

Stolen childhoods: The dilemma of child marriage in rural Sindh



Despite legislation to combat the practice at both national and provincial levels, child marriage is still common in Pakistan, particularly in rural areas. **Nadir Ali Shah** and **Abdur Rehman Cheema** draw on fieldwork conducted in rural Sindh to highlight the ongoing problem, and write that if child marriage is to be eliminated in line with the Sustainable Development Goals social guidance and other forms of support will be needed alongside proper implementation of the law.

Veeru is a landless farmer in a village in the district of Tando Allahyar, 200km northeast of Karachi. He tells us, “I got married at the age of ten and my bride was the same age”. Now a father of four sons and a daughter, he did not hesitate to repeat the tradition by arranging marriages for his daughter and son at the ages of ten and twelve respectively. He followed the dictates of his community and these marriages were result of *Bado* or *Watta Satta*, local words for exchanging brides. “My son, Mithoo, now 15, was in 5th class when he got married and my daughter-in-law, Dharmi, never went to school as per the local tradition”.



Figure 1: Child marriage couple in Tando Allahyar district. Credit: Nadir Ali Shah

Veeru is now set to marry his 13-year-old son, Narain, in December 2017. Veeru is aware this is likely to disrupt his son’s studies, but he appears helpless before social pressure:

“If we refuse the marriage then there will be a heavy fine imposed, and we will be socially boycotted. Since we do not want to spoil our relations with the relatives or pay a fine, we are going ahead with the wedding.”

An elderly uncle of Narain says,

“Only the government can stop this tradition in our community as we are ignorant people and we cannot stop it by ourselves. If government ensures the implementation of the law forbidding the child marriages, we will breathe a sigh of relief.”

Parveen is twelve and works in the field with her mother, Haleema, to earn daily wages. Her father died when she was five and her mother remarried but the marriage broke down and Haleema became a single parent again. Parveen does not attend school due to traditional barriers and poverty in the area. Her marriage is fixed next year, although she does not yet know it. Her mother considers it the best option for her:

“Early marriage for a girl is a positive step because it’s a big responsibility for any mother. It can protect my daughter from sexual assault, which would be an irreparable loss of family honour if it happened. In addition, her marriage would reduce the financial burden of feeding her. It’s not unusual; I also got married when I was 14 years old. It’s a part of our tradition in the area so there is no harm in it”.

The problem of child marriage is not restricted to Pakistan. Every year [15 million girls](#) are married before the age of 18 and the practice is most common in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. [The latter has the highest prevalence of child marriage](#) in the world: it is most common in Bangladesh (52%), followed by India (47%), Nepal (37%), Afghanistan (33%) and [Pakistan \(21%\)](#) according to 2016 UNICEF data. Target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals [calls for ending the child marriage](#) by 2030. Pakistan was [among the first states to propose](#) the target in the discussions that shaped the current international development goals. However, it is not easy to end these practices overnight.

In the context of Pakistan, child marriage is connected with tradition, culture, and customary practices. It may involve the transfer of money, or the settlement of debts variously referred to as *Vani* or *Swara*, and is often sanctioned by a *Jirga* or *Panchayat* (council of elders from the community). Early marriage is deemed an important instrument to strengthen relationships and protect the honour of family by reducing the risk of sexual assault on young girls. In acute poverty, early marriage is also seen as a way to reduce the economic burden of rearing a girl child, something that is ultimately shifted to her husband’s family. For the parents of a young boy, marriage is a tool to impel him to work and abjure all connections to childhood, as well as a source of pride for parents in the community.

At present, the minimum legal age of marriage in Pakistan is 16 for women and 18 for men according to the [Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929](#). In Sindh province, where the marriage of minors is most prevalent, the marriage age was revised under [The Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act 2013](#), making marriage of women or men below the age of 18 years punishable by law. In cases of underage marriage, the parents, bride and groom can all be sentenced to three years in prison and receive a PKR 45,000 fine (approximately USD 430). The Sindh Assembly was progressive in being the first provincial assembly in the country to pass a bill of this kind.



Figure 2: A 12 years old girl set to marry next year. Credit: Nadir Ali Shah

However, the law is far from being fully implemented and the practice of child marriage remains rampant in the province. Cases like those of Narain and Parveen, which emerged during fieldwork conducted as part of the EU-funded [SUCCESS](#) programme, reveal how deep rooted the practice is in rural communities. Implementing the law is key but there is clearly a wider need to provide social guidance and other forms of support to get local buy-in and reduce the incentives to marry off young children.

The [Rural Support Programmes Network](#) is one organisation that is working to change attitudes by organising communities through social mobilisation and providing technical and financial support to improve the quality of life in target areas. The SUCCESS programme aims to reach 770,000 households in eight districts of the Sindh province by 2021 and although the primary focus is not child marriage, it aims to reduce the prevalence of this practice through contributions to income, health, education and also through a specially designed community awareness toolkit.

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