

**Child Marriage's in Pakistan: A Case of Psychological Effects**Saira Akram<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Aqeel\*<sup>2</sup>, Sarwat Sultan<sup>3</sup>, Muntaha Sharafat<sup>4</sup>**Original Article**

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**Abstract**

*Child marriage has significant psychological consequences, particularly for the young girls forced into these unions. According to UNICEF, over 20% of girls in Pakistan are married before the age of 18. Child brides may experience extreme emotional distress due to the sudden transition into adulthood and the responsibilities of married life. They often face overwhelming pressures to fulfill traditional roles as wives and mothers. The Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2014 and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2014 have set the legal minimum age for marriage at 18 for males and 16 for females. However, child marriages continue to occur due to a combination of factors, including cultural traditions, poverty, and limited awareness about the harmful consequences of early marriage. Child marriage jeopardizes the health, education, and future prospects of girls, often subjecting them to early pregnancies and a cycle of gender-based violence. To address this issue, comprehensive efforts are needed, including enforcing existing laws, raising awareness, and providing economic opportunities for families, to reduce the prevalence of child marriage in Pakistan. In this research explore the child marriage issues in Pakistan and how child issue psychologically affect the married girls, meanwhile find out the steps taken by state to overcome the child marriage issues.*

**Keywords:** *Child Marriage, Psychological, Girl, Health, Child Marriage Act 2014, UNICEF etc.*

**Background**

Child marriage is a deeply concerning practice in which one or both parties involved in a marriage are below the legal age of adulthood, typically defined as 18 years old. This harmful tradition disproportionately affects girls and is prevalent in various parts of the world, often driven by cultural, economic, and social factors. Child marriage deprives children, especially girls, of their fundamental rights, subjecting them to numerous physical, emotional, and psychological risks, including premature motherhood, limited educational opportunities, and increased vulnerability to domestic violence. Efforts to combat child marriage focus on legal reforms, raising awareness, and improving access to education and economic opportunities for young girls, with the aim of protecting their rights and well-being.

Child marriage remains a significant and deeply entrenched issue in Pakistan, with a substantial number of girls forced into early marriages. This practice is often driven by a combination of cultural traditions, economic pressures, and limited educational opportunities. Despite legislative efforts to raise the minimum age for marriage, effective enforcement remains a challenge, and the practice persists in various regions of the country. Child marriage perpetuates gender inequality, restricts access to education and healthcare, and places young girls at risk of physical and psychological harm. Tackling this issue requires a comprehensive approach, including legal reforms, educational initiatives, awareness campaigns, and community engagement to challenge the deeply ingrained norms and practices that continue to jeopardize the well-being and rights of children in Pakistan.

Child marriage has a profound and negative impact on the psychological well-being of those involved, especially the young brides. These girls often experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression due to the abrupt transition into adult roles and responsibilities. They face immense pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and adapt to unfamiliar family dynamics, which can lead to feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. The loss of educational opportunities and personal autonomy further exacerbates their psychological distress. The early onset of motherhood can also be emotionally overwhelming, as they may not be emotionally or mentally prepared to care for their children. In many cases, child brides endure emotional abuse and domestic violence, which further traumatizes them. These psychological consequences of child marriage can have long-lasting and detrimental effects on a girl's mental health and overall life satisfaction.

Child marriage has a long and complex history that spans across cultures and regions. The practice of child marriage, where one or both spouses are children, has been prevalent in various forms throughout history for a variety of reasons, including economic, social, cultural, and religious factors. The child marriage can be traced back to ancient civilizations, such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. In these societies, girls were often married off at a young age, sometimes as early as puberty, for reasons such as cementing political alliances, economic gain, and the perpetuation of family lines. Meanwhile, in medieval Europe, child marriages were not uncommon among the nobility and aristocracy. These marriages were often arranged for political and economic purposes, and they typically involved girls being married to older men.

The 19th and 20th centuries saw the emergence of social and legal movements to address child marriage. Many Western countries began raising the legal minimum age for marriage. International efforts, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), also sought to combat child marriage. Despite these efforts, child marriage remains a global issue in the 21st century. Many countries continue to struggle with high rates of child marriage, and it remains a deeply ingrained practice in some communities. Organizations and activists are working to raise awareness and combat child marriage, emphasizing the importance of education, women's rights, and economic empowerment.

Efforts to eradicate child marriage have made progress in recent years, with many countries revising their laws and policies to set higher minimum marriage ages and improve enforcement. However, the practice persists in some regions, necessitating continued global advocacy and intervention to protect the rights of children and ensure they are not forced into early and often detrimental marriages.

**Role of International Organizations in Child Marriage**

Child marriages remain a pressing global issue, affecting millions of children, primarily girls, and undermining their rights and well-being. International organizations, including UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund), play a crucial role in addressing this problem through various strategies: UNICEF plays a vital role in addressing and overcoming child marriage issues around the world. UNICEF works in partnership with governments, non-governmental organizations, and local communities to implement various strategies and programs aimed at preventing child marriage and protecting the rights of children. Here are some of the ways UNICEF contributes to addressing child marriage issues.

UNICEF advocates for changes in national laws and policies related to child marriage, aiming to raise the legal age of marriage to 18 for both girls and boys. Meanwhile, UNICEF works to raise awareness about the harmful effects of child marriage and the importance of ending the practice. This includes public campaigns, media outreach, and community engagement. On child marriage issue UNICEF conducts research and collects data on child marriage to better understand the scope of the problem and identify vulnerable populations. Meanwhile, UNICEF provides technical assistance to governments to help them develop and implement laws, policies, and action plans to combat child marriage. UNICEF encourages countries to establish or reform child protection systems to prevent and respond to child marriage cases.

UNICEF focuses on ensuring that girls have access to quality education, as education is a key factor in delaying child marriage. Keeping girls in school is a protective measure against early marriage. Parallel, organization promotes vocational training and life skills education to enhance the economic and social empowerment of girls. Additionally, UNICEF works with communities to challenge harmful social norms and practices related to child marriage. Community-based interventions aim to change attitudes and behaviors, encouraging families and communities to abandon child marriage.

Efforts are made to ensure that child marriage survivors have access to medical care and psychosocial support. So that the efforts are part of a broader global movement to end child marriage, and the organization's commitment to protecting children's rights and well-being is central to these initiatives. While progress has been made, child marriage remains a complex issue, and continued collaboration and dedication are required to achieve meaningful and lasting change.

**Significance of the Study**

Studying child marriage and its psychological effects is of paramount significance as it sheds light on the devastating consequences of this pervasive practice, emphasizing the urgent need for legal reforms, social interventions, and support systems. This research not only underscores the violation of children's rights and the perpetuation of gender inequality but also informs policymakers, advocates, and communities about the critical importance of preventing early marriages to safeguard the emotional and mental well-being of children, ultimately contributing to the creation of a more just and equitable society. In Pakistan child marriage cases frequently reported and state could not take steps to overcome such issue. This study contributes that how early marriage case report and eradicates such challenge.

**Research Methodology**

A qualitative and descriptive research approach adopted for investigating child marriage issues with support of involve in-depth literature. Meanwhile analysis of relevant documents and reports on child abuse issues and specifically UNIEF as international organization how deal to overcome child marriage issue in society. Additionally explore how stake holder's deal and state make policy and legislation to reduce such child marriage issue. The content analysis of documents, such as legal records and policy documents helps to contextualize the issue and provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and implications associated with child marriage, with the aim of informing future prevention and intervention strategies.

**Literature Review**

Agbaje at el, (2013) discusses that counseling plays a crucial role in addressing the complex issues associated with early marriage. For individuals who have entered into early marriages, particularly child brides, counseling provides a safe and supportive environment to address the emotional and psychological challenges they face. It can help them navigate the power imbalances and trauma often associated with early marriage, offering strategies for coping, building self-esteem, and developing resilience. Furthermore, counseling can offer education on reproductive health, family planning, and provide essential information to help them make informed decisions about their lives. For those at risk of early marriage, counseling can offer prevention strategies, including awareness of their rights and support in resisting pressure or coercion, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive approach to combating this harmful practice.

Ahinkorah at el, (2022) explain that the girl child marriage is strongly associated with significant barriers to maternal healthcare. When girls are married at a young age, they are more likely to become pregnant before their bodies are fully developed, increasing the risk of complications during childbirth, such as obstructed labor or fistula. Child brides often face limited access to healthcare services, including prenatal and postnatal care, which are essential for a safe pregnancy and delivery. Stigma and social isolation can prevent them from seeking medical attention, and their lack of decision-making power in the family can result in delayed or inadequate healthcare.

Bhutto at el, (2013) mentioned that the child marriage has a profound connection with depression. Girls forced into early marriages often experience a sense of helplessness, isolation, and powerlessness within these unions, which can lead to a higher risk of developing depression. The abrupt transition into adult roles and responsibilities, along with potential abusive situations, contributes to emotional distress and a lack of autonomy, ultimately affecting their mental well-being. These experiences in early marriages can exacerbate feelings of sadness, anxiety, and low self-esteem, increasing the likelihood of depression. Understanding this link is crucial for addressing the mental health needs of child brides and emphasizing the urgency of ending child marriage as a means to prevent the development of this debilitating condition.

Cantekin (2019) describes that child marriage carries a multitude of severe consequences, particularly for the young individuals involved. Girls who marry at a young age often face a range of physical and psychological risks, including increased vulnerability to domestic violence, sexual abuse, and early pregnancies with associated health complications. Their educational opportunities are curtailed, limiting their economic potential, while perpetuating cycles of poverty. Moreover, child brides are more likely to experience limited decision-making power, leading to reduced autonomy and self-esteem. The consequences of child marriage reverberate throughout

their lives, perpetuating gender inequality, and depriving them of their fundamental rights to a safe and fulfilling childhood, quality education, and the chance to develop to their full potential.

Chandra et al, (2018) mentioned that the state has a vital role in addressing the child marriage issue by implementing and enforcing legal frameworks that raise the minimum age for marriage, protect children's rights, and impose penalties for offenders. Beyond legislation, the state plays a critical role in providing education and awareness programs to both children and their families about the harmful consequences of child marriage. It should also ensure access to quality education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for girls, which can act as preventive measures. Additionally, the state can support and collaborate with local NGOs and communities to promote social change and address the cultural and economic factors contributing to child marriage. Ultimately, the state's commitment to eradicating child marriage is essential for safeguarding children's well-being, ensuring gender equality, and fostering a brighter future for the nation.

Efevbera & Bhabha (2020) Child marriage, or girl child marriage when specifically referring to girls, is a harmful practice that involves the marriage of girls under the age of 18. It is often driven by cultural, social, and economic factors, perpetuating gender inequality and human rights violations. In the context of global public health, girl child marriage has significant implications. It leads to a range of health risks for young girls, including early pregnancies with increased maternal and infant mortality rates, limited access to education and healthcare, and a heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence.

Fan & Koski, (2022) Child marriage has serious health consequences for girls. It often leads to early pregnancies, with young brides experiencing higher risks of maternal and infant mortality, as their bodies are not fully developed to handle childbirth. Girls who marry early are more likely to face complications during pregnancy and childbirth, and their infants have a higher risk of being born prematurely or with low birth weight.

Gage (2019) argues that parents play a significant role in the child marriage issue, as they are often the decision-makers and facilitators of such unions. In communities where child marriage is prevalent, parents may arrange these marriages due to cultural norms, economic pressures, or traditional beliefs, sometimes without fully considering the best interests and rights of their children. To overcome this issue, parents can play a crucial role in reversing the practice by raising awareness about its harmful consequences, valuing their children's education and personal development, and actively participating in local initiatives and advocacy efforts to promote a safer and more equitable future for their children, thereby helping to break the cycle of child marriage.

Judisasih (2020) mentioned that overcoming marriage issues typically requires effective communication, mutual understanding, and a commitment to resolving conflicts. Open and honest dialogue between partners can help address underlying problems, while empathy and active listening can build a stronger emotional connection. Seeking professional marriage counseling or therapy is often beneficial in providing structured guidance and tools to work through challenges. Additionally, a willingness to compromise and adapt to changing circumstances, along with setting clear boundaries and expectations, can contribute to a healthier, more harmonious marital relationship. Ultimately, a successful marriage often hinges on a shared dedication to working through issues collaboratively and fostering a loving and supportive partnership.

Khoto et al, (2020) points out that sociocultural norms and pressures often push girls into early marriages, as families may prioritize traditional values, female chastity, and community expectations. Economic factors play a significant role, with poverty and the perception that marriage can provide financial security driving girls to marry at a young age. Limited access to education and opportunities hinders girls' independence and decision-making power, making them more susceptible to familial and societal pressures. Gender inequality and discrimination further exacerbate this issue, as girls may lack agency and the ability to resist early marriages. Understanding and addressing these multifaceted factors are essential for preventing child marriage and empowering girls to make informed choices about their lives and futures.

McFarlane et al, (2016) discusses on child marriage remains a deeply entrenched issue within the society, with a significant number of girls forced into early marriages, often as a result of traditional customs, economic pressures, and limited educational opportunities. The practice perpetuates gender inequality, restricts girls' access to education and healthcare, and places them at a higher risk of physical and psychological harm. Although legislation has been enacted to raise the minimum age for marriage, effective enforcement remains a challenge, and cultural norms and economic factors continue to contribute to the persistence of child marriage in various regions of Pakistan.

Psaki et al, (2021) described in research that the drivers of child marriage are multifaceted and can be conceptualized within a framework that includes economic, social, cultural, and individual factors. At the economic level, poverty and dowry practices can incentivize child marriage, as it may be seen as a means to reduce economic burden or increase family income. Social norms and traditional practices often perpetuate the practice, with concerns over female chastity, family honor, and community expectations playing a role.

Sarfo (2022) finds out that child marriage can have profound and lasting psychological effects on the individuals involved, particularly the child brides. They often face high levels of emotional distress, anxiety, and depression, stemming from the abrupt transition into adult roles and responsibilities, including sexual and reproductive roles. Child brides are more likely to experience power imbalances in their relationships, which can result in a sense of helplessness, low self-esteem, and feelings of being trapped. This early exposure to intimate partner violence and lack of autonomy can lead to trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and a range of mental health issues that persist throughout their lives, hindering their emotional well-being and potential for personal growth.

Sahin et al, (2010) mentioned in research that child marriage inflicts severe psychological trauma on the young individuals involved, particularly the child brides. They are thrust into adult roles and responsibilities prematurely, often with limited control over their lives and choices. The experience of early marriage can lead to profound emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and trauma. Child brides often endure power imbalances, abuse, and a lack of autonomy in their relationships, which can result in feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem. This exposure to intimate partner violence and restricted personal agency can result in long-lasting psychological scars, potentially leading to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, and depression, ultimately impeding their emotional well-being and overall development.

### **Conclusion**

Child marriage remains a complex and deeply rooted issue with far-reaching consequences that affect individuals, communities, and societies at large. The role of government is instrumental, as it

has the power to enact and enforce legal reforms to raise the minimum age for marriage and hold perpetrators accountable. However, such legislative changes must be accompanied by a commitment to comprehensive educational and awareness programs that challenge cultural norms and beliefs, ensuring that laws are not only on the books but also effectively implemented.

Parents, as decision-makers in many child marriages, play a crucial role in shifting the practice. It is essential for them to be informed about the harmful consequences of child marriage and to prioritize their children's well-being over traditional customs. This transformation necessitates changing not only the mindset of parents but also the broader societal mindset.

Society, as a whole, must support and encourage these shifts in norms and values. Community-based interventions are often the most effective way to combat child marriage, as they can help change attitudes and behaviors, fostering an environment where early marriages are no longer seen as acceptable. Collaboration with local NGOs and religious leaders can also aid in shifting societal perspectives.

Child mental health is an integral aspect of this issue, and understanding the psychological effects of child marriage is crucial. Child brides often experience emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and even trauma due to the abrupt transition into adult roles, potential power imbalances, and abusive situations. This psychological impact underscores the urgency of preventative measures and support systems, highlighting the need for both early intervention and long-term support for child brides to help them overcome their traumatic experiences.

In conclusion, addressing child marriage necessitates a multifaceted approach, involving not only the government, parents, and society but also a keen focus on child mental health. It is only through the collective efforts of all stakeholders that this deeply entrenched practice can be eradicated, children's rights can be protected, and their overall well-being and development can be promoted.

### **Suggestion to overcome Child Marriages**

Eradicating child marriage is a complex and challenging task that requires a multi-pronged approach. Here are some suggestions on how to address and overcome these challenges:

**Legal Reforms:** Governments should raise the legal minimum age for marriage to 18 for both girls and boys, and ensure that these laws are effectively enforced. Penalties for offenders should be strictly applied.

**Education:** Promote access to quality education, especially for girls. Education empowers children, delays marriage, and breaks the cycle of poverty. School enrollment and retention programs can be effective.

**Awareness and Advocacy:** Raise awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage at the community, regional, and national levels. Engage local leaders, civil society organizations, and media to advocate for change.

**Economic Empowerment:** Address the economic factors that drive child marriage by providing vocational training and income-generating opportunities for girls and their families.

**Support Services:** Establish support systems for child brides, including legal assistance, counseling, and shelters for those at risk. Ensure that survivors of child marriage have access to medical care and psychosocial support.

**Community Engagement:** Work closely with communities to challenge harmful social norms and practices related to child marriage. Engage religious and community leaders in advocating against child marriage.

**Data Collection and Research:** Continuously gather data and conduct research to better understand the prevalence and underlying causes of child marriage in specific regions. This information can inform targeted interventions.

**Collaboration:** Promote collaboration among governments, NGOs, and international organizations to share knowledge and resources. Pooling efforts can lead to more effective strategies.

**Mentoring and Role Models:** Promote mentoring programs and provide role models for girls to inspire them to pursue their aspirations and resist early marriage.

**Legal and Policy Frameworks:** Ensure that legal and policy frameworks support gender equality, child protection, and women's rights. Encourage the implementation of international conventions, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

**Public Awareness Campaigns:** Utilize media, social media, and grassroots campaigns to spread information and encourage community dialogue on the consequences of child marriage.

**Monitoring and Evaluation:** Implement monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the effectiveness of interventions and adjust strategies accordingly.

Eradicating child marriage is a long-term endeavor that requires persistence and the active involvement of governments, communities, families, and individuals. By addressing the root causes and employing a combination of legal, educational, economic, and social strategies, it is possible to make progress in ending this harmful practice and protecting the rights and well-being of children.

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