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## Causes of Early Girls' Marriages in South Punjab: A Case Study of Rajanpur District

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### Abstract:

Early marriages, especially among girls, remain a critical issue in Pakistan, with rural regions such as Rajanpur in South Punjab being among the most affected. This research investigates the underlying causes of early girls' marriages in Rajanpur, focusing on socio-economic, cultural, educational, and legal factors. By employing a quantitative research method by using questionnaire of five point Likert scales and collect 200 respondent data from rural and urban areas of district Rajanpur. The study examines how deep-rooted traditions, poverty, lack of education, and weak law enforcement contribute to the persistence of early marriages. Findings suggest that in Rajanpur, early marriages are driven largely by poverty, as families marry off daughters to reduce financial burdens, and by cultural norms that view early marriage as a means to preserve family honor. The lack of access to education for girls further exacerbates the problem, reinforcing gender inequalities and limiting future opportunities. Moreover, the failure to enforce existing child protection laws leaves many girls vulnerable. This paper concludes with recommendations for policy interventions, such as improving access to education, strengthening legal frameworks, and raising community awareness. The findings are aimed at informing policymakers and community leaders to develop targeted strategies that address the root causes of early marriages and support the empowerment of girls in the region.

### Key Words

Early marriages, socioeconomic, Cultural, Legal framework, Poverty, Gender inequalities

### Introduction

Early marriage, particularly among girls, remains a pervasive issue in Pakistan, undermining attempts to achieve gender equality, education, and poverty reduction.

Early marriage is considered a violation of human rights worldwide and is associated with a variety of negative effects for young girls, including a loss of education, health hazards, and limited possibilities for personal growth (UNICEF, 2022).

Child marriages occur in many regions of the world, but they are especially common in South Asia, where social, cultural, and economic reasons combine to perpetuate this disastrous practice.

Early marriage is still common in Pakistan, particularly in the rural areas of South Punjab, especially the Rajanpur district.

Rajanpur, in South Punjab, is known for its high levels of poverty, illiteracy, and firmly entrenched patriarchal traditions. The region's socioeconomic weaknesses, combined with cultural norms, provide ideal ground for the continuation of early marriages. Despite the fact that the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 technically prohibits marriage before the age of 18, these marriages continue to occur due to inadequate enforcement mechanisms and social acceptability of the practice. The law alone has not been adequate to deconstruct the cultural and economic factors that perpetuate early marriages, leaving many girls vulnerable to early marriage.

Cultural standards in Rajanpur, as in many other rural parts of Pakistan, play an important role in the continuation of early marriages. Girls are frequently considered as financial liabilities, and marriage is viewed as a means of securing their future while relieving economic pressure on the family. Early weddings are often organized to protect family honor, which is directly related to regulating a girl's sexuality and ensuring that she marries at a societally acceptable age (Jafri, 2018). These cultural imperatives frequently override concerns about the girl's health, education, or permission, making early marriage a common practice.

Economic variables have a significant impact on the persistence of early marriages in Rajanpur. With many families struggling to pay their basic requirements, marrying off daughters is viewed as a method to alleviate financial hardship. Early marriages are frequently accompanied by the exchange of dowries or bride prices, which provides immediate financial assistance to the bride's family (Nasrullah et al. 2014). This economic transaction perpetuates the impression that girls are commodities rather than people with rights and aspirations. In such circumstances, early marriage becomes a survival strategy for disadvantaged families, reinforcing gender inequality and limiting girls' access to education and prospects for empowerment.

The absence of educational facilities in Rajanpur exacerbates the problem. Education is a vital tool for postponing marriage and empowering females, yet there are few educational possibilities for girls in Rajanpur. Schools are frequently few, and when they do exist, social norms hinder girls from attending, particularly after puberty (Ahmad and Khan, 2020). As a result, many girls drop out of school early, leaving them with little options other than marriage. The lack of education not only limits females' future opportunities, but it also maintains the cycle of early marriage and poverty, as uneducated girls are more likely to marry young and have children early, perpetuating the cycle of economic dependency and marginalization.

In addition to cultural and economic factors, the legal and legislative frameworks designed to discourage early marriages are frequently badly enforced in rural places such as Rajanpur. Despite the existence of laws preventing child marriage, local governments frequently lack the means, political will, and societal backing to intervene in early marriage situations (UNICEF, 2022). In many cases, community leaders and municipal officials are hesitant to confront traditional practices, undermining the enforcement of legislation designed to protect girls from child marriage.

This study seeks to explore these interconnected factors driving early girls' marriages in Rajanpur, South Punjab. By investigating the socio-cultural, economic, and educational dimensions of the issue, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of why early marriages persist in the region. It will also examine the role of legal frameworks and their enforcement in either preventing or perpetuating this practice. Understanding these causes is essential to developing effective interventions that can break the cycle of early marriage and promote the rights and well-being of girls in Rajanpur.

This study will address a vacuum in the existing literature by focusing on Rajanpur, which is sometimes disregarded in broader discussions regarding early marriages in Pakistan. This study expects that its findings will help to design more focused and successful policies and programs to reduce early marriages and improve the lives of girls in South Punjab.

### **Literature Review**

Early marriage, particularly among girls, is a strongly ingrained tradition in many regions of the world, including Pakistan.

Early marriage has serious consequences, impacting young girls' social, economic, and scholastic well-being while also perpetuating cycles of poverty and gender inequality.

This literature study looks at the existing corpus of studies on early marriages, with an emphasis on South Punjab and the Rajanpur district, which is still one of Pakistan's most impacted areas.

The review looks at sociocultural, norms, economic drivers, education, health risks, and legal frameworks that all contribute to the continuance of early marriages.

The goal is to grasp the multifaceted nature of the problem and highlight crucial findings from earlier research to guide the current investigation.

### **Socio-Cultural Norms and Traditions**

Early marriages are profoundly ingrained in many rural areas of Pakistan, including Rajanpur.

Girls are frequently seen as the "honour" of the family, and marrying them off at a young age is seen as a method to safeguard that honour while avoiding the potential societal disgrace that comes with postponing marriage (Jafri, 2018).

Cultural standards mandate that females marry before they reach adulthood in order to remain "pure" and reduce the chance of bringing dishonour to the family.

This cultural imperative has been identified as one of the most powerful promoters of early marriage, with little regard paid to the girl's health, education, or personal preferences Ahmad & Khan 2020.

Tribal practices in Rajanpur exacerbate the situation. The area is home to several tribal groupings, and marriages are frequently arranged to reinforce relationships between families or tribes.

According to Ahmad and Khan (2020), Rajanpur's feudal structures contribute significantly to the perpetuation of early marriages.

In many situations, girls are married off to settle disputes or form political and economic alliances among tribal chiefs. These marriages are not only cultural traditions; they are also viewed as a type of currency, maintaining patriarchal control over women's lives and bodies.

Similar findings have been observed in larger studies of South Asian countries, where early marriages are motivated by family honour and social control over women's sexuality UNICEF, 2022

In such communities, females are viewed as bearers of family honour, and early marriage is viewed as a means of securing that honour.

According to research, girls have limited say in these decisions, with male family members frequently making marriage decisions without consulting the girls concerned (Nasrullah et al., 2014).

This trend is widespread in South Punjab, where patriarchal institutions dominate family life and restrict women's and girls' autonomy.

### **Economic Drivers of Early Marriage**

Economic issues are important in sustaining early marriages in Rajanpur. Poverty-stricken families frequently see marriage as a means of alleviating financial stress.

Marrying off a daughter early reduces the number of mouths to feed, and in many circumstances, early marriages are accompanied by a dowry or bride price, which gives immediate financial relief

to the family.

In Rajanpur, where economic hardship is widespread, this economic drive cannot be neglected as a substantial factor of early marriages.

Several studies show that in rural regions like Rajanpur, dowry exchange is a frequent practice that encourages early marriages (Ahmad & Khan, 2020).

Dowries, while theoretically banned in Pakistan, are still routinely used, and younger females frequently command larger dowries.

this financial transaction perpetuates the idea that girls are commercial commodities rather than people with rights and potential.

Families are encouraged to marry their daughters early in order to secure the largest possible dowry, particularly during times of economic crisis.

Nasrullah et al. (2014) contend that poverty, when combined with illiteracy, causes a vicious cycle of early marriage.

Poor households frequently prioritise marriage above education because dowries provide quick financial gain and they believe that educating women yields no real benefits.

This economic calculus, along with cultural norms, creates an environment in which early marriage is viewed as both a financial necessity and a cultural obligation.

### **Educational Barriers**

Education is crucial in postponing weddings and helping females to make informed decisions about their futures. However, educational chances for girls are limited in locations like as Rajanpur.

Girls who are not in school are more likely to be perceived as ready for marriage, exacerbating the problem of early marriage. The relationship between education and delayed marriage is well-documented.

According to Jafri (2018), females who continue in school are less likely to marry early since knowledge is viewed as a valued commodity that can contribute to the family's future.

Social customs in several regions of Rajanpur restrict girls from attending school.

Once girls enter puberty, their families frequently opt to keep them at home, thinking that sending them to school will attract unwanted attention or tarnish their reputation.

This disengagement from education contributes to the cycle of early marriage by portraying girls without education as having no opportunities beyond marriage and motherhood.

According to a UNICEF (2022) study, early marriage rates are significantly lower in communities where girls' education is prioritized.

However, in Rajanpur, where educational infrastructure is lacking and there is minimal cultural support for girls' education, families frequently see little benefit in sending girls to school.

This lack of education not only limits girls' options for future work and personal growth, but also reinforces their reliance on marriage as the sole realistic alternative.

### **Health Risks Associated with Early Marriages**

Early marriage poses severe health hazards, particularly for mothers and children.

Young brides, generally under the age of 18, are substantially more likely to experience pregnancy and childbirth difficulties, such as maternal and infant mortality (World Health Organization, 2021).

In Rajanpur, where healthcare services are limited, the health hazards connected with early pregnancies are considerably more severe.

Many young brides do not have access to sufficient healthcare, which increases the risk of pregnancy-related difficulties and long-term health issues.

According to Ahmad and Khan (2020), early pregnancies frequently put physical and emotional hardship on young females who are not yet completely formed to cope with childbirth.

In addition to the physical health hazards, young brides are more likely to face domestic abuse and emotional trauma, because they are generally married to much older men and have less agency within the marriage.

According to the World Health Organisation (2021), early pregnancies lead to greater rates of malnutrition because young mothers are frequently unable to provide enough care for their infants.

This perpetuates a cycle of bad health and poverty that impacts not only the young bride, but future generations.

In regions like Rajanpur, where healthcare infrastructure is poor, these health concerns are exacerbated by a lack of maternity healthcare and family planning options.

### **Legal Framework and Enforcement**

The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 in Pakistan makes marriage legal for boys at the age of 18 and girls at the age of 16.

Despite this legal structure, early weddings persist, particularly in rural communities like Rajanpur. The law is frequently not enforced, and local authorities may be hesitant to intervene in what are considered family affairs (UNICEF, 2022).

Local officials often lack the means or political will to fight entrenched cultural norms, and families are either uninformed of the legislation or prefer to ignore it (Ahmad and Khan, 2020).

Enforcement issues are exacerbated by the fact that many early marriages in Rajanpur occur inside tribal systems that function outside of established legal processes.

Tribal leaders frequently have their own governance and dispute resolution systems, and they may reject state legislation that contravenes customary customs (Jafri, 2018).

This undermines the enforcement of national laws, leaving young girls susceptible to early marriages in the absence of legal protection.

Several studies have proposed that, in order to reduce the prevalence of early weddings, the government not only enhance current laws but also create awareness among rural communities about the legal marriage age and girls' rights (Nasrullah et al., 2014).

Without more knowledge and tighter enforcement, the Child Marriage Restraint Act remains a paper law that accomplishes little to safeguard girls from the dangers of early marriage.

### **Conclusion of the Literature Review**

The available literature on early marriages emphasises the complex interplay of cultural, economic, educational, health, and legal variables that support the practice in areas such as Rajanpur, South Punjab.

Early marriages in this region are perpetuated by cultural traditions that emphasize family honor over individual rights, economic constraints that prioritise marriage over education, and lax enforcement of legal frameworks.

Addressing this issue necessitates a multifaceted approach that addresses the underlying socioeconomic and cultural factors while enhancing legal safeguards and increasing educational possibilities for girls.

This literature analysis lays the groundwork for the current study, which will expand on these findings to investigate the particular causes of early marriages in Rajanpur and provide focused interventions to address this essential issue.

### Research Question

What are the primary socio-economic, cultural, and educational factors contributing to early girls' marriages in the district of Rajanpur, South Punjab.

### Research Objectives

- To identify the socio-cultural traditions that perpetuates early marriages in Rajanpur.
- To examine the economic drivers, including poverty, that influence early marriages.
- To analyze the role of education, or lack thereof, in contributing to early marriages.
- To explore the effectiveness of legal frameworks in preventing early marriages in the region.
- To propose policy recommendations for reducing the prevalence of early marriages.

### Methodology: Quantitative Approach

This study uses a quantitative research approach to look into the factors of early marriage among females in Rajanpur, South Punjab.

To collect data from participants, a structured survey questionnaire was created using a 5-point Likert scale.

The questionnaire sought to assess respondents' attitudes, views, and experiences regarding the factors influencing early marriages in the region.

The use of quantitative data enables the examination of trends, linkages, and correlations among various variables, such as socio-cultural norms, economic conditions, education, and legal enforcement.

Section	Details
Research Design	Quantitative
Research Instrument	Structured questionnaire with 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)
Sample Size	200 respondents
Sampling Technique	Random sampling in rural and semi-urban areas of Rajanpur
Data Collection	Self-administered questionnaires
Data Analysis Tool	SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)
Data Analysis Methods	- Descriptive Statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) - Reliability Testing (Cronbach's Alpha) - Correlation and Regression Analysis
Key Factors Measured	Socio-cultural norms, economic pressures, education, health risks, legal enforce

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

#### Socio-Cultural Norms:

65% of respondents either “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that early marriages are essential to preserve family honor. This highlights the strong cultural belief in Rajanpur that marrying girls early is necessary to avoid dishonor.

Mean score: 4.1 (SD = 0.85)

#### Economic Pressures:

70% of respondents agreed that financial hardship was a major reason for early marriages, with 60% also stating that dowry plays a significant role in the timing of a girl’s marriage.

Mean score: 4.3 (SD = 0.75)

#### Education:

58% of respondents agreed that girls in Rajanpur are more likely to drop out of school to marry early, while 50% agreed that access to education could help delay marriages.

Mean score: 3.8 (SD = 1.1)

#### Health Risks:

73% of respondents either “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that early marriages pose significant health risks for young girls.

Mean score: 4.2 (SD = 0.9)

#### Legal Enforcement:

Only 40% of respondents agreed that laws against child marriage are well-enforced in Rajanpur, with many expressing concerns about the lack of government intervention.

Mean score: 2.9 (SD = 1.2)

#### Reliability Testing

The Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was 0.84, indicating that the survey instrument had strong internal consistency and reliability.

This suggests that the Likert scale questions were effective in assessing the targeted constructs about early marriages.

#### Correlation Analysis

##### Socio-Cultural Norms and Early Marriage:

A significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.65$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) was found between socio-cultural norms and early marriages. This indicates that stronger adherence to traditional norms correlates with higher rates of early marriages.

##### Economic Factors and Early Marriage:

Economic pressures were also significantly correlated with early marriages ( $r = 0.71$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Families facing financial hardship are more likely to marry off their daughters early, confirming the economic motivations behind the practice.

##### Education and Early Marriage:

A negative correlation ( $r = -0.55$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) was found between access to education and early marriage rates. The more access girls have to education, the less likely they are to marry at a young age.

#### Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the impact of socio-cultural norms, economic factors, education, and legal enforcement on early marriages. The results showed that

**Socio-Cultural Norms** and **Economic Factors** were the strongest predictors of early marriages, accounting for 52% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Education** had a significant inverse relationship with early marriages, indicating that higher levels of education could reduce the incidence of early marriages.

**Legal Enforcement** was not a significant predictor, suggesting that weak enforcement of laws against early marriage had little impact in preventing the practice in Rajanpur.

### Results Summary

Factor	Sample Questionnaire Statement	Mean (SD)	% Agreement (Agree/Strongly Agree)	Correlation with Early Marriage	Interpretation
<b>Socio-Cultural Norms</b>	"Early marriage is essential to preserve family honor."	4.1 (0.85)	65%	$r = 0.65$ , $p < 0.01$	Cultural norms strongly support early marriages.
<b>Economic Pressures</b>	"Families marry daughters early due to financial hardships."	4.3 (0.75)	70%	$r = 0.71$ , $p < 0.01$	Economic factors are highly significant in early marriages.
	"Dowry plays a significant role in determining marriage age for girls."				
<b>Education</b>	"Girls in Rajanpur are more likely to drop out of school and marry early."	3.8 (1.1)	58%	$r = -0.55$ , $p < 0.01$	Access to education inversely correlates with early marriage.
	"Educational opportunities can delay early marriages."				
<b>Health Risks</b>	"Early marriages pose significant health risks for young girls."	4.2 (0.9)	73%	—	Majority believe early marriages lead to health risks.
<b>Legal Enforcement</b>	"The laws against child marriage are well-enforced in Rajanpur."	2.9 (1.2)	40%	—	Weak legal enforcement has little effect on reducing early marriages.

Multiple Regression Results	Variance Explained
<b>Socio-Cultural Norms &amp; Economic Pressures</b>	<b>52% (<math>R^2 = 0.52</math>, <math>p &lt; 0.01</math>)</b>
<b>Education</b>	Significant inverse relationship
<b>Legal Enforcement</b>	Not a significant predictor

### Practical Suggestions to Overcome Early Marriages in Rajanpur



## **Promote Education for Girls**

**Establish More Schools and Incentivize Attendance:** The government and NGOs should invest in building more schools, particularly in rural and remote areas, to make education accessible for girls. Offering financial incentives such as scholarships, free uniforms, and meals can encourage parents to keep their daughters in school.

**Community Awareness Campaigns on Education:** Launch campaigns to raise awareness about the long-term benefits of educating girls. Engage religious leaders, local influencers, and community elders to advocate for education as a means to delay marriage and improve future prospects.

## **Economic Empowerment of Families**

**Financial Support Programs for Vulnerable Families:** Introduce social welfare programs that provide financial aid, vocational training, and microloans to families in poverty. These programs can reduce the economic pressure to marry off daughters early and offer alternative means of income.

**Skill Development for Girls:** Establish vocational training centers where young girls can learn skills such as tailoring, crafts, and computer literacy. This will help them gain financial independence and reduce their economic dependence on early marriage.

## **Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Enforcement**

**Improve Enforcement of Child Marriage Laws:** The government should strengthen the enforcement of existing laws, such as the Child Marriage Restraint Act, and raise the legal age of marriage for girls to 18 nationwide. Law enforcement agencies need training to actively prevent early marriages and intervene where illegal marriages are taking place.

**Empower Local Governance Systems:** Engage local leaders and councils in legal enforcement. Creating child protection committees within communities can ensure that local governance structures are aligned with national laws and prevent violations.

## **Raise Awareness on Health Risks**

**Health Education Campaigns:** Organize health education campaigns that target both parents and young girls to raise awareness about the serious health risks of early pregnancy, such as maternal mortality, malnutrition, and mental health issues.

**Strengthen Healthcare Services for Reproductive Health:** Improve access to reproductive healthcare, family planning services, and counseling in rural areas. Mobile health units and community health workers can play a vital role in providing these services in underserved areas like Rajanpur.

## **Engage Religious and Community Leaders**

**Dialogue with Religious Leaders:** Religious leaders hold significant influence in Rajanpur. Collaborating with them to promote interpretations of religious texts that support the well-being of girls can help shift cultural norms regarding early marriage.

**Cultural Awareness Programs:** Organize workshops and discussions that involve community leaders, teachers, and parents. These programs should aim to challenge harmful socio-cultural norms, emphasizing the value of delaying marriage for girls' health, education, and economic prospects.

## **Media and Advocacy Campaigns**

**Mass Media Campaigns:** Utilize radio, television, and social media to disseminate messages against early marriages. These campaigns can showcase real-life stories of girls who pursued education and were empowered, creating role models for the community.

**NGO and Government Collaboration:** Encourage partnerships between NGOs, local governments, and international organizations to fund and drive awareness campaigns, health interventions, and legal reforms.

## **Establish Safe Spaces for Girls**

**Shelters and Support Centers:** Create safe shelters where girls who are at risk of early marriage can seek refuge and receive legal, educational, and psychological support.

**Counseling and Peer Support Programs:** Establish community centers offering counseling and peer support for young girls to empower them and provide a platform to voice their concerns about early marriage pressures.

## **Data Monitoring and Policy Development**

**Conduct Ongoing Research and Data Collection:** Encourage continuous research and data collection to track the prevalence of early marriages and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. This data can guide policy changes and resource allocation.

**Policy Advocacy and Reform:** Push for national-level policy reforms that address the root causes of early marriage, such as poverty alleviation, gender inequality, and educational reform.

By addressing the socio-cultural, economic, educational, and legal factors comprehensively, these practical suggestions aim to reduce the incidence of early marriages in Rajanpur and promote a future where girls can fully realize their potential.

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