



Desk Review on Early & Forced Marriages in Pakistan

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Abbreviations:

AJ&K: Azad Jammu and Kashmir

CEFM: Child, early and forced marriage

EFM: Early and forced marriage

GB: Gilgit Baltistan

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

SRHR: Sexual reproductive health and rights

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1. Introduction

Pakistan ranks 151 out of 153 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index Report 2020 index, published by the World Economic Forum (WEF) only managing to surpass Iraq and Yemen. Pakistan received a score of 150 in economic participation and opportunity, 143 in educational attainment, 149 in health and survival and 93 in political empowerment. A comparison of previous rankings shows that the overall ranking for Pakistan has declined from 112 in 2006 to 151 in 2020¹.

According to the Human Development Report 2019, Pakistan reported Gender Development Index (GDI) 0.747 and Gender Inequality Index (GII) 0.547 which was highest in the region. These indicators reflect discrimination faced by women in health, education and command over economic resources. A high GI value reveals the loss in human development due to inequality between women and men in reproductive health, empowerment and economic activity.

UNICEF defines a child as an individual less than 18 years of age. Child or early (forced) marriages (CEFM) have at least one child partner, and since they take place where at least one party has not expressed their full, free, and informed consent, they are also considered forced marriages. Unsurprisingly, child marriages disproportionately affect girls more than boys all over the world.

1.1. Young People's Demography

According to the last census Pakistan's population stands at a staggering 207.774 million and 26.71% of the total population is estimated to be between the ages of 15-29, while 70.11% of the population is under the age of 30²; the composition of Pakistan's youth bulge.

According to the Pakistan Demographic Health Survey (2012-2013), fourteen percent of girls, aged 15-19, have been married which is seven times higher than their male counterparts of the same age. Eight per cent of young women, aged 15-19, have become pregnant, with the highest in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) at 10.3 per cent, followed by Sindh at 7.9 per cent. School dropout rates are also alarming - 49 per cent of girls and 40 percent of boys are currently out of school³.

1.2. Situation of early and forced marriages in Punjab, Sindh, KP, Balochistan, AJ&K and GB

Unfortunately, the numbers of child marriages in each of Pakistan's provinces are not definitive. There are many surveys and studies that have been carried out in all of the provinces at different times with different methods. Hence, the numbers reported are not from one study.

In 2017, the demographic and health survey (DHS) of women in Pakistan in their early twenties showed that 39.5% had been married before the age of 18. In Punjab province, the share was 29.9%, while in Sindh province, it was 43.1%⁴.

1 - <https://shirakat.org/category/news-events/>

2 - "Pakistan Bureau of Statistics," accessed May 28, 2018, <http://www.pbs.gov.pk/>.

3 - <https://pakistan.unfpa.org/en/topics/young-people-13>

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The Population Council, with support of the United Nations Population Fund, carried out a Political Economy Analysis (PEA) on child marriage in Pakistan with focus on Balochistan. More than 21% women of 20-24 years are married in Balochistan when they turn 18 whereas about 6% are married before they turn 15 years of age. According to the report Makran has the highest prevalence of under 18-years girl marriage (23%).⁵

While it is known that child marriage is prevalent under cultural practices in KP, the exact number remains unreported. The far-flung areas of KP still follow the Swara custom, in which the side that loses arbitration has to marry off women from its family to the other side. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan Report and a survey by ActionAid, 74% of girls under 16 were married in Charsadda and Mardan districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Similar lack of information exists when it comes to AJ&K and GB. While the practice is prevalent, studies that show the exact numbers are missing.

1.3. Objectives and the Problem Statement

Pakistan's provinces and territories are diverse in their population when it comes to culture and social development. This is due to many reasons which are beyond the scope of this study. However, while all these differences necessitated the need for the devolution of power that came with the 18th Amendment to the constitution, it also meant that subjects like CEFM required separate policy level advocacy in each province and territory.

Pakistan was originally governed under the remnants of the leftover colonial law, Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. Since then, not much has changed. Before the 18th Amendment, the legal age of marriage in Pakistan was 16. After the amendment in 2010, only Sindh managed to increase the legal age of marriage to 18 in 2014. Since then all other provinces have failed to follow suit despite multiple attempts by civil society organizations.

This desk review aims to:

- 1) Summarize the existing legal situation of CEFM across the country
- 2) Bring forward Pakistan's international commitments to CEFM
- 3) Identify the political economy and dynamics supporting CEFM
- 4) Offer recommendations based on the research

1.4. Scope of the Desk Review

The scope of this desk review is confined to material available online on the subject matter. It scans available literature online in the form of reports, surveys and research. The information reviewed is locally and internationally published material.

4 - <https://globaldev.blog/child-marriage-pakistan-evidence-three-development-programs/#:~:text=In%202017%2C%20the%20demographic%20and,province%2C%20it%20was%2043.1%25.>

5 - <https://www.dawn.com/news/1664281>

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The methodology followed is that of an external desk research. Within that category, this research follows an online desk research methodology. It does not archive or reproduce any of the organizational work but is a review of everything available on the subject matter of CEFM online. It compiles information from local and international organizations done through surveys, studies and published research.

1.6. Limitations

This study is not primary research. It is merely a review of existing information and research online. The study is limited by its methodology. It is limited to what is available and may therefore only provide partial answers, in terms of the precision and/ or the timeliness of information.

2. Legal and Policy Environment

2.1. International obligations and SDGs

Pakistan is a signatory to nearly all UN treaties regarding human rights. Having adopted the Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC), Pakistan agrees, “a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (Article 1”).

The eradication of child marriage is an important and acknowledged challenge for global policy. This is because a lack of attention to child marriage will undermine the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ensuring gender equality, the empowerment of women and protection of women’s human rights is a commitment of the Government of Pakistan, which is enshrined in the 5th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Similarly, half of the SDGs will not be achieved fully without significant progress on child marriage, including those related to poverty (SDG Goal 1), nutrition, and food security (SDG Goal 2), health (SDG Goal 3), education (SDG Goal 4), economic growth (SDG Goal 8), reduction of inequality and other manifestations of gender inequality (SDG Goal 10). Likewise, there area number of related targets in SDGs that are not directly hindered by the existence of child marriage but ending child marriage from the country is critical for achieving those targets.⁶

In addition to fulfilment of SDGs, Pakistan has also committed to ending child marriage on a number of other forums. Pakistan has signed and ratified a number of international commitments (binding and non-binding) including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1990 and CEDAW UN Human Rights Charter (1945), the Beijing Declaration, ICPD and MDGs. While not all are directly linked to age of marriage, CRC and CEDAW directly address the issue. For example, Pakistan agreed to setting the minimum age of marriage to 18 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 and the Convention

6 -

<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2021/02/UNW-NCSW%20Costing%20Study%20KP-Punjab%20FINAL.pdf>

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on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1996, which obligates that states ensure free and full consent to marriage. Pakistan is also an active member of the South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC), which adopted a regional action plan to end child marriage from 2015-2018. Similarly, in 2014, the country also affirmed that it would end child marriage at the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation's (SAARC) platform "Kathmandu Call to Action to End Child Marriage". Pakistan also committed to adopting Beijing's Declaration and Platform for Action. Despite these commitments, the high statistics for child marriage remain a grave concern for the country, indicating the lack of effort placed in promoting women's rights on this front.

In Pakistan's last Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2017, many countries recommended increasing the legal age of marriage to 18 and it is important to note that Pakistan accepted all of these recommendations. Pakistan's next review should provide an explanation for not doing so on the international stage.

2.2. National and Povincial Marriage Laws

In Pakistan, the legal age for marriage is 18 for males and 16 for females (Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 and Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961), despite acceptance of the definition of child under CRC as anyone under 18 years of age. Sindh is the only province to have amended the legal age for girls also to 18 in 2014. However, poor implementation of laws resulted in a high number of child marriages even below the prescribed age limit of 16 years for girls and 18 for boys. The laws that have direct implications on child marriages in Pakistan are:

- Divorce Act, 1869
- Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929
- Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act, 1939
- Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961 (MFLO)

In 2009, the Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act, 2009 was tabled in the National Assembly to amend the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929. The bill aimed to remove the gender disparity by setting 18 years as the minimum age of marriage for males and females. The bill also proposed amendments for enhancing imprisonment and fines. The proposed bill, however, lapsed due to time constraints.

A similar provincial bill in 2013 was rejected in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Assembly after much criticism and on the notion that it would spur an unnecessary debate in the province.

In addition, more than half a dozen laws aiming to promote women have been promulgated in the past two decades. These laws help implement Pakistan's obligations under the many conventions the country has ratified. While not all of these laws directly address early age marriage, they show some commitment in securing women empowerment and fulfilling International commitments. These laws include:

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- Amendments in Family Courts Act for Khula (woman's unilateral declaration of divorce to her husband) etc. 2002
- Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act, 2006
- Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2010
- The Women in Distress and Detention Fund (amendment) Act 2010
- The protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010
- The Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2010
- Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment) Act 2011
- National Commission on the Status of Women Act 2012

Protection of Women Act, 2006, in particular, made a significant legal change by defining rape as sexual intercourse with a woman under circumstances that includes "with or without her consent when she is under sixteen years of age." While the definition does not make any exception for an underage wife and has not provided any ceiling on the age of the wife, but it does raise the question of whether sex with an underage wife can be prosecuted as rape. If so then the penal provision under Women Protection Act, 2006 can be an effective deterrent against under age marriages of girls.

In November 2011 the National Assembly of Pakistan passed the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act 2011 criminalizing several discriminatory customs practiced towards women. Among these practices are forced marriages (the act outlines strong punishments for customary practices such as wanni, swara or budla-i-sulh where women, of whom many are child brides, are forced into marriage to settle disputes), which since the passing of the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act 2011 are regulated under Section 498B of the Pakistan Penal Code which criminalizes anyone who compels a woman to enter into a marriage. Perpetrators shall be punished with imprisonment between three and seven years and a fine of 500,000 Pakistani Rupees. In 2017 a proviso was inserted in Section 498B, by which the punishment was increased from five to ten years of imprisonment and a fine of one million Rupees was set in case the concerned woman is a minor or non-Muslim.

The passage of the 18th amendment meant that formulation of legislation on social issues is now a province's domain and not the federal government's. In this regard numerous actions have been taken by the provincial governments. These include:

- The Sindh government formed a committee to finalize a bill for the prohibition of child marriages. The bill set 18 years as the legal age for marriage for both males and females. This was passed into law in 2014. Sindh is the only province to have achieved this.
- The KPK Government formed the Provincial Commission for the Welfare and Protection of Children under the Child Protection and Welfare Act, 2010 which provides protection against child marriage and discriminatory customary practices in accordance with federal laws.
- Punjab Government's child protection mechanism under the Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act, 2004 does not address child

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- The Punjab government has not been able to increase the legal age of marriage so far but it did manage to amend the Act to make the punishments and fines stricter in 2015. Previously the fine for contracting a child marriage was imprisonment for up to one month and a fine of PKR 1 thousand which was amended to 6 months' imprisonment and a fine of PKR 50,000.
- The same punishment will apply to a Nikkah Registrar who solemnizes or conducts a marriage between two children, or a marriage of an adult with a child. Parents or guardians of either party will be punished if they facilitate or organize the marriage of a minor (anyone under the age of 18) or a child. Parents and/or guardians will be punished with imprisonment of up to 6 months and fine of PKR 50,000. Furthermore, the Court can forbid any party from solemnizing, facilitating, or organizing a child marriage through an Injunction (a Court Order preventing child marriage). This includes the groom, parents, or guardians, nikkah registrars and any other person involved. Violation of an injunction is punishable with imprisonment of up to 3 months and fine of PKR 1000.
- In February 2017, the Government of Pakistan in an effort to crack down on child marriage, made an amendment to the Penal Code, toughening penalties for those found guilty of the crime. According to Section 498B of the amended Penal Code, the punishment was increased from five to ten years of imprisonment and a fine of one million Rupees in case the concerned women were a minor or non-Muslim.
- Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) Prime Minister Raja Farooq Haider has pledged to extend his support for imposing a ban on early marriages across the region, and suggested consulting the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) to take the religious fraternity on board in this regard. His remarks came during a seminar on family health and population control organized by the AJK Population Welfare Department in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the health ministry in January 2020.⁷
- No legislative actions have been taken to address the root causes of child, early and forced marriages in Pakistan since 2017. A bill to protect women and girls belonging to religious minorities from forced conversion and subsequent child/forced marriages was rejected by a Parliamentary Committee to Protect Minorities from Forced Conversions in October 2021.

2.3. National and provincial policies and strategies on child marriage (youth and SRHR policies)

Civil Society in Pakistan has regularly addressed the issue of early-age marriages by engaging government, legislators and members of the community.

Alliance against Child Marriages (AACM), a platform of 16 civil organizations and representatives from the government was formally launched in November 2013 in an effort to reduce early-age marriages. The alliance is an example of civil society and government partnership to increase the average age of

7 - <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2129248/ajk-premier-end-early-marriages>

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marriage for girls. The alliance worked closely with the Punjab Minister for Population Welfare and Social Welfare Department to end child marriages in Punjab and Sindh provinces of Pakistan.

Another example of efforts by women/child rights activists to address the issue of child marriages is the national network of more than 100 civil society organizations called The Child Rights Movement. Working for the protection and promotion of child rights and safety, this network keeps a special focus on child marriages. The network has repeatedly asked the government to take concrete and effective steps by introducing policy, enacting legislation, making budgetary allocation, creating awareness among stakeholders and prioritizing child rights to prevent child abuses in the country. For example, a postcard campaign was launched by the alliance in October 2013 asking the government to enact various laws including the National Commission on the Rights of Children Bill, the Child Protection (Criminal Law) Amendment Bill 2013 and the Child Marriages Restraint (Amendment) Bill.

In addition to the above, Civil Society Organizations have actively involved the community through awareness sessions, capacity building trainings and media campaigns. Some examples include:

- A campaign on Safe Age of Marriage titled “Legal age for identity card is 18, why is legal age for marriage less?” was launched by Shirkat Gah to advocate for an increase in the legal age of marriage for girls. Posters (both English and Urdu) highlighted the causes and consequences of early-age marriages.
- Bargad has been advocating with parliamentarians since 2014 to facilitate the Amendment to the Punjab Child Marriage Restraint Act to increase the legal age. It has provided assistance to the Punjab Youth Parliamentary Caucus as the host with legal drafting of the amendment as well. However, this was unsuccessful once tabled in the Punjab Assembly.
- Bargad also launched a campaign in 2019, “Say no to Child Brides”. This campaign has engaged social media influencers to generate awareness on the effects of CEFM. It also included a Rickshaw campaign carrying messaging for the masses.
- The Right Here Right Now (RHRN) Network Pakistan was a network of 11 organizations striving for better SRHR for youth in Pakistan. RHRN focused on strengthening the visibility of young advocates working on sexual and reproductive rights and increasing their ability to hold the government and other duty bearers accountable for the adoption and allocation of budgets and implementation of progressive and inclusive SRHR legislation and policies in line with international norms and standards. This included CEFM as well.
- Bargad also provided assistance to all provincial governments and the governments of AJK and GB in developing their Youth Policies after the 18 th Amendment. The Punjab Youth Policy was approved in 2012, the KP Youth Policy was approved in 2016 and the Sindh Youth Policy was approved in 2018. Balochistan, AJK and GB still do not have their youth policies. All youth policies and drafts include sections on child marriage as well requiring strict measures against them.
- International Day of the Girl Child has been commemorated by Civil Society ever since it was first announced in 2012. The day is celebrated to acknowledge girls as a population that faces challenges including gender inequality, violence, discrimination and early-age marriages.

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2.4. The question of equal rights

Evidence from the literature suggests that the earlier a girl marries; the more likely it is that she will have a low level of schooling. A study conducted in Bangladesh estimated that each year of early marriage below the age of 18 led to a decrease of 4–6 percentage points in the probability of secondary school completion for girls (Field and Ambrus, 2008). Child marriages disproportionately affect girls more than boys all over the world.

Child marriage is often the result of entrenched gender inequality, making girls disproportionately affected by the practice. Globally, the prevalence of child marriage among boys is just one sixth that of girls. Child marriage robs girls of their childhood and threatens their well-being. Girls who marry before 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence and less likely to remain in school. Girls who are married face worse economic and health outcomes than their unmarried peers if married before 18 years of age.

Child brides often become pregnant during adolescence, when the risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth is high. The practice can also isolate girls from family and friends, taking a heavy toll on their mental health.

3. Political economy and dynamics of EFM

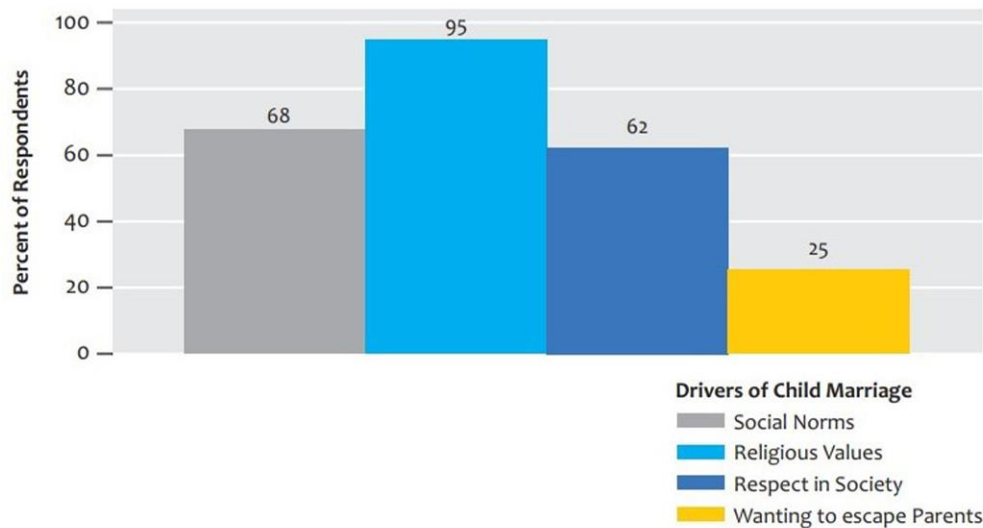
3.1. Rules of the game

In Pakistan, the legislation and implementation of laws aimed to end child marriages is very complex and needs to be addressed according to the provincial cultural context. For the legislation to be effective and the responses to be specific there is a need for research based evidence to inform policy making and legislations and help civil society devise strategies and responses which address the right drivers that contribute and lead to child marriages.

There are many different factors that hinder the end of CEFM in Pakistan. While the legal and policy environments have been making progress, albeit at a very slow pace, there are many cultural and economic factors that perpetuate the practice such as poverty, lower social status of women, cultural and traditional norms, concepts of protecting chastity and family honor, children at risk in humanitarian context and the cultural/religious glorification of marriage.

3.2. Incentive and value structures of EFM

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The Child Marriage Costing Study Survey⁹ asked questions about drivers of child marriage on a 4-Point Likert scale. As shown in the figure above, the religious and moral values seem to be the top-most factor that drives child marriage in the study areas of Punjab and KP. This, coupled with social and gender norms wherein girls are discriminated against, means there is an innate pressure on parents to marry their girls earlier than their boys. Evidence from the study also shows that 54 percent of girls agree that a young girl who gets married is more obedient to her husband compared to an older girl who gets married.

These religious values and social norms around gender are also influenced by the composition of households in terms of the number of siblings a young girl has. Having more siblings puts greater pressure on limited household resources as the siblings compete with each other for resources in terms of income spent on education, food and other expenditures. Where resources are scarce and customs are rooted, parents tend to marry their girls early to ease the pressure on resources. Evidence from the survey shows that 55 percent of the respondents agree that marrying early can solve parents' financial problems. Regression analysis on the survey data collected for this study shows that having a large number of siblings increases the likelihood of being married before 18. Estimates show that for each additional sibling, the likelihood of the girl to become a child bride increases by 8 percent. Similarly, having more girls as siblings compounds these effects as even 1 more girl child increases the likelihood of child marriage by 10 percent.

3.3. EFM and health

9 - <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAAsia/Docs/Publications/2021/02/UNW-NCSW%20Costing%20Study%20KP-Punjab%20FINAL.pdf>

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While CEFM has countless risks and adverse consequences, perhaps the most important of all are the health risks and the burden of disease as it raises questions regarding their quality of life and “right to life”. These results include preventable deaths and disability.

A qualitative study was conducted by UNFPA Turkey on the risks for and results of child, early, and forced marriages on health based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with relevant service providers, public officials, civil society workers, and academics working in this field. This study reveals many health problems caused by child marriages and adolescent pregnancies, such as increased risk of maternal and newborn mortality, miscarriages, preterm births, difficult delivery, growth retardation during pregnancy, low birth weight, severe bleeding, fistula and tears, sexually transmitted infections, and postnatal complications.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as the “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Service providers who have received training in health take this definition of health as a basis and assess health risks of child, early, and forced marriages accordingly. From a holistic perspective, these marriages generate physical, emotional, and social risks and disturb the state of well-being of persons concerned. All health risks associated with child, early, and forced marriage are addressed in the context of not being ready. Unpreparedness in anatomical, physiological, psychological, and social terms constitutes the most important factor that gives rise to health risks. The health risks of CEFM are not only associated with physiological health but the effects on psychological health include trauma and also prevent healthy psychological development.

As much as for maternal health, there are also significant risks for children’s health. Starting from pregnancy, risks emerge for both the mother and the infant. Anatomical and physiological immaturity creates further perilous outcomes with pregnancy. Not yet ready for the process, a girl cannot properly take care of her newborn child. There is frequent mention of young mothers stressed by childcare due to their already heavy workload at home and in the fields. The lack of appropriate care frequently leads to cases of infant mortality and morbidity. Expectations are higher when rural girls are married too early. Household chores and agricultural work combined with the pressure to have a child immediately after marriage can make healthy motherhood and childcare impossible.

Adolescence is already a difficult period in itself, and the addition of marriage adds an extra factor to these difficulties, upsetting the whole process and negatively affecting personality development and the psychological and emotional health of the adolescent. Lack of information about the difficulties of adolescence and ways of coping with it makes the direct transition from adolescence to adulthood even more problematic. Children unable to experience a healthy period of adolescence should not be expected to be healthy adults.

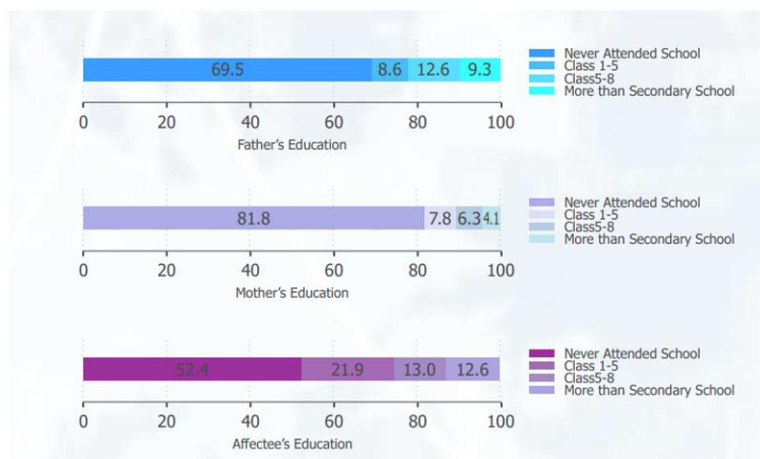
3.4. EFM & linkages to poverty and other socio-economic issues

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Education postpones the age of marriage, but if resources are limited then educating girls is often not a priority in Pakistani society. In part this is due to the poorly developed labor markets for females which result in low wages and thus low rates of return on female education. Some families consider female education a waste of resources since the child will eventually move to a different home upon her marriage.

The lack of schooling affects females in many ways. First, they are deprived of any socialization, networking or informal support that schools may provide. Second, their skills remain under-developed, reducing their earning potential. Earnings, in turn, affect women's decision-making and status within the household. Thus, the ripple effects upon their negotiating power extend to their whole life.

Within-family inequality between children by gender widens over time as girls are perceived to be 'economic burdens', or 'just another mouth to feed' with 'little to no income potential'. The quickest way to shed this burden is to marry girls off, as early as 'a suitable match' is found. Reinforcement comes from societal traditions and norms. The preference for a male heir is still very much prevalent in our society. According to a study, "How would avoiding child marriages affect human capital outcomes in Pakistan?" by the Consortium for Development Policy Research (CPDR), lack of education among parents plays a key role in the incidence of CEFM. The figure below shows the education profile of the study sample. A significant proportion of parents who married their children young had never attended school. Also, 52.4 % of those who got married early had never attended school.



Low education of mothers has multiple effects that pass on to successive generations. Such effects include low awareness of health issues, low immunization rates and high malnutrition rates among their children, as well as a higher likelihood of their children marrying at early ages. In turn, these factors reinforce the intergenerational cycle of problems. A mother's low educational attainment due to an early marriage also has indirect consequences for her children's education. Findings from a study in India suggest that a delay of one year in the mother's age of marriage is associated with a greater likelihood of her children being able to attempt arithmetic and reading tasks of higher difficulty. It also shows that the mother's age of marriage impacts choice of school for her kids and how much time and supplies are provided for homework and educational pursuits.

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Literature suggests that a young age at the time of the first birth is usually an indicator of greater future fertility. Dixon-Mueller (1993) considers the relationship between women's relative position in their marriage on the one hand and fertility on the other, and found that women who marry before age 19 have two to four times more children than those who marry after the age of 25. On average, men often report larger ideal family sizes and a lower demand for contraception than their wives (Becker, 1999). Contrary to that, women who marry at a later stage of their lives exercise more autonomy, which translates into greater relative bargaining power. For this reason, we see lower fertility rates (Balk 1994; Eswaran 2002) and an increase in the use of contraception (Ashraf et al., 2010) among women who marry later. Ashraf et al. (2010) estimates that women's autonomy in decision-making is associated with a 57 percent fall in unwanted births. In the South Asian context, Field (2004) using data from Bangladesh, found that as a result of high rates of marriage at very young ages, girls in rural Bangladesh experience more frequent reproductive health complications, have higher fertility and experience lower levels of gender equality in marriage. Nasrullah et al. (2014), using data from Pakistan, found that child marriage affects half of all married women aged 20–24 years in Pakistan, and increases their risk for high fertility and poor fertility health indicators, including rapid repeat childbirth and pregnancy termination.¹¹

The existing literature suggests that child marriage in itself can be considered a form of violence against girls. This is because gender norms that devalue girls and women and drive the practice of child marriage may also promote the acceptability of violence. Hence young brides are more likely to suffer from domestic violence. Being reclusive and vulnerable, such women are inclined to depression, low self-esteem, and physical and emotional distress. They are kept ignorant, socially isolated, and away from family support, and have few future perspectives and little access to economic opportunities. Women's economic dependency is the cornerstone of the perpetuation of early marriage. As they are often dependent on their husbands and in-laws, they are unable to speak out against these acts of violence. This increases the risk for child brides experiencing physical, sexual, emotional, and other forms of violence at the hands of their husbands' families and in-laws (UNICEF 2014). Moreover, the probability of child mortality is higher when maternal depression is accompanied by physical and emotional violence.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

- Child marriage interventions show that child marriage can be addressed only through a multi-dimensional approach. It is not enough to target only (at-risk) girls. Programs also need to change social norms and attitudes among decision-makers in the families, local influencers such as religious leaders, the officials responsible for enforcing laws, and institutions at every administrative level.

¹¹ - <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2021/02/UNW-NCSW%20Costing%20Study%20KP-Punjab%20FINAL.pdf>

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- The punishment currently is not enough to deter anyone. A mere fine of PKR 50,000 and imprisonment up to 3 months as per the law in Punjab is not appropriate for the crime.
- On the other hand, stricter punishment might not be as big an issue as the actual implementation of the punishment is. There is little to no precedence of anyone actually being punished under the existing acts.
- Indirect ways that tackle the drivers of CEFM can also prove helpful. For example, government's commitment to reducing poverty can also decrease the rate of child marriage. Free or low-cost education for girls is another useful indirect tool.
- Similarly, making sure girl births are registered, marriages are registered, nikkah khwans are given training etc. are measures that can help achieve the end goal indirectly.
- International commitments are not being honored by Pakistan at the moment. The global world will hold Pakistan accountable for its actions at multiple pending reviews such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the Voluntary National Review (VNR).



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