

Prevalence of Early Marriage among Women in Rural Palestinian Community: A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Early marriage of girls is rooted in developing countries. Nevertheless, the situation is varied greatly by country and by regions within each country. It has been considered a human-rights violation of girls and young women, where contributing to mother and early morbidity and mortality.

Objectives: To determine the prevalence of early marriage before 18 years of age in young adult women in Yatta, south Palestine.

Methods: This study was conducted on 500 married women in Yatta. All the women were interviewed personally using a structured Arabic questionnaire. Prevalence of early marriage was estimated for the whole sample. Chi-square was used to compute the frequencies & percentages.

Results: Overall 41.4% of women marry or enter a union before the age of 18 years, and 54.6% do so by their age of 18-25 years. Women's and husbands' age at marriage, husbands' education appear to be significant determinants of consanguineous marriages. The results indicated no significant differences between education and early marriage based on consanguinity.

Conclusion: Early marriage is a common occurrence and highly pervasive in the region and that it is the most dangerous of all the harmful traditional practices. Thus, there is a need for urgent family-planning, maternal and child health intervention programs targeted to married adolescents to minimize the high fertility (early and frequent pregnancies), and to control other outcomes of this practice.

KEY WORDS

early marriage, rural communities, impoverished, Yatta, Palestine

INTRODUCTION

Early marriage, also referred to as child marriage, is defined by UNICEF as any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl are physically mature and psychologically developed, and become ready to carry the responsibilities of the marriage and child bearing. It affects more than 10 million girls globally each year, where contributing to infant morbidities (such as delivery complications, low birth weight) and mortality (UNICEF, 2007; UNICEF, 2011; Raj, 2011).

Early marriage is perpetuated in areas of poverty, more common in rural communities (UNFPA, 2012). Previous study indicated that 48% of women between 15 and 24 were married before 18 in South Asia, 42% in Africa (UNICEF, 2005), and more than 60% in some parts of East and West Africa (UNFPA, 2006). Only 29% were married before the age of 18 years, in America and the Caribbean, though some individ-

ual countries have much higher rates (UNICEF, 2005). Early marriage also is prevalent in the Middle East, where almost 50% of girls younger than 18 in Yemen and Palestine are married (IPPF, UNFPA, 2006).

Reaping financial incentives encourage parents to accept the marriage of their daughters while they are still children: to ensure their daughter's financial security and to relieve the financial burden daughters place on the family (e.g., Feeding, clothing, and education). Most of these marriages are arranged by parents, and girls rarely meet their future husbands before the wedding. Some families take advantage of religious laws that condone an earlier marriage age, and arrange for their daughters to marry in religious wedding ceremonies, postponing the official registration until the bride reaches the legal age. Such practices leave bride with no legal basis to receive inheritance, alimony, or child support if the husband dies prematurely or abandons his underage bride.

Early marriage often means limited female educational opportunity,

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Table 1. distribution of women characteristics by consanguinity

Variable	consanguinity						Pvalue
	Yes		NO		Total		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Age at marriage							
< 18	142	28.4	65	13.0	207	41.4	0.005
18-25	155	31.0	118	23.6	273	54.6	
> 25	8	1.6	12	2.4	20	4.0	
Education							
< 7 years	155	31.0	93	18.6	248	49.6	0.556
7-12 years	128	25.6	83	16.6	211	42.2	
> 12 years	22	4.4	19	3.8	41	8.2	
Occupation							
Housewives	284	56.8	176	35.2	460	92.0	0.515
Working with payment	20	4.0	18	3.6	38	7.6	
Working without payment	1	0.2	1	0.2	2	0.4	

Table 2. Distribution of husbands Characteristics by Consanguinity

Variable	consanguinity						Pvalue
	Yes		NO		Total		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Age at marriage							
< 18	39	7.8	9	1.8	48	9.6	< 0.001
18-25	221	44.2	115	23.0	336	67.2	
> 25	45	9.0	71	14.2	116	23.2	
Education							
< 7 years	108	21.6	59	11.8	167	33.4	0.001
7-12 years	171	34.2	102	20.4	273	54.6	
> 12 years	26	5.2	34	6.8	60	12.0	
Occupation							
Unemployed	57	11.4	35	7.0	92	18.4	0.359
Skilled	67	13.4	42	8.4	109	21.8	
Unskilled	134	26.8	86	17.2	220	44.0	
Professional	20	4.0	17	3.4	37	7.4	
Land or factory owner	25	5.0	10	2.0	35	7.4	
Socially highly professional	2	0.4	5	1.0	7	1.4	

forced sexual relations, early childbearing, marital instabilities, reproductive health-related complications, high fertility, reduced employment opportunity and poverty. Moreover, girls who marry early are generally more vulnerable to spousal violence than girls who marry late (Kharboush et al., 2010). Early marriage has been recognized as violation of human-rights (Saardchom, Lemaire, 2005; UNICEF, 2001).

In addition, those women are exposed to increased risk of frequent pregnancies and childbirth, early and frequent sexual relations, increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases, cervical cancer, mental health disorder (depression), obstetric fistulas (Musa et al., 2013; Dham et al., 2013), and malformations (Swarhib et al., 2013), maternal and child morbidity and mortality (UNFPA, 2006), combined with limited access to, and use of, contraception and reproductive health services and awareness. In addition, Mortality rates are 73% higher for infants born to mothers < 20 years of age than for those born to older mothers (Nour, 2006).

Maternal health, infant mortality, and women's empowerment had been prioritized by the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations (UN, 2013), confirming the urgent need to attenuate early marriage and its consequences on mother and early health (Bhutta et al., 2004).

Although early marriage has decreased worldwide during the past 20 years, one in seven girls marries before her 18th birthday in Arab regions (UNFPA, 2012), and one in 10 girls marries between the age of 15 to 19 years in Palestine (Jarallah, 2008). Unfortunately, despite of the widespread and severe consequences of the early marriage, few study research has been published in the past decade, especially in Palestine. This scarcity in knowledge curbs the work of health practitioners and policy makers.

To the best of our knowledge data on prevalence of early marriage among rural communities in the south of Palestine are not available. In this context this study was designed to provide the prevalence of early marriage in rural community of Yatta, through household surveys.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was part of a cross sectional household survey which was carried out in Yatta, a south rural area in Palestine. A convenience sample of 500 married women was personally interviewed using a structured questionnaire to determine the prevalence of early marriage. Arabic version questionnaire was used and included four areas of interest: Personal information, Socioeconomic factors include; level of education of both wife and husband, occupation, monthly income of the husband and parents, housing includes (ownership, type of the build-

ing, number of the rooms), in addition to the obstetric profile and family pedigree. To minimize literacy barriers this survey was administered verbally via a trained interviewer in Arabic language. A representative household-based sample was obtained via a systematic household sampling strategy in all census blocks. Early marriage was defined as marriage before 18 years of age.

Statistical analysis

Prevalence of early marriage was calculated for the total sample of women aged 20-24 years. Differences in early marriage by demographics and marital characteristics were assessed by chi-square analyses, with significance for all analyses set at $p < 0.05$.

Pilot Study

A small pilot test was conducted prior to administration in order to assess readability, understanding, response bias, respondent burden, time required for completion and analysis of potential social desirability bias by correlation between the summed social desirability measure and individual questionnaire items (internal consistency and factor analysis were not conducted on the pilot test data). Internal consistency for these variables, as represented by Cronbach's alpha was tested prior to the implementation of the environmental education program, was 0.84.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the higher education ethical committee of Al Quds University, permission was obtained from the Municipality of Yatta, and consent form was signed by the participants.

RESULTS

Socioeconomic Study Variables

Women by Consanguinity

Table 1 presents social variables by consanguinity among women. The study shows that 207 (41.4%) of the total women were get married before the age of 18 years old, 142 (28.4%) of them were consanguineously married, and 65 (13.0%) of them are non-consanguineously married. Whereas, 273 (54.6%) of the total were get married in age 18-25 years, where 83 (16.6%) of them were married to non- relative husbands. There was a statistically significant differences ($p = 0.005$) in early marriage between the three age-groups based on consanguinity.

The study results showed that 248 (49.6%) of the total study population had less than seven years of education, 155 (31%) of them were of non-consanguineously marriage, 211 (42.2%) of the women had 7-12 years of education, where 128 (25.6%) of them were of consanguinity. The results indicated no statistical differences between education and early marriage based on consanguinity. Pearson chi-square showed no association between years of education and early marriage.

The vast majority of the participated women were housewives. The results revealed that, there were no statistical differences between women's occupation and early marriage. Pearson chi-square indicated no association between occupation and early marriage.

Husbands by Consanguinity

Table 2 presents the socioeconomic variables of the husbands by consanguinity. The study shows that the vast majority of the husbands were get married in age 18 - 25 years, where 44.2% of them were of consanguineous marriage 48 (9.6%) of the early married husbands were married before the age of 18 years, and 23.0% were of non-consanguinity marriage. The results showed that, there were statistically significant differences in early marriage between the three age-groups based on consanguinity.

The study results showed that 167 (33.4%) of the husbands had less than seven years of education, 108 (21.6%) of them were of consanguineously marriage. The highest prevalence of early marriage was recorded in husbands those who had 7-12 years of education, where 171 (34.2%) of them were of consanguinity. The results indicated statistically significant differences ($p = 0.001$) between education and early marriage based on consanguinity. Pearson chi-square showed significant association between years of education and early marriage.

The vast majority of the participated husbands were unskilled workers. The results revealed that, there were no statistical differences ($p = 0.359$) between husbands occupation and early marriage. Pearson chi-square indicated no association between occupation and early marriage.

DISCUSSION

For women - more than one-third of the participated women were married before 18 years of age, and more than half of them were married in age 18-25 (table 2). The highest prevalence of early marriage was recorded in women those who had less than 7 years of education (primary school) table 2. The overwhelming majority of the early married women were housewives.

For husbands - almost two-third of the men were get married in age 18 - 25, whereas only around 10% were married before they reached the age of 18 years. The highest prevalence of early marriage was recorded in husbands who had 7-12 years of education, followed by those who had less than 7 years of education.

In light of these findings, it is reasonable to conclude that, early marriage is highly prevalent in Palestine, thus it is the most serious of all the harmful traditional practices. While the practice has decreased globally over the last 30 years, it remains common in rural areas and among the impoverished families (The Population Council, 2002). Poor parents often believe that early marriage will protect their daughters. But in fact, it results in lost development opportunities, limited life

options and poor health. Almost half of ever married participated adult Palestinian women got married before the legal age of 18 years, with rural, poor, less educated girls, and those from south region of the country most vulnerable to the practice. This practice is associated with increased and less controlled fertility, reduced contraception early in marriage, and increased poor fertility outcomes such as abortions, and frequent pregnancies in less than 24 months. However, the determinants of such early marriage are not well documented.

The study results are consistent with previous research, in South Asia, where over 48% of women were married before they reached the age of 18 years, 42% in Africa, and in Palestine and Yemen, where about half of under-18s were already married (UNICEF, 2005).

Contrary to the common belief that education is often seen as key to preventing early marriage. Our results showed that, the more educated the husband is the higher the chance that he will marry one of his relatives. Because, they look to the educated person like a star in the family, so he must marry from the same family (according to family decision makers). On the other hand, families did not pay enough attention to their daughters' education, because they believe that if the girls did not get married by the age of 18-20 years, it will be difficult to get marry later. Therefore, families are seeking to marry their daughters before reach the age of 18.

In addition, our findings suggest that although urbanization and accompanying changes it brings may cause a considerable strain reducing the prevalence of early marriages, factors such as the cultural norms of kinship and sib ship solidarity cherished by early marriage, and socioeconomic benefits offered by such marriages, tend to outweigh such strain. The study findings suggest that economic changes and women's development (UNFPA, 2005), existing legislations and programmatic efforts to prevent early marriage and encourage maternal and child health (IRCW, 2007), have been not sufficient to reduce the prevalence of child marriage in Palestine similar to the most other neighboring countries (UNICEF, 2007; IRCW, 2007), the more educated the husband is the higher the chance that he will marry one of his relatives

On the other hand, the more education the girl receives is the less chance that she will marry as a child. Improving access to education for both girls and boys and remove gender differences in education are important strategies in halting the practice of early marriage.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, in Palestine, specifically in southern rural Palestine, early marriage is a common occurrence and highly pervasive in the region and that it is the most dangerous of all the harmful traditional practices. Available data show that about four in ten ever married women marry before the age of 18 years. These results are considered data base information about the prevalence of early marriage and its health consequences on mother and child that can help stakeholders, policymakers, and health practitioner recognize that action is needed.

Ending early marriage requires an urgent need for culturally tailored education program that provide education and reproductive health services to unmarried girls; early married women, and men who might follow children for marriage to eliminate this phenomenon. In addition, there is a need for family-planning, maternal and early health intervention programs targeted to married adolescents to minimize the high fertility (early and frequent pregnancies), and to control other outcomes of this practice.

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