

Customary Marriages in Rural Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Background: Although the incidents of customary marriages are frequently reported in Pakistani press, yet no large scale community-based study has ever been conducted to gauge the magnitude of such marriages. The present study is the first-ever community based study on this topic.

Methods: 4,385 ever-married women, aged 18-83 years, from six rural districts, were interviewed to enquire about the types of their marriages. The data was collected through interviews conducted by trained female interviewers and analysed through SPSS-20.

Results: Twelve percent marriages were the result of Vanni, Swara, Sang Chatti, Badal, Bazo i.e. to settle blood feuds; 58.7% were Watta-Satta / Pait Likhai i.e. exchange marriages and pledging a fetus; in 7.9% case bride was bought; 1.0% marriages were Badle-Sullah i.e. to settle dispute other than murder and 0.1% women were married to Quran. The traditional marriages, where wishes of both families and consent of the couple to be married are also considered, constituted 20.3%.

The prevalence of Vanni, Swara / Sang Chatti / Badal / Bazo was the highest in Balochistan (22-24%) followed by Sindh (5-17%) and the least in Punjab (0-4%). The other practices in Balochistan were selling the bride (10-17%), Badle-Sullah (3%) and marriage to Quran (1%). Watta Satta was most prevalent in Sindh (66-78%), where 3-13% brides were bought. In Punjab also Watta-Satta was common (44-47%), where 0.5-4% brides were bought and 0.3-3% marriages were Budle-Sullah.

Conclusions: Since laws against these harmful customs exist but are not applied forcefully, there is a great need to create massive awareness against such customs.

KEY WORDS:

Customary marriages, Harmful marriage practices, War against women, Forced Marriages, Child Marriage

INTRODUCTION

Marriage, also called matrimony or wedlock, is a socially or ritually recognised union or legal contract between spouses that establishes rights and obligations between them and their children, and between them and their in-laws.¹ The definition of marriage varies according to different cultures,

but it is principally an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually sexual, are acknowledged. As 95-98% population of Pakistan is Muslim,² majority of marriages are conducted according to Islamic injunctions, which require the free consent of both the bride as well as bridegroom. However, there are certain areas, where marriages are solemnised without regard to religious dictates and the consent of brides and bridegrooms.³ Although some data based on cases of such marriages reported in press or registered in police station or discussed in various academic gatherings, has been collected and presented^{4,7} but such data lacks the scientific vigour of properly conducted community based studies. The present paper, the first large scale community-based survey, ascertains the prevalence / magnitude of customary marriages in three provinces of the country.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data for present study was collected as part of a survey conducted to determine the quantum of domestic violence against women in six rural areas of Pakistan. The sample size calculated for the domestic violence survey was 4,385 ever-married women of more than 18 years of age, residing in these six rural districts, two each from provinces of Balochistan, Punjab and Sindh (Figure-1). Due to law and order situation, the fourth province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, could not be included in the survey. Ethical approval of the study was obtained from Netherland-based Institutional Review Board of Rutger – World Population Federation as well as HOPE of Pakistan.

Multistage sampling was used to approach the calculated sample size from these districts in two stages. In the first stage urban and rural union councils were selected while in the second stage Enumeration Blocks in urban areas and villages in rural areas were selected. A minimum number of 30 households per village or EBs were selected through systematic random sample, as per World Health Organization (WHO) standard guideline.

The data was collected through interviews conducted by female interviewers from the local area, who were familiar with local language and culture. They were imparted exhaustive training on the art of data collection. The data so collected was analysed through SPSS-20.

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Fig. 1: Map of Pakistan.

RESULTS

The map of Pakistan is shown as Figure-1. At the time of this survey, Pakistan had four provinces; Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh. As explained above the study was conducted in only three provinces. The sample size of 4,385 women was distributed as 1,462 women in Balochistan, 1,466 in Sindh and 1,457 in Punjab.

The age of population ranged from 18 to 83 years with a median age of 32 years. Majority of the population (63.5%) had no schooling. Only 4.1% had more than 10 years of schooling. The number of children ranged from one to 18 with a median of two girls and two boys. The majority of women (90.7%) were currently married, 6.2% were widows, 1.4% divorcees and 1.7% separated (Table I).

Table I : Socio-demographics of Study Population

| Variables | Median | Range |
|--|--------|---------------|
| Age (Years) | 32 | 18-83 |
| Age at Marriage (Years) | 16 | 9-37 |
| No. of children | 4 | 1-18 |
| Boys | 2 | 1-11 |
| Girls | 2 | 1-10 |
| Family Income in Pak Rupees | 6,000 | 1,000-100,000 |
| Variable | Number | Percent |
| Education | | |
| No schooling | 3785 | 63.5 |
| Primary (5 years Schooling) | 585 | 13.3 |
| Middle (8 years Schooling) | 239 | 5.4 |
| Matric (10 years Schooling) | 311 | 7.1 |
| Intermediate (12 years Schooling) | 112 | 2.6 |
| Graduation (14 years Schooling) | 43 | 1.0 |
| Post Graduation (> 14 years Schooling) | 20 | 0.5 |
| Other / No information | 307 | 6.6 |
| Marital status | | |
| Married | 3980 | 90.8 |
| Widow | 272 | 6.2 |
| Divorced | 60 | 1.4 |
| Separated | 77 | 1.7 |

Table II : Prevalence of Customary Marriages according to Province and District

| Name of Custom | Explanation | Balochistan Province | | Punjab Province | | Sindh Province | | Total |
|---|--|----------------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|-----------|-------|
| | | Jaffarabad | Naseerabad | D G Khan | Muzaffargarh | Kashmore | Jacobabad | |
| Vanni, Swara, Sang Chatti, Badal, Bazo | Custom of giving girls to other party to settle murder dispute | 22.0 | 24.0 | 4.0 | 0 | 17.0 | 5 | 12.0 |
| Watta Satta, Pait Likhai | Exchange Marriage Pledging the foetus | 55.0 | 62.0 | 47.0 | 44.0 | 78.0 | 66 | 58.7 |
| Selling the bride. | Paying money to get a bride | 17.0 | 10.0 | 0.5 | 4.0 | 3.0 | 13 | 7.9 |
| Marriage with Quran | Practice to keep inheritance of girls. | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0.1 |
| Badle Sullah | Custom to settle dispute other than murder | 0 | 3.0 | 0.3 | 3.0 | 0 | 0 | 1.0 |
| Customary Marriages in each District | | 94.0 | 99.0 | 51.8 | 51.0 | 98.0 | 84.0 | 79.7 |
| Customary Marriages in each Province | | 96.5 | | 51.4 | | 91.0 | | 79.7 |
| Traditional Marriages in each province, which are solemnised with the consent of both families as well of bride and bride-groom. | | 3.5 | | 48.6 | | 9.0 | | 20.3 |

The customs under which marriages were solemnised are shown in the box below.

Marriage Customs

Swara: A Pashto word denoting a child marriage custom in tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. This custom is tied to blood feuds between different tribes and clans where young girls are forcibly married to members of the enemy clan in order to compensate for a crime committed against a member of that clan (always by a male) and to end a feud.

Vanni: A child marriage custom in tribal areas of Pakistan, also widely prevalent in Punjab. This custom is tied to blood feuds among the different tribes and clans where young girls are forcibly married to members of opposing clans in order to resolve feuds or compensate for a crime. Vanni can be avoided if the girl's clan agrees to pay blood money, called *Diyat*. Otherwise the young bride may be forced to spend her life paying for a crime committed by her male relatives.

Watta Satta: A tribal custom in Pakistan of exchanging brides between two families. Both families must have a daughter and a son, and be willing to betroth them to the daughter and son of the other family. In order for a family to marry off a son to a daughter of another family, it must have a daughter to marry off in return to the same family.

Pait Likhai / Pait Likhi / Chatti. Betrothals of girls at birth with a male member of family.

Marriage with Quran. In some areas the girls are married to Quran and told to surrender all rights of inheritance to family's material properties like Land and houses.

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Aurat Foundation, 2015

The description of custom under which the marriages were solemnised is given in the box. The overall prevalence of these customs is shown in Figure -2. The most common custom was Watta Satta / Pait Likhai (58.5%), followed by traditional marriages (22%), Vanni / Swara / Sang Chatti / Badal / Bazo i.e. to settle blood feuds (12%); Selling of Bride (7%), Badle Sulah (0.3%) and marriage with Quran (0.2%). Overall only 20.3% marriages were solemnised with the consent of both families as well as the wishes of both bride and bridegroom.

There were provincial differences in prevalence of various customs (Table II). Vanni / Swara / Sang Chatti / Badal / Bazo, were more common in Balochistan (24-27%) followed by Selling the bride (10-17%), Badle-Sulah (0.9%) and marriage to Quran (1%). In Balochistan 96.5% marriages are solemnised under these customs. Sindh was the next province with high prevalence of customary marriages (, where the prevalence of Watta Satta, was the highest (66-78%) followed by selling of bride (7-13%), Vanni / Swara/ Sang Chatti /Badal / Bazo (5-12%) and Budle Sullah (0.3%). The overall prevalence of customary marriages in Sindh was 91.1%. Punjab was the province with minimum practice (47.3%) of such customs, where the practices of Vanni / Swara/ Sang Chatti / Badal / Bazo were only 4% and Badle-Sulah (4%).

Traditional marriages, where in addition to the will of parents and family, the wishes of the couple to be married are given due consideration, was most prevalent in Punjab (48-56%).

DISCUSSION

In Pushto the word "**Swara**" is used for that female who is riding on a horse/camel or any conveyance (carriage). Since in good old days as there were no other means of carriage except animals, so the palanquin in the marriages were used to be carried on horse/camel. In the same way the female (given in compromise to rival party) were sent to her "New House" on the back of camel/horse and for this reason the word "Swara" got popular.⁸

The swara girl agrees going to the enemy's house in a bid to secure the lives of the male members of her family. Once a girl is given away as swara, there is little chance of a happy life for her as there is no honour for such girls. The treatment meted out to the swara at her "new house" is horrifying. She is taunted at every moment and is cursed for being a swara. She lives a life worse even than a maid servant. The innocent swara has to bear the brunt of a crime she has never committed for the rest of her life.⁸

Hashmi and Koukab⁹ claim that this custom started almost 400 years ago when two northwestern Pakistani Pashtun tribes fought a bloody war against each other. During the war, hundreds were murdered. The Nawab, regional ruler, settled the war by calling a Jirga of elders from both sides. The elders decided that the dispute and crime of men be settled by giving their girls as a retaliatory punishment. Ever since then, tribal and rural jirgas have been using young virgin girls from 4 to 14 years old, through child marriages, to settle crimes such as murder by men. This blood for blood tradition is practiced in different areas of Pakistan such as Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and tribal areas.⁹ Vani is a cultural custom found in parts of Pakistan wherein young girls are forcibly married as part of punishment for a crime committed by her male relatives. Vani allows the men to give away their females, including minors, in marriage by the offending party to the males of the victim party to settle disputes. Vani is a virgin girl, daughter, sister etc of the offender who is given to the aggrieved family. Vani is a Pashto word derived from Vanay, which means blood. This centuries old tradition is practiced in almost all areas of Pakistan. Vani is also known as Sak, Swara and Sangchatti in different regional languages of Pakistan.^{1,3} Some claim Vani can be avoided if the girl's clan agrees to pay blood money, called *Deeyat*.⁹ Vani is a form of arranged child marriage and the result of punishment decided by a council of tribal elders named Jirga.⁷ Women and girl children who are victims of vani or swara arrangements live in a hostile environment where they are treated as daughters or relatives of the enemy.⁸

Marriage with Quran is another customary practice prevalent in Balochistan and Sindh. This practice is resorted to keep the inheritance of girls within the family. Women and girl children are deprived of their property rights by symbolically marrying them to the Holy Quran. This ensures

that the girl child or woman will not bear children in the future and will not demand her rightful share in the family property. Sometimes poor parents who cannot afford to marry their daughters resort to this symbolic arrangement.⁷

The review of the available literature does not reveal any community based study of these marriage customs. Aurat Foundation⁵ regularly collects data on gender-based violence on yearly basis. This data is based on the cases reported in newspapers or registered in police stations throughout the country. This methodology is prone to duplication of data because the same news might have been published in a national daily on one date and might be reported by a national newspaper after few days or the cases collected from police stations might be the same already reported in some newspaper. The latest data of Aurat Foundation, Annual Report of 2013, mentions only 12 cases of Vani and 2 cases of Watta-Satta in Punjab, 10 cases of Vanni and one case of Watta-Satta in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, none in Balochistan and 72 cases of Vanni in Sindh.⁵

The data reported by SDPI⁷ have mostly been derived from reports of Aurat Foundation. In 2004, Awaz Foundation conducted a study in 13 Tehsils of Southern Punjab⁷ to create awareness against laws discriminatory to women using REFLECT CIRCLE methodology¹⁰ with 7,764 individuals; 3,447 females and 4317 males. During this exercise, 779 incidences of conventional customs and practices were reported by the participants. Out of these, there were 22 cases of Vani (2.8%) and 251 cases of Watta-Satta (33.2%).⁷ A report published in International Business Times of 20th February, 2014 shows that a social activist has identified at least 132 cases of swara across Pakistan in 2012.⁸

These customary marriages are basically daughter devaluation customs, where the dignity and self-respect of women is compromised. Some reports have concluded that customary practices are one major source of violence against women.^{7,12} A nexus between customary marriages and Violence against women has been established by Qayyum.¹³ She has reported that women married off to settle land or murder dispute are at a higher risk of being abused by their husbands, who employ all means of domestic violence.

Since 2005, such customs have become illegal in Pakistan and further reinforced¹⁴ in 2011. However, the practice continues. Recently the courts in Pakistan have begun taking serious note and action against the continuation of such practices but since most victims and her relatives (not to mention, perpetrators) are reluctant to air their dirty laundry in public, prosecutions are difficult.

CONCLUSION

Since laws against these harmful customs exist in the country but are not applied forcefully because neither the victim nor her relatives protest against this high-handedness of their elders, there is a great need to create massive awareness against such customs.

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