

## Child marriages

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Child marriages are major public health issues in the developing world. It is defined as marriage before the age of 18 years. According to UNFPA (United Nations Fund for Population), in developing world, 36 percent of girls are married before reaching the age of 18 years, and 10 percent of girls in these countries are married before the age of 15 years.<sup>1</sup> Globally, it is estimated that 10 million pregnancies occur in adolescent girls, and 90% of these occur in developing countries.<sup>2</sup> The burden is mainly borne by the Sub Saharan Africa and South Asian countries.<sup>3</sup> Except in Nepal, where legal age of marriage is 20 years, the legal age in India, Bangladesh and Srilanka is 18 years. In Pakistan, except for the Sindh province where legal age of marriage is 18 years, the rest of the provinces have legal age of 16 years for contracting marriage. Hence there is increased prevalence of child marriage in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces.<sup>4</sup> It is observed that this legal cover is mainly seen on papers, and reality is far different in the actual world.

Child marriages not only take away the joys of childhood, it also brings with it the burden of social, psychological and reproductive harms. It not only affects the female child, but also has its effects on the male child. The burden of raising and supporting a family at a younger age exerts extra mental and psychological trauma, among boys. This in turn increases the incidence of domestic violence among the couples.

It is a well-known fact that child marriages are more common in low- income household, rural areas, and at times are contracted in order to settle family disputes. In rural areas these child marriages are seen as a stop gap arrangement for premarital sex, unwanted pregnancies and sexual assault. These adolescent girls are married to elderly men, invoking mental disparity and psychological trauma. There is also increased prevalence of domestic violence and wife beating in this age group. Vertical transmission of this attitude has also been observed in studies. This basic violation of human rights is transferred from mothers to daughters as normal behaviours.<sup>5</sup>

The children born out of child marriages have greater early neonatal and infant mortality. The chances of survival in

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children born to women of reproductive age 15-45 years is 50 times greater than the children born to adolescent mothers.<sup>6</sup> This is related to the vicious cycle of prematurity, low birth weight and nutritional deficiencies. Lack of education in these adolescent mothers also adds up to this burden. Early marriage, followed by pregnancies results in drop out from educational institutions. Lack of social support and inability to take proper care of new born leads to depression in these younger mothers.

Child marriage not only affects the immediate reproduction, it has been found to be associated with increased risk for unwanted pregnancy, repeated pregnancies at short intervals, high fertility and increased risk for termination of pregnancy.<sup>7</sup>

The reproductive outcome of adolescent pregnancies is well established in scientific literature. With immature bony growth of the pelvis, these young mothers are exposed to all forms of obstetrical complications, from vesicovaginal fistula to obstructed labour. The young mothers are vulnerable for anaemia, hypertension, haemorrhage and postpartum depression. In a case-control study the risks for instrumental deliveries (7.1% vs 2.2%,  $p < 0.01$ ) and chorioamnionitis (2.8% vs 0.8%,  $p = 0.01$ ) was found greater among adolescent girls (15-19 years), when compared to women (20-35 years).<sup>8</sup> In another case-control study comparing adolescent pregnancy with adult pregnancy, prematurity (11.2% vs. 4.9%,  $p = 0.04$ ) and low birth weight (19.3% vs. 8.2%,  $p = 0.005$ ) were more common in adolescent pregnancy.<sup>9</sup> Apart from obstetrical complications, lack of empowerment in decision making, recurrence of pregnancies is more common in an adolescent. A Brazilian cross-sectional study found girls aged less than 20 years of age to have more than 2 children.<sup>10</sup> Repeated pregnancies at short inter pregnancy intervals itself increases the risks of pregnancy associated complications.

In a population- based survey, exploring the long-term reproductive outcomes of adolescent birth, were found to have increased number of children by the age of 40 years and were found to have less access to reproductive health services.<sup>11</sup> Hence giving birth at less than 18 years of age, carries the lifelong impact on reproductive health.

The social, psychological and reproductive impact of child marriages is well established. The impact is life long and

few aspects, like domestic violence do show a trend for vertical transmission. This provides a background for multidisciplinary approach, involving all the stake holders in not only policy making but also its strict implementation uniformly. It must start with changing perspectives of families which consider child marriages in a positive manner. Educating of these peers can improve the situation. Similarly the laws need to be uniform throughout the country. The relevant authorities should make an effort to fix 18 years as a minimum age for the marriage across the country. The law needs to be enforced in letter and spirit across the country. Increasing awareness about the harms of child marriages can also improve upon the situation. This can only be achieved through increasing the literacy level. The educational status of the adolescent also needs to be emphasized. Special programmes need to be introduced to emphasize upon girl education. Efforts should be made to decrease the drop out of adolescent girls from schools. Sexual and reproductive health needs to be introduced at an earlier stage of education. Similarly the unmet needs of contraception needs to be addressed in this age group. Lack of awareness, social support and access to supplies result in repeated unintended pregnancies, starting a vicious cycle, which continues through- out the life. Religion plays an important role in the lives of people. Pakistan being an Islamic country, marriage is obligatory. Religious leaders and religious spaces can provide a pivotal role in curbing the menace of child marriage. Religious leaders having opportunity of weekly sermons, can emphasize upon the need for choosing an appropriate age for the girl marriage. This can only be achieved when both government and society become proactive and takes the responsibility of ending child marriage. Pakistan being an agricultural country, the focus needs to be more on the rural areas. Reducing child marriage will also help in increasing gender equality and in reaching attainable sustainable development goals (SDG) by year 2030.

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