**Underage brides in Chitral**

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Chitral was the biggest district in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa in terms of area before its division into two units: Upper and Lower Chitral though the division is yet to be crystallised. It frequently remains in the news and social media because of its tourist attractions like the Shandur festival, Terich Mir peak, and Kalash Valleys to name a few. These are positive and attractive features which every Chitrali takes pride in and will boastfully talk about. But hidden under the lure of beautiful landscape and mighty mountains, there lie troubling social evils that are gracefully brushed under a rug and hence do not become part of public discourse.

The unsettling news of Maulana Salahuddin Ayubi, an MNA from Balochistan, marrying an underage girl from Chitral was in the news and social media this past month. This might not be the only case of underage marriage from the district, but the involvement of a member of the National Assembly has garnered traction to the case. The incident is a blatant disregard for the Child Marriage Restraint Act from the legislator, and legislators flaunting laws is not healthy for the sanctity of the laws. The incident brings two white elephants to the fore: underage marriage issues in Chitral and a clash of traditions and Islamic learnings with modern laws, especially on marriage.

[Artificial intelligence brings new vision to healthcare](https://nation.com.pk/18-Mar-2021/artificial-intelligence-brings-new-vision-to-healthcare)

A newspaper recently published an article on Chitrali girls marrying outsiders and it quoted, “In Chitral, girls are sold like cattle”. It is a bit of an exaggeration, but it is a widely accepted notion among the Pakhtuns of Dir and Peshawar. This is not true. The underlying reason behind this gross misunderstanding is that outsiders do not understand the traditional nuances related to the institution of marriage in the district. Traditionally, when both parties agree to a marriage, the bride’s father puts certain demands in front of the groom’s family, unlike marriages in mainland Pakistan where the groom’s family puts their demands in front of the bride’s family.

Historically, the bride’s family would ask for animals, money, and a good single or double bore gun. The gun is kept as a souvenir and memory of the marriage, but the animals and money are used in the arrangements of the ceremony by otherwise financially-limited families. This tradition of the girl’s father asking for animals and money before the marriage to make arrangements for the marriage is misconstrued as the buying price for the girl by outsiders. This indifference to the local customs by outsiders puts a bad name to a tradition that has been a quintessential part of nuptial ceremonies in the valley.

[UN Security Council condemns escalation in Yemen](https://nation.com.pk/18-Mar-2021/un-security-council-condemns-escalation-in-yemen)

Often old and rich outsiders visit the valley and pay a certain amount and take in brides of their likings. As a Chitrali, I often get in arguments with outsiders about the misconstrued tradition and the utter disregard for the tradition from outsiders. I am certain every Chitrali has debated this issue among friends, and with prospective grooms looking for a new bride in the valley. Once I was travelling to Chitral and a Pakhtun driver told me he was looking for a second bride in Chitral and he has saved up some money for it too. I tried to reason with him regarding the customs and traditions, but he did not understand a thing. Other Chitralis are in denial and contend that nothing of this sort happens.

Recently, the Tahafuz Haqooq-e-Chitral Movement (THCM) called it organised trafficking under the guise of marriage. This is no less than trafficking because a majority of the families in these transactions are poor and they are often handicapped when anything happens to their daughters. Once married, these girls face a lot of problems and sometimes end up dead as well. Some of these girls are also forced into prostitution by their so-called husbands. UNICEF’s report also highlights these issues in KP especially in the district of Chitral and tribal areas.

[FM Qureshi, UN chief discuss issues of mutual interest](https://nation.com.pk/18-Mar-2021/fm-qureshi-un-chief-discuss-issues-of-mutual-interest)

In Pakistan, there is no dearth of legislation, but it is crippled when it comes to the implementation of the law. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 is still in place with some modifications, which limits the marriage age for girls to 16 years and boys to 18 years. After the 18th Amendment to the constitution, all these laws are now the responsibility of the provinces. KP still has to enact an updated law. The Council of Islamic Ideology, a legal body which advises the government and the parliament on Islamic issues, ruled that laws regulating minimum marrying age are against Islamic injunctions and children could get married if they attained puberty.

Child marriages issues in Chitral are attributed to a lot of different factors. Misconstrued tradition, poverty, lack of awareness, and lack of law enforcement are a few reasons which keep the shameful raft of child marriages afloat. Most of the time, these ceremonies are held in private spheres and fake or forged Nikahnamas are crafted to fool people and on other occasions a nikkah ceremony is carried out under a guardian which makes it hard to crosscheck the age of the girl.

[Nation will stand with Kashmiris till independence: Asad Qaiser](https://nation.com.pk/18-Mar-2021/nation-will-stand-with-kashmiris-till-independence-asad-qaiser)

As we move forward, the issue of child marriages must be acknowledged as a problem at all levels. On a personal level, underage girls undergo physical and mental trauma. As a society, we do not give equal opportunities to girls and in Chitral, boys are still preferred to girls like the rest of Pakistan. Although Chitral leads in KP in terms of the literacy rate, but for equality of opportunities for girls, we still have to walk miles. Education and community awareness will help discourage the practice in the district. Expectations are high from the newly elected female senator from Chitral, Falak Naz Chitrali to work for female rights and space in the district.