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Girls Not Brides: Evolution of Child Marriage in Pakistan

Rashid Javed* Mazhar Mughal†

Abstract

Child marriage is still widespread in countries across the Indian Subcontinent. The practice has important consequences for the health and well-being of the woman and the child. In this study, we examine the incidence of child marriage in Pakistan and the changes that have taken place over time in the profile of the women who marry before turning 18. We use data from all the four rounds of the representative Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS), namely 1990 – 91, 2006 – 07, 2012 – 13 and 2017 – 18. With the help of these data, we observe the evolution of the individual and household characteristics of early-marrying women over a span of three decades. We find that the practice of child marriage has become much less generalized over the past three decades. In 2017 – 18, 39% of married women of child-bearing age (i.e. those between the age of 15 and 49) had got married before the age of 18. Though still high, it is nonetheless lower than the 54% incidence found in 1990 – 91. The decrease is particularly significant among women from wealthy and urban households. The incidence of child marriage is increasingly concentrated among women who are older and less educated and those belonging to poor, rural households. Elimination of the harmful practice of child marriage is crucial for achieving the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) which deals with gender equality. The findings of the study highlight the close links present between child marriage, poverty and urbanization.

Key words: Child marriage; Demographic change; Pakistan.

JEL codes: D10, J10, J12, Z10, Z13.

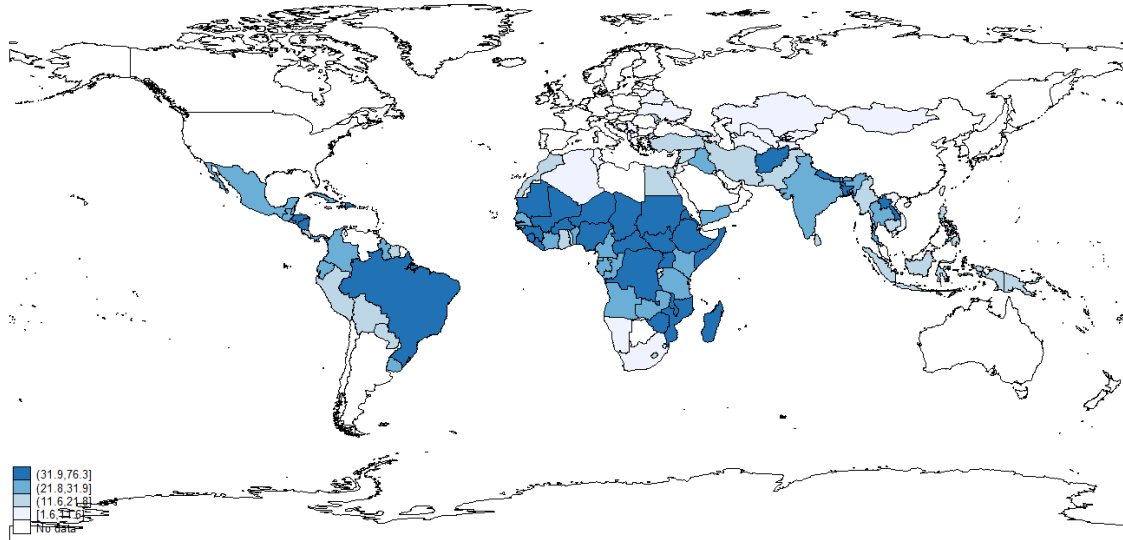
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1 Introduction

The practice of early marriage of women (also called Child marriage) remains common in many parts of the developing world. Around 700 million currently alive women worldwide were married by age of 18 ([Suarez, 2017](#)). The phenomenon is particularly frequent in the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia where 38 and 30 of women still get married before their 18th birthday ([Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1: Incidence of child marriage in the developing world



Source: Authors' calculations using UNICEF global database 2018.

The practice has important consequences for the health and well-being of the woman and the child. Women who marry early produce more children than who marry later ([Nasrullah et al., 2014](#); [Raj et al., 2009](#)). They are younger at the time of first birth and have subsequent births at shorter intervals ([Jensen and Thornton, 2003](#); [Koski et al., 2017](#)). Child marriage is associated with greater risk of still-birth and miscarriages ([Kamal and Hassan, 2013](#)). It is also reported to limit

women’s economic empowerment and education outcomes of their children ([Sekhri and Debnath, 2014](#); [Yount et al., 2018](#)).

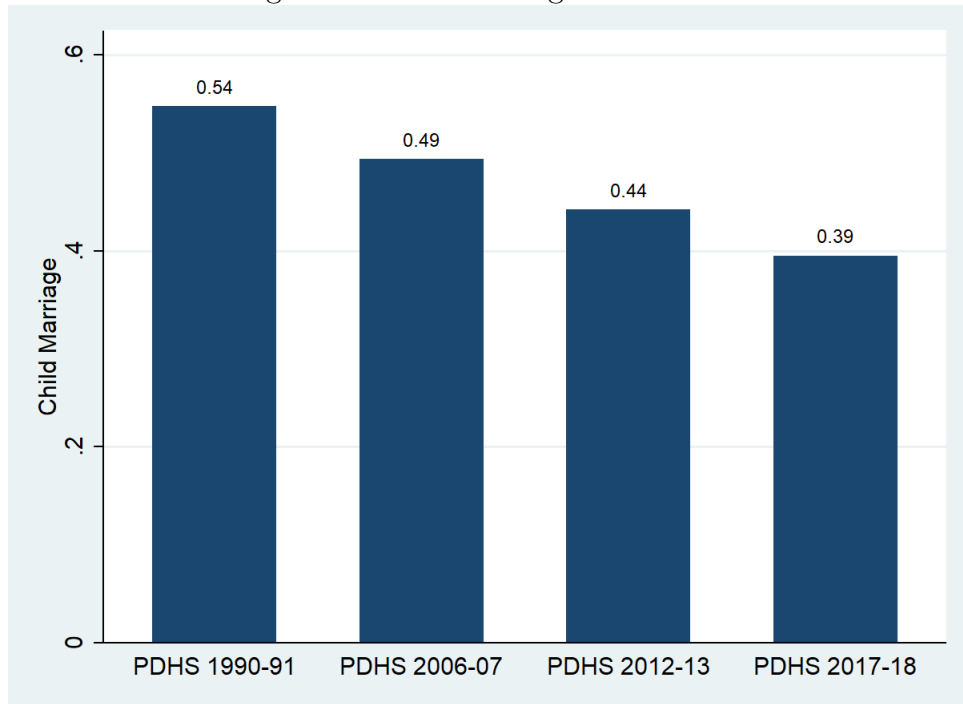
In this study, we examine the incidence of child marriage in Pakistan and the changes that have taken place over time in the profile of the women who marry before turning 18. For this, we use data from all the four rounds of the representative Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS), namely 1990 – 91, 2006 – 07, 2012 – 13 and 2017 – 18. With the help of these data, we are able to observe the evolution of the individual and household characteristics of early-marrying women over a span of three decades. During this period, the incidence of child marriage has gradually come down ([Figure 2](#)). In 2017 – 18, 39% of married women of child-bearing age (i.e. those between the age of 15 and 49) had got married before the age of 18. Though still high, it is nonetheless lower than the 54% incidence found in 1990 – 91. Two women out of every three (65.65%) who got married before 1980 were aged 18 or less ([Figure 3](#)). This proportion has dropped to one in four (25.31%) among women who married during the previous decade (2010 – 2008).

Concomitantly and not unrelatedly, Pakistan has undergone significant demographic and socioeconomic changes. The country graduated from low-income to middle-income country. The per capita GNI in PPP dollar terms rose from \$2,060 in 1990 to \$5,830 in 2017 ([Bank, 2019](#)). The country became one of the more urbanized countries in South Asia with the share of urban population in the total population increasing from 31% to 37% during the period. Economic development

has also influenced the country's demographic transition. Pakistan's total fertility rate fell from 5.4 in 1990 – 91 to 3.6 in 2017 – 18 (PDHS 1992, 2018). These factors have contributed to changing female marriage patterns.

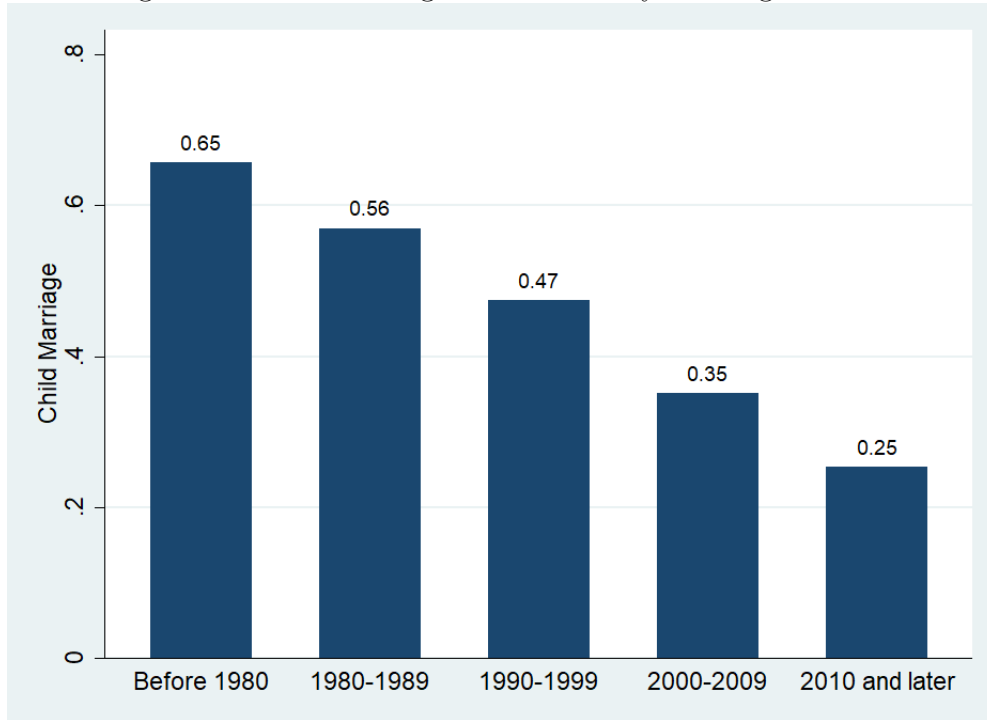
In the next section, we briefly review the literature on early female marriage. Section 3 briefly describes the data used in the study. Section 4 and 5 present individual and household characteristics of early-marrying women in Pakistan respectively. Finally, Section 6 offers some concluding remarks.

Figure 2: Child marriage in Pakistan



Source: Authors' calculations using PDHS.

Figure 3: Child marriage in Pakistan by marriage cohorts



Source: Authors' calculations using PDHS.

2 Literature Review

There is a large and burgeoning literature on female early marriage in the developing world. Several studies analyse the impact of marriage age on marital life stability and satisfaction. For instance, [Clark \(1949\)](#), [Lee \(1977\)](#), [Becker et al. \(1977\)](#) and [Heaton et al. \(2001\)](#) found a positive relationship between female marriage age and marital stability and satisfaction. [Heaton et al. \(2001\)](#) pointed out that delayed marriages significantly reduce the incidence of divorce in Indonesia.

The existing literature also demonstrates that female age at marriage significantly influences reproductive behaviour. According to [Alice and Phyllis T \(1979\)](#), women who marry age 20 year or above tend to have fewer children than women

who marry earlier. Similarly, [Harwood-Lejeune \(2001\)](#) estimated that around one sixth to one third of the fertility decline witnessed in nine countries of southern and eastern Africa was due to rising age at marriage. Studies from South Asia report similar findings. [Nahar et al. \(2013\)](#), for example, show that Bangladeshi women who marry later produce fewer children than who marry early. [Sathar and M. Framurz Kiani \(1998\)](#) and [Nasrullah et al. \(2014\)](#) reported that child marriage is significantly associated with high birth rates in Pakistan, and increase in marriage age of Pakistani women has delayed fertility. In the same vein, [Maitra \(2004\)](#) and [Raj et al. \(2009\)](#) show that an increase in women's age at marriage significantly reduced total fertility and increases the likelihood of using contraceptives in India and Nepal respectively.

Some studies highlight the adverse medical and socioeconomic outcomes of child marriage on the mother and the children. [Nour \(2006\)](#) report that early marriage increases the risk of catching sexually transmitted diseases, cervical cancer, malaria, death during childbirth, and obstetric fistulas. There is also greater risk of premature birth and death among neonates, infants, or children. Similarly, [Kamal and Hassan \(2015\)](#) analyse the 2011 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey dataset, and find that child marriage significantly increases the probability of still-birth or miscarriage. Likewise, [Garcia-Hombrados \(2017\)](#) reports a significant effect of child bride on the probability of infant mortality among children born to Ethiopian women.

Some studies also show that delay in female marriage is positively associated with the long-term economic and social empowerment of women ([Dhamija and Roychowdhury, 2018](#); [Field and Ambrus, 2008](#); [Gordon B. Dahl, 2010](#); [Wang and Wang, 2017](#); [Yount et al., 2018](#)).

Child marriage has also been shown to influence child development outcomes: [Chari et al. \(2017\)](#), for instance, demonstrate that delayed marriage among Indian women results in significantly better child health and educational outcomes. Early female marriage has an adverse effect on the children size at birth and weight-for-height, as well as on learning outcomes. [Delprato et al. \(2017\)](#) evaluate the impact of maternal age at marriage on children’s education in Sub-Saharan Africa, and report that early marriage is still an obstacle to children’s access and completion of schooling and contributes to the education gender gap.

3 Data

In this study, we have used Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) datasets. The PDHS are household surveys which contain information about fertility, family planning, maternal and child health. These surveys were conducted by the National Institute of Population Studies, Islamabad with technical and financial assistance from USAID. A two-stage stratified sample design was adopted for the survey. PDHS 1990 – 91 comprises 408 Primary Sampling Units (PSU) (225 in

urban areas and 183 in rural areas). It interviewed 6,611 women from 7,193 households. The second round (PDHS 2006 – 07) comprises 1,000 PSUs (390 in urban areas and 610 in rural areas). In this round, 10,023 women from 95,441 households were interviewed. PDHS 2012 – 13 consists of 500 PSU (248 in urban areas and 252 in rural areas). It covered 13,558 women from 12,943 households. The 2017 – 18 round comprises 580 PSUs (285 urban and 295 rural) and covered 15,068 women from 14,540 households. The response rate in the four rounds ranged from 95% (PDHS 2006 – 07) to 97% (PDHS 1990 – 91). All the women surveyed were of child-bearing age (i.e. 15 – 49 years) and were married at the time of the survey¹.

4 Individual Characteristics

Table 1 shows characteristics of the women who married before the age of 18 according to the four rounds of the survey. We observe that the incidence of child marriage has come down for women of all the three age groups: 20–29 years, 30–39 years and 40–49 years. The share of early-marrying women among the women belonging to the 20 – 29 year age group at the time of the survey dropped from 57.6% in 1990 to 42% in 2017, showing a 15% decrease. The decrease in the share in the 30 – 39 year age group is a similar 18%. The fall in case of the 40 – 49 year age group, at 9%, is however the weakest.

¹This, along with the fact that women’s age at marriage was computed by subtracting age at first child birth from the interval between marriage and first birth, precludes analysis at women’s birth-cohort basis.

As a result, the age profile of early-marrying women has changed. While the proportion of the young cohort (20 – 29 years) among early-marrying women aged 15 – 45 fell from 39% in 1990 to 34% in 2017, the corresponding share of the oldest cohort (40 – 49 years) rose from 21% to 28%. On average, early-marrying women are increasingly older, underscoring the gradual decline in the practice of child marriage. This is accompanied by a moderate decrease in age difference between men and women from 7.27 years in 1990 to 6.5 years in 2017.

Table 1: Individual characteristics of women married before the age of 18

	PDHS 1990-91	PDHS 2006-07	PDHS 2012-13	PDHS 2017-18
Age group				
20-29	57.62	49.74	42.2	38.53
30-39	49.87	46.43	39.74	31.56
40-49	46.24	44.1	44.34	37.14
Age difference	7.27	6.74	6.42	6.50
Education				
No Education	84.01	75.55	70.94	67.02
Primary	8.78	13.27	14.97	17.48
Secondary	7.12	9.62	12.16	13.28
Higher	0.07	1.54	1.90	2.20
Years of Education	1.00	1.56	1.89	2.14
Education (18-25 Age group)				
No Education	85.25	68.27	62.24	61.03
Primary	09.34	18.55	18.40	19.34
Secondary	05.39	12.02	16.79	17.08
Higher	0.00	01.15	02.55	02.53
Employment	20.00	30.64	30.63	20.65
Related to husband	66.10	69.09	70.34	68.54

Source: Authors' calculations using PDHS 1990-91, PDHS 2006-7, PDHS 2012-13 and PDHS 2017-18. Adequate sampling weights are used.

A vast majority (84%) of early-married women had no schooling according to the 1990 survey, and hardly any (0.07%) had continued their studies after marriage to

acquire college or university degree. Though the situation has improved over time, still two-thirds (67%) of the early-marrying women lack any education according to the 2017 survey, while 2.2% have acquired higher education. The average number of years of education has increased from 1 year to 2.14 years during the same period.

The change in education attainment is more clearly visible among the youngest cohort of married women (18–25 years). Illiteracy among this group of women fell from an above-average 85 percent in 1990 – 91 to a below-average 61 percent in 2017 – 18. Lack of education is consequently more frequently seen among older women. Improving schooling enrolment is going hand-in-hand with falling incidence of child marriage.

5 Household Characteristics

Table 2 sheds light on some important aspects of the changing profile of early-marrying women. In 1990, child marriage was present in similar proportions across households regardless of their position in the wealth distribution. The incidence of child marriage ranged from 48.9% for households in the fourth quintile (i.e. rich households) to 56.5% for those in the bottom quintile (i.e. poorest households). By 2017 however, the patterns have clearly diverged: The practice of child marriage among the poorest households shows little sign of change as more than one in two

(54.9%) women in the households belonging to this group still get married before the age of 18. The incidence in the other wealth categories, however has substantially altered. The proportion of women from the richest households who married before 18 (19.4%) is a third that found among women belonging to the poorest households and half that of women from middle-class households (37.5%). This reflects the fact that child marriage is increasingly concentrated among the poorest households.

Table 2: Household characteristics of women married before the age of 18

	PDHS 1990-91	PDHS 2006-07	PDHS 2012-13	PDHS 2017-18
Household size (number of persons)	8.29	9.05	8.64	8.28
Wealth status				
Extremely poor	56.51	60.96	59.34	54.87
Poor	56.51	54.96	51.04	45.65
Middle class	53.40	49.69	42.98	37.55
Rich	48.91	44.93	35.19	28.57
Richest	54.04	31.43	27.20	19.41
Place of Residence				
Urban	47.26	42.28	33.25	29.33
Rural	56.36	51.18	47.75	41.14
Province of residence				
Balochistan	60.19	42.22	52.67	49.13
Punjab	49.00	43.26	38.40	29.75
Sindh	65.10	57.96	47.76	42.41
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	51.06	53.95	49.56	46.18

Source: Authors' calculations using PDHS 1990-91, PDHS 2006-7, PDHS 2012-13 and PDHS 2017-18. Adequate sampling weights are used.

Likewise, the incidence of child marriage is becoming a more rural phenomenon. In 1990, 47.3% of women living in urban centers were married before the age of 18 as against 56.4% of women in the rural areas. Although the proportion of early-married women declined in both areas (29% in urban areas, 41.1% in rural areas

according to the 2017 survey), the fall has been steeper in the urban areas leading to a greater urban - rural divide.

This divergence is also reflected at the provincial level. The difference in the incidence of child marriage between the four provinces of Pakistan as already substantial in 1990. In the most populous province of Punjab, the incidence of child marriage was 49% as compared to 65.1% in Sindh. Since then, the practice of child marriage in these two more-urbanized provinces has fallen sharply while the two less-urbanized provinces of Balochistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa have lagged behind. As a result, inter-provincial cleavage has worsened. In 2017, 29.8% of married women in Punjab had got married before the age of 18 as compared to 49.1% in Balochistan.

6 Conclusion

The fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the United Nations which deals with gender inequality calls for entailing women and girls equal rights to economic resources and ensuring their full participation at all levels in economic decisions (UN, 2015). One important step in this regard is the elimination of the harmful practice of child marriage.

In this study, we analysed data from the four rounds of Pakistan Demographic

and Health Survey to understand the changing situation of child marriage in Pakistan. We found that the practice has become much less widespread over the past three decades. The decrease is particularly significant among women from wealthy, urban households. Consequently, the incidence of child marriage is increasingly concentrated among women who are older and less educated and those belonging to poor, rural households. These findings highlight the close links present between child marriage, poverty and urbanization.

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