

An investigation into the Role of early Marriage in developing suicidal Ideation among Girls in Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract:

Early marriage is a common practice in African and Asian regions, including Pakistan. For females, early marriages have numerous adverse consequences, including those that are mental, physical, social and educational. However, so far, the association between early marriages and suicidal ideation and behaviours haven't been well researched. Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between suicidality and early marriage. This study was conducted in Chakdara and Ouch region, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. This study is framed under a mix-method research design and is cross-sectional. Sampling for the study was done in multiple phases. First,

girls were identified who were married before 18 years of age, and second, there was an identification of girls who were not happy in marital life. A total of 120 girls were identified as a target population, and 92 were sampled through the Uma Sekaran sample size table. Third, 2 completed suicides and 4 uncompleted suicide attempts were identified, comprising a total of 6 cases among girls. An SIQ questionnaire devised by William M. Reynolds was utilized for judging suicidal ideation among the 92 sampled girls. Informal interviews were carried out for the 6 cases of completed and uncompleted suicides from key informants (family members and nearby people). The information collected was analysed quantitatively (data collected through the SIQ questionnaire), descriptive and inferential statistics were used, and data collected through informal interviews was transcribed and narrated. Findings show that suicidal ideation prevails among girls that are married before 18 years of age, and in some cases, it leads to suicide attempts. The most notable causes of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among girls married early include stress due to an inability to take care of the husband and his family in the expected way, the burden of household responsibilities, relationship issues with the husband and/or his family, mental changes with pregnancy and rejection by parents.

1.1. Background of Study

In Pakistani society women face many problems (Gul et al., 2019). Early marriage is a commonly prevailing practice in many countries (Worldatlas, 2017). Pakistan is on the list of countries with high numbers of early marriages. So far, a bulk of research studies have been carried out about the practice of early marriages exploring numerous causes and consequences of them (The Express Tribune, 2013). Similarly, in Pakistan the causes and consequences of early marriages have been well researched. The key consequences of early marriage among females include poor sexual and physical health (ICRW, 2012; Save the Children, 2004), an impact on education, such as absenteeism, poor test and exam performance, discontinuation of education (Ababa, 2006), and fear (Carranca, 2013). Another key consequence includes increased household responsibilities, e.g., cooking, helping the mother-in-law, taking care of the husband and after some time the children as well (Yardley, 2006; UNFPA, 2012).

Regarding the relationship between early marriage and suicidal ideation, very few studies have been carried out. Among such studies, a study conducted by Gage in one African region

revealed that girls who are married between 10-17 years of age are at increased risk of having suicidal ideation compared to girls who are not. The risk increases because of mental health issues resulting from marriage at a very young age, and this is due to increased tension, stress and depression because of dependency and pressure resulting from marital responsibilities (Gage, 2013).

A study in Syria revealed that a total 13 cases of suicide among under-aged girls was reported during a six-month period. Responsibilities and depression are some of the common factors contributing to suicide among girls married before adulthood. The reasons for depression also include strict familial norms (of the husband's home), rejection by one's own parents after marriage in case of issues with the husband and his family, and social stigma in case of fear of divorce (Arfah and Yahya, 2017). Another study revealed that forced marriage is linked with suicidality (Pridmore and Walter, 2013); however, the study wasn't about early marriage. But it should be kept in mind that many early marriages are forced and are therefore a source of stress, depression and marital issues later, which can contribute to suicidality. The main

reason for suicidality among females married forcibly is to *escape from pain*.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Majzoub (2018) reported that a young girl aged 16 attempted suicides in Lebanon. The girl was married at the age of 14 and was recently divorced by her husband. She further illustrated that so many cases of young girls attempting suicide soon after marriage goes unreported in Lebanon. Globally, the association between early marriage (among females) and suicidality hasn't been well researched. Only a few studies are available regarding the association between early marriage and suicide. Although early marriage is a common practice throughout the developing world, specifically in African and Asian regions, suicides still haven't been researched. The consequences of early marriage among females are a well-researched area. The common consequences include an increased burden of household responsibilities, poor educational performance and dropping out of school, pregnancy and health related issues, mental illness, etc. However, its association with suicidality is not well researched and documented.

1.3. Theoretical framework

A wide range of theories explains the social nature of suicide (Bak et al., 2019). This research work is guided by liberal feminism, specifically the work of Jessie Bernard. According to Jessie Bernard, there are two aspects in one marriage: first, a man's marriage, and second, a woman's marriage. For a man, marriage comprises of authority, independence and a right to domestic, emotional and sexual service by the wife. Whereas for a woman, marriage corresponds with powerlessness, dependence, an obligation to provide domestic, emotional and sexual services, and a gradual „*dwindling away*“ of the independent young person she was before marriage. Therefore, marriage for women is a source of stress, and many studies have shown the physical consequences of it, such as heart palpitations, fear, anxiety, sleepiness and insomnia (see Ritzer 2012 for further details).

1.4. Objectives of the Study

- To find out about suicidal thoughts prevailing among females married before 18 years

- To investigate the prevalence of suicide attempts among females married before 18 years
- To explore the factors responsible for suicide attempts among females married before 18 years

1.5. Methodology

This study is framed under the mixed-method research design. Mixed-method design was chosen to provide the researcher with maximum flexibility to investigate the problem, as the aims and objectives of the study are sensitive in many ways. First, the issue of suicide is often not discussed openly in the studied area. Secondly, Pakhtunwali prevails in the study area. Norms in Pakhtun culture are very sensitive when it comes to any aspect or dimension related to females.

Keeping in view the objectives of the study, there were two types of potential samples for the current study: first, girls who are married before 18 years of age (to judge the suicidal ideation among them); and second, girls who attempted suicide and were married before 18 years of age. Identifying individuals and families where females were married earlier wasn't a difficult task, as early marriage is practised commonly and is a culturally and socially accepted practice in the studied area. In this regard, a short survey helped the researchers to identify girls who were married before 18 years of age, and a total of 249 such girls were identified. 229 girls were accessed, and the rest were not accessible. Among the 229 girls, 120 girls stated that they were happy in their marital life, and therefore were not potential samples for judging suicidal ideation due to early marriage. From 120 girls, 92 girls were sampled based on an Uma Sekaran sample size table. Therefore, 92 girls were sampled to judge suicidal ideation due an early marriage.

The identification of girls who were married before 18 years of age and who attempted suicide (whether completed or not) was carried out by asking friends and relatives. Some samples were identified easily as they belonged to nearby areas where the researchers reside. It is important to mention that this issue came into consideration with such reports. In this context, 2 complete suicides and 4 uncompleted suicide attempts were identified, comprising a total of 6 cases. Only in one case was the person directly

accessed, whereas for the rest, family members and relatives were interviewed.

For assessing suicidal ideation, a questionnaire was adopted that was developed by William M. Reynolds. The questionnaire was reprinted upon his permission and is available online. The questionnaire contains 15 items related to thoughts and ideas about suicide that the respondents had over the last one month. The questionnaire was used for the 92 sample respondents, i.e., girls who were married before 18 years of age. The questionnaire is provided at the end of this paper. Informal interviews were carried out to collect information about familial and personal issues confronted by females married before 18 years of age who attempted suicide. Only one respondent was directly accessed, whereas for the rest, family members and relatives were questioned.

Data was analysed accordingly, and descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to the

data collected through the SIQ questionnaire. The data collected through interviews was analysed thematically.

1.6. Data Analysis

Table 1 is an illustration of the eligibility for judging suicidal ideation among the population of interest, i.e., early married girls. In this regard, the first basic question is whether the girl who was married before 18 years of age was happy with her marital life or not. If she was happy, then she was not eligible. Whereas if she was not happy, she was included among the potential samples for further investigation. In this regard, out of the 229 identified girls married before 18 years of age, 109 (47.59 %) stated that they were happy with their marital life, meaning that they were ineligible for further investigation. 120 respondents (52.41%) said that they were not happy with their marital life, making them eligible for further investigation. As per Uma Sekaran

Table 1 Eligibility for Suicidal Ideation

Are you happy in your marital life?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	109	47.59
No	120	52.41
Total	229	100
If no, then please explain.		
Note: The information below was collected from 92 respondents. 120 respondents were eligible for further investigation, and 92 were sampled based on the Uma Sekaran sample size table.		
Household responsibilities	Frequency	Percentage
To some extent	26	28.26
To a greater extent	66	71.74
Total	92	100
Relationship issues with husband and/or his family	Frequency	Percentage
To some extent	44	47.82
To a greater extent	48	52.18
Total	92	100
Physical and mental health issues, including pregnancy	Frequency	Percentage
To some extent	76	82.61
To a greater extent	16	17.39
Total	92	100
Rejection by parents after marriage	Frequency	Percentage
To some extent	16	17.39
To greater extent	76	82.61
Total	92	100

Table 2 Uni-variate Description of Suicidal Ideation among Early Married Girls

S. No	Statement	6	5	4	3	2	1	0	Mean Score
1.	I thought it would be better if I was not alive	4.3%	8.7%	22.8%	13%	33.7%	4.3%	13%	2.72
2.	I thought about killing myself	7.6%	8.7%	6.5%	9.8%	8.7%	29.3%	29.3%	1.91
3.	I thought about how I would kill myself	6.5%	5.4%	7.6%	14.1%	17.4%	25%	23.9%	1.99
4.	I thought about when I would kill myself	13%	5.4%	12%	13%	28.3%	20.7%	7.6%	2.70
5.	I thought about people dying	7.6%	3.3%	21.7%	23.9%	19.6%	9.8%	14.1%	2.70
6.	I thought about death	20.7%	27.2%	25%	8.7%	4.3%	7.6%	6.5%	4.02
7.	I thought about what to write in a suicide note	3.3%	3.3%	00%	00%	2.2%	2.2%	89.1%	0.42
8.	I thought about writing a will	3.3%	3.3%	00%	00%	2.2%	2.2%	89.1%	0.42
9.	I thought about telling people I plan to kill myself	13%	3.3%	23.9%	15.2%	28.3%	5.4%	10.9%	2.98
10.	I thought about how people would feel if I killed myself	13%	19.6%	26.1%	9.8%	6.5%	18.5%	6.5%	3.41
11.	I wished I were dead	22.8%	19.6%	21.7%	15.2%	8.7%	6.5%	5.4%	3.91
12.	I thought that killing myself would solve my problems	19.6%	21.7%	15.2%	12%	13%	15.2%	3.3%	3.64
13.	I thought that others would be happier if I was dead	25%	5.4%	16.3%	16.3%	14.1%	17.4%	5.4%	3.37
14.	I wished that I had never been born	23.9%	14.1%	10.9%	22.8%	12%	14.1%	2.2%	3.64
15.	I thought that no one cared if I lived or died	29.3%	33.7%	6.5%	15.2%	5.4%	4.3%	5.4%	4.32
0: I never had this thought; 1: I had this thought before but not in the past month; 2: About once a month; 3: A couple of times a month; 4: About once a week; 5: A couple of times a week; 6: Almost every day									

sampling table, a total of 92 respondents were sampled. The further description is based on the responses of the 92 sample respondents.

Regarding the eligible respondents, 26 (28.26%) respondents said that they were unhappy to some extent because of the burden of household responsibilities, and 66 (71.74%) respondents replied they were unhappy to a greater extent. 44 (47.82%) respondents stated that to some extent that they were unhappy in their marital life because of relationship issues with the husband or his family members, and 48 (52.18%)

respondents marked to a greater extent. Further, 76 (82.61%) respondents to some extent and 16 (17.39%) to a greater extent said that they were unhappy in their marital life because of physical and mental health issues they were confronted with after marriage, such as stress, pregnancy, fatigue, etc. Lastly, 76 (82.61%) respondents marked to some extent and 16 (17.39%) to a greater extent that they are unhappy in their marital life because of parental rejection due to issues with the husband, his family, health problems and the burden of household responsibilities.

The tabular information indicates that in lower albeit considerable numbers of respondents, suicidal ideation prevails in a severe form, e.g., 20.7% of respondents thought about death almost every day; 22.8% of respondents wished for death every day; 23.9% of respondents wished that had never been born; and 29.3% of respondents thought that no one would care if they lived or died every day. Similarly, a small but considerable number of respondents thought about death a couple of times a week; 21.7% of respondents thought that killing themselves would solve their problems, and 33.7% of respondents thought that no one would care if they lived or died a couple of times a week. 22.8% of respondents thought it would be better if they were not alive about once a week; 21.7% of respondents thought about people dying about once a week; 23.9% of respondents thought about telling people that they were planning to kill themselves about once a week; and 28.3% of respondents thought about telling people that they were planning to kill themselves about once a month. 13% of respondents thought almost every day about how people would feel if they killed themselves, and 26.1% of respondents thought about it about once a week. 22.8% of respondents thought about wishing to be dead almost every day, and 21.7% of respondents thought about wishing to be dead about a couple of times a month. 19.6% of respondents thought that killing themselves would solve their problems almost every day, and 21.7% of respondents thought the same about a couple of times a week. 25% of respondents thought al-

most every day that people would feel happy if they were dead. 23.9% of respondents wished almost every day that they had never been born. 29.3% of respondents thought almost every day and 33.7% a couple of times a week that no one would care if they lived or died.

Correlation analysis was conducted between the judging association between suicidal ideation and early marriage in the four categories of issues identified among the samples, including household responsibilities, relationship issues with the husband and/or his family, physical and mental health issues including pregnancy, and rejection by parents after marriage. In this context, the burden of household responsibilities among girls married before 18 years of age were found to be significantly associated with suicidal ideation ($r= 0.91, p=0.001$; and *mean score*=3.82, $p=0.001$). Relationship issues with the husband and/or his family among girls married before 18 years of age were found to be significantly associated with suicidal ideation ($r= 0.88, p=0.001$; and *mean score*=3.18, $p=0.001$). A significant association was found between physical and mental health issues, including pregnancy and early marriage ($r= 0.84, p=0.001$; and *mean score*=2.88, $p=0.001$). A significant association was found between rejection by parents after marriage and early marriage ($r= 0.89, p=0.000$; and *mean score*=3.95, $p=0.000$).

Part-II

This research reveals that early marriage is one of the reasons for suicide attempts among females. Cases of attempted and complete sui-

Table 3 Pearson Correlations of the Problems after Early Marriage Score with Suicidal Ideation among the Study Samples

Scale	Household responsibilities		Relationship issues with husband and/or his family		Physical and mental health issues including pregnancy		Rejection by parents after marriage	
	R	P	R	P	R	p	R	p
Total mean score of problems with early marriage	0.91	0.001	0.88	0.001	0.84	0.001	0.89	0.000
Total mean score from SIQ	3.82	0.001	3.18	0.001	2.88	0.001	3.95	0.000

cide have been reported in the study area among girls married before 18 years of age. Suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and completed suicides can be explained because of early marriage among females. Field information collected through interviews and informal discussions indicates that early marriage is not directly associated with suicidal ideation, and a suicide attempt is the outcome of the situation and other consequences of early marriage among females. For example, it is evident from many research studies that early marriage increases household responsibilities on teenage females. Research further illustrates that increased responsibilities paves the way for developing suicidal ideation among individuals. Samaritans (2013) stated that failure to fulfill responsibilities leads to stress, and stress significantly correlates with suicide-related behaviours. In this regard, one extract is:

..... Teenage girls are unable to take appropriate care of the husband's family (including the husband, father-in-law, mother-in-law, brothers, and sisters of the husband, etc.), but in this culture they are expected to do so. Due to their age and immaturity they often are unable to do so. This creates extra pressure on such girls. This pressure causes tension, and in that case, I observed this was the situation. The girl couldn't cope with the responsibilities, and this led to relationship issues with the husband's family, and later she committed suicide...."

A respondent stated that:

..... Married girls, whether teenager or adult, are considered responsible for taking care of the husband's family. This is particularly difficult for girls to marry at a very young age. They are unable to take proper care, leading to stress among them. Sometimes it leads to relationship problems with the husband's family members, and this is dangerous when considering suicide and related behaviours...."

The brother of a deceased girl, who committed suicide, said that:

..... My sister had issues with her mother-in-law and the sisters of her husband. The issues primarily started due to household work, such as washing clothes, cooking, cleaning the home, etc. My sister was just 16

years old, and they were exerting pressure on her as she was not good at that. She told us many times, but in this society, we can't do anything about it...."

Relationship (particularly intimate) issues contribute to suicidal ideation and attempts. This is evident from the current study as well. Relationship issues with the husband and his family are one of the key causes of the prevalence of suicide attempts among teenage married girls. In one case a key informant illustrated that:

..... It had been told to us by our wives that she (referring to girl who died by suicide) didn't like her husband. She was married against her consent. She left her husband's home 2 times, but her parents' exerted pressure and brought her back to the husband's home. In the end, she could not find a way out and hanged herself...."

Health problems, particularly problems about pregnancy, are difficult to cope with at a very young age. Fear, stress and altered emotions are very common among females when pregnant because of hormonal changes. One unique case has been reported in this regard as well in the study area. The family members of a girl who died by suicide stated that her behaviour turned strange when she became pregnant. She was complaining of fear and screamed many times during sleep. In addition, she started reacting aggressively and was stressed for two weeks. Her husband said that:

..... I told her many times to control herself and took her to a doctor. The doctor told us to take care of her; as a medicine prescription at such a time can harm the child within the womb. After a few days she fought with my mother about an unimportant issue and committed suicide. She was behaving in a strange manner, but we were not expecting such an extreme act...."

Key informants also illustrated that rejection by parents after marriage is common in cases where girls do not have good relationships with the husband or his family. Society stigmatizes parents who support their daughters (married) not having good relationships with their husband or his family. Parents are expected to exert pressure upon their daughters to maintain good relationships with the husband and his family. In rare cases girls get parental support if they have

issues with the husband and his family. Therefore, girls get more stressed when they are having issues with their husbands and/or his family because pressure or rejection also comes from their own parents. A key informant stated that:

„..... *People don't like parents who do not exert pressure on their daughters to maintain good relationships with their husband's family. If a girl (married) does not like her husband or his family members, parents are expected to taunt their daughters for that. So it creates more stress for girls. I had a lot of information about Ms. X (not mentioning the name of the girl) that she was not happy, but her parents were also rejecting her. I was told by my wife that her parents told her not to come to their home if she had another fight with her husband. And after a few days, I heard the sad news that she had hanged herself....*“

1.7. Discussion and Conclusion

The results from the sample population indicate that a particular portion of girls married before 18 years of age are vulnerable to developing suicide and related behaviours. It is important to mention that suicidal ideation among girls married at earlier ages is linked with other socio-economic factors and is not an outcome of the marriage. Therefore, populations where other causative indicators are missing are not considered. Such factors or indicators include the pressure of household responsibilities, relationship problems with the husband's family, health problems (stress and behavioural issues with pregnancy) and rejection by parents.

In the target population, it is evident that early marriage can develop suicidal ideation among girls who are married before 18 years of age. In Pakhtun culture there are numerous expectations from girls who are married, and these particularly come from the family of her husband. The expectations include taking care of the husband and his family members, helping the mother-in-law cook and other household responsibilities, etc. However, girls who are married at a very young age often are unable to meet such expectations, leading to tension, stress and issues with the husband and/or his family members, in addition to rejection by and stress from parents. In some cases, it leads to mild to moderate levels

of suicidal ideation, and in rare cases suicide attempts.

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