Socio-demographic Correlates of Child Marriages: A Study from Turkey

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Abstract

The present study was aimed at determining the factors affecting women's decisions of early marriage. The study sample comprised 651 women who were in the 30 and under age group, and had gotten married during their childhood. The study data were collected using the questionnaire developed by the researchers through a literature review. In the present study, those who had Romani ethnic origin, who were primary school graduates, who had parents with lower education and/or whom had low income got married at a younger age. Most of the women who had early marriages were unemployed and vulnerable to spousal violence. It was determined that the women who had love marriages at an early age regretted getting married more compared to those who had arranged marriages and the vast majority of the former ones stated that they would have continued their education if they had not gotten married at an early age. Given the causes of early marriages, it is recommended that women in the at-risk group should be educated about the negative aspects of early marriages that women who have gotten married at an early age and seek support should be helped and that child marriages should be discouraged by preparing stricter legal sanctions.

Keywords Child · Child brides · Child marriages

Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Child Protection Law define a child as any person who has not completed his 18th year of age. (https://www.unicef.org/turkey/crc/_cr23c.html, Access Date: May 20, 2017; http://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.5395.pdf, Access Date: May 20, 2017). Therefore, child marriage is defined as marriage entered into by an individual before reaching the age of 18 (Speizer and Pearson 2011; Erulkar 2013). In the world, there are more than 60 million marriages before the age of 18. UNICEF has emphasized that child marriage deprives children of rights to health, nutrition, education, and abstinence from violence/exploitation/abuse, and that it is the violation of child rights (Raj 2010; Mahato 2016).

According to the UNICEF (2014), between 2011 and 2020, 140 million girls (about 40,000 a day) will have been married at an early age (Wodon 2015). Child marriage is an internationally recognized health and human rights violation that disproportionately affects girls around the world (Raj 2010). According to many international conventions, early marriages not only prevent girls from effectively using opportunities for schooling (Nour 2006; Erulkar and Muthengi 2009) but also can also lead to health risks resulting from having early sexual intercourses and pregnancy, including sexually transmitted diseases and maternal deaths, and malnutrition and deaths of children if they have any (Hotchkiss et al. 2016; Butt and Naveed 2015). Child marriages not only lead to psychological problems, partner violence, depression and suicides (Wodon 2015; Anik and Barlin 2017; Özcebe and Biçer 2013; Hotchkiss et al. 2016) but also cause girls to suffer social and financial problems (Udgiri 2017). In their study, Godha et al. found that child marriages were associated with recurrent childbirth, contraceptive use, female sterilization, termination of pregnancy, unintended pregnancy and inadequate use of maternal health services (Godha et al. 2013).

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It has been reported that early marriages are more common in uneducated and rural communities (Gaffney-Rhys 2011; Udgiri 2017) and that those who have early marriages generally come from poor families or families with low levels of education (Nour 2006; Nasrullah et al. 2014).

As to Turkey, men and women who reach the age of 18 can legally marry, and in exceptional circumstances, the judge may allow those who reach the age of 17 to marry (https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/kanlar/k4721.html, Date of access May 20, 2017). Among exceptional circumstances are the girl's becoming pregnant or losing her virginity (Boran et al. 2013). The fact that girls are married much earlier than are boys poses more serious problems for girls, which suggests that studies on early marriages should focus on girls more (Özcebe and Biçer 2013). In Turkey, the general tendency regarding men's marriage age is that they get married after they complete their compulsory military service and start working (Güler and Küçüker 2010).

Studies on child marriage in Turkey are very few. Studies on the subject have shown that living in rural areas in the eastern provinces and parents' and children's low education or socioeconomic levels, etc. have been shown to increase the likelihood of a girl's being a child bride. According to data released by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT) in 2017, the proportion of legal child marriages for girls aged 16–17 is 4.2% of all the legal marriages. This rate in the city of Edirne where the present study was conducted is 6.1%, which is above average in Turkey. (http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=27596, Access date April 21, 2018).

In another study, it was stated that to determine the exact proportion of early marriages, the number of those who had religious marriages should be added to the number of officially married ones. From this perspective, the rate of child marriages in Turkey should cover at least 30–35% of all the marriages. In this case, it can be said that one out of every three marriages in Turkey is a child marriage (Gök 2016). Therefore, prevention of child marriages in Turkey is an issue that should be dealt with urgently.

It is thought that the results of the present study may contribute to the literature within this regard and may guide those interested in the issue when they take precautions to prevent child marriages. Prevention of child marriages is crucial because this will contribute not only to women's personal development, participation in workforce, financial independence, health, but also to the health of children they will give birth to, and therefore to the mental health of the community. This descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted to determine correlates and consequences of child marriages.

In the light of this purpose, answers to the following questions were sought.

Questions:

1. What are the correlates and consequences of early marriage?
2. Do women who are married early agree to early marriages?
3. Are women who get married at an early age exposed to violence? If so, to what extent?
4. Do women who are married early regret that?
5. If women who are married early were not married early, how would their lives differ?

Methods

Sample and Setting

The study sample comprised women in the 30 and under age group, living in the province and districts of Edirne, and having gotten married during their childhood.

While determining the sample of the study, it was planned to reach women under 30 years of age who had been married at early ages. However, unfortunately, we could not find any data on the age groups of child marriages by provinces in Turkey. According to the data released in 2013, the number of married women in the 20–24 age group is known. Therefore, because women under 30 years of age were targeted, of the women in the 20–24 age group, those who were assumed to have child marriages were selected as a sample group (Statistical counseling was received). In 2013, the total number of women in all age groups in the districts of Edirne was 165,259. The number of married women was 106,949 (Selected Showcases Edirne 2013). Hence, of the women in Edirne province, 64.716% were married and 35.284% were single. Because married women in the 20–24 age group were reached when the sample size was calculated, the calculation was based on this data.

The formula used for calculation: PXQXZ2/d2
The number of all women: 165,259
The number of married women: 106,949 (64.716%)
The percentage of single women: 35.284%.
Z: 1, 96
d: 1
Because the number of people in the population is known "p" refers to the proportion of population elements that have a particular attribute (0.5)
"z" refers to a standardized score (1.96)

The result of the formula is 2283.44 people, which constituted the general population of the present study. However, of these people, those in the 20–24 age group were the ones to be investigated in the study. Of the women in the 20–24 age group, 64.716% were assumed to be married. The population of the married women in the 20–24 age group was

9984. Based on the percentage of child marriages in Turkey, 15.5% of these married women were thought to have had early marriages, which equals to 1549 women. When the size of the population was 2500, the sample size was calculated as 651 people with an error of 0.03 and p: 0.2, q: 0.8. Based on this value, it was aimed to reach the aforementioned numbers for the provincial center and districts of the province.

The questionnaires were filled in through face-to-face interviews. The questionnaires with missing responses were excluded from the study. The 24-item questionnaire consists of 23 closed-ended questions and 1 open-ended question. The open-ended question is as follows: "What do you think about your early marriage now?" (What is your current opinion about your early marriage?") The responses to this question were grouped according to the majority of responses (having regrets about getting married early, not having any regrets about getting married early). The data collection was not performed at a certain place. Women in the hospital garden, in the street or women who brought the children to the Family Health Center were asked whether they had an early marriage. Of them, those who said they got married before the age of 18 and volunteered to participate in the survey were administered the questionnaire. While the data were collected, attention was paid to privacy.

Data Collection Tools

The study data were collected using the questionnaire developed through a literature review.

The questionnaire included 24 items questioning the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants such as age, gender and ethnicity and the factors affecting the decision of early marriage, and if women who are married early were not married early, how their lives would differ.

Procedure

Ethical Issues

Before the study was conducted, the approval of the Ethics Committee of Trakya University Faculty of Medicine Department of Scientific Research (dated September 27, 2017 and numbered TÜTF-BAEK 2017/242) and the permission of the governorate of Edirne province (dated October 12, 2017 and numbered 82864187-492-E.8982) were obtained.

In the study, the questionnaire was administered to the participants in an environment where they could feel comfortable by taking into account their privacy and ensuring the confidentiality of the data to be obtained from them.

Data Analysis

The study data were analyzed using the SPSS for Windows (version 18.0, Chicago, SPSS Inc.). Percentages, mean values and the Chi square test were used in the analysis of the data. p values < 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Results

Table 1 gives the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants of the study. Of the participants, 45.6% had Romani ethnic origin, 69% were primary school graduates, 63.3% had husbands who were primary school graduates, 53% had illiterate mothers and 66.4% had fathers with a primary school education. The vast majority of the participants stated that they themselves made the decision of marriage and that they had love marriages where the individuals love each other and they do not necessarily obtain consent of their parents to get married.

In Table 2, of the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, marriage age is presented. Of the participants, those who had Romani origin got married earlier than did those who had Turkish or Kurdish origin (p = 0.000). The comparison of the educational status of the participants revealed that those who graduated from primary school got married earlier than did those who were illiterate or high school graduates (p = 0.000). In the present study, the prevalence of early marriages increased as the education level of the parents decreased. It was also determined that spouses of the participants who got married at a younger age were mostly primary school graduates. In the present study, the lower the financial level of the parents was, the higher the prevalence of early marriages was. As the marriage age increased, so did rate of the employment among the participants. In addition, the women who got married at the age of 16 or under were more vulnerable to spousal violence than were the women who got married at the age of 17.

Table 3 shows the results regarding how the marriage decision was made. Those who had love marriages at an early age regretted getting married at an early age and were exposed to spousal violence more than those who had arranged marriages where the bride and groom are selected by family members, such as parents (p = 0.000). If people who got married at an early age by their own preference had not gotten married at an early age they might have had a greater number of positive changes in their lives than might those who had arranged marriages. For instance, they might have continued their education, had financial freedom, and been happier and healthier (p = 0.000).

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

Sociodemographic characteristics	n	%
Ethnic origin		
Turkish	252	38.7
Romani	297	45.6
Kurdish	56	8.6
Pomak	46	7.1
Educational status		
Illiterate	95	14.6
Primary school graduates	449	69.0
High school graduates	107	16.4
Spouses' educational status		
Illiterate	56	8.6
Primary school graduates	412	63.3
High school graduates	183	28.1
Educational status of the mother		
Illiterate	345	53
Primary school graduates	306	47
Educational status of the father		
Illiterate	219	33.6
Primary school graduates	432	66.4
Economic level of the parents		
Income equal to expenses	347	53.3
Income less than expenses	260	39.9
Income more than expenses	44	6.8
Type of marriage		
Love marriages	524	80.5
Arranged marriages	127	19.5
Factors leading to early marriages		
Exposure to domestic violence at parents' home	64	9.8
Low parental economic status	62	9.5
Desire to leave parents' home due to lack of peaceful environment	104	16.0
Love of prospective husband	421	64.7
Demand for bride token		
Yes	142	21.8
No	509	78.2
The number of children		
None	75	11.5
One	222	34.1
Two	236	36.3
Three or more	118	18.1
Age gap between spouses		
1–5 years	425	65.3
6–10 years	226	34.7
Current opinion about her early marriage		
Having regrets about getting married early,	231	35.5
Not having any regrets about getting married early	420	64.5
Type of spousal violence		
No violence	514	79.0
Physical abuse	41	6.3
Psychological abuse	48	7.3

Table 1 (continued)

Sociodemographic characteristics	n	%
Economic violence	28	4.3
All types of violence	20	3.1
Negative consequences of early marriages		
Having to leave education	277	42.5
Not having financial freedom	90	13.8
Unhappiness	79	12.1
Loss of health	40	6.1

Discussion

In the literature, it has been reported that in countries with high rates of child marriages, maternal and infant mortality rates are high, that poor maternal and child health is widespread (Raj and Boehmer 2013), that psychological problems are widespread among child brides (Strat et al. 2011), and that health problems as serious as suicidal attempts emerge. Child marriage is an important public health issue that must be prevented. In the present study, it was aimed to determine causes and consequences of child marriages. Thus, possible precautions to be taken can be planned.

The results of the present study revealed that of the participants, those who had Romani origin got married earlier than did those who had Turkish or Kurdish origin. In Turkey, the prevalence of early marriages is high in rural areas, and Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia Regions and among those with Romani ethnic origin. In a study investigating child marriages among Romani people in Turkey, the rate of early marriages among girls was determined as 50% (Taylan 2016). It is thought that not only should the social projects be developed to increase the education level and socio-cultural integration of Romani citizens, but also the problem of early marriages among them should be dealt with on a political basis so that they can integrate with the rest of the society.

In the present study, primary school graduates got married earlier than did those who were illiterate or high school graduates. In the literature, it is stated that there is interplay between the education level and child marriage; while the education level affects the decision of child marriages, (Strat et al. 2011), child marriages prevent these people from receiving education (Nguyen and Wodon 2015). According to the data from the Turkey Family Structure Survey in 2011, of those who got married under the age of 18, 42.5% did not finish primary school, 19.0% were primary school graduates (http://ailetoplum.aile.gov.tr/data/5550af1d369dc51954e43522/taya2013trk.pdf, Accessed date, 17 May 2018). The low level of education of women is both the cause and consequence of early marriage of girls (Kaptanoglu and Ergçöçmen 2012). While girls who do not have

Table 2 Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants related to the marriage age

The marriage age	≤ 15 n (%)	16 n (%)	17 n (%)	p değeri
Ethnic origin				
Turkish	19 (19.8)	72 (32.9)	161 (47.9)	0.000**
Romani	67 (69.8)	105 (47.9)	125 (37.2)	
Kurdish	5 (5.2)	24 (11.0)	27 (8)	
Pomak	5 (5.2)	18 (8.2)	23 (6.8)	
Total	96 (100)	219 (100)	336 (100)	
Educational status				
Illiterate	33 (34.4)	22 (10)	40 (11.9)	0.000**
Primary school graduates	59 (61.5)	170 (77.6)	220 (65.5)	
High school graduates	4 (4.2)	27 (12.3)	76 (22.6)	
Total	96 (100)	219 (100)	336 (100)	
Spouses' education				
Illiterate	19 (19.8)	17 (7.8)	20 (6)	0.000**
Primary school graduates	57 (59.4)	148 (67.6)	207 (61.6)	
High school graduates	20 (20.8)	54 (24.7)	109 (32.4)	
Total	96 (100)	219 (100)	336 (100)	
Educational status of the mother				
Illiterate	73 (76)	119 (74.3)	153 (45.5)	0.000**
Primary school graduates	23 (24)	100 (45.7)	183 (54.5)	
Total	96 (100)	219 (100)	336 (100)	
Educational status of the father				
Illiterate	53 (55.2)	67 (30.6)	99 (29.5)	0.000**
Primary school graduates	43 (44.8)	152 (69.4)	237 (70.5)	
Total	96 (100)	219 (100)	336 (100)	
Economic level of the parents				
Income equal to expenses	43 (46.9)	112 (51.1)	192 (57.1)	0.003**
Income less than expenses	51 (53.1)	92 (42)	117 (34.8)	
Income more than expenses	0 (0)	15 (6.8)	27 (8)	
Total	94 (100)	219 (100)	336 (100)	
Working status				
Employed	14 (14.6	36 (16.4)	85 (25.3)	.012*
Unemployed	82 (85.4)	183 (83.6)	251 (74.7)	
Total	96 (100)	219 (100)	336 (100)	
Being exposed to violence constantly				
Yes	21 (15.3)	61 (44.5)	55 (40.1)	0.005**
No	75 (14.6)	158 (30.7)	281 (54.7)	
Total	96	219	336	

Chi square analysis,*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

healthy decision-making skills due to their low levels of education may marry at an early age, those who get engaged or married at an early age may have to leave their education. Given that those having compulsory education are not allowed to get married, extension of compulsory education age to 18 years may prevent child marriages. In addition, in the present study, it was determined that spouses of women who married at a young age were mostly primary school graduates. This result shows that the spouses of the child brides have homogenous characteristics. That individuals who grow up in the same culture and region have similar characteristics is something expected. In the present study, most of the mothers and fathers of people married at a young age were illiterate or had low-income levels. Similar to the present study, in Envuladu et al. 2016 study, it was found that early marriage was more prevalent among girls whose parents had lower levels of education. In their study, Hotch-kiss et al. 2016 found that child marriage was associated with a number of socio-economic characteristics, including welfare, education and place of residence of households.

Table 3 The results regarding how the marriage decision was made

The marriage decision	Love marriages n (%)	Arranged marriages n (%)	Statistical analysis	
			Chi square analysis	p value
Regret about getting married at an early age				
Yes	149 (64.5)	82 (35.5)	58.295	0.000**
No	375 (89.3)	45 (10.7)		
Exposure to spousal violence				
Yes	87 (63.5)	50 (36.5)	31.889	0.000**
No	437 (85)	77 (15)		
Negative consequences of early marriages[a]				
Having to leave education	232 (83.8)	45 (16.2)	36.193	0.000**
Not having financial freedom	69 (76.7)	21 (16.7)		
Unhappiness	46 (58.2)	33 (41.8)		
Loss of health	30 (75)	10 (25)		

[a]One participant gave more than one response **p < 0.01

In the literature, it is stated that those from poorer families marry at a younger age (Nasrin and Rahman 2012; Ali et al. 2014; Mahato 2016). Given that the socio-economic level of the family affects people's decision of child marriages, awareness-raising trainings should be provided for people of low-socio-economic status, and their awareness of the consequences of early marriage should be raised.

In the present study, it was determined that as the marriage age of the participants increased so did the rate of employment among them. It is obvious that the right of a girl who marries at a young age to education is prevented, and that she cannot work or voice her wish that she wants to work. In the literature, it is stated that getting married or being a mother at an early age has a negative effect on job finding (Machio et al. 2017). Taking into account this fact, efforts should be made to increase women's participation in employment.

In the literature, it has been reported that marriage in childhood poses a high risk for partner violence and other forms of violence (Wodon 2015). In line with the literature, in the present study, the women who got married at the age of 16 or under were more vulnerable to spousal violence than were the women who got married at the age of 17. In their study, Speizer and Pearson 2011 also found that early marriage increased the risk of partner violence. While the rate of exposure to physical and/or sexual violence in those who marry before the age of 18 was 50.1% at any stage of life, it was 33% in those who marry after 18 years of age (Prevalence of violence against women 2015). It seems that child marriage deprives a girl of right to education, prevents her from getting financial freedom because she does not work and prevents her from protecting her own rights. A girl having a child marriage is taught that she is to be dominated by her husband, and that she is supposed to comply with the rules set up by her husband. Another negative consequence of child marriage is that the girl is more likely to be exposed to domestic violence.

In the present study, those who had love marriages at an early age regretted doing so and were exposed to spousal violence more than those who had arranged marriages. A greater number of positive changes such as continuing education, having financial freedom, being happier and healthier are expected to occur in the lives of people who get married at an early age by their own preference if they do not get married at an early age than in the lives of those who have arranged marriages. In order to investigate the factors leading to this result, qualitative studies to be conducted with women who have made early marriages can provide data that are more detailed.

Conclusion

In the present study, it was determined that of the participants, those who had Romani ethnic origin, who were primary school graduates, and who had parents with low education and low income got married at a younger age. Also, most of the participants who married at a younger age did not work and were subjected to spousal violence. According to their statements, the participants who made love marriages at an early age regretted doing so more than did those who had arranged marriages, and the vast majority of the former participants would have continued their education if they had not married at an early age. This suggests that community mental health nurses and forensic nurses should identify people in the at-risk group and provide them with training on the negative aspects of child marriages, and that they should assume an active role in the prevention of such marriages.

In addition, in cooperation with other disciplines, they should help women to be more productive, provide job opportunities for them, plan interventions to improve those women's physical and mental health, and help women exposed to violence by offering them psychological counseling and guidance.

It is recommended that community-based studies with larger samples should be carried out to clearly understand the factors associated with women's early marriage decisions. In addition, poor families should be officially warned and encouraged to educate their daughters and be informed about the negative consequences of child marriages. It is recommended that trainings to be given should first target the regions and communities where the child marriages are most common. Among the other precautions to be taken is to have girls receive at least high school education.

Limitations of the Study

The present study was carried out in only one province, Edirne. Therefore, the results obtained from this study are applicable only to people surveyed and cannot be generalized to people in all the provinces of Turkey, which is one of the limitations of the study. Another limitation of the study is that no additional scales were used in the study. In future studies, scales that measure the psychological health of women can also be used. In addition, there is a need for studies to investigate effects of child marriages on child health outcomes.

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