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Factors Influencing Early Marriage among Girls: A Qualitative Study Based on the Socio-Ecological Model



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Early marriage among girls is a complex, multi-layered, and intertwined phenomenon shaped by the interaction among individual, familial, cultural, social, and structural factors. The aim of the present study was to identify the factors influencing early marriage among girls in rural areas of Zanjan Province, Iran.

Methods: This qualitative study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach and used thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, guided by the Socio-Ecological Model. Participants included 13 girls with a history of early marriage and 13 key informants (school counselors and principals), selected purposively using snowball sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method.

Results: The analysis identified 9 main themes and 26 sub-themes, categorized across four levels of the socio-ecological model: at the individual level, psychological-emotional needs and cognitive-emotional immaturity in decision-making; at the interpersonal/family level, reproduction of family patterns and patriarchal family dominance; at the community level, social norms and traditions and stereotypical media representations of women's roles; and at the structural/policy level, educational limitations and inadequate awareness, absence of legal and social protection, and economic poverty and pressures.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that early marriage is not merely the outcome of girls' individual choices, but rather the product of intertwined interaction of cultural, economic, and institutional structures in the rural areas of Zanjan. By providing a localized portrayal of this phenomenon, the study can inform the design of multilevel preventive interventions for policymakers, health professionals, educators, and counselors.

1. Introduction

The family, as the primary social unit and pillar of society, is formed through the union of a man and a woman and serves as a crucial context for fulfilling individuals' physical, emotional, and intellectual needs (Pourabdol et al., 2025). However, recent global and national trends reveal a concerning rise in marital instability, with studies indicating that nearly two-thirds

of first marriages end in separation or divorce (Tahmasby & Khorramabadi, 2025). This fragility of family structures underscores significant challenges in achieving and sustaining healthy, stable marriages - challenges often rooted in the circumstances under which marriages are formed, particularly early marriage among girls.

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Early marriage is a multidimensional phenomenon arising from the interplay of individual, familial, social, and structural factors. It is not merely a personal issue but a socio-structural concern rooted in poverty, local cultural norms, gender inequalities, and weak legal and social support systems (Pourtaleb & Mousavian Alenjaq, 2021; Saleh et al., 2022). Despite legal and social changes in Iran, early marriage remains prevalent in disadvantaged and rural areas - areas typically characterized by high unemployment rates, low educational attainment, and the strong influence of traditional beliefs (Koochi, 2019; Hajilou et al., 2022).

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2012) defines early marriage as a union in which one of the parties - typically the girl - enters into a marital relationship before the age of 18 and consider it one of the most serious forms of human rights violations. This phenomenon has a wide range of consequences, including physical and psychological harm, school dropout, and the formation of unstable families, perpetuation of poverty, and the deepening of gender inequalities (Sagalova et al., 2021; Fan and Koski, 2022). Global statistics indicate that more than 650 million women and girls have been married before the age of 18 (Putri et al., 2022). Similarly, in Iran, this phenomenon is more frequently observed in disadvantaged areas where traditional cultures prevail (Saber et al., 2023).

To gain a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon within local contexts, it is essential to adopt context-specific and multilevel approaches. The Socio-Ecological Model offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing social behaviors across individual, interpersonal, community, and structural levels (Lee et al., 2017). This model is particularly useful in examining phenomena such as early marriage, which emerge from deeply embedded social and cultural structures. According to this model, adolescent girls can be positioned at the center of a network of influential factors, allowing for the analysis of the roles of parents, communities, formal institutions, and broader policy frameworks in shaping their decisions.

A comprehensive understanding of this issue requires localized and qualitative analysis in each specific region, as the causes of this phenomenon vary across different societies and are influenced by their unique cultural and social contexts (Lubaton et al., 2023). In some countries, such as Bangladesh, the most prominent causes are low levels of education, economic poverty, and lack of awareness (Talukder et al., 2020). In Indonesia, more than 91 percent of girls cite love as their motivation for early marriage. In addition, the role of culture and tradition in rural areas is significant. In the Tapal Kuda region of East Java, marrying girls before the age of 18

is considered a cultural custom. Many parents do so to preserve chastity and to avoid social gossip (Ernawati et al., 2023). Similarly, in Zambia, girls view marriage as a means of escaping poverty (Tembo, 2021).

In Iran, however, cultural factors, concerns about social stigma, and traditional family patterns play a greater role (Pourtaleb & Mousavian Alenjaq, 2021; Ashayeri et al., 2024). Findings from recent qualitative studies in Iran demonstrate that early marriage is the outcome of intertwined cultural, social, economic, and familial factors, rather than a matter of individual choice. Key contributing factors identified include economic hardship, patriarchal attitudes and gender-based discrimination, family instability, socio-cultural pressures, intergenerational continuity of early marriage, neglect of girls' education, restrictions on premarital romantic relationships, insular and conservative rural cultural environments, religious and customary norms, inadequate legal protection, chastity-oriented expectations. These factors have been consistently highlighted as the most influential drivers shaping the persistence of early marriage in the Iranian context (Fataei et al., 2022; Majdi et al., 2023; Enayat & Zare, 2023; Salahshoor & Habibpour Getabi, 2022; Hajilou et al., 2022; Nosratikhah, Beheshty & Mokhtari, 2025).

Therefore, although numerous studies in Iran and worldwide have examined early marriage, systematic searches indicate that no study in Iran has yet employed the Socio-Ecological Model to conduct a systematic analysis of multilevel factors within the specific socio-cultural context of the country, and particularly within the rural areas of Zanjan Province. Moreover, existing Iranian research has largely focused on a single level of factors - whether economic or cultural - while neglecting the dynamic interplay among individual vulnerabilities, family dynamics, community expectations, and structural barriers. The present study addresses this gap by providing a holistic, context-sensitive analysis. Another key innovation of this study lies in integrating the perspectives of girls who have experienced early marriage with the insights of local informants (including school counselors and principals), thereby offering a nuanced, multilayered understanding of the phenomenon - an understanding essential for designing targeted, multilevel interventions in this region.

2. Materials and Methods

This qualitative study employed a qualitative approach and thematic analysis, guided by the Socio-Ecological Model. The primary objective was to achieve a deep, context-sensitive, and interpretive understanding of the multidimensional causes of early marriage in the rural areas of Zanjan Province, Iran. Thematic analysis was

used to extract key patterns and themes related to girls' decisions to enter into marriage before reaching psychological and social maturity, based solely on the lived experiences of participants and without imposing preconceived notions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The Socio-Ecological Model served as the conceptual framework of the study, offering a suitable tool for multi-layered analysis of the phenomenon of early marriage. This model enabled the identification of influential factors at the individual, interpersonal, community, and structural levels, and allowed for examining the complex interactions among these levels (Lee et al., 2017). Given the multidimensional nature of early marriage, the model permitted the simultaneous examination of individual, familial, cultural, social, and structural factors.

The study was conducted in 2025. The target population consisted of two main groups: the first group included girls who had married before the age of 18; the second group comprised key informants (including school counselors and principals) in the study region, who had knowledge of or direct experience with early marriage. Sampling was carried out using purposive and snowball techniques. Girls who met the inclusion criteria were identified and selected, and simultaneously, relevant key informants were also added to the sample.

In total, 26 individuals participated in the study: 13 of them were girls who had married before the age of 18, and the other 13 were key informants from the target region. The sampling process continued until theoretical saturation was reached - that is, the point at which new data no longer contributed to novel insights or patterns, and the collected data showed redundancy. At this stage, it was confirmed that the data possessed sufficient theoretical and data richness, enabling the analysis to offer a comprehensive and coherent understanding of the issue.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method allowed the interviewer to access deeper layers of participants' experiences and subjective meanings while maintaining the flexibility needed to guide the conversation. Each interview was conducted in a safe, nonjudgmental environment with full respect for participants' privacy and lasted between 35 and 60 minutes.

The interview procedure consisted of the following steps: (1) introducing the researcher and explaining the study objectives; (2) obtaining informed consent and emphasizing confidentiality; (3) collecting background information regarding personal and family situations (for the girls) and prior involvement with early marriage (for key informants); (4) posing main questions about social, cultural, economic, and psychological motivations and influencing factors; (5) using follow-up probes when

necessary; (6) audio-recording the interviews; and (7) transcribing them verbatim.

The main questions addressed topics such as the decision-making process surrounding marriage, the role of parents and family, religious and cultural beliefs, psychological and emotional experiences, economic and educational factors, and the influence of media and social networks. In cases of ambiguity or when clarification was needed, probing questions - such as 'Could you elaborate on that?' or 'Could you tell me more about that?' - were used to enhance the depth and precision of the data.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis: becoming familiar with the data through re-reading interviews and taking notes; generating initial codes from meaningful segments; grouping these codes into initial themes; reviewing themes to enhance analytical coherence; defining and naming the themes with clear and precise descriptions; and finally, reporting the findings with direct quotations from participants. The analysis was conducted in a systematic and in-depth manner, and the extracted main and sub-themes were categorized within the framework of the Socio-Ecological Model. Accordingly, each theme was situated within one of the individual, relational, community, or structural levels, ensuring alignment between the final analysis and the conceptual framework of the research.

In conducting this study, all qualitative research ethics were strictly observed. Prior to the interviews, all participants were provided with detailed information about the objectives of the study, how the data would be used, and the assurance of confidentiality. Participation was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent. Data were recorded anonymously and analyzed solely through thematic coding.

Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time or to decline to answer specific questions. Furthermore, the collected data were used exclusively for the purposes of this study, and any unauthorized use or disclosure was strictly prohibited.

3. Results

Data were collected from 26 participants, including 13 adolescent girls who had experienced early marriage and 13 key informants (school counselors and principals). The girls were aged 13 to 18 at the time of interview and had married between the ages of 11 and 16. Their education levels ranged from 8th to 12th grade, with some experiencing school interruptions after marriage. Two girls had children, and the time since marriage varied from 1 to 6 years. The experts ranged in age from 28 to 44, with most being between 38 and 41. Eleven held bachelor's degrees and two held master's degrees.

Professionally, nine were counselors and four were principals, all of whom were actively engaged in work with students and families. No male participants were included. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with girls and key informants (school principals and counselors) led to the extraction 9 main themes and 26 sub-themes (which are

presented in Table 1). These findings were categorized based on the Socio-Ecological Model, encompassing influencing factors across individual, interpersonal, community, and structural levels. In the following sections, the themes and subthemes are presented along with detailed explanations and illustrative excerpts drawn from the data.

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Subthemes Extracted Based on the Levels of the Socio-Ecological Model

Model Level	Main Theme	Subthemes	Analysis and Interpretation of the Theme
Individual	Psychological-Emotional Needs	Lack of intimacy with parents; escaping violence or strict family control; seeking meaning and a better future	Emotional voids, experiences of violence, and psychological pressures in the parental home strengthen the motivation for early marriage as a means for girls to attain security, affection, and a different future.
Individual	Cognitive and Emotional Immaturity in Decision-Making	Incomplete understanding of marriage; lack of knowledge about the spouse	Superficial understanding and emotional decision-making turn acceptance of marriage into a passive act for girls.
Interpersonal / Family	Reproduction of Family Patterns	Early marriage of mother or sister; low parental education level; parental ignorance of early marriage consequences	Continuation of generational patterns, parental illiteracy, and lack of awareness normalize early marriage and weaken understanding of its harms.
Interpersonal / Family	Patriarchal Structure and Family Domination	Father's decision-making disregarding the girl's opinion; ignoring the girl's voice	In patriarchal structures, the girl's opinion is overlooked, and the dominance of the father or family turns marriage into a tool for control or preserving family honor.
Community	Tradition and Social Norms	Traditional norms and values; misinterpretations of religion; negative attitudes toward delayed marriage; local rivalry and competition; maintaining family honor and reputation	Traditional culture, incorrect religious interpretations, social pressure, and local competition establish early marriage as an accepted and even desirable norm in society.
Community	Stereotypical Representation of Women in Media	Stereotypical portrayal of women in media; promotion of romanticized marriage; reduction of women's roles to wife and mother	Media promote unrealistic models of marriage and traditional portrayals of women, steering girls' mindset toward unconditional and idealized acceptance of these roles.
Structural Policy	Educational Limitations and Lack of Awareness	Absence of sexual, psychological, and life skills education; lack of awareness about prerequisites for marriage; deficiencies in the education system	Ineffective education and lack of basic information limit girls' understanding of their rights and the realities of marriage, reducing their ability to resist inappropriate decisions.
Structural Policy	Gaps in Social and Legal Support	Absence of supportive institutions; silence or weakness of laws; lack of legal education	Weak support structures, inadequate legal frameworks, and lack of child rights education leave individuals defenseless against social pressures and poor decision-making.
Structural Policy	Poverty and Economic Pressures	Family poverty and girls' efforts for better welfare through marriage; diminishing role of non-financial criteria in spouse selection	Difficult economic conditions motivate girls to escape poverty through marriage, which is perceived as a financial relief strategy, while other marriage criteria gradually become marginalized.

1. Individual Level

Theme 1: Girls' Emotional and Psychological Needs

Many participating girls perceived marriage as a way to compensate for emotional voids or to escape the psychologically distressing environment of their parental homes.

Subtheme 1.1: Lack of Parental Intimacy and Substitute Attachments: The absence of close emotional bonds with parents led many girls to see their future husbands

as emotional substitutes. One participant stated: "When I was in fifth grade, I lost my father and became very lonely. I chose him mostly because of that loneliness. He really filled the void left by my father." Another girl shared: "In our family, no one ever talks to me about how I feel. When someone came and said he loved me, I thought he was the only one who understood me. I didn't think about anything else."

Subtheme 1.2: Escape from Violence or Excessive

Family Control: In several cases, marriage was perceived as a mechanism for escaping domestic violence or extreme restrictions. A key informant noted: “We had a female student who decided to marry early because of her parents’ constant fighting. She said, ‘I can’t take it anymore; I fall asleep every night to the sound of arguments.’”

Subtheme 1.3: The Search for Meaning and a Better Future: Some girls entered marriage with the hope of building an independent and meaningful future. As one girl put it: “I thought if I got married, I’d get out of this situation. He promised to help me continue my studies.”

Theme 2: Cognitive and Emotional Immaturity in Decision-Making

The Cognitive and emotional inability to assess the future implications of marriage played a significant role in passive acceptance of early marriage.

Subtheme 2.1: Incomplete Understanding of the Concept of Marriage: Many participants perceived marriage through purely romanticized notions. One girl stated: “At that age, you’re just excited and curious, wondering what it’s all about.” Another participant shared:

“I had no idea what marriage actually meant. Everyone said it was good, so I just agreed.”

Subtheme 2.2: Lack of Familiarity with Spouse: Decision-making often occurred without any prior acquaintance with their future husband. A key informant remarked: “Some girls said they thought getting married meant they’d live like a queen. But once they entered married life, they realized it was nothing like what they had imagined.”

2. Interpersonal / Family Level

Theme 3: Reproduction of Family Patterns

In many cases, early marriage was part of an intergenerational pattern passed down through the family.

Subtheme 3.1: Early Marriage of Mothers or Sisters: These girls had been raised in environments where early marriage was considered normal—or even admirable. One participant shared: “My mom also got married at thirteen. She always says, ‘I built a good life for myself, so you can too.’ She never thinks that times have changed.” Another girl said: “In our family, all the girls get married young—my aunts, my mom, my cousins. It’s just considered normal.”

Subtheme 3.2: Low Educational Level of Parents: Parents’ low literacy levels were often linked to a disregard for education and the postponement of marriage. One girl explained: “My mom only studied up to third grade. She always said a girl should learn how to be a wife, not chase after a diploma.” A key informant added: “We’ve seen many cases where parents—especially mothers—lack formal education and simply don’t understand or communicate the importance of

schooling to their daughters.”

Subtheme 3.3: Parental Unawareness of Consequences: Parents’ often made decisions were often made without an informed understanding of the harms of early marriage. A key informant commented: “Families mostly focus on the surface: that the girl gets married and settles down. They have no idea about future depression, anxiety, or marital problems.”

Theme 4: Patriarchal Structure and Familial Domination Patriarchal family structures played a significant role in marriage-related decision-making for girls.

Subtheme 4.1: Father’s Decision-Making Regardless of the Girl’s Opinion: In numerous reported cases, girls had no agency in marriage decisions. One participant stated: “Unfortunately, in many of these families, the girl’s opinion doesn’t matter at all. The father—or sometimes even the grandfather—is the final decision-maker, and everyone else just goes along. Sometimes even the mother doesn’t dare to speak up.”

Subtheme 4.2: Ignoring the Girl’s Voice and Wishes: Girls’ objections were often dismissed or suppressed. One girl shared: “My father told someone to come propose without even asking me. Then he said, ‘I know what’s best for you.’ I just cried, but it didn’t make any difference.”

3. Community Level

Theme 5: Tradition and Social Norms

Some participants highlighted the influence of traditional norms and cultural attitudes in promoting early marriage.

Subtheme 5.1: Traditional Norms and Values: In certain rural communities, early marriage is regarded as a measure of family success. A key informant noted: “In many families, they still think it’s more valuable to invest in boys’ education. For girls, they say, ‘she’s going to get married anyway, why should she study?’”

Subtheme 5.2: Misinterpretations of Religious Teachings: Incorrect interpretations of religious concepts were used to justify girls’ marriage at a young age, without considering their cognitive and psychosocial readiness. One participant shared: “My mother said that when a girl marries early, God is more pleased.” A key informant added: “When families make decisions without proper awareness of religious teachings, they might have good intentions but end up harming the girl.”

Subtheme 5.3: Negative Attitudes toward Delayed Marriage: An increase in the age of unmarried girls was associated with stigma and suspicion. A key informant explained: “In many families, more than thinking about the child’s readiness, they worry about what people say. They say, ‘So-and-so’s daughter got married; ours shouldn’t fall behind.’”

Subtheme 5.4: Competition and Keeping Up with Neighbors: Some girls and families consented to early marriage to avoid falling behind others. A key informant

said: "In some villages, when one girl gets married and wears a wedding ring, others feel they shouldn't be left behind. It's like an unspoken competition about who gets married first."

Subtheme 5.5: Preserving Family Honor and Reputation: Psychological pressure to consent to marriage to avoid social gossip was repeatedly mentioned. A key informant noted: "Some families quickly decide on marriage out of fear that their child might commit a sin." Theme 6: Stereotypical Representation of Women's Roles in Media

Participants emphasized the media's role in distorting the reality of marriage and reinforcing stereotypical female roles.

Subtheme 6.1: Media's Role in Promoting Stereotypes: Portrayals of women solely as wives and mothers limits girls' visions of their future. One key informant stated: "Many films depict early marriage as a positive thing. It's as if a girl must be matched before she turns fifteen!"

Subtheme 6.2: Promotion of Romanticized Marriage: Media often glamorizes early marriage with exaggerated and idealized beautified portrayals. A key informant remarked: "Foreign films, despite cultural differences, depict an exaggeratedly romantic atmosphere that makes kids—especially girls—feel that marriage is all about love, while in reality, it comes with many responsibilities." One girl shared: "When you see a teenage girl happily dressed as a bride in TV series, you subconsciously think marriage means happiness."

Subtheme 6.3: Depicting Women Only as Wives and Mothers: A key informant noted: "In many films, a girl's role is reduced to being just a wife or mother. It's as if she can't have any other dreams, like becoming a scientist or having a career."

4. Structural/ Policy Level

Theme 7: Educational Limitations and Lack of Awareness One of the main underlying causes of early marriage is the lack of awareness among girls and their families regarding the consequences of this decision.

Subtheme 7.1: Absence of Sexual, Psychological, and Life Skills Education: A clear lack of basic knowledge for making informed decisions was evident. One girl expressed: "I had no idea what marriage meant. I thought it was just about wearing a wedding dress and having a party. No one told me what would happen afterward or what responsibilities I would have." A key informant added: "Health centers mostly focus on vaccinations and prenatal care. There's no special education about how a teenage girl can be harmed in this regard."

Subtheme 7.2: Girls' Lack of Awareness of Marriage Prerequisites: Unawareness of physical, psychological, and legal harms caused by early marriage was frequently mentioned. A key informant stated: "Students don't have

a realistic and accurate image of marriage. No one talks to them about the responsibilities and the psychological maturity needed for marriage. Many of them only fantasize about the wedding dress and ceremony."

Another key informant remarked: "We don't even have a simple brochure explaining the risks of early marriage."

Subtheme 7.3: Deficiencies in the Education System: Schools have failed to provide adequate awareness or to deter families from early marriage decisions. A key informant noted: "We still don't have a real-life skills course in schools. Most of it is rote memorization and doesn't help in real life. Kids don't even understand what a healthy relationship is or how to make decisions."

Theme 8: Lack of Social and Legal Support

Girls and their families often lack effective legal and social support when facing pressures for early marriage.

Subtheme 8.1: Absence of Supportive Institutions: Participants pointed to the lack of counseling centers or intervention bodies. A key informant stated: "In practice, we don't have an institution that supports a girl truly under family pressure. For example, the social emergency number is mostly just a phone number, and even that is not well publicized so that children know it exists."

Subtheme 8.2: Silence or Weakness of Laws: The absence of explicit prohibition of underage marriage facilitates the practice. A key informant said: "The law should protect these children, not only on paper but in enforcement. Now many of these marriages are officially registered because the father or legal guardian has given permission."

Subtheme 8.3: Lack of Legal Education: Girls lack necessary awareness about protective laws and children's rights. One girl said: "I didn't even know legally how old I should be. I was just told that since my father agreed and the court permitted, I could get married."

Theme 9: Poverty and Economic Pressures

One of the most significant drivers of early marriage in the study area is economic hardship and financial constraints faced by families. In the interviews, participants clearly indicated that marrying off young girls is perceived as a way to alleviate the family's financial burden.

Subtheme 9.1: Family Poverty and Girls' Effort for Better Welfare through Marriage: Many families suffer from chronic economic problems and view the daughter's marriage as a means to reduce expenses. A key informant stated: "Economically, because some families face difficulties and cannot manage expenses, they feel compelled to marry off their daughters. In families with poor financial conditions—especially those where the father is addicted, unemployed, or indebted—marriages under the age of 15 occur." Another informant added: "Some girls also think that if the father provides 50% of the family's financial needs, then in the husband's house, it becomes 100%."

Subtheme 9.2: Diminished Role of Non-financial Criteria in Spouse Selection: Criteria such as maturity, personality compatibility, and age suitability gradually become overshadowed by the groom's financial capacity. In this regard, a key informant remarked: "Unfortunately, in marriages, the groom's financial status is the primary

focus. They don't consider how old the groom is, the age difference between the two, or whether they truly love and understand each other. They look at whether this person can pay a sufficient dowry so the girl can be sent to her marital home."

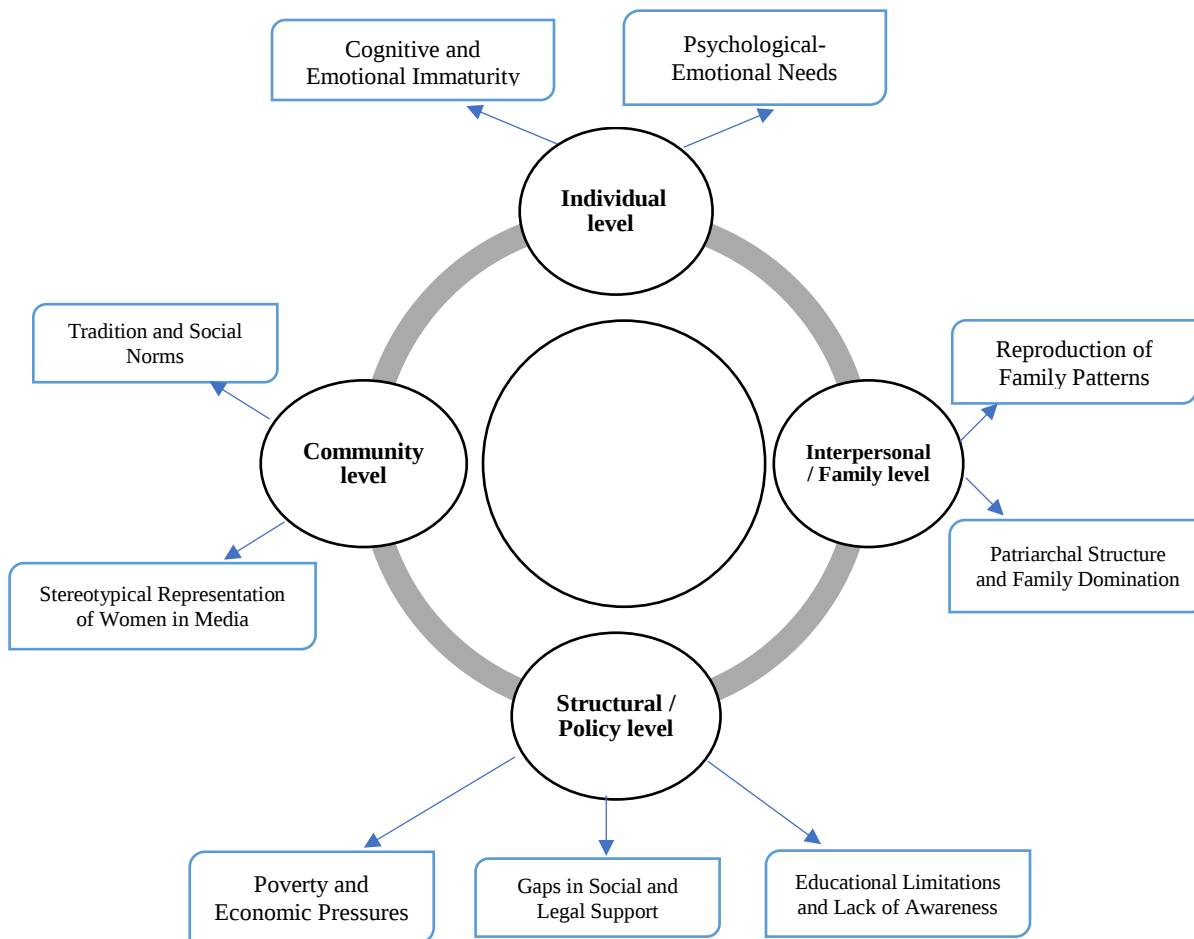


Figure 1. Thematic conceptual model of the factors contributing to early marriage

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that early marriage is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the complex interplay of individual, interpersonal, community, and structural factors. This issue is not merely the result of individual decisions made by girls but is also a consequence of the combined influence of cultural beliefs, patriarchal structures, educational deprivation, economic poverty, and weaknesses in legal and support systems, all of which were evident in the study regions. According to the findings, all nine identified themes can be situated within the four-level framework of the Socio-Ecological Model. For instance, cognitive immaturity and psychological-emotional needs fall within the individual level; patriarchal family structures and the reproduction of family patterns are located at the interpersonal-family level; social and media-related

cultural factors belong to the community level; and poverty, legal deficiencies, and the absence of supportive institutions are positioned at the structural level. This alignment enables a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional nature of early marriage, highlighting not only individual factors but also social and cultural structures (Lee et al., 2017).

1. Individual Level: At the individual level, cognitive and emotional immaturity of girls emerged as a prominent theme. Many girls enter into relationships without a full understanding of the true meaning of marriage and without sufficient opportunity to get to know their partner, often guided by momentary emotions, enthusiasm, and unrealistic perceptions. Another key finding of this study was the significant role of psychological and emotional needs in girls' decisions to marry early. Many girls viewed marriage as an

opportunity to receive love and attention, escape domestic violence, or improve their life circumstances. In other words, lacking full awareness of the realities of marriage and the opportunity to properly understand their partner, many girls marry under familial and social pressures.

This finding aligns with previous studies including [Ernawati et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Tembo \(2021\)](#), which demonstrate that young girls often lack a realistic understanding of future responsibilities and marital obligations.

2. Interpersonal-Family Level: At the family level, patriarchal structures and the absence of gender equality in family decision-making emerged as one of the main reasons behind this phenomenon. In many cases, girls lack the right to voice their opinions, and even when they express opposition, their protests are often ignored. This finding aligns with [Connell's \(2005\)](#) study on structural patriarchy, which demonstrates how gender inequalities within the family can lead to broader societal inequalities. Furthermore, the repetition of family patterns of early marriage - such as the early marriage of mothers or sisters - causes the phenomenon to be perceived as a natural and unquestioned process. Many girls grow up in families where all daughters marry before reaching social maturity, which normalizes and legitimizes early marriage for them.

This finding is consistent with [Saleh et al. \(2022\)](#) in Iraq, who showed how family patterns can be repetitive and reinforcing factors of early marriage. Additionally, the findings highlight that low parental education plays a prominent role in the lack of awareness about the consequences of early marriage ([Hajilou et al., 2022](#)). This is further corroborated by [Bhattarai et al. \(2022\)](#) in Nepal, who found that illiterate and uninformed parents are more involved in such marriages. Households with at least one member having university education are 87% less likely to marry off their daughters early ([Bhattarai et al., 2022](#)). This suggests that improving access to education, especially for girls, can be one of the most effective strategies to address this phenomenon.

3. Community Level: At the community level, traditional attitudes, misinterpretations of religious beliefs, and social pressures such as rivalry and social stigma reinforce the phenomenon of early marriage. Many families perceive early marriage as a way to protect chastity or gain divine approval. This finding aligns with [Tembo's \(2021\)](#) study in Zambia, which demonstrated how incorrect interpretations of religion and traditions can legitimize early marriage.

Additionally, familial competition and rivalry act as strong social forces encouraging early marriage. The study by [Naved et al. \(2022\)](#) also showed that girls are

often under significant social and familial pressure and view marriage as a means to preserve "family honor."

In this study, the influence of media and popular culture in promoting unrealistic perceptions of marriage was also identified as a key factor contributing to early marriage. Girls frequently encountered romanticized and idealized portrayals of marriage in films and television series, which motivated them toward early marriage. The growing use of media in individuals' daily lives and relationships carries undeniable importance and benefits. However, alongside these advancements, many individuals—particularly adolescents - are exposed to various negative influences that can lead to serious relational and psychological harms ([Gheibi et al., 2025](#)).

4. Structural Level: At the structural level, poverty, the lack of supportive institutions, and weaknesses in existing laws have created conditions that facilitate the spread of early marriage. Poverty emerged as a major structural driver in early marriage decisions. Both parents and, in some cases, the girls themselves perceived marriage as a strategy to reduce the financial burden on the family or to escape material deprivation. This finding aligns with the study by [Wahyuningsih et al. \(2025\)](#), which emphasized similar motivations.

These results also resonate with multiple studies, including [Talukder et al. \(2019\)](#) in Bangladesh, which found that poverty and low levels of education are key contributors to early marriage; [Tembo's \(2021\)](#) study in Zambia, which highlighted that poor girls often view early marriage as a pathway out of poverty; and [Bhattarai et al. \(2022\)](#) in Nepal, which showed that impoverished families are more likely to marry off their daughters early. Likewise, the findings of [Kabir et al. \(2019\)](#) in Bangladesh demonstrated that economic hardship and low literacy are among the most significant reasons behind the phenomenon. Altogether, these studies indicate that in many societies, early marriage is not merely a personal decision, but rather a coping strategy in response to economic and social pressures.

The lack of support systems, weak legal frameworks, and limited awareness of legal rights were identified as key factors sustaining early marriage. Many girls, lacking alternative options and formal support, were compelled to accept early marriage. Furthermore, the absence of regular educational programs—both in schools and families—along with poor enforcement of protective laws, has led to widespread unawareness among girls and their families regarding the consequences of early marriage. The weakness of the educational system in delivering life skills and educating about marital responsibilities further exacerbated the problem ([Mikaeili and Salmani, 2021](#)). This finding is consistent with the study by [Wahyuningsih et al. \(2025\)](#),

which noted that girls who have not acquired life skills such as decision-making, problem-solving, negotiation, and critical thinking are less able to resist early marriage. This study demonstrated that early marriage is a multidimensional phenomenon rooted in a complex interplay of individual, interpersonal, community, and structural factors. Drawing on qualitative data from three counties in Zanjan Province, the findings revealed that early marriage is not merely the result of personal choices, but rather a reflection of broader cultural beliefs, patriarchal family structures, educational deficiencies, economic hardship, and legal and institutional inadequacies. The socio-ecological framework allowed for a comprehensive classification of nine emergent themes across four systemic levels, confirming the embedded and systemic nature of early marriage in the studied context.

Research Limitations:

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations need to be acknowledged. The findings are specific to certain counties in Zanjan Province and may not be generalizable to other regions. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and conservative social norms, some participants - particularly married girls - may have provided socially desirable responses or withheld critical information about familial coercion or marital dissatisfaction. Access to participants was primarily facilitated by school counselors and local authorities, potentially excluding marginalized or isolated girls and limiting the diversity of experiences. Additionally, the study relied solely on retrospective self-reports, which are subject to recall bias, and the perspectives of key informants may reflect institutional or professional biases rather than the full range of community attitudes.

Research and practical suggestions:

In light of the present study's findings, future research should address the gaps identified herein. Given that the role of media in shaping girls' romanticized expectations of early marriage emerged as a salient theme, quantitative studies could examine the impact of media literacy programs on adolescents' attitudes toward early marriage. Moreover, the absence of male perspectives - particularly those of fathers and young husbands - limits our understanding of decision-making dynamics; thus, future qualitative research should incorporate these voices to analyze power relations, consent, and economic negotiations within early marriages. Finally, longitudinal studies are needed to systematically trace how the interplay of poverty, school dropout, and familial pressure unfolds over time, particularly during the critical transition from early adolescence to marriage. The findings of this study also have several practical implications. Policy interventions should focus on

strengthening protective legislation and enforcement mechanisms aimed at preventing underage marriage. Educational institutions need to integrate comprehensive life skills training and reproductive health education into school curricula, with particular emphasis on empowering adolescent girls. Social services and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should expand community-based support systems - including counseling centers and crisis intervention units- especially in rural and underserved areas. Media professionals must also be sensitized to the long-term harms of romanticizing early marriage and should instead promote alternative, empowering role models for young women. Finally, families and communities should be actively engaged through awareness-raising campaigns that challenge intergenerational norms and harmful traditional practices.

5. Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

This study was conducted in full compliance with the ethical principles of qualitative research. Prior to the interviews, all participants were informed about the research objectives, the process of data usage, and the principle of confidentiality. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and individuals were free to withdraw from the research at any time.

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Authors' contributions

The corresponding author was responsible for the study design, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript preparation.

Conflicts of interest

No conflicts of interest have been reported in this research.

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