

A Qualitative Study of Early Child Marriages in Umerkot, Sindh

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Abstract

Child marriage has been a major social and human rights issue in Pakistan, especially in the rural areas where economic poverty, traditions, as well as gender inequality have perpetuated the vice. This paper has discussed the causes of early child marriage and its implications in Umerkot District, Sindh. The qualitative research design was applied to gain deep insight into the experiences and opinions of the participants. The semi-structured interviews were carried out with 27 key informants who included child marriage victims, family members, non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives, and police officials. Thematic analysis was used to analyse interview data and identified three key themes. The findings showed that poverty, financial insecurity, and limited livelihood opportunities might frequently drive a family to consider child marriage as an option. The entrenched traditional values, such as Watta-Satta and Pait-Likkhi, along with the issue of family honour and societal pressures, further supported the practice of early marriage irrespective of the legal provisions. The research also concluded that there is a strong educational, health, psychological and social consequence of child marriage particularly to girls; school dropout, early pregnancy, emotional disturbance and lack of independence and economic dependence in later life. These findings show that fighting child marriage is not a legal challenge, but requires multifaceted interventions that include reducing poverty, educating, raising community-level awareness, and enhancing the institutional performance. The paper provides qualitative data of the rural setting in Sindh and provides context-based perspectives to policy and community-based interventions to end child marriage in Pakistan.

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Introduction

Despite decades of international work, child marriage continues to be one of the most entrenched rights and public health issues globally, impacting millions of children. Child marriage is defined as being any formal or informal union, in which at least one party is under 18 years old, is a disproportionate problem for girls and is clearly a violation of children's rights to education, health,

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protection and personal development (UNICEF, 2023). While there is evidence of positive change over the last 20 years, it is estimated that 640 million women around the world were married as children, and that roughly 12 million girls are married annually (UNICEF, 2023). Child marriage is especially common in low- and middle-income countries, where poverty, gender inequality, low levels of education and entrenched cultural norms persist in perpetuating child marriage (UNFPA, 2022).

International evidence shows that there is no single determinant of child marriage, but rather an interplay of economic, cultural, religious and social factors. Research in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa has found poverty, family insecurity, lack of access to education, gender discrimination, and customary marriage practices are the main drivers of early marriage (Malhotra et al., 2011; Raj et al., 2019; Yaya et al., 2019). In addition to its social consequences, child marriage is linked to poor maternal and child health outcomes, school withdrawal, psychological well-being, intimate partner violence, diminished economic potential and the perpetuation of poverty (Nour, 2009; Wodon et al., 2017). The results indicate that child marriage is not only a social and cultural problem but also an obstacle in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically, SDG 5 which aims to end all harmful practices, especially child marriage, by 2030 (United Nations, 2015).

Despite the slight decrease in the prevalence of child marriage in the region, South Asia still hosts one of the largest proportions of child marriages in the world. Traditional kinship systems, patriarchal social institutions, and economic insecurity have prevented any drastic changes in legislation and awareness campaigns in many countries of the region (UNICEF, 2023). Pakistan is one of the countries in this region where the problem of child marriage remains a severe social and developmental issue. The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS 2017-18) revealed that a significant percentage of women aged 20-24 were married before the age of 18, especially in rural areas, and among households with lower education and income levels (National Institute of Population Studies & ICF, 2019). Although in Sindh the legal minimum age at which marriage should take place is 18, with the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013, the impact of tradition and the inability to create an institutionalized environment and sensitize society contribute to non-implementation (HRCP, 2023).

Previous studies conducted in Pakistan have shown that child marriage is strongly associated with poverty, gender inequality, tribal traditions, and unequal access to education. Anam. K, (2024) revealed that in many cases, families cannot avoid early marriage due to financial insecurity to ease their load. Similarly, Nasrullah et al. (2014) found out that there is a significant positive relationship between the early marriage and school dropouts, early pregnancies, and poor maternal health of young women in Pakistan. Moreover, child marriage is further conventionalized in various rural groups through the customary marriage practices such as Watta-Satta, Pait-Likkhi and exchange marriages (Jacoby & Mansuri, 2007; HRCP, 2023). Although these results exist, most of the available literature is largely based on national surveys and quantitative studies, which offer little information about how the affected children, families and institutional stakeholders themselves perceive and experience child marriage in their local social and cultural settings.

Umerkot District in Sindh is one such situation in which child marriage is entrenched in the traditions and socio-economic realities of the community. The rural rural-based district, where the majority of the population resides, literacy is relatively low, economic deprivation is high, and tribal and kinship relationships are very strong, provides a unique setting to study the interaction of structural and cultural inequalities to maintain child marriage. The government agencies and the civil society organizations have launched awareness campaigns and legal action but qualitative evidence cannot be traced on the experiences of child marriage victims, family attitude towards child marriage and challenges NGOs and law enforcement agencies are facing in dealing with child marriage.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the factors contributing to early child marriage, examine its consequences for children's health, education, and

living conditions, and understand the perspectives of victims, family members, NGO representatives, and police officials in Umerkot District, Sindh. By setting the lived experiences of the people directly impacted by child marriage and the perceptions of the key institutional players, the study offers a contextual interpretation of the social forces that perpetuate the practice. The findings are intended to contribute to the growing body of qualitative evidence on child marriage in Pakistan and to inform culturally responsive policies and community-based interventions aimed at preventing child marriage and protecting children's rights.

Literature Review

Child marriage has received considerable scholarly attention because of its far-reaching implications for children's rights, public health, education, and socio-economic development. Child marriage is acknowledged as a human rights violation and an obstacle to sustainable development by international organisations because it robs children of opportunities to fulfil their potential (UNICEF, 2023; UNFPA, 2022). Despite the reduction in child marriage over the last few decades worldwide, progress and results have been variable and South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa remain home to the highest number of child marriages in the world (UNICEF, 2023). The literature shows that child marriage is a phenomenon with multiple dimensions that is influenced by the interplay of economic deprivation, cultural norms, gender inequality, and inadequate institutional safeguards.

Across the world, poverty has been found to be a key driver of child marriage. Wodon et al. (2017) states that financial pressures are among the perceived ways to escape from financial burdens to economically disadvantaged households, and so is the practice of early marriage. Likewise, Nour (2009) noted that in economically challenged households, children's education and welfare are often neglected in favor of current economic needs. Malhotra et al. (2011) also observed that child marriage is not solely caused by poverty but is supported by social norms, unequal gender relations, and low education levels. Studies in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa also reveal that children living in poorer families are much more likely to marry before the age of 18 than children living in wealthier families (Yaya et al., 2019). Traditions and community norms have also been acknowledged to be a significant push factor for child marriage. Raj et al. (2019) found that family decisions about marriage are very much shaped by customary practices and collective social expectations, particularly in low-income environments. In societies where family honour and social standing are important, a delayed marriage of a daughter may bring criticism and social pressure to the family. Hence, girls are often seen as bearers of family honour and parents are encouraged to marry them at an early age. Malhotra et al (2011) have noted that these cultural expectations are often reinforced in the kinship systems, as well as through traditional marriage arrangements, which are based more on the interests of the family than on the choice of the children. As a result, child marriage remains socially acceptable in many countries where it is outlawed.

Another key reason cited for the prevalence of child marriage is gender inequality. Patriarchal social arrangements are found across the world to be a barrier to girls' education, mobility and household decision-making (UNICEF, 2023). The boys are often given more education and economic opportunities, and girls are expected to take on domestic duties and reproductive roles at a young age. These differential expectations about gender role constrain the human capital development of girls and their potential participation in the labour market, which can perpetuate poverty cycles, as explained by Wodon et al. (2017). Findings like these indicate that child marriage is a symptom of gender inequality and it is also a tool for gender inequality to be passed down from one generation to the next. The effects of child marriage have also been well documented in international literature. Early marriage is found to be linked with school dropouts, early pregnancies, pregnancy-related morbidity and mortality, psychological distress, intimate partner violence, and long-term economic dependency (Nour, 2009; Raj et al., 2019; Wodon et al., 2017). Girls that are married at an early age

are less likely to finish secondary school and more likely to have negative reproductive health outcomes than women who marry later in life (UNFPA, 2022). In addition to individual effects, child marriage also has wider community effects, as it is a driver of poverty, a constraint on female labour force participation and a barrier to the development of the community.

Although the laws have been changed, child marriage is still a social problem in Pakistan. As per the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS 2017-18), low levels of education and economic disadvantage are also strong determinants of early marriage, which is still considerably more prevalent in rural areas (NIPS & ICF, 2019). The Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013 introduced 18 as the minimum age of marriage, however, its implementation has remained inconsistent due to weak institutional enforcement, limited public awareness and continued influence of customary traditions (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [HRCP], 2023). Pakistani studies have revealed that there are various determinants of child marriage that are corroborated by both international studies and local socio-cultural context. According to Nasrullah et al. (2014), girls who were married prior to the age of eighteen were significantly at risk of dropping out of school, early pregnancy, poor maternal health outcomes. Fatima (2023) also found that poverty, lack of education, and gender bias play significant roles in early marriage in rural parts of Pakistan. Jacoby and Mansuri (2007) also found that traditional marriage rituals like Watta-Satta still play a significant role in the marriage process in many rural communities, as it cements family bonds and social obligations. These practices often limit the involvement of children in decisions about their own marriage and perpetuate child marriage in subsequent generations.

Studies on the subject specifically in the province of Sindh show that tribal traditions, low literacy rate and lack of educational opportunities are related to child marriage. Despite laws banning child marriage, several rural districts still have fairly high rates of child marriage, especially when customary practices have a strong influence and awareness of child protection laws is low (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2023). Civil society organisations have also identified the difficulties with implementing the child marriage legislation in remote communities, due to lack of institutional capacity, poor reporting systems and community tolerance of traditional marriages. Past research has made significant strides in understanding underlying causes and effects of child marriage, but there are key areas of further research that need to be addressed. Existing literature almost exclusively uses quantitative household survey data or demographic data, which highlight associations and patterns but lack in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of those impacted by child marriage. Few qualitative studies have explored the views of child marriage victims and parents, as well as NGO representatives and law enforcement officials, in the same study. Also, empirical evidence from rural districts of Sindh and especially from Umerkot is still limited in spite of the fact that child marriage continues to prevail in the region. The current study aims to fill this gap through investigating early child marriage as experienced by the affected children as well as the institutional actors involved, and as a result provide a context-specific insight into the social, cultural and institutional mechanisms that uphold early child marriage in Umerkot, Sindh.

Objectives

- i. To investigate the factors that contribute to early child marriages in Umerkot.
- ii. To examine the impact of child marriages on health, education, and living conditions in the study region.
- iii. To recommend strategies and policy guidelines for addressing the issue of early child marriages in Pakistan
- iv.

Research Methodology

The present study used a qualitative approach to examine the issue of early child marriage in Umerkot District, Sindh, which is culturally embedded and socially sensitive in nature. A qualitative

method was deemed to be appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants lived experiences, perceptions and the socio-cultural context of the phenomenon which cannot easily be captured through quantitative methods. The study population consisted of 4 groups: child marriage victims, family members of child marriage victims, representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGO) and police officials. The NGO participants were drawn from among the organizations working in the Umerkot area such as *Umerkot Rural Development Foundation (URDF)*, *Sindh Rural Awareness Initiative (SRAI)*, and *Local Rights Forum (LRF)*. Semi-structured interviews were done with child marriage victims, family members, representatives of NGOs, and police officials, to gather the data. The interviews were also carried out in Sindhi or Urdu so that the participants were able to share their experiences easily and correctly. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and field notes were kept throughout the data collection process to record observations and non-verbal cues. Secondary sources like NGO reports, Police records, relevant legal documents like the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013 were also reviewed and utilized to support and verify the primary data in order to make the findings as credible as possible.

A purposive sampling was employed to acquire information rich samples by selecting the individuals with first-hand knowledge of and direct experience of child marriage as well as was able to provide meaningful information that would answer the questions of the causes, consequences and social processes of child marriage. A total of 27 study participants comprised 9 victims of child marriage, 8 relatives, 5 NGO representatives and 5 police officials. The sampling methodology enabled the incorporation of different perspectives of not only the affected individuals but also the major institutional players into the research. A manual thematic analysis method was employed to analyze the data collected. The transcripts of the interviews and field notes were read numerous times to become familiar with the data and then the coding process was started. 73 initial codes were identified through line-by-line manual coding, and they indicate ideas and patterns that were recurring throughout the data set. Such codes were further grouped into more broad categories and methodologically narrowed down to higher order themes which enabled an inductive process to take place through the experiences of the participants in life. To safeguard the confidentiality of the participants and for the purpose of presentation of the findings, each participant was given an anonymous code: *RF (Father)*, *RM (Mother)*, *RG (Girl)*, *RB (Boy)*, *RN (NGO Representative)*, *RP (Police Officer)*. The study findings are discussed in four broad sections each section having a holistic picture of the different factors, experiences and institutional factors of early child marriage in Umerkot, Sindh.

Findings

The findings presented in this section are derived from the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with child marriage victims, their family members, NGO representatives, and police officials in Umerkot District, Sindh. The analysis produced four broad thematic disciplines which reflect participants' realities, perceptions, and institutional views of early child marriage. Instead of child marriage as a stand-alone phenomenon, the findings show how child marriage is deeply rooted in a larger social context and influenced by a complex matrix of interrelated cultural, economic, gender-based and institutional factors. Participants' narratives are included to give depth to the themes and provide an in-depth understanding of the complex realities of child marriage in the study area. Demographic data is used here to frame participants' experiences, not to provide statistical generalizations, where appropriate.

The results are presented in four interrelated parts. The demographic profile of the participants is presented in the first section to help interpret the results. The second part delves into the socio-cultural, economic and structural aspects that help to explain the prevalence of child marriage in Umerkot. The third section explores the multi-faceted impact of child marriage on the

health, education, psychological well-being and life experiences of children who marry and their families. The final section covers institutional responses and participants' recommendations, indicating the current gaps in law enforcement, community awareness and support services as well as recommendations to prevent child marriage and enhance child protection systems in the region. As a whole, these themes offer a detailed qualitative picture of the experiences, justifications, challenges and responses to early child marriage in the local socio-cultural context.

Section 01: Understanding The Participants And Their Social Context

The demographic profile of the participants provides an important context for understanding the experiences and perspectives presented in this study. In total, 27 participants were involved, including child marriage victims, family members, representatives from NGO and the police. These participants included representatives from a variety of stakeholder groups directly or indirectly related to the issue of early marriage in Umerkot, enabling the study to have multiple voices. Their backgrounds illustrate the broader socio-economic and cultural setting within which child marriage continues to occur.

TABLE 1 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS (N = 27)

CHARACTERISTIC	CATEGORY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Participant Category	Child Marriage Victims	9	33.3
	Family Members	8	29.6
	NGO Representatives	5	18.5
	Police Officials	5	18.5
Gender of Child Marriage Victims (n = 9)	Girls	5	55.6
	Boys	4	44.4
Age at Marriage (Victims)	12–16 years	9	100.0
Educational Status Before Marriage (Victims)	Primary or Middle School	8	88.9
	No Formal Education	1	11.1
Educational Status After Marriage (Victims)	Dropped Out of School	7	77.8
	Continued Education /	2	22.2
	Already Out of School		
Educational Level of Family Members (n = 8)	Illiterate	5	62.5
	Primary Education	1	12.5
	Matric/Intermediate	2	25.0
Occupation of Family Members (n = 8)	Domestic Workers	4	50.0
	Daily Wage Labourers	2	25.0
	Farmers	1	12.5
	Health/Factory Workers	1	12.5

As presented in Table 1, the child marriage victims included five girls (55.6%) and four boys (44.4%), all of whom reported being married between the ages of 12 and 16 years. Most of the participants were in primary and middle school before marriage; but most of them stopped their study after marriage. In the interview they spoke about the sudden end of their schooling and the changes in their responsibilities after they were married, such as housekeeping, family life and marriage. Girls, in particular, frequently reported greater restrictions on continuing their education after marriage. The socio-economic profile of the family members interviewed also showed to be disadvantaged. The vast majorities of parents were poorly educated and were employed in low-paid jobs, such as domestic work, daily wage work, agriculture and factory

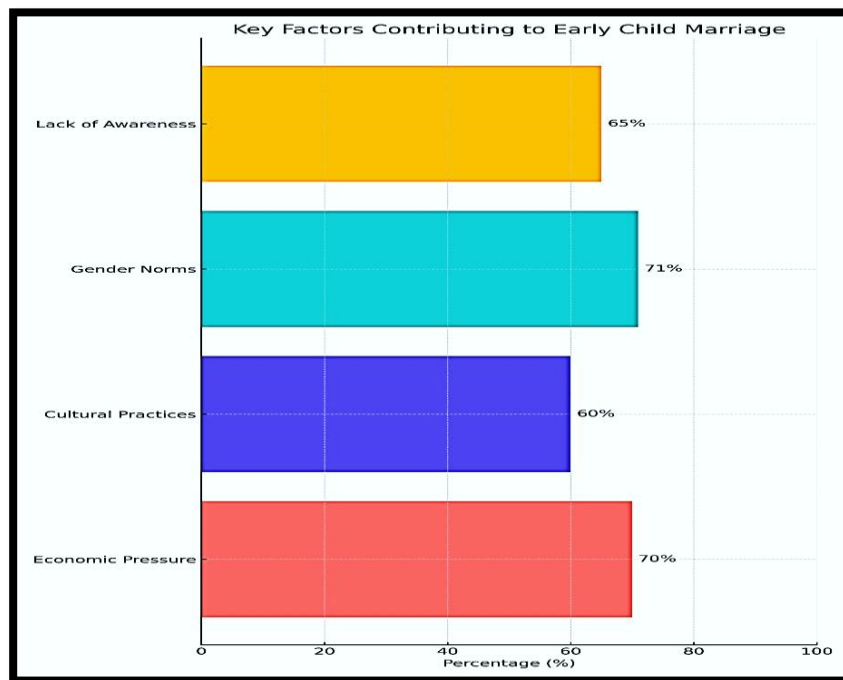
work. Their narratives showed that restricted education and poor financial circumstances were significant aspects of the social context that influenced early marriage decisions. A few respondents spoke of child marriage as a traditional practice, accepted by their families and communities for many generations.

The views of NGO representatives and police officials complemented this information by adding to the wider community context. In both groups, child marriage was more common in poor families that held traditional beliefs. Their experiences also showed that there is still low knowledge of legal provisions and low community engagement, which continues to constrain efforts to prevent child marriage. To conclude, the background and demographic details of the participants provide valuable background information to the results discussed in the subsequent sections. The histories of the participants indicate that early marriages of girls are occurring in a complicated social situation, which is marked by economic poverty, illiteracy, and deeply rooted cultural values, which are also elaborated on in subsequent paragraphs.

Section 02: Factors Contributing To Early Child Marriage

The participants highlighted various interrelated factors that perpetuate early child marriage in Umerkot. As shown in Figure 1, economic hardship was the most common factor cited (70%), followed by patriarchal gender norms (71%), lack of awareness of child marriage legislation and the importance of education (65%) and entrenched cultural traditions (60%). It was noted that these factors were almost always linked and mutually reinforcing when it came to sustaining child marriage in families and communities. From a parent's perspective, as well as that of victims, NGO representatives and police officials, child marriage was not considered to have a single cause, but to be a practice driven by economic, traditional and social pressures. Economic difficulties were frequently cited as a factor for child marriage, with many families seeing marriage as a way of decreasing the burden of financial obligations within the family. Some respondents also indicated that marriage sometimes was resorted to in order to pay off family obligations or cement economic ties between families. Traditional customs, especially for Watta-Satta and Pait-Likkhi, were also consistently pointed out as customs which facilitated early marriage arrangements within families. The participants said that these customs were accepted in their communities, and sometimes override the legal necessities.

Another significant factor influencing family decision-making was patriarchy-based gender norms. Parents often voiced their worries about family honour, social standing, and the necessity to safeguard girls by marrying them early after puberty. Moreover, lack of awareness about the legal age of marriage and the long-term implications of child marriage also ensured the continuation of child marriage. NGO representatives and police officials observed that a lack of awareness among the community and low education levels frequently undermined the effectiveness of the existing laws on child marriage. The following descriptive findings offer a picture of the key determinants of the phenomenon of child marriage in Umerkot. Each of these factors is explored in depth below using thematic analysis with a focus on the participants' narratives, which explain how these factors impact decisions around child marriage in the local socio-cultural context.

FIGURE 1 MAJOR FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EARLY CHILD MARRIAGE IN UMERKOT

Section 3: Lived Experiences And Consequences Of Early Child Marriage

Thematic analysis was undertaken to capture participants' experiences and perceptions about the factors that perpetuate early marriage in Umerkot. Through repeated reading and manual coding of interview transcripts, three interrelated themes emerged that collectively explain how economic circumstances, cultural traditions, gender relations, and the consequences of early marriage shape the lives of children and their families. While each theme is discussed individually, participants repeatedly referred to how they are interrelated, and how they compound the cycle of child marriage in their communities. The themes are presented with quotes from the child marriage victims, family members, NGO representatives and police officials.

➤ **THEME 3.1: Economic Vulnerability And Household Survival Strategies**

One of the key contributing factors to early child marriage was economic vulnerability. Poverty was consistently reported as a factor that limited the scope of family decisions and drew them towards marriage as a way of dealing with financial difficulties. Early marriage was often depicted not as a cultural practice, but as a way of cutting household costs, providing for economic uncertainty, and assuring children's financial security. Parents reported that low employment, lack of consistent income and the rising cost of living were challenging in terms of providing for large families, especially in rural communities where access to resources was also low. Some family members made it clear that financial difficulties had a direct impact on their choice of when to get married. For some households, marrying a daughter was understood to decrease the number of dependents in the family, and for others, marriage was seen as a mechanism for strengthening economic ties between families and/or for solving economic debts. These stories illustrate how economic pressures impacted parental decision making, and how children had little to no choice in decisions that were made about them and their future. One father stated:

"My father could not repay the loan, so he married me to the lender's son." (RF-03)

Another participant explained:

"There was no regular income in our house. We believed marriage would reduce our financial burden because we could no longer afford to support another child." (RF-06)

The experiences shared by child marriage victims reflected similar realities. Several participants explained that they understood the financial difficulties faced by their families but had little choice in the decisions that affected their lives. While some accepted marriage as a family obligation, others described feelings of disappointment after being forced to abandon their education and personal aspirations because of economic circumstances. One female participant shared:

"I wanted to continue studying, but my parents said they could not afford my education anymore. Marriage was the only option they saw." (RG-02)

Another structural issue highlighted by the NGO representatives is poverty because it is one of the most chronic issues that lead to child marriage in Umerkot. The economically disadvantaged households, as per their experience, tend to view marriage as one of the viable options for financial security, especially in areas where access to education and social support mechanisms are restricted. An NGO representative commented:

"It is not only culture that drives child marriage; poverty leaves many families believing they have no alternative. Without economic opportunities, marriage becomes their coping strategy." (RN-01)

The police also reported that in most instances of child marriage they had witnessed, it was due to financial reasons and not choice, especially in poor families. Even though the law prohibits child marriage, the respondents indicated that the economic situation that is fueling child marriage can only be addressed by law enforcement alone. The general tendencies of the narratives of the participants indicate that economic vulnerability cannot be reduced to a lack of funds only. It has an impact on family priorities, educational opportunities, the autonomy of children, has been perceived as a survival strategy and not as an independent cultural practice. The findings indicate that poverty reduction and improvement of livelihood of families is a key component of all long-term strategies to fight the vice of child marriage in Umerkot.

➤ **THEME 3.2: Traditional Customs, Social Expectations, and Community Pressure**

The analysis found that traditional practices and community norms are highly influential in perpetuating child marriage in Umerkot. Respondents invariably referred to child marriage as a socially accepted practice that is passed down from generation to generation and not a matter of choice by individuals. Victims, parents, NGO representatives and even police authorities pointed out several times that practices such as Watta-Satta (exchange marriage) and Pait-Likkhi (marriage arranged, pre-prepared before birth or childhood) were prevalent practices that contribute to early marriage. The respondents described how these customs were entrenched in the local social fabric and learned to be accepted as family duties, and not something to be questioned nor challenged. Some parents admitted that traditional beliefs had a great impact on their decision on their children's marriage. Few families analysed the implications of child marriage; instead, many families felt they had to abide by the long-standing traditions and obligations of family members. These customs were reported as part of the life of the community, and if not followed it could lead to poor relationships within the family and the community. One mother explained:

"This is how marriages have always been arranged in our family. We simply followed the tradition that our elders practiced." (RM-02)

Another parent stated:

"Our elders had already decided this marriage years ago. We believed it was our responsibility to fulfil their commitment." (RF-05)

Victims also described having little or no involvement in decisions concerning their marriage. Several participants reported that marriage arrangements had been made during childhood, leaving them with limited opportunity to express their preferences. As a result, many accepted these decisions because they believed challenging family traditions would bring conflict or disappointment to their parents. A female participant recalled:

"I was never asked whether I wanted to marry. My family said the decision had already been made when I was very young." (RG-06)

These traditional practices were also enforced by community expectations. Respondents often elaborated that families were under a lot of social pressure to conform to traditional arrangements. Violation of an agreement or delaying marriage was generally considered negatively by family members and society members, and many parents were motivated not by the desires of their children but by the demands of the community. An NGO representative observed:

"Families often continue these customs because they fear social criticism. Even when parents know the consequences, they hesitate to oppose traditions that have existed for generations." (RN-03)

Similar experiences were reported by police officials who indicated that traditional customs often made it difficult to enforce laws against child marriage. The participants mentioned that in the eyes of many families, the community traditions were more valid than the laws and it was hard to intervene even in cases when the authorities realized that they were about to make child marriages. One police officer commented:

"Many cases involve families who believe they are following tradition rather than committing an offence. This makes enforcement very challenging because community support often favours customary practices." (RP-02)

Overall, participants' narratives demonstrate that traditional customs and community expectations remain deeply intertwined with decisions surrounding early child marriage. These traditions do not exist in a vacuum of a cultural context but exist in a larger social framework in which family requirements, social acceptance, and societal expectations can be used to encourage the perpetuation of child marriage across the generations.

➤ **THEME 3.3: Gendered Consequences of Early Child Marriage**

The findings revealed that early child marriage has profound consequences for the physical, psychological, educational, and social well-being of children, particularly girls. The participants unanimously reported that marriage was a life-changing event and that it interrupted childhood, reduced educational opportunities, heightened the domestic load and exposed young people to emotional and health-related issues. While there were some examples of both girls and boys being affected by early marriage, participants highlighted that girls were more likely to have their autonomy curtailed and be exposed to the greater impact of early marriage and associated reproductive responsibilities. The most common impact reported was loss of education. Victims reported that when they got married, they left their studies immediately and were expected to take on household tasks and put their family needs and duties above their studies. Some of the participants said they were sorry they could not continue their studies or go on to their future aspirations. A female participant stated:

"I wanted to become a teacher, but after my marriage I had to leave school. My daily life became limited to household work." (RG-04)

Another participant explained:

"After marriage, continuing my education was no longer considered important. Everyone expected me to take care of the home." (RG-07)

Besides disruption in education, participants also reported severe physical and psychological difficulties that were related to early marriage. Young girls complained of premature pregnancies, birth complications, body tiredness, and poor access to healthcare facilities. Many also described feelings of fear, anxiety, loneliness, and emotional distress as they struggled to adapt to adult responsibilities at a young age. One participant recalled:

"I was still a child myself when I became a mother. I did not understand how to care for a baby, and I was constantly afraid." (RG-03)

Another victim shared:

"Everything changed overnight. I felt isolated because I had to leave my friends, my school, and my family." (RG-08)

Participants also emphasized on the disparate gender expectations that determined normal life after marriage. Girls had the role to play in housework, childcare, and show submissiveness to their husbands and in-laws, whereas boys were to take up the financial roles at a tender age. Such expectations tended to deny children a chance to develop personally, recreation and make independent decisions. An NGO representative explained:

"Child marriage affects both boys and girls, but girls experience the greatest burden because they lose their education, their freedom, and often their childhood." (RN-05)

The police officials also reported that the long-term effects of child marriage often spilled over past the marriage itself. According to participants, early marriage was the cause of school dropout, bad maternal health, economic dependency and then the poverty cycle which ensued, and the children who suffered could barely do anything to change the situation. One police officer observed:

"Many girls who marry early remain dependent on their husbands throughout their lives because they lose the opportunity to complete their education or develop vocational skills." (RP-03)

Altogether, the stories of participants indicate that the effects of early child marriage are much more than the marriage ceremony. The practice disrupts education, compromises physical and psychological well-being, upholds unequal gender roles, and inhibits the opportunities of children to grow socially and economically. These intertwined effects underscore the long-term effects of child marriage on lives of the affected children and their future opportunities.

Discussion

The present study aimed to address the root causes of early marriage and its impact in the Umerkot district of Sindh. The findings indicate that the three factors: economic disadvantage, the culture and gender inequalities that are deeply rooted in the society all contribute to the fact that child marriage is a problem that is being perpetuated, as it has an impact on the family decision-making process and the opportunities available to children. These variables are not independent but support each other in a larger social environment with limited educational access, poverty, and patriarchal social structures. The results corroborate the literature and contribute with qualitative information from one of the less studied districts of Sindh where community traditions still have significant influence on marriage.

Economic vulnerability and strategies to cope with the survival of the household were the first theme, identified as a key component in perpetuating child marriage. Financial stress was repeatedly cited as a major factor influencing many families to see marriage as a way out of financial insecurity. Many parents reported marriage as a way to cut down on household costs or to deal with poor livelihoods. Household poverty and economic insecurity are known to play significant roles in child marriage as do similar observations in Bangladesh, Nepal and Ethiopia (Amin et al., 2017; Efevbera et al., 2017). Moreover, the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (NIPS & ICF, 2019) also reveals that child marriage is significantly higher among households with limited education and poor wealth status in Pakistan. The current findings further this evidence by providing a picture of how economic hardship affects the reasoning and family decision-making processes of parents, and not just as a back-ground characteristic. The narratives revealed that poverty decreases perceived options, making early marriage one way for families to cope with immediate financial difficulties, with long-term consequences.

The second theme focused on the impact of traditional customs, social expectations and community pressure. The participants referred to traditional customs like Watta-Satta and Pait-Likkhi as longstanding traditions that are handed down from generation to generation and still continue to influence marriage. Such practices were intimately associated with issues of family honour, social acceptance and commitments to wider kinship. Field and Ambrus (2008) also reported similar patterns and they suggested that in traditional societies, community expectations and social norms often influence the age at which people marry and not their own preferences. Similarly, *Girls Not Brides* (2023) highlights how many times, social pressure and community acceptance are some of the most significant obstacles to ending child marriage in many low-income countries. At the local level in Pakistan, SPARC (2022) found that traditional authority structures and patriarchal traditions continue to impede implementation of child protection laws, notably in rural areas. The present study adds to this literature by showing that the participants themselves sometimes viewed these customs as not just cultural traditions, but also as social obligations, which were hard to avoid, because of the fear of hurting family relations or to hurt the community.

The third theme explored the gendered effects of early child marriage, and found that there is significant educational, psychological, health and social impact, especially on girls. The education, social isolation, early pregnancy, emotional distress, and added domestic responsibilities were reported as common consequences of early marriage. This is in line with the findings of Parsons et al. (2015), who found that child marriage has a profound impact on the education level and increases the risk of adverse maternal health, mental health and future economic dependency. Similarly, Walker (2012) stated that early marriage is reinforcing gender inequality as it curtails girls' autonomy and hampers their education and employment. According to a study conducted by Population Council (2018) under the EWUP, girls in Pakistan who get married before 18 years of age face significantly higher odds of dropping out of school and encountering poor reproductive health outcomes. The current study contributes to this in several ways, particularly by detailing the personal experiences of the loss of educational aspirations, social relationships and opportunities for independent decision making. These qualitative narratives highlight that the impact of child marriage is not just quantifiable social and economic outcomes; it also has a profound impact on children's emotional well-being and their life course.

A key strength of the current research was the incorporation of multiple perspectives from multiple stakeholders. This research is unique in that it involved the perspectives of victims,

parents, NGO representatives and police, and offered a more in-depth understanding of child marriage in the wider institutional and community context. The NGO participants spoke about the need for community awareness, education and empowerment, while the police spoke about the challenges in legal enforcement, especially when customary traditions have widespread community backing. UN Women (2020) also notes that legislation is not enough to end child marriage without social norm change, investment in education, and community engagement. The results indicate that interventions need to combine legal protection with poverty reduction and educational access and awareness programmes at the community level that actively engage local institutions, religious leaders and parents.

Overall, the results indicate that child marriage in Umerkot is not only a result of individual family decisions, but rather a result of structural inequalities which are part of the wider socio-cultural context of Umerkot. Some of the factors that propagate the practice even in the face of the law are the traditional customs, gender norms of patriarchy and lack of institutional support amidst economic deprivation. The existing study is based on the qualitative evidence of the views of the two groups of people and the institutional actors, thus adding to the overall picture of child marriage in rural Sindh. The findings emphasise that interventions on policy should be multi-sectoral to see that community mobilisation, laws about child protection, poverty alleviation and education of girls are all put in action to achieve long-lasting results in child marriage in Pakistan.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, coordinated action is needed from government institutions, local communities, educational institutions, civil society, and law enforcement agencies to reduce child marriage in Umerkot. The following measures are proposed, based on the experiences and recommendations shared by the participants.

- Comprehensive awareness programmes should be undertaken to inform parents, adolescents, community leaders and religious scholars of the legal, educational, health and social implications of child marriage. A culturally appropriate awareness campaign should be created through a partnership between the schools, the local media and the community organizations that can highlight the value of girls' education and delay marriage.
- Government agencies and development organizations should implement targeted poverty alleviation programmes for vulnerable household with a focus on providing vocational training, income-generating opportunities, social protection programmes and funding for girls' education. Reducing household economic insecurity may lessen the reliance on child marriage as a coping strategy.
- The effective implementation of the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013, should be strengthened through improved coordination among police, local government authorities, marriage registrars, and child protection institutions. There is a need for regular trainings, community reporting mechanisms and more robust monitoring systems to ensure timely identification and prevention of cases of child marriage.
- Sustainable reduction of child marriage requires active participation from tribal elders, religious leaders, teachers, women's organizations, and civil society groups. Prominent issues of discussion in the community should be harmful practices (Watta-Satta and Pait-Likkhi) and the adoption of alternative practices respecting culture and safeguarding children rights.
- There is a need for accessible support services, including educational reintegration, psychological counselling, reproductive health, legal support and skills training, to be provided by Government and non-governmental organisations to children who have been

victims of child marriage. These services can help mitigate the long-term educational, health and socio-economic impacts that were found in this study, and can help children who are impacted by such violence rebuild their lives.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the factors associated with early child marriage and its impact with the voices of child marriage victims, family members, representatives from non-governmental organisations and police officials in Umerkot District, in Sindh. It shows that child marriage is not caused by one single reason, but rather by interplay between economic vulnerability, cultural practices with a long history, and inequitable gender relations. The poor living standard and livelihoods facilitated the ease of considering early marriage by families as a way of alleviating economic strains, although custom and community values still exist, despite the existence of the law. It was also established in the study that child marriage has long term effects on education, health, psychological and social outcomes particularly among girls that restricts their growth and development prospects and perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage. The significant contribution of the study is that it employs various stakeholder perspectives giving a more detailed picture of child marriage compared to the studies that use only victims or survey data. The study shows that legal interventions will not be adequate to prevent child marriage unless the experiences of children, parental, NGO, and police opinions are considered. Altogether, the results indicate that child marriage reduction needs a multifaceted strategy that would involve economic empowerment, the enhancement of access to education, the involvement of communities, the efficacy of child protection laws, and the enhancement of institutional cooperation. This research will be used to bridge the knowledge gap in the literature on child marriage in rural Sindh because it will present qualitative evidence collected in Umerkot and offer practical recommendations that would assist the policy makers, development practitioners and community organizations in developing culturally sensitive interventions that would facilitate the protection of the rights of children and the promotion of their longer-term well-being.

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