

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Identifying the reasons why men marry teenage girls: a qualitative study from the perspective of men in western Iran

Javad Yoosefi lebni¹, Ahmad Ahmadi², Seyed Fahim Irandoost³  and Mandana Saki⁴

¹Social Determinants of Health Research Center, Lorestan University of Medical Sciences, Khorramabad, Iran, ²PhD student in Educational Technology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran, ³Department of Community Medicine, School of Medicine, Urmia University of Medical Sciences, Urmia, Iran and ⁴Social Determinants of Health Research Center, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Lorestan University of Medical Sciences, Khorramabad, Iran

Corresponding authors: Seyed Fahim Irandoost, Mandana Saki; Emails: irandoost.sf@umsu.ac.ir, mandana_saki@yahoo.com

(Received 12 April 2023; revised 30 December 2024; accepted 6 January 2025)

Abstract

Marriage with teenage girls is an important health and social challenge, which is caused by various factors. Considering that no research has been done to show the reasons for men's desire to marry teenage girls, this research was conducted with the aim of identifying the reasons why men marry teenage girls in western Iran. This qualitative research was conducted with the conventional content analysis approach among 37 men in western Iran who married to girls under the age of 18. Targeted, theoretical, and snowball sampling methods were used to reach the participants. To collect data, semi-structured interviews were used both in-person (20 people) and online (17 people). Data analysis was done with Graneheim and Lundman approach and checking the accuracy and strength of the results with Guba and Lincoln criteria. One core category, 9 subcategories, and 88 initial codes were obtained from the data analysis. The core category, foresight along with desired upbringing, included the subcategories of getting sure of purity, to bring up the girl, seeking sexual pleasure, dominating the wife, low expectations, appropriate fertility, encouragement of social organizations and families, following models, and cultural beliefs. The reasons for men marrying teenage girls are rooted in personality traits, family encouragement, and the cultural and social context of the society. Marriage with teenage girls can be prevented by intervening at different levels and taking measures such as training and raising men's awareness about the consequences of marrying teenage girls, changing men's cultural and gender beliefs, raising the awareness of parents and social organizations about the adverse effects of child marriage, and establishing appropriate laws.

Keywords: Child marriage; reasons for marriage; teenagers; girls; men; qualitative study

Introduction

Child marriage is one of the major problems in the world, and it refers to a marriage where at least one of the couple is under 18 years of age (Staff, 2011; Yoosefi Lebni *et al.*, 2023). Despite the declining trend of child marriage in the last few decades, this phenomenon is still prevalent in many countries, and according to estimates, the number of child marriages will reach 1.2 billion in 2050 (Unicef, 2014). Child marriage happens mostly in developing countries (Koski *et al.*, 2017). But developed countries also have this problem. For example, in 2016 in Germany, 1475 cases of child marriage were registered (Kidman, 2017). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

also explicitly calls for an end to child marriage and forced marriage, experienced by 650 million women worldwide (Siddiqi and Greene, 2022). It is estimated that between 2010 and 2030, there will be about 130 million child marriages in the world (Boender, 2016). There are over 115 million men alive in the world who got married before reaching the age of 18. In poor and middle countries, one out of every 21 men gets married under the age of 18 (Yoosefi *et al.*, 2021). In Iran, in the last few decades, there have been many developments in the field of marriage age, and it has increased due to economic problems and social changes (Aghajanian *et al.*, 2018; Yoosefi *et al.*, 2021). However, a significant number of child marriages still occur in Iran (Hajihassani and Sim, 2019; Lebni *et al.*, 2020). In recent years, the highest marriage rate of girls was in the age group of 15–19 years with 196,592 cases and in the age group of 20–24 years with 204,202 cases. From 2012 to 2016, between 4.9 and 5.6 percent (about 40 thousand) of all marriages registered in Iran were in the age group of 10–14 years (Ahmady, 2021).

Child marriage is considered as a form of violence against children (Arthur *et al.*, 2018), which threatens their health (Mahato, 2016) and affects the lives of both sexes. But women are more affected due to social and cultural conditions as well as the duties and roles they have as wives (Arthur *et al.*, 2018; Unicef, 2014). Therefore, most of the researches that have been done in the field of child marriage have emphasized on women (Elnakib *et al.*, 2022; Qamar *et al.*, 2022). Child marriage is accompanied with consequences such as dropping out of school or educational failure (Murphy-Graham *et al.*, 2020), violence in all its dimensions (Nasrullah *et al.*, 2014; Tenkorang, 2019), mental problems such as depression and suicide (Gage, 2013; Uecker, 2012), high-risk pregnancy and childbirth (Adhikari *et al.*, 2009; Okine *et al.*, 2020; Onoyase, 2020), and an increase in sexually transmitted diseases (Clark, 2004; Santhya and Jejeebhoy, 2007). Child marriage of girls occurs due to various personal, family, and social reasons such as cultural beliefs (Schaffnit *et al.*, 2019), social customs (Lebni *et al.*, 2020), social norms (Cislaghi *et al.*, 2019), family (Nur *et al.*, 2020), control of girls (Horii, 2020; Steinhaus *et al.*, 2019), economic poverty (Fattah and Camellia, 2022; Tsaneva, 2020), low education (Paul, 2019), and so on. Also, in boys, child marriage happens for reasons such as working, not being busy with education, family pressure, financial independence, and patriarchal norms (Chauhan *et al.*, 2020; Gastón *et al.*, 2019; Soler-Hampejsek *et al.*, 2021).

Results of a research showed that education of women and their husbands, place of residence, and religion affect their marriage and early pregnancy (Kamal, 2012). Talukder *et al.* 2020 also reported in a study in Bangladesh that the education level of women and their husbands, religiosity, property, wealth, and geographical location are the most important factors related to child marriage of girls (Talukder *et al.*, 2020). In the study of Kohno *et al.* 2020, insecurity and war, legal issues, values, family conditions, religious beliefs, and social norms were stated as the main reasons for child marriage of girls (Kohno *et al.*, 2020). Yoosefi Lebni *et al.* 2020 reported in a research among Iranian women that economic benefit, social customs, gaining prestige and social protection, community encouragement, parental ignorance of the consequences of child marriage, and limited access to educational services are among the most important determinants of child marriage (Lebni *et al.*, 2020).

Child marriage is an important health and social challenge, which is affected by various factors that need to be identified and explained in order to prevent it by providing appropriate solutions and social interventions. Most of the studies conducted in the field of the causes of child marriage have been carried out quantitatively, and few qualitative studies have been conducted among women. So far, no research has been conducted among men to show why men tend to marry teenage girls. Although in the research of Yoosefi Lebni *et al.* 2020, it is reported that the high demand of Iranian men is one of the main reasons for child marriage in girls (Lebni *et al.*, 2020), but the reasons for men's demand to marry teenage girls have not been investigated. Therefore, examining this phenomenon from men's point of view can help a lot to understand this issue. Therefore, this research was conducted with the aim of identifying the reasons for men marrying

teenage girls with a qualitative approach in western Iran. The results of the study can be used in policies and interventions related to the issue of marriage with teenage girls.

Methods

Design

This study was conducted with a qualitative approach and conventional content analysis method (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). The reasons for choosing the qualitative approach were the lack of a comprehensive theory about the reasons for the choosing the teenage women to marry in Iran and the world, the few quantitative and qualitative researches conducted in this field, the specificity of the reasons for choosing the young women to the culture and customs of different regions, and the necessity of investigating this phenomenon in the social and cultural context of western Iran, limited access to the participants and unknownness of the statistical community. The reason for using conventional content analysis as one of the types of qualitative data analysis methods was to describe a phenomenon titled marriage of men to teenage girls. In this approach, the researcher, with an open mind and free from preconceptions, focuses on identifying the reasons behind a particular behaviour and avoids using pre-existing categories, allowing categories and their names to emerge from the data.

Participants

This research was conducted in the west of Iran (4 provinces of Kurdistan, Lorestan, Kermanshah, and Ilam). These regions are almost homogeneous in terms of cultural characteristics and have linguistic, cultural, and social commonalities. The participants in the research were married men who married to girls under 18 years of age. The criteria for entering the study were the experience of marriage with a girl under 18 years of age, a maximum of 10 years have passed since the marriage, a minimum age of 20 years, the ability to speak, living in the desired provinces at the time of marriage and research, and willingness to participate in the research.

Participants were initially selected through targeted sampling; in this way, 25 participants were identified by asking trusted local people in urban and rural areas. Then, in order to increase the number of interviews and to reach saturation, at the end of each interview, the participants were asked to introduce other people they know – who meet the criteria for entering the study – to the researcher, and 12 participants were selected in this way. In the selection of participants, the theoretical sampling strategy was also considered, that is, the participants who have the most diversity and help the most to formulate the existing concepts were selected.

Data collection

Data collection was done using semi-structured interviews, both in-person (20 cases) and online (17 cases). In face-to-face interviews, the first author of the article, who has a doctorate degree in health education and health promotion, as well as a lot of experience and skill in the field of qualitative research and interviews, presented the participants a brief biography of himself at the beginning. Then, he explained the objectives of the research and the general process of the interview to the participants, and after obtaining written consent, the interviews began. Also, due to the dispersion of the study environment and according to the request of some participants, telephone interviews using WhatsApp were also used in some cases. At first, some demographic questions were asked in terms of age, education, etc., and then the interview started with a general question, 'what happened that you married your wife (who was less than 18 years old)?'. Then, it continued based on the guide of questions that had been formulated and finalized in advance during several discussion sessions between the authors of the article and its experimental implementation among 4 men who met the criteria for entering the study (Table 1).

Table 1. Guide to interview questions

| NO. | Question |
|-----|---|
| 1 | What happened that you married your wife who was less than 18 years old? |
| 2 | What were your most important reasons for marrying a girl under 18? |
| 3 | What was the role of the family and relatives in the formation of this marriage? |
| 4 | Did the society and the media have an effect on the formation of this marriage? Please explain. |

The participants determined the time and place of the interviews, which were mostly conducted at their workplaces or places like parks without the presence of anyone other than the researcher and the participant. The duration of the interview was different for each participant because they had different information and experiences. The average time of the interviews was 61 minutes, the minimum time was 25 and the maximum time was 101 minutes. Data collection and analysis were done at the same time and continued until reaching data saturation, which was finally achieved with 37 interviews. Of course, in the last 7 interviews, no new codes and data were obtained, and the researchers could have stopped the data collection and analysis process, but for more certainty and to prevent false data saturation, the interviews continued up to 37 cases.

Data analysis

The process of conventional content analysis can be conducted using various approaches, and one of the recommended methods is the Graneheim and Lundman approach (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). They have introduced a method for analysing qualitative data called content analysis, which is named after them. In this proposed method, the analysis process consists of six stages: implementing interviews and converting them into text, repeated reading of the interview texts to gain a general understanding, extracting initial concepts, placing similar concepts under subcategories, forming categories, and ultimately sharing the results and data with the research team for final decision-making. In the first step, the first and second authors of the article, after the first interview, typed the recorded interview text word for word in Word 2013 software on the same day of the interview or the day after the interview, and at the same time, the analysis process began and the information obtained was used to prepare the next questions from the interviewees and this process continued until the end of the interviews. In the second step, the text of the interviews was carefully read twice by the researchers to get a general understanding of the text. In the third step, all the texts of the interviews were read word by word very carefully and the primary concepts were extracted. In the fourth step, the researchers put the concepts that were similar in terms of meaning and concept and could be placed in the same category in the same class and determined how they are related. In the fifth step, the codes and categories were placed in the main classes, which were conceptually more comprehensive and abstract, and the themes were extracted. Finally, in joint meetings, the entire data analysis process was shared and the opinions of all research colleagues were used.

Trustworthiness

To increase the accuracy of the research, Guba and Lincoln's criteria were followed (Lincoln *et al.*, 2011). Since the researchers were natives of the investigated areas and were familiar with their culture and language and had the necessary experience in the field of qualitative research and the subject of the study, their long-term involvement with the participants and the research field was maintained. This helped them to engage with the data and gain a deep understanding of the participants' views and interpretations and their experiences. During the research, participants

with different demographic characteristics (in terms of age, education, etc.) were selected in order to have maximum diversity. Also, at the end of each interview, the researcher expressed his understanding of the participant's speech in general and briefly to see if he understood his speech correctly or not. Also, at the end of the research, the findings were provided to 7 participants to see if the results correctly expressed their opinions and experiences, which was approved by them. Therefore, credibility was obtained through this way. In order to obtain confirmability, the researchers followed the principle of impartiality in the entire research process. Also, during the coding and analysis of the data, all the authors of the article were active and constantly discussed and finally the categories and subcategories were approved by all of them. After extracting the model, the findings of the research were presented to 3 researchers familiar with the qualitative approach and 5 people familiar with the subject of the research and were approved by all of them with minor modifications. In order to control dependability, the researchers wrote down the entire research process in an explicit and clear manner and also recorded the interviews and notes immediately after the interview, and all the members of the research team supervised the process during the entire process of conducting the study. In order to obtain transferability, all work steps, participants, path, and field of study were carefully described, and direct quotes of participants were included in the research. Also, the table of categories, subcategories, codes, and the entire section of findings were sent to 4 men who met the criteria for entering the study but did not participate in the research, to evaluate whether the research findings are in accordance with their reasons, experiences, and feelings. All of them were approved.

Ethical considerations

In order to comply with ethics in the research, the code of ethics was obtained from Lorestan University of Medical Sciences (IR.LUMS.REC.1401.178). Also, written and verbal consent was obtained from all interview participants. At the beginning of each interview, the objectives of the research as well as the conditions of participation in the research and how to conduct the interview were explained to the participants, and that participation in the research was completely optional, and they could withdraw from the interview at any time or postpone it to another time and place. At the end, the method of reporting the findings was explained to the participants, and they were assured that the recorded file will be used only in line with the goals of the research and will not be given to anyone else. Also, in publishing the findings, no names or addresses of them that can be identified should be provided. The participants in the study spoke freely about their decision to marry teenage girls without any limitations. They expressed their reasons for this action (marry teenage girls) without hesitation and did not regret their decision.

Results

In this study, 37 men participated, whose demographic characteristics are listed in Table 2. Also, after analysing the data, one core category, 9 subcategories, and 88 primary codes were obtained (Table 3).

Foresight along with desired upbringing

The obtained core category was foresight with desired upbringing, which consisted of nine subcategories. In the explanation of this category, it can be said that some men go to teenage girls because they have a kind of vision for the future. On the one hand, they believe that as they age, their wives should be younger and satisfy their sexual needs, and on the other hand, part of this perspective is due to the belief that men think that it is easier to manage young girls and they can bring up them in line with their goals and desired life. Of course, the existence of cultural beliefs and the commonness and value of marrying young girls are also involved in this process.

Table 2. Demographic information of the participants

| Variable | group | frequency |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|
| Age | Under 30 | 10 |
| | 30–50 | 21 |
| | Over 50 | 6 |
| Education | illiterate | 5 |
| | Under diploma | 12 |
| | Diploma | 10 |
| | Higher than diploma | 10 |
| Occupation | employee | 6 |
| | Self-employed | 31 |
| Age difference with wife | Less than 5 | 7 |
| | 5–10 | 13 |
| | More than 10 | 17 |
| Residence | City | 15 |
| | Village | 22 |
| Marriage years | Less than 5 | 25 |
| | 5–10 | 12 |
| Socio-economic status | rich | 10 |
| | medium | 15 |
| | Poor | 12 |

Getting sure of purity

Due to their young age, teenage girls are less exposed to emotional, sexual, and social relationships than adult girls. Therefore, due to sensitivity to this issue, some men choose teenage girls for marriage because they believe that they are purer. In Iran, it is unusual and taboo for girls to have sexual relations, and it is very important for girls not to have sexual relations before marriage, so that if a man or his family finds out that a girl had sexual or even emotional relations before marriage, they no longer see her as suitable for marriage. For this reason, the desire of men to marry teenage girls increases.

‘An older girl must have had a boyfriend before and maybe had sex, but a younger girl is trustable’ (35 years old, with a bachelor’s degree)

‘My first wife wasn’t young. After I got married, I found out that she loved someone else and I divorced her. That’s why I went to a younger girl because at least that way I was sure that she had never been with anyone before’ (38 years old, under diploma)

‘The good thing about a young girl is that she hasn’t seen the world yet, she is not like university student girls who have talked with men, that’s why I decided to get a young girl’

(33 years old, with a master’s degree)

Table 3. The category, subcategories and codes obtained from analysis

| Core category | subcategories | codes |
|--|---|---|
| foresight along with desired upbringing | getting sure of purity | Not having emotional relationships before marriage, not having sexual relationships before marriage, not having many social relationships before marriage |
| | To bring up the girl | Moral and personality upbringing of girls, desired religious upbringing of girls, social education |
| | seeking sexual pleasure | Having a lot of sexual power, having a lot of sexual desire, sexual freshness, not having the experience of circumcision |
| | dominating the wife | Being submissive to the husband, being dependent on the wife, not nagging, not making excuses, not being brave |
| | low expectations | Low expectation from life, low expectation from husband, low education, low financial expectation |
| | appropriate fertility | Having a high ability to have children, increasing the number of reproductive years, delaying fertility at will, the possibility of having more children |
| | encouragement of social organizations and families | Giving more loans, supporting the parents of the boys, supporting the parents of the girls |
| | following models | Taking an example from the father of the family, imitating the brothers, friends and acquaintances |
| | cultural beliefs | The younger a woman is (than a man), the easier it is to control her; a woman should be much younger than a man; a younger woman is less costly; a young woman becomes a man's hand in late old age; with a young woman you enjoy sex until you die; a woman who is older than a man can dominate him |

To bring up the girl

One of the presuppositions that participants had was that teenage girls have not completed their personality due to their young age and their husbands can raise them however they want. In fact, in some cases, men considered themselves the role of educators. This issue can originate from the sexist and patriarchal views that exist in the studied areas because in these areas and the entire country of Iran there are wrong assumptions about women, such as the assumption that women are less intelligent than men and it is necessary for them to be raised by men so that they can have a better life. These issues make men think that they can shape the character of women however they want.

'I got a young wife that I can raise as I want so that I don't have any more problems with her in life' (25 years old, with a bachelor's degree)

'It was very important to me that my wife says her prayers and be a believer, that's why I went and got a young girl so that I could raise her according to Islamic principles, because if she were too old, I wouldn't be able to raise her myself' (40 years old, with a diploma)

'The good thing about a young woman is that you may have problems with her at first, but then you can teach her everything gradually and train her the way you like' (29 years old, with a master's degree)

Seeking sexual pleasure

Teenage girls always have more sexual attractions for men, and a large part of this sexual attraction is due to the belief that teenage girls have remained untouched and have no sexual experience. Another part of the participants believed that young girls have more sexual power and lust, so they chose them for marriage. Of course, part of the choice of young girls in the studied areas was related to the issue of female circumcision, because in the past decades, girls in these areas were circumcised to reduce their sexual desires. As people become aware of the negative consequences of female circumcision and the obsolescence of this custom, girls are no longer circumcised in the last two decades. Therefore, some men tend to marry girls who have not had the experience of circumcision, and since the girls who have not had the experience of circumcision are mostly under 18 years of age, the tendency to marry teenage girl increases.

‘I always wanted my wife to be young. The younger a woman is, the more lustful she is’ (51 years old, illiterate)

‘The good thing about a young woman is that a man does not worry about having sex for years, because once women get older, they don’t want to have sex anymore’ (56 years old, with a bachelor’s degree)

‘A young woman is more enjoyable for a man because she has more sexual power and lust’ (27 years old, with a diploma)

‘If I wanted to get an older woman, I had to choose a woman who had already been circumcised and had very little sexual desire, and this was annoying for me, so I chose a younger woman because I was sure that she was not circumcised’ (35 years old, under diploma)

Dominance the wife

Teenage women have less education and are not very aware of the rights they have as women. Therefore, they are usually submissive to their husbands in their joint lives. On the other hand, young women are less able to deal with their husbands’ bullying because of their fragile conditions. Some participants said that they went to young women for these reasons. Also, having a big age difference makes the young woman to be in a weaker position and to be obedient to her husband’s orders.

‘I got a young woman so that she accepts whatever I say. An older woman will not obey us much anymore’ (25 years old, with a diploma)

‘A young age of your wife makes her depend on you from the beginning because she doesn’t understand anything about life, which makes you feel at ease and have less tension with her for the rest of your life’ (33 years old, with a PHD degree)

‘A girl who gets married early becomes more obedient and easier to manage’ (52 years old, illiterate)

Low expectations

Most of the participants believed that teenage women have fewer expectations, and this issue was the reason for their choice for married life. Perhaps most of the reasons for these low expectations are due to their low level of education and their knowledge of life, as they have

not yet reached social maturity and have not been able to have a correct understanding of a married life.

‘A young woman is less costly and more satisfied’ (43 years old, with under-diploma education)

‘The older a woman is, the more she expects’ (30 years old, with a diploma)

‘Since teenage girls didn’t go to university, their expectations are not high, it’s easier to live with them’ (20 years old, with a diploma)

Appropriate fertility

Due to the conditions of teenage women, their age range for pregnancy increases, and they can have more pregnancies. On the other hand, due to the low age, couples can delay the process of having children and keep themselves away from obligations and responsibilities related to children for several years. For some men who did not have much desire to have children in the first years of their married life, having a young woman was considered as a great advantage because from their point of view they could delay the process of having children for a decade so that they could handle their own lives or improve their education and jobs.

‘I liked children and I wanted to have 6 children, so I got a young woman who could have children for me’ (56 years old, illiterate)

‘I wanted the age gap between my children to be large, so I went for a younger woman’ (39 years old, with a master’s degree)

‘I wanted to get married, but when I thought about having children, I got nervous, that’s why I got a young girl, and first I told her and her family that I don’t want to have children for ten years’ (33 years old, with a PHD degree)

‘A young woman is better in many ways, especially in bearing children. You can choose everything yourself, but if your wife is older, you should have a child in the first year and you will not enjoy married life at all’ (36 years old, with a bachelor’s degree)

Encouragement of social organizations and families

In Iran, recently, due to the government’s desire to increase the country’s population growth, plans have been registered to encourage marriage at a young age, so that if the age of the girl in these marriages is younger, more loans will be granted to the couple. Therefore, some participants chose teenage girls because of receiving more loans. On the other hand, the man’s family feels more satisfied with having a young daughter-in-law and they want their daughter-in-law to be young and even look at it as a prestige and social privilege. A woman’s family also supports her more when she marries at a young age.

‘I heard that if my wife is younger, they will give me a higher loan amount, so I got a younger wife’ (24 years old, with a diploma)

‘My family always insisted that I must marry a young girl. I loved a girl, she was two years older than me, but my family did not agree’ (39 years old, with post-graduate education)

‘When a woman is young, her family, especially her mother, supports her more, and this is good, they even help her with childbearing. When our first child was born, my mother-in-law raised them’. (42 years old, with a diploma)

Following models

Considering the prevalence of marriages with girls under 18 years old in the studied areas, this behaviour is learned by other men and has become a role model for marriage, as most of the participants stated that among family, friends, and acquaintances a number of marriages with girls under 18 years of age are observed and this behaviour has influenced their decision to marry young girls.

‘Why did I choose a young girl? I’ve never thought about it until now. Like others, I married a girl who was ten years younger than me’ (38 years old, with postgraduate education)

‘When I saw that all my brothers had wives under the age of 18, I, like them, looked for younger girls, although my mother always wanted her bride to be young’ (27 years old, with a diploma)

‘In most of our relatives, choosing a young girl for marriage is a normal thing, and no one criticizes you because your wife is young, but if your wife is old, everyone complains’ (35 years old, with a bachelor’s degree)

Cultural beliefs

Another reason for marrying teenage girls was cultural beliefs. In fact, there was a set of cultural beliefs in the studied areas that encouraged men to marry teenage girls. Most of these beliefs were related to the position of patriarchy in the region under study and the gender roles that are imagined for women.

‘The younger a woman is (than a man), the easier it is to control her’ (25 years old, with a bachelor’s degree)

‘A woman should be much younger than a man’ (24 years old, with a bachelor’s degree)

‘The younger a woman, the less costly she is’ (33 years old, with a bachelor’s degree)

‘A young woman becomes a man’s hand in late old age’ (24 years old, with diploma)

‘With a younger woman, you will enjoy sex until you die’ (33 years old, with PHD degree)

‘A woman who is older than a man can take him under her control’ (52 years old, illiterate)

Description of the conceptual model

Based on the findings, it was found that young women are chosen by men for various reasons (Fig. 1). Part of these reasons are related to the personality of people and the way they look at marriage and married life, and another part is related to the structure of the family they live in. But the larger part of these reasons was related to the cultural and social context. In the studied society of western Iran, not having sex before marriage is considered a great value for a girl, and few families consider a girl who has already had sex for marriage. Even many people and families do not accept having an emotional relationship before marriage for a girl, while this situation is not

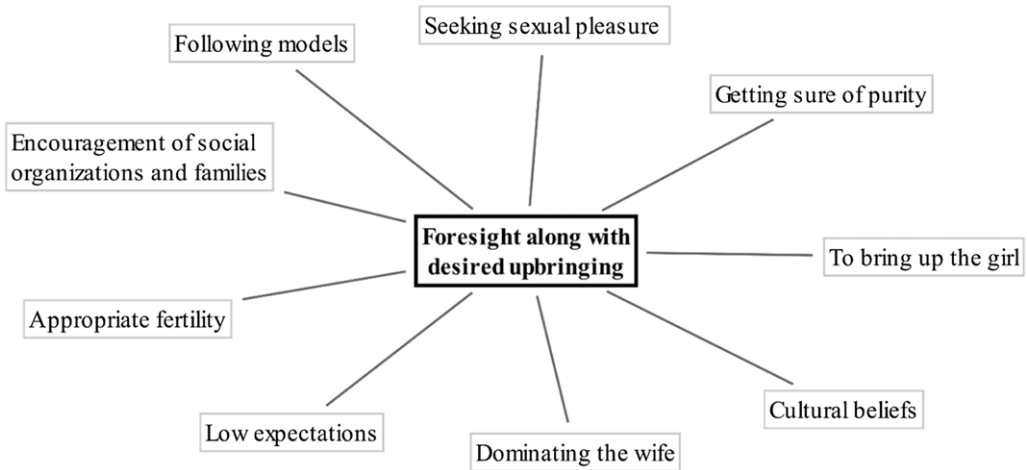


Figure 1. Conceptual model formed of men's reasons for choosing adolescent women.

the same for boys, and even if they find out that a boy had an emotional relationship or even a sexual relationship before marriage, it is not considered important that is related to the society's patriarchal culture. Of course, religious views can also be influential in this issue, because in Islam, the punishments for men and women who have sex outside of marriage are unequal, and women face more severe punishments.

Another reason for marrying young women was desired upbringing. Part of this desired upbringing could be rooted in the lack of trust in older girls or the purity of teenage girls because they believe that they can educate teenage girls however they want. Of course, this issue is also related to the common patriarchal view in the society, because women in the studied society always have a lower position than men, and they are less able to have an equal position in their married life. Therefore, men allow themselves to create women's characters as they wish. Sexual pleasure was also another reason for men. In general, the findings showed that men have a sexual point of view regarding the choice of teenage women and believe that teenage women are more enjoyable for men and can satisfy their sexual needs for more years. In a patriarchal culture, men look for women who obey them the most. Therefore, teenage girls who are in a weak position due to lack of education or a suitable job can be a suitable option for marriage and give men the opportunity to treat them however they want.

In addition to this, a set of cultural beliefs rooted in the social and cultural structure of the studied society and the way of looking at women encourage men to choose young women. These beliefs are so deep that they are rooted in the legal structure of the society under study and also in the families, so that even social and religious organizations not only do not consider marriage to teenage women as bad, but also encourage it; in families, marrying teenage girls is considered an important value and a success for the family, and parents and other family members encourage men to marry young girls. On the other hand, the widespread prevalence of this phenomenon in the studied society also causes it to be learned by other men and ultimately reproduce it.

Discussion

This research was conducted with the aim of analysing the reasons for choosing teenage girls to marry from the perspective of men with a qualitative approach in western Iran. Child marriage exists throughout Iran, but it is more prevalent in certain provinces compared to others. The provinces examined in this study have relatively higher rates of child marriage compared to other

provinces in Iran. Additionally, it has been generally established that child marriage occurs more frequently in poor countries and among impoverished families.

The results showed that regardless of their age, men have a set of reasons for choosing teenage girls for marriage, and all these reasons can be placed under the category of foresight along with desired upbringing. Part of this foresight goes back to sexual and pregnancy issues related to teenage women, and another part goes back to their personality issues, which are more attractive to men because these characteristics make them submissive and have low expectations. Also, due to the attractiveness of teenage women in the field of pregnancy and reproduction, marriage with them is encouraged by families and government and social organizations.

Getting sure of purity was one of the reasons for men to choose teenage girls, which was one of the new and interesting findings in this research. Part of the value of preserving virginity during singlehood and not having sex is related to religion, because in Islam (the common religion of Iran) sex outside of the family is strongly denied and virginity is considered as a value. But the larger part of it is related to the social and cultural structure of the society, in which it is forbidden for women to have sexual and even emotional relations before marriage, and women face the most severe punishments if they have sex before marriage. The issue of girls' virginity is very important for men and families, and men tend to marry girls who are less exposed to such relationships. Therefore, they show interest in teenage girls because with their young age and many restrictions on them, it is much less likely that they have experienced sexual or even emotional relationships. In most of the researches that have been conducted in the field of child marriage, prevention of having sex outside of marriage has been reported as the reason for child marriage (Taylor *et al.*, 2019). Steinhaus *et al.* 2019 have also stated the control of adolescent sexuality and pregnancy prevention outside the family framework as one of the determinants of girls' child marriage (Steinhaus *et al.*, 2019). In the research conducted by Horii 2020 in a part of the Indonesian Muslim population, it was shown that judges who judge cases related to child marriage for reasons such as protecting girls from social stigmas in the face of pregnancy and extramarital sex usually prefer religious and customary norms to international laws and consent to the marriage of young girls (Horii, 2020).

The girl upbringing was another interesting finding in this research. In fact, the predominance of patriarchal views in Iran, as well as the idea that women have less intelligence and tact than men, caused men to go to teenage girls for marriage, so that they can educate them in their married life and shape their personality. They say that this education is more aimed at promoting a submissive and obedient character in women.

Another reason for men was sexual pleasure. Several researches have shown that girls are subject to men's violence due to their sexual desires, and this violence may be in the form of formal or informal marriage (Kidman, 2017; Zaman and Koski, 2020). In the present study, teenage girls had more sexual pleasure for men for several reasons, the first reason was related to their virginity, the main root of which was the cultural and social issues of the society, that virgin girls had a better social status and this social status and value caused men to feel better in marriage with them. Another reason was related to the cultural belief that adolescent girls are more sexually active and can be more pleasurable for men. Also, another reason pointed out the issue of female circumcision, that in some of the studied areas, many girls were circumcised until a few decades ago, and this issue affected their sexual relations. Therefore, some men did not want to marry circumcised girls who were now over 20 years old and preferred to marry girls who were not circumcised and were less than 18 years old. It has been reported in researches in Iran and the world that circumcision can affect women's sexual relations (Mohamed *et al.*, 2022; Shafaati Laleh *et al.*, 2022).

Dominating the wife was another finding of the research. Due to the dominance of patriarchal views in the studied society, the majority of men expect women to be submissive, and according to them, a good woman is a woman who is obedient to her husband's orders. Therefore, due to their weak social status and low education, which causes them to have little knowledge about their

rights, teenage girls become more submissive than adult and educated women. This submissive personality can provide the ground for violence in the family, as domestic violence has been reported in most of the researches that have been conducted in the field of child marriage (Ahinkorah *et al.*, 2022; Qamar *et al.*, 2022). Tenkorang, 2019 in a study in Ghana showed that women who married in childhood were more likely to approve of patriarchal gender norms that indicate a type of servile personality in women (Tenkorang, 2019).

Having low expectations was another reason for men to choose teenage girls. Young girls still do not have a correct understanding of the married life and the duties of men in the married life. Since they have a low level of education, they do not know much about their rights in a joint life. Hence, they have low expectations in the married life, and this is very attractive to some men because they do not have to fight with their women daily.

Appropriate fertility was another reason for men to choose teenage girls, which was one of the interesting findings in this research. Women's fertility rate has always been important for men and their families throughout history and one of the main bases of choosing girls for married life. Because teenage girls are very young, this fertility increases and can be attractive for some families. Of course, with the increase in people's knowledge, as well as the change in people's lifestyles and the desire of couples to have fewer children, this feature is changing. Even now, despite the financial problems of families, at the beginning of life, a man with a young wife can delay the process of pregnancy and having children for many years until their conditions become more suitable. Therefore, having a young woman can be an advantage for men in this field.

Encouragement of social organizations and families was another research finding that was consistent with the research of Yoosefi Lebni *et al* 2020, who reported that child marriage in Iran is constantly encouraged and promoted through the media, religious clerics, and elders, and this is the reason for its continuation (Lebni *et al.*, 2020). In another study, the effect of advertising on child marriage has been reported (Gage, 2013). In Iran, in recent years, due to the approval of policies based on population growth, the media and social organizations constantly encourage young people to marry early and even offer privileges such as having higher loan amount if they marry young girls. This issue is effective in encouraging some men to choose teenage girls. Many families in the studied areas consider having a young bride as a privilege and prestige and encourage their sons to marry young girls. Of course, the girl's family also provides her with more financial and social support by marrying their daughter at a young age.

Following models was another significant finding in this study. It can be said that marrying teenage girls is seen as a frequent behaviour among the society, and this issue causes this behaviour to be learned by other young people by observing. Although this finding has not been reported among men, in the study of Yoosefi Lebni *et al* 2020, which was conducted among women, learning from others was reported as one of the determinants of child marriage, that is, girls learn from their mothers, sisters, and friends. They get married at a young age (Lebni *et al.*, 2020). Also, Erulkar 2013 in a research in Ethiopia reported that most child marriages of girls were arranged by their mothers (Erulkar, 2013). Seeing people around you getting married at a young age encourages others to get married at a young age. This issue is either modelling the behaviour of others or at least it affects their behaviour in the field of marriage.

Cultural beliefs were another reason for men to marry teenage girls. There were some cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes in the studied areas that encouraged men to marry teenage girls. Child marriage in any country is influenced by its cultural beliefs. In the examined regions, cultural beliefs include the notion that controlling women is easier when their age is significantly younger than their husbands, a woman should be much younger than her husband, a younger woman is less expensive, a young woman becomes a walking stick for an elderly man, having a young wife provides sexual pleasure until one's death, and a woman who is older than a man should ride on his back. These cultural beliefs have influenced men's opinions and decisions regarding marrying adolescent girls. Most of these beliefs were based on patriarchy and aimed at subjugating women, such as a young woman becoming a man's hand in late old age, or the

younger a woman is, the easier it is to control her. Most of the researches conducted in the field of child marriage have emphasized the colourful role of social beliefs and customs in the formation of child marriage (Edmeades *et al.*, 2022; Naved *et al.*, 2022). Also, in the research of Cislighi *et al.* 2019, this cultural belief that chaste girls do not have sex before marriage and that girls should get married immediately after reaching puberty has been reported as one of the main factors of child marriage in rural areas of Cameroon (Cislighi *et al.*, 2019).

Limitations and strengths

This research, for the first time in Iran and the world, according to the research team, examines the reasons for men to choose teenage girls for marriage from men's point of view and with a qualitative approach, which can provide first-class and complete information to social organizations and legislators to intervene in order to prevent this problem. Another strength of the research was that the researchers were local and had a long history of conducting research (especially the first author) in the field of marriage and women among the studied regions, which made the researchers fully familiar with the manners and customs of the participants and this issue helped to gain their trust a lot.

However, the research had some limitations. One of these limitations was the dispersion of the studied environment. Conducting research in four provinces made it difficult for researchers to collect data. Therefore, the researchers overcame this problem by using the telephone interview method to collect data from some participants. Also, the identification of participants was another limitation that the researchers were able to overcome by using local trustees and snowball sampling. Another limitation of the research was the reluctance of some participants to record their voices, which the researcher gained their consent by explaining to them how to use the recorded voices and assuring them that the recorded voices will only be used in line with the research, and after the end of the research, the audio files and the texts of the interviews will be destroyed and the results of the research will be published in such a way that none of the participants can be identified.

Conclusion

Marrying girls under the age of 18 is one of the main issues in western Iran, which has several reasons. Some of the reasons are rooted in the personality traits of men, and another part is due to family encouragement, and the more important part is rooted in the cultural and social context of society and the way women are viewed. Policies regarding marriage, particularly the marriage of men to teenage girls, can be guided by research findings. Marriages with teenage girls can be prevented by intervening at different levels and measures such as education and raising the awareness of men about the consequences of marrying teenage girls, changing the cultural and gender beliefs of men, raising the awareness of parents as well as social organizations about the adverse effects of child marriage, and establishing appropriate laws. Since one of the objectives of this type of marriage and some of its outcomes are negative and contribute to the reproduction of male dominance, it should face greater limitations. Furthermore, extensive interventions are necessary to change men's beliefs and their understanding of the potential negative consequences of this type of marriage, as well as to educate teenage girls about the implications of marrying men with significant age gaps.

Acknowledgements. The authors would like to thank all the participants who patiently participated.

Author contribution. All authors participated and approved the study design. JYL, MS, and SFI contributed to designing the study. JYL and AA collected the data and analysed it by SFI and JYL. The final article was written by SFI, JYL, and MS. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding statement. No funding was received for this work.

Competing interests. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare

Ethical standard. The authors assert that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human experimentation and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Lorestan University of Medical Sciences (Code: IR.LUMS.REC.1401.178). Written consent was obtained from all participants.

References

- Adhikari R, Soonthorndhada K and Prasartkul P** (2009) Correlates of unintended pregnancy among currently pregnant married women in Nepal. *BMC International Health and Human Rights* **9**, 1–10.
- Aghajanian A, Vaezzade S, Kohan JA and Thompson V** (2018) Recent trends of marriage in Iran. *The Open Family Studies Journal* **10**, 1–8.
- Ahinkorah BO, Onayemi OM, Seidu A-A, Awopegba OE and Ajayi AI** (2022) Association between girl-child marriage and intimate partner violence in Sub-Saharan Africa: insights from a multicountry analysis of demographic and health surveys. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* **37**, NP13560–NP13580.
- Ahmady K** (2021) The feminization of poverty: causes and implications of early child marriage in Iran. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry* **12**, 7825–7837.
- Arthur M, Earle A, Raub A, Vincent I, Atabay E, Lutz I, Kranz G, Nandi A and Heymann J** (2018) Child marriage laws around the world: Minimum marriage age, legal exceptions, and gender disparities. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* **39**, 51–74.
- Boender C** (2016) *Mapping of Child Marriage Initiatives in South Asia*. Kathmandu, Nepal: UNICEF and UNFPA.
- Chauhan S, Sekher T, Kumar P, Srivastava S and Patel R** (2020) Prevalence, determinants and socio-economic inequality of early marriage among men in India. *Children and Youth Services Review* **116**, 105273.
- Cislaghi B, Mackie G, Nkwi P and Shakya H** (2019) Social norms and child marriage in Cameroon: an application of the theory of normative spectrum. *Global Public Health* **14**, 1479–1494.
- Clark S** (2004) Early marriage and HIV risks in sub-Saharan Africa. *Studies in family planning* **35**, 149–160.
- Edmeades JD, MacQuarrie KL and Acharya K** (2022) Child grooms: understanding the drivers of child marriage for boys. *Journal of Adolescent Health* **70**, S54–S56.
- Elnakib S, Elsallab M, Wanis MA, Elshiwiy S, Krishnapalan NP and Naja NA** (2022) Understanding the impacts of child marriage on the health and well-being of adolescent girls and young women residing in urban areas in Egypt. *Reproductive Health* **19**, 1–14.
- Erulkar A** (2013) Early marriage, marital relations and intimate partner violence in Ethiopia. *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* **39**, 6–13.
- Fattah KN and Camellia S** (2022) Poverty, dowry and the ‘good match’: revisiting community perceptions and practices of child marriage in a rural setting in Bangladesh. *Journal of Biosocial Science* **54**, 39–53.
- Gage AJ** (2013) Association of child marriage with suicidal thoughts and attempts among adolescent girls in Ethiopia. *Journal of Adolescent Health* **52**, 654–656.
- Gastón CM, Misunas C and Cappa C** (2019) Child marriage among boys: a global overview of available data. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies* **14**, 219–228.
- Graneheim UH and Lundman B** (2004) Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today* **24**, 105–112.
- Hajihassani M and Sim T** (2019) Marital satisfaction among girls with early marriage in Iran: emotional intelligence and religious orientation. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* **24**, 297–306.
- Horii H** (2020) Legal reasoning for legitimation of child marriage in West Java: accommodation of local norms at Islamic courts and the paradox of child protection. *Journal of Human Rights Practice* **12**, 501–523.
- Kamal SM** (2012) Adolescent motherhood in Bangladesh: evidence from 2007 BDHS data. *Canadian Studies in Population* **39**, 63–82.
- Kidman R** (2017) Child marriage and intimate partner violence: a comparative study of 34 countries. *International Journal of Epidemiology* **46**, 662–675.
- Kohno A, Techarivichien T, Suguimoto SP, Dahlui M, Nik Farid ND and Nakayama T** (2020) Investigation of the key factors that influence the girls to enter into child marriage: a meta-synthesis of qualitative evidence. *PloS One* **15**, e0235959.
- Koski A, Clark S and Nandi A** (2017) Has child marriage declined in sub-Saharan Africa? An analysis of trends in 31 countries. *Population and Development Review* **43**, 7–29.
- Lebni JY, Solhi M, Azar FEF and Farahani FK** (2020) Qualitative study of social determinants of child marriage in Kurdish regions of Iran: evidence for health promotion interventions. *Journal of Education and Health Promotion* **9**, 242.
- Lincoln YS, Lynham SA and Guba EG** (2011) Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* **4**, 97–128.
- Mahato SK** (2016) Causes and consequences of child marriage: a perspective. *International Journal of Scientific and Engineering Research* **7**, 697–702.

- Mohamed AH, Mohamud RYH, Mohamud HA, Eraslan A, Gur M, Omar AA and Cimen S** (2022) Somalian women with female genital mutilation had increased risk of female sexual dysfunction: a cross-sectional observational study. *Scientific Reports* **12**, 1–5.
- Murphy-Graham E, Cohen AK and Pacheco-Montoya D** (2020) School dropout, child marriage, and early pregnancy among adolescent girls in rural honduras. *Comparative Education Review* **64**, 703–724.
- Nasrullah M, Muazzam S, Bhutta ZA and Raj A** (2014) Girl child marriage and its effect on fertility in Pakistan: findings from Pakistan demographic and health survey, 2006–2007. *Maternal and Child Health Journal* **18**, 534–543.
- Naved RT, Kalra S, Talukder A, Lateral A, Nunna TT, Parvin K and Al Mamun M** (2022) An exploration of social norms that restrict girls' sexuality and facilitate child marriage in Bangladesh to inform policies and programs. *Journal of Adolescent Health* **70**, S17–S21.
- Nur R, Dwitama M, Fadly M, Patui N, Radhiah S, Mantao E and Mallongi A** (2020) The culture and age of first marriage on female teenagers in west Marawola. *Medico-Legal Update* **20**, 1335–1340.
- Okine I, Dako-Gyeke M, Baiden P and Saa-Touh Mort K** (2020) Exploring the influence of repeat pregnancy on the lives of teenage mothers. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* **30**, 863–880.
- Onoyase A** (2020) Causes of child marriage and its effects on the child In Jigawa State, North West Nigeria: implications for counselling. *Journal Of Education And Training Studies* **8**, 50–57.
- Paul P** (2019) Effects of education and poverty on the prevalence of girl child marriage in India: a district-level analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review* **100**, 16–21.
- Qamar M, Harris MA and Tustin JL** (2022) The association between child marriage and domestic violence in Afghanistan. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* **37**, 2948–2961.
- Santhya K and Jejeebhoy SJ** (2007) Early marriage and HIV/AIDS: risk factors among young women in India. *Economic and Political Weekly* **42**, 1291–1297.
- Schaffnit SB, Urassa M and Lawson DW** (2019) “Child marriage” in context: exploring local attitudes towards early marriage in rural Tanzania. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* **27**, 93–105.
- Shafaati Laleh S, Maleki A, Samiei V, Roshanaei G and Soltani F** (2022) The comparison of sexual function in women with or without experience of female genital circumcision: a case-control study in a Kurdish region of Iran. *Health Care for Women International* **43**, 194–206.
- Siddiqi M and Greene ME** (2022) Mapping the field of child marriage: evidence, gaps, and future directions from a large-scale systematic scoping review, 2000–2019. *Journal of Adolescent Health* **70**, S9–S16.
- Soler-Hampejsek E, Kangwana B, Austrian K, Amin S and Psaki SR** (2021) Education, child marriage, and work outcomes among young people in rural Malawi. *Journal of Adolescent Health* **69**, S57–S64.
- Staff U** (2011) *The State of the World's Children 2011-Executive Summary: Adolescence an Age of Opportunity*. New York, NY: Unicef.
- Steinhaus M, Hinson L, Rizzo AT and Gregowski A** (2019) Measuring social norms related to child marriage among adult decision-makers of young girls in Phalombe and Thyolo, Malawi. *Journal of Adolescent Health* **64**, S37–S44.
- Talukder A, Hasan MM, Razu SR and Hossain Z** (2020) Early marriage in Bangladesh: a cross-sectional study exploring the associated factors. *Journal of International Women's Studies* **21**, 68–78.
- Taylor AY, Murphy-Graham E, Van Horn J, Vaitla B, Del Valle Á and Cislighi B** (2019) Child marriages and unions in Latin America: understanding the roles of agency and social norms. *Journal of Adolescent Health* **64**, S45–S51.
- Tenkorang EY** (2019) Explaining the links between child marriage and intimate partner violence: evidence from Ghana. *Child Abuse & Neglect* **89**, 48–57.
- Tsaneva M** (2020) The effect of weather variability on child marriage in Bangladesh. *Journal of International Development* **32**, 1346–1359.
- Uecker JE** (2012) Marriage and mental health among young adults. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* **53**, 67–83.
- Unicef** (2014) *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects*. New York, NY: Unicef.
- Yoosefi Lebni J, Solhi M, Ebadi Fard Azar F, Khalajabadi Farahani F and Irandoost SF** (2023) Exploring the consequences of early marriage: a conventional content analysis. *INQUIRY: The Journal of Health Care Organization, Provision, and Financing* **60**, 00469580231159963.
- Yoosefi LJ, Pirouzeh R, Khosravi B and Mansourian M** (2021) Exploring the reasons for single-hood among girls aged over 33 years living in Tehran: a qualitative study. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Health Sciences* **10**, 238–245.
- Zaman M and Koski A** (2020) Child marriage in Canada: a systematic review. *PloS One* **15**, e0229676.