

## On the Ground



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# Report from a Pashtun Teen: Arranged Marriage

By [SHER BANO](#)

*Sher Bano is a 17-year-old Pashtun girl from Pakistan who spent last year as an exchange student in Evanston, Illinois, as part of the [Youth Exchange and Study \(YES\)](#) Program. She is now back in the city of Peshawar in the northwest of Pakistan. As a guest blogger, she'll be writing about life in Pakistan from the perspective of a teenage girl who has spent time in the West. This is her second post.*



Sher Bano

The bride and groom, along with two witnesses, must sign the contract during the Nikkah (marriage) ceremony.

My previous post gave readers a taste of Peshawar's culture. After reading the comments, I observed a major curiosity about the marriage system in Peshawar, especially arranged marriage. So I decided to write about this. However, please remember that no single person can ever portray a culture, neither can I.

When I was in the United States, at first I regretted telling my host sister that several of my relatives had married their first cousins, because it made her go into a partial state of shock. For those of you like me who are not aware of this: it is illegal to marry first cousins in Illinois. The thought of interacting

with illegally married couples was quite disturbing at first. But then I remembered...I am not from Illinois, but Peshawar!



Sher Bano

The groom's car, which is full of children.

Some of my American friends had boyfriends/ girlfriends and I would always be interested to see them with their partners. But I never actually wanted to have a boyfriend myself because all the drama, expectations and explanations seemed quite a tiring job. I would have partial crushes but I tried my best not to show any signs of interest as it was against my religion and culture.

I would always tell myself that teenage crushes are common and should not be taken seriously. Besides, I would have an arranged marriage as it is the common trend in my family and area. When I would tell my American friends this, they would pity me. Their reactions surprised me, as the prospect of an arranged marriage seemed very interesting to me. I was determined to correct the misconception about arranged marriages as cruel acts. For this reason, I participated in many speeches and discussions.

According to a dictionary, arranged marriage is a marriage arranged by someone other than the persons getting married, curtailing the process of courtship. But it has a little different meaning in my city. An arranged marriage is different from a forced marriage. In it, the consultation of the boy and the girl getting married is an important part of the marriage decision. The usual custom is that the boy's parents ask for the girl's hand whom they and their son find suitable. If the girl's family finds the boy as fulfilling all the important considerations for their daughter, such as having a good livelihood etc, they will then ask for their daughter's opinion. If she agrees, the decision is made. Yet if she vetoes it, it is time to consider someone else for her. Thus the marriage is not imposed in any way. There may still be some forced marriages in the area and these are the ones that can justifiably be called "cruel."

I know the prospect of marrying someone you love sounds so attractive and romantic! (After all I am a girl who spent a year in the U.S.!) That is why I once asked my aunt, “How could you live happily marrying a man you didn’t love?” Her reply was “I learned to love!” I found the statement confusing at first. But then I realized the wisdom of her remark. After all, neither love nor arranged marriages can guarantee a happy life. Raymond Hull, a famous Canadian writer, once said, “All marriages are happy. It’s the living together afterward that causes all the trouble.”



Sher Bano

Floral decoration at a wedding.

One cannot just deny the benefits of arranged marriages either. If a couple in Peshawar with an arranged marriage faces problems, there would be many people (like their families) who would support them. There are also greater chances of a mature and a long lasting relationship, because experienced and knowledgeable parents play an important role in the decision making (one of the reasons for a very low divorce rate). Neither does one have to worry so much about being left single or how to ask someone out for a date (which I noticed was a major concern for many in America). I have nothing against

love marriages, but I want the benefits of arranged marriages to be known.

As I mentioned earlier, it is quite common here to marry amongst relatives, especially cousins. The reproductive complications resulting from such marriages are no hidden facts these days. But most people in Peshawar do not pay much attention to this. They place more emphasis on keeping inheritances within the family and on continued closeness within the extended family. However, due to concerns about inheritable diseases and so on, many people are changing their attitudes. I would not say that marrying in the family is wrong, as I myself was born to a couple from the same family. But I would rather not take such a risk myself.

Another big difference between American and Pakistani marriages is age. The widely accepted marriageable age for a Peshawari woman is somewhere in her early 20's. In the U.S. , I noticed that many people were comfortable remaining single until almost the age of 30. Also, most women here marry men who are older because it is the older men who have a more settled life and better jobs. I guess in Peshawar husbands are older than their wives about 99 percent of the time. I know two couples with more than 20 years of age difference between the husband and wife.



Sher Bano

A sacrifice is made when the bride arrives at her new home.

“Which one do you feel is better, America or Pakistan?” Several times I have come across this question. Yet, I have not been able to find an answer to it. After all, who am I to judge cultures? One can just accept them, and if possible try to improve and admire them. Marriages in Peshawar and Illinois have both positive and negative aspects to them. The journalist Sydney J. Harris once said, “Almost no one is foolish enough to imagine that he automatically deserves great success in any field of activity; yet almost everyone believes that he automatically deserves success in marriage!”

In any case, one must strive in order to make his/ her marriage a success

(whether it is arranged or romantic). But looking down upon arranged marriages without knowing what they actually are and considering them to be a cruelty on a couple is absolutely unfair.