particularly regarding gender equality. The persistence of such practices projects Pakistan as resistance to reform and modernization, undermining its credibility in the global forums and affecting its progress towards sustainable development goals.

Lastly, forced marriages undermine the rule of law and the credibility of the justice system. The persistence of jirgas and panchayats as alternative courts reflects the weakness of state authority. When parallel system sanction forced unions, the authority of the state is challenged, and citizens lose faith in formal institutions. This lawlessness foster a culture of impunity where violations of women's rights go unpunished.

While Pakistan has enacted several progressive laws, the prevention of Anti-Women practices Act, the Child Marriage Restraint Act, and Provincial Women protection laws and their implementation remains uneven. Legal reform alone cannot eradicate a practice so deeply woven into cultural fabric. What is required is an integrated approach that combines legislative enforcement with social awareness, education, and empowerment. The law must be accompanied by a shift in mindset that recognizes women not as dependents but as autonomous individuals capable of making their own choices.

Meaningful reforms can be initiated by education. By promoting gender-sensitive curricula and human rights education, schools can challenge stereotypes and instill respect for equality. Public awareness campaigns, particularly in rural areas, can dispel misconceptions that forced marriages are acts of protection or virtue. Religious scholars and community leaders must also play a responsible role by emphasizing that Islam condemns coercion and upholds consent as essential to marriage.

Economic empowerment is another vital pillar. Women who are financially independent are less vulnerable to coercion. Expanding access to vocational training, microfinance and employment opportunities can strengthen women's agency within their families and communities. Similarly, social support structures such as safe shelter, legal aid centers,

and psychological counseling should be made accessible at the district level. These facilities would provide refuge and rehabilitation for victims, allowing them to rebuild their lives with dignity.

Men, too, must be part of this transformation. Sustainable change requires dismantling patriarchal notions of honour and control. Engaging men through community-based initiatives can foster empathy and awareness making them allies in the struggle against coercion. By redefining honour not as control over women but as respect for their choices, society can move toward genuine moral and cultural progress.

Ultimately, addressing forced marriages requires a holistic strategy that combine law, education, economic reform and cultural dialogue. Poverty reduction programs, rural education system, and awareness drives can collectively weaken the structural foundations of coercion. The state must also ensure that perpetrators whether individuals or groups have to face accountability, sending a clear message that forced marriage is not a family affair but a crime against humanity.

Forced marriages in Pakistan a grim reminder of the distant that still separates social practice from the ideals of justice, equality and human dignity. They encapsulate the struggles of countless women whose voices are silenced under the weight of tradition and conformity. While the problem is rooted in centuries old customs,

it is sustained by modern-day indifference and institutional neglect. The path to change is difficult but not impossible. Through collective will, consistent enforcement, and cultural enlightenment, Pakistan can transform marriage from a symbol of coercion into one of companionship and equality.

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