

Strategies to End  
Child Marriages  
in Pakistani Context



## Child Marriage in Pakistani Context

Child marriage is not only a violation of a girl's rights; it also seriously compromises efforts to reduce gender based violence, advance education, overcome poverty and improve health indicators for girls and women. Child brides in Pakistan are often forced into early sexual activity and therefore early childbearing. Because their bodies are not yet fully developed, these young adolescents are at risk of suffering life-threatening or debilitating conditions as a result of childbirth like obstetric fistula and hemorrhaging, or even death. Also, girls are more vulnerable to contracting life-threatening diseases as they are often given away in marriage to much older men who have an elevated chance of being HIV positive or having other sexually-transmitted infections because of prior sexual experience.

When a girl is pulled from school and forced to marry young, her personal development is stunted. She is left with few – if any – negotiation skills and therefore has limited decision-making power in her new household. Often uneducated and unskilled, many child brides are completely dependent on their husbands and in-laws to survive. Girls are often not yet mature or skilled enough to properly perform household tasks or care for their husbands and children.

In spite of some legislative changes in Sindh and Punjab, child marriage in Pakistan remains a big challenge. A dangerous combination of entrenched poverty and cultural norms that are deeply rooted in patriarchal tradition continue to fuel the harmful practice. As a result, customary law and economic need often trump national policies and legislation. Despite best efforts, girls continue to be pulled out of school and forced into marriage.

With the marriage, a girl's childhood abruptly ends, her health and future prospects immediately fall in jeopardy, and large number of girls in Pakistan are at the risk of being forced to wed as part of deeply entrenched practice that significantly impedes progress on human rights, education, health and economic development. The rights of women and girls, including freedom from child marriage have generated emotionally charged and debates of law reform all over Pakistan in the last decade. Such debates often focus on personal opinions and experiences, or on the varied interpretations of religious teachings on marriage or cultural and societal issues.

Through this brochure we are glad to share with you some strategies which can be possibly be used to delay or prevent child marriages and it provides recommendations, actions for needed reform at community and policy level. More effective policies, programs and actions will not only help reduce child marriage prevalence; it will also help in the fight against poverty and increase the pace of development in Pakistan. We anticipate that this publication will help kick-start strategies for reducing the prevalence of child marriage, tailored to the unique context and needs of each community and pave the way for more just society in which boys and girls enjoy equal rights, freedoms and opportunities to grow into productive and healthy adults.

### **Child Marriage in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa**

Steeped in centuries-old tribal tradition and exacerbated by poverty, child marriage is pervasive in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and efforts to eradicate it should be a high priority on the Government's and civil society development agenda. Girls are largely viewed as an economic burden on the family, and parents are quick to marry off their daughters to receive a bride price in some districts. According to the report of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan the figures are alarming: the child marriage ratio in some districts are as high as 74 percent. While statistics may vary slightly across districts geographic and demographic samples, it is clear that girls from all districts are vulnerable to child marriage. Key causes are illiteracy and lack of access to schools in rural areas, low levels of awareness of both Sharia and state laws, and low levels of awareness of the harms and negative consequences of childhood marriage. Child marriage has adverse physical and psycho-social health, personal security and social effects on young and adolescent girls as well as their communities.

Because the practice deprives girls of education, they grow up ill-equipped to make safe and healthy choices as adults while remaining entrenched in poverty. As a result, they are also more likely to engage their own children in marriage at an early age. The magnitude of the problem across the province warrants the urgent attention of civil society and policymakers as the need for responsive and effective policies and legislative action is critical.

## Policy Overview of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

The child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 stipulates that a girl cannot legally marry until she is 16. However, in practice, a girl is often married off when she is considered 'physically mature', which can occur at a much younger age. Security situation, temporary dislocations, disasters and conflicts adds in creating an environment for tribal traditions like child marriage to thrive. Arranging a “girl's marriage” is one of life's most important tasks in Pakhtun society and parents often agree to an early union for fear that another viable offer may not emerge. Girls are often married at a very young age to protect their sexual purity; late marriage is considered shameful. Parents also marry off their daughters to repay debts, resolve tribal conflicts and boost family standing. Some child marriages serve to preserve a family's image but sometimes result in what amounts to forced domestic or sexual slavery for girls.

**The Consequences:** Child marriage leads to early sexual initiation and consequently pregnancy, yet most of the population has limited knowledge of the health risks associated with it. Premature pregnancy often leaves many physical and emotional scars. It also presents a high risk for complications, including, but not limited to, prolonged and obstructed labor, hemorrhaging, infection and obstetric fistula. Young mothers often require more caesarian sections than women over 18 because their bodies are not yet sufficiently developed for childbirth. Early marriage and pregnancy is one of the major contributor to high maternal mortality rate. Early marriage also impacts girls' social and personal development. Following marriage, many girls are forced to drop out of school, if they were fortunate enough to receive schooling in the first place. Because many child brides are uneducated and unskilled, they are completely dependent on their husbands and in-laws to survive. Girls are often not yet mature enough to perform household tasks or care for their husbands and children. Many child brides are abused by their husbands, families and in-laws. As a result, many opt for self-immolation and other forms of suicide and sexual and domestic violence.



### **Some proposed Strategies:**

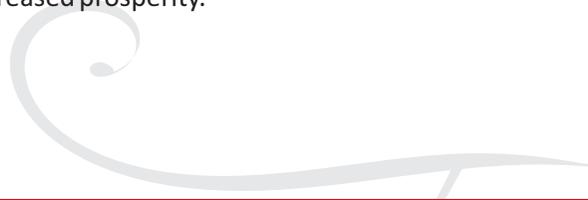
#### **Strengthen birth registration system as a first step to enforcing laws:**

A much more systematic approach to enforcing birth registration would greatly help enforce child marriage laws and reduce prevalence of the harmful practice. Birth registration is critical because it provides proof of age, based on which an underage marriage can be identified and halted and/or those abetting it can be punished. A monitoring system would help identify and impose strict fines on parents who fail to register their children's births.

**Strengthen laws and law enforcement:** Stronger enforcement of the registration of all nuptials is urgently needed as a critical first step to begin monitoring and reducing the prevalence of child marriage. Schools and hospitals can play a role in recording marriages in local communities. Special trainings for police and other law enforcement officials on the dangers of child marriage and the importance of enforcing relevant child protection laws would also be beneficial. In addition, quick action to bring amendment in the Child Marriage Restrain Act 1929 and to raise the legal minimum age of girl from 16 to 18.

**Design effective child marriage monitoring systems:** Accurate statistics on the incidence of child marriage are rare the government must review and strengthen its marriage registration and monitoring system and find more effective ways of registering unions, especially in poor, rural areas where prevalence of child marriage is highest. This in turn will provide a solid foundation on which to better enforce child marriage laws when they are broken, or prevent such unions from occurring in the first place.

**Keep girls in school:** According to some statistics the female literacy rate in the province is low as 32% which is the matter of great concern. Most girls have had no schooling. Government policies mandating education for all children until the age of 18, with equal emphasis on girls, would yield a better educated society which can contribute to national development and increased prosperity.



**Create girl friendly facilities and environment within the schools:** It has been observed that a rise in education is correlated with a fall in child marriage and pregnancy among adolescents an effective strategy could be to create facilities that are friendly to girls. These efforts should be complemented by the creation of other support structures within the communities where child marriage rates are high.

**Reproductive health education:** Life skills seminars organized to educate young people on issues of sexuality and marriage and the establishment of a forum for them to discuss such issues freely could help reduce levels of teenage pregnancy and marriage. Creating dialogue by distributing materials on the dangers of early marriage to schools and colleges nationwide would be an effective tactic to generate public awareness. In this context, incorporating reproductive health education into school curricula would also serve as an effective strategy for knowledge building.

**Strategically engage religious and key community leaders:** Given the sensitivities involved in dealing with religious institutions, it will be helpful to engage in a strategic discussion with key religious and other leaders from communities where the prevalence is high. Religious and community leaders are greatly venerated in rural areas and can especially influence behavior. They communicate effectively with parents of adolescent boys and girls, and their opinions are held in high regard by communities.

**Invest in a countrywide awareness-raising campaign on the adverse effects of child marriage:** All community members and civil society organizations must become engaged in advocating against child marriage in order to bring about change. It is therefore recommended that the government invest in a mass media and community outreach campaign, rolled out as an important means of reaching these audiences, and importantly, parents of adolescents. In addition, school curricula with lessons on the adverse effects of early marriage for both boys and girls, is strongly advised.

**Launch area specific and targeted awareness-raising campaign:** Raising awareness in areas where the prevalence is high can help families, communities and society to understand the harm that child marriage can cause to girls families and societies.

A strategic campaign may include local media campaigns as well as trainings for community leaders, police and other law enforcement personnel and government officials.

**Invest in economic incentive programs:** Because child marriage is exacerbated by poverty, addressing the financial motivations behind the practice could help reduce prevalence among impoverished and/or indebted families. Therefore, it is highly recommended that the government invest in piloting cash incentive programs to educate girls and test their effectiveness in discouraging the practice of child marriage.

**Engage Men and Boys:** Engaging Men and Boys can prove to be critical Strategy in delaying child marriage, it is strongly recommended to roll out campaign in high-risk areas and engage men and boys who ultimately make important matrimonial decisions. These efforts would complement programmes that are already underway in community to help shift men and boys' attitudes in order to create a society with more gender equitable views.

**Heed international recommendations:** It is advised that the government review relevant recommendations from 2012 Universal Period Review (UPR), CRC and CEDAW, civil society, communities and government actors need to look at all of the factors that are limiting women's development and respond accordingly with an integrated approach, including interventions at the community level and strengthened national policies.

**Coordinate with the international community:** Coordination with other countries in the region, as well as with international agencies that have designed effective policies and programmes towards ending child marriage, could greatly inform Pakistan's own strategies to design innovative new interventions and initiatives.

**Work towards universal child marriage laws:** It is highly recommended that steps towards increasing the legal age of marriage in the country are taken. This would mean strategic dialogue and capacity building of stakeholders and influential figures associated with them of the harms and adverse effects child marriage has on the development of girls, women and society as a whole.



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