

Original Article

**The Prevalence and Perceived Impacts of Early Marriages:
A Study on Women in Rural Pakistan**

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Abstract

The prevalence of early marriage has been well documented in developing countries, however women's own perspectives on the practice are less well recognized. This study sought to explore female perspectives on early marriage in rural Pakistan in order to further understand its immediate origins and outcomes. A total of 56 participants were recruited and interviewed, with an array of probing questions that investigated the social and cultural context of their marriages. Of those interviewed, 14.3% were married before the age of 15 and 30.4% of women were married between the ages of 15 and 18, indicating that only 55.4% of the respondents were married after reaching the legal age, in Sindh, of 18 years old. Furthermore, 51.8% and 57.1% of women responded "YES" when asked whether their marriage affected their education and health, respectively. Approximately 21.4% of women felt their marriage affected their social life, and 46.4% felt it impacted their professional careers. In determining the cause for marriage, 75% of women agreed that it was largely due to family pressure, and when asked about the cultural context of the marriage, 82.1% of females responded that cultural norms and practices were highly influential in determining their age at marriage. Only 57.1% of women agreed their marriage was by choice, and women who indicated they were satisfied with the marriage also noted they had no choice but to be satisfied. Early marriage is still an extremely prevalent phenomenon in rural Pakistan, especially in rural Sindh, despite the laws forbidding the practice. In order to effectively combat forced child marriage, there needs to be a higher emphasis on gender equality in education that eventually overturns deep rooted cultural norms, and further initiatives that lift families out of poverty and empower women by increasing female autonomy and women's options outside of their household/childbearing roles.

Keywords

Early marriage, Child marriage, Developing nations, Pakistan early marriage, Women in rural Pakistan

Introduction

Early marriage is a global dilemma that is highly concentrated in the developing world. One out of every 3 girls in developing nations is married before the age of 18, and 700 million women worldwide are married as children (Child Marriage around the World, 2017). An "early" marriage is commonly defined as marrying before the age of 18; although males, to an extent, may be forced to marry early, child marriage is principally a female problem (Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi, 2003). Of developing nations, South Asian countries consistently have higher proportions of married women, lower divorce rates (Westoff, 2003), and some of the highest rates of early

marriage. In Bangladesh, 52% of women aged 20-24 years old reported being first married before turning 18, while in India 47% of women in the same age group reported an early marriage; Bangladesh and India rank #5 and #10 respectively out of all developing countries with the highest rates of early marriage (Child Marriage around the World, 2017). Generally, early marriage rates decrease with urbanization and education (Westoff, 2003).

Two well-cited reasons for early marriage are poverty and financial situations. Securing the marriage of a girl can relieve financial tension within a family through the form

of a dowry, or just by generally lifting the financial burden of a daughter off a family's shoulders. Various other causes, such as education or employment, are closely linked to levels of poverty. Singh and Samara elaborate that, in developing countries, higher levels of urbanization correlate to decreased incidence of early marriage; however, this trend becomes less well defined and varies greatly in countries with less than 40% urbanization. Moreover, they find a generational difference in that older women report earlier marriages than younger generations are now reporting. Furthermore, they advocate for gender equality in education, finding that increased educational gender equality correlates with decreased early marriage rates in developing countries (Singh & Samara, 1996). Bunting similarly attributes the causes of early marriage to gender inequalities in societies, but adds the dimension of cultural dynamics to her argument. She demonstrates that cultural traditions, including a woman's societal status and expected functions, interact with the role of poverty in causing early marriage, citing traditions such as shame associated with lost virginity and the close connection between women and their reproductive ability (Bunting, 2005).

The effects of early marriage on women are vast and detrimental. Education is stunted, health deteriorates, and female autonomy is drastically reduced. In Jensen and Thornton's review of early female marriage in developing countries, they find that a female's age at marriage strongly correlates with the amount of education she receives. Looking at Indian women in particular, they find that women who delay marriage often receive a longer education. They conclude that early marriage is a barrier to education. Additionally, they find that early marriage corresponds to early pregnancies, as women tend to bear children soon after they are married (Jensen & Thornton, 2003). Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi similarly argue that early marriage is associated with low education, adding that it leads to deleterious health and self-esteem issues. They elaborate that the marriages are often pressured by families and not initiated by the spouses themselves, noting that the marriages are

largely prevalent in poor communities of developing countries. Bunting also emphasizes that regions of low secondary school enrollment coincide with regions of high early marriage rates. Furthermore, she highlights that female reproduction prior to the age of 18 significantly increases maternal mortality (women are twice as likely to die during childbirth between the ages 15-19 than women in their twenties) and results in a cascade of health effects including obstetric fistulas and gynecological defects that have a profound, lifelong impact on the lives of women, especially when they do not have access to healthcare (Bunting, 2005).

In addition to education and health issues, child marriages have significant psychological and social implications. A study in Turkey recruited and analyzed two groups of Turkish women, those married before the age of 18 and those married after. Researchers found that women with earlier marriages had higher scores of emotional and physical abuse; likewise, higher incidence of childhood trauma and lower age at marriage led to decreased marital harmony and emotional affection (Gunes et al., 2016).

In Pakistan, early marriage rates from 1990-1991 neared 32% in women aged 20-24, and 11% of women were married by the age of 15 (Singh & Samara, 1996). While Jensen and Thornton found that early marriage rates remained highest and relatively constant in South Asian countries in comparison to all other developing countries from 1950-1970 (Jensen & Thornton, 2003), a US analysis prepared from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) disaggregated the data and found that Pakistan actually had the steepest decline in early marriage compared to other South Asian countries within that same time period (Westoff, 2003). Currently in Pakistan, 21% of women aged 20-24 have reported an early marriage (Child Marriage Around the World, 2017). Another study found that the Sindh province demonstrated the highest early marriage rates out of all other provinces, including in its urban areas (Faizunnisa & ul Haque, 2004). Similar to global trends in developing countries, causes of child marriage in

Pakistan include proportions of rural vs. urban populations, poorer socio-economic groups, and lower education and literacy. The interaction with labor force participation is more complex (Malé & Wodon, 2016). Significant cultural factors also influence the incidence of early marriage, such as the concept of honor (“izzat”), the practice of Watta-Suni (bride exchange), childhood engagement, and the association of puberty with female maturity and preparedness for marriage (Rajwani & Pachani, 2015). A study report on early marriage in Pakistan emphasized the social impacts early marriage has on women, as younger girls are more commonly forced to live with their in-laws than older women are, disrupting any previous social life. Furthermore, the study report cites that the lack of female autonomy and decreased decision-making ability that accompany early marriage (in part due to the age difference between the spouses) significantly contribute to the subjugation of women within the home (Study Report: Child Marriage in Pakistan, a Taboo, 2007).

The present study seeks to explore populations of rural Pakistan and further investigate the impact and prevalence of early marriage on rural women. We investigate perceived social/psychological outcomes for women with various marital ages, as well as what circumstances surrounded their early marriage.

Methodology

This was a cross sectional survey from women of ages ranging 16-60 years, who were present as attendants, patients, staff and students at Koochi Goth Women’s Hospital in Sindh, Pakistan. The data was obtained by means of a pre-designed questionnaire. The list of questions addressed topics such as the women’s age at first marriage, age of first pregnancy, indicators of poverty (family income, husband profession, area of residence), and perceived psychosocial consequences of the marriage. The complete survey is included in Table 1. The data was compiled and analyzed in Excel and SAS, where graphics were also produced. Maps were produced via CARTO. One-way ANOVA statistical tests were done in R Studio.

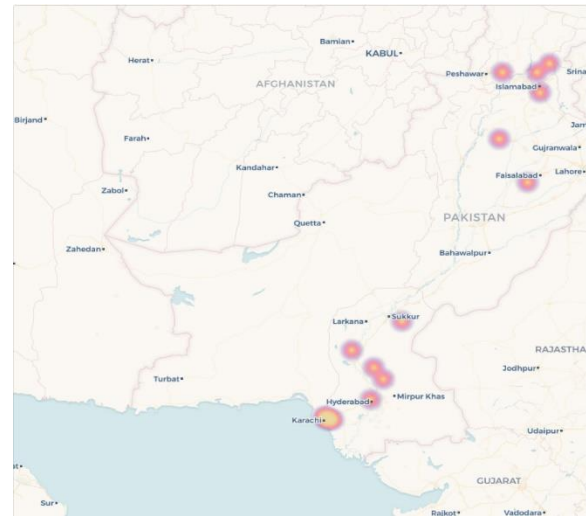


Fig 1: Map of Pakistan with indicated area of residence of participants

Indicated regions identify area of residence of the respondents. Most respondents, as seen in the map, came from the surrounding areas of Karachi and rural Sindh.

Results

Out of the total participants interviewed, the mean marital age was 17.5 +/- 3.6 years old, ranging from 10 years old to 27. Specifically, 14.3% were married before they were 15 years old, 30.4% were married between the ages of 15 and 18, and 55.4% were married after turning 18 years old (Figures 2 and 3). The age of first pregnancy closely corresponded with marital age ($R^2=0.81$), indicating that most women became pregnant soon after marriage (Figure 4). Approximately 33.9% of women had no education, 32.1% discontinued education before Matriculation, 14.3% stopped after Matriculation, and 17.9% completed Intermediate level. Only 1 participant achieved higher education following Inter, and marital age was not significantly affected by level of education (One-way ANOVA, $P=0.0875$, $n=56$).

The monthly income of participants ranged from 2500 PKR/month to 80,000 PKR/month, with 19.2% of participants below 10,000 PKR/month, 53.8% between 10,000-

20,000 PKR/month, 13.5% between 20,000 and 30,000 PKR/month, and 13.5% above 30,000 PKR/month (excluding 4 participants who did not know their monthly income). About 51.9% of respondents had no miscarriages, while 48.1% had at least one miscarriage and 11.1% had more than 2 miscarriages (the highest number being 6 miscarriages). The majority of respondents were from rural Sindh, in close proximity to Karachi, while some were from Punjab and more northern areas of Pakistan (Fig 1). Approximately 52% of females lived in joined families, while 48% lived in separate (Fig 5).

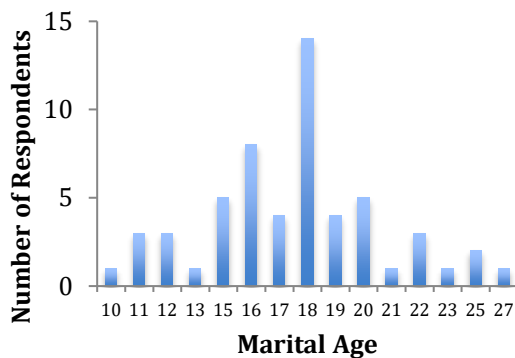


Fig 2: Frequency of respondents according to indicated age at first marriage

Figure signifies the number of respondents according to their marital ages. The most frequent marital age was 18 years old.

When asked if their marriage affected educational attainment, 51.8% of females indicated that it did. In terms of perceived detriments to health, 57.1% of respondents felt that their marriage negatively impacted their health. As for social life and professional life, 78.6% and 53.6% of females, respectively, felt their marriage had no influence on that part of their lives (Figure 6). In ascertaining reasons for marital age, females attributed culture as the most important factor, followed by family pressure, and choice. Religious reasons or reproductive age were not significant factors for women, as only 10.7% and 7.1% of women, respectively, indicated those factors as influential (Figure 7).

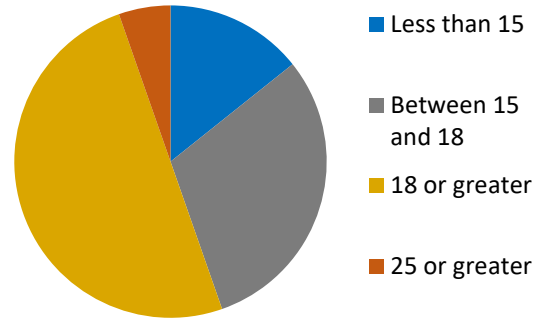


Fig 3: Proportion of respondents with corresponding marital age

This figure represents the proportion of respondents according to marital age, grouped into 4 categories.

In terms of marital satisfaction, 14% of women were unsatisfied while 68% indicated satisfaction. Approximately 16% of respondents gave ambiguous answers because they were uncomfortable answering the question (Figure 8).

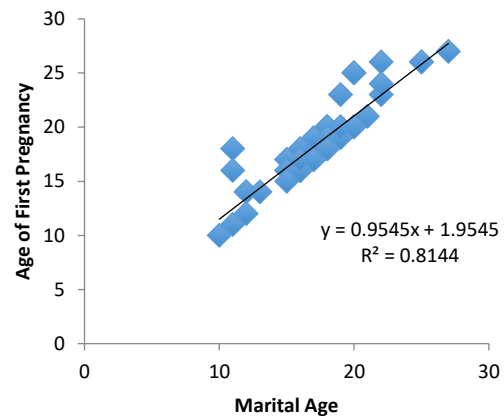


Fig 4: The correlation between age of marriage and age of first pregnancy

This graphically displays the close correlation between marital age and age of first pregnancy, demonstrating that women tend to presume their childbearing roles quickly after marriage.

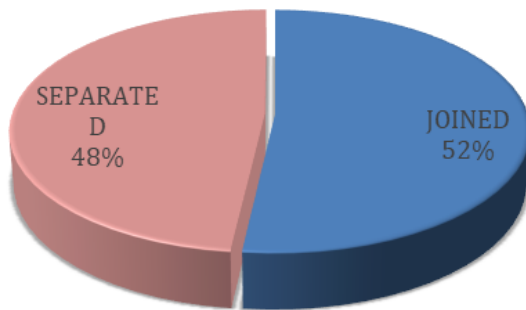


Fig 5: Type of Family

Our results show that among all the interviewed females, 48% of females live separately while 52% are in joined families.

Of the women unsatisfied with their marriages, reasons for dissatisfaction included that they felt they were too young at the time, they had wished to pursue their studies more extensively and pursue a career, or that they did not love or even know their prospective spouses.

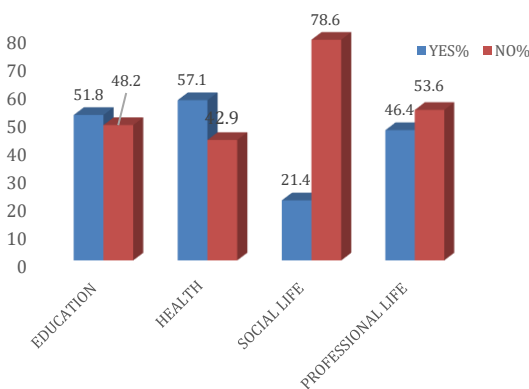


Fig 6: Effect of early marriage on education, health, social and professional life

Results indicate that 51.8% of females responded "YES" when asked if the early marriage affected their education, while 48.2% refused. Additionally, 57.1% and 46.4%, respectively, responded that early marriage affected their health and professional life.

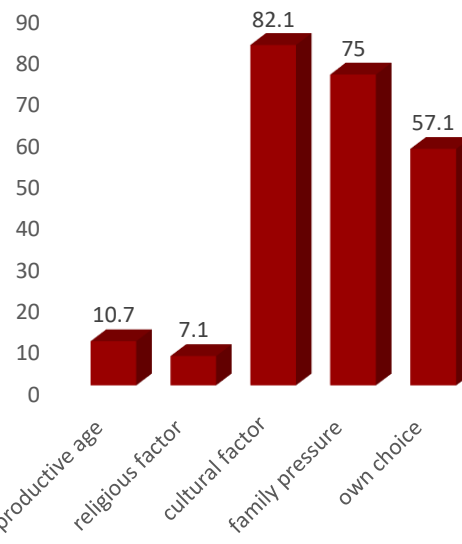


Fig 7: Reasons for early marriage

Approximately 75% were pressured to marry by their family, whereas 57.1% married by choice. 82.1% of females attributed their early marriage to cultural factors, 7.1% attributed the cause to religion and 10.7% felt they were forced to marry upon reaching the reproductive age.

Of the women who felt satisfied, many qualified their answer with the notion that they had no choice but to be satisfied since they were fulfilling their family's, or father's, wishes, demonstrating the strong impact culture has on female perceptions of life satisfaction. Many respondents refused to support child/forced marriage, expressing a desire to avoid such circumstances for their own children. Furthermore, when females were asked what age they felt was most suitable for their own daughters, respondents overwhelmingly suggested after their daughters finish their studies, or after reaching 20 to 25 years of age, regardless of their own marital ages.

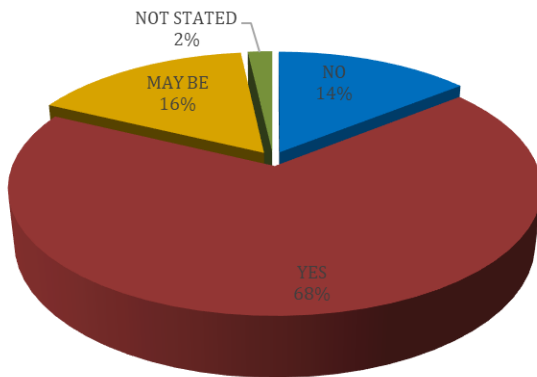


Fig 8: Satisfaction with Marital Age

Figure 8 shows that 14% of the targeted population was unsatisfied with their marriage while 16% had indefinite feelings about their satisfaction rate, mostly because they were not comfortable answering the question. Approximately 68% of the females were satisfied with their married life.

Discussion

This study sought to explore the prevalence of early marriage in rural populations and investigate women’s own perspectives on the social implications of marital age. Results demonstrated that early marriage is still highly prevalent in the rural populations studied, and that more than half of the women interviewed believe that the marriage negatively impacted their health and education. Social life, on the other hand, was not significantly inhibited following marriage, while professional life was inhibited but not to as great an extent as health or education, mostly because women indicated they were not intending to pursue careers anyways.

In comparison to the national early marriage rate (21%), this study found that 44.6% of all women interviewed were married before the age of 18. Since this study recruited women from rural areas, this confirms the idea that rural women experience a higher incidence of early marriage; further studies should investigate the co-occurrence of early marriage in rural and

urban populations. A large portion of women felt that the early marriage did not affect their level of educational attainment (48.2%) or professional career (53.6%); likewise, education qualifications did not correlate strongly with marital age. Our study therefore indicates that marital age is more significantly influenced by inherent levels of poverty and strong cultural factors than it is by education, or that the benefits of female education are limited by robust cultural pressures. In contrast, Samara and Singh found that marital age is significantly influenced by level of education. However, they also note that increased education tends to affect marital age only when it co-varies with the degree of urbanization; they hypothesize that this interaction effect is likely due to the employment opportunities in urban areas that increase with education and that can delay age at marriage. They further clarify that although decreased educational attainment is associated with lower age in marriage, the causation could run in either direction (low education results in low age at marriage, or early marriage stunts educational attainment) (Samara & Singh, 1996). Their conclusion elucidates an important aspect of our findings, indicating that within a rural population that is of a relatively low socioeconomic standing, education plays a muted role in characterizing a woman’s marital age; in such circumstances, female marriage is largely determined by cultural factors.

Our results also revealed the lack of female autonomy in determining marriage, as 75% of women cited family pressure as a reason for marriage. Other studies confirm the influence of family and cultural pressures in early marriage. Montazeri et al. found that in their study of Iranian early marriage, participants felt ill-prepared for marital life and were propelled into marriage by cultural family structures, low authority, and response to needs (Montazeri et al., 2016).

Studies in Pakistan often cite dowry as a reason for early marriage, however the present study did not find dowry to be a significant factor or reason for marriage. This could be due to the increasing difficulty of creating a dowry

arrangement. Faizunnisa and Haque, in their study on adolescent reproductive health, note that the decreasing incidence of early marriage may be attributable to the increasing difficulty of arranging a dowry, due to reasons of poverty and the lack of male employment in many cases (Faizunnisa & ul Haque, 2004). Indeed, one of our participants was married twice because her first husband had difficulty finding employment and supporting a family.

Due to the complexity of the prevalence of early marriage, combating it requires a multi-faceted approach. Increased educational attainment can reduce amounts of poverty, which in turn may decrease the prevalence of early marriage. Education initiatives will likely be most effective if they are coupled with legislation that seeks to bolster female employment; if women do not foresee adequate employment opportunities following their educational attainment, then education will do little to expand women's options outside of marriage and increase their household autonomy. Furthermore, increasing gender equality in access to education can alleviate the pervasiveness early marriage, as an equal premium on education for women and men can combat gendered norms and perspectives. While law-making efforts are necessary, they are not sufficient. Pakistan's Child Marriage Restraint Act sets the age limit of marriage for females and males at 16 years old and 18 years old, respectively. Recent legislation seeking to amend the female age to 18 years old was rejected by the national assembly. While the national government and the Punjab government have introduced harsher penalties for those violating these marriage laws, neither have increased the female marital age to 18. On the other hand, Sindh increased its limit to 18 years old (Child Marriage around the World, 2017); however, as indicated in this study, female marriage before the age of 18 is still highly prevalent in Sindh. As such, policies and methods to combat early marriage should focus on alleviating poverty and changing the cultural perception of women. This requires significant work in improving reproductive health and education, ensuring that families cease equating

female puberty to female maturity and acknowledge the immense health effects early marriage has on women. Combating the prevalence of early marriage requires a cultural overhaul in conjunction with economic and educational improvement. Only then will women stop being subjugated to practices that significantly and disproportionately infringe on their quality of life and general autonomy and satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study explored early marriage rates in rural Pakistan and investigated women's own thoughts on their marital lives, finding that rates remain high and women's lives are vastly disadvantaged by early marriage. Women perceive several detrimental outcomes following their marriages, including reduced educational attainment, deterioration of health, a measured negative impact on social life, and the reduced potential for a professional career, all of which compound into a general dissatisfaction, or subdued satisfaction, of marital life. The cultural imperative for women to quickly undertake their childbearing roles as mothers and caretakers significantly impacts their general quality of life. However, the harmful effects of early marriage are not isolated to the female community. Women make up half of the population, and when they are made unavailable by early marriages and specialized into reproductive roles, the potential to lift a community out of poverty is cut in half. Female education and employment is vital to decreasing overall poverty in Pakistan and changing the entrenched cultural ideals that universally subjugate women and limit their independence and autonomy.

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