[**Protecting children**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1698312/protecting-children)

[Kishwar Enam](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8534/kishwar-enam) Published July 5, 2022 - Updated 2 days ago

The writer is a paediatrician at AKUH.

IN most parts of the world, when a child is groomed, abducted and married, the state is on its side and does its best to protect the child. Here in Pakistan, it is the opposite!

An adolescent girl recently told the court that she was an adult. In such a case a very thorough investigation of the marriage process and legal documents would be required. However, the girl was allowed to live with the culprit.

The details of the birth certificate, school documents and her parents’ marriage certificate appeared to be overlooked. An age determination exam and test were ordered. Pubertal development assessment and radiological ossification tests require expertise, and results are given in ranges. In this case, no one seemed to check the reliability of the report signed by a junior doctor. A medical board has now verified that her age is between 15 and 16 years (closer to 15).

When the police had presented their challan report, they reported no evidence of abduction and advised that the case should be dismissed as it was a ‘free-will marriage’. It is such official dereliction of duty that results in children being abused, abducted, married off, and trafficked. Where should one ask for justice?

The state has failed to curb child marriages.

Child marriages are widespread in Pakistan. Although, the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013, is most progressive in setting the age limit at 18 unlike the other provinces, Sindh still has the highest prevalence of child marriages. The lack of formation of a proper system for solemnising a wedding, and no strict rulings for the parties involved, have hindered efforts to stop child marriages.

Simple measures like showing valid CNICs to ensure that the bride and groom are 18 or above should be mandatory for the bride and groom.

As is the practice in many other countries, registering the marriage at a government office to verify identity cards through biometrics should be compulsory. Nadra should then provide a marriage registration certificate. And the nikah should not be performed without the availability of this certificate. With Nadra’s computerised system, this could quickly be done and will help reduce the incidence of child marriages. Also, punishments for the parents, the nikahkhwan, and all the adults who participated in conducting a child marriage should be strictly followed.

Adolescence is a complex developmental process taking place between the ages of 10 and 21 years. A child may be physically mature in the late adolescence phase, but the brain’s cognitive development, abstract thinking and proper reasoning continues well into the 20s. In early and middle adolescence, there is impulsiveness and a lack of understanding of the consequences of one’s actions. Therefore, when the grooming process — where the perpetrator focuses on a vulnerable child — of the victim is initiated, her brain is not yet prepared to understand the complications. Grooming can take place in person, online, on social media or gaming platforms. The dark web is notorious for these kinds of activities. Perpetrators gain the trust of the victim, and entice them by giving them attention. They entice them with attention, promises and gifts. They get them to agree to run away with them or find out their whereabouts and kidnap them. Often, they are not only individuals but a whole gang, and the child trafficking mafia is involved.

In some parts and communities of Pakistan, child marriages are not considered improper by the parents, who must be made to understand that child marriages affect children’s psychology and may hinder their personal and educational growth as they are given more responsibilities than they can handle. Pregnancy and childbirth put an extra burden on the health of the girl and is known to create further complications at a later age. Studies have shown that increased risk of mental health problems and domestic violence is associated with child marriages.

Often such marriages are conducted under the pretext of religion by convincing/ forcing the child to convert. Recently, some good decisions were made by the Islamabad High Court on child marriages. But the Council of Islamic Ideology has challenged this, saying child marriages should not be added to the sexual abuse and rape articles in Pakistani law. This kind of advice will push us behind and remove the progress made so far.

Marrying a child takes away their right to enjoy their childhood and to seek an education that can make them independent. Also, children are unprepared developmentally to take on the burden of responsibilities. Not that we do not have laws to protect our children. We have good laws but are not interested in enforcing them. It is time to enforce the law, not simply to ‘fulfil’ pacts we have signed but also for our children’s safety, protection, healthy development, dignity and survival.

*The writer is a paediatrician at AKUH.*

**Twitter** [**@kishwarenam**](https://twitter.com/kishwarenam)

*Published in Dawn, July 5th, 2022*