

## **Child Marriages and Female Education: Examining the Impact on Learning Opportunities in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

The present research investigated the profound effects of child marriages on female education and learning in Pakistan, focusing on how patriarchal beliefs and religious misconceptions contribute to this issue. Deeply entrenched patriarchal mindsets and traditional values perpetuate gender discrimination, leading to a high incidence of child marriages that adversely impact the educational opportunities and development of young girls. Present research explores the relationship between these socio-cultural factors and their detrimental effects on the education and mental health of 118 participants including 79 girls and 39 boys married before the age of 18. The girls were disproportionately more in sample as child marriage practice is more common in girls as compared to the boys. The present research used the qualitative research design consisted of in-depth interviews for rigorous information about the topic of investigation. Thematic analysis was conducted to explore the major findings from the transcripts of interviews. Findings reveal that child marriages significantly hinder educational attainment, resulting in lower academic performance and reduced school attendance among affected girls. The present research highlights gender-specific disparities, with girls experiencing greater educational setbacks compared to their male counterparts. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to promote gender equality and improve educational outcomes for girls. By fostering accurate religious understanding and challenging regressive norms, present research aimed to contribute to the ongoing efforts to dismantle patriarchal paradigms and enhance the quality of life for girls impacted by early marriage in Pakistan.

*Keywords:* child marriages, educational disruption, gender inequality, patriarchal beliefs

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## Introduction

Child marriage has a significant impact on young girls' education and general well-being. It is a problem that is common in many developing nations, especially in South Asia (Nasrullah et al., 2014). The practice of marrying girls at a young age is a reflection of gender inequality that limits educational prospects and impedes personal development in Pakistan, where societal norms are frequently extremely patriarchal (Bhabha, 2018). With an emphasis on how patriarchal ideas and religious misconceptions support this practice and its negative impacts on girls' learning possibilities, present research aimed to investigate the effects of child marriages on female education.

One in three Pakistani girls get married before turning 18, which is much higher than the global norm, according to UNICEF (2020). Girls who are forced into child marriages frequently lose their schooling, which restricts their access to education and exacerbates long-term educational gaps. Gender-specific impediments that limit girls' educational advancement are reinforced by underlying socio-cultural and religious dynamics in Pakistan, which are crucial in maintaining these harmful practices (Ali, 2021).

## Literature Review

According to research child marriages frequently result in early school dropout, which reduces the chances of future scholastic success and employment (Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021). Young girls who marry are frequently overburdened with motherhood and family responsibilities, which leaves them with little time for further study (Nour, 2009). Cultural and religious conventions in Pakistan that place a higher priority on girls' home responsibilities than their academic endeavors further compound the educational difficulties faced by married girls (Jamal, 2020). Boys are more likely than females to continue their education after marriage, despite the fact that they are equally impacted by child marriages due to different societal expectations (Awan, 2017).

Pakistani society's strong patriarchal ideals are a major contributor to the continuation of child marriages (Mahmood & Shah, 2015). Early marriage is frequently seen by families as a means of preserving girls' honor, securing their future, and lessening the financial burden of the dowry (Anwar, 2018). Religious misunderstandings exacerbate the problem, since some groups use Islamic teachings as justification for early marriage customs (Shaikh, 2016). Scholars and religious leaders, however, stress that Islam forbids underage marriage and supports education for both boys and girls (Iqbal, 2020).

In Pakistan, child marriage is still a major problem, especially in rural areas where patriarchal attitudes and customs are prevalent. The practice of child marriage persists in undermining the educational, social, and economic opportunities for millions of girls, even in spite of notable global progress in this regard. Pakistan is among the nations where child marriage is still commonly practiced, according to UNICEF (2020), particularly in areas where family decisions are governed by patriarchal and religiously oriented societal institutions. Thus, present research aimed to investigate the deep and complex effects of child marriage on the education of girls, their access to learning opportunities, and their general development, paying particular attention to the ways in which sociocultural variables support and impede these effects.

The rationale for present research is threefold:

### ***Examining the Educational Impact of Child Marriage***

Studies continuously demonstrate that child marriage severely impairs girls' education, causing them to drop out of school early and consequently having poorer educational attainment (Nasrullah et al., 2014). Girls who marry young frequently take on domestic chores that leave little time for education, which makes it difficult for them to finish even a basic education. Since education is closely associated with improved health outcomes, economic growth, and gender equality, this disruption will have long-term effects on society as a whole as well as on the individual (UNICEF, 2020). Present research intends to close this gap by offering a thorough analysis of the educational obstacles experienced by young Pakistani brides and examining both the short- and long-term impacts on their education.

### ***Calling Attention to Disparities Based on Gender***

Although child marriage has an impact on both boys and girls, girls are disproportionately affected. According to earlier research, girls are expected to put family responsibilities ahead of education, but guys who marry young are more likely to finish their education (Awan, 2017). In order to better understand these gender differences, present research looks at the ways that patriarchal beliefs and cultural expectations put unique obstacles in the way of girls' education, which in turn exacerbates gender disparity. Through a comparative comparison of the experiences of girls and boys married before turning 18, the research will demonstrate the critical need for gender-sensitive treatments.

### ***Challenging Patriarchal Norms and Religious Myths***

In many regions of Pakistan, deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and religious myths are used as justifications for child marriage. Families may think that marriage after puberty is required by religious teachings, or they may view early marriage as a way to preserve family honor—beliefs that may be misguided (Shaikh, 2016). The present research aimed to conduct a critical analysis of the ways in which socio-cultural and religious elements perpetuate child marriage and undermine girls' educational opportunities. By dispelling these myths, the study hopes to support existing initiatives to rectify misinterpretations of religion and combat regressive attitudes that jeopardize girls' rights to an education and personal growth.

Given these circumstances, our study is not only relevant but also essential for guiding community-based initiatives and policy that support gender equality, improve access to education, and discourage detrimental practices like child marriage. Policymakers, educators, and activists striving to break down the socio-cultural barriers preventing girls from realizing their full potential and their right to an education will find great value in the findings.

## **Method**

### ***Objectives of Study***

This study aimed to explore the following objectives:

1. **To explore the educational impact of child marriage** by examining how early marriage disrupts schooling, limits academic achievement, and affects future opportunities for girls in Pakistan.

2. **To analyze gender disparities in educational outcomes** by comparing the experiences of married girls and boys, highlighting the role of societal expectations in reinforcing inequality.
3. **To investigate the influence of patriarchal norms and religious misconceptions** in sustaining child marriage and restricting girls' access to education.
4. **To understand the psychosocial consequences of child marriage** on young brides, particularly in relation to their motivation, self-perception, and learning opportunities.
5. **To identify sociocultural barriers and enablers** affecting married girls' education and suggest community-driven strategies to improve their access to learning.
6. **To provide insights for policymakers, educators, and activists** on addressing child marriage through education-focused interventions and policy reforms.

### *Research Design and Sample*

The present research used a qualitative methodology that consisted of in-depth interviews to investigate the experiences of 118 participants, 39 boys and 79 girls who had all gotten married before turning 18. Because they were chosen from both Pakistan's rural and urban areas, the participants represented a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

The demographic details of the 118 study participants are broken down in detail in Table 1. It includes gender, age at marriage, education level, place of residence, and socio-economic status. Most participants were women as it is reported earlier in introduction that women are more effected by the practice of child marriages in Pakistan. Most participants reported that they aged 15-16 years at the time of their marriage. Most participants were only educated till middle school which is grade 6-8. The majority of participants belonged to rural areas of Pakistan. Plus, the majority belonged to Low Socioeconomic Status.

Table 1: Demographic Details of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (N = 118)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Women	79	66.9%
	Men	39	33.1%
<b>Age at Marriage</b>	12-14 years	47	39.8%
	15-16 years	52	44.1%
	17-18 years	19	16.1%
<b>Education Level</b>	No formal education	25	21.2%
	Primary education (1-5 grade)	39	33.1%
	Middle school (6-8 grade)	29	24.6%
	Secondary school (9-10 grade)	18	15.3%
	Higher secondary school (11-12 grade)	7	5.9%
<b>Residence</b>	Rural	82	69.5%
	Urban	36	30.5%
<b>Socio-economic Status</b>	Low-income	63	53.4%
	Middle-income	45	38.1%
	High-income	10	8.5%

## ***Data Collection***

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from the participants and their families. The main goals of the interviews were to investigate how child marriage affects schooling, what obstacles married couples encounter in their quest for higher education, and how cultural and religious attitudes affect marriage choices. Local languages were used for the interviews, which were then transcribed for analysis.

## **Results**

Thematic analysis, a qualitative technique that finds patterns or themes in the data, was used to analyze the data. Braun & Clarke (2021) method has been used for conducting thematic analysis in present research. After the transcripts were transcribed, important themes about gender inequality, educational disruption, and the impact of patriarchal and religious traditions were found. This method made it possible to comprehend how child marriages impact women's education in the Pakistani setting in a more complex way.

Key themes emerged from the thematic analysis are as follow:

### ***Disruption to Education***

It was discovered that child marriages seriously impair girls' education, with the majority of participants stating that they were compelled to leave school soon after getting married. The main causes were pressure from in-laws to put household obligations ahead of schooling, early parenthood, and household responsibilities.

### ***Gender Disparities***

The study brought to light glaring differences between the educational outcomes of the sexes. Although child marriages had an impact on both boys and girls, boys were more likely to pursue further education after marriage. Girls, on the other hand, had to overcome more challenges, such as societal norms that demanded they stay at home full-time.

### ***Patriarchal Influence***

The choice to marry off girls at a young age was largely influenced by patriarchal views. Marriage was frequently seen by families as a means of regulating girls' sexuality and preserving family honor, which reflects ingrained gender stereotypes that place a low value on female education.

### ***Religious Misconceptions***

The study discovered that child marriages were excused by religious misconceptions, especially in rural communities. Despite the fact that Islamic scholars support education and are against child marriage, many participants and their families thought that Islam approved of the practice.

The details of themes, subthemes and the relevant verbatims from interviews are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis Table With Verbatim Quotes

Themes	Subthemes	Description	Verbatim Quotes
<b>Educational Disruption</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. School Drop out</li> <li>2. Interruption in Educational Progress</li> <li>3. Limited Access to Education</li> <li>4. Financial Constraints</li> </ol>	Child marriages force young girls to drop out of school, limiting their future educational opportunities.	<p>"I had to leave school because my in-laws wanted me to take care of the house." (Participant 12, 17 years old)</p> <p>"My husband said education is no longer important, my duty is to look after our family." (Participant 22, 16 years old)</p>
<b>Gender Disparities in Education</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Unequal Opportunities</li> <li>2. Son Preference</li> <li>3. Men as Bread earner and women as homemaker</li> </ol>	Boys tend to continue their education post-marriage, while girls face greater educational setbacks.	<p>"My brother still goes to school even after his marriage, but they didn't allow me to." (Participant 45, 18 years old)</p> <p>"For boys, it's different. They are expected to study and work, but for girls, marriage is the end of their education." (Participant 28, 15 years old)</p>
<b>Patriarchal Influence</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Control over female decision making</li> <li>2. Societal Norms and Conforming</li> <li>3. Limited Autonomy in educational choices</li> </ol>	Patriarchal norms and beliefs prioritize marriage and household duties over girls' education.	<p>"My parents believed that the earlier I got married, the better. They said I didn't need education to be a good wife." (Participant 9, 16 years old)</p> <p>"They said a girl's place is in her husband's home, not in school." (Participant 34, 17 years old)</p>
<b>Religious Misconceptions</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Misinterpretations of religious teachings</li> <li>2. Use of religion to justify illegal acts</li> <li>3. Resistance to Co-Education</li> </ol>	Families often misinterpret religious teachings to justify child marriages.	<p>"My family said Islam allows girls to marry early, so there was no need for me to study more." (Participant 67, 14 years old)</p> <p>"They believed that once a girl reaches puberty, she should marry as per religious teachings." (Participant 73, 15 years old)</p>
<b>Psychological Impact</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Emotional Distress and Trauma</li> <li>2. Anxiety and Depression due to forced responsibilities</li> <li>3. Reduced Self Esteem</li> </ol>	Girls experience emotional and mental stress due to early marriage, which affects their learning ability.	<p>"I always feel sad and anxious because I had to leave my dreams behind." (Participant 14, 16 years old)</p> <p>"I feel like I lost a part of myself when I got married and left school." (Participant 51, 17 years old)</p>
<b>Lack of Support for Education</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Absence of female role models</li> <li>2. Lack of support in handling household chores</li> <li>3. Lack of Support by spouse</li> </ol>	Girls married young often lack financial or emotional support to continue their education.	<p>"No one in my family supported my decision to go back to school after marriage." (Participant 40, 18 years old)</p> <p>"I wanted to study further, but there was no one to help with my children while I attended classes." (Participant 21, 16 years old)</p>

The primary concerns that women married before the age of eighteen experience are encapsulated in this thematic analysis, which also highlights the complex effects of child marriage on Pakistani society and education. The verbatim quotes offer a firsthand understanding of the participants' actual experiences.

## Discussion

The findings of the research highlight how urgently focused interventions are needed to address the sociocultural and religious variables that contribute to child marriages in Pakistan. The promotion of accurate religious understanding and the challenge of patriarchal norms can bolster attempts to improve the educational achievements for girls. The study also emphasizes the value of community-based initiatives that give girls the tools and confidence to pursue their education long after they are married.

According to the present research, patriarchal practices provide a serious obstacle to female education in Pakistan. Many families, especially in rural areas, believe that education is superfluous for girls' domestic tasks and favor early marriage for them as a means of upholding family honor (Ali, 2021). This kind of thinking supports the idea that a female should prioritize becoming a bride and mother above going to school or achieving her career aspirations.

Consequently, as participants who expressed a strong desire to continue their education but were constrained by family expectations showed, girls who marry early are often forced to drop out of school and take on home obligations. This is in line with other research suggesting that one of the main causes of the high rates of female dropout in South Asia is patriarchal ideas (Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021). Furthermore, the psychological effects of an early marriage are an important but sometimes disregarded aspect. Several study participants expressed emotions of melancholy, worry, and a sense of unrealized potential as a result of having to drop out of school at an early age in order to assume the obligations of marriage and parenthood. These results are consistent with earlier studies that show a link between child marriage and increased rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues, which further hinders the girls' capacity to achieve their academic and personal development goals (Ali, 2021; Nour, 2009).

The study shows that there are significant gender differences in how child marriage affects schooling. Although early marriage had an impact on both boys and girls in the study, boys were more likely to continue their studies after marriage, while girls had major educational setbacks (Awan, 2017). This is indicative of larger cultural expectations in which boys are viewed as future breadwinners and, as such, education is valued highly, even beyond marriage (Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021). Girls, on the other hand, are encouraged to prioritize household responsibilities, which limits their opportunities for the future and perpetuates the cycle of gender inequality.

The difference in the educational attainment of the sexes emphasizes the necessity of policies that primarily focus on the education of girls, especially in areas where child marriage is common. Along with community awareness campaigns that highlight the long-term advantages of educating females, offering financial incentives to families to keep their daughters in school can aid in changing societal perceptions. Furthermore, married girls may be able to continue their education with the support of flexible learning choices like remote learning or evening sessions.

The issue of child marriage and how it impacts women's access to education calls for a multimodal strategy that involves community-based interventions, educational reforms, and legal changes. Although child marriage is already illegal in Pakistan, there is frequently lax enforcement of the law, especially in rural regions where the practice is still strongly

ingrained in local norms (Ali, 2021). To alter opinions about the importance of girls' education, community involvement must be combined with strengthened law enforcement.

Community-based initiatives involving parents, religious authorities, and other local stakeholders can be extremely effective in posing challenges to the cultural norms that support child marriage. These initiatives ought to center on educating people about the detrimental effects of young marriage and the value of education for girls. They should also provide assistance to married girls who want to go back to school. Studies indicate that community-wide interventions, as opposed to focusing just on individual targets, are more successful in altering detrimental behaviors (Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

In Pakistan, child marriages continue to be an important threat to female education. The practice significantly restricts the educational prospects available to young females, leading to long-term socio-economic disadvantages. It is motivated by patriarchal ideas and religious misconceptions. A multimodal strategy is needed to address this problem, one that challenges detrimental cultural norms and advances gender equality through community engagement, educational initiatives, and legislative changes. Pakistan may make a significant advancement in the lives of women and girls and achieve sustainable development by guaranteeing that girls have access to education.

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