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Abstract

Although the recent Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) show that two-thirds of marriages in Pakistan are consanguineous, the sociocultural determinants of such marriages remain largely unexplored. This paper examines the relative importance of the three commonly perceived reasons for such marriages: religious, economic and cultural. The analysis is based on qualitative data collected in 1995 from multi-ethnic and multireligious communities in Karachi, the largest city of Pakistan. Results show that consanguineous marriages are preferred across all ethnic and religious groups to a varying degree, and that parents continue to be the prime decision-makers for marriages of both sons and daughters. The major reasons for a preference for consanguineous marriages are sociocultural rather than any perceived economic benefits, either in the form of consolidation of family property or smaller and less expensive dowries. Among Muslims, following religious traditions is the least commonly cited reason for such marriages. Despite the reported sociocultural advantages of consanguineous marriages, such unions are perceived to be exploitative as they perpetuate the existing power structures within the family.

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COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF REASONS FOR PREFERENCE FOR CONSANGUINEOUS MARRIAGES IN PAKISTAN

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Summary. Although the recent Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) show that two-thirds of marriages in Pakistan are consanguineous, the sociocultural determinants of such marriages remain largely unexplored. This paper examines the relative importance of the three commonly perceived reasons for such marriages: religious, economic and cultural. The analysis is based on qualitative data collected in 1995 from multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities in Karachi, the largest city of Pakistan. Results show that consanguineous marriages are preferred across all ethnic and religious groups to a varying degree, and that parents continue to be the prime decision-makers for marriages of both sons and daughters. The major reasons for a preference for consanguineous marriages are sociocultural rather than any perceived economic benefits, either in the form of consolidation of family property or smaller and less expensive dowries. Among Muslims, following religious traditions is the least commonly cited reason for such marriages. Despite the reported sociocultural advantages of consanguineous marriages, such unions are perceived to be exploitative as they perpetuate the existing power structures within the family.

Introduction

Many Muslim countries in Asia and North Africa have witnessed marked demographic changes such as urbanization and improvements in socioeconomic status etc. However, cultural practices, especially those pertaining to marriage, have remained largely unchanged. The evidence from recent national DHS surveys and other small-scale studies shows that there has been little decline in the preference for consanguineous marriages (Bittles *et al.*, 1991; Ahmed *et al.*, 1992; Khoury & Massad, 1992; Al-Ghazali *et al.*, 1997; Hussain & Bittles, 1998). While marriage choice and decision-making is a complex interaction of various social and cultural norms, the main reasons cited for a continuing preference for consanguineous unions are: religious, economic and cultural. This paper aims to investigate the relative importance of these factors for marriage choice in Pakistan.

The sociological determinants of marriage decision-making have not been

adequately explored within the Pakistani cultural milieu. Information available from the literature is limited to a few anthropological accounts of village life in northern areas of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province (Eglar, 1960; Barth, 1960; Donnan, 1988; Naveed-i-Rahat, 1991); and two small-scale sociodemographic surveys of university students conducted in the cites of Karachi and Lahore in the 1960s (Korson, 1969, 1971) and a similar survey in Karachi in the 1970s (Hafeez, 1981). While such studies are useful for the development of sociocultural reference points, it should be stressed that they are region- and clan-specific, and that information gathered by them in addition to being out-of-date, is based largely on perceived marriage choice. The latter is an important issue as in Pakistani society parents are, by and large, the ultimate decision-makers for selecting marriage partners for their children, and there may exist a wide gap between perceived choice and eventual reality.

Methods

The study was conducted in four squatter settlements of Karachi in 1995. The port city of Karachi, with an estimated population of over 12 million, has since the early 1950s attracted a substantial flow of migrants from other parts of the country, especially smaller towns and villages. Since the inflow of immigrants far outstripped available housing, this led to a rapid increase in the number of squatter settlements in the city. Whilst most of these settlements started as shanty huts over vacant plots of land, many now have semi-concrete housing structures with paved link roads and are generally being provided with basic civic amenities by the municipality. The rapid expansion of the city also led to conversion of some old well-established peri-urban villages into squatter settlements due to encroachment on surrounding land. Currently an estimated 40% of the city's population resides in the 500 squatter settlements that exist on official records.

The study was conducted in four such settlements which were part of a primary health care (PHC) programme initiated by the Aga Khan University in the mid-1980s. These study sites were: Orangi, Grax, Chanesar Goth, Grax and Essa Nagri. Details of the PHC programme and the field settings have been described in detail in earlier publications (Hussain *et al.*, 1997; Hussain & Bittles, 1998). Briefly, these settlements each had a population of approximately eight to ten thousand and together comprised all major ethnic and religious groups of Pakistan. This paper is based on the analysis of a section of qualitative data obtained during the second stage of a larger study aimed at assessing the prevalence of consanguineous unions and the impact of such marriages on the health of offspring. The respondents for the main study were ever-married women aged 15–49 years. The qualitative data comprising in-depth interviews and focus group discussions concentrated on eliciting information on community perceptions about sociological determinants of marriage decision-making.

In-depth interviews

These were conducted with a subset of women who had participated in the quantitative survey. The main inclusion criterion for the in-depth interviews was the age and not consanguinity status of the respondents. Of the 357 respondents aged over 30 years who completed the quantitative survey, a list of 300 respondents was drawn

Table 1. Consanguinity status of participants in in-depth interviews and group discussions

	In-depth interviews		Focus group discussions	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Non-consanguineous	43.2	127	47.4	54
Consanguineous: First cousin	51.4	151	52.6	60
Other	5.4	16		

randomly; of these, 294 women were successfully interviewed. The last six interviews in Orangi could not be conducted after the study site became inaccessible because of escalating political violence since the settlement was one of the worst affected areas in the civil strife besetting Karachi in 1995.

Focus group discussions

Of the planned 20 focus group discussions (FGDs), fifteen were conducted, five in each of the three study areas (Essa Nagri, Chanesar Goth and Grax). None of the five FGDs planned for Orangi could be conducted due to the problems mentioned above. Since the FGDs were primarily aimed at exploring the reasons for consanguineous marriage and its various implications, a more heterogeneous age distribution of the respondents was sought to allow for different generational viewpoints. All ever-married women residents of the four study sites who were not part of the sampling frame for the quantitative survey or the in-depth interviews were considered eligible to participate in the FGDs. Each FGD comprised an average six to eight women and a total of 114 women participated in the fifteen group discussions. The key information obtained from the group discussions is reproduced throughout the results section in the form of quotes. To maintain confidentiality, all names of the respondents have been replaced by descriptions, i.e. characteristics such as age, ethnicity and consanguinity status. To offset the lack of representation of Mohajir women (the main ethnic group in Orangi), some of their responses to open-ended questions from the in-depth interviews are reproduced. While attempts have been made to include a variety of viewpoints, there is a need for caution in generalizing from these to the larger Mohajir community.

Results

More than half of the respondents (56.8%) interviewed for the in-depth interviews had a consanguineous marriage, over 90% of which were first cousin unions. A similar pattern was seen for respondents who participated in the focus group discussions. The consanguinity status of the respondents for both types of interviews is provided in Table 1; and information on their religious and ethnic affiliation is provided in Table 2. The predominance of Punjabi women in both types of data is due to the fact that one of the study areas, Essa Nagri, was inhabited predominantly by Christian Punjabis

Table 2. Religious and ethnic affiliation of participants in in-depth interviews and group discussions (%)

	In-depth interviews			Focus group discussions		
	All (n = 294)	Non- consanguineous (n = 127)	Consanguineous (n = 167)	All (n = 114)	Non- consanguineous (n = 54)	Consanguineous (n = 60)
Religions						
Muslim	71.1	57.5	81.4	45.6	25.9	63.4
Christian	24.5	34.6	16.8	43.0	59.3	28.3
Hindu	4.4	7.9	1.8	11.4	14.8	8.3
Ethnicity						
Mohajir	22.1	21.3	22.8	0.0	0.0	0.0
Punjabi	36.0	44.1	29.9	43.0	59.3	28.3
Sindhi	20.1	13.4	25.7	22.8	16.7	28.3
Balochi	11.2	8.7	13.2	16.7	7.4	25.0
Pathan	5.8	4.7	6.6	6.1	1.8	10.1
Other	4.8	7.8	1.8	11.4	14.8	8.3

who were mainly first- or second-generation migrants to Karachi from rural areas of the Punjab Province.

Reasons for consanguineous unions

Religious. It is commonly and somewhat erroneously believed that Islam favours marriage between close relatives other than the proscribed ones such as those between siblings, parent and child, uncle and niece or aunt and nephew. However, no passage in the Koran can be interpreted as encouraging consanguineous marriages. Moreover, according to one of the *hadith* (a record of the pronouncements of Prophet Mohammad), the Prophet discouraged marriages to cousins who, because of the closeness of the relationship, were almost like siblings (Jaber *et al.*, 1992). It is generally believed that the *hadith* refers to the Prophet's discouragement of first cousin marriages and the underlying rationale perhaps was to ensure wider marriage alliances which would facilitate the spread of Islam through Arabia. The only clan groups in Pakistan that practise endogamy (though not always close consanguineous marriage) for religious reasons are *Sayyeds* (who claim to have lineage associated directly with offspring of the Prophet) and *Qureshis* (who claim to have lineage associated with the patriline of the Prophet), and therefore are concerned with keeping the lineage 'pure'.

In the group discussions as well as in-depth interviews, religion, or more specifically following of the *sunnat* (the deeds of Prophet Mohammad, who married his daughter Fatima to his paternal first cousin Ali), was never cited as a major reason for contracting cousin marriages. In fact, even on probing, very few respondents agreed that religion might be a contributory factor in the continuation of such practices in modern Pakistan. Among the Muslim women, most of the responses echoed those of an elderly Sindhi matriarch.

'The custom of consanguineous marriage has very little to do with *sunnat*. It is just a time-honoured tradition. If you ask me to specify the reasons, I will not be able to do so because I really do not know.'

A similar response was provided by another woman who, when asked to reflect on the role of religion in the continuing popularity of such marriages, said:

'I do not think people go for consanguineous marriage because it is a *sunnat*, but they do it mainly because they want to enhance their family relationships.' (A 60-year-old non-consanguineously married Balochi respondent.)

Economic (property). The consolidation of family property has been one of the other commonly cited reasons for continuation of cousin marriages in the Middle East and South Asia in general, and for the preference of patrilineal parallel (FBD) marriages among Muslim populations in particular (for details see Khuri, 1970, and Moors, 1995). However, in reality this line of argument has less applicability than some of the other reasons discussed later in the paper. Under Islamic law women are entitled to inherit property, but, given their subordinate position, not only are women unlikely to inherit but, more importantly, very few women are inclined to assert their legal rights of inheritance. Moreover, their status in their husband's house, especially in the early years of marriage, is heavily dependent on the kind of social support they can obtain

from their brothers. Women are therefore reluctant to forgo this tremendous social advantage for the sake of any economic gains they may accrue from asserting their claim to the family inheritance.

It, therefore, was not surprising that in the in-depth interviews the economic rationale of consanguineous marriages in terms of consolidating property was mentioned by only four (1.4%) of the women as a major consideration in their own marriage. In the group discussions, economic reasons were never mentioned without probing by the moderator, and even then the responses illustrate the line of argument discussed in the above paragraph.

'It is not only in consanguineous marriages that women do not ask for their inheritance. Even in non-consanguineous marriages, a woman or her family (husband, and in-laws) do not ask for a woman's share.' (A 35-year-old non-consanguineously married Mohajir respondent.)

'These days girls do get offered their share. After the death of my husband, I had called all my daughters together and offered them their share but my daughters themselves declined to take their share and legally passed their share to their brothers.' (An elderly Sindhi matriarch from Chanesar Goth.)

Economic (dowry). Dowry or *jehez* is therefore the major economic transaction that underpins marriage decision-making. An important distinction that needs to be made here is that, unlike the situation in India and even Bangladesh (Lindenbaum, 1981; Amin, 1995), dowry in Pakistan does not generally include cash payments to the groom's family as 'groomprice'. It is generally true that the size of the dowry is a consideration in opting for cousin marriages. Not only are the demands and expectations of the potential in-laws (who are also close relatives) likely to be lower and more realistic; but more importantly the bride and her family are less likely to be 'penalized' for any perceived shortcomings in the expected dowry. However, during the in-depth interviews there appeared to be some sense of discomfort about acknowledging the importance of dowry as an underlying deciding factor in marriage choice. Only three out of the 294 respondents (1%) acknowledged that dowry was one of the main reasons for their parents' decision. Surprisingly, all three women were married to non-relatives. This sense of unease, especially among consanguineously married women, can be attributed not only to the 'rationalization' of their marriage choice to non-economic factors, but more importantly it reflects that marriage decision-making is based on a complex set of factors, of which the economic considerations of dowry are an integral, but often less explicit, part. In the group discussions, the participants were more open in their responses, largely because they felt they were commenting on the prevailing norms rather than acknowledging the reasons for their own marriage.

'In our family, there is no strong tradition of big *jahez*. However, if one opts for non-consanguineous marriage, then the size of the *jahez* is larger to ensure that the girl does not have to listen to any taunts. Our elders say that if you want to marry your daughter to strangers, then give her enough *jahez*, that she need not ask for anything from her in-laws.' (A 50-year-old Punjabi respondent.)

Similar responses were given by the non-Muslim respondents, especially the Christians. Most of these Christians have strong rural roots in central and southern

Punjab and many of their cultural practices, including marriage customs, closely resemble those of Muslim and Sikh Punjabis in Pakistan and the Indian part of the Punjab region.

'Relatives are a well-known entity. They are conversant with the economic constraints of the other party – who has how much property – who is poor, etc. Who can give how much jewellery as part of dowry. Whereas, with non-relatives, one has to give the required amount of *jahez* and jewellery irrespective of whether one can afford it or not.' (A middle-aged consanguineously married Christian Punjabi respondent.)

Cultural. The most important and overriding reasons for consanguineous marriages, both in South Asia and the Middle East, therefore appear to be social and cultural considerations. Despite increasing urbanization and nucleation of families, as well as increases in female literacy, marriage choice continues to be strictly the domain of parents, reinforced by the vocal or tacit support of elder married siblings (Korosn, 1969, 1971; Rao, Inbaraj & Jesudian, 1972; Khlat *et al.*, 1986; Chaleby, 1988). It is widely believed that consanguineous marriages offer the best opportunity for compatibility between the husband and wife, and the bride and mother-in-law. An additional important general consideration favouring consanguineous marriages is the conviction that, by marriage within the extended family, undisclosed problems regarding health or other unfavourable social characteristics of either bride or groom will be effectively avoided (Bittles *et al.*, 1991).

Both in the in-depth interviews and the group discussions, many respondents considered that remaining within the inner bounds of clan endogamy was a matter of pride as it implied that the family was 'sought after' and hence had a better social standing than one that opts for exogamous marriages. While this could be an important consideration for those who are migrants from rural areas, the justification among Mohajirs for choosing consanguineous unions (in addition to other reasons) was that an exogamous marriage may imply that the parents were unable to solicit a match within the family because of some undesirable traits in their daughter.

'Outside marriages imply that there is a physical or moral defect in the girl which makes her unacceptable to relatives . . . such defects are perceived to be more easy to hide in marriages to non-relatives.' (A 35-year-old Mohajir woman.)

Most marriage decisions were made by the parents of the respondents. In the case of consanguineous marriages, the multiplicity of relationships required not only consultation with close relatives such as uncles and aunts, but also their participation to some degree in the final decision-making process (data not shown). With regard to modalities of marriage choice, the prevalent cultural pattern of children following their parents' wishes was very much evident both for consanguineous and non-consanguineous marriages (Table 3). A similar pattern was evident from group discussions. Most women reported either that they had no choice in the men to whom they married, or that the consultation process was merely a formality in which the girl was informed of her parents' wishes by either her mother or a close female relative.

Within the study population, there appeared to be no clear pattern for favouring patrilateral (FBD/FZD) over marilateral (MBD/MZD) cousin marriages, except among the non-Muslim study population. The strict rules of clan endogamy among

Table 3. Modalities of marriage decision-making for respondents' marriage (in-depth interviews)

	Non-consanguineous		Consanguineous	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Parents' agreement ^a – couple neutral	92.9	118	97.6	163
Parents' agreement ^a – husband opposed	—	—	—	—
Parents' agreement ^a – wife opposed	3.1	4	—	—
Couple's agreement before parents' consent	1.6	2	0.6	1
Couple's decision despite parents' opposition	1.6	2	—	—
Other	0.8	1	1.8	3

^aIncludes both mother and father.

Muslims made cross-cousin marriages equally attractive. The search for a 'suitable' match within the family entailed the screening of both patrilineal and matrilineal parallel and cross cousins. The final decision was based on the assumption that social and cultural similarities shared by first cousins were likely to facilitate the development of a stable marital bond. Moreover, in a patriarchal society like Pakistan, the presence of common relatives who can intercede with both spouses in times of marital conflict is perceived to be a tremendous advantage that such marriages have over marriages to non-cousins. In fact, the strongly patriarchal nature of Pakistani society is maintained partly through parental or paternal domination of the marriage decision-making processes. In marriages between relatives, the authority of the father of a girl is transferred to an uncle (who is also the father-in-law); and that of her brothers to male cousins (elder brothers-in-law and the husband).

More than a third of the respondents for the in-depth interviews cited a 'better and more caring' attitude of the in-laws, thereby facilitating 'easy adjustment' for the bride, as a major advantage of consanguineous marriages (Table 4). Similar responses were provided by many participants in a number of group discussions.

'Consanguineous marriages are popular because relatives are more caring and considerate. The girl is more happy . . . and in times of conflict usually the parents-in-law play a supportive role and try and reason with both parties.' (A middle-aged consanguineously married Sindhi respondent.)

'My siblings are consanguineously married, if God forbid there is any conflict then all the concerned parties are more accommodating because they are mindful of their family relationships.' (A 22-year-old Christian Punjabi respondent.)

The other important consideration for preferring consanguineous unions was the fact that such marriages attach far less importance to the physical attributes of the bride-to-be. It is a common observation that across all social strata in Pakistan, the girl's family often goes through a series of very stressful visits by potential mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, who often assume the role of 'bride inspectors'. Both Urdu and regional literature is replete with phrases such as *chand see dulhan* (a bride

Table 4. Advantages of consanguineous marriages (in-depth interviews)

	Non-consanguineous		Consanguineous	
	%	<i>n</i> (127)	%	<i>n</i> (167)
Relatives more caring	18.1	23	33.5	56
Relatives – known entity	8.7	11	6.6	11
Easy adjustment for girls	5.5	7	4.8	8
Strengthen family ties	3.9	5	3.6	6
Tradition	3.9	5	12.0	20
Depends on fate/destiny	21.3	27	10.8	18
Other	19.7	25	19.1	32
None	18.9	24	9.6	16

as pretty as the moon), which symbolize the search for a fair complexioned and pretty bride. Parents of daughters are acutely aware of this phenomenon and would prefer, if possible, to avoid facing such a situation by planning marriage alliances within the family.

‘Non-relatives do send marriage proposals but we people do not accept them because we have dark skins and curly hair . . . We do not want our in-laws to taunt us later about our physical features or the marriage to end up in divorce. Therefore it is better to marry within the family where physical beauty is not an important consideration.’ (A 30-year-old Balochi respondent.)

Despite the perceived multiple advantages offered by consanguineous unions, there was also a fair degree of discontent and ambivalence about whether women in consanguineous unions do receive better treatment from their husbands and their in-laws (Table 5). Most women reflecting on their own or a close relative’s experience felt such relationships were exploitative, and provided the in-laws with more room for manipulation. Similar views were expressed by many respondents in the group discussions.

‘If it is a match within the family then there is more room for accommodation. However, it is usually the daughter-in-law who makes the compromises, whereas a non-related daughter-in-law will not give such concessions to the in-laws.’ (A consanguineous married Sindhi respondent.)

‘There are disadvantages in marriages within the family. The real issue is taking care of the basic needs [clothing, spending money etc.] of the wife. Conflicts arise out of disagreement on this issue or a wife’s dissatisfaction with the way she is taken care of by her husband and also her in-laws. Such conflicts then lead to souring of existing family relationships because the wife’s mother feels unhappy about how her daughter is being treated. Therefore, I do not see any advantage in consanguineous marriages.’ (A young consanguineously married Balochi respondent.)

In addition to ambivalence, there was also a sense of fatalism about whether a marriage alliance was going to ensure happiness or material comfort. Women in

Table 5. Disadvantages of consanguineous marriages (in-depth interviews)

	Non-consanguineous		Consanguineous	
	%	n (127)	%	n (167)
Relatives less caring	12.6	16	4.2	7
Increased conflict	11.8	15	10.2	17
Affect health of children	1.5	2	—	—
Depends on fate/destiny	32.3	41	11.9	20
None	39.4	50	65.2	109
Only marry relatives	2.4	3	8.5	14

Pakistan do not expect their marriages to be easy. For most of them it is moving from one socially regulated environment to another – a potentially more complex one – which, in the case of an exogamous marriage, is also almost unknown. Given their limited choices and subordinate position, it is not surprising that women develop a sense of helplessness or are resigned to accepting what they perceive is the hand of fate (Tables 4 and 5).

'It all depends on fate . . . whatever is written in her [the girl's] *kismet* will happen – it is really unimportant whether it is consanguineous or non-consanguineous marriage.' (A 40-year-old non-consanguineously married Mohajir respondent.)

Discussion

Sociocultural determinants of marriage choice, rather than religion or economic reasons, appear to dominate the preference for consanguineous marriages. Since most marriages are still arranged, mate selection continues to be largely the responsibility of the parents. The work of Donnan (1988) and Naveed-i-Rahat (1991) shows that, even in cases where the son may have migrated out of the village and achieved considerable economic independence, he still returns to his village to marry the girl chosen for him by his parents. The same situation exists in urban areas of Pakistan. With regard to the marriage of daughters, arranged marriages are still the *sine qua non*, even among those with college level education. An interesting question that demands an answer is why, despite increasing female education, there has been no change in attitude towards marriage choice. The answer lies perhaps in the explanations provided by Caldwell, Reddy & Caldwell (1983) for South India, and Fricke, Syed & Smith (1986) for rural Pakistan: the education of girls is largely based on the parental expectation that it will increase the marriage prospects of their daughters. In contemporary Pakistan, where, despite poverty, girls are being sent at least to primary schools, more especially in urban areas, the level to which a girl is educated depends not only on parental resources but also, and largely, on the available marriage choices for her. When a match is available within the family, the girl is allowed to continue her education to the level that correlates with the expectations and approval of her future in-laws.

The general perception that consanguineous unions are preferred to consolidate

economic assets within the family has little applicability, not only for the study population but for the wider community in general. This is not to suggest that there is no feeling of unease among some women about relinquishing their due share of inheritance. The fact that women do not assert their rights has to do with lifelong conditioning about upholding their natal family's honour and not undertaking any actions that might undermine the social position of their brothers. Furthermore, many girls grow up surrounded by constant, subtle – and often not too subtle – reminders about their being an 'economic liability' on the family due to the need to provide dowries for them. This further acts as a deterrent to their seeking a share of the patrimony.

Although the potential for family feuds could increase when marriages are contracted between relatives, it is unlikely that such a concern would act as a sufficient deterrent to the continuing of the practice of consanguineous unions. This is perhaps because in patriarchal societies, women often have to sacrifice their interests to those of their in-laws, as 'females are socialized to believe that their own interests and wishes are subordinate to those of the family group' (Dyson & Moore, 1983, p. 134). Mernissi (1987) argues that both Islam and culture in Muslim societies discourage the strengthening of the conjugal bond, as they accord extraordinary respect, and power, to the mothers and sons. In South Asia, similar levels of subordination of daughters-in-law are found among Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Pakistan and North India. Therefore, whereas Islam may be interpreted as an important element in power dynamics at the family level in Pakistan, it is equally important to recognize that patriarchal cultures which promote motherhood as the only positive image of women are likely to perpetuate the subordination of women.

Finally, although there is some evidence of an increasing interest in studying the health effects of consanguineous marriages, there is a need to complement such research with studies that provide an understanding of the sociocultural context in which marriage decision-making takes place. This, in a country like Pakistan, becomes all the more important as the rapid pace of socioeconomic changes in the past decade, precipitated by political instability, is bringing in two simultaneous and diametrically opposed changes. The large-scale monetization of the economy, the changing nature of the labour markets, and the growing economic disparity, are, in turn, changing economic realities for citizens, both urban and rural. In such a climate, seclusion of the majority of women from the workforce is a luxury that few will be able to afford in the near future; and such changes are likely to have an impact on marriage choice. On the other hand, polarization of society along ethnic lines is very likely to make communities more inward-looking. Given the widespread prevalence of consanguineous marriage, there is a need to study not only the health implications of such unions, but also to understand the sociological underpinning's of marriage choice. This requires an integrated framework for interdisciplinary research, especially across different social strata, in order to come up with appropriate and balanced policy recommendations that address both the health and social issues at stake.

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