Marriage of cousins: Congenital diseases and people’s perceptions in Pakistan, a public health challenge


Marriage between cousins results in congenital diseases: heart disease, thalassaemia, and other disabilities in the children.\(^1\)–\(^4\) Post-neonatal mortality, childhood morbidity, and haemoglobinopathies (\(S\) and \(E\)) are common in the offspring of these marriages.\(^5\) These parents increase the risk of low intelligence, mental instability, sickle-cell anaemia, and cystic fibrosis in the children.\(^3\) Researchers have studied inbreeding among Pakistani diaspora living in the West, but few studies have been conducted in Pakistan.

Two perspectives emerge:

- Genetic problems are common – 4–10 per cent of cousins’ children – and genetic disorders can increase in future generations.\(^1,\)\(^3,\)\(^6\) Therefore, legislation is necessary to ban the marriage of cousins.
- Genetic disorders in the offspring of cousins are uncommon and exaggerated.\(^7,\)\(^8\) The media has stigmatized ethnic minorities alienated from mainstream western society. Similar risks may be present in non-relative marriages.\(^9\)

The resulting debate goes on between medical healers, geneticists, and other health professionals in the West, but not in countries where the marriage of cousins is common. More than 20 per cent of the world’s population – in the Middle East, parts of Japan, and South Asia – has consanguineous marriage. Worldwide, 8.5 per cent of child births are from consanguineous marriages,\(^8,\)\(^9\) with the greatest rates in the Middle East (30 per cent) and in Pakistan (40 per cent).\(^1\)

My goal has been to understand the genetic problems resulting from consanguineous marriage and people’s perceptions of it, so a solution may be found. During my study of the ‘exchange marriage system’ in Kabirwala, South-Punjab, Pakistan, I found among children whose parents were cousins two blind and one deaf child.
plus one who died 1 month after birth. The couples ascribed this to
destiny. Their children were blind because of sin and one had died
because he had ‘finished his life’ – the one given by God. When I
asked, ‘Was this not a genetic problem?’ the parents replied that it
was ‘God’s will’ alone.

According to people in Kabirwala, South-Punjab, these marriages
unite, bind, support, and maintain societal security, strength, and
purity of family. They bring respect for women, provide stability in
marriage, strengthen social ties and political networking, offer old-
age care, and are considered a source of land preservation. They are,
however, a cause of congenital disorders, which generate conflict
among the involved families.

Consanguineous marriage persists in Kabirwala because of super-
stition, little awareness of genetics, and lack of research on the issue;
unavailability of genetic counselling; strong beliefs and traditions
where parents dominate. Overall, the community is unaware of
genetic disorders.

Kabirwala also lacks a health infrastructure for dealing with the
genetic disorders, as counselling services that might bring awareness
are not available. When people learn of genetic disorders, they reject
that knowledge based on community belief systems.

Young, educated parents are aware of the risks associated with
consanguineous marriage – lower intellect, physical weakness, plus
other abnormalities and domestic conflicts – but they are unable to
resist the social control. Consanguineous marriage is described as
stable, produces a low divorce rate among first cousins, and its socio-
economic effects support the traditional family system – a single
fabric that if violated would harm marriage patterns, causing serious
‘moral-decay’.

Culture-centred techniques to cope with these societal problems
can reduce consanguineous marriage; for example, if a local imam or
the school syllabus highlights the marriage of cousins, a ‘new
morality’ may develop. Other measures may also sensitize people,
using media, but results are less likely to be sustained as the media is
restricted and lacks credibility.

In this situation, legislation might be a last resort: banning the
marriage of cousins. But a ban is likely to be counterproductive in a
cultural context in which breaking a law is considered ‘fashionable’
and a ‘symbol of superiority’. Non-conformity indicates a high social
status. Thus, lack of scientific knowledge, plus strong beliefs and traditions sustain the marriage of cousins in Kabirwala, where unlike in the West, notions of luck and destiny trump understanding of genetics.

References


Muhammad Zaman
University of Leipzig,
Johannes-R-Becher Str. 9/404, 04279 Leipzig,
Saxony, Germany
E-mail: zaman@uni-leipzig.de