

Untangling the Threads: An In-Depth Qualitative Exploration of Challenges Encountered by Teenage Girls in Early Marriages in Talagang, Punjab, Pakistan

Muhammad Kamran	M.S Scholar, Department of Sociology, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: muhammadkamran6983@gmail.com
Asad Zia	PhD Scholar, Department of Sociology, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: asadskt00@gmail.com
Shahab Khalid	PhD Scholar, Department of Sociology, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan Khyber Pakhtunkhwa-Pakistan.

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Corresponding Author:

Muhammad Kamran

Email:

muhammadkamran6983@gmail.com

Abstract: *This research intended to analyze the facts of Teen girls marrying at the age below fifteen, in District Talagang, Punjab Pakistan. A purposive sampling technique was used for the selection of sampling size. 15 participants were purposively selected who have already experienced the issues related to early marriages. An interview guide was used for the purpose of obtaining in-depth information about the experiences of early marriage. Thematic analysis was used to examine the gathered data. The study findings showed that Teen mothers have a greater probability of being poor, and their long-term ability to change their socioeconomic circumstances is limited by their lack of education and experience. Moreover, the study findings showed that early motherhood snatches girls' childhood activities, due to the age gap girls face sexual and physical violence. The adjustment issues compel teenage mothers to use anti-anxiety and anti-depressant drugs for short-lived happiness. Instead of identifying the real experiences of women's issues, people took them to saints for spiritual healing. In traditional societies, the perceived difficulty of enduring love leads to families to enforce engagements at illegal ages, bypassing the individual choices and upholding prevailing social norms. Policy measures are recommended to address the adverse consequences of early marriages among teenage girls in District Talagang, Punjab Pakistan, focusing on legal protection, education and community awareness to safeguard their well-being.*

Introduction

Early marriage, also known as marriage during adolescence, is defined as getting married before turning eighteen. This can happen to both boys and girls, but it typically happens to girls. It is a fact that exists in many countries. Considering its importance, the issue has not been addressed or accepted as a standard for a long period of time. In Pakistan, it's becoming a more serious issue (Nawaz et al., 2021).

Teenage motherhood has been a more controversial topic among policymakers and in the wider societal context in recent decades. Teenage mothers are frequently viewed as a homogeneous group of inexperienced, careless, and reliant on benefits, unfit parents who don't adhere to traditional conceptions of motherhood (Dlamini, 2016). Adolescent mothers are unfavorably portrayed in the discourse on maternity. One of the common misconceptions about

adolescent pregnancies is that these mothers are incapable of being 'good' mothers and are inexperienced (Nawaz et al., 2021). On the other hand, it is suggested that they are not yet mentally and physically prepared to handle the obligations of motherhood. Contrary to popular belief, mothering is not a natural or instinctual trait shared by all females, especially adolescent mothers (Chohan & Langa, 2011). Furthermore, becoming a parent at a young age presents several challenges concerning adult transitions. According to McCarthy et al. (2018), 16 million teenage girls become mothers each year. Additionally Regardless of the mother's age or socio-economic status, adolescent motherhood necessitates assistance and community involvement. Neonatal mortality is known to rise with decreasing mother age; teenage girls who give birth before the age of fifteen have five times the risk of dying during pregnancy or delivery compared to women in their 20s, partially due to physical immaturity Neal et al., 2018). As far as child marriage is concerned, child marriages lead girls to higher health issues and violence prevents them from accessing social relations and social support and keeps them in a series of poverty and inequalities (Tehreem, 2021). It is always been a fact Adolescent moms deal with a variety of difficulties that place requirements on their level of adolescent development as well as their capacity to adjust to the responsibilities of motherhood. During their pregnancies, adolescent women endure a wide range of things, including financial hardship. One important discovery shows that, despite initial discomfort at the announcement, teenage pregnancies are frequently later recognized by both young females and their households. A rare desire to use an intentional abortion was also noted. Adolescent women in sub-Saharan Africa experience severe disadvantages during pregnancy and the early stages of parenting. Pregnancy and delivery complications are more common in adolescent mothers. Mothers who are adolescents are more likely than mothers who are adults to have adverse maternal and newborn outcomes, such as low birth weight or both mother and child death (Gyesaw & Nkomah, 2013).

There is also worry that teenage pregnancies contribute to or maintain a cycle of poverty. Adolescent pregnancy has a negative impact on young girls' academic and human capital development today. According to recent reports, 16.3 percent to 28.9 percent of young females are expected to get pregnant by the time they are 19 years old. According to a survey study, young women between the ages of 15 and 19 had already started having children in Ghana, where teenagers were responsible for 30% of documented births. Teenage parenthood has long been explained by the combination of socioeconomic vulnerability of young girls and poverty. The study showed the combined impact of peer pressure, media influence, poverty, inadequate parenting, and school dropout on teenage girls' higher chances of becoming pregnant. (Morgan et al., 2022). Teen mothers face more life stressors and issues than mature mothers during postpartum stage that can add to postpartum depressive symptoms (Niyonsenga & Mutabaruka, 2021). Among these, depressive disorders, particularly in mothers, have been linked to a reduced capacity for infant growth. Ten to twenty percent of women experience depression at some point in their lives, and for around one-third of these women, the illness is chronic and recurrent. The most constant and well-replicated risk factor for childhood major depressive disorders has been maternal depression. Compared to controls, children of depressed moms are at a 2- to 3-fold higher risk. The lack of social support from their family was more frequently reported by mothers and kids who had depression. A woman who marries when she's still a teenager has limited experience as a mother. She develops anxiety and despair as a result. A mother's depressive behavior has a direct impact on how her kids are socialized (Nawaz et al., 2021).

Moreover, the issue of sex education encourages teenagers to early legal or illegal sexual relationships. Family Life Education (FLE), is a type of sex education that is taught in every educational institution in the Gambia, focusing on the rights of women, the planning of families, the usage of contraception, and sexual and sexuality relationships. In the context of defending the rights of girls, particularly rights regarding reproduction and equal opportunity, both the National Gender Policy in schools and the National Reproductive Health have brought about significant changes. This has made access to reproductive health care, including contraceptives, free and available almost everywhere in the country (Bah, 2016).

It is commonly recognized that a successful mother of all ages frequently relies on social assistance. Teenage parents require information, financial assistance, child care, support with decisions, and emotional encouragement from family members even more so than older mothers do. Pre- and postpartum problems are reduced by social support; a sympathetic partner in labor may even reduce medical expenses, mortality, and morbidity. The mother's future educational and professional successes as well as the health of the kid are both significantly influenced by the use of supportive networks. Parental challenges can take many different forms when teenage mothers are frequently unable to seek assistance owing to cognitive or interpersonal limitations. For instance, a teenager who needs assistance with child care so that they may make the necessary social connections may sneak away and leave the child with siblings or grandparents, or they may just leave the child unattended. If other family members are not told, there may be a childcare problem or an irate reaction from the family (or both) as a result (Thomas, 2020).

The issues related to teenage mothers have always been focused on by different non-governmental organizations and all other government organizations working for social welfare within the country. This research intended to analyze the experiences of teenage mothers in District Talagang, Punjab to create enough awareness among the people by adding new knowledge.

Research Objectives

- To analyze the issues related to early marriages
- Examine the issues the teenagers meet after becoming mothers.
- Examine the way teen mothers handle and adapt to the situation of becoming mothers.

Research Questions

1. What are issues related to the early marriages?
2. What are the issues that teenagers meet after becoming mothers?
3. How do teen mothers handle and adapt to the situation of becoming mothers?

Significance of the study

This study produces theoretical knowledge about the experiences of teenage mothers. The research also contributes to the development of actionable steps that policymakers may be advised to take to solve the problems associated with teenage mothers in Pakistan. By sharing the experiences of teenage mothers the study will examine the issues related to early marriages.

Literature Review

Teenage mothers face a variety of mental, psychological, social, and moral issues, including a requirement for continuous assistance and instruction, difficulty making plans and decisions, lack of motherhood abilities when faced with unfamiliar circumstances and significant modifications to their lives, high-risk pregnancy and delivery, psychological issues (such as anxiety, depressive disorders, shocks, lack of confidence, and identity's confusions), difficulty juggling numerous duties, conflicting roles and identity confusion, inadequate societal and spiritual assistance, disruptions to education and work, financial difficulties, stigmatization from society and negative reactions related to religion or culture (Mangeli et al., 2017). Shaw (2006) revealed that Girls continue to be particularly at risk in many ways even in this supporting legal context, primarily due to the prevalent gendered societal standards. They are also prone to marry as children—to males who are typically five years older—have less access to formal schooling, and are socializing in a culture where social institutions are permeated with gender discrimination.

In the UNDP's 2016 Human Development Report, which ranked 188 nations, Pakistan came in at position 144. As stated in the Global Gender Gap 2021 Index Report by the World Economic Forum, which is based on the economic, political, social, and health arenas, Pakistan ranked 153rd out of 156 nations in 2021, with a 0.7% point rise in the gender gap. Additionally, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, in 2015 alone, around 1096 women suffered honor killings. Pakistan came in at number six on the list for being an unsafe nation for females because of the risks associated with cultural, religious, and traditional practices. In addition, Pakistan's ranking of 154th out of 189 nations on the Human Development Index reflects the nation's inferior record for equal rights for women (Aftab, 2022).

According to a survey, participants unanimously agreed that they felt parenting was a major duty in response to questions on its challenges. They talked about how difficult it was to reconcile the obligations of being teenage mothers and attending school, saying that they often spent sleepless nights tending to their crying infants, spending less time with friends, and needing effective time management skills (Chohan, 2011).

According to a study, some teenager's pregnancies and childbirths are planned and desired. In certain situations, girls could experience being compelled to get engaged and start a family. Around fifteen million females get married before turning 18 every year, and ninety percent of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 give birth to children while they are married (Franjić, 2018).

Swara one of the cultural practices became a custom actively practiced in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan to end blood feuds between two parties by marrying off young girls to the members of the offended party to provide compensation for the crime committed by the men of the family and settle the dispute between them (Aftab, 2022).

According to certain studies, child marriage has detrimental medical and social effects on the mother and the children. According to Nour (2006), being married young increases your risk of contracting STIs, cervical cancer, malaria, miscarriage, and obstetric fistulas. Premature delivery and mortality are also more likely to occur in neonates, infants, or kids. Similar findings have been made by Kamal and Hassan (2015), who examined data from the 2011 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey and discovered that child marriage considerably raises the risk of stillbirth or miscarriage. A similar large impact of child brides on the likelihood of infant mortality among infants born to Ethiopian women is reported in the study.

Forced marriage is another problem. Young girls are disproportionately affected by the negative effects of such marriages, which have been viewed as a kind of child abuse. Sexual assault, early pregnancy health hazards, high maternal and infant mortality, and an increased chance of STDs are some of the negative effects. In some circumstances, the rights of parents and communities to maintain their own identities may be included in rights discourses on marriage, which may be predicated on the notion that early marriage is the norm. Consequently, there may be a clash between child rights and those of families or ethnic groups.

Gum Chi Watts (2015) reveals that forced marriages are increasingly common, particularly in rural populations in underdeveloped regions. Economic uncertainty is one of the key factors leading to forced marriage.

The significance of particular cultural conceptions of izzat (honor) and sharam (shame) in inhibiting women from verbalizing their exposure to abuse in home contexts has been highlighted by research on domestic violence in South Asian communities (Bhopal, 1997). Izzat and Sharam are first and foremost founded on the idea that women's bodies and behavior symbolize collective or personal honor. Izzat and Sharam norms are crucial in convincing young women to marry according to their parents' preferences and, in certain situations, to stay in an unhappy marriage. The majority of the women who were interviewed commented on their ability to manage their mobility and their conviction that their acts and demeanor were seen as reflecting family honor and, in certain circumstances, communal honor. The women who replied also mentioned how they felt compelled to force the sexuality of their daughters and, of their boys, and that forced marriage was thought to be justified because of such control over young people's sexuality. In some cases, parents see these partnerships as important to maintain societal or family acceptance rather than as coerced partnerships or partnerships of adolescents. Forced marriage generally has a significant socio-psychological influence on life. They are thrown into a new existence at a young age and find it weird, frustrating, and depressing (Gangolietal., 2009).

Along with that, Not only do non-sexual violence and marital disappointment rates dramatically exceed rates of marital rape, but they also have lower judgments of marital's quality. Verbal tactics are commonly used by sufferers of marriage-related rape to continue resisting. Nonetheless, the majority of women who are raped in marriage are either incapable or incapable to confront their partner's sexual aggressiveness. Marital rape victims have notable symptoms of

depressive disorders, gynecological issues, bodily issues, and post-traumatic stress disorder. (Martin et al 2017).

Teenagers who are forced into early motherhood may struggle to balance their demands as adolescents with their new role as mothers during this formative period. Early parenting encounters are contextualized, and shaped by the cultural context as well as society that the teenage girls or woman belongs to. From 22.1 live births per 1,000 women in 1992 to just over 15.5 births per 1000 women in 2010, teenage birth rates in Australia decreased. There are more teenage pregnancies in low socio-economic locations. The study literature has emphasized the effects of teenage pregnancies and early deliveries, as well as the circumstances surrounding these pregnancies. Teens from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those who suffered from violence, those without father figures, and households with a history of teenage pregnancies are the most vulnerable to unintended pregnancies. Early pregnancy and delivery are associated with risk factors and outcomes, including detachment from school and early school departure (Zweig, 2003).

Infant weight loss, stillbirth, and the possibility of death in the early few weeks of life are some of the potential dangers that arise with the younger age of the mother. Mortality among mothers and fistula complications are substantial for mothers, especially in poor environments. Among the societal issues are school dropouts, which result in less educational opportunities and poor skill development. (World Health Organization, 2012). An increasing corpus of research, however, has cast doubt on the notion that childbirth at a teenage has mostly detrimental effects on both the mother and the child, emphasizing the significance of learning about the perspectives of teen parents. Nevertheless, mothering becomes a reality after the baby is born (Ngum Chi Watts, 2015).

Statistics revealed that 17100, 16800 and 19200 teenage girls had unwanted pregnancies in 2016, 2017 and 2018 correspondingly, and most of them finally dropped out of school or leave their education for an extended length of time. Furthermore, a survey carried out in the Western Province between July and September 2017 found that the number of teenage pregnancies were on the rise, with an average of 25 females becoming pregnant each day. (Niyonsenga & Mutabaruka, 2021). Although these dangers may be greatest for the youngest teenagers, pregnant adolescents under the age of 17 have a higher prevalence of medical issues involving mother and child than do adult women. The popular perception that children of adolescent moms do not do as well as those of adult mothers is supported by research over the past ten years. These kids are more likely to experience developmental delays, scholastic challenges, behavioral problems, substance addiction, early sexual activity, depression, and the possibility of becoming parents while still adolescents (Bragg, 1997).

The current research intended to analyze the experiences of teenage mothers about the marital issues in District Talagang, Punjab to create enough awareness among the people by adding new knowledge. After the critical examination of the above literature, we found that some identified issues including disruption to education, depressive disorders, financial instability, stigmatization, force marriage, sexual violence and unwanted pregnancies (Mangeli et al., 2017; Martin et al 2017; Gangolietal., 2009; Bragg, 1997) but here the matter does not end, there are several issue identified by the current study including the influence of sexual content, deprivation of childhood, parents pressure, victim of black spirit, discontinuity of schooling and the attitude toward illiterate mothers.

Theoretical Framework

Applying the theory of intersectionality to the issues related to teenage mothers in District Talagang Punjab reveals the complex and interwoven nature of the challenges they face. Intersectionality, as developed by kimberle Crenshaw emphasizes the overlapping and interconnected system of oppression that individuals experience based on various social categories. In the context of teenage motherhood, multiple intersecting factors contribute to the unique struggles of these young women (Carbado, et al., 2013). The cultural heritage, community affiliations, and life events or journeys of the teenage mothers in this study should all be taken into account to comprehend their situation and experiences. Gender, age, impairment, sex, socioeconomic class, color, race, caste, and nationality are just a few of the socio-political characteristics of females that interact to produce

distinct experiences of privileges and discrimination. Intersectionality is a framework for comprehending these elements and how they affect early marriages (Anitha & Gill, 2011). By applying the theory of intersectionality, it becomes evident that the issues faced by teenage mothers result from the convergence of multiple factors. Recognizing these intersections is crucial for developing comprehensive and effective strategies to address the unique needs of teenage mothers in District Talagang Punjab. Moreover, it underscores the significance of awareness and challenging stereotypes to create more supportive and inclusive environment for these young women.

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative. The goal of employing a qualitative methodology is to gain an in-depth comprehension of the various challenges that teenage women encounter when they marry.

The study was carried out in District Talagang, Punjab Pakistan. The research intended to know the understanding of mothers who got married at an early age. The underage married women were the unit of analysis. A purposive sampling technique was used for the selection of sampling size. Purposive sampling is non-probability sampling technique which is based on the characteristics of population and objectives of study. I planned to purposefully select 15 participants who have already experienced the issues related to early marriages. I used interview guide as tool for the data collection process. An interview guide is a structured set of questions and prompts design to facilitate a conversation between interviewer and an interviewee. It serves as a framework for conducting interviews in a systematic and organized manner. Thorough interviews were carried out in order to gain in-depth information from the study participants. Moreover some follow up questions were also asked for purpose making the research more authentic. Thematic analysis was used to examine the gathered data. The process of finding, examining, and interpreting themes or patterns of meaning within qualitative data is known as thematic analysis. All the responses and ideas with in interview were ordered, and then the related responses were coded and arranged into the relevant theme. Finally relevant themes were developed from related ideas. The information of participants was kept confidential, and were told of the objective before the interview. The results were used primarily for the goals of the research. There was a guarantee of the participant's privacy and confidentiality.

Analysis

This section presents the participant's views on the experiences of teenage mothers. The chapter covers the responses of married women with specific marital issues that have been put out and examined closely. The sociological lens used in this chapter has unveiled several topics related to the study.

Child Marriage

Rumble (et al., 2018) wrote that child marriage or forced in any marriage, whether or not there is agreement, in which one or both spouses are under the age of eighteen. It profoundly changes the course of these girls' lives as well as the lives of their offspring. One of the study participants said that:

At the age when I got married, I did not even know the true meaning of marriage. At the age of fifteen, my first daughter was born. After marriage, due to my lack of marital experience and young age, many things went wrong and I got divorced.

It is concluded from the above-mentioned arguments that underage marriages create many issues among spouses including unstable relations, unwanted pregnancies, and divorces.

Attitude toward illiterate mother

Exploitation of uneducated women is not a new thing these days. Uneducated women are treated as slaves and their words are not given importance. One of the participants argued that:

I could not continue my education after marriage. All others in the husband's family were educated. Due to this my words and decisions were not given any importance and I was considered inferior.

It is concluded from the above arguments that Marriage is becoming an obstacle in the way of education especially in rural areas that becomes the source of one's inferiority.

Effects of Porn Videos

Pornography puts people at high risk of psycho-social issues (Rehman et al., 2022). Porn-addicted people exploit women's true essence by imitating porn content. In this regard, one of the participants said that:

My husband abuses me sexually and behaves very badly with me-I feel like I am not his wife but his toy. Now I cannot live with him because I cannot tolerate his cruelty anymore. I am a human being and as such I have certain rights.

It is concluded from the above arguments that pornography addiction affects mental, physical, and social health due to which the relations especially between spouses are unstable.

Forced Marriage

When one or more persons are married despite their will or regardless of their approval, it's known as a forced marriage. This is another name for enslaving women. A participant regarding the issue said that:

I had heard about the man with whom I was going to marry that he drank alcohol. But he was my mother's cousin and also rich, so my mother ignored all the bad habits of his cousin. It is concluded that marrying someone without consent creates misunderstandings between spouses that lead to more serious issues e.g. divorce

Parent's pressure

Relationships can be successful in a love marriage, but many people try to make it fail. In this regard, one of my participants said that:

I have been in a relationship with one of my cousins since childhood; he is a very polite and kind-hearted person. When my mother came to know about this, she abused me and got me engaged to someone else prematurely

It is concluded that a mother itself in some cases a part of those who oppressed teenage girls.

Domestic Violence

Violence against immature mothers is a common issue, especially in the rural areas. Teenage mothers face violence due to their little experiences of motherhood and other family matters. One of the participants said that

My mistake was my young age and inexperience, due to which I suffered the cruelty of my mother-in-law every day. She used to say to my husband that she was an ignorant woman.

It is concluded that domestic violence mostly in rural areas is becoming the main hurdle that keeps married women from a smooth life.

Deprivation of childhood

Childhood is considered the happiest stage in one's life. Children love to play and enjoy every small moment. But due to the strange decisions of some families, even this happiness cannot be achieved.

A participant said that

I was old enough to play with dolls when I was a child in my lap. I often think that I wish I had taken the time to talk to the girls a lot and celebrate the joys with them

Child marriages skip the rights of children and families start considering them mature before maturity

Anxiety

Anxiety is the name of continuous worries and tension that affect our physical health. A participant told regarding that:

I had a baby when I was too young. I wasn't familiar with how to handle a baby. I was often worried. That's why my husband took me to the doctor and he suggested me anti-depressants

Drug addiction is another disadvantage of early marriage. Drug addiction has many disadvantages including, mental disabilities and heart problems.

Victim to black Spirits

Most often early married women's psycho-social problems are misinterpreted by their elders. The issues are attached to some supernatural powers. A participant told regarding that:

I could not cope with the life after marriage. I felt I was imprisoned. I was short-tempered. Sometimes I felt dizzy. My elders are attached to this situation to some supernatural entities. They used to take me to saints for spiritual healing. Saints were treating me violently

Discussion

The study presents a poignant portrayal of the myriad challenges faced by teenage mothers, encompassing mental, psychological, social, and moral dimensions. The narratives shed light on their struggles in decision making, motherhood skills and navigating the profound changes imposed by early pregnancies. High-risk pregnancies contribute to a spectrum of psychological issues, including anxiety and identity confusion, exacerbated by societal expectations, lack of education and limited support structure. The findings underscore systemic issues reflected in global gender inequality indices and national practices like child marriage, emphasizing the pressing need for targeted interventions. The study also highlighted the alarming prevalence of forced marriage, disrupting the lives of teenage girls and emphasizing the clash between child rights and entrenched cultural practices. The detrimental effect of forced marriage on physical and psychological well-being is vividly portrayed. The study sheds light on the role of pornography in destabilizing marital relationships and the impact of cultural norms on perpetuating harmful practices, particularly in the context of domestic violence. Apart from that the study findings also shed light on the attitude toward illiterate mothers, where marriage becomes a hindrance to education, particularly in rural societies, perpetuating a cycle of inferiority for uneducated women. Parental pressure is another issue where mothers become complicit in oppressing teenage girls. The discussion concludes with a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by teenage mothers, emphasizing the urgency of implementing policies and interventions to break the cycle of adversity and foster a more equitable and supportive future

Conclusion

This study concludes that Teenage mothers have a greater probability of being poor, and their capacity over time to change their socioeconomic condition is limited by their deficiency of education and experience. Moreover, the study findings showed that early motherhood snatches girls' childhood activities, due to the age gap girls face sexual and physical violence. The adjustment issues compel teenage mothers to use anti-anxiety and anti-depressant drugs for short-lived happiness. The rigid traditions and socioeconomic interests compel girls to get married early. Underage marriage creates unstable relations between the spouses. Due to the age gap, girls face physical and sexual violence. The porn-addicted husband uses their wives as sexual objects. Husbands use them for their pleasure only. Besides that, due to little motherhood experience, teenage girls face severe psychological issues. They use anti-anxiety and anti-depressant drugs for short-lived happiness. Due to little motherhood experience, teenage mothers also face discrimination and oppression by their mother-in-law. Most teenagers claim that women are oppressed and discriminated against by other women. In the family, some women tempt the males against others. Besides that, after marriage teenage mothers can't continue their education due to rigid customs and domestic chores due to which they are considered inferior and their words gain no importance. Moreover, mothers have a key role in going against the marital decisions of their daughters. They decide the one to whom their daughter will marry. Their decisions are based on socio-economic interests. In this craze, mothers ignore their daughter's age and the personal traits of those to whom they will marry. *Most often early married women's psycho-social problems are misinterpreted by their elders.*

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