

## Early Marriage: A Developmental Challenge to Women in Pakhtun Society

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Marriage is one of the universal social institutions established to control and regulate the life of mankind. It is the approved social pattern whereby two or more persons establish a family. However, marriage which occur without natural way or which violate the basic principles of human rights, creates critical social problems with multifaceted consequences. The current study investigates into various causes and consequences of early marriage in Pakhtun society. The study was undertaken in Ramora village of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan that focused on 100 respondents comprised of both married males and females. The data was collected with the help of structured interview schedule where a descriptive approach was utilized for data analyses. The analyses reflect that early marriage is practiced due to illiteracy, deeply rooted traditional social structure and economic insurance, which laid devastating impacts in terms of social, physiological and psychological problems for the individual, family and society as a whole. It is recommended that parent education, proper role of government and media will assist in elimination of the curses of early marriages.

*Key words:* early marriage, causes, customs, illiteracy, adversity, consequences, health problems, tension, poverty, mortality

Marriage as an institutional pattern is specialized for brining unanimity and interdependence for maintaining the familial affairs (Bankole et al, 2004). In addition, Nair (2006) reflects that marriage is a universally practiced pattern that is instilled through citizenly acts, and cultural and traditional ceremonies of the society. The choice of a marriage partner is one of the most serious decisions people face. In the contemporary world, this decision usually follows a long learning period during which people engage in more informal and often polygamous relationships (Fisman et al, 2006). There is a specified age for young girls' age for marriage in most of the societies while in some cases, age limit is overlooked by physiological promptness for childbearing. Alan Guttmacher Institute reflects that marriages in traditional structures are often practiced below the standardized pattern proclaimed age limit (AGI, 2008), which usually and legally accounts in the pattern of early marriage that is proceeded among children at the age of 18 or less (Somerset, 2000).

The custom of early marriage is common in most of the rural belt of the developing countries and prevailing due to certain causative factors, which lay-down devastating impacts upon females, and families (Kabir, 2006). In addition, such practice is one the common future in most of societies i.e. Saharan Africa, South Asia, and West Africa, East Africa and South Asia (UNDESA, 2000). Besides, people following the traditional lifestyle in North Africa, Middle East and other parts of Asia, hold on the marital proceedings of children after puberty, which is commonly been observed (Stone,

2009) while early marriage is a common phenomenon in Latin America as well as Eastern Europe (Rawson, 2000).

Marriage ceremonies in rural structures under traditional patterns are customary in nature that put force on some members while the others are rarely rational in order to take the decision and exercise their right (Macfarlane, 2002) where abduction also plays a pivotal role (UNICEF, 1998). Such a rural structure is excessively found in developing countries particularly in the South Asia (Khan and Naz, 2012). In this connection, Pakistan lines-up eminently having far-more exposure to early marriages and their adverse consequences (Assani, 2000). Although the Essential Conditions of Marriage (Section 2, Article 6-16) of the Revised Family Code (Proclamation of 2000), Article 7 specifies the legal marriage age of both boys and girls yet the implementation is impeded by several reasons. Such cases reflect that a male or a female shall have the age fit for marriage (CPG, 1998) while studies assert that many female in rural areas i.e. 13 percent are married at the age of 15 while 66% before that age of 18 (DHS 2000, Richard & Sundar, 1999).

The previous study on Harmful Traditional Practices in Pakistan assert that 57 percent of the population got married below that age of 15 while a study in Northern Ethiopia report that most of the young girls married below the age of ten and even at the time of birth their marriage is decided (NCTPE, 2003). Such practices are also very common among Pakhtuns with different ration i.e. in rural areas of Baluchistan region are much higher than the other parts of the country (Taylor, 1993). Studies also indicates that mostly early marriages are perform for some of the economic gains

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including improving family status, strengthening kinship bonds, and even many times to avoid dishonoring family status as well (RWGFM, 2000). However, keeping the positive aspects of early marriage, there have been many side effects of the practice including physical, social, psychological and even physiological as well obstructing both the well being of the married girl and even of the newborn as well (IPPF, 2000). In this regard, we can conclude that early marriage which is a practice in most of the traditional societies have serious implication not only for female but also for the new generation as well as social structure of the society.

#### **Sexual and Reproductive Health**

Health is an important indicator and the basis for productivity, increases in capacity to learn in school, and the capability to grow intellectually, physically, and emotionally. Studies have shown that marriage occur before the age of 18 has many complicated implications during pregnancy and may sometimes leads to maternal mortality (Whitehead, 2001) and even girls of the age 10 to 14 are having more risk than the age group above. The report of IAC (1993) assert that force intercourse in many cases causes the death of the victim while on the other hand long labor resultantly causes serious consequences to both mother and the baby (Farooq, 2010). The cited literature thus conclude that many complications in health and other related aspects do come from early marriages which may sometimes leads to fades the lives of many of women.

#### **The Denial of Education and Decision-Making**

Decision making process and education is male oriented and dominated by masculinity where female are deprived to a major extent (Naz, et al, 2012). Similarly, early marriage increase the drop out level among children and such girls receive less attention towards education from family and kin whereas the ratio of such female is 73% (having no education) and 45% have to some extent (Berhane-Selassie, 1993). The probable age difference between spouses in Pakistan is 10.1 years (CN, 2000) that resultantly causes huge age differences between spouses that inversely affects girls' freedom and decisional empowerment. With regard to domestic and familial decision making, such girls are deprived and have no such say in familial as well economic affairs (Khan, W and Naz, A (2012) while such marriages deprived female in decision making related to property, divorce and other employment as well (Naz, 2011). In this regard, early marriage is a factor in making women subordinate and deprived in many aspects of life.

#### **Gender-Based Violence**

Gender-based violence usually refers to some physical, sexual or psychological suffering of one of the gender (mostly women) in terms of threat, embezzlement of rights, deprivation etc (Ayres, 2000). Early marriage creates a number of conditions that expose married girls to poverty and violence (Saxena, 1999). Men's control over key resources, social isolation, and the low socio-economic status and dependency of women predispose married girls to

violence and poverty (Heise, 1999 and Naz, 2011). Some examples of gender violence that can be exacerbated by early marriage include domestic violence, rape, and emotional abuse (Naz, et al, 2012). The fact is evident that most of forced-early marriages lead to domestic violence and often wife desertion. Such a habit entangles the young girls into the mire of marginalized masses while involving in prostitution and other social evils (Mensch, 1998).

The discussion reveals that there is a close and strong association between early marriage and its various negative impacts upon female personality and health. The practice of early marriage does exist in many societies including Pakistan. However, in relation to Pakhtun society, the practice of early marriage is socially approved and culturally accepted normative behavior and it is in practice since centuries. The traditional social structure, and Pakhtun social organization is encouraging such practice which ultimately deprives women in familial decisions, make them dependent and even have many other medical complication for the married couple which have lays many other devastating impacts upon the male, female and family as well.

#### **The Argument**

Pakistan in general and Pakhtun society in particular has a strong cultural heritage and distinct customs and traditions which mostly favor early marriage. Early marriages are practiced here at a higher ratio as compared to other parts of the country on the basis of economic instability, lack of awareness and strong cultural trend encourages such a custom (UNICEF, 2005). In addition, the sentimental local nationalism, unawareness and ignorance further pave the way for early marriages among Pakhtun of Pakistan. Most of the Pakhtun families are lower class families and are very keen to marry their children at early ages in accordance to decrease the financial burden (Senderowitz, 2010). Similarly, parents marry their male children at a lower age because of economic burden over them and for this reason they want to subject their male children to premature responsibilities.

In other words, by marrying them at lower age they want to get rid of them and to make them as an earning member of the family because normally a child doesn't feel earning responsibility for the family. However, in some cases, Pakhtun prefer early marriages to increase their family members in order to have a superior influence in their locality (Zabin, 2005). The custom of early marriage in Pakhtun society lays devastating impacts including violation of children's basic rights and a burden of responsibilities on children, of which they are not capable both mentally as well as physically. In addition, it has created a social instability and is affecting the Pakhtun generation in an unbalanced way (Adlakha, 2008). After marriage, the husband's home proves as the next confinement where they are entangled in plenty of responsibilities that affect them both physically and psychologically.

On the other hand, male children who are subjected to early marriages also face serious threatening problems that result into ill effects in the society (Rocha, 2004). Some of the early-married male children adopt deviated behavior and they choose wrong ways for their economic stability and psychological satisfaction. Some of these children get a part of their parents, which is a threat to joint family system and some become criminals and drug addicts (Bruce, 2000). Early married female children also face a lot of physical and mental problems that include their difficulty in house hold activities, so called pressure by husband's family for not doing the house holding by proper way, traditional strictness over them, their mental retardation, feeling of frustration, defective reproduction and ill socialization. As children are mentally as well as physiologically immature they face a big difficulty in adaptation in a new environment where they have to skip over their childhood.

#### Objectives of the study

- To identify and explore the various causative factors of early marriages in Pakhtun society
- To illuminate the consequences of early marriages on individuals, families and society

#### Hypotheses

- Strict customs and traditions have significant association with early marriage
- Early marriages cause social, physical and psychological abuses

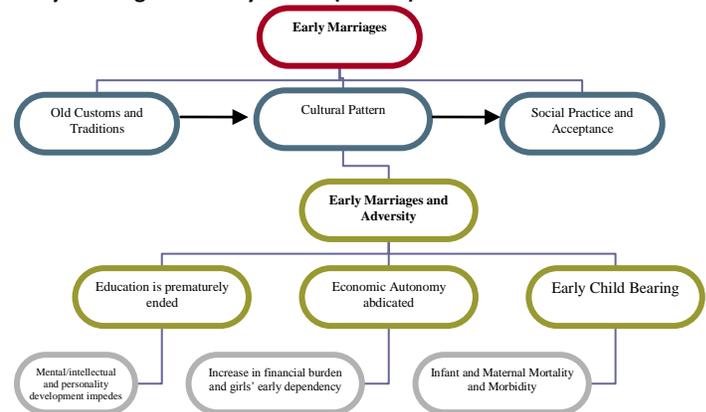
#### Method

This study was conducted in Ramora village District Dir Lower Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan. In the mentioned village the custom of early marriage is predominantly prevalent with high zeal, which creates numerous social, physical and psychological abuses. The total population of the village was 4321 (District Survey Report, 2010) where a defined criterion was adopted for recruitment/selection of target population that accounted as 1245. In this regard, 100 samples were selected from the specified age group and gender. In this connection, 50 married males and 50 married females were selected from the age group of 12-20 years. The defined technique for sample selection was snow ball sampling as all the selected samples were early married where each sample highlighted and pointed out the other.

Besides, a structured-interview schedule was used as a source of data collection that comprised of structured questions followed by the optional answers. The schedule consisted of different categories of questions such as the personal biography of the respondents at the initial stage followed by the relevant about the causes and consequences of early marriages. In addition, ethical considerations were taken into account during the course of data collection.

#### Study Matrix

##### Early Marriage Adversity Model (EMAM)



Source: The model has been derived from cited literature and field information

#### Result and Discussion

A descriptive approach has been utilized in order to analyze data with the help of two point scale categories (Agree and Disagree). Further, the discussion has been elaborated in the form of frequencies and percentages with strong support of field information and grounded theory. The leading causes and consequences of early marriage obtained from the primary information have been discussed as under:

##### Causes of Early Marriage

The analyses demonstrate the various encouraging factors of early marriage in Pakhtun society. The primary information exposes 91% respondents argue that deeply rooted customs and traditions are the major causes, which bring early marriage in the stated locality and destroy the educational ratio of both the genders. Similarly, 85% respondents agree to greater extent that economic instability and financial insurance encourage the custom of early marriage. In addition, 88% respondents elucidate that illiteracy and ignorance in the area have also contributed in early marriage and produces a variety of consequences. Likewise, 84% respondents palpably explicate the social acceptance of the members for the society and family is the major cause of early marriage. However, 82% respondents dominantly explained that religion allowed marriage at the age of puberty; therefore religion is also counted as factor in the promotion of early marriage. At the end, 87% respondents support that, Pakhtun do early marriages to increase their family members in order to safeguard their families, which adversely affect their well-being in different aspects (see Table-1).

Table 1  
*Causes of Early Marriage*

	Level of Agreement		N=100 Total
	Agree	Disagree	
Deeply rooted customs and traditions	91%	09%	100%
Economic instability/financial insurance	85%	15%	100%
Illiteracy and ignorance	88%	12%	100%
Social acceptance	84%	16%	100%
Religious factors	82%	18%	100%
To increase family members	87%	13%	100%

The field information and the literature with regard to causes of early marriage among Pakhtun are associated with deeply rooted customs and traditions, cultural values and even sometimes with religious misperceptions propagated by religious persons. Similarly, the economic position of male (i.e. the controller of economic assets), and female domestication is another reason for early marriage. The information and its analysis further support mass illiteracy and ignorance, female social exclusion and subordination is regarded as the major causes compelling Pakhtun for early marriage of the daughters and son.

#### Consequences of Early Marriage

The custom of early marriage produces a variety of impact for male, female (particularly) and for the family as well which further creates complications for the members of the family their future endeavors. In this regard, 84% respondents evidently describe that early marriage creates social instability as the young females and males are no more able to handle the responsibility of the family. Moreover, 85% respondents show that doing early marriage decreases the female and male literacy because the female cannot continue their education after marriage due to familial affairs and activities. In addition, 90% respondents argue that early marriage creates psychological problems in the form of tension, depression and anxiety etc. Similarly, a major chunk of respondents i.e. 92% strongly agreed that early marriage is a threat to women's health and produces a variety of health complications as the teens are rarely capable of reproduction. Moreover, 88% respondents reflect that the custom of early marriage creates gender based violence, which inversely affects women's empowerment (see Table-2).

Table 2  
*Consequences of Early Marriage*

	Level of Agreement		N=100 Total
	Agree	Disagree	
Social instability	84%	16%	100%
Increases Illiteracy	85%	15%	100%
Psychological problems	90%	10%	100%
Poor health for women	92%	08%	100%
Familial disputes	89%	11%	100%
Gender disparity/violence	89%	11%	100%

The analysis of the information thus concludes that the custom of early marriage produces a variety of negative impact upon male and female. Among the very complications as obtained and analyzed from the data is social instability, increases female illiteracy, creates psychological problems i.e. tension, depression and anxiety etc. Besides, early marriage is a threat to female health and paves a way towards gender based violence and crating obstacles in women's empowerment.

#### Conclusion

The present research study accesses the fact that child marriage is an accepted cultural pattern and a social practice in many countries especially in developing countries with more prevalence in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. It is still widely sanctioned, even though it is a violation of the human rights of young ones in multi-dimensions. Although early marriage violates the rights of both girls and boys yet the fact is blatant the girls are more prone to its adverse consequences as the practice is more frequent among girls. The ill-consequences that are drawn-out in result of early marriage, are less likely to be exploitative or physically harmful for boys as compared to girls. The imposition of a marriage partner on children or adolescents is commonly practiced pattern in the research area where the victims are mostly girls who are never ready for marriage. Such a practice tends to adversely impact the freedom of the victims as well as they lose the opportunity for personal development and other rights including health and well-being, education, and participation in civic life, nullifies the meaning of the conventions working for insurance of child rights.

Similarly, the research findings show that early marriage is intrinsically linked to low levels of education, high levels of violence and abuse, social isolation, severe health risks and harmful power dynamics and results in increased gender inequality and vulnerability to poverty for girls, young women, families and the society as a whole. Besides, the prevalence and practice of old customs and traditions along-with religious misperception and misinterpretation instigates the pattern to occur. Resultantly, the elaboration can be made this practice also threatens the international development effort to fight against poverty and related challenges in developing countries and weakens to social bonds as the future of nation is put into the mire of exploitation.

#### Recommendations

To trickle this challenging phenomenon, a joint effort to formulate and implement policies and strategies is needed. Actions to fulfill or restore the rights of those already married should go hand in hand with preventive actions to insure that all of the interventions are available to married, as well as to unmarried girls. The following recommendation will help to overcome the issue of early marriage:

The practice of early marriage is recognized as a barrier that inhibits young girls and boys from attaining education that would otherwise have a lasting positive impact on their life and well being. It further creates social, physiological and psychological impacts for male, female and family as whole. In order to decrease the ratio of early marriage; the parents and young people should be educated about their rights, laws and international norms. Child brides and their parents should know that there are international standards which, in addition to discouraging child marriage, stipulate that both marriage partners should enjoy certain rights such as education, health care, and freedom of movement. Similarly, Creating incentives for parents to keep their girls in school as long as possible, for example by waiving school fees, will yield a number of positive social and economic benefits. When girls remain in school they become aware and will marry later, they will have fewer children spaced farther apart, and are less likely to live in poverty. According to the National Child Protection Policy, marrying a child at an early age is a punishable offence. The PPC Section 310 has been amended to outlaw exchange marriages (*vanni and swara*). Its violation carries a sentence of three years and maximum 10 years imprisonment. So there is need to practically implement this policy, to punish those who marry their children an early age by ignoring their fundamental and legal rights of marriage on their own will. The Print and electronic media can play a vibrant role by writing features, making documentaries, writing columns, through visual coverage of actual cases, talk shows and debates with public participation to highlight the negative impacts of early marriage in order to reduce it.

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