

**WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES AND UNDERSTANDING MARRIAGE IN THE
BALOCH SOCIETY**

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Abstract

Marriage is unavoidable for most women of reproductive age in rural Balochistan. The twenty women from four villages informing this ethnographic sociological study that examines contemporary perspectives and understanding of the Balochi marriage explain why they think that this social institution with its underpinning norms and values has a cohesive function that unites and gives strength to the tribal society, and the 'female folk'. Their first-person accounts offer a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of traditional marriage arrangements that, more often than not, highlights the interference of cultural traditions with women's desire of self-affirmation and self-fulfillment. We are not victims of the socio-cultural norms that structure and organize our daily life, they seem to suggest. These women may well be poor, illiterate, and out of public view, as it has been remarked by international observers, yet, their renderings open up an alternative line of argument to discuss woman empowerment in this remote and conflict-ridden area of South Asia. From a female point of vantage, we elucidate the renewal of this traditional institution that is at the heart of Balochi life. The views assembled, analyzed and presented in this essay prompt us to argue to give greater support to efforts in multi-jurisdictional practices that seek balancing out conflict of laws arising

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from clashes between tribal, religious and civil laws and regulations.

Keywords: Baloch marriages; Conflict of laws; Women's rights, Balochistan, Pakistan

Introduction

Marriage is the institution, which is universally and legally accepted and practised in almost every culture tradition of any society (Nair, 2006). It is an agreement and a life contract for observing familial relations between two individuals (Bankole *et al.*, 2004). The mate selection for the marriage is the riskiest decision of the people, which in the case of dissatisfaction immerse individuals in polygamous or unacceptable relationships (Fisman *et al.*, 2006) (Cartwright and Cooper, 1993). The pattern of marriages differs from culture to culture, however; the traditional marriages are characterised by early age marriages, forced marriages, endogamy and polygamous marriages (Laws, 2013). These traditional marriages are commonly practised in majority of the developing countries, which ironically dwell women in a disadvantaged position (Kabir, 2006).

Moreover, these commonly practised, centuries old traditional marriages define the future of all male dominating societies of south Asia (UNDESA, 2000). In Pakistan where male enjoys a dominant and privileged status, in such social environment, women do not have the right or power to decide or select their life partners (Naz and Rehman, 2011). Naz, Khan, Daraz, Hussain & Chaudhry (2012) mentioned in their study that the tribal people of Pakistan are more traditional than being Islamic, although Islam gives liberty to women to choose or reject the partner on the basis of any ground, but traditional male dominating society where women are subjugated, deny the trend of self-decision making for the selection of mates and discourage the practice of love marriages, and emphasize on the execution of traditional marriages. In rural set ups where the traditional norms are strictly practiced, the nature of these ceremonies is sensed as forced marriages where the weaker segment like women cannot take a bold step against the imposed decisions (Macfarlane, 2002).

The evidence can be witnessed from the previous scholarly writings where it is mentioned that 57 % of the population in Pakistan got trapped in

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the custom of early age marriage - below the age of fifteen (NCTPE, 2003). Similarly, the traditional societies of Pakistan have ethnocentric beliefs on the purity of their ancestral blood which does not allow them to get mixed with any non-ethnic (apart from their own) group for the sake of getting married which results in forced marriages or endogamy without noticing the compatibility of the individuals who are supposed to be wed (Naz *et al.*, 2012). The traditional marriages are reasoned to defend the honour and status of the family, regulating the kinship bonds and some for economic lifting (Rawson, 2000).

In Pakistan, refusing the marriage partner decided by family is considered to be a major violation of traditional norm which results in honour killing (Babur, 2007). In Balochistan, these trends are highly appreciated and more practised than any regions of the country (Taylor, 1993). However, the consequences of such traditional marriages are hostile for the women not only socially but also affect the lives of the next generation (IPPF, 2000). It is concluded that the women bear the aftermaths of traditional marriages which also negatively vibrates the structure of the family structure and society.

Study Area

The social structure of Balochistan is mostly tribal based on clan system and the proselytes of this system are highly concerned about their culture, traditions and prestige (Sajid & Sadiq, 2016) (Majeed, 2010). The ethnocentric values, love and respect towards their traditions and culture, labelled the people of this region as the most conservative community (Paterson, 2008).

Likewise, the other parts of Pakistan, this region of Balochistan, also hosts a male-dominated society where women are granted with restricted power of decision making in every sphere of life (Kakar *et al.* 2016). Due to the exceeded authority of the tribal men, women are kept in deprivation, consequently, the basic rights of women are violated at every step (Umer, Othman & Hassan, 2016). Such violation can be perceived by the pattern of traditional marriages in the region, the footprints of traditional marriages are witnessed in rural areas, where marriages are arranged to settle the disputes or blood battles between two tribes (Shaheed, 1990).

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The folk bear the consequences of such marriages by having no right of divorce (Naz, 2011). The Change Newsletter (2000), mentioned that the average age difference in Pakistan between the spouses is 10.1, this age difference further squeezes the freedom of mobility, the power of decision making and also responsible for the economically disadvantaged status of the folk (Khan and Naz, 2012). The dominating and privileged position of men have kept women in the state of poverty and dependency. However, the married women are affected by the domestic violence and lower socioeconomic position (Naz, 2011). (Mensch, 1998) also mentioned in his study that the domestic violence is one of the primary causes of forced marriages, such marriages can be held responsible for further amplification of social evils and prostitutes in the society.

However, Balochistan, being a strict traditional society where married woman cannot raise their voices against the domestic violence or in other words such cases are never reported in the frequency they occur (Bhatti, Jamali, Phulpoto, Mehmood and Shaikh, 2011). Furthermore, the previous records show that the girls who get married before they reach the age of 18 face some serious complication during pregnancy which results in maternal mortality (Whitehead, 2001). Similarly, highlighting the same point, (Baloch, 2016) mentioned in her study that in Baloch community the maternal mortality is reported highest in the world. Daraz, Naz, and Khan, (2014) mentioned that the traditional social structure enforces traditional marriages (like early marriage) which affect the health as well as the social life of the whole family and compel folk to live a deprived and dependent life.

Hence, it is revealed that a traditional marriage promotes embargo of women in society, which not only affects the women, but also jeopardize the future of the coming generation.

Feminist Theory

The present study used feminist theory as supporting theory, because it helps to link the status of women in male dominated society. The feminist theory deals with the interests and rights of women as well as an equitable distribution of power and resources between men and women in a society. From the feminist point of view, women are equal to men and have a right to the same treatment (Hughes 2002). Feminist theory inspires women to acquire economy in their role as mothers, wives and daughters. Treatment of women on equal basis as well as equivalent distribution of

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resources encourages women to empowerment and vigorous participation in the society Majali (2012), the study uses the feminist approach to address the situation of women in society and to highlight the impact of traditional marriages in restricting women's participation in social affairs.

Methodology

The current study was conducted in four villages' Killi Umer Abad, Killi Sardar Nabi Bakhsh, Killi Shadeni and Killi Muhammad Khan of Punjpahee (Sub-Tehsil Quetta) Balochistan, Pakistan. In these villages, the customs of traditional marriages are highly practised by tribal men which are one of the reasons of women's lower status. For this study, three focus group discussions were held among educated and uneducated female informants of 20, these groups were consisted of 6 to 8 women respectively. Each group discussion took almost 90 minutes. The personal data of informants were collected at the time of opening the discussion.

The informants discussed freely the basis and the consequences of their marriages, while few young women were quite reluctant in sharing their point of views initially. The questions which were aimed to discuss in this group discussion were pre-selected. For coping with hesitation of the group members the researcher started discussing the issues regarding health education and village environment and later the discussion took turn specifically about their own lives, the reasons of their marriage bonding and the consequences of the type of marriage on their lives, family and children. The data was initially transcribed after transcription notes have been taken to explain the phenomena being studied from the data.

Key Findings

The previous study of Umer, Othman and Hassan (2016) mentioned that Balochistan is the region where tribal norms are strictly followed or implement in such social situation men and women are bound to the customary norms of the tribe. The result of the current study also verifies their statement, where the traditional marriages are strongly in practice. For this study, the key findings were collected by the focused group discussion. The women shared their experiences according to their marriage status and

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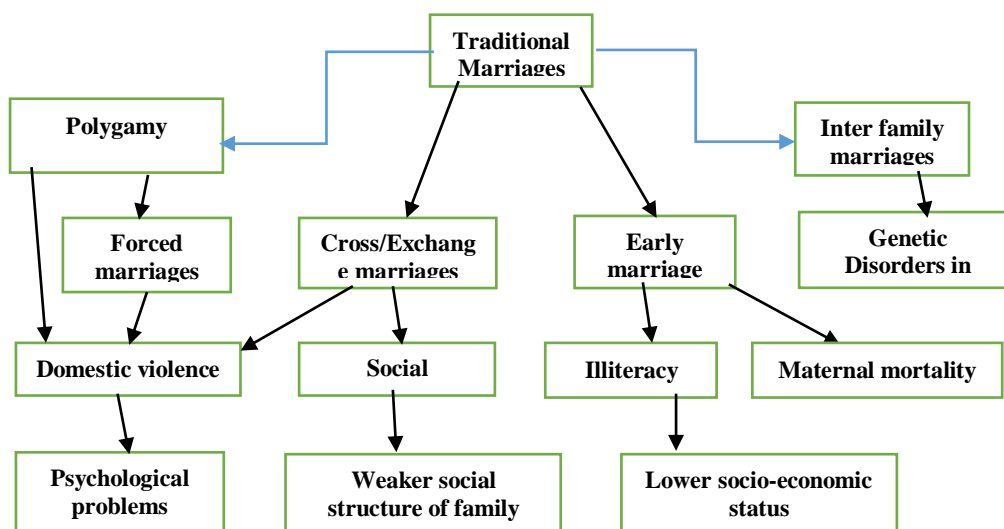
ultimately mentioned some points which prompted a lower position in the society.

Table 1: Basis of Informants Marriage

Basis of Marriage	Marriage Type	Mentioned by
Married at the early age	Early age marriage	I ¹ , I ⁴ , I ¹³ , I ¹⁷ , I ¹⁹ , I ²⁰
Cousin to cousin marriage	Endogamy	I ³ , I ⁶ , I ⁸ , I ¹¹ , I ¹⁶ , I ¹⁸
Marriage in another tribe (resolution of the dispute)	forced marriage	I ² , I ¹⁵
Second wife	Polygyny (polygamy)	I ⁵ , I ⁷ , I ⁹ , I ¹⁰ , I ¹² , I ¹⁴ ,
Watta Satta	Cross marriage	I ³ , I ¹⁴ , I ¹⁹

Source: Author

Figure 1: Key Findings of Focused Group Discussion



Source: Author

The focused group discussion exposed that the customary practices of traditional marriages promoted bulk of social issues, which not only affect the women lives but distress the structure of the family and next generation also come across dire consequences in the future. Moreover, it was expressed that the traditional marriages are because of the deeply rooted socio-cultural norms, illiteracy, and preference of the male child.

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These marriages most of the time are arranged without the prior willingness of the folk. On the other hand, if a girl gets married at an early age, it causes serious health issues. In the early age, an immature girl conceives a baby that further causes complication in delivery which is not only dangerous for her life, but also puts life of the offspring in danger.

Traditional marriages like polygamy and cross marriages (watta Satta) also promote instability in family affairs. Due to negative competition between both the wives the peaceful environment of the family is ruined. To avoid such tense and disparaging environment, man does not stay at home. Hence, there are more chances of immersion in social evils outside the home. It is believed that women cannot continue education after getting married. In traditional marriages, the women abandon her education which compels her to lead a life of dependency, poor and deprived of basic rights. Social injustice and domestic violence are coupled together in the families where marriages are based on resolving the disputes between two tribes.

Pros of Traditional Marriages

In addition to that, the point of views of the informers on the core issue of traditional marriages were abridged to supplement the discoveries. The focused group discussion also delineated that the traditional marriages contain some productive characteristics on the lives of women. Adequate amount of information was quoted by the educated women revealing both positive and negative aspects of traditional marriages.

The key points were summarized

Endogamy- upholds the bondage within the group. No “I” feeling, just “We” the phenomenon of successful life. Matters of life are dealt on equality basis and mutual respect. A great deal of contentment because of good deal of understanding between the families, hence avoiding creating any inappropriate unhappy situation.

Early marriages- A significant opportunity for the couples to develop better understanding, as it is quite flexible to mould life style and adopt new changes at an early age.

Polygamy- considering the ratio of women against men which much larger in number opens the door for women to marry one man at the same time avoiding any unhappy situation of being unmarried. Extending hand to

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each other in household chores and looking after children, Exchange Marriage- enables the families to avoid any economic burden as it assists as a mechanism for withdrawing the dowry assets.

Forced marriage- proves to be a tool to retain peace and harmony and resolve any sort of disagreements between the two conflicting families. It is hence concluded through some in depth analysis that the customs of cultural and traditional marriages have both negative and positive impacts, traditional marriages is a kind of mechanism to retain solidarity amongst the families. It creates more opportunities for women to find husband that is productive for a civilized society. In broader facets these marriages are economical as the property of the family remains within the family.

Contrary to that the negative impacts the traditional cannot be overlooked by any means, which definitely provoke socio-psychological issues. The enhancement of female illiteracy produces psychological issues, such as, tension, depression, and anxiety for the folk. Furthermore, the traditional marriages are an inevitable threat to the health of the folk which creates gender based violence and ultimately causing hurdles on the way to empowering women in all spheres of life.

Finally, it is presumed from the afore mentioned facts that the aftermaths of social-cultural factors as traditional marriages, as an impediment to women empowerment are elaborated by feminist theory.

Key Issues and Concerns among Educated Women

Although the educated women who participated in the groups reported feeling relatively safe, they did report about the mismatched life partner. According to them due to endogamy marriage, woman must get marry in the same family, mostly men are not well educated and without noticing the compatibility of the man and woman, who are supposed to get married. Such type of marriages, they named the bonding of compromise, in which the parents of the girl teach the lesson of compromise and adjustment at any cost, lack of understanding between couple results in weakening the bonds of family which spoils the peaceful environment of the home.

Another issue was of particular concern among educated women that the trend of 'Lab' (an amount man pays to woman's family) is pre requisite for tying the knot, man has to arrange the money by taking debts for paying the amount and after marriage woman suffers due to the debts (he took from people) she lives a low social status and also faces worse behavior of in laws, such normative foundations of marriage mostly results

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with domestic violence and relationship instability. The participants were concerned about the future of their next generation due to endogamy or inter caste marriages, they identified that children of first-cousin marriages may have an increased risk of genetic disorders and eye diseases they further added that due to lack of awareness children are not diagnosed and treated at initial stages, subsequently such children do not survive more than five years. Cousin to cousin marriage is a threat to next generation.

Conclusion

The crux the findings presented that the traditional marriages have both the 'pros and cons. The socio-economic status of families' plays a significant role in its success and failure. For example, educated and well-off families had rich information and experiences. Consequently, considerable amount of importance to the priorities of their sons' and daughters' being the tribal heads or the religious masses. On the other hand, illiterate and people with limited exposure denied the viewpoints of their women/girls.

This study reveals the facts that traditional marriages are the accepted and essential part of the Baloch culture. Such marriages are highly in practice in rural areas of Balochistan especially the tribal areas like Punjpahee, where traditional informal customs are implemented more strongly than formal laws made by any flegilaters. The ill-consequences that are drawn-out in the result of traditional marriages, it is measured that such marriages are physically harmful and exploitative for the folk more than men, women are the victims of traditional marriages as they are taught the lesson of compromise which further leads towards the domestic violence.

However, the victims of traditional marriages are mostly girls who are never asked their opinion for selection or rejection of the life partners. The practices of the customary traditional marriages tend to adversely affect the lives of the victims by depriving them of their fundamental rights such as education, better health, mobility and participation in the socio-economic development of their lives.

The trend of marriages between cousins, within a clan or caste should be discouraged as the number of children suffering from a group of genetic diseases, is on the rise.

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Similarly, the key findings of this study showed that the traditional marriages promote a deprived and discouraged life, where a woman has to bear domestic violence without complaining, due to early age marriage, a woman has to suppress her inner abilities to attain education and job, which further compel them to live a dependent and subjugated life. The flag of male dominance can never be bowed down until the practice of these marriages is dispirited. For the up-lifting of development and empowerment, it is a prerequisite to avoid the gender inequality, high health risks, psychological issues, domestic violence, social isolation and poverty, which is only possible if a woman owns her life by having the power of decision making for her life. Try to reflect here the views of illiterate women.

Although, the traditional marriages have disadvantages, but the positive impact these marriages on society cannot be denied at all. Such type of marriages are a kind of guarantee for the existence of respect for legendary civilization. Marriages of any type discourage social evils like prostitution, adultery. Traditional exchange marriages are economically beneficial for those who cannot afford dowry. Finally, traditional marriages give protection to women and promote the prototypical culture.

Recommendations

In order to decrease the ratio of traditional marriages, social capital (non-governmental organisations and masses) and social institutions (governmental organisations) need to hold awareness programs and campaigns for the parents and tribal people, regarding the rights of the folk and aftermaths of such traditional marriages on the whole family and also play a vibrant role to assist the government in highlighting the areas where such traditional marriages are prevailing.

The government may discourage such trends by practically implementing the laws and policies to penalize the culprits who marry their folk without knowing their verdict of the agreement, and also integrate societal changes to meet the UN Sustainable Development goals by supporting girls in avoiding child marriage, delaying having children, and finishing school bring opportunities for skills and income to eradicate poverty for future generations.

Educating parents must be the basic objective of the organisations regarding the rights of women in Islamic perspectives. Islamic lessons regarding women rights are the basic key points where the parents can be

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agreed to change their trends of marriages. For coping up with the international poverty, it is essential to bring revolutionary changes in women's lives by empowering them, by promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women. The views assembled, analyzed and presented in this essay prompt us to argue to give greater support to efforts in multi-jurisdictional practices that seek balancing out conflict of laws arising from clashes between tribal, religious and civil laws and regulations. Thus, it is essential to involve the religious scholars because the rigidity of tribal customs can be abated only by the teachings of Quran and Sunnah.

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