

## The Burden of Early Marriage: Examining Social and Emotional Consequences

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### ABSTRACT

*The practice of child marriage is a crucial and delicate issue present in various cultures worldwide. Furthermore, child marriage significantly impacts the psychological, social, and economic well-being of young girls, especially in rural areas of Pakistan. The main purpose of the research was to explore the mental health outcomes and sociocultural factors leading to child marriage in Malakand, Pakistan. In the quantitative approach, a cross-sectional study has been designed consisting of surveys and interviews with 350 participants measuring mental health and cultural influences. The findings showed significant psychological impacts, such as extremely high depression and economic boundaries. The study provided solutions for effective interventions to identify the negative effects of early marriage. The findings indicate that marrying at a young age significantly negatively affects educational prospects, personal development, and psychological well-being. Child marriage can result in anxiety, sadness, and diminished self-esteem. The Study indicates that extensive steps are necessary to eradicate the practice of child marriage. These strategies should encompass community awareness initiatives, educational opportunities, legislative improvements, and economic empowerment.*

**Keywords:** Early marriage, Child marriage, Depression, Psychological effects, Mental health, Girls empowerment

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of the Study

Child marriage is a tradition that has deep roots in many areas and still affects millions of girls globally. The world describes it as a formal or informal union in which both parties are below eighteen years old, a practice considered a major infringement of human rights, which has been hampering global development. Though efforts to exterminate child marriage have been taken to another level, this practice persists through various socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors. In South Asia, wherein the prevalence of child marriage has increased globally, Pakistan sticks out as a country in which thousands of women are compromised of their childhoods, Education, and independence because of early marriage. Despite criminal frameworks and worldwide commitments geared toward curbing this practice, early marriage remains high, mainly in rural and underprivileged regions. It is a complex problem, heavily embedded with poverty, gender discrimination, and traditional norms that place greater value on their family's respect and economic survival over the welfare of younger girls. Child marriage has been a serious problem for quite a long time and continues to impact people today. It affects young women and girls disproportionately, with most violations of rights regarding their potential on a personal and societal level. Adhering to the commitments made globally to end child marriage as stated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, the practice continues in many areas around the world, like South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. Recent estimates indicate that 12 million girls below the age of 18 are married every year worldwide (UNICEF, 2021).

Child marriage is a big issue in Pakistan, especially in rural and neglected areas. It is a country with nearly 19 million child marriages, and among six young girls, one of these is married while still in childhood (UN Women, 2024). The PDHS 2019-2020 reported that 22.4% of women between the ages of 20 and 24 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa got married before they turned age 18. Moreover, a 2020 report from UNICEF revealed that 21% of girls were married before the age of 18; 5% of such marriages were contracted before the girls turned fifteen. This Study investigates the problems associated with early marriage in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Malakand area.

The practice has been kept alive by traditional customs, dominating patriarchal family systems, and economic weaknesses along with low opportunities for girls, augmenting the already strong prospects of early marriages and perpetuating the cycle of poverty and disempowerment. According to the Study conducted by Khan et al. (2024), because of deeply ingrained cultural and societal norms that enforce women's dependence on male family members, child marriages are more common in rural areas of Pakistan, such as Malakand. In the last 5 years, updated research has been conducted on the psychological and physical well-being of girls in situations of child marriage. For example, child marriage proves to be an important multivariate predictor of increased prevalence of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among young brides in South Asian countries (Ahmed et al., 2023). Child marriages were also discovered to affect the self-esteem, life satisfaction, and social support of girls married before age 18 in Pakistan, according to Yousaf et al. (2022). There is, therefore, an urgent imperative need for evidence-based policymaking and programming on child marriage and its consequences.

### **Research problem and objectives**

Child marriage has psychological impacts that require the most attention. Early marriage is not limited to affecting the mental health of a child; it goes very deep into a personal and social problem. Child marriage is linked with many other adverse effects, such as loss of education and career opportunities for these girls, as well as psychological and physical health risks. These include increased risks for depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal behaviors. In many cases, child brides are forced in marriage settings into having little or no agency and power, which makes them more vulnerable to domestic violence and abuse (Ahmad et al., 2023; Yousaf et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2024). In addition to this linkage between child marriage and poor maternal antenatal and neonatal morbidity and mortality, it also has numerous negative health-related consequences, such as complications in pregnancy, premature births, and high infant mortality rates (Fatima et al., 2024). Therefore, the intergenerational consequences of child marriage state that adolescent mothers very often are not able to provide adequate child care owing to a lack of resources

and insufficient knowledge regarding child health and development. This subject creates a cycle of poverty and vulnerability capable of continuation through generations. Examine the sociocultural factors that encourage child marriage in Malakand to create successful insider intervention plans. Local customs, patriarchal family structures, and financial hardship maintain the practice of underage marriage. Making relevant and culturally sensitive policy and program actions that could support the local population requires a thorough understanding of these aspects. While providing impacted girls with social, educational, and psychological support, specific interventions should aid in identifying the factors that contribute to child marriage. The current study examines the Social and Emotional Consequences of early child marriages in district Malakand.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Child marriage**

Child marriage simply means that one or both partners are under the legal age of eighteen, and it is a very important global issue as it concerns an estimated twelve million girls annually (UNICEF, 2021). Thus, a human rights violation and the greatest hindrance to the equality of women (UNFPA, 2022). Although most countries in the world have made international pledges, such as those in SDG 5.3, they are still found uncontrolled in several regions, especially those in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America.

### **Pakistan's prevalence of child marriage**

In Pakistan, nearly 19 million girls are married before the age of adulthood (UN Women, 2024). The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS, 2019-2020) reported that 22.4% of women ages 20-24 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had been married before reaching the age of 18, against factors that continue to increase the prevalence of child marriages in the country, namely poverty, limited access to Education, patriarchal norms, and society's emphasis on family honor (Khan et al., 2024).

### **Psychological effects of child marriage**

The mental health consequences of child marriage have been documented in great detail. Evidence from studies in South Asia has consistently pointed to a correlation between early marriage and depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Ahmad et al., 2023; Yousaf et al., 2022). Often, child brides feel alienated by distance from their families of birth and lack of social support (Nasir et al., 2023). In addition, the brides experience more feelings of low self-esteem and less satisfaction with life because of societal expectations that deny them personal autonomy (Ali et al., 2021).

### **Cultural Impacts**

Research has shown that child marriage has repercussions beyond the individual. According to a study conducted by Fatima et al. (2024), young mothers are less likely to give better care for their children, as they are deprived of resources and knowledge, and that continues to a cycle of poverty and vulnerability, which later leads to early marriage across generations.

### **Sociocultural Factors**

In Malakand, the crux of child marriage lies in the quotidian customs, the patriarchal family structure, and economic suppression. Malakand, along with all other rural areas of Pakistan, falls into one among several high-risk sites of this practice due to deep-rooted, cultural-oriented practices (Shah et al., 2022). Education is another limiting factor; it can hardly be considered an asset due to the lack of schools, whereas the self- and socially internalized attitudes are adverse to girls' Education (Rehman & Bibi, 2023).

### **Gaps in interventions and policies**

Policies and Laws of Pakistan work against child marriage, whereas their implementation is questionable in rural areas (Siddiqui et al., 2021). Policy measures are ineffective in tackling issues of sociocultural and economic factors underscoring the problem (Bano et al., 2023). Targeted interventions such as community-

based educational programs and financial incentives to families could have proven to be more promising in reducing the incidence of child marriage in comparable situations (Rahman et al., 2022).

### **2.3 Adverse Consequences of Child Marriages**

Comprehensive studies have been conducted on the prevalence of child marriage and its correlation with violence. Prior empirical studies and the existing body of knowledge have examined physical, sexual, and emotional forms of violence. Research indicates that various forms of violence are exacerbated by child marriage (Begum et al., 2015, Rahman et al.(2023)). The published studies disclosed the rates of violence. John et al. (2019) indicated that a substantial percentage of women surveyed in Tigray, Ethiopia, had encountered physical violence from their intimate partners during pregnancy. A correlation was identified between this violence and other characteristics, including early marriage, rural residency, and low educational attainment. Similarly, numerous prior researches have demonstrated that women residing in rural regions and originating from disadvantaged families in developing countries are more vulnerable to the adverse consequences of child marriage. Hindin and Fatusi (2009), Khan et al. (2025), Rehman et al.(2021), Khan et al.(2023), and Sarfo et al. (2022) indicate that the findings of this Study reveal that these women possess insufficient control over the timing and selection of their marriage partners, thereby rendering them more vulnerable to domestic violence. A lamentable aspect of adolescent marriage is that both individuals, predominantly women, are wed without their consent, so exacerbating their distress. The behavior in question may result in various societal repercussions, including violence and abuse. Young girls coerced into marriage frequently endure physical, emotional, and sexual abuse from their husbands or in-laws. Child marriage perpetuates a cycle of poverty and dependency by obstructing educational attainment and employment opportunities (Anozie et al., 2018; Khattak et al. (2021); Mc Cleary-Sills et al., 2015 ). Child marriage is one of the most prevalent kinds of violence against women. Young married women typically possess limited influence and prestige within marital relationships and household matters, which elucidates this phenomenon. Consequently, individuals are more prone to encounter psychological distress, domestic abuse, sexual assault, and estrangement from their family, friends, and society. The uncertainty, distance, and the wife's premature divorce contribute to this regrettable circumstance. The girl is attaining the maturity necessary for an autonomous existence. Becker et al. (1977), Ishaq et al. (2023), James and Beattie (2012), and Nour (2009). Research demonstrates that child marriage hinders the autonomy of young girls and obstructs their participation in health-enhancing activities. It is intricately associated with adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes, as well as detrimental consequences on young married women. It are also intricately connected to child marriage. Moreover, child brides may be uneducated or deficient in language skills, impeding their awareness of their rights and, consequently, their capacity to negotiate safer sexual relationships or prevent early pregnancies. Women who marry at a young age typically bear their first children sooner, resulting in a heightened risk of problems during childbirth and pregnancy-related fatalities, which are the primary causes of mortality among young women aged 15 to 19. Infants born to adolescent mothers face an elevated risk of low birth weight and an increased likelihood of newborn mortality (Burgess et al., 2022)

.Recent research has demonstrated a significant correlation between child marriage and specific maternal health complications. These obstacles encompass an increased probability of encountering labor and delivery complications at an earlier stage, along with a substantial impact on the incidence of recurrent pregnancies, preterm deliveries, and unsafe abortions. The mental and social health issues associated with child marriage impede the girl's developmental chances and exacerbate her psychological stress. Similarly, previous research on child marriage has identified associations with various adverse health behaviors and outcomes, including elevated fertility rates, reduced utilization of modern family planning, increased risk of unsafe deliveries, mental health disorders, suicidal ideation and attempts, low socioeconomic status, and morbidity and mortality in children under five years old ( Paul, 2020; ).

Child marriage adversely affects the psychological and emotional development of young females in numerous ways. They specifically feel bereft of the life they experienced in their youth. The psychological development of these individuals is adversely affected by the deprivation of personal freedom, restricted opportunities for self-identity formation, denial of psychosocial and emotional wellbeing, reproductive health, and access to Education (John et al., 2023). Furthermore, Le Strat et al. (2011) found that women married in childhood had a significantly greater prevalence of various mental disorders compared to those married at an appropriate age, with nicotine dependence and phobias being the most prevalent contributors to mental illness. Moreover, girls who married in childhood exhibited a markedly higher propensity for obtaining treatment for mental health issues throughout their lives, with antisocial personality disorder being particularly prominent among these conditions. These results were also congruent with those of Burgess et al. (2022). Moreover, young women are anticipated to assume multiple roles upon marriage: wife, daughter-in-law, homemaker, and mother. Young girls frequently lack the requisite maturity and skills to navigate their personal, familial, economic, and social interactions, rendering this expectation mentally and emotionally burdensome. It may induce enduring fears and complexes (Morrow et al., 2023). The current study investigates the consequences of social and psychological effects on child marriages.

#### **Current Recommendations and Interventions**

Practical learning and education programs for girls will be beneficial. In an intervention area that provides various modes of benefit, early marriage rates among girls are drastically reduced, as shown by Malik et al. (2025). Likewise, community engagement with local leaders and male family members can make a difference in many social norms (Hassan et al., 2024).

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Study Area and Design**

This Study was carried out in Malakand, Pakistan, with a quantitative research practice and cross-section study design being utilized to study the social and psychological impacts of child marriage. This Study included 350 girls who were married below the legal age. Due to the cultural and social constraints, convenience sampling (a non-probability sampling method) was adopted, whereby participants were recruited based on their easy availability and accessibility. The data were collected with the help of a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of the following sections: Demographics (age, Education, socioeconomic status). Social implications of child marriage (educational impact, social isolation). In additions, Psychological implications of child marriage. Mental/psychological health, emotional well-being).

#### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using: Frequencies and percentages to summarize the data. Correlations to assess the relationship between child marriage and its social/psychological impacts.

#### **Ethical Consideration**

Informed consent was taken from each participant prior to data collection. Confidentiality was guaranteed to protect the identity of participants and the sensitive information involved in the research process.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Table-1 Demographics of the Respondents

<b>Decision Making</b>	Father (59.8%), grandfather or other relative (29.5%).
<b>Age at Marriage:</b>	18% before 18 years, 4% before 15 years



**Residence:** All participants are from Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

**Education Level:** A significant 66.62% illiterate (based on 33.38% female literacy rate)

**Marriage Registration:** 77.1% of the marriages were unregistered

Table 1 shows that in the majority, the decision regarding the marriage is made by the father and other relatives, such as a grandfather or another guardian, who also make the decision. Most of the marriages occur when the girls are 10 to 14 years old. All the subjects in the study belong to Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Most of them have never attended any school or received any education. Not all marriages are officially registered, which implies that they are not recorded anywhere in the official documents.

**Table-2**

**Social impact of early marriage**

<b>Education</b>	66.62% claim that they have been interrupted in their education caused by early marriage.
<b>Health concerns:</b>	72.6% showed an acknowledgement of health problems facing them during childbirth.
<b>Cycle of Poverty:</b>	72.9% think that early marriage entraps families into poverty.
<b>Personal Growth:</b>	They feel that 81.2% limit personal development and independence due to early marriage.
<b>Gender Equality:</b>	They agreed with 70.3% that early marriage is detrimental to gender equality.
<b>Opportunities in the future:</b>	Child marriage is believed to reduce opportunities for career and life by 53.7%.
<b>Right to Decision Making:</b>	87.6% said that they denied the right to make decisions about their lives.

Table 02 shows that most of them reported that early marriage prevented them from pursuing higher education. Most of them also experienced health issues while giving birth. Most of them believe that early marriage ensnares families in poverty and makes life hard. They also think that it restricts personal development and autonomy, not allowing them to make their own decisions. Most of them agree that early marriage hurts gender equality and makes it more difficult for women to have equal rights. It further discourages future career prospects and a better life. Most of them reported that they were not permitted to control decisions in their own lives.

**Table-3**

**Psychological effect of child marriage**

<b>Loss of Control:</b>	49.3% of participants perceived that following marriage, they lost control over their lives.
<b>Fear in Marriage:</b>	55.2% admitted to often feeling frightened during their marriage.
<b>Low Self-Esteem:</b>	55.8% said that their self-esteem had been affected by marriage.
<b>Depression:</b>	52.4% felt extremely sad and hopeless due to their marriages.

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**Physical Health Problems:** 63.7% had physical problems such as headaches due to stress.

**Thoughts of Escaping:** 41.6% admitted to having considered escape from their marriage.

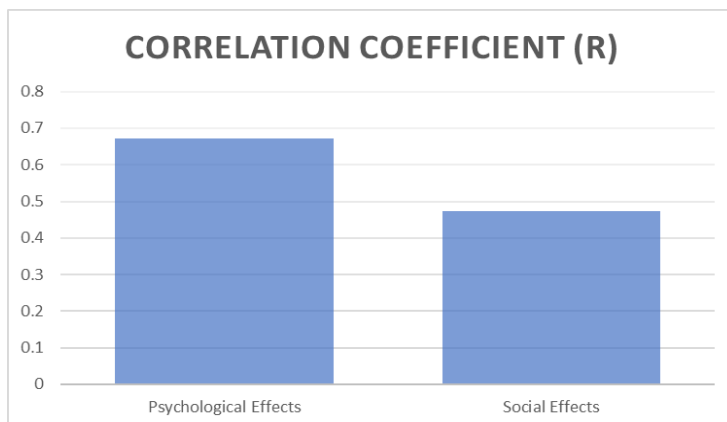
**Loneliness:** 54.3% often felt lonely or cut off from the world.

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Most of the participants believed that they lost control over their lives when they got married. Most of them often lived in fear in their marriage, and most mentioned that their self-esteem was hurt. They felt deep sadness and hopelessness, too. Physical health issues, such as constant headaches, were also experienced because of stress caused by marriage. Some even considered running away from their marriage. Most of them also felt lonely and cut off from the world.

### Correlation Coefficient Analysis

This study assessed the interrelationship between child marriage and social as well as psychological impacts: Figure-1



**Child Marriage & Psychological Effects:** The highly positive correlation coefficient( $r = 0.672$ ) indicates that with an increase in child marriage, there also rises an increase in psychological distress.

**Child Marriage & Social Effects:** The moderate positive correlation ( $r = 0.472$ ) suggests that child marriage does indeed impact social life. The correlation analysis depicts that child marriage has a statistically significant relationship with variables like psychological and social ramifications on young girls.

### DISCUSSION

The findings show that marriage at a young age has a very marked influence on the minds of young girls, which leads to depression, tension, post-traumatic stress disorders, and a lack of confidence within themselves, like research conducted at a global level and also in South Asia. However, this research focuses on Malakand, which is significant for examining sociocultural and economic issues.

### Psychological changes and child marriage

South Asian studies reflect that many, like "anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and depression," are directly related to child marriages (Singh et al., 2020). On the other hand, child brides in India reported significantly higher levels of psychological distress or suffering, such as depression or anxiety, as compared to unmarried

peers. Young brides in rural Pakistan, who also reported increased rates of the prevalence of psychological disorders, were cited by Rashid et al. (2019) due to the chronic emotional and physical conditions resulting from early marriages. These findings indicate that even in Malakand, the psychological burden of early marriage is further aggravated by forced marital arrangements and deprivation of any autonomy in one's life, arguing that early marriage restricts the psychological development of young girls generally and, particularly in this case, creates a scenario where early marriage becomes a source of psychological development.

The findings from this study regarding the high prevalence of PTSD among young brides are in accordance with those documented by Mahmood et al. (2022), who have reported trauma arising from incidents of domestic violence, forced sexual relations, and the overall isolation that child marriages entail for such young brides in Pakistan. Such trauma becomes emotional, physical, as well as social, disempowering for these girls, while they are largely being ignored by both family members as well as society as a whole.

### **Factors Sustaining Child Marriage from a Sociocultural Perspective**

Another point confirmed by the study is that child marriage in Malakand is taking place due to the customs and patriarchal family structures. These are also the findings of Ahmed and Khan (2018), who reported in their study on child marriage in rural areas of Pakistan where child marriages are a result of gender norms that carry no more significance as family respect than survival for economies while ignoring young girls' happiness. In such communities, they consider that the marrying of daughters at an earlier age not only protects them but also secures them a future in a patriarchal society that has limited opportunities for women.

According to Khan et al., marriage is perceived as a tool for reducing economic strain on families. This perspective holds for most families in Malakand because they comprise a majority poor, uneducated, and unskilled population. Early marriage, from their point of view, can be seen as a practical solution because it ensures a smaller number of dependents and offers some dowry as a means of financial relief. The result is in line with Patel and Verma's (2021).

### **Intergenerational Consequences of Child Marriage**

This study shows that child marriage has intergenerational effects: young mothers find it difficult to care for their children. Sharma and Luthra (2021) found similar results in their research because child brides have insufficient resources and Education to nurture their children. The young mothers' failure to take care of their children may cast a long spell of poverty, health issues, and low educational outcomes for generations to come.

In addition, this effect of child marriage on developing one's mental health and that of the children born to young mothers has been documented by Johnson et al. (2022). Research has demonstrated that children born to child brides are at a higher risk of experiencing poor health, malnourishment, and delays in cognitive development. It is often due to their mothers being too young or lacking the necessary resources and support to care for them effectively.

### **Gaps in Local Policy and Practice**

This study reveals significant shortcomings in local policies and emphasizes the urgent need for better enforcement of laws related to child marriage. Results support Baloch and Khan (2018), who noted that Pakistan has laws against child marriage, but enforcement is still weak in rural areas. The illiteracy about such laws or the lack of mechanized enforcement further entrench the practice. Young girls thus easily become victims of early marriages. The findings from qualitative data in this study indicate that many participants did not know the legal protection against child marriage, and there was little support from local authorities in dealing with the psychological effects of the practice. Awareness is needed for which training programs should be arranged in the presence of experts and tall personalities of society to decline the percentage of child marriages and incline mental health.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

This study identifies the serious psychological effects that child marriage has on girls in the Malakand district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study indicates that early marriage has serious mental health implications, such as a higher rate of "depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, low self-esteem," as well as life satisfaction. These psychological issues are also compounded by sociocultural factors **such as economic poverty** and limited access to Education, which promote the practice of child marriage.

Conceivably, the current research states the reproductive health impacts of teenage child marriages for more generations. This phenomenon has become highly visible among the younger mothers who were denied much-needed resources and Education to care for their children and to educate them. They pass it on to the next generation in the interwoven cycle of poverty and vulnerability, thereby aggravating it in rural areas like Malakand. With these challenges, this research recommends a holistic set of policy interventions targeting the root causes of child marriage, including reforms at the educational level, economic empowerment of girls, and community awareness programs. Such interventions should comprise psychological support and social services for child wives to empower them to take up control over their lives and end the cycle of child marriage. Also, the involvement of local communities, policymakers, and healthcare providers is very crucial in addressing the sociocultural dynamics of maintaining child marriage. Culturally appropriate approaches to the well-being of girls and access to Education, vocational training, and economic independence are very important because they protect against future incidences of child marriage and psychological effects.

Thus, this research becomes an important part of understanding child marriages in Pakistan, especially in the Malakand district, and developing targeted and evidence-based government policies and interventions for better mental health and well-being in affected girls.

### Recommendations and Policies for Stakeholders

One of the critical findings that would establish critical imperative components for the comprehensive intervention needed to prevent child marriage and deal with the psychological impact it has on children is that prevention of child marriage is equally an important avenue, along with addressing the impacts of potential child marriages. Education, as a tool for empowerment, is echoed by Zaman et al. (2019), whereby the researchers argue that providing Education with vocational training to girls could help prevent them from being vulnerable to early marriage. Educational training will not only provide girls with skills for everyday living. It will also create avenues for economic independence, which can help tear the chains of poverty that sustain child marriage. Moreover, mental health assistance should be provided to newly married young girls. The participants of the study highlighted the need for counseling services as well as psychological support that was recommended, based on their research on the mental health of child brides in rural areas. Initiatives like these should be included in the health and educational system to provide complete care for affected girls.

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