

PUSHING BOUNDARIES OR PULLING NORMS? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE CASES OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT: *From the perspectives of the interviewees, this research studies the role of traditions in child marriage as a social and cultural phenomenon in Turkey. This exploratory study focuses on the narratives of a group of Turkish women who married in their childhood. These sorts of marriages are one of the hot topics of sociology and social policy as an interdisciplinary academic field. There has been a profound change concerning attitudes towards marriages over the last years: even for those from conservative families, there is no hesitation in saying that culture and norms radically shaped marriages in the past, resulting in a child or early marriage. As stated, the results suggest that marriage patterns have been changing radically. This shift from past to present concerning marriage patterns results from many parameters like technological progress, improvements in education, social media, urbanization, the usage of popular culture outlets such as TV programs, talk shows, documentaries, platforms like Netflix, Disney Plus, and so on. However, early marriage still occurs in particular regions of the country. The present study details the outcomes of qualitative research conducted in Turkey on respondents who married when they were children. It demonstrates that cultural factors played a certain role in these sorts of marriages. The snowball technique was applied to identify the interviewees, and thematic and content analysis were utilized to analyze the qualitative data. As a result of the research, four categories and ten themes correlated with child marriage were verified.*

KEYWORDS: *social policy, child marriage, cultural factors, in-depth interviews*

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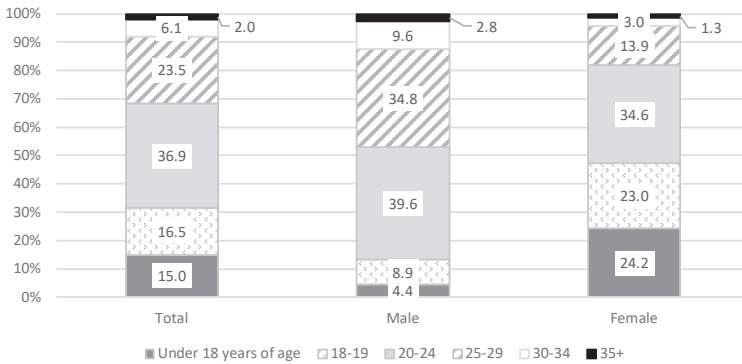
INTRODUCTION

Child marriage, the marriage of an individual under 18, is one of the key topics in sociology and social policy around the world, including in Turkey. Because these marriage patterns are regarded as a direct form of human rights violation (Mehra et al. 2018), many scientific papers and or reports are available about this issue (Malatyali 2014; Boran et al. 2013; Yüksel–Yüksel 2014; Gök 2016; Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu – Ergöçmen 2014). However, the universality of these studies and their concern about the problem in relation to cross-cultural norms, especially within the framework of Turkey, is quite limited. It has been stated that culture is a sort of “pushing” or “driving” component in these marriages (Chakraborty 2019); thus, the primary objective of this study is to scrutinize the case based on this understanding. As a matter of fact, there is a trilogy in terms of addressing the matter because the vast majority of scholars refer to the phenomenon using the term “child marriage” (Yüksel–Koçtürk 2021; Yılmaz et al. 2022;

Chort et al. 2022), which is common to the literature while others claim that the term “early marriage” should be used (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu – Ergöçmen 2014; Baysak et al. 2021). On the other hand, some scholars assess the issue as an “adolescent problem” or “adolescent pregnancy” (Şen–Kavlak 2011; Stevens-Simon – McAnarney 1996; Klein – Committee on Adolescence 2005; Fleming et al. 2015; Holness 2015; Hockaday et al. 2000; Kaufman et al. 2001; Creatsas–Elsheikh 2002; Omar et al. 2010).

Despite major declines in the number of child marriages over the last two decades, the issue still poses a significant threat to many in Turkey. According to a dataset containing marriage statistics from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) from 2022, the official rate of child marriage decreased from 7.3% of all marriages in 2002 to 2.3% in 2021, which indicates a gigantic shift (TUIK 2022). Also, considering the 30-year trend (1978–2008) of marriage patterns, Turkey is on the correct path since the Turkish Fertility Survey in 1978 and Turkey Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS) in 2008 revealed that the proportion of all women, at the age of 20 and 24 who had married before the age of 18 declined from 38% in 1978 to 14% in 2008 (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu – Ergöçmen 2014: 1707). However, this does not prove that the problem has been eliminated in the country, and this challenge, as a type of human rights violation, is still present in one way or another (UNICEF 2020a; Mehra et al. 2018).

Figure 1. Age at first marriage by gender, 2021 (% of population aged 15 and above)



Source: Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK 2023).

Note: Due to the rounding distributions may not add up to exactly 100%.

The main goal of the current research is to identify the cultural or traditional factors behind child marriage in a district located in the middle of Turkey. The motivating idea is to emphasize how customs effectively shape these marriage patterns. For this purpose, the article is divided into two sections. The first step is outlining and clarifying the related discursive practice by analyzing the traditional factors regarding child marriage. This section of the research aims to comprehend how customs are significant in the occurrence of these marriages. The second part delivers a qualitative analysis of ten women’s perceptions to understand the normative values behind this type of marriage.

Grounded upon an exploratory study, this research examines the current situations of these women, the reasons behind their marriages, and the cultural and social factors that play a crucial role in this problem. The study involves an in-depth analysis that helps understand the matter in an overall manner. There are several contributions of the research to the literature. First and foremost, it is unique in its assessment of the driving factors behind child marriage in Turkey from a cultural point of view. In particular, it analyzes the cultural and social norms that push children or adolescents to marry at a very young age. Additionally, it reveals the role of religion as a legitimating factor. What is more, it also provides an overview of pulling and pushing factors behind child marriage in the region, including kinships, neighborhoods, relatives, etc. The research also portrays the problems in early marriages, respondents’ positive and/or negative attitudes towards these marriages, their reactions, and the dowry problem in a qualitative manner.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditions as pushing instruments for child marriage: a cause-and-effect approach

Traditions play a more significant role in settling marriages within particular communities (Horii 2020; Hobsbawm – Ranger eds. 1983). Therefore, the question is, what kind of traditional factors exist, and what is the extent and effect of these norms? Of course, this depends and shifts from culture to culture, yet there are major and predefined cultural motifs. Concerning the reasons for child marriage, some studies consider religion to be an integral part of traditional values (Hashemi 2007: 194). According to research conducted by Ghosh (2011: 312–315) (1) the patriarchal system, (2) religion, and kinship are the major constituents of these norms. Jacobson (2012) additionally references the fact that patriarchy, or in his words, an “honor-based society” that operates along with tribal values, is the main dynamic of child marriage. Lee-Rife et al. (2012) stress the idea that (1) traditions, (2) poverty, and (3) dowry can be regarded as three fundamental causes of this phenomenon.

Scholars like Stith (2015), Bakare et al. (2020), Chowdhury (2009), and Ezejiofor (2011) stress the idea that marriage decisions are taken in a patriarchal manner and daughters are not involved in the process, which is similar in Turkey. The father is an authoritative figure in these families, and he decides everything, including the nature of the marriage (Stith 2015; Bakare et al. 2020; Chowdhury 2009; Ezejiofor 2011). Sometimes, other men and women in the household or from the family can represent the patriarchy (Yıldız 2018). According to Davis (1955), Sabbe et al. (2015), and Vega-Gomez – Galan-Ladero (2019), these sorts of marriages commonly take place in developing or underdeveloped countries. Therefore, the problem also has economic, cultural, and financial dimensions (Davis 1955; Sabbe et al. 2015; Vega-Gomez – Galan-Ladero 2019). Additionally, the issue of “dowry,” which indicates the profitability of the arrangement, is the other motivating instrument behind these marriages in Turkey. Like commodities, daughters, at a very young age, are traded or merchandised in return for money.

According to the TDHS conducted in 2008, 14% of families push their daughters to marry in this way due to the dowry (Chort et al. 2022: 3; Özcebe–Biçer 2013: 89; Yüksel-Kaptanoglu – Ergocmen 2012). The Ministry of Family and Social Policies in Turkey assesses child marriage as a “socio-cultural” problem, indicating that diverse factors such as traditions, cultural norms, values, religious beliefs, and perceptions about the value of girls and their place in society perpetuate this matter (Ministry of Family and Social Policies 2015). Sometimes, these marriages can be “optional” or “compelled” (Yiğit 2016)

because of a loss in the family, violence or pressure within the family, the need to care for stepparents, financial problems, etc. In all these cases, the daughters may regard early marriages as a solution to or means of escape from these challenges (Durdu–Yelboğa 2016).

Consequences of child marriage: an overview

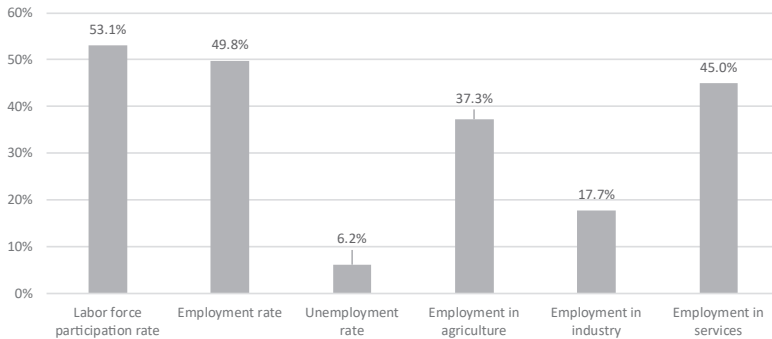
In this part of the research, the consequences of child marriage are briefly mentioned. Both individually and socially, there are variable effects and results. These can range from mental health disorders to psychiatric problems (Le Strat et al. 2011) and, in some cases, lead to suicide attempts (Gage 2013). According to the studies of Soylu and Ayaz (2013), 45.8% of girls subjected to early marriages were diagnosed with a specific psychiatric disorder. Women or their babies having medical complications due to early marriage is another problem (Seçkin et al. 2016). Moreover, these sorts of marriages reduce the chance of pursuing education, which leads to poverty, low wages, unequal distribution of income, and unemployment (Paul 2019). Women segregated from economic life and labor markets owing to their low level of education are displaced from society not only culturally but also socially. Verbal and physical violence is another outcome of child marriage. According to the formerly conducted studies, many of those who marry at the age of 17 or below are subject to verbal violence, and 57.4% endured physical violence too (Kurt et al. 2018). This paves the way for child marriage procedures like the chains (cycle), and the whole of society's economic components may be disrupted if one part of this organism is ruined. This claim is valid for those who marry at a very young age and the societies in which this happens.

INFORMATION ON THE ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE SPECIFIED REGION

To understand whether there is a correlation between economic status or activity and the proportion of child marriage, it is important to look at the region's financial framework. Economically, the region has great potential, but several problems, like high unemployment rates, immigration, and low labor force participation, are evident. Despite organized industrial zones and the city's proximity to Ankara, the capital of Turkey, as well as economic stimulus packages for the region and the existence of universities and community colleges, the diversification of economic activities is quite limited, and the city

cannot utilize its physical, economic, and social capital at a desired level. Rather than private sector investment, state-dominated initiatives and an agriculture-oriented economy are shared features (www.kuzka.gov.tr; www.catso.org.tr). The agricultural economy is still strong regarding employment, but the job-creation capacity of industry and the service sector is lower than average (see Figure 2). A comparison of the situation indicates that the region's financial infrastructure and investment capacity were not so promising in the past. Hence, it is not surprising that economic affairs were one of the main impetuses for child marriage in this region.

Figure 2. Labor market outlook of TR 82 level cities (Cankiri, Kastamonu, Sinop) in Turkey in 2022 (%)



Source: Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

The ultimate objective of this research is to reveal the push and pull forces behind child marriage in Turkey and related procedures and outcomes. Content and thematic discourse analyses, frequently used as qualitative research techniques, were selected as the research methods. For this analysis, five steps were followed by the researcher: compiling (Step 1), disassembling (Step 2), reassembling (Step 3), interpreting (Step 4), and concluding (Step 5) (see Figure 3.) Using these methods, analytical frames and several thematic categorizations rather than a numerical dataset emerge (Kłonkowska 2022: 409). The study, which is an exploratory investigation of the situations of the respondents, included ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with women who had been married as children in Cankiri, Turkey. The research was

carried out between October 2017 and January 2018. On average, each interview lasted between 40–60 minutes.

Figure 3. *Phases of research (main framework) and data analysis procedures*



Source: Castleberry–Nolen (2018: 807–815).

All informants were from the middle of the country and the same region in Turkey, which is culturally and/or politically conservative and nationalist. In other words, culture and political views dominate life from top to bottom here, even regarding marriage. Due to all these specific reasons, females, at least in the past, were more prone to child marriage, which is not the case for the western and southern sides of the country, where vast investments have been made in parallel with the development of industrialization. Unlike the middle and the eastern parts, the country’s western and southern sides are more secular, democratic, leftist, and urbanized. Therefore, the sample was selected from the middle of the country. However, it should also be noted that marriage behavior and patterns have shifted throughout the country.

Sampling

Using the snowball technique, the research participants were recruited from those who defined themselves as “child brides” due to their marriage at a young age. For this purpose, ten women exposed to the problem of child marriage were selected as the sample of the research. Ten in-depth semi-structured interviews were implemented to gather qualitative data. All participants are from Turkey, and virtually all are in their forties and fifties. Apart from one, all of them were undereducated. In the research, participants were coded from “P1” to “P10” in a consecutive way. Here, “P” stands for participant in the study.

Semi-structured interviews, transcription and coding

The study collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews to measure and define the potential reasons for child marriage and their results. While forming the interview questions and categorical and thematic coding

procedures, expert opinions were used to collect reliable data. The interviews were conducted in Turkish and later translated into English with selected citations. Including the demographic factors, eleven questions were asked of the participants, and all were recorded in detail. The interviewees were informed about the purpose and the scope of the research, and their consent was obtained before the interviews. Data was collected, recorded, and transcribed in line with the qualitative study procedures and content and thematic analysis methods. The interviews were developed using a form that was split into several categories in order to obtain reliable, generalizable, and valid results. This strategy also facilitated the coding procedures of the research. The transcribed data were read repeatedly, and key statements concerning the traditional factors behind child marriage were identified. Moving from here, the research's codes, categories, and themes were identified. Four categories, including causes (Category A), the process of child marriage (Category B), the results (Category C), and participants' assessments about child marriage (Category D) were created. In relation to these categories, ten themes in total, all of which are referenced in the results section in detail, were detected qualitatively.

Research questions

Research questions can be crucial for shedding light on an issue and determining the dimensions and the reasons behind a particular problem. In the current case, the following research questions guided the research described in the article:

- Q1: What variables are correlated with child marriage?
- Q2: How and in what way does culture affect the occurrence of child marriage?
- Q3: What are the respondents' attitudes, beliefs, and reactions towards child marriage?
- Q4: What is the role of the family, relatives, and others in this type of marriage?
- Q5: Do religion and the dowry problem constitute a notable driver of child marriage?

FINDINGS

Demographically, all the women were between forty and fifty. Their age at the time of marriage was between 13 and 18. The participants' average age at marriage was 15.6 years. The age at which they were married was identified

during the data collection. Only one of them was educated (secondary school graduate). Most of them were homemakers, so they are dependents. All of them were still married to their original husband. The participants were natives of Cankiri, which is located in the middle of Turkey. As stated, Cankiri was selected as the sample area for the research as it is a conservative, religious, nationalist, and traditional (culture-oriented) region, which factors may affect child marriage.

Participants' child marriage experiences: thematic discourse analysis

Women's early marriage experiences were analyzed under (a) the categories of causes, (b) the process of child marriage, (c) results, and (d) participants' assessments of child marriage. These are also the categories that arose in the qualitative analysis. Later on, this categorization resulted in ten sets of themes. Under *the category of causes* (Category A), (1) kinship (household) impact / patriarchy, (2) religion, and (3) dowry came to the fore as elements of the thematic discourse. Regarding *the process of child marriage* (Category B), (1) participants' relationship with the grooms, and (2) the effects of a close environment on the marriage played a crucial role as themes. Concerning the *results* category (Category C), (1) problems encountered and (2) the impact of child marriage on education were identified. In the last category, called *participants' assessments about child marriages* (Category D), (1) reactions towards child marriage, (2) positive and negative attitudes towards child marriage, and (3) participants' attitudes and beliefs about current marriage patterns were prominent as thematic categorizations.

Figure 4. *Customs-oriented reasons behind child marriage (Word Cloud formation)*



Source: Author's thematic categorization (based upon respondents' answers).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Causes (Category A)

Kinship (household) impact / patriarchy

As a push factor, kinship (household) / patriarchy is one of the prominent factors in child marriage. However, the result of this research is a little bit contradictory. Six of the participants stated that they were pushed into early marriage by their own families, one of them married voluntarily, and one of them stated that kinship did not have any impact on her marriage. In contrast, two of the participants were of the point of view that kinship (household) had directly influenced their marriages.

It was due to the matchmaker character of our neighbor. Concerning the marriage, our neighbor tricked my family since the candidate was financially safe and sound. (P8, 17)²

Most interviewees decided to marry due to being forced by their families. Here, we allege that family is a key element in these marriage patterns, signaling the fact that patriarchy as well as traditions are strong determinants, particularly in rural areas.

My family's ceaseless desire for me to marry despite my unwillingness, psychological pressure, and the feeling of obligation. (P1, 13)

No one ordered me to marry. I married of my own will. [...] I contemplated that I would be free when I got married. (P6, 16)

Religion

Religion is the other constituent to be considered while assessing the dimensions of child marriage in Turkey. The research showed that religion is used as a legitimizing agent of unlawful situations. It creates a spiritual and/or ad hoc legal tie between bride and groom until the daughters become mature enough. All respondents stated that the law did not permit them to marry, so

² The first number in parentheses is the participant's code, the second shows her age at the time of marriage.

their marriage ceremonies were conducted according to Islamic rules, and later, formal procedures were carried out.

I became mature enough to get married on a legal basis, an Islamic marriage ceremony was held. Two years later, official procedures were completed. (P1, 13)

The case of dowry

Dowry, the merchandising of daughters, is another reason for child marriage in the literature. Yet, still, the results revealed that this variable was not a principal motivating instrument in the research. Eight participants stated that dowry had not played a role in their marriages, whereas two confessed that the grooms' families were obliged to pay the bride price. Further, one revealed the amount of the money that had been charged.

Requiring [payment for] the price of the bride is a well-known tradition in our village. That's why; my family received it. (P2, 15)

Yes. They gave 15,000 Turkish Liras [for me]. (P7, 15)

The process of child marriage (Category B)

Respondents' relationship with the groom

Seven of the ten respondents or their families had close ties with grooms or their families. The parties knew one another either because of kinship or the similar place (villages) where they lived. On the other hand, three interviewees stated that there had been no relationship with groom or grooms' family in advance. One claimed that she had become familiar with her husband through the Internet (P6, 16), and the other reported that she had met her husband at her workplace (P10, 18). These two cases are absolutely exceptions. Therefore, it may be witnessed that culture, traditions, and the rules associated with rural settings are again the main determinants of child marriage.

The effects of a close environment on marriage

Regarding the effects of a close environment, it was documented that, except for one of the participants (P5, 15), families (e.g., father, mother, grandmother, sister), relatives (e.g., aunt, brother-in-law), or neighbors had intervened in the child marriages. This reality suggests that the respondents did not use their own free will in their marriage process since third parties made the decisions.

Mostly, my grandfather wanted me to marry. I did not marry by force, but I felt obliged to do so. I could not reject my elders' offer. By the way, my father was quite eager. (P2, 15)

My older sister and brother-in-law intervened in the case. I met with my husband through their efforts. (P3, 16)

Results (Category C)

Problems encountered

This research proved that the participants had to grapple with various marriage problems. It was reported that these included (a) "violence," (b) "jealousy," (c) "alcohol addiction," (d) "crowded (numerous) family," (e) "financial drawbacks," (f) "black magic," etc. Apart from one, all respondents considered that their marriages at a very young age had created a significant burden in their lives.

My husband's family did not accept me. They tried to separate us. They even tried to use black magic. My family and my husband's family were offended. (P5, 15)

[Problems included] not being familiar with housework, crowded family, violence, and no permission for outdoor activities due to jealousy. (P1, 13)

I was exposed to violence from my husband's family, which was also the case for my husband. I was not allowed to go out until I had a baby. (P7, 15)

The alcohol addiction of my husband, my obligation to work, and my husband's bankruptcy two times. (P8, 17)

The impact of child marriage on education

Participants gave very detailed answers about the negative impacts of child marriage on their education. All of them thought they were not educated enough due to their marriages. Half of them were either primary school graduates, and some had not even been able to complete this initial phase of education. Some continued secondary school, yet they could not obtain a degree. In evaluating the past, they were very regretful about the situation, but there was no way out.

In those years, there were not so many people studying. Most probably, students finished 5th grade. I studied until the 3rd grade in primary school. I was living with my grandmother, and she gave me to the grandson of her brother/sister. I would like to be educated; however, no one asked us whether we wish to study. (P4, 14)

I had just started secondary (upper) school. I made friends with someone on the internet, whom I really did not know anything about. Two months later, they visited my family to ask for their permission. My family did not want me to marry, but I did. I said that I would escape from home if they did not allow me to marry. They (my family) were obliged to do so [allow me]. I dropped out of school, and later on, I wanted to study via open learning platforms. Nevertheless, my husband did not let me study. (P6, 16)

Those older than 15 years old were regarded as being too late to marry. The matchmakers of marriage would [pursue you as] if you were mature. My father allowed me to study until 3rd grade in primary school. Later on, I registered at school confidentially and by myself. I was just able to study until fifth grade in primary school. I wish I had been a lawyer now. (P1, 13)

Among the participants, one was able to compensate for her lost years in terms of education. She continued her studies at college. Clarifying the situation, she criticized her parents:

I am married, but I am studying sociology at an open university. I would have liked to have studied, but I did not have a father or mother who really took good care of me. (P9, 17)

Participant's assessments about child marriage (Category D)

Reactions towards child marriage

It appears that child marriage was normalized since it was accepted as a social norm or part of the culture. It was routine. About the process, the critical word used by respondents was “*normal*.” No one questioned the legal status of the phenomenon. Also, there were no community and/or individual reactions against it. In stark contrast, those who did not get married at a very young age were regarded as weird and were ashamed. Thus, daughters had to obey the pre-accepted and pre-determined values of the region.

I did not face any reaction because it was quite normal in those years. If I had not been married, [being subject to criticism] would have been quite possible. (P1, 13)

Positive and negative attitudes towards child marriage

In the research, participants were required to assess child marriage from negative and positive perspectives, if any. Quite surprisingly, the interviewees had some favorable evaluations. They thought the process was advantageous in some way, such as “learning how to be patient,” “learning how to support your family financially,” “having kids,” “meeting the need for protection,” and “learning housework practices.”

I learned to support my family financially at a very young age. I became a mother very early. (P2, 15)

Arguments on the opposing side centered on the “problem of financial independence,” “merchandising [women] like a commodity,” “liberty of speech,” and “violence.” All respondents observed that they were vulnerable in every way and that the community had denied them their birthright. It is noteworthy that participants’ negative feelings outweighed their positive ones.

Like a commodity, I got married in return for money. I did not feel as if I were special. I was exposed to violence. (P7, 15)

Participants' attitudes and beliefs about current marriage patterns

Nearly all participants thought that individuals ought to marry someone of their choosing rather than someone selected by their family. Some claimed that flirting, in other words, choosing your partner, is the best method of obtaining marriage, and they were jealous of contemporary marriage procedures. To put it another way, few reported that their marriage process was acceptable to some extent because it had happened due to religious concerns. From their perspective, the purpose of child marriage had been to protect them from their sins.

I wish I had studied and married via flirting [choosing your own partner] when I was mature enough. Today, no girls ask anyone about their ideas about marrying, and they say that they love them [their partners], and then they decide to marry. The old times were too challenging, but now everybody is so relaxed about [relationships]. (P4, 14)

In the past, they used to force us to marry at such an early period to protect us from sins. Nevertheless, [I think that] knowing [flirting/choosing your own partner] the potential partner when you are mature enough is best. (P7, 15)

Based on the views of these respondents, marriage patterns have changed radically in the region, which is considered a positive thing compared to their own marriage process. Unlike in the past, the research signals that the city of Cankiri is becoming more international in its values, albeit perhaps only moderately, in line with its cultural and religious norms, even concerning marriage behaviors.

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this research was to analyze the impact of culture and tradition on child marriage in Turkey. Determining the leading reasons for and outcomes of these marriages was also a goal. Based upon a report named Plan UK, it is alleged that Turkey (14%) has the highest child marriage rate after Georgia (17%) (Sibanda 2011: 2). Therefore, the topic has captured the attention of many international scholars. In the literature, it has been claimed that culture and traditions play a very significant role in these kinds of marriages (Kamal et al. 2015; Adedokun et al. 2016: 986; Najjarnejad–Bromfield 2022; Nasrullah

et al. 2014; Zahangir–Kamal 2011; Ghosh–Kar 2010; Mashozhera 2016; Duran – Tepehan Eraslan 2019; Mawodza 2015). The countries in which culture is characterized as a driving force behind child marriage are mostly referred to as underdeveloped or developing (Koçtürk et al. 2018; Köroğlu 2014; Erulkar 2013; Yüksel–Koçtürk 2021; Kaynak Malatyalı et al. 2017). This is also the case for Turkey, despite its economic growth and development over the last three decades. The current research found that culture in Turkey is the principal driver behind families pushing their daughters into marriage at a very young age. A great number of the respondents’ families live according to rural values. Moreover, some of them still live in the past. For the interviewees, culture as a social construction was identified as the driving force behind decisions and behaviors, which later became social norms. The research clarified that the participants had to accept these norms, and they were affected by this process, which involved a direct violation of human rights.

In parallel to cultural identity, it should not be forgotten that religion is a key parameter fueling child marriage since it is interdependent with culture (Al-Hakami–McLaughlin 2016). In Islamic societies, preserving virginity until marriage is highly valued, and its loss before marriage is considered a major shame for both the bride and the groom, as well as the bride’s family (Bhanji–Punjani 2014: 2). Likewise, it was detected by the research that religion is another stimulus behind these types of marriages and some of the respondents had the idea that this marriage pattern is okay as it protects them from sin. The sins in their minds are “premarital sex” and its undesired consequences like pregnancy, abortion, and so on (Yilmaz et al. 2022). Therefore, child marriage for some respondents is a means of obtaining protection from non-marital sexual relationships.

Furthermore, patriarchy and authoritative family patterns or social structures are the other reasons behind child marriage that are identified in the literature (Tenkorang 2019; Chowdhury 2009; Anagol 2020; Yount et al. 2016; Sarfo et al. 2022; Bakare et al. 2020). Admittedly, the patriarchy is a powerful tool in Turkey. Despite major changes and the transition to modernity, fathers or older family members still have the authority in families, especially those of the latter, which adhere to prevalent social values and norms. The former have the last word and decide on everything, including marriages. Even if they are not decision-makers today, they would still like to be honored in one way or another. This claim was also validated in this research. In the study, the interviewees pointed out that these patriarchs (e.g., grandmother, father, or mother) made many decisions about marriage without daughters being asked for their ideas.

Dowry is another factor behind child marriage in the literature. In order to emphasize the severity of the phenomenon, Corno and Voena (2021) use the term “selling daughters,” Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte (2012) note that it is a

“social phenomenon,” Mangena and Ndlovu (2013: 472) state that it involves a violation of the human rights of women, while the World Health Organization prefers to use the word “merchandise” (WHO 2010). Unlike in the literature, it was determined in the research that dowry was not the main reason behind child marriage in this specified region. However, a few families who had engaged in this procedure were paid some money, a tendency which is confirmed by the author’s personal experience. To put it another way, I can personally affirm that some families living in the rural areas of Turkey prefer to use the word “selling” instead of “marriage” in relation to the process of their daughters’ marriage. This behavior may create trauma for the daughters forced to marry, as witnessed in the present study (one of the respondents still remembers the amount of money paid for her marriage). In addition, it was demonstrated in the research that kinship, a rural atmosphere, relatives, and or neighbors are very effective triggers of these marriages. This finding also aligns with the results of prior studies (Power–Parke 1984; Gupta et al. 2022).

In the literature, it has been reported that child marriage gives rise to partner violence (Duran – Tepehan Eraslan 2019: 1207; Warriia 2019), and it is suggested that the earlier the marriage, the more probable it will involve violence. Kidman (2017) clarified that violence can lead to mental health disorders. Studies conducted by UNICEF have verified that those married under the age of 18 are more liable to be involved in domestic violence, too (UNICEF 2020b). The research partly supported this. The preliminary problematic areas are violence, loss of economic freedom and the right to speak freely, jealousy, the need to tackle housework, and financial affairs.

CONCLUSION

All in all, it can be claimed that child marriage is a fact of life in Turkey (Baysak et al. 2021: 248), as authenticated in this research. The study demonstrated that cultural and traditional norms are strong determinants of child marriage in the country and revealed their outcomes. Even though marriage patterns have changed around the country, this problem is still widespread in one way or another. The analysis shows that cultural norms, including religion, patriarchy, kinship, and dowry, play a particular role in the formation of these forms of marriage. These factors may be perceived as the push elements of the process. It was demonstrated that the pre-determined push factors outweigh their pull equivalents. What is more, those subject to child marriage were not capable of overcoming these established sentiments or rules.

This study addresses how traditions and local culture cut communities' connections with the outside world and convert these societies into closed ones, blocking interaction and mutual understanding involving different values. Due to this closed or restricted way of life that results from cultural affairs, child marriage is quite normalized. Thus, the qualitative analysis in this research shows that culture is a restraining parameter for societies, especially for rural ones, which results in social and cultural realities like early marriage.

Another finding of this research is the fact that those married at a very young age are more prone to marital problems such as violence, jealousy, and financial drawbacks. Of these, violence owing to jealousy is prominent, which has a direct negative influence on women's labor market participation. Accordingly, child marriage is a vital impediment to the career development of child brides that sustains their economic dependency on their partners.

This study also suggests that opportunities for education and a prevalence of educational institutions, from primary schools to universities around the country, are key elements to overcome this barrier. The reason is that, as found in this research, the majority of the respondents were poorly educated. It is quite certain that education improves awareness and financial independence and enhances society's consciousness of social and cultural behaviors or clichés involving early marriage.

The study's novelty lies in suggesting an explicit distinction between the past and present depending on marriage types or behaviors. To put it another way, it was found that the participants had the idea that their region's perspective about early marriage was radically shifting, and the new generation's ideas were effectively taken into account by their families. Maybe this can be interpreted as meaning that modernity, popular culture, social media, and urbanization are now more powerful influences on marriage than cultural norms.

The research paves the way for society and all its components to grapple with the problem as a social and cultural phenomenon. First, policymakers, colleges, research institutes, and NGOs are strongly responsible for eliminating or minimizing this phenomenon. Increasing awareness through education, press, technology, or social media apparatuses may have positive consequences.

Limitations and further suggestions

There are several limitations to the study. Only ten respondents participated in the research because of the qualitative nature of the study. This can be interpreted as a restriction on drawing general conclusions. Second, the research was conducted in a city in the middle of Turkey, with a limited number of

interviewees, in a qualitative manner. This is also a constraint to its generalization potential. Moreover, computer programs like Nvivo, Maxqda, and Atlas were not utilized as part of the exploratory inquiry. Further suggestions can be made for researchers closely interested in the same issue. The initial advice is that several cities should be included in the research instead of focusing on one. The cities could be selected from different parts of the country, which would contribute a lot to diversity as well as to the cross-cultural dimensions of the research. Last but not least, computer software programs incompatible with the qualitative framework of the current study could be used, too.

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