INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES BULLETIN
ISSN: (E) 3007-1917 (P) 3007-1909
Volume 4, Issue 2, 2026

EXPLORING THE PSYCHOSOCIAL EFFECTS OF EARLY MARRIAGE AMONG WOMEN IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18690836

Received	Accepted	Published
20 December 2025	04 February 2026	19 February 2026

ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to explore the psychosocial impact of early marriage on women residing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). The main objective of the study was to explore the cultural, religious and traditional shaping factors driving child marriages and to scrutinize the subjective experiences of young brides in terms of marital compatibility, economic reliance, family dynamics, and psychosocial ramifications. A qualitative methodology was opted, involving open – ended questions to capture the personal narratives of 15 randomly selected women who entered early marriage at an early age. Their responses were analysed thematically to extract common themes and patterns. The 6 major themes which were revealed were religious beliefs, traditions, social security, gender control, changing perspectives and psychosocial pressures. This study provides multidimensional nature of child marriage and individual struggles faced by young brides, drawing attention to the vital need for recognition, legal laws and social awareness. This study provides valuable insights for psychologists and policy makers in developing contextually sensitive approaches and preventive methods.

Keywords: *Early marriage. Psychosocial effects, young brides, religious factors, cultural Context, women.*

Introduction

Early marriage refers to a marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18. (UNICEF, 2023). Early marriage is one of the most prevalent practices present in South Asia. (Subramanee et al., 2022). Early marriage has deep historical roots in Pakistan specifically rural areas, tracing back to the pre partition era as it was practiced as part of traditional, tribal and feudal structures. Young girls were married off early to protect the "family honor" or to secure alliances and more commonly with religious interpretations. A rather recent study evaluates that religious interpretations suggested by religious leaders emphasize that young girls are eligible for marriage once they reach puberty enforcing early union (Policy Advocacy and Research to strengthen Implemental on of Pro-Women Legislation Ons and GBV Response Services in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, n.d.). Furthermore, economic pressures such as dowry or access to social stability reinforced the practice. (Javed & Mughal, n.d.). Although marriage is seen as an important part in building healthy relationships and social structures in societies as per Islamic perspective. However, early marriages violate the god given human right specially women. Such conduct transgresses the divinity of religion. (Islamic Relief, n.d.). Such women are particularly vulnerable to psychological disorders as they are frequently silences leading to deprivation of their fundamental rights including self-expression and self-defense (Le Strat 2011). Educational opportunities are limited, leading to lack of access for jobs or otherwise growth and productivity. Moreover, isolating young girls from their peers. The idea of independent living is rather farfetched as well (Yoosefi Lebni et al., 2023).

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, early marriage

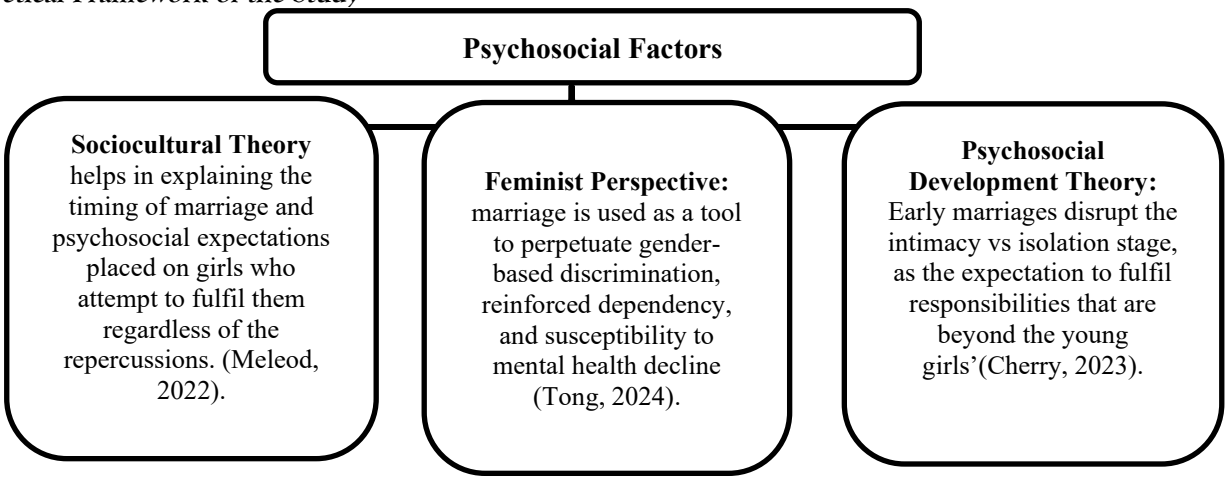
is prevalent practice, rooted in traditional customs, strong tribal structures, persistent poverty and entrenched gender norms. Economic hardships lead to devising early marriage to reduce financial burdens. Families reinforce the gender norm of women being primary caretakers as wives and mothers and such. Gender roles. are intertwined with attitudes of religious and cultural factors that contribute towards child marriage with expectation of subordination from women entailing a girls' opinion about their own marriage are often ignored. (Marshall, 2018). Ultimately, these factors contribute for the continuing of early marriage practice regardless of all the development of educational measures and protection of right (Annual Report Pakistan, n.d.). According to UNICEF report (2018), approximately 18 % of girls in Pakistan are married before the age of 18 years, making Pakistan the second lowest rate of early marriage right after Sri Lanka (Child Marriage in Pakistan, 2022).

The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 sets the minimum legal age at 16 years for girls and 18 years for boys but KPK has yet to pass its own updated law to raise the minimum age of girls to 18 years. However, implementation of the law would remain to be a challenge, specifically in rural areas. The child marriage deducted in Punjab and KPK, as compared to 1990 to 2020. In 1990 31.53 % cases were reported and in 2020, 21% cases were reported (Shahbaz, 2021).

Theoretical Framework of the study

The current study focuses on psychological theories that help evaluate how early marriages impact psychosocial distress. In KPK, early marriage is deeply embedded within the social structure, traditional beliefs, and religious and cultural norms. The Sociocultural theory helps in explaining the timing of marriage and psychosocial expectations placed on girls who attempt to fulfil them regardless of the repercussions (Vygotsky, 1978; Meleod, 2022).
The feminist perspective focuses on power dynamics, gender inequality, and the subordination of women in patriarchal society. Early marriages excessively affect girls' education, limit their autonomy, and increase dependency, leading to an inability to make decisions. It highlights marriage is used as a tool to perpetuate gender-based discrimination, reinforced dependency, and susceptibility to mental health decline (Tong, 2024). In psychosocial development theory, Erikson highlights the importance of resolving age-appropriate conflicts for psychological development. Early marriages disrupt the intimacy vs isolation stage, as the expectation to fulfil responsibilities that are beyond the young girls' capacity results in hindering healthy identity formation, which is fundamental (Cherry, 2023).

Figure 1
Theoretical Framework of the Study



Note: **Figure 1 reveals the psychosocial perspective of the theories on early marriages on women**

Rationale of the study

Despite increased campaigning of child rights and gender equality, the practice of early marriage remains common in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

(KPK), primarily affecting young girls. "Approximately 21% of girls in Pakistan are married before the age of 18 and 3% before the age of 15." (Yousafzai, W., 2024). According to the Mirror of Society. (n.d.). Early Marriage is is said that "Additionally, 5.7% of girls in KP were married before the age of 15." Young girls bear the brunt of early marriages, experiencing significant psychosocial distress and mental burden. While existing literature highlights weak law enforcement, lower status of women, cultural and religious norms, legal and health implication of healthy marriage, there remains limited exploration of psychosocial impacts while aspects such as financial dependency and lack of decision-making power within a household are often overlooked in existing research. The key aim of current research study is to offer an "overview of cognitive, psychological and social consequences related to child marriage among young girls of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), highlighting underrepresentation of financial dependency and little to no decision-making power within the household". By addressing the lived experiences of women, this article aims to gain a holistic grasp of psychosocial effects of early marriage, through a qualitative methodology and a thematic analysis to undercover dominant trends and salient themes within their narratives.

Objectives

The objectives observed in the studies are initially to explore the cultural, religious and traditional factors influencing early marriage among Pathan girls, similarly, to examine the personal experiences of young Pathan brides in terms of financial dependency, relationships with in-laws and influence of early marriage on their overall opportunities. Ultimately, examine community attitudes towards delaying marriage.

Method

A qualitative method was selected for this study to collect rich and extensive knowledge regarding the psychosocial effects of early marriages among women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). Data was collected through semi structured interview comprising of open-ended questions, allowing them to share their firsthand accounts A total of 15 females were interviewed individually. The interviews were conducted in their native language Pashto, so that they can articulate their mental and emotional states unreservedly. The use of open-ended questions allows space for in-depth exploration of their subjective experience.

Research Design

A phenomenological qualitative research design was employed to picture the subjective experience of women married at a young age. This design was selected to capture the cultural, religious, factors influencing early marriages among Pathan women. Semi-structured interview provided ease of adjustment giving the researcher the openness to probe into surfacing issues. An experience centered methodology (phenomenological approach) helped reveal the deep-rooted meanings which participants linked with their experiences, reinforcing their emotional realities rather than just purely objective interpretation.

Sample

The sample for the current study was comprised 15 married women from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) region who were married at an early age. All entered into marriage during adolescence, with ages at marriage ranging between 14 and 19 years, majority ranging from 16-18 years. The sample included women from different socio-economic backgrounds, with most participants belonging to middle class households. Their marital status at the time of the study varied, including currently married, divorced, and widowed individuals. Educational level among the participants ranged from no formal education to matriculation, reflecting the wider gaps in access to education for girls in the region. The interviews continued until no new themes emerged, ensuring comprehensive insights.

Measure

Data was collected using a semi-structured interview format with open-ended questions in Pashto Language that allowed the participants to express their feelings openly. A total of 15 females were interviewed and at the start of the interview demographic information was collected including socio-economic status, marital status, age and educational level. The semi structured approach provided room for spontaneity, promoting honest dialogue between the interviewer and the participants, which established an informal and pressure free space.

Procedure

First, the literature was reviewed to understand the depth needed to utilize while formulating the questions. With respect to various investigations and the objectives that were focused on within the research semi structured questions were articulated that explore subjects of the objectives. Furthermore, Participants were interviewed in appropriate settings and one-on-one interviews to be precise. Each interview was approximately 30 minutes long. In accordance with ethical considerations, consent was driven by each participant. With each participant's consent, each interview was recorded through a phone recorder app. Pashto language was selected for the interview protocol as it is the local language of the areas observed. The identities of the participants were anonymous. A total of 15 interviews were conducted with women of various demographics such as age, relationship status or socio-economic background. Purposive sampling techniques were implemented to meet all the research objectives.

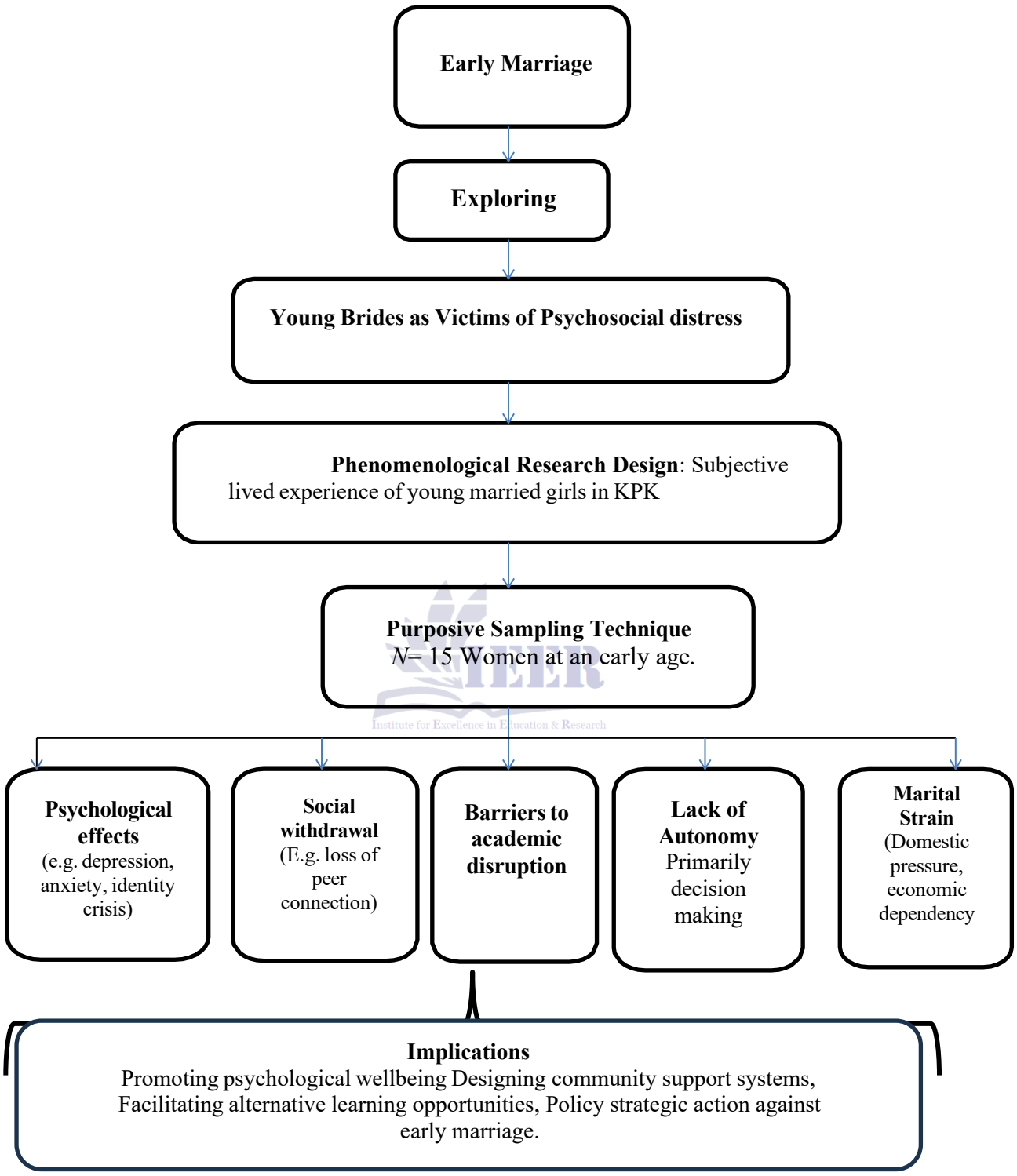
Ethical consideration

In this study, APA ethical guidelines for research were observed. The purpose and objectives of the study were properly informed to the participants prior to providing informed consent. The identities of each participant are anonymous to respect the privacy of the participants. Personal details were also not pried upon to maintain confidentiality of the ethical considerations. Furthermore, the researcher has taken consent from each participant for recording the interviews for later evaluation.

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Figure 2

Conceptual Framework of the Study



Results

Table 1

Thematic findings of participants responses about Cultural, Religious & Traditional factors influencing Early Marriage (n=15)

Major Theme	Sub Theme	Responses in Verbatim terms of coding

			Pashto	Translate
Cultural and Religious Influences	Cultural Justifications	Following Pathan traditions and norms	*Da de pukhtanoon rewaj*	*It is tradition.*
		Societal/Community pressure	*Apala depala ogori mashra ke nu biya wei che zemunga jeenakon umm zar oshi.*	*Our elders see people around them getting their daughters married young and wish to do the same.*
		Marriage seen as act of divine will	*Da de Allah hukum na ey nu biya na kigi.*	*It's all about what God has written.*
		Settling daughters while elders are alive	*Soch khao che ze de aghoo jawand ke khpl kor ta shama*	*They feel it's important to see their daughters married while they are still alive.*

Table 1 determines the major theme of "Cultural, Religious & Traditional Factors Influencing Early Marriage." Participants expressed a range of reasons for early marriage based on cultural practices, religious beliefs, and traditional values. The sub-theme reflects on cultural explanations, with categorized under preserving Pashtun honor, fulfilling religious duties upon puberty, and protecting girls from societal gossip. Early marriage was also seen as a way to fulfill family expectations and as an act of divine fate. These responses show how deeply embedded norms and beliefs play a vital role in normalizing early marriage within the participants' communities.

Table 2

Thematic findings of participants responses on personal experiences of Early Marriage: Compatibility and Satisfaction (n=15)

Major Theme	**Sub Theme**	**Responses in terms of coding**	**Verbatim**	
			Pashto	Translation
Marital Challenges	Emotional and spousal relationship challenges	Lack of emotional maturity at the time of marriage	*Ze dera zyaat immature we ma*	*I was very immature.*
		Lacked autonomy due to age gap	*Ze kho zyat mature na wem nu ma ba hi de aghay khabra ba mana la.*	*I wasn't very mature, so I used to listen to him all the time.*
		Burden of responsibility at a young age led to instability	*Agho wade ke generation gap oo.... saree jeenai la bacho*	*There was a generation gap.... The husband treats the wife like a child, and she is deprived of*

		shaane treat kai aao khpl pa laare agha la chalo la	*making her own decisions and life experiences*
	Lack of fulfillment and regret	*Ze kho bilkul satisfies na emma. Ke ze wem che waroko umer ke wade nae kol pakar.*	*I was not satisfied at all. I think people should not be married young or early.*

Table 2 highlights the major theme of "Marital Challenges" faced in early marriages. The sub-theme identified is Emotional & Relational Impact, where participants shared low emotional preparedness, struggling with communication, and limited compatibility due to age gaps and immaturity. Taking on early responsibilities such as motherhood and household roles were often overwhelming leading to dissatisfaction or marital breakdown. The coded responses reveal how early marriage negatively shaped participants' emotional health and overall marital stability.

Table 3

Thematic findings of participants responses on financial dependency and Education (n=15)

Major Theme	**Sub Theme**	**Responses in terms of coding**	**Verbatim**	
			Pashto	Translation
Barriers to empowerment	Educational and Financial limitations	Lost academic and career potential due to early marriage	*agha wakht zama de sabk oo*	*That time was meant for my studies*
		Total financial dependence on husband	*Ze wem che masara khpla paisa wa.*	*I wish I had my own money.*
		Getting awareness about financial independence after marriage	*De mata usse mehsoos kigi che ze chata na wem che mala paise raka*	*I now realize how much I dislike asking anyone for money*

Table 3 outlines the major theme of "Barriers to Empowerment" caused by early marriage. The sub-theme focuses on Educational & Financial Limitation, highlighting shared experiences of participants interrupted education, complete dependence on their husbands for financial needs, and lack of encouragement to become financial dependent. Several reflected on how early marriage restricted their potential for education and career. Some expressed growing awareness of the importance of financial independence, but only after facing hardships in early marriage. The coded responses show how early marriage constrained women's self-reliance.

Table 4

Thematic findings of participants responses on relationship with in-laws (n=15)

Major Theme	Sub Theme	Responses in terms of coding	Verbatim	
			Pashto	Translation
Family dynamics	In-law interference	Emotional support from in laws	*Uss de time sara agho mata zama parents shaane de.*	*With time, they became like my own parents*
		Treated like a kid due to young age	*Zama in laws ba ze bacho shanne treat kolam*	*My in-laws treated me like a child.*
		Difficulty adjusting in joint family system	*der zyat der interference oo de agho*	*There was a lot of interference of in laws.*
		Conflicts caused by interactions, especially sister in laws	*Zama inderor ba zama har mamla ke ba ey zan zai Kao*	*My sister-in-law would always get involved in every matter of mine*

Table 4 presents the major theme of "Family Dynamics" within the context of early marriages. The sub-theme In-Law. Interactions explore participants' subjective experiences ranging from emotional support and guidance to conflicts and control due to interference from in-laws. While some participants reported good family dynamics marked by kindness and mutual respect, others shared expressed lack of autonomy particularly, in joint family systems where interference from relatives was common. The coded responses reflect how the nature of in-law relationships shaped the participants' early marital lives.

Table 5

Thematic findings of participants responses Community response towards delaying marriage (n=15)

Major Theme	Sub Theme	Responses in terms of coding	Verbatim	
			Pashto	Translation
Societal perceptions	Struggles in delaying marriage	Older Unmarried women face societal backlash	*De ke biya khalak da um soch kai che zyat umer ke biya bachi um na kigi.*	*People also worry that with older marriages, having children might be difficult.*
		Some families show willingness in delaying marriage	*Zumung pa family kay sa dase trend nade zar wada kolo bas zma osho.*	*In our family there wasn't really a trend of early marriage, it just happened in my case.*

Girls lack freedom in marriage timing	*Zama khpl barake da rai de che mala kam as kaam 25 na above laka kam age chez ama usse de ala wade kol pakr oo*	*I think that I should have been at least 25 years old or above or like the age I am at right now*
Community holds contradicting attitudes towards age and education	*khalak wae chay jeenai dera parha likha eey um vi aao kam umer de umm vi*	*People say that a girl should be too educated and still young.*

Table 5 highlights the major theme of "Societal Perceptions" surrounding delayed marriage. The sub-theme Barriers to Postponing Marriage reflects participants' subjective experience of social pressure, judgment, and lack of personal agency. While a few acknowledged gradual changes in attitudes regarding delaying marriage within their families, many shared that community gossip, unrealistic expectations, and a lack of autonomy created obstacles in delaying marriage. The coded responses emphasize how societal norms contribute to how girls are married, often leaving them with little or no control over this critical aspect of their lives.

Table 7

Thematic findings of participants responses on perceived benefits of early marriage (n=15)

Major Theme	Sub Theme	Responses in terms of coding	Verbatim	
			Pashto	Translation
Supporting early marriages	Safeguarding morals and reputation	Protection from immoral influences	*Zar wade maksad hi da de che insaan mashray ganda khalko na aao baadeyy khabron na bach shi.*	*The purpose of early marriage is to save people from bad company and harmful societal influences.*
		Early marriage is used as a way of social security with persisting issues	*Zar wade kala bhi insaan la mashare baadna na khalas ye, khaa terbiyat insaan la bach kai.*	*Early marriage doesn't save a person from societal harm. Good upbringing is what saves a person.*
		Under religious belief, puberty viewed as the right time for marriage	*Islam ke umm waye che jeenai ya alak baligh shi nu bs wade eyy okai.*	*Islam, it is said that once a girl or boy reaches puberty, they should get married.*

Table 6 explores the major theme of "Justifications for Early Marriage" as shared by participants. The sub-theme Protection from immoral influences reflects beliefs that early marriage helps prevent exposure to negative societal influences and sin. Some participants supported early marriages through religious principles that consider puberty an appropriate age for marriage. However, others questioned this view, pointing out that early marriage does not necessarily guarantee protection or stability. The coded responses reveal a mixture of moral reasoning, religious beliefs, and lived experience in shaping early marriage is perceived.

Discussion

This study focuses on cultural, religious, and traditional factors influencing young Pathan girls. In Pathan society, their agencies are confined to social structures that adhere to specific, rigid values, such as preserving honor, or are reshaped as mechanisms of familial protection. To accomplish this objective, we must first understand the extent to which cultural, religious, and traditional factors contribute to the impact on women of early marriage. As a result, they fail to go beyond what is presented because these ideas have been embedded in them. There is a tendency for early marriage to be accepted in Pathan communities, regardless of its harmful effects, since religious beliefs and tribal customs often justify its practice. It causes profound psychosocial disruptions primarily to girls, which leaves lasting emotional scars. Traditional roles are often remodeled to conform to conservative interpretations of Islam to preserve family honour and modesty (Malik et al., 2022).

The second objective focuses on how their lived experiences have contributed to their financial dependence, relationship with the in-laws, and opportunities that have been overlooked. The basis of a household is two people who have entered a legally recognized marriage and who are socially accepted as a couple. They navigate their lives through the complexity of their relationship with their in-laws, where rigid hierarchy and limited autonomy are molded into the framework of their mentality. It is also important to restrict the opportunities that provide space for growth (Zubair et al., 2024).

A third objective will explore how communal ties can be explored in terms of delaying marriage. There is a tendency to respond to criticism by gossiping or making unwarranted judgments. It is clear that society is hypocritical to require a girl to be young and well-educated before she marries. However, the concept sets different expectations while providing limited opportunities for girls. In Qatari society and Pathanic society, myths regarding delayed marriages and infertility stem from misconceptions that provide a basis for family pressure to get married at an early age. Essentially, it relates to the notion that a sense of familial concern overrides a young girl's physical and mental well-being (Lari, 2022).

The social norm in conservative communities is for girls to accept submissive roles, which ultimately robs them of the ability to make an informed decision about their education, independence, etc. The historical oppression shaped by patriarchy undermines the autonomy and agency of women (McKinley, 2022). Similarly, it is essential to understand the circumstances that lead to behaviors that result in conflict or undesirable situations that lead to psychological distress.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

There are some limitations and recommendations in the current study regarding the selection and scope of the sample. A total of 15 women from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) were included in this study and were married at an early age. The study cannot be generalized to the broader Pakistani population since the sample belongs to a specific geographical area. In future research, the demographic scope could be broadened, including participants from other parts of Pakistan in addition to capturing a more detailed understanding of the psychosocial effects associated with early marriage. As a second limitation, the study relied solely on qualitative data obtained through open-ended questions. A longitudinal approach may prove useful in future research to provide a comprehensive overview of the subjective experiences of early marriages. Furthermore, the research focused primarily on the voices of women who underwent early marriages. It may be beneficial to involve the perspectives of male family members, community elders, and policymakers in future studies in order to better understand the social and cultural factors that perpetuate early marriage. Furthermore, researchers may wish to further

examine the role that education, economic dependency, and accessibility to mental health services play in this process. It would be beneficial to include these components in future studies so that the depth and reliability of the results can be enhanced.

Implications of the study

This study provides meaningful insight for mental health professionals and policymakers by shedding light on the psychosocial impact of early marriage. Policies should be made in order to work towards progression and understand the importance of maturing before marriage. Its findings can inform. The current study presents some limitations and recommendations concerning the selection and scope of the sample. This study included 15 women who were married at an early age belonging to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) region. Since the sample belongs to a specific geographical area, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to the broader population of Pakistan. Future research could broaden the demographic scope including participants from other areas of Pakistan as well to capture a more detailed understanding of the psychosocial effects of early marriage. Secondly, the study relied solely on qualitative data obtained through open-ended questions. Future research may benefit from employing longitudinal approaches to provide a deep overview of the subjective experiences of early marriage.

Besides, this research centered exclusively on the voices of women undergone early marriage future studies may benefit from including the perspectives of male family members, community elders, and policymakers to better understand of the social and cultural factors that perpetuate early marriage. Moreover, researchers could further explore the role of education, economic dependency, and access to mental health services. Incorporating these components in future studies would meaningfully strengthen the depth and relativity of results.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, this study explores the hardships faced by women who are married off early. It focuses on factors that hinder the psychosocial development of women in KPK. Early marriage often limits women's economic, educational, and psychological development while being deeply rooted in tradition and culture. Lack of autonomy, limited opportunities, and the absence of economic prospects strip them of their chance to live life according to their own terms. The findings suggest that although women might not entirely detest early marriage, some states do not want their daughters to be married early, since the mindset of whom they marry is very crucial. Marrying someone unsuitable would imply undergoing the same hardships. This calls for better living standards and reform to educate girls and present opportunities that help offer financial stability and restore autonomy. Although the study is not generalizable, given the geographically specific sample collected, it is necessary to observe that the implications would advocate for uplifting all individuals collectively. Creating an environment that caters to all and believes in empowerment.

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