



An important female child and woman problem: Child marriages

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Summary

The aim of this study is to define the reasons of early and forced marriages in our country, determine the place of early marriage in national and international legislations and find the frequency of the situation. Also discuss the prevention interventions with public health view. In the study, the scientific literature on early marriages were reviewed, in conjunction with reports, regulations and practices global and country level. From this evidence-based recommendations on child/woman health promotion were developed from the perspective of public health. In the literature, there are numerous studies on health effects of early marriages. Early marriages frequencies were between 30% and 35% in Turkey, however there is a difference according to regions, local social and cultural structure. Psikolojik and sensual development adversely affected when married at early ages. The children whose rights are taken will be negatively effected in their adulthood. The different interpretation at legislations in Turkey makes difficulties at commitments on early marriages and gives place to opinions which accepts early marriages. Early marriages are important child and woman problem in our society. Preventing of early marriages for whatever the reason is, solving social contradictions, raising awareness on the issue and governmental further proceeding on early marriages are necessary from the point of public health. (*Turk Arch Ped* 2013; 48: 86-93)

Key words: Bride, child, early, girl, marriage

Introduction

According to the convention on the rights of the child, a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier (1). For an individual to develop abstract thinking, to decide and to live by taking responsibility, he/she should reach a certain physical, psychological and intellectual maturity. This corresponds to a process which continues until the age of 18 years physiologically. Puberty has a special place in the childhood. In the puberty, physical development occurs in the first place and psychosocial and social maturation occur later. In parallel to completion of physical development at earlier ages in adolescence, fertility abilities are observed to be attained at gradually earlier ages.

Physical or emotional abuse of children, sexual abuse, ignorance and negligence and exploiting children commercially and in other ways are considered offensive interventions directed to the child. Most child abusers are defined as family members, caretakers, friends, relatives, foreigners, officers who may have relation with the child

(police, teacher, soldier, etc.), employers, healthcare givers and other children by the World Health organization (WHO) (2).

Marriages which take place during the childhood are also considered as exploitation. These marriages are expressed in different terms including "early marriages", "child brides" or "child marriages" (3). Most of these marriages which take place before the psychological and physical development is completed are also described as "early and forced marriages", since they take place without the conscious consent of the child. Approaches and applications related with early marriages change according to the social and cultural patterns (4).

Since girls are made to marry at a substantially earlier age compared to boys, this condition creates much more severe problems in terms of girls. This shows that studies related with early marriages should be focused on girls to a greater extent (5,6,7,8,9).

The aim of this study was to discuss the causes and results of early and forced marriages which take place in our country, to examine the place of early and forced marriages in international and national areas, review the

status related with the frequencies of early marriages and to discuss the recommendations related with prevention in terms of public health.

Child marriages in the world and in Turkey

Life styles are formed in accordance with the socio-cultural patterns of countries. According to the study of marriage modelings, child brides are observed with very low rates in developed countries. The marriage percentages in girls aged between 15 and 19 years are shown in Table 1.

It is observed that the frequency of child marriages is low in the Western countries. However, it is observed to have reached to very high levels in some African countries. In a study performed in sub-saharan Africa, it was stated that 40% of women married at an age between 15 and 19 years (12). Again, the frequency of child marriages is increasing in Middle Asian countries (Table 1).

In Turkey, there is evidence showing that childhood marriages are an important problem. The results of the research can be summarized in the following way:

- The Turkish Population and Health Survey shows that 11.9% of the women aged between 15 and 19 years were married in 2003 and 9.6% were married in 2008. In addition, one (9%) out of every 12 women aged 17 years gave birth or became pregnant. According to the 2008 Turkish Population and Health Survey, 5,9% of the women aged between 15 and 19 years gave birth to their first children (13).
- According to 2007 Turkey Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health survey, the marriage rate was 7,5% in women aged between 15 and 19 years and 0,9 in men in the same age group. 73.1% of the married women aged between 15 and 19 years had an experience of pregnancy and 12,4% had a history of voluntary abortion (14). In Turkey, 20.3% of the marriages which took place in the first half of 2011 were in the 16-19 age group. 7.9% of the deliveries were performed by mothers aged below 19 years in 2010. 0.4% of these mother were below the age of 15 years (15).
- In two local studies performed in Turkey, the frequencies of marriages below the age of 18 years was found to be 59.7% and 42.5% in Diyarbakır province (16,17).
- Ertem et al. (18) reported the rate of adolescent marriages to be 56.1% and the mean age at the time of first marriage to be 16 years (the lowest: 12) in a study they performed in Mardin province on adolescent marriages.
- TurkStat numbers related with the age of marriage are based on the data of the Central Population Administration System and show that 26% of the brides in 2006 were between the ages of 16 and 19 years (19).
- According to the the results of the Turkish Family Structure Survey, the frequency of marriage below the age of 18 years in 2011 was found to be 0.2% in men, whereas it was found to be 9.3% in women.

According to the results of these surveys, it is observed that the rate of child brides ranges between 30% and 35% in Turkey. However, studies show that the frequencies of child marriages vary according to regions and local and sociocultural patterns.

Child marriages and their impact on health

The psychological and physical development of a girl who marries is affected negatively. The child who has married at an early age has actually not completed his/her psycho-social growth and development yet. A child who is in the developmental phase is placed under a heavy burden. The role of a good bride and mother may be difficult. Marriages may lead to psychological problems as well as depression and suicide.

The effects on fertility start after marriage. Different dimensions related with many reproduction and sexual health conditions come to the fore. Fertility also starts at an early age. 90% of the young ones who do not use contraceptive methods in presence of active sexual life at an early age become pregnant in the first year. A great part of the married youngsters experience their second pregnancy before completing their youth (20).

The possibility of sexually transmitted diseases increases especially because of the physiological properties of women

Table 1. The frequencies of child marriages in different countries (10, 11)

Country	Frequency of child marriages (%)
Canada	0.6
America	3.9
England	1.7
Finland	0.6
Swiss	0.4
Japan	0.7
France	0.6
Azerbaijan	12.0
Niger	61.9
Holland	2.4
Belgium	1.6
Germany	1.2
Italy	3.0
Spain	2.3
Portugal	5.7
Greece	5.5
Argentina	12.4
Afghanistan	53.7

and as a result, their health conditions deteriorate. While pregnancy and delivery are risky in all age groups, this risk is at an unacceptable level in the childhood. The mortality risk for both the woman and the child who will be born increases. Incomplete physiological development leads to a difficult delivery and experience of a greater number of health problems (20).

The main health problems include hypertension, preeclampsia-eclampsia, anemia and bleedings and spontaneous abortus. Difficult deliveries and related tears are other important health problems. In addition, head-pelvic incompatibility, flattening of the waist pit, premature opening of the amniotic sac and complications related with the placenta are commonly observed in deliveries in this age group. Difficult delivery and postnatal complications lead to atonia and infections. Vesicovaginal or rectovaginal fistulas which occur during delivery are also among the commonly observed complications. The health of the baby who is left in this condition is affected negatively (20).

Infections including vaginitis and cystitis are commonly observed in pregnancy in the adolescence. The woman who is young may find it difficult to understand and express her problem. Thus, the time to refer to a health institution may be prolonged and sometimes she can not reach a health institution. Health problems affect the health of both the mother and the infant (20).

Child marriages separate children from their families and friends, expose them to domestic violence, jeopardize their development and the opportunities in educational, social and occupational areas. The further periods of lives of the children whose children's rights are taken away are affected negatively (24).

A look at the causes of child marriages in Turkey

Early marriages occur because of different causes including economical insufficiencies, lack of education, traditionalism and religious beliefs, wars, disasters, domestic violence and social pressures (17).

Although there are different causes of early marriages, the main ones among these include the causes related with the social structure of the community.

It was observed that the children of families with lower education levels had also similar levels of education and early marriages occurred more commonly in these children (21). According to 2008 Turkish Population and Health Survey, the education level of the woman is a factor which affects marriage with a significant extent : In Turkey, the rate of marriage in the 15-19 age group is 7.2% in illiterate girls, 7.6% in girls who are graduates of the first phase of the primary school, 1.0% in girls who are graduates of the second phase of the primary school and 3.9% in graduates of high school and above. When these frequencies are

Table 2. Medical and psychosocial problems in adolescent mothers and infants (21- 23)

Medical	Psychosocial
Mothers	Dropping out of educational institutions
Insufficient increase of body weight	Limitation in social activities
Obesity, excessive increase in body weight	Loss of occupational opportunities
Preeclampsia	Poverty
Anemia	Divorce and separation
Sexually transmitted diseases	Social isolation
Head-pelvic incompatibility	Stress/depression
Severe hemorrhagias	Substance abuse
Postnatal problems	Frequent pregnancy
Frequent pregnancy	
Disruption of general well-being	
Maternal deaths	
Infants	Growth retardation
Low birth weight	Abuse
Premature delivery	Behavioral disorders and substance abuse
Sudden infant death syndrome	Academic failure and dropping out of school
Acute infections	Unemployment and poverty
Accidents	Unwanted pregnancy
Infant deaths	

evaluated, early marriages are observed in women with low education levels.

The percent of child marriages varies according to the economical level which is involved in the base of social inequalities. The rate of onset of fertility in the 15-19 age group is 8% in the group with the lowest household income, 11.1% in the group with a low household income, 4.8% in the group with a moderate household income, 4.3% in the group with a high household income and 1.7% in the group with the highest household income (13). Number of child marriages decreases as the economical status increases.

When the literacy status in women and men are examined in Turkey, differences are noted. While the frequency of illiterate individuals between 14 and 18 years is 4 226 in men, it is 15 582 in women. As you can see, the population of illiterate women is almost four-fold higher compared to the population of illiterate men. This means that the education level of women is generally lower (24, 25). Thus, women with a low education level who do not participate in labor force become dependent in time to continue their lives and are forced to early marriages which are also accepted by the community (21).

The relation between the social structure of the family and the education level of girls can also appear as the family's pressure on the girl to discontinue her education at an early age. In some regions, it is not regarded necessary that girls complete their education. The education of girls who start to draw attention physically with adolescence is interrupted by their families with the rationale of engagement or marriage (21). In Turkey, among the 693 students who showed absenteeism because of early marriage or engagement by March 2009 in Turkey, 675 were female students and 18 were male students. A marked difference is noted against girls in East and Southeast regions.

In some families, girls are regarded as economical loads. Even the thought of a deficient dish on the table may sometimes be a factor which encourages early marriages. In addition, girls derive a profit for their families when getting married because of the bride price which is an appraised value for themselves. Families marry off their daughters at an early age both to ease the economical burden on themselves and to gain profit by way of the bride price (21). The girl who is married at an early age because of economical reasons is traded like a merchandise and never has right to speak in the family into which she has participated as a bride. She fulfils the duties given to her and complies with the situation. This situation is considered as commercial child abuse. Commercial marriage in the childhood age group may also lead to sexual abuse, pressure and violence (3).

The financial difficulties of families cause girls to be given to families with a good economical status as brides. This may sometimes lead to a competition between some families.

Sometimes, girls want these marriages with the imagination of a more comfortable life and a rich husband. Girls who imagine that they will get rid of the financial problems they have experienced while living with their families and the work load which they have been forced to bear at an early age may think of marriage as an escape way (21).

In addition to customs and traditions, religious beliefs may also accelerate early marriages. The traditional family regards their daughter as a creature which has been resigned to the them for a certain period and think her actual home is beside her husband. In the traditional approach, boys receive education at a certain level and marry after doing military service and having a job. This causes men to marry at relatively advanced ages (21).

In traditional communities, a perception related with the thought that young girls may fall in love in the process of sexual growth and development in the adolescence, define their expectations from the men whom they would marry or resist to reach her expectations may also occur. As a result of the discrimination created by social gender inequality, it is thought that especially girls should be married off before they become awake (27). In addition, it is believed by some families that early marriage would make it easier to obey the husband and adapt the new housing. Families of men want to receive possibly younger brides so as their adaptations are easier (21).

In some families, "a good marriage" of a young girl creates a marked change in the position in the communal living. This may lead to ignorance of the age and the characteristics of the man who will be married. On the other hand, the social structure inside the family and the position of the girl in the family prevent her from participating in the decisions related with partner and age to be selected. For example, in rural areas, girls can not participate in decisions related with marriage because of their social positions (11). According to 2011 Turkish Family Structure Survey, girls are married off by the procedure of "inspecting a marriagable girl" without the consent of the girl in 11.7% of the families with low socio-economical status. This is found with a rate of 11.8% in the rural areas and 9.4% in the whole of Turkey.

Rasing up girls with the thought of marriage and thoughts that they will have difficulties in the social life, if they do not marry may lead to an increase in early marriages. Warnings including "you will become an old maid", "you will have bad luck", "nobody will marry you, if your age gets older" and "marry as soon as possible and have a child" directed to young girls may be accepted as indicators of approval of early marriages (11).

Some families think that girls can be protected from sexual abuse and violence by putting them under the protection of a man as soon as possible. In addition, it is thought that these marriages will prevent girls from extramarital affairs and from becoming pregnant (21).

Different marriage applications according to the cultural pattern are also qualified as an important factor in the reduction of the age of marriage. Different marriage types include bride exchange, "betrothed in the cradle", "bride price marriage", "blood money" marriage, "co-wife" marriage and "consanguineous marriage" and these may lead to a reduction in the age of marriage (28). On the other hand, religious marriage ceremony also allows occurrence of early marriages (11). In Turkey, the rate of people who do not have a legal marriage (legally unmarried) is 7.7% and the frequency of religious marriage alone is 7.4% (30). In the 15-19 age group, the frequency of marriages with only religious marriage ceremony is found to be 30.7% (31).

Domestic violence, lack of harmony, pressure, lack of love for children, loss of the mother or father at an early age, having a stepmother or stepfather may develop the belief that the child will get rid of this situation if she marries and lead to early marriages (21).

Experience of economical and cultural change as a result of forced migration is among the factors which increase the number of marriages at an early age (21).

Although some of the laws present in our country make marriages at an early age possible, some laws include judgements related with prevention (32).

- The 12th item of the Civil Code states: "the youngster who has completed his/her 15th age can be rendered grown up by the court with his/her own will and the guardian's consent". The judge can allow a woman or man who has completed the age of 16 to marry in extraordinary situations and with an very important reason. In this case, Turkish Civil Code considers a girl who marries before completing the age of 17 as child bride. However, it is accepted according to the general judgement that a girl who has not completed the age of 17 and may be considered as child bride can marry with the decision of the judge in extraordinary conditions (11).
- The Turkish criminal Law states, "the crime of sexual abuse which is committed agains young children with the consent of the child or using force, threat, cheating or based on another reason affecting the will can be punished with prison sentence from 3 years to 8 years and if the abuse is committed by inserting an organ or another object into the body, the prison sentence will be between 8 years and 15 years" (33).
- According to the Child protection Act: "A child is defined as a person who has not completed the age of 18, though he/she has become an adolescent at an earlier age. The child who needs protection is a child whose physical, mental, moral, social and psychological development and personal safety are under threat, who is abused or neglected or who is a crime victim". Thus this act shows the necessity of protection of the child (34).

Different interpretations of these three acts make it difficult to make a definite legal interpretation and cause the views which accept these marriages to continue.

As set forth by the Civil Code in Turkey the frequency of early marriages performed by the decision of a judge is 15.5% (35). Outside the marriages which can be performed below the age of 16 with the decision of a judge, all marriages below the age of 17 are actually legally invalid. On the other hand, the unity of family which is not possible legally because of the obstacle of age is tried to be established by religious marriage and this method constitutes a legal problem in itself.

Reccomendations related with fighting against child marriages

Child marriages are mainly a social and cultural problem. They show the point of view of the state in the frame of the Children's Rights Act and its present legal structure. Prevention of child marriages with the public health point of view will be evaluated in the approach of primary prevention, detection in the early phase and prevention of health impacts will be evaluated in the approach of secondary prevention and rehabilitation of the individuals who experience problems will be evaluated in the approach of tertiary prevention.

Prevention of child marriages

Children's Rights approach

In the viewpoint of child marriages, the main protection approach should be based on social and cultural children's rights. It should be accepted that children are not miniatures of adults or an investment for the future community and have rights because they are private individuals. Therefore, positive attitudes and approaches should be adopted in the issues of awareness of children's rights, acceptance of them as private individuals and respect for their rights.

In development of an approach based on rights, the role of the family and teachers who are in the closest place is significant. Interaction with the family and teacher will contribute positively to the positive development of the child. Adoption of such an approach by the families may be provided by family counseling; for teachers it is important to provide high-level awareness related with children's rights in the preperation phase of their occupational life and participate in programs of development of positive attitudes with in-service trainings.

In addition to the interaction of the child with the teacher in school, a school environment which adopts and recognizes children's rights will allow development of a positive attitude. It is improtant that textbooks and curriculums as well as school regulations and applications are child-friendly and include children's rights.

The rights-based approach will allow to approach many different problems in the family and school in a different way. It will change the point of view for problems which exist in the background of the issues including attendance of the child to the school, the right to participate to decisions related with himself/herself and prevention of abuse.

The main method of fighting is compulsory education for girls. The importance of continuous education for 12 years is that it would provide compulsory attendance of these children to school. Thus the child would be kept away from early marriage.

Increasing the awareness about early marriages and informing

Perception of early marriages as normal by the community is one of the most important factors which inhibits prevention of the problem. The information that girls below the age of 18 are not ready for marriage physiologically and psychologically is insufficient and the view that girls can marry is accepted. In addition to unawareness, social acceptance causes girls to marry at an early age. Acceptance of marriages by the community is an obstacle in front of legal notice.

The awareness of each fraction of the community about child marriages should be increased and the importance of the institution of marriage should be explained. The messages which are aimed to be transferred to the community should be accurate and understandable. It is important that these messages reach a great fraction in regions where such marriages are common.

- In addition to healthcare givers, teachers, media, imams and artists should give messages to the community knowing that they are models.
- Lawyers and advocates should know and interpret the acts well and provide consciousness in the community.
- Studies about the media which has an important role in the awareness of the community should be increased. The media can provide an increase in punishments and formation of a high reaction by the community by acting more responsibly in the lawsuits opened.
- Non-governmental organizations should focus on this issue and increase the interest about the issue by arranging different activities.

Both introductory films which will increase the awareness about the issue and campaigns should be prepared both locally and nationally in a larger-scale fashion and cooperation with the state should be exercised.

Strengthening of the socioeconomical structure

In families with strengthened socio-economical structure, the reason for early marriage will be eliminated with a great extend. In this area, intervention by the state in the stage of supporting the social and economical structure of the family is essential. When it is supported that families are prospered by providing them employment possibilities,

families withdraw from the thought of marrying the child off and have the chance to make a preference for sending her to school.

Elimination of the legal obstacles

It is possible to state that the definition of child bride changes in the Turkish Legal System according to the act. There is a contradiction between the acts. This is also valid for boys. Prevention of early marriages is possible by close monitoring of the application of the present Civil Code. The problem of early marriage will be started to be solved by better application of the present legal regulations and adaptation of the present contradiction to the Children's Rights Act. Another reason for this contradiction is the point of view of the community (32,33,34). It is important to eliminate the incompatibility between the acts as well as establishing the mechanisms which allow application and supervision of these acts.

Detection in the early period and application of the enforcements

During performance of child marriages, it is expected that some fractions of the community have a greater awareness:

- Teachers spend long periods with students in schools. Teachers may play a key role in the stage of consciousness-raising and follow-up in risky areas in terms of child marriages. The reasons of students for leaving school should be evaluated and the legal procedures related with the children who are married off should be forced to be performed.
- The healthcare personel should be informed about this issue and be able to give voice to the subject. In child marriages, the procedures should be performed legally.
- Imams should warn the families who want to performed religious marriage without legal marriage about obeying the acts and should not be involved in the process.
- The state should take its position as the main power in protecting children's rights. In this subject, various and comprehensive studies should be performed to demonstrate the status and its reasons. Early detection can be provided by a good "surveillance" net.

Enforcements should be applied when the acts are disrespected in the issue of child and young marriages. Non-governmental organizations and the media should be involved primarily in these studies. Different structures established by non-governmental organizations may contribute to strengthening these programs and prevention of early marriages.

Presentation of young-friendly approach services

Centers which may support the young ones who get married at an early age because of social pressure, but who

have exceeded the legal limit should determine the young-friendly approaches. It is important that counselling is offered in the issue of problems related with early marriages and solution methods in these centers. The young ones who get married at an early age are not very ready for marriage and for becoming parents. In cases where pregnancies occur and continue, health monitoring should be done in terms of risky pregnancies.

It is very important to offer possibilities of distance education with a directive approach in the issue of uncompleted education and to offer a chance of university in terms of overcoming the situation.

Inability of the child to continue education and a negative position in the community threaten the freedom of self-expression which is a human right. A minor individual most of the time loses the state of being a "child" and also protection which it brings with it (3).

Child marriages strenghten the present unequal position of the woman in the community. They establish barriers in benefiting from education, health and employment possibilities. Applications which increase the status of the woman in the community should be generalized. In this way, it is possible to prevent this transmission form generation to generation and reverse the "generation effect".

Conclusively, early marriages are one of the important problems of children and women in the community. In terms of public health, early marriages should be prevented, the contradictions in this area should be eliminated, the awareness on this issue should be increased and the state should monitor the issue independent of the reason. Monitoring and evaluating the methods applied in the country and making changes when necessary are among the main responsibilities of the state. While acts should be readjusted and their applications should be monitored, the awareness of children and families about acts should be raised. The state should monitor applications and should be attentive to cooperate with non-govenmental organizations and the media. All kinds of interventions should be planned and monitored to reach all layers of the community with different cultural and social background.

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