



How would avoiding child marriages affect human capital outcomes in Pakistan?

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Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed tremendous progress in global human development: since 1990, the percentage of the population living in extreme poverty has declined from 36% to 9.2% in 2022¹; neonatal mortality rates are down by 51%²; and global maternal mortality has declined by 38% (since 2000)³. Despite such progress, several problematic practices persist. Child marriage is one such practice: 12 million girls are married before the age of 18 every year – nearly 1 every 2 seconds⁴.

UNICEF defines a child as an individual under 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. 650 million women alive today had been married as a child⁵.

The past two decades have witnessed much effort to address CEFM and its root causes. UNICEF (2018)⁶ reports a decline from 25 %

to 21 % in the global prevalence of CEFM in a decade; but huge regional variations still exist. South Asia remains a hotspot of child marriages. There, girls from the poorest quintile are four times as likely to become child brides as girls from the richest quintile.

The determinants as well as consequences of child marriages are intuitive and straightforward. The academic literature⁷ highlights poverty, illiteracy, cultural practices, lack of awareness, patriarchal norms, poor law enforcement, and risks of sexual violence as the major reasons for child marriages. Studies⁸ also show how child marriages are associated with adverse social outcomes such as unchecked population growth and compromised human capital in the form of poor health and education outcomes, which in turn reinforce intergenerational poverty.

In this article we focus on low education attainment as a reason as well as a consequence of early marriages. We note how CEFM translates into suboptimal quality of human capital. We then examine how increasing education and awareness is one potential and potent solution for eradicating the practice of early marriages in line with Sustainable Development Goals 5.3.⁹ We

Low Education as a Determinant of Child Marriage

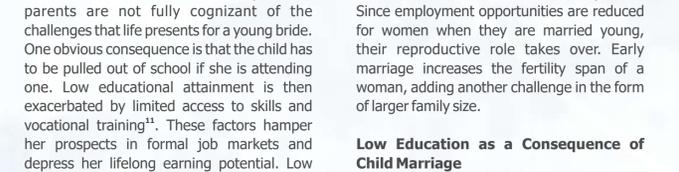
It can be argued that in a patriarchal society like ours, the birth of a girl child is met with mixed emotions: the worries of marrying her off and providing a dowry start from her infancy. Often, the lower the education attainment of the family, the more aggravated their concerns, especially since low education and low income usually occur in tandem.

Education postpones age of marriage, but if resources are limited then educating girls is not often a priority. Parents prefer their male children to go to school and to acquire marketable skills. In part this is due to poorly

developed labor markets for females which result in low wages and thus low return of human education. Furthermore, 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 various 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 extend to their negotiating power for 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'¹⁰. 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. This is supported by our quantitative data which shows 'general tradition in the family' to be a major determinant of child marriage. This is corroborated by qualitative data from child brides themselves.

"It was my mothers' decision in the end but mostly it was driven by a father's thinking that children should be married off as soon as possible after puberty. It is also a tradition in our family to marry girls at a young age. This is why he got me married so quickly" Female, DG Khan, Punjab



Education Profile of Child Early and Forced Marriage Families

Low education attainment often implies that parents are not fully cognizant of the challenges that life presents for a young bride. One obvious consequence is that the child has to be pulled out of school if she is attending one. Low educational attainment is then exacerbated by limited access to skills and vocational training¹¹. These factors hamper her prospects in formal job markets and depress her lifelong earning potential. Low female labor force participation in turn increases household poverty, reduces income diversity thus making the household more vulnerable to income shocks¹². Nasrullah (2013) reports that poverty, low formal education and rural residence are significant determinants of the prevalence of CEFM in Pakistan.

Education levels and earning prospects are

also found to be correlated with fertility levels. Since employment opportunities are reduced for women when they are married young, their reproductive role takes over. Early marriage increases the fertility span of a woman, adding another challenge in the form of larger family size.

Low Education as a Consequence of Child Marriage

Low education of mothers has multiple effects that pass onto 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.

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 in the Shirakat study. A



Source Section 5: CEFM Study

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.



"My father had passed away. My mother wished for me to pursue higher education but due to the conservative environment and dominance of my uncle who did not favor girls being educated, she could not provide me with further education. It was my uncle's decision to get me married despite my mother telling them that I am underage and that she will find a suitable match for me when I grow older." Female, Dadu, Sindh

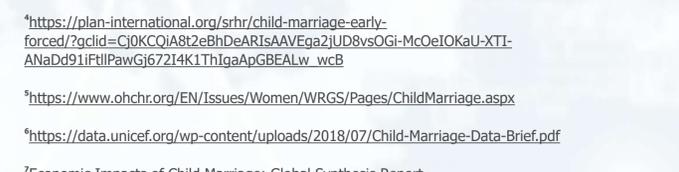
Advantage of reducing feeding and clothing expenses.

The foregoing has shown that CEFM affects not just the rights of the girl child but also the prospects of future generations. The practice involves a long term social cost that must be taken into account. The wider community must play a part in eliminating CEFM. Teachers and parents must be made aware of its negative ramifications. Endorsement from religious leaders about the ills of CEFM would help raise awareness. Health care providers, media and artists also need to incorporate the harmful effects of child marriages in their messages and campaigns. Lastly, lawyers should be trained to comply with the law to stop the practice of CEFM instead of facilitating it. Of course, such changes cannot be fully implemented without a shift in the perception that it is preferable for girls to be married while still legally children.

Making education compulsory, safe and accessible; and offering economic incentives to the poor to ensure attendance in school is a generally agreed-upon policy to combat CEFM. Priority should be given to rural and slum areas¹⁴. In addition to formal schooling, girls should be empowered with information, skills, and support networks. In Pakistan, cottage industries can be promoted in rural areas to create earning opportunities for women thus relieving the economic burden felt by poor parents.

A critical aspect is creating awareness and spreading education in its truest sense, above and beyond basic literacy and numeracy. Our society requires a shift in how marriages and gender roles are viewed. Given the age distribution in Pakistan, harnessing the power of young minds can be achieved by providing them with skills and education and channeling their energies in productive spheres. Nationwide awareness campaigns to raise awareness about CEFM, fully supported by a legal framework that makes child marriages difficult is the need of the hour.

"Ending of early child marriages has to be a state owned campaign with follow up of good health facilities, family planning facilities, schools, pro-bono lawyers and sensitization of the police. We need to impart essential life skills in girls that raises their self-esteem to stand up for themselves and prevent them from dropping out or at least enable them to struggle for the rest of their lives" Director, Saahil



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