

# TRENDS OF EARLY MARRIAGES IN PAKISTAN; QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PAKISTAN DEMOGRAPHIC AND HEALTH SURVEY (PAKISTAN HEALTH & DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY 1990, 2006-07 & 2012-13)

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**ABSTRACT:** Early age marriage has certain socio-economic, demographic and health outcomes and consequences. This study examines the trend of early age marriages in Pakistan using data from Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) by carrying out uni-variate analysis of ever married women from age 15 to 49. Due to difference in cultural traditions and kinships, age at marriage is different in different regions of the world. Women with increasing birth cohort tend to marry earlier as women who born earlier have higher possibility of marrying in younger ages than the women in youngest cohort. With the development interventions and changing socio-economic roles of women, decreasing trend of early marriage occurrence is found.

**Keywords:** MDGs, Age at Marriage, PDHS, Fertility, Wealth Index

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a social institution that unites people legally and forms the basis of family formation through sexual and reproductive union. It is a social, religious and traditional practice acknowledged by the society [1]. In most of the developing societies, marriage is considered as a socially acceptable union of two people and main purpose of getting married is considered to have children. Marrying off girls in their childhood is considered as an early marriage [2, 3].

Although there is no clear definition of early age marriage, many studies define marriage before 18 years age as child marriage<sup>1</sup>. In many regions of the world, especially in developing countries<sup>2</sup>, marriage in a very early age is widely practiced and mostly females are married off at very young age without considering their physiological ability of bearing a married life as well as bearing a child [2]. In 2010, there were over 67 million women between ages 20 and 24 who had been married before the age 18 in developing countries [4]. Among these developing countries, Asian and African countries have the highest proportion of girls married in early periods of their life [4].

Different factors have been found having strong association with the age of marriage of females. Among these factors, education, residential factors (rural urban) and economic status seem to have positive relationship with age at marriage. As education level increases the age at marriage also increases. Similarly, higher the socioeconomic status (education level, wealth, employment) of a household, lower will be the risk of marrying their girls at younger age [5].

In addition to social factors, geographical factors also have their part in determining the age at marriage of females. The

urban-rural disparities of early age marriage are found to be more prominent among females than males [5, 6]. Early age marriage is likely to be higher in rural areas due to less development as compared to more developed urban areas [6]. Lesser or fewer educational and economic opportunities reduce the female access to education and restrict their involvement in sales and services as compared to their urban counterparts. Poverty and cultural barriers put constraints on women from having their say regarding their marriage decisions. Early age marriage can have severe consequences to the life of females<sup>3</sup> through posing serious personal and social problems ranging from health issues to social mobility<sup>4</sup>. Women who marry earlier in age are more likely to bear child at younger age and are more exposed to prolonged domestic violence [7]. Similarly, women marrying at younger ages tend to have less education, less economic opportunities, lower level of social mobility and poor access to health services. Early marriage does not only restrict women from socio-economic opportunities, but also affects their reproductive health status such as forced sexual relations, early and complicated pregnancies, higher fertility rate and large family size formation. It almost comes to a consensus fertility and age at marriage has an inverse relationship, lower the age at marriage, higher will be the fertility rate as lower age at marriage lengthens the reproductive span of a girl [8]. In general, early age marriage of females not only exacerbates the poor socio-economic development by depriving them of education, social freedom, good health, but also their personal development and well-being [3].

While talking about the consequences of early age marriage at broader level, it not only brings socio-economic underdevelopment at individual level but also hampers the development process of a region or a country. Therefore substantial part of human population, the women, remain uneducated or less educated, unemployed and underprivileged with poor health measures and no decision

<sup>1</sup> International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) 2012-2013, International Planned Parenthood federation (IPPF) 2006, Center Of Reproductive Rights (CPR) 2013, , UNICEF Innocenti Research Center 2001.

We are applying the same definition of early age marriage for our study.

<sup>2</sup> India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Gambia, Cameroon, Tanzania, Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, Uganda, Malawi, Chad, Haiti, Guatemala, Zimbabwe, Brazil, Yemen, Senegal, Sudan etc.

<sup>3</sup>Zahangir, 2011; Mensch *et al.*, 2005; Clark *et al.*, 2006; Loiaza Sr & Wong, 2012; Emirie, 2005.

<sup>4</sup>Access to formal schooling, market, labor force, transportation and Media and Communication.

making power. It also increases the gender inequality and putting higher value on the boys than girls in the society [4]. According to (PDHS) 2006-07, around 12-13 percent of women in Pakistan enter marriage before their fifteenth birthday and this practice of early age marriage is also common in Pakistan. There has been no significant change in the occurrence of early age marriage over the time and the proportion of never married women among 15-19 ages has slightly increased from 84 percent to 86 percent (PDHS 2012-2013). Not surprising, early age marriages are more prevalent in the province of Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) because of low education and cultural set up [9]. In Pakistan, urban women tend to marry one year later than women living in rural areas due to prevalence of consanguineous marriages [9, 10]. Consanguineous marriages are also one of those factors influencing age at marriage in Pakistan and women who marry at an early age are more likely to marry their cousins or relatives [11].

### Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study is, 1) to evaluate the current trend and situation of early age marriage in Pakistan, and 2) to draw policy recommendations based on findings of the study for tackling the problem in terms of legislation and implementation.

### Research Methods

For analyzing the trend of early age marriage in Pakistan, three rounds of PDHS are used for which at univariate level. For this analysis, data from PDHS 2012-13 is undertaken. This study is based on the analysis of the data obtained from the series of PDHS's conducted under the global Demographic and Health survey (DHS) Program. These surveys were conducted by National Institute of Population Studies (NIPS)<sup>5</sup>. The survey provides data on demographic and maternal and child health indicators in order to provide updated information to policy makers and program managers.

The main objective of PDHS is to collect high-quality data regarding the topics such as age at marriage, fertility levels and preferences, contraceptive use, maternal and child health, infant and mortality levels, awareness regarding HIV/AIDS, and other indicators related to the Millennium Development Goals and the country's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. For this research study, the unit of analysis is an individual ever-married woman from age 15-49 years. The variables of interest are taken from the individual women questionnaire.

**Table I: Number of Households covered in the series of PDHS 1990-91, 2006-07 and 2012-13**

Sample Year	1990-91	2006-07	2012-13
Sample Size ( Households)	8,019	10,2037	13,944
Rural	3969	6,1210	7,000
Urban	4050	40827	6,944

Source, PDHS, Analysis of original data

### Trends in Age at Marriage

Age at marriage is different in different regions because of differences in marriage traditions and kinship system of the region [12]. Early marriages are common in the societies of Asia and Africa prior to 1950 as cultural tradition. While later marriages are common in modern societies and atypical region of Africa [13]. Change in timing of marriage for both men and women in the major regions of developing world like Southeast Asia, South Asia and South America has been observed and substantial decline has occurred in the proportion of young men and women who are married at younger ages [13,14]. Social and economic changes such as urbanization, educational opportunities and labor force participation have major contributions in changing the marriage pattern in the region of Asia in past few decades [15].

Age at marriage for both males and females is rising in last few decades. There is an increasing trend of later marriages in the countries where culture of arranged marriages have broken down and profound changes regarding women's age at entry into marriage is found in the region of South Asia and North Africa and it is occurring both in rural and urban areas [15,16]. Increase in median age at marriage is due to education, income and sometimes residual time trend. The urban-rural differentials are found to be more prominent among females than males.

The above mentioned literature presents changing trend of early age marriage in different parts of the world. Overall there is a slight decreasing the practice of early age marriage in developing regions of the world showing the general prevalence of this phenomenon usually among the females. Different factors including new employment opportunities, increasing urbanization and cultural and kinship system in the region are the factors reflecting the trend of age at marriage.

## RESULTS and DISCUSSION

### Data Description

In this study, initially all ever married women aged 15-49 (at the time of survey) are taken from three rounds (1991, 2007 and 2013) of PDHS data. Women are categorized into two groups; marriage that took place before age 15 are defined as very early marriage and marriage that took place 15 to 18 are defined as early marriage<sup>6</sup>. The percentages of age at marriage in different birth cohorts are mentioned in Table II. At univariate level, it is evident from Table II (a) that trend of occurring marriage before age 15 decreased from 31.9 percent to 11.1 percent over the period of 1991 to 2013, respectively. In addition, the percentage of very early age at marriage (<15) decreases with the women's increasing birth cohort as women who born earlier have higher possibility of marrying earlier in their ages than the women in youngest cohort [17]. In year 1991, among all married women ages 15 to 49, 17.1 percent of women had to get married before age 15, while during the year 2007 and 2013, this percentage

<sup>5</sup> The survey represents the population of Pakistan excluding Azad Jammu and Kashmir, FATA and restricted military and protected areas.

<sup>6</sup> Age 15-49 captures the age at interview not the age at marriage so the survey provides information regarding age of marriage below 15 too. PDHS provides information on complete years.

**Table II (a): Percentage of women married at different ages distributed by current age (in 5-years groups).**

Current Age (in 5 year groups)	% of Women by age at first marriage					
	Number of Respondents			less than 15		
	1990-91	2006-07	2012-13	1990-91	2006-07	2012-13
15-19	405	569	605	31.9	21.8	11.1
20-24	1058	1499	2106	19.9	13.9	5.6
25-29	1461	2007	2724	19.4	13.4	6.0
30-34	1195	1786	2528	19.4	14.8	6.0
35-39	1026	1653	2226	17.3	15.2	8.9
40-44	812	1302	1765	19.5	15.2	10.1
45-49	615	1208	1603	17.1	14.8	10.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>6572</b>	<b>10024</b>	<b>13557</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>14.9</b>	<b>7.7</b>

Source: PDHS 1991, 2006-07 and 2012-13, data calculated by the author.

**Table II (b): Percentage of women married at different ages distributed by current age (in 5-years groups).**

Current Age (in 5 year groups)	% of Women by age at first marriage					
	Number of Respondents			15 – 18		
	1990-91	2006-07	2012-13	1990-91	2006-07	2012-13
15-19	405	569	605	68.1	78.2	88.9
20-24	1058	1499	2106	61.1	60.4	64.4
25-29	1461	2007	2724	49	46.4	49.0
30-34	1195	1786	2528	48	47.1	48.7
35-39	1026	1653	2226	46.4	50.3	52.4
40-44	812	1302	1765	43.1	47.5	53.5
45-49	615	1208	1603	39	50.0	53.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>6572</b>	<b>10024</b>	<b>13557</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>51.7</b>	<b>54.7</b>

**Table II (c): Percentage of women married at different ages distributed by current age (in 5-years groups).**

Current Age (in 5 year groups)	% of Women by age at first marriage					
	Number of Respondents			≤19		
	1990-91	2006-07	2012-13	1990-91	2006-07	2012-13
15-19	405	569	605	-	-	-
20-24	1058	1499	2106	19.0	25.8	30
25-29	1461	2007	2724	31.8	40.2	45
30-34	1195	1786	2528	32.8	38	45.3
35-39	1026	1653	2226	36.4	34.5	38.7
40-44	812	1302	1765	37.5	37.2	36.5
45-49	615	1208	1603	43.9	35.2	36.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>6572</b>	<b>10024</b>	<b>13557</b>	<b>30.5</b>	<b>33.4</b>	<b>37.5</b>

reduces to almost 15 and 10 percent, respectively showing the overall gradual decrease of very early age marriage in the country.

For the early marriage between ages 15-18, age at marriage gradually increased overall by 50, 51.7 and 54.7 percent in year 1991, 2007 and 2013 respectively (Table II (b)). Similarly, increase in trend of later marriages is evident from the increasing percentages of age at marriage in the following years with almost 31 (1991), 33.4 (2007) and 38 (2013). While observing women from younger cohort to older cohort, the percentage of very early and early age at marriage decreases with the increasing birth cohort. But it somewhat increases in very later birth cohorts in year 2007 and 2013 (Table II (b)). Moreover, observing the trend of occurrence of marriage at or above age 19, age at marriage increases with the increasing age of all married women showing the increasing trend of late marriages (Table II (c)).

Table II (b) shows that women aged 15-18 are found to marry earlier in their ages and an increasing trend in late marriages i.e. marriage at or after the age of 19 has been noticed by almost 31 to 38 percent within the year 2012-2013, collectively (Table II (c)).

Different factors may responsible for determining age at marriage in Pakistan. Pakistan has one of highest rates of consanguineous marriages in the world [10]. According to PDHS 2006-07, one third of the women of age 15-49 were married to non-relatives and this proportion was lower among those below age 30. Consanguineous marriage has been practiced in some Asian countries. In some countries, it has been declining, but there is little evidence of such a reduction in Pakistan and Iran, along with others [12].

In Pakistan Demographic Health Survey (PDHS) 1990-91, data regarding percentage of women who have married by specific age and median age at first marriage according to

their current age in Pakistan shows that 7.3 percent women of ages 15-19 married at exact age of 15 while in the period of 2006-07 this figure has sharply reduced to 3.5 percent leaving the 75.1 percent and 84.0 percent bulk unmarried at age 15, respectively.

Changes in marriage pattern and trend in terms of increasing age at first marriage are also evident by looking at the difference in the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) in Pakistan. SMAM for females is increased to 21.7 in 1990-91 to 23.1 in 2006-07. And also proportion of women marrying at age 15 has declined over the last 16 years from 15 percent to 7 percent among women age 20-24 (PDHS, 2006-07). According to PDHS 2012-13, early marriage occurs relatively in women than men in Pakistan; among women age 25-49, 35 percent of women were married by age of 18 and 54 percent married by age of 20. The median age at marriage for women is 19.5 years.

A positive association is found between median age at marriage for women and their education attainment in Pakistan. More education leads to later age at marriage and no or lower education leads to early marriage [18, 19]. Women with no education are more likely to get married four years earlier on average as compared to those with secondary or higher education (PDHS 1990-91). In recent report of PDHS (2012-13), median age of marriage for women age 25-49 with no education is 18.3 years whereas for women with secondary education, it is 22.3 years [20]. While discussing the RECOUP quantitative survey analysis conducted in Pakistan, has mentioned that among women aged 20-29, 68 percent were married. 22 percent of the women aged 20-29; women without any schooling tend to marry earlier than women with secondary education.

According to Demographic and Health Surveys of 1990-91 and 2006-07, there is variation in age at marriage between the women of urban and rural areas. Women of urban areas tend to marry one year later than their rural counterparts. Similarly talking about the difference in age at marriage of women in different provinces, survey report of 1991 provides median age at marriage is highest in Punjab and Khyber PakhtunKhwa as compared to other two provinces of Sindh and Baluchistan. However, in 2006-07 PDHS results it is found that in Sindh and Khyber PakhtunKhwa women enter into marriage earlier than women belonging to Punjab and Baluchistan. Young women residing in urban areas, in Punjab, marry one year later after their rural counterparts. The PDHS 2012-13 is providing the stronger shift toward delayed marriage among women in Pakistan. Among Urban women, the median age at marriage is shifted from 19.7 (2006-07) to 20.7 in 2012-13. As compared to this, there has been found no shift among rural women regarding median age at marriage

PDHS 1990-91 indicated that wealth quintile does play its role in determining the age at marriage for women. And in order to avoid the burden of dowry and other economic cost, parents may prefer marriage of their daughter within relatives. It is assumed that if a girl marries with her cousin may have to give small size of dowry and it may be kept within the family. In PDHS 2012-13 highlights that women

with higher wealth index are marrying more than four years later than those with lowest wealth index showing that wealth index is a clear factor responsible for later marriage.

Women access to education and to proper employment has emerged as one of the most important issues in studies of development [21]. Schooling gives strong support to women to have their say in decision making regarding their married life and reproductive health. Both education attainment and economic independence provide female a sense of her well-being, better knowledge, and provide her with a power of decision making that when and whom to marry, resulting in later marriage [8, 22].

## CONCLUSION

In Pakistan, the trend of early age marriage is changing towards increase in delayed marriages showing positive signs towards women's development. There is almost consistent trend of marriages at early age in Pakistan. Literature mentions education, type of residence, region (provinces), ethnic background and wealth quintile are among the significant reasons for this trend of early marriages. Education, regional and ethnic background, and wealth status are among the most significant covariates of age at marriage. In order to bring betterment in the status of early age marriage in Pakistan, our study derives some policy implications and recommendations for government departments and local and international development organizations working on this particular issue.

Although, situation is getting better as results have shown gradual increase in the age at marriage of female in Pakistan, there is a need to examine it in further detail to address the root causes of it, following are few recommendations in this regard

- Education is found to be a significant factor in determining the age at marriage, provincial government should make efforts to ensure universal provision of education and enrollment of girls in schools. Further, provincial governments need to expand the educational facilities up to higher secondary levels and encourage young girls to pursue education for their better future.
- As different background factors of women affect the timing of age at marriage, more enriched data is needed on the socio-economic characteristics of women's family to study and investigate the root causes of early age marriages responsible for changing trend of marriages.
- Moreover, women who are married or tend to get married in their younger ages should be provided with awareness regarding early pregnancy risks, effective use of contraceptive methods, and other sexual and reproductive issues rights. Along with this, they should be guided by the experts regarding their role in family decision making about their reproductive health and marital relationship. In this regard, government might provide its service through partnership with civil society or Non-governmental organization which could make this initiative accessible to women at local and community level.

- There is a need to conduct a qualitative study to explore and examine the role of different factors affecting the age at marriage of women in Pakistan.

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