Aawaz II Focus and Pathways to Change

In line with the programme mandate and pathways to change, Aawaz II in partnership with communities will be focusing on:

- Creating awareness and promoting behaviour change to highlight the adverse effects of early marriage and the positive effects of education and of allowing young people to mature before being married;

- Inspiring social dialogue and action on inclusion and empowerment of girls/women, supporting their access to required resources/services and reducing acceptance of early/forced marriages at different levels;

- Enabling community/Aawaz forums to engage in dialogue and raise informed demands with relevant duty bearers/services providers/support structures to address the harmful practice and make provisions for protection of the rights of those at risk or affected by early/forced marriage;

- Investing in capacities and engaging youth volunteers as change agents to support the programme in promoting behaviour change and citizen engagement for inclusion, voice and improved action for protection from early and forced marriage and other harmful practices.

Definition and Scale

The UN defines early marriage as any marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age. Early marriage is also used for unions in which both spouses are 18 or older but other factors make them unready to consent to marriage, such as their level of physical, emotional, sexual and psychosocial development (European Institute of Gender Equality).

The terms child and early marriage are generally used interchangeably. However, in countries where the definition of child is younger than 18 years (e.g. 16 years), the term ‘early marriage’ is appropriate for marriages in which one or both spouses is under the age of 18. In Pakistan (except Sindh it is 18 for both) the minimum age of marriage for girls is 16 years, and for boys 18 years.

Forced marriage is marriage at any age that occurs without the free and full consent of one or both spouses. Child or early marriage is therefore considered as forced marriage because children (aged under 18) are not able to give full consent.

Forced marriage is also marriage in which one or both parties is unable to end or leave the marriage, for example as a result of intense social or family pressure (Girls Not Brides).
Early marriage is a significant problem in Pakistan. The country ranks sixth in the world in terms of the highest absolute numbers of child marriage. Geographically, early marriage is most prevalent in rural areas: various sources report that it is common in South Punjab, Interior Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan. Higher prevalence is reported for rural areas than for urban.

Impact of Early and Forced Marriage

Early and forced marriages have severe negative impacts on girls and women. While child marriage affects both boys and girls, the practice harms girls to a greater degree because it adversely affects their social well-being, reproductive health and exposes them to domestic violence. One in 3 girls is married before the age of 18 (USAID 2015) while in 82 low and middle income countries 1 in 25 boys married before the age of 18 (UNFPA).

Child marriage for boys does not carry the same risk due to biological and social differences, the practice is nonetheless a rights violation. Boys are forced to take on adult responsibilities, economic pressures which restraint their access to education and opportunities for career advancement (Gaston et al, 2019).

1. **Health:** Girls may not be able to bear the burden of child-bearing leading to death or serious damage to their health. Pakistan’s has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in South Asia, and the high incidence of child marriage is a significant factor. Girls are also likely to have underweight babies. Pakistan also has a high newborn mortality rate. Hence early marriage and childbearing is bad for both mother and child.

   Girls under the age of 18 are 83% more likely than women over 18 to experience barriers to health care services (Centre for Reproductive Rights CRR, 2018). They lack access to and information about contraception and cannot exercise choice over number and spacing of births. This disempowerment increases the occurrence of unwanted pregnancies, maternal mortality, and sexually transmitted infections.

2. **Education:** Child marriage has a hugely detrimental impact on girls’ education, with girls more likely to drop out of school after getting married (CRR, 2018). Lack of education in turn means limited opportunities for girls, reduced labour force participation and less income than women who marry as adults. It affects household wellbeing as women with seven years of schooling are more likely to have fewer children and provide better nutrition and healthcare for them.

3. **Violence against women and girls:** Girls and women in early/forced marriages are highly vulnerable to domestic violence and other forms of abuse, not just by their husbands but also by their in-laws, notably the mother-in-law. This is particularly the case where marriages have taken place to resolve disputes. They are cut off from their own families, lacking education and skills, and thus financial independence, and unable to leave (for financial reasons, as well as socio-cultural factors – the stigma of divorce) such females are typically powerless to challenge the treatment meted out to them.

4. **Impact of Emergencies/Crisis:** During emergencies, conflict situations, natural disaster, and pandemics, such as Covid-19 the risk of violence intensify against marginalised groups especially women, girls, minorities and others at-risk of harmful practices. Social and economic pressures coupled with lack of social protection and support mechanisms increases the risk of early marriage especially of girls.
Factors Driving Early and Forced Marriage

1. **Social norms and gender inequality**

Early and forced marriage of females is strongly tied to socio-cultural norms and gender inequality. Girls are considered as less important than boys, who will be the breadwinners; the former are therefore often denied access to education and confined to the home. They are prevented from engaging in the monetised labour force, while their house and fieldwork is not recognised as economically productive.

Lack of voice of young people (both boys and girls, but particularly the girls) also leads to marriages without consent. As noted in a study that there is no tradition of getting a girl’s consent (for marriage): the girl follows the decisions made by her parents and stays silent. *(Shirkat Gah & IDRC, 2018).* The notions of family honour are also tied to girls – early marriage is a way of ensuring shame is not brought on the family, as girls can be subject to harassment or worse, abduction.

2. **Poverty and financial gain**

Poverty is associated with early and forced marriage but is not an absolute factor. To reduce financial pressures, parents may marry their children (specifically, their daughters) off at a young age – leading to ‘one less mouth to feed’. However, financial considerations can prompt parents to marry off their daughters, either because they can secure a bride-price, or because they will pay less dowry for younger girls.

In societies (notably in KP and Balochistan) where the groom has to pay a ‘bride-price’ to the girl’s family, there is an obvious financial benefit for the latter in marrying their daughters off. Even in societies where the girl’s family have to give a dowry, ‘Families may consider it economical to give their girls away for marriage since child marriages often imply smaller dowry payments’ *(CRR, 2018)*.

3. **Lack of education**

Child marriage is linked to the absence of education. Access to education, especially at the secondary level, leads to a reduction in child marriages. Research suggests that girls with secondary education are up to six times less likely to marry before the age of 18 than girls with no education *(CRR, 2018)*.

4. **Dispute resolution**

A manifestation of lesser value attached to girls/females is treating them as a ‘commodity’: and being awarded in marriage to resolve disputes/settle debts. It is a frequent feature of informal justice mechanisms, such as jirgas, panchayat and tribal councils.

*Watta satta* is the practice of bride exchange between two families: it is common in both Sindh (accounting for 66–78% of marriages) and Punjab (44–47%) *(Van Veen et al, 2018)*.

*Vani* is the practice of marrying a girl off to settle a dispute between families: it was found to be most prevalent in Balochistan (22–24% of marriages), followed by Sindh (5–17% of marriages) and least in Punjab (0–4%) *(Rehan & Qayyum, 2017)*.

A survey of newspaper reports in 2014 showed a large number of forced marriages had occurred to resolve disputes, and in the vast majority of cases the girls being exchanged were minors – some as young as three years *(CRR, 2018)*.
Addressing Early and Forced Marriage

- Targeted awareness raising and behaviour change campaigns about the negative consequences of child marriages on girls and boys involving community elder, religious leaders, households and young men etc.

- Establishment of linkages and referral mechanism by Aawaz Aagahi Centres (AACs) with the local Child Protection Unit, Social Welfare Department and police department for referring child marriages related cases;

- Sensitisation of Nikah Registrars by Aawaz Forums at district and village level about the legal provisions related to child marriages in KP and Punjab;

- Advocacy for the effective implementation of the Provincial Right to Free and Compulsory Education laws as the number of out of school’s girls is higher than boys particularly in KP leading to early marriages for girls;

- Advocacy for the effective implementation of the existing laws related to child marriage and sensitisation and capacity building of the concerned stakeholders;

- Advocacy for increase in the minimum marriageable age from 16 to 18 years in Punjab and for the enactment of the KP Child Marriages Restraint Bill 2020.

Source: Aawaz II. September 2019. Thematic Causal Analysis Paper