

Forced Marriages in Pakistan: Causes & Consequences

Outline:

1- Introduction,

- Marriage; a sacred union built on consent and companionship.
- In Pakistan, cultural pressure often silences the consent.
- Around 19 million girls are married before 18 (UNICEF 2024)
- Pakistan ranks 148th out of 148 in the WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2025.
- Thesis statement: Forced marriages in Pakistan stem from patriarchal tradition, poverty, misinterpreted religion, and weak enforcement, that ~~produce~~^{cause} deep psychological, social, and developmental harm to individuals and society alike.

2- Historical and Culture Roots

- Persistence of tribal practices: watta-izara, vani
- Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 - first colonial attempt to curb child marriage.
- Prevalence of feudal patriarchy and honor culture.
- Mukhtaran Mai case (2002) - Symbol of systematic injustice.

- 3- The Concept of Marriage in Islamic Teaching
- Islam stresses free consent: "Do not inherit women against their will." (Al-Quran)
 - Contradiction between Islamic ideals and cultural practices.

4- Socio-Economic Causes

- Poverty, dowry, and illiteracy drive early marriages.
- Daughters viewed as burdens.
- Only 13% of married girls complete secondary school (UN Pakistan 2025).
- Gender inequality deepened by economic dependence.

5- Legal Framework and Implementation Gaps

- Provincial laws - Sindh (2013), Punjab (2015), and ICT (2025) - aim to curb child marriage and set the legal age near 18 years but lack uniformity nationwide.
- Weak enforcement and low conviction rates
- UNICEF Pakistan's 2025 campaign ^{featuring} Saba Qamar highlighted 19 million child brides and urged nationwide implementation of the 18-year legal standard.
- Advocacy ^{by} groups like the Aurat Foundation continues to push for stronger implementation.

6- Consequences

- Early marriage harms girls' reproductive health, increasing risks maternal mortality, domestic violence, and loss of autonomy.

- World Bank (2017) estimates that ending child marriage could increase women's earning by up to 13% enhancing national productivity.
- National impact: hinders progress on SDG 4 (Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

7- Conclusion

- Forced marriages violate freedom, dignity, and human rights.
- Require strict enforcement of the 2025 Law, education, and grass-roots awareness.
- A nation cannot rise when its daughters are denied the right to choose.
- The liberation of women from forced unions is the liberation of society itself.

Marriage is meant to be a sacred bond based on consent, companionship and mutual respect. Yet in Pakistan, this sacred bond is misused for coercing girls into marriages without their free will. According to (UNICEF 2024), about 19 million girls were married before turning to 18, making the country rank one of the highest in child and forced marriages. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025 ranks Pakistan 148th out of 148 countries, last in gender equality, showcasing how deeply rooted the issue is. Poverty, family pressure, and cultural traditions often compel families to choose marriage over education. Resultantly, many young brides lose their right to education, health, and a better future. Forced marriage is not only a personal tragedy but also a national issue that obstructs social progress and national development.

Forced marriages in Pakistan have deep roots in customs and traditions. In many areas, girls are still treated as a means to settle disputes or

preserve family honor. Customs such as watta satta, vani, and swara are still prevalent as part of family honor instead of giving them their own autonomy. In some cases, girls are symbolically "married to the Quran" to prevent them from claiming their inheritance. These practices deny them their rights.

During the British era, the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, was the first law to curb child marriages in the subcontinent. But, deep-rooted patriarchal and feudal values limited its impact. Even after independence these practices exist due to social pressure and male dominance to control women's lives.

A striking example is of Mukhtar Mai case in 2002, where a woman was abused because of her brother's actions signalling honour violence.

This shows how deeply rooted ~~patriarchal~~ patriarchy is and the need to end them once and for all.

Islam gives significant importance to consent in marriage. Stated in the Quran:

'O believers! It is not permissible for you to inherit women against their will' (Al-Quran)

The Holy Prophet (SAW) also rejected marriages that were conducted without the consent of women, setting a clear importance of justice and equality.

However, in Pakistan, culture is often mixed with religion which results in misinterpretation. Society use religion to justify customs that have no real link to Islamic values.

Forced marriages are presented as religious duty, even though they go against the spirit of Islam. Islam teaches and emphasizes on consent and women's rights. This lack of awareness allow harmful tradition to continue and denies women of their rights that Islam has clearly given them.

Poverty, illiteracy, and dowry are the main driving forces behind forced and early marriages in Pakistan. Many low-income families marry off their daughters to reduce financial pressure. Daughters are still seen as a burden.

Lack of education and skills make women financially dependent on men.

This erodes their ability of autonomy. According to UN Pakistan (2025), only 13% of married girls complete secondary school compared to 44% of unmarried girls, showing how early marriage ends a girl's chance to become self-reliant.

Economic hardship, along with traditional family pressure, forces parents to see marriage as a form of 'security'. But in reality it only exacerbates the cycle of poverty and dependence for the next generation.

Pakistan has made efforts to curb child and forced marriages, but gaps in law and enforcement exist.

The Sindh Marriage Restraint Act (2013) was the first major law to set 18 as the minimum age for marriage of both boys and girls. Later, Punjab (2015) also introduced amendments. A major step came in May 2025, when Islamabad Capital Territory passed its Child Marriage Restraint Act, making 18 the legal marriage age for both sexes and adding stricter penalties. UN agencies have called this a positive move toward protecting children's rights.

According to UNICEF (2025) Pakistan,

There are around 19 million child brides in the country. The report urged for stronger reforms and implementation systems. Civil society organisations like Aurat Foundation and National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) continue to campaign for better awareness, stronger implementation of laws to end this harmful practice.

Forced and early marriages have lasting and devastating impacts on women and society. According to ~~reports~~ UNFPA (2020), early marriage increase the risk of maternal deaths, domestic violence, and loss of decision-making power ~~at~~ for young girls. The World Bank (2017) found that ~~that~~ ending child marriage could increase women's earning by up to 130%, showing benefits to the entire economy. On a national level, forced marriages hinders progress toward SDGs, especially 4 and 5; Quality Education and Gender Equality, respectively.

Forced marriages in Pakistan remain a painful reflection of deep-rooted patriarchy, poverty, and weak social justice.