

# Factors that encourage early marriage and motherhood from the perspective of Iranian adolescent mothers: a qualitative study

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## Abstract

**Background:** Early marriage and motherhood is one of the most important health challenges in developing countries and affects mothers, children, families and communities, thus their causes and predisposing factors must be explored. The aim of this study was to explore the factors that encourage early marriage and motherhood in Iranian culture.

**Methods:** Inductive Conventional Content Analysis approach was used in this qualitative study. Face to face in-depth semi-structured interview were conducted with 16 Iranian adolescent mothers in the Kerman province of Iran. Data collection continued until acquiring data saturation and MAX-QDA software was used for analysis of the data.

**Results:** Two main categories (external incentives and internal incentives) and 8 sub-categories (inappropriate economic condition, instability of family, desire and encouragement of parents, copying others, position (status), subjective beliefs, meeting inner needs and desires, insufficient awareness) were extracted from the data.

**Conclusion:** Various factors (personal, social, economic, cultural, spiritual and technological) encourage adolescents to early marriage and motherhood. Understanding of these factors can help health care providers, who work in the field of mother and child health, to provide appropriate assessment and interventions for improvement of the health of this group of society.

**Key words:** Adolescent Mothers, Marriage, Encourage, Iran, Qualitative

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## Introduction

Marriage is one of the most important life events and is necessary for development of societies(1), but early marriage will be followed by unpleasant feelings if participants are not being prepared to take on new responsibilities(2). Early marriage which includes any legal or illegal marriage under the age of 18 (3, 4) is among the important challenges of the world, and it is estimated to reach 150 million cases by 2030 (5). Early marriages exist in many countries, especially developing countries, but most cases (46%) are related to South Asian countries(3). Early marriage and motherhood in Iranian culture has long been approved and the highest number of marriages has been seen among 15-19 year old girls(6, 7).

Although adulthood is one of the requirements for accepting mother's role, an increasing number of adolescent mothers are among serious challenges of many countries(8). According to the World Health Organization, more than 16 million adolescents become mothers each year(9). Such number is the lowest in South Korea and it is the highest in sub-Sahara Africa. Among 1,000 Iranian adolescent girls, 27 become mothers(10). Adolescent mothers, who must simultaneously go through two developmental crises (motherhood and adolescence), are not physically and emotionally ready to take the roles of mother, wife and their consequent responsibilities, and they are not able to overcome social and psychological challenges (11, 12).

Early motherhood has many consequences for girls, society, and the environment(8). It also causes financial problems for children's future and reduced social support(13). Child abuse, behavioral problems, shock, low self-esteem, depression and role conflict are seen in adolescent mothers(11). Low accountability, emotional fluctuations, lack of knowledge and experience, less desire to engage emotionally with the baby and breastfeeding, lack of attention to health and safety issues, the influence of peers and the probability of high risk behaviors during adolescence; highlight the importance of health care providers' role in dealing with such clients(14). In developed countries, there are several strategies for protect girls from early motherhood. In developed countries early motherhood is considered specially along with cardiovascular disease, cancer, and mental disorders (15), and it is studied by gynecologists, obstetricians, pediatricians, psychologists, sociologists and family physicians(16). Studies have indicated that many factors are effective on early marriage and motherhood including; economic factors (poverty, unemployment) (4, 6, 17, 18), social factors (gender discrimination, school dropout, social norms, mass media, migration from rural to urban areas, the influence of peers)(4, 15, 17, 19-21), cultural and religious factors (prevention from unrestrained sexual promiscuity, religious and cultural incentives, ethnicity and race) (19, 22), safety factors (war, rape, kidnapping)(3, 17, 22), psychological factors (low self-esteem, mental health problems, anti-social behavior, sense of emotional maturity)(19, 23, 24), political and legal factors (the national laws for marriage and sexual relations, legal gap)(23, 25), organizational factors

(views of health care givers and access to services)(23), family factors (breakdown of family structures, the absence of father, family values, social and psychological problems of parents, parents demand)(3, 24), and individual factors (inability to continue education, love, desire to have children, sense of empowerment)(19).

Since, the provision of desirable healthcare services to adolescent mothers requires understanding of factors that encourage marriage and pregnancy through qualitative studies, this study was conducted to determine the factors that encourage early marriage and motherhood from the perspective of Iranian adolescent mothers. Findings of this study can lead healthcare teams to make proper decisions.

## Materials and Methods

**Design:** This qualitative study was conducted through inductive conventional content analysis. Content analysis is a suitable method for obtaining valid and reliable results from textual data in order to create knowledge, new ideas, facts and a practical guide for performance, which extract concepts or descriptive themes from the phenomenon. This approach is recommended when there is not enough knowledge about the phenomenon or if this knowledge is fragmented (26).

**Participants & Setting:** This study was conducted in 2016 in Kerman province of Iran. Kerman is located in the south east of Iran, and has a high rate of adolescent mothers. A total of 16 adolescent mothers who met the inclusion criteria (having maximum of 19 years of age at the time of first birth, have a child or children up to 2 years of age, marriage of legal form, being able to speak Persian, being willing to share personal experiences and good cooperation with the researcher) participated in this study. Participants were selected purposefully with maximum variation in age, child's age, place of residence (urban or rural), financial situation (Table 1).

**Data collection:** Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted by first author (PhD candidate in nursing). The interviews were focused on the perspectives of the participants. Adolescents were asked to explain factors that have encouraged them towards early marriage and motherhood. Interviews began with a general question and progressed to specific questions. Time and place of the interviews were set with the agreement of the participants which were mainly at home. Interviews lasted for 45 to 60 minutes and during a 5-month period from March to August 2016. Entire interviews were recorded and transferred into audio files to be entered in the computer. Data collection continues until data saturation, when no new information was obtained from the interviews

**Data Analysis:** Analysis of the data was done by using the inductive conventional content analysis approach (Graneheim & Lundeman)(26). Predetermined categories were not used and categories emerge from the data. First audio files of interviews were listened to and recorded

interviews were immediately transcribed verbatim and then read several times to gain a general impression. The resulting text from the interviews was read line by line and broken down into meaning units (words or sentence or paragraphs), which were then condensed, abstracted, coded, and labeled. Then, the codes were re-read in order to be arranged into categories and sub-categories based on their similarities and differences. The first author performed data coding and all co-authors supervised the coding process. If there was a disagreement over the coding, the authors discussed and negotiated the codes until they achieved agreement. Data analysis was done continuously and simultaneously with data collection and the data and the generated codes were constantly compared. MAXQDA10 software was used also.

**Trustworthiness:** In this study, credibility increased through prolonged engagement with the researcher, spending sufficient time for data collection and analysis, favorite communication with participants, member check and peer check. To increase dependability, the baseline review of literature was limited at the beginning of the study and the opinion of an expert (outside the research

team) was used. For confirmability, the research process was accurately recorded to make the follow-up possible. To ensure transferability, results of the study were checked with numbers of similar samples who were not among the participants.

**Ethical considerations:** The Kerman University of Medical Sciences Human Research Committee approved this study (ethics approval number: IR.KMU.REC.1394.591). Purpose of the study, how to publish results, and possible risks, dangers and benefits were explained to the participants. Participant anonymity, privacy and confidentiality were maintained. Interviews were conducted in a private and non-threatening environment and audio files were kept anonymously in a secure place. Participants were ensured that their responses would remain confidential. Participants were also informed that participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. Written informed consent for participation in the study and recording of the interview was obtained. During the data collection, the first author was ready to provide help and support; if necessary.

**Table1: Demographic characteristics of participants**

Participants	Age at childbirth (year)	Age at marriage (year)	Children age (month)	Place of living	Current Education level	Education level of husband	Age difference with husband (year)	Job of husband
1	18.5	17	6	Rural	Diploma	Bachelor	4	Worker
2	15	14	24	Rural	Middle school	Diploma	11	Farmer
3	17	15	6	Urban	High school	Diploma	2	Self employed
4	18	16	13	Rural	High school	Diploma	14	Worker
5	14	12	14	Urban	Middle school	University Diploma	10	Engineer
6	17	14	8	Urban	Diploma	University Diploma	7	Jobholder
7	16	13	4	Rural	Middle school	Diploma	11	Self employed
8	17	14	18	Urban	Diploma	Diploma	10	Self employed
9	18	15	14	Urban	Diploma	Diploma	13	Engineer
10	17	14	23	Urban	University Diploma	Bachelor	10	Engineer
11	15	15	10	Rural	High school	High school	7	Self employed
12	17	15	13	Urban	High school	Diploma	11	Jobholder
13	15	14	24	Urban	Middle school	Middle school	24	Self employed
14	17	16	22	Rural	High school	High school	10	Clergyman
15	14	13	3	Urban	Middle school	Diploma	12	Worker
16	16	14	24	Urban	Diploma	Diploma	6	Self employed

## Results

In total, factors that encouraged early marriage and motherhood were classified into two main categories and eight sub-categories (Table 2).

Table 2: Main categories and sub categories of factors that encourage early marriage and motherhood

Categories	Sub categories
External incentives	Inappropriate economic condition
	Instability of family
	Desire and encouragement of parents
	Influence of others
Internal incentives	Position
	Subjective beliefs
	Meeting inner needs and desires
	Insufficient awareness

### 1. External incentives

External motivations related to family, life position and community had caused adolescents to get married and become mothers.

**1-1: Inappropriate economic conditions:** The financial problem was one of unpleasant situations for early marriage. Some adolescents were getting married to improve economic conditions for themselves and their families (Table 3. Quotation 1).

**1-2: Instability of the family:** Family breakdown, divorce or death of parents had caused adolescents to get married, and separation from family created a better position for them (Table 3. Quotation 2). Trying to resolve family disputes and helping strengthen families were also among reasons stated by adolescents for pregnancy (Table 3. Quotation 3).

**1-3: Desire and encouragement of parents:** Early marriage of some adolescents was due to urging of their parents. Financial problems, social norms, cultural and religious issues or their personal attitude were encouraged by parents to this desire (Table 3. Quotation 4, 5).

**1-4: Copying from others:** Excessive interest in friendship and the need to be approved by friends affected the decision of adolescents on marriage (Table 3. Quotation 6). Early marriage of sister or brother had also encouraged adolescents to get married in order to be similar to other family members (Table 3. Quotation 7).

### 2 - Internal incentives

Some factors that encouraged early marriage were related to adolescents 'desires', and were originated from their beliefs.

**2-1: Position:** Some adolescents were married in order not to lose such an opportunity. Adequate understanding of the suitor and detecting ideal features in him, were some of the reasons of early marriage (Table 3. Quotation 8). Some of the adolescents thought that, protection of marital relations depended on childbirth. Therefore they had decided to get pregnant (Table 3. Quotation 9).

**2-2: Subjective beliefs that encourage the marriage & motherhood:** Some adolescents selected marriage because of their subjective thoughts and beliefs. Some considered marriage as God's will and divine destiny and were not opposed to it (Table 3. Quotation 10). The belief "the situation will get better and more comfortable by childbirth", had caused adolescents to get pregnant (Table 3. Quotation 11). Early puberty and gaining some abilities had caused adolescents to imagine that they were ready to get married (Table 3. Quotation 12). Facing cultural beliefs in consequences of contraception had encouraged adolescents to get pregnant and act based on their mentalities (Table 3. Quotation 13).

**2-3: Meeting inner needs and desires:** Feelings of loneliness and desires, love, respect, and independence had encouraged some adolescents to be married. Adolescents wanted independence and freedom in decision making and expected to be addressed as an influential person. They were tired of parental interferences and were married for love, soul-mate, and value acquirement (Table 3. Quotation 14). Most participants expressed that they wanted a child to get rid of loneliness. Some adolescents had become lonely after separating from previous dependencies such as; family, friend, school, etc... (Table 3. Quotation 15). Also having old parents who had not been able to be friendly with their children, had encouraged adolescent girls to get pregnant and close the age gap between themselves and their children (Table 3. Quotation 16). Love and desire towards baby, and satisfying the sense of possession which is one of the characteristics of adolescence were reflected in the statements of participants (Table 3. Quotation 17).

**2-4: Insufficient awareness:** Some of the adolescents thought marriage was simple and viewed it as a child play as they lacked sufficient knowledge about it, its meaning and philosophy. They were assuming the marriage only by its apparent applications and had not thought about it seriously (Table 3. Quotation 18). Some of them were presuming childbirth as a simple process, and were unaware of the possible difficulties of pregnancy and childbirth (Table 3. Quotation 19). Not having enough information about the possible mechanisms of pregnancy, unfamiliar with contraceptive methods, and they referred to their imperfect knowledge in this field as the cause of early pregnancy (Table 3. Quotation 20).

**Table 3: Quotations of Participants**

**Quotation 1** "I saw my dad and my mom were struggling financially. They had difficult to covering our costs, so I was helping them as much as I could, I was working, then I thought that it was better to get married. I wanted to leave the home earlier so I could help my parents".p4

**Quotation 2** "I was nine years old when my parents got divorced ... my mother married another man. I had a lot of problems with my stepfather and half-sisters and brothers. I could not accept my stepfather as my father.P6

**Quotation 3** "My mother-in-law was angry with my mother. My mother said: if you have children, the hatred and resentment between the two families will be resolved".p7

**Quotation 4** "When my sisters got married, my father said to me: if a good suitor comes for you, you have to accept him. My parents were satisfied with him so I accepted to get married" p15

**Quotation 5** "A few months after our marriage my husband said: we must have a baby as I could not resist my parents' insistence anymore. I did not want to become pregnant too soon, but my husband's parents forced us".p3

**Quotation 6** "I saw my friends who were married and also studying. They were satisfied. I thought I could do the same thing. I was always like them; we were buying the same clothes, and having fun together. I did not want to fall behind them. When the first suitor came, I got married". P5

**Quotation 7** "Only one of my sisters married when she was 20 and my other sisters and brothers got married at 17 or 18 years. In our family, my siblings get married at early age".p12

**Quotation 8** "I knew him very well. They were very nice people... he met my criteria. I was going to school that time, but I thought, if I got married I would be better off because my husband had a good condition. I did not want to miss the chance"p10

**Quotation 9** "Three months had passed since our marriage but I was not pregnant yet. I told my husband: if I do not get pregnant we would get divorced, so you could marry again and have kids ... I was really scared".p4

**Quotation 10** "It was God's will that we got married. It just happened. I said nothing, and did not oppose it. I let it happen".p1

**Quotation 11** "My mother-in-law said; "if you have a baby, God will sort everything out and if there is a problem it will be solved".p6

**Quotation 12** "I was fatter than my peers. I became menstruate very soon. I had to cook, clean and do housework. I had learned lots of things. My attitude was like older women, and I understood more than my age. I thought, I knew how to deal with husband and his family. My general knowledge was so high that older people were consulting with me."p8

**Quotation 13** "My mother-in-law said; "if you use contraceptive pills, you may never get pregnant. Contraception is not good". She said: if I use contraceptive pills, my ovaries may stop working forever and I could never have children".p14

**Quotation 14** "Before I was married, my parents decided for me. I wanted to be independent and I didn't like people interfere in my business. I wanted to get married as soon as possible, perhaps I would have more freedom. I wanted to get married to somebody that I love. Someone that we could make plan for our life together, and ask me what I like. We would have fun together and be together".p3

**Quotation 15** "As I have no sister or brother, father, mother or friends, I decided to get pregnant, no one was beside me".p11

**Quotation 16** "I like to have a grown up child when I am still young, because my parents were old and they could not understand me. I wished my parents were younger so we could talk with each other. I liked to get married early so my children wouldn't feel the same".p2

**Quotation 17** "I like kids very much. I wanted to have children. When I saw other people's children, I wanted to have a baby too". P8.

**Quotation 18** "My dad said: do you want to get married? Yeah, I like it very much I replied. I did not know what marriage means. I thought it was very good, I could put makeup whenever I wanted, and I could showoff my colored hair, my wedding ring and other stuff. Now I understand how playful and childish I was thinking".p9

**Quotation 19** "I thought having a baby is very simple, I did not think it is hard. I did not think of childbirth and I was just thinking of having a baby".p16

**Quotation 20** "I did not want to become pregnant. I was using contraception but I got pregnant. I did not think that getting pregnant happened so easily. I did not know how I can be pregnant. I wanted to do something in order not to get pregnant. I had heard there were ways to prevent or quit pregnancy but did not know them very well".p13

## Discussion

In Iranian culture, being a mother is a predictable and ordinary event that happens after marriage and the reasons for early motherhood lay in early marriage. The minimum legal age of marriage in Iran is 13 for girls and 15 for boys, but there is no legal impediment to early marriage(6). Due to lack of laws or their implementation, there is no possibility to protect the girls from early marriage in many countries (18, 25, 27). In Iranian culture, women are expected to get pregnant as soon as they get married, and if this does not happen, people would assume there exists a problem and women should provide an explanation.

Early marriage and motherhood of the participants was in response to external and internal instincts.

A poor economic condition was among the causes of early marriage. Several studies indicated that poverty is one of the main causes of early marriage which is a survival strategy for cutting the costs for poor families (3, 4, 6, 7, 18-20, 22, 25, 28, 29).

Family breakdown was another incentive for early marriage. In Iran, offspring are highly dependent on family and the existence of parents who have special roles and responsibilities is essential. Divorce or death of a parent can change the normal process of family life. Coyne (2014) recognized the breakdown of family structure and the absence of the father as the reasons for early marriage and motherhood(24).

A group of adolescents were married due to the urge of their parents and relatives. Such a situation occurs mainly in traditional families. UNICEF identifies the most important reasons for early marriage as; the urge of parents, the need for self-esteem and social approval, relatives' pressure; preventing social stigma, staying unmarried in girls, and sex before marriage(3, 20). In Iranian culture, the most important reasons for parents' tendency towards early marriage of their daughters include; protect the girl and ensure her purity, security and safety. Of course, this is the parent's view and daughters may not agree. Worry of some parents from harassment has caused them to be interested in early marriage of their daughters. Most of the daughters in traditional Iranian culture accept decisions of parents without any disagreement. Thus sometimes parents don't consider desires of adolescents. Early marriage in many cultures is a way to avoid sin and sexual promiscuity (without legal marriage)(19). In these cultures, unmarried girl's sex is an odious sin and creates severe social stigma for family. The Muslims of Iran believe, marriage is the best way to meet the sexual needs even when a girl and boy are very young. In Islamic countries, because of religious beliefs in favor of early marriage and fear of pregnancy outside the marriage, parents agree with the marriage of their daughters at first opportunity(20, 22). Some adolescents decided to get pregnant to meet the demands of the relatives, especially the husband and his family. In Iranian culture, having children is fundamental and preservative of marital life and couples have children

to strengthen the relationship between themselves and their families. Kibretb (2014) stated that, one of the reasons for motherhood among adolescents is to help strengthen family relationships(4).

Some adolescents were married to be like their families or friends. Netsanet (2015) believes that, early marriage of mother increases the likelihood of her daughter to copy her(3). Most mothers prefer their daughters to get married at the same age as they did(7). This kind of mothers inculcate to their children that early marriage is a social value. Adolescents' tendency to emulate peers is also another reason for this copying behavior(30). Also, the media encourage adolescents to sexual relations.

Some of the adolescents were married to avoid losing the position. One of the social issues affecting early marriage is the fear of not finding a suitable partner. This belief exists in traditional Iranian culture, especially in rural areas. In some provinces of Iran, adolescent girls have the best suitors for marriage because the best men tend to marry girls who are at the peak of beauty. When the age of a girl increases, her opportunities for marriage diminish. Hence, families prefer early marriage of girls to prevent this problem. In some other cultures, any delay in marriage makes them believe that the girl does not have many options, so the girls get married when they have their first suitable opportunity(3). From the Muslims' point of view (including Iranians) some events are divine destinies, and will happen whether we want them or not, so must accept them. Marriage in adolescents was considered as such an event. In Iranian culture, there is this belief that marriage will happen, if God will. So the marriage time is at "hands of God". Existing religious beliefs of the society had caused adolescent mothers to see children as the reason for receiving God's blessing. They believed that, having children would make their life better so they had decided to get pregnant. Iranians believe, when a child is born, he/she brings many gifts for the family, and God paid more attention to family. Most adolescents believed they had enough physical preparation for marriage, and did not pay attention to mental social, financial, and spiritual preparation that are essential for marriage and making a family. Rapid physical growth during adolescence created the impression that they were prepared for marriage. Early marriage also is more common in adolescents who feel the emotional readiness for marriage. They believe they should offer their love and affection to another human(19). In Iran, marriage is legal and religious way of expressing love and Iranian culture supports adolescents who married to achieve love.

A group of adolescents were married to meet their inner needs and desires. Adolescents at this age are full of emotional instability and become interested in early marriage to get love and affection(19). Another encouraging factor for early marriage was gaining independence. Interference of people, especially parents were unpleasant for some adolescents, so they preferred getting married than obeying their parents. Being interested in having children and responding to inner desires such as getting rid of loneliness was causing adolescent mothers to get

pregnant. Some of the reasons that influence adolescents decision about pregnancy which included; an interest in having children, growing up (responsible, mature, independent), receiving love of the husband and getting rid of loneliness, having a sense of ownership (having a child) and increasing self-confidence (being a good mother)(31). Some of the adolescent mothers believed that, early motherhood depended on the energy and strength of the mother and having a small age gap with children can be beneficial for both mother and children.

Some others thought marriage was simple. Lack of sufficient information about the consequences of early marriage and suitable age for marriage had caused adolescents to believe marriage is simple(7, 29). Insufficient knowledge of adolescents about pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing had also caused them to assume having children is a simple process, and they decided be pregnant. More participants in this study had been pregnant unintentionally. Majority of adolescents did not have adequate information about sex and pregnancy mechanism, and were using contraception incorrectly or did not have access to it (15, 16, 32, 33). Married adolescents are forced to have sex under the pressure of spouse, family and community that will ultimately lead to pregnancy(33, 34).

In Iranian culture, married women must be engaged in sex and married teens are also not excluded from this law.

In issue of early marriage and motherhood, the youth, mass media, schools, neighbors, religious centers, parents, researchers, health centers, and policy makers must be considered. Health providers can improve families' economy by introducing them to support centers. They could also help family disputes by providing appropriate counseling and advice. Providing appropriate education for adolescents, parents and other people involved can lead to appropriate and timely marriage. Identifying adolescent mothers' educational and caring needs and providing appropriate training and care can prevent unwanted pregnancy and its consequences. School nurses can use the influence of friends to promote optimum health behaviors in adolescents. All of these services must be done in accordance with the principles of counseling adolescents, in order to empower them in decision making and solving challenges. However, the sample size of this study was small and looked at only part of multiple cultures Iranian, so researchers suggest the need for similar research in the field.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that, decision for marriage and early motherhood is influenced by adolescents' external motivations (related to society and life situations) and internal motivations. Exploring the cultural context of different societies can guide healthcare policymakers in identifying high-risk groups and predict the consequences of this phenomenon with respect to different cultures' view, because achieving optimum health of mothers and child requires close examination of

factors affecting marriage and motherhood. Adolescents, parents, teachers, and other influential people should be trained on the negative consequences of early marriage and motherhood. Health policymakers in Iran and other countries should protect girls against early marriage and motherhood, because adolescents need sufficient time to properly grow, and for development, and success.

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