



# Socio Demographic Predictors of First Union Age in Transitional Societies

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

In many countries, marriage ages are set by a web of cultural standards, financial considerations, and legal systems that mostly influence women. Despite a gradual national trend towards delayed marriage, child and early marriage remain deeply entrenched in Pakistan, particularly in rural and low-income regions. This paper examines the interrelated roles of education, urbanisation, and legal reforms in the changing trends of marriage age in Pakistan. Particularly for females, the primary objective is to understand how these factors influence the timing of marriage and evaluate the effectiveness of existing policy measures. The study employs a qualitative and data-driven methodology, utilising legislative analysis, UNICEF reports, and national survey datasets, including the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (2017–18). The findings indicate a significant negative correlation between early marriage and the educational attainment of girls; urbanisation further contributes by introducing individuals to contemporary values, enhanced educational opportunities, and employment prospects. However, significant disparities exist: urban-rural divides, socioeconomic inequality, and inadequate policy implementation all contribute to the perpetuation of child marriage practices in various countries. Despite the potential of provincial initiatives such as Sindh's 2019 legal reform, social resistance and enforcement deficiencies curtail their effectiveness. The study concludes that delaying the marriage age in Pakistan necessitates a comprehensive strategy encompassing community engagement, equitable urban development, robust legal frameworks, and accessible education for all females. This study contributes to the policy discourse on promoting gender equality, protecting children's rights, and achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 by emphasising the interplay between structural and cultural factors.

**Keywords:** Child Marriage, Education, Urbanization, Legal Reform, Gender Equality.

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## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a vital social institution that shapes people's and society's course. In Pakistan, marriage ages are set by a web of cultural standards, financial considerations, and legal systems that mostly influence women. Although the average age of marriage has been rising gradually in recent years, marital patterns have changed. Notwithstanding its inequality, this change marks the beginning of fresh dynamics shaped by fast urbanization, changing policy environment, and more educational possibilities. Young people, especially girls, should be informed of these changes so that they can have the freedom and chances to make wise decisions in life.

Though laws and awareness campaigns have changed,

child marriage is still a prevalent issue in Pakistan; an estimated 18% to 30% of girls get married before turning eighteen [1]. Rural communities with high rates of poverty, strict gender roles, and poor educational possibilities are especially sensitive to this type of behavior. With around 19 million brides, Pakistan is among the nation's most likely to be causing the worldwide burden of early marriage, per UNICEF projections from 2023 [2]. Statistics show that early marriage is linked to poverty, rural life, and less education as well as to poverty. These qualities still influence marriage decisions all around.

The good news is that brides' average age has been continuously dropping. The average age of a woman's first marriage was 23.9 years, according to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey of 2017–18; this is rather older

than in past decades. Recent legislative actions have helped to some degree in this direction. One province, Sindh, formally raised the age of marriage for females to 18 in 2019 in order to bring it into conformity with global human rights norms [3]. Still, the nation's application of these policies shows a lot of laxity, and regional differences remain somewhat evident.

One of the main determinants of marriage age is obviously education. Girls who complete secondary or higher education are far less likely to get married young since education not only postpones marriage but also gives them more autonomy and access to job possibilities. Urbanization intensifies this effect even more by exposing people to different ideals, increasing the scope of education, and generating young people's alternative goals. Therefore, the urban-rural gap in marriage age is not only spatial but also reflects more profound socioeconomic changes.

The changing marriage age scene in Pakistan is investigated in this paper with particular attention to how government policies, urbanization, and education interact to produce this change. Using real data from national polls, international research, and policy studies, the study seeks to pinpoint the fundamental causes of change and underline the ongoing obstacles preventing advancement. By doing this, the research helps to clarify the several social changes needed to support delayed, informed, and consensual weddings as ways to achieve more general goals of gender equality and development.

Literature Review

Child Marriage

A marriage or civil union between two people, both under the age of eighteen, is regarded in most legal systems as a child marriage. According to UNICEF [4], child marriage breaches girls' human rights generally and seriously affects their health, education, and economic possibilities. This defines child marriage, however, its pragmatic implementation and cultural view could vary significantly between one area or society to another.

Pakistani law defines marriage in a hodgepodge of rules and court rulings. When the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) took effect, boys were expected to be 18 years old, and girls originally had to be 16. But in 2019, changes in Sindh and other regions raised the minimum age for girls to be 18. Usually avoiding official registration procedures, marriages may be consummated or planned according to traditional criteria; nonetheless, these rules coexist with religious and customary practices. The application of age-related regulations is hampered since customary weddings, arranged in line with local customs or religious rituals, are not under legal scrutiny.

Thus, in Pakistan, there are two kinds of marriages: those that are more commonly practiced, known as customary marriages, which may ignore the official age restrictions, especially in more conservative areas or in rural areas; and those

that are legally binding and follow the letter of the law. This dual system aggravates both persistent underreporting and poor policy execution by complicating the tracking and prevention of child marriages.

Theories of Marriage Age Transitions

One needs a theoretical framework to understand the causes of the differences in marriage age among people and nations. Scholars have presented cultural, socioeconomic, and financial viewpoints to help clarify these changes. Usually, sociologists connect child marriage with patriarchal norms and gender expectations. In many traditional countries, Pakistan included, marriage is viewed as a symbolic step into adulthood, especially for women. From this vantage point, variations in marriage age represent conventional gender roles and family obligations. For instance, structural functionalism holds that early marriage helps to preserve social order and gender hierarchy [5].

Economic theories view early marriage as a sensible response to poverty. Becker's "marriage market" hypothesis holds that, just like in an economic choice, people select partners to maximize their own utility. Early marriage of daughters is one method that low-income households may use to guarantee dowries or help reduce financial burden. Conversely, females are more likely to postpone marriage until they have developed their human capital, which is best achieved through greater schooling, thereby providing more economic possibilities for women.

From a cultural standpoint, social conventions, religious beliefs, and ethnic identity define marriage customs. Cultural theories hold that long-held beliefs, rather than only personal or financial factors, define age at marriage. Some Pakistani communities, especially in more traditional or tribal areas, follow the early marriage custom in order to preserve family honor or to avoid conceiving a child outside of marriage.

These views of view complement rather than compete. Rather, marriage age changes are determined by the interaction of macro-level institutions and micro-level agency at the confluence of socioeconomic level, policy frameworks, and societal conventions.

Education and Marriage Timing

There is a substantial corpus of literature that emphasizes the inverse correlation between educational attainment and early marriage. Higher educated girls throughout South Asia, especially in Pakistan, are far more likely to postpone marriage. According to UNICEF (2023), girls without any education are six times more likely than those with secondary or higher education to be married before age eighteen.

The processes by which marriage is delayed by schooling are several. First of all, schools provide safe surroundings that keep

girls busy and involved, so lowering the possibility of early unions. Second, education improves girls' goals, autonomy, and job access, therefore raising their negotiating power in homes

and society. At last, families that value education could be less likely to view early marriage as either required or desired.

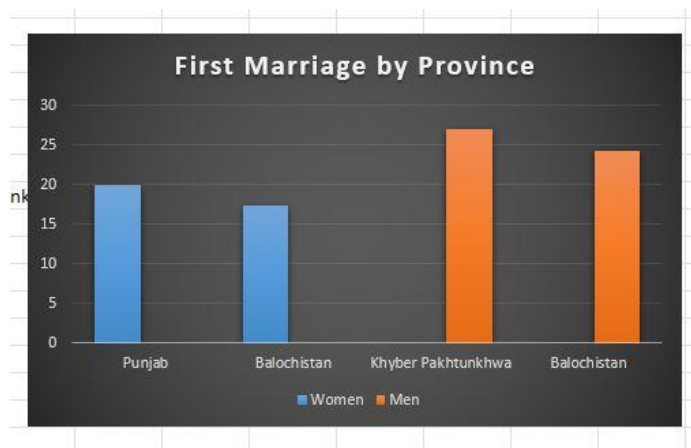


Figure 1: First Marriage by Province in Pakistan

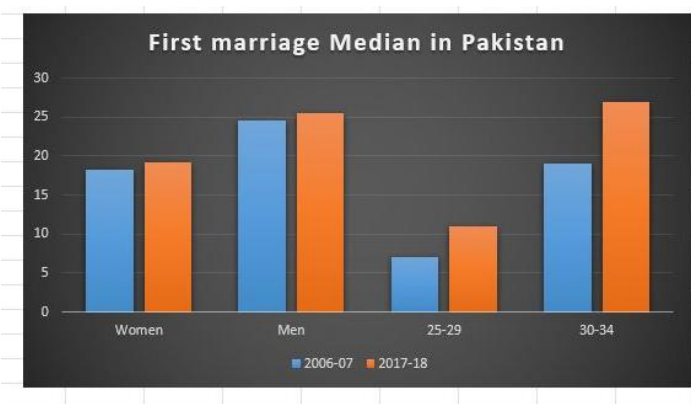


Figure 2: First Marriage Median in Pakistan

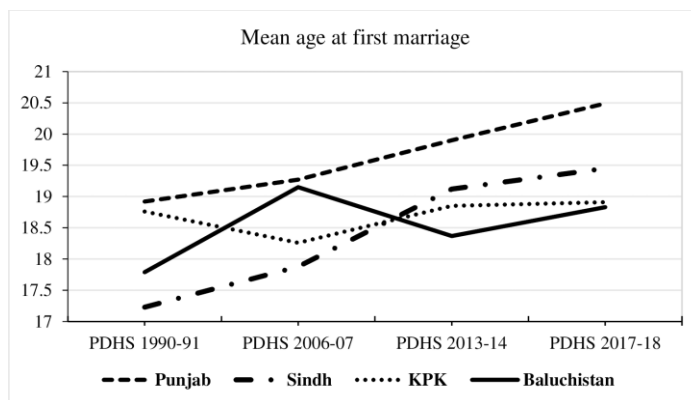


Figure 3: Mean age at first marriage

National statistics from the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) 2017–18 validate these trends in Pakistan. Compared to 20.9% of men, just 16.5% of married women had 16 or more years of education, therefore underscoring gender inequalities in educational access. But where education has

grown, marriage age has also climbed, especially in cities. Reduced child marriage has shown promise from initiatives like conditional cash transfers for school attendance, life skills programs, and vocational training.

## Urban vs. Rural Dynamics

The urban-rural divide plays a critical role in marriage age transitions. In general, urban areas in Pakistan exhibit higher marriage ages due to better access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Urban women are also more exposed to modern gender norms and values that prioritize personal development and delayed marriage.

In contrast, rural communities home to nearly 64% of Pakistan's population remain bastions of traditional practices. According to the UNICEF report, child marriage is significantly more prevalent in rural areas. Rural girls are more likely to be out of school, live in poverty, and adhere to conservative cultural norms, all of which reinforce early marriage as the expected norm.

Urbanization thus emerges as a transformative force. Studies suggest that as families migrate to urban areas or are influenced by urban lifestyles, attitudes toward marriage timing begin to shift. Moreover, urban youth are more likely to participate in

non-arranged or delayed marriages, reflecting changing social structures.

However, urban areas are not immune to challenges. Low-income urban settlements, where access to services remains limited, often mirror rural marriage patterns. Thus, policy must target not only rural development but also marginalized urban populations to ensure equitable change.

## South Asia's Context with Emphasis on Pakistan

Pakistan's marriage age trends must be situated within the broader South Asian context. South Asia has the highest number of child brides globally, though significant progress has been recorded in countries like India and Bangladesh. According to UNICEF, the average rate of decline in child marriage across the region needs to be seven times faster to meet the SDG target of elimination by 2030 [6].

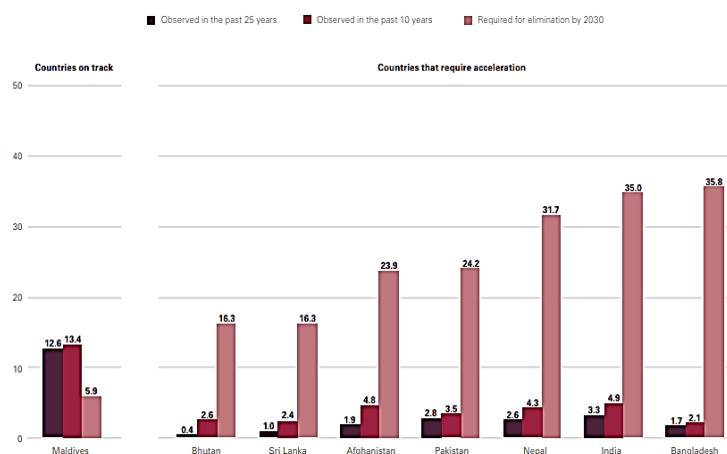


Figure 4 Average annual rate of reduction (%) in the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18

Within this landscape, Pakistan has made moderate progress but continues to lag behind its regional counterparts. For instance, while India has driven regional reductions through widespread education campaigns and girls' empowerment programs, Pakistan's progress has been hampered by political instability, conservative backlash, and weak institutional mechanisms.

Still, Pakistan is working to eradicate child marriage with the support of progressive MPs, women's rights groups, and international agencies. Encouraging changes have come from investments in girls' education, legislative changes, and community-based projects, as well as from other areas. To catch up with regional advancement, Pakistan must overcome the gaps between theory and practice, between culture and legislation, and between urban and rural reality.

## Historical and Current Trends in Marriage Age in Pakistan

Religious, cultural, and socioeconomic elements greatly affect marriage in Pakistan; while it has historically happened at a young age, especially for girls, changing social dynamics have helped to progressively raise the marriage age over time. Examining past trends and present data in this part emphasizes important elements influencing these changes.

### Historical Patterns of Early Marriage

In Pakistan, especially among rural and tribal groups where customs, respect, and social stability were more crucial, marriage at a young age was customarily common and accepted. Common practice was marriage off females shortly

after puberty, with the aim of preserving family honor, lightening domestic chores, and building alliances. In agricultural societies, males were expected to take on marital responsibilities quite early, even though they were married somewhat later, since marriage and family formation were closely related to adult status. Particularly, women lacked the legal and educational tools needed in former times to delay marriage. Many areas made it quite difficult for girls to obtain an education; society expected them to perform home chores instead of pursuing their own personal growth. Pakistani women thus kept having a median marriage age less than 20 throughout the latter half of the century [7].

**Shifting Marriage Age: Recent Statistics**

Recent data reflect a slow but meaningful increase in the average age at first marriage, particularly for women. According to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) 2017–18, the average age at first marriage for women was 23.9 years, while for men it was 27.6 years [9]. This marks a noticeable shift from earlier generations, where women often married between the ages of 16 and 20.

UNICEF's 2023 report highlights that 18% of Pakistani women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18, while about 4% were married before 15. Though this represents progress, the figures remain high relative to global standards and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets [8].

Several factors account for this transition:

- Increased access to education, particularly secondary and post-secondary education, for girls.
- Urbanization promotes exposure to modern lifestyles and values.
- Policy interventions and legislative reforms that raise awareness and legal age limits.
- Economic pressures that delay marriage until greater financial stability is achieved.

**Gender Disparities in Marriage Trends**

Despite overall progress, significant gender disparities persist. Girls are still far more likely than boys to be married at a younger age. This reflects deeply entrenched patriarchal norms where girls are seen as dependents to be married off early, while boys are expected to establish economic security before marriage.

Furthermore, social expectations regarding female chastity and family honor often place pressure on families to arrange marriages for girls early, particularly in conservative or rural communities. These gendered expectations continue to undermine efforts to raise the average age of marriage for girls across the country.

**Regional and Socio-Economic Disparities**

Marriage age trends are not uniform across regions. The prevalence of child marriage is notably higher in rural

areas and among low-income households. The UNICEF report shows that in Pakistan, child brides are more likely to live in poor households, lack formal education, and reside in rural settings. Conversely, women in urban areas and wealthier households tend to marry later.

In Sindh province, for example, legal reforms in 2019 raised the minimum age of marriage for girls to 18, making it the most progressive province in this regard. However, enforcement remains inconsistent, and other provinces like Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan continue to struggle with high rates of child marriage, often due to weak institutional capacity and resistance from conservative factions [10].

This regional variation illustrates the fragmented nature of legal and cultural norms, where provincial autonomy allows for progressive legislation in some areas while others lag behind due to political, religious, or cultural barriers.

**Cultural and Religious Influence on Marriage Patterns**

Marriage customs in Pakistan are strongly influenced by religious and cultural norms, many of which uphold early marriage as a moral and social necessity. Arranged marriages remain the dominant form of union, with Gallup Pakistan (2018) reporting that 70% of marriages were arranged, and only 7% were categorized as “love marriages.”

Religious interpretations also play a key role in shaping perceptions of appropriate marriage age. While Islamic law generally requires physical and mental maturity before marriage, local interpretations often justify early unions, especially for girls. This has led to friction between religious traditions and statutory laws aiming to delay marriage.

Beyond age, the type of marriage, arranged vs. love marriage, also impacts age patterns. Arranged marriages, which often involve decisions made by parents or elders, are typically contracted earlier in life, particularly for girls. Polygamy, though legal in Pakistan, remains a minor trend, with 2.5% of married men reporting more than one wife in the 2017–18 PDHS data. Nevertheless, this practice can also influence women’s autonomy and marital timing.

**Role of Education in Delaying Marriage**

A strong negative correlation exists between a girl’s level of education and her likelihood of early marriage. According to UNICEF’s 2023 report, girls in South Asia with no education are six times more likely to marry before the age of 18 than those with secondary or higher education. In Pakistan, this correlation holds firmly: girls who are kept in school longer tend to marry later, have fewer children, and are more likely to participate in the labor force [8].

The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) 2017–18 provides important context [11]:



- Only 16.5% of married women had 16 or more years of education, compared to 20.9% of men.
- Women with secondary education or higher were far less likely to have been married before 18.
- Girls who dropped out of school were much more vulnerable to early marriage, with many families perceiving that schooling and marriage are incompatible for girls.

Thus, education not only delays marriage directly by occupying girls' time during critical years but also influences the long-term decisions and perceptions of families and communities.

## Urbanization and Socio-Economic Transformation

Urbanization is a defining feature of modern development, and in Pakistan, it is gradually reshaping social structures, values, and practices including those related to marriage. The movement of people from rural to urban areas, the expansion of cities, and exposure to diverse cultural influences have collectively contributed to shifts in the timing and nature of marriage, especially for women. This section examines how urbanization and broader socio-economic transformation impact marriage age transitions in Pakistan.

### Urban vs. Rural Disparities in Marriage Age

When it comes to marriage age and related metrics, urban and rural Pakistan differ obviously. Rural girls are more likely than metropolitan ones to tie the knot before turning eighteen. This is so because traditional values, lower economic levels, and limited access to healthcare and education define rural places [13]. Conversely, metropolitan locations provide greater chances for jobs and education, which helps to change a society in which marriage is postponed in favor of personal growth. Furthermore, less reliance on conventional extended-family structures and frequently smaller, more nuclear in structure, metropolitan households can help to lower the urge to get married young. Finally, people living in cities

### Exposure to Diverse Values and Modern Norms

Urbanization results in fresh ideas of gender roles, family dynamics, and personal liberties experienced by people, especially young people. These ideas often challenge the conventional wisdom connected to young age marriage. For example, young women living in cities might put finishing postsecondary education or getting a job ahead of marriage. Engaging in interactions with people from many socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds also helps one develop greater tolerance and open-mindedness on personal choices like marriage. Regarding selecting a partner and timing the marriage, urban Pakistani women are more involved players. Though they are still frequent in cities, arranged weddings have evolved throughout the years. Urban homes that want their daughters to marry well-educated,

career-oriented men sometimes delay marriage until after a daughter has completed school or entered the workforce.

## Socio-Economic Mobility and Aspirations

One of the most remarkable effects of urbanization is the increase of chances for people to climb the social scale. Rather than early marriage and childbirth, education and professional development are increasingly linked with personal success among metropolitan young, especially among girls. Education, work, and unofficial markets, which provide additional alternatives to child marriage, may deter girls and their families from getting married young. Moreover, metropolitan women are more likely to try to make it on their own financially before being married. Once one has achieved financial security, which is partly related to this change in aspirations, marriage is today considered a decision best made in later life. Under this perspective, societal and cultural changes, as well as economic logic, affect marital changes. Still, a more complicated picture shows low-income urban areas. Those living in informal settlements or peri-urban areas sometimes face the same systematic issues as rural communities, including poor educational possibilities, restricted access to healthcare, high unemployment rates, and continuous gender bias, although being in metropolitan areas. In many contexts, early marriage might still be considered a pragmatic or protective choice.

### Challenges of Urban Inequality

Urbanization has benefits as well as drawbacks, even if it could help to propel social development. Urban inequality causes significant problems. Sadly, not every city citizen benefits from the same portion of the city's resources. Child marriage rates among girls and women in low-income areas and urban slums may continue at high rates due to elements including urban poverty, overcrowding, and a lack of official monitoring. Furthermore, families from rural areas could discover that their customs and values are disturbed when they migrate to cities since they do not have the same support systems at hand. Urbanization might not be sufficient to alter long-standing trends like child marriage unless particular actions are carried out.

### Urbanization and Policy Implications

Urban areas offer a fertile ground for policy innovation. Municipal governments and civil society organizations working in cities can implement localized strategies to promote delayed marriage and support girls' education [12]. These may include:

- Urban education campaigns targeting slum communities
- Youth-focused employment and skills training programs
- Reproductive health services tailored for young, unmarried women
- Legal literacy and marriage registration awareness campaigns

The urban-rural contrast also underscores the need for equitable development. For urbanization to contribute

meaningfully to marriage age transitions, policies must address the inequality within urban settings and ensure inclusive access to education, employment, and legal protections.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative legislative analysis with quantitative data examination from reputable sources, including UNICEF reports (2023) and the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) 2017–18. Secondary data analysis revealed trends in marriage age across various countries, socioeconomic statuses, and educational levels. Examined were comparative statistical charts illustrating disparities based on urban-rural residency, gender, and provincial policies. Also examined were relevant legal frameworks, including the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act (2019) and the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929), to assess the impact of legislative changes on the age of marriage. The study incorporated content analysis of NGO interventions, policy studies, and national strategies to elucidate enforcement gaps and socio-cultural resistance. This approach utilised data triangulation to comprehensively understand the variations in marriage age in Pakistan influenced by education,

urbanisation, and legal reforms, thereby facilitating evidence-based policy recommendations.

## RESULTS

This section presents and discusses the statistical findings from the two primary documents reviewed. These results offer insight into the age of marriage in Pakistan, patterns of change over time, regional and socio-economic disparities, and correlations with education and urbanization. Visual data presented in charts, figures, and survey outcomes have been critically interpreted to highlight significant patterns and trends.

### Prevalence of Child Marriage in South Asia and Pakistan

According to the UNICEF report (2023), South Asia is home to the largest number of child brides globally, with approximately 290 million women having been married before the age of 18. Pakistan alone accounts for 19.4 million of these cases, ranking third in the region after India and Bangladesh. These statistics emphasize Pakistan’s critical role in the global campaign to eliminate child marriage.

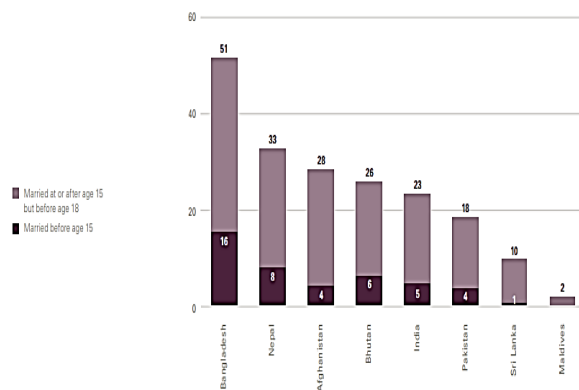


Figure 5: Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18

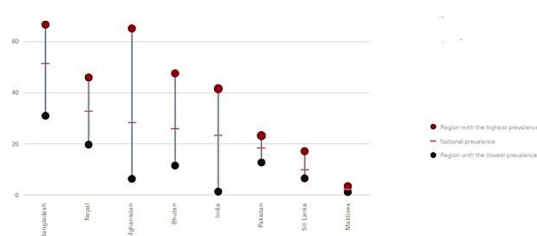


Figure 6: Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18

Figure 5 and 6 shows:

- 18% of Pakistani women aged 20–24 was married before 18.
- 4% were married before 15.

- In contrast, Bangladesh's rate exceeds 50%, while Maldives is below 2%.

This data highlights that while Pakistan is not the worst-performing country in South Asia, its rate of early marriage is

still considerable and significantly above the threshold of international human rights standards, such as SDG 5.3, which aims to eliminate child marriage by 2030 [13].

## Provincial and Regional Disparities within Pakistan

The figures also reveal marked disparities across provinces and regions. For example, Sindh is the only province to have raised the legal age of marriage for girls to 18 years, matching that of boys, thanks to the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act (2019) [14]. Despite this reform, enforcement remains inconsistent, and rural regions in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan still report high rates of early marriage due to weak institutional frameworks, socio-cultural norms, and poor legal awareness.

Further visualized disparities include:

- Urban women tend to marry later than rural women.
- Marriage age is inversely related to poverty levels.

These findings demonstrate that location, wealth, and education intersect to determine a girl's likelihood of marrying early.

## Correlation with Education: A Critical Factor

In Pakistan specifically, the data shows:

According to a UNICEF report (2023), 97% of currently married girls aged 15–19 in Pakistan are out of school. Data for never-married girls in Pakistan is not available (N/A), which makes direct comparison difficult but underscores a likely trend that early marriage almost entirely excludes girls from formal education.

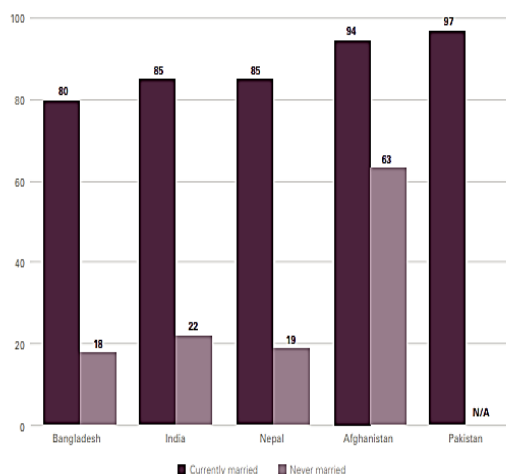


Figure 7: Percentage of girls aged 15 to 17 years who are out of school, by marital status

Other countries also show a wide gap:

- Bangladesh: 80% of married girls vs. 18% of never-married girls are out of school.
- India: 85% vs. 22%
- Nepal: 85% vs. 19%
- Afghanistan: 94% vs. 63%

## Childbearing Patterns and Reproductive Health

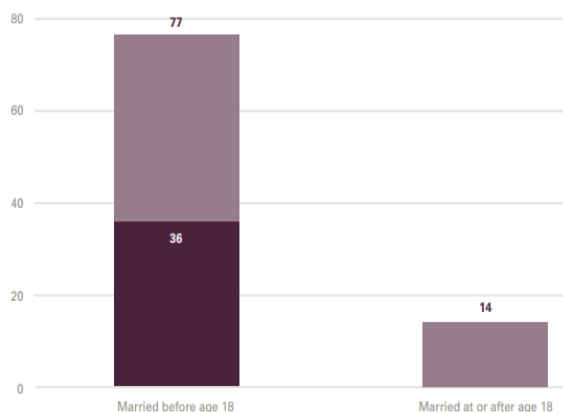


Figure 8: Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who gave birth before age 18 and 20,



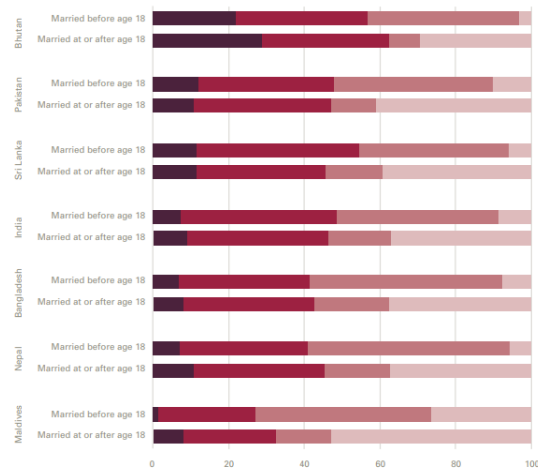


Figure 9: Percentage distribution of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years by timing of pregnancy

Figures 8 and 9 from the UNICEF report provide vital insights into reproductive patterns linked to early marriage:

- 77% of child brides in South Asia give birth while still adolescents.
- 36% give birth before age 18.

Marriage before 18 significantly increases the likelihood of

early pregnancy, compared to those who marry later.

In Pakistan, this pattern is echoed:

- Women who marry early are more likely to become pregnant within the first year of marriage.
- Early childbirth is strongly associated with health risks, school dropout, and limited economic opportunities.

## Type of Marriage and Spousal Age Gaps

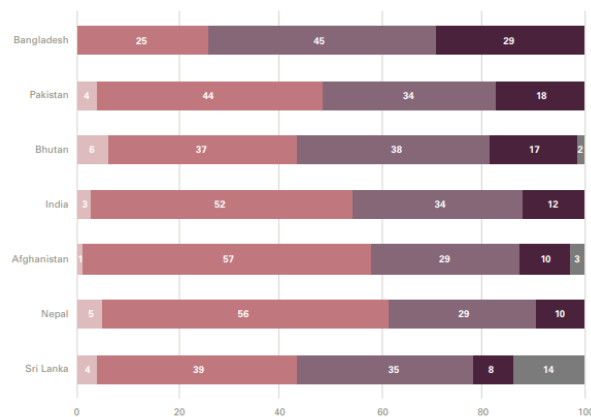


Figure 10: Percentage distribution of currently married women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married

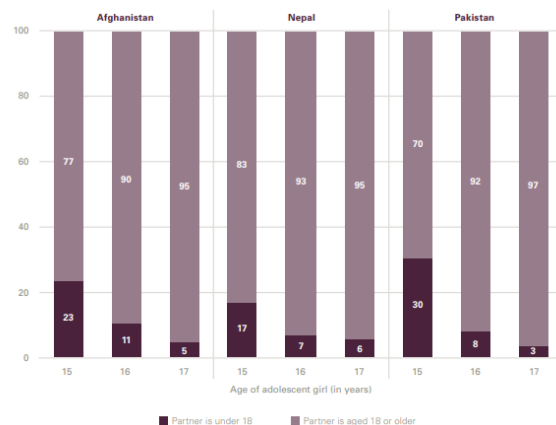


Figure 11: Percentage distribution of currently married adolescent girls aged 15 to 17 years, by age of partner

Figures 9 and 10 taken from UNICEF provide insights into age gaps between spouses:

- In Pakistan, around 29% of child brides are married to men 5–9 years older, while 10% marry men who are at least 10 years older.
- Although the majority of marriages occur within a 0–4 year age gap, power imbalances increase significantly in marriages with larger age gaps, contributing to decreased agency and higher vulnerability for girls [16].

Furthermore, arranged marriages remain predominant:

- Gallup Pakistan (2018) data cited in the presentation found that 70% of respondents had arranged marriages, while only 7% reported love marriages.

These figures suggest that autonomy in marital decision-making remains limited, especially for girls.

### Urbanization and Residence-Based Disparities

Figures from the UNICEF report show clear residence-based disparities in child marriage rates, Rural girls are almost twice as likely to be married before 18 compared to urban girls. This is due to differences in education access, poverty, exposure to legal information, and cultural flexibility.

The urban-rural divide is a crucial indicator of how socio-economic conditions, infrastructure, and policy implementation affect marriage age. In urban settings, girls benefit from:

- Better access to education and employment
- Greater exposure to progressive norms
- Stronger legal enforcement mechanisms

Nevertheless, as the presentation highlights, urban inequality persists. In low-income urban areas or informal settlements, early marriage remains prevalent due to overcrowding, insecurity, and under-resourced schools.

### Policy and Enforcement Trends

The Sindh Assembly's 2019 decision to raise the minimum legal marriage age for girls to 18. The role of NADRA's marriage certificate registration system, which attempts to bring customary and informal marriages under legal scrutiny. However, the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929), still enforced in many provinces, remains outdated, setting different legal ages for boys (18) and girls (16), a clear inconsistency with gender equality standards [18].

The data presented shows that:

- Legal reform has not kept pace with social realities.
- Enforcement is weak, especially in rural and conservative regions.

Community-based awareness campaigns and NGO interventions have shown success in reducing early marriages locally but have not yet scaled nationally.

## Policy and Legal Reforms: Progress and Gaps

Legal frameworks and policy interventions are critical tools in influencing societal behavior, particularly regarding early and child marriage in Pakistan. Over the years, a range of laws and policy reforms have been introduced to address the issue, yet the persistence of child marriage points to significant gaps between legislation, enforcement, and societal acceptance. This part offers a summary of the present legal scene, emphasizes important provincial reforms, and explores the obstacles still standing in place to prevent these initiatives from having a transforming effect.

### The Legal Framework on Marriage in Pakistan

Considered the fundamental law governing teen marriage in Pakistan, the Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) was passed there in 1929. Though passed with revolutionary intent, the CMRA seems outdated when considered through the prism of current human rights discussions. Set the minimum legal age of marriage at 16 for females and 18 for boys, therefore violating Pakistan's promises under international frameworks like the CEDAW and Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, which urge the eradication of harmful practices like child and early marriage. Further complicating matters, the concurrent legislative list include marriage rules in Pakistan, therefore empowering both federal and provincial governments to draft legislation addressing this issue. This division of power has resulted in certain provinces advanced improvements while others remain under control by outdated federal legislation [19].

### Progressive Provincial Reforms: Sindh as a Case Study

Among the provinces, Sindh has led in applying fresh laws. The Sindh Assembly lifted the legal marriage age for women up to 18 by passing the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act in 2019, therefore matching the legal marriage age for boys and with international norms. Under this law, those who enable underage marriages parents, guardians, officiants may face penalties and even jail time. One of the best illustrations of how lawmakers, civic society, and international development partners may cooperate to create good policies is demonstrated in the successful passage of this bill. Its implementation has proven challenging in tribal and rural areas, where traditional customs usually predominate over legal requirements, nonetheless. When public knowledge is lacking and enforcement systems are absent, progressive legislation fall short in producing the intended social transformation [20].

### Weak Enforcement Mechanisms

In Pakistan's fight against underage marriage, ineffective application of existing laws still presents a regular challenge. There are several hurdles causing this vulnerability. First, especially in more rural places, the general public is ignorant of the legal minimum age for marriage. Second, when it comes to looking at and punishing instances of child marriage, judges and law enforcement lack

resources and training severely. Families and community leaders may be reluctant to disclose child marriages depending on cultural acceptance, concern of community reaction, or social stigma [20].

Many Pakistani weddings still lack the required documentation or official government registration as well [21]. Though introduced as an oversight tool, many rural communities lack access to the formal marriage registration system of the National Database and Registration Authority (Nadra). In some societies, child marriage can thus go essentially unpunished since unregistered marriages are not subject to legal enforcement.

## Resistance to Reform and the Role of Religion

Particularly outspoken in their criticism of attempts to increase the age of majority marriage for girls from 16 to 18 in all spheres are conservatives and religious political groups. These groups see a legal age threshold as against religious belief since Islamic law permits marriage upon reaching puberty. Many Islamic academics and human rights advocates, however, disagree with this interpretation as Islam also encourages consent, maturity, and protecting of individual welfare.

Often blocking progressive proposals in Parliament, such the Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Bill of 2018, this religious opposition has helped to create a state of policy stagnation. This resistance emphasizes the need of constructive communication with religious leaders to establish an understanding and redefine religious beliefs in a way that supports girl protection legislation. This helps to approves of religion ideas.

## Role of NGOs, Civil Society, and International Organizations

Legislative and institutional inaction has left significant voids filled by non-governmental organizations (NGRs) and players of civil society. Initiatives aiming at eradicating the practice of child marriage have been started by worldwide organizations including UNICEF and UNFPA as well as regional and local women's rights groups. Among these initiatives, we could underline the need to inform the public on the psychological, physiological, and legal consequences of child marriage, support of ongoing education of girls as a protection against this practice, and provide victims of forced marriage access to therapy and legal representation.

The fact that many of these organizations work with religious authorities to advocate Islamic marriage rules fit for children's age is one of the main causes of contention. Community-based initiatives include the declaration of "Child Marriage Free Villages" aim to challenge long-standing social practices and offer workable alternatives by combining youth participation, education, and family outreach.

## Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the numerous limitations of this research. Initially, it is primarily reliant on secondary data sources, which may not accurately reflect the most recent or regionally specific patterns in marriage behaviour across Pakistan. The absence of separated data restricts research by ethnicity, religion, or province, potentially resulting in the neglect of significant cultural distinctions. Additionally, the research is devoid of primary qualitative insights from impacted populations, which would be beneficial in elucidating local standards and pressures. The study places a greater emphasis on women's experiences, as there is a lack of research on the function of changing gender dynamics or the perspectives of men [25]. These fractures present opportunities for additional investigation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Pakistan requires a thorough plan considering cultural, institutional, and legal elements all at once if it is to close the discrepancy between theory and reality [23]. The first stage is a consistent legislative framework defining 18 as the legal marriage age for every nation. All provinces should apply updated CMRAs in line with world standards and Pakistan's development goals [24].

Moreover, there is great need to strengthen enforcement actions. Part of this includes teaching municipal authorities, courts, and law enforcement on how to spot and handle offenses. Legal documentation of every union also calls for extending Nadra's marriage registration program to tribal and rural areas [22].

Third, especially in underprivileged communities, programs aiming at increasing legal awareness and public education are absolutely vital. The efforts should guarantee that the legal age of marriage and the fines for violating it are clearly expressed. The fourth principle is that religious leaders ought to cooperate with the government and non-governmental organisations [25]. By rereading Islamic law to support delayed marriage and females' rights, many of these leaders have the ability to shift people's perceptions.

## CONCLUSION

This research contributes to understanding the shifting marriage patterns in Pakistan, emphasizing how education and urbanization are reshaping traditional norms, especially among young women. It highlights the critical role of access to higher education, urban exposure, and evolving societal attitudes in delaying marriage age, while also exposing persistent challenges in rural, impoverished areas.

Changing marriage age in Pakistan is influenced by education, urbanisation, laws, and long-standing socio-cultural standards. Particularly for women, rising educational possibilities and the effects of city life have helped to create a general trend toward later marriage ages during the past several decades. Still a big issue, early and child marriage is

especially common in low-income rural areas where poverty, custom, and gender inequality are more common.

Two strong change factors simultaneously have emerged: education and urbanization. Particularly college-educated girls, young people living in cities are delaying marriage in favor of self-improvement, additional education, and economic activity. The challenging aspect of giving these chances to underrepresented groups and disadvantaged places is ensuring that no girl is driven into marriage due of custom, pressure, or poverty. Going forward, we need a comprehensive, cross-sectoral strategy. Part of this involves involving communities in changing norms, supporting enforcement, improving access to education and reproductive health, and harmonizing legal frameworks. Working together among youth programs, religious leaders, and families will help to produce more equitable, knowledgeable, and consensual marriage options. Delaying marriage is an investment in gender equality, public health, and national development not only about following international rules. The degree to which Pakistan follows its moral and legal obligations to make sure every girl has the freedom to choose for herself whether, when, and with whom to get married will define the nation's destiny.

For further research, a deeper investigation into regional disparities, cultural resistance, and the effectiveness of existing interventions is needed. Longitudinal studies and qualitative interviews can provide insights into community-level attitudes, while evaluating policy impacts can guide more inclusive, targeted, and sustainable strategies to end child marriage.

### COMPETING INTERESTS DISCLAIMER:

Authors have stated that they have no known competing financial interests OR non-financial interests OR personal ties that would have seemed to affect the work disclosed in this study.

### Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

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Author(s) hereby declares that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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