



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

Bilquis Tahira,
Dr. Hadia Majid,
Rabia Saeed,
Saman Tahir,
Zainab Shuja

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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

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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

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.

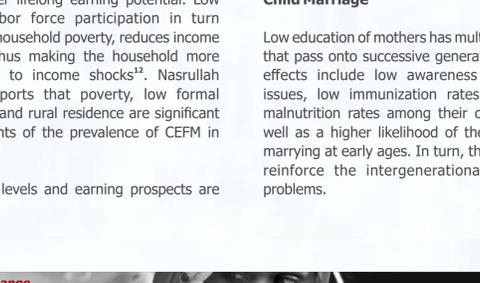


Figure : Education Profile of Child Early and Forced Marriage Families

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.

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.

Education levels and earning prospects are

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.

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A mother's low educational attainment due to an early marriage also has indirect consequences for her children's education. Findings from a rigorous study in India¹³ 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. They also show that mother's age of marriage is associated with choice of school for her kids and how much time and supplies are provided for homework and educational pursuits.

advantage of reducing feeding and clothing expenses.

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Early marriages entrench gender roles because of the belief that the younger a girl is, the easier she is to control. Thus, the affected child also faces household tensions related to unequal gender roles. The urge to exert greater control on women is manifested in customs like watta satta¹⁴ in Pakistan. While some families would opt for Watta-satta as a way to protect one's daughter from ill-treatment in her husband's household because the latter has also given a daughter to the brother of the bride, an implicit motive behind such marriages is an attempt to ensure control and usually involves at least one under-age bride whose consent is not solicited. Our study found the highest prevalence of CEFM (49%) to be in watta satta cases.

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.

CEFM may also be promoted by the practice of providing dowries. Since dowry demands grow as girls age, there is an indirect benefit for poor households in marrying off young girls in addition to the direct economic

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 areas¹⁵. 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.

"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

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.

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About the Article

The article discusses the social problem of early child marriages and their economic repercussions with a special focus on low education, both as a determinant as well as a consequence of child marriages. This is based on a 2022 primary study conducted by an Islamabad based NGO, Shirakat (Partnership for Development) in ten districts of Pakistan.



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- ¹¹Khanna et al., 2013;
- ¹²Chaaban & Cunningham 2011; Duran & Eraslan, 2019; & Smith & Haddad 2015
- ¹³Sekhri & Debnath, 2014
- ¹⁴Child Marriages in Humanitarian Settings, Girls Not Brides, 2018
- ¹⁵Watta Satta is a tradition involving simultaneous marriage of brother-sister pair to another brother-sister pair
- ¹⁶Bicer & Ozcebe, 2013; Naveed & Butt, 2015; Parsons et al, 2015; & Rahman & Nasrin, 2012.

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Insights for Change

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