

## Child/Early Marriage in Pakistan

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### Definition

Child marriage is defined as marriage of a male or a female prior to 18 years of age.

### Child Marriage Around the World

Child marriage is a truly global problem that cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. Child brides can be found in every region in the world, from the Middle East to Latin America, and from South Asia to Europe. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia regions have one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. According to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) report in 2017, across the globe, levels of child marriage are highest in sub-Saharan Africa, where around 4 in 10 young women get married before the age of 18. According to this report, it was found that 3 in 10 girls get married before the age of 18 in South Asia, 17% in the Middle East and North Africa, 11% in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and 25% in Latin America and Caribbean.

### Situation in Pakistan

Pakistan is a member of the South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC), an inter-governmental body which has adopted regional action plan targeting child marriage. Child marriage in Pakistan is connected with tradition, culture, and customary practices. It sometimes involves the transfer of money, settlement of debts or exchange of daughters (Vani/Swara or Watta Satta) sanctioned by Jirga or Panchayat (a council of elders from the community). The dowry tradition that is largely practiced in Pakistan consists of exchange of wealth, either in the form of money or gifts, before and after marriage between the bride's and groom's families. As a result, women are likely to get married at much younger ages, and become economically and socially dependent on family's support. These factors clearly compromise the productivity of women by limiting their role in family decision-making.

#### i. Puberty, Marriage and Childbearing

The mean age of puberty for females is 13.5 years and for males 15.0 years in Pakistan. The mean age of marriage for women in Pakistan has significantly increased from 13.3 years to 23.1 years with steady gains over time, but the overall age at marriage is still much lower. Women residing in rural areas tend to marry much earlier than those living in urban areas. According to UNICEF estimate, the prevalence of child marriage among all women aged 20 to 24 in Pakistan is 24.0%. The practice unduly affects girls of lower socio-economic status and those residing in rural regions. Despite steady increase in the age of marriage over time in Pakistan, the national data show close relationship between

marriage and childbearing. It has been shown that marriage is almost immediately followed with pregnancy among females younger than 20 years old.

ii. **Fertility, Contraception and Son preferences**

By 2020, the population policy of Pakistan has a target of achieving stabilization in population by reducing annual population growth rate from 1.9% to 1.3% and total fertility rate to 2.1. However, there is only meager progress in achieving this goal with overall contraceptive rate still hovering around 27%, which is quite low as compared to other neighboring countries. Adolescent women in Pakistan are culturally expected to prove fertility background for son after marriage. Husbands desire to have more children, and son preference is observed among couples. High fertility and low contraception use among women can be attributed to these tendencies. These young girls are faced with high maternal and infant mortality. When coupled with limited access to healthcare and low antenatal services, the situation surrounding them would lead to poor health outcomes.

iii. **Government's Legal Implementations for Male and Female Age at Marriage**

Pakistan's Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) 1929 sets the legal age for marriage at 16 years for women and 18 for men. In February 2017, the Parliament adopted an amendment to the Penal Code that would toughen punishment against child marriage. Offenders face a minimum of five years in prison and may serve up to 10 years including a fine of up to 1 million rupees. In April 2014, the Sindh Assembly unanimously adopted the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, increasing the age of marriage to 18 and stipulating that marriage below 18 is a punishable offence. A similar bill proposed at the national level was unfortunately struck down by the Pakistan's National Assembly in May 2017. Punjab and Khyber Pakhtukhwa have introduced and adopted bills with harsher penalties for marriage under the age of 16. However, they did not increase the age of marriage to 18. Recently the Council of Islamic Ideology, a constitutional body which gives Islamic legal advice to the Pakistani government, declared that Pakistani laws prohibiting child marriage are un-Islamic. The rulings were widely criticized at the national and international levels.

**Significance of Child Marriage**

Although the practice of child marriage affects both boys and girls, it poses disproportionately serious risks to girls, bringing about far more negative health outcomes among girls. The prevalence of child marriages, even though less than some of the neighboring countries such as India, Nepal and Bangladesh, is still substantial in Pakistan. Studies from other low-income countries have shown that child marriage is associated with high maternal

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and child mortality/morbidity. Further, reports by UNICEF and International Council for Research on Women (ICRW) consisting of data from various countries found that, as compared to those married as adults, women married as children are mostly poor and uneducated, residing in rural areas with limited access to healthcare services. This disproportionate risk of high maternal and child mortality/morbidity seems to be related to their socio-economic, cultural and structural vulnerabilities.



Girl aged under 16 prepared for marriage in Sindh



Young married girl with a pregnancy problem in southern Punjab