



# Experiences of Child Marriage Among Women and Men in Turkey

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Accepted: 16 January 2024

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## Abstract

Every marriage before the age of 18, regardless of gender, is considered a human rights violation, a public health problem, and a social risk. The present qualitative study aims to understand and reveal the child marriage experiences of both women and men with respect to gender. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten male and ten female participants, aged between 29 and 64, who had child marriages and lived in different regions of Turkey. As a result of the thematic analysis, four main themes were derived: “unlived childhood”, “reflections on marriage”, “reflections on the relationship with the child” and “health problems”. The theme “unlived childhood” includes sub-themes that examine the childhood experiences of the participants; “reflections on marriage” spousal relations and marital life; “reflections on relationship with children” participants’ upbringing and relationship with their children; and “health questions” reproductive health and mental health. As a result, it was seen that the participants experienced gender-specific differences along with an unlived childhood and a suspended adulthood. While particular responsibilities and health problems stood out for female participants, male participants carried the responsibilities of being a father and the pillar of the household during their childhood.

**Keywords** Child marriage · Childhood · Adolescent · Gender · Child welfare

## Highlights

- The study investigates both male and female participants’ experiences of child marriage.
- The participants who married during childhood experienced an unlived childhood and a suspended adulthood.
- Child marriage was revealed to have significant effects on the adulthood of the participants.

Despite the developments in international standards regarding children’s rights (Todres & King, 2020) and the increasing awareness of the children’s self-determination rights (Ruck & Horn, 2008), child marriages continue to be a global problem (Sabbe et al., 2013). Until today, more than 650 million girls worldwide have been married before the age of 18 (UNFPA, 2022). According to data from ninety-eight countries, the proportion of women aged 20–24 who got married before the age of 18 in 2020 was 19%.

According to data from ninety-five countries, the rate of those who got married before the age of 15 in the same group was 5%. Although there is no detailed statistics for men, it is stated that approximately 115 million men engaged in child marriage (UNICEF, 2022).

Although related to each other, child marriage, early marriage and forced marriage are fundamentally different concepts that are often used interchangeably in policy documents and by international organizations (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013). Child marriage, which refers to age, is defined as “any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child” (UNICEF, 2023). Early marriage, on the other hand, refers to the fact that the individual is not yet ready to consent to marriage due to factors such as not completing his or her physical, emotional, sexual and psychological development, or not having enough information about life options, even if he or she is over 18 years old (Tosun, 2021). In a forced marriage, at least one of the parties, whether under the age of 18 or not, does not have full and

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free consent to the marriage. For this reason, child marriage is also considered a type of forced marriage (OHCHR, 2023). In the context of this study, the author(s) preferred to use the concept of child marriage because child marriage criteria were taken into account in determining the research participants and the current legislation and policies in Turkey focus especially on child marriages.

Gender norms are important for understanding the causes of child marriage. This is because the perception of masculinity and femininity that is defined socially and culturally also shapes relationships and marriage (Greene et al., 2015). Especially in patriarchal societies, girls do not have a say in their marriage decision and are married under the pressure of their family elders (Yıldız & Poyraz, 2020). Under the guise of ‘honor’, fear of premarital sexual intercourse and childbearing outside of wedlock highly affect families’ decision in this regard (el Arab & Sagbakken, 2019; Naved et al., 2022). Boys also get married to ensure the continuity of the lineage (Dursun, 2021; Yakıt & Coşkun, 2014). Economic concerns are another cause of child marriages. In families with low socioeconomic levels, girls are seen as an economic burden (Asadullah et al., 2021; UN Women, 2021). Marriages can take place in order to break the cycle of poverty (Asghari, 2019) or to add to their wealth (de Silva-de-Alwis, 2008). For this reason, traditional practices such as bride price and bride exchange are also expected (Trinh & Zhang, 2021). Not attending school or being unemployed is also one of the reasons for child marriage (Parsons et al., 2015; Zeren & Gürsoy, 2020). In addition, the idea that marriage and having children prepares children for adulthood and gives them a social status influential in child marriages (Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021; Tuna-Uysal et al., 2019b; Yaşar & Şaşman-Kaylı, 2021).

Although the consequences of child marriage for both men and women are not the same due to biological and social differences (Gastón et al., 2019), marriage has negative consequences on both genders. According to the research, with child marriage, people had to give up education or completely drop out of their schools (Chauhan et al., 2020; Kuzucu, 2020). Reproductive health problems (Misunas et al., 2019) such as child pregnancies and risky births (Adedini et al., 2022; Mrayan & Obeisat, 2021), chronic diseases (Vikram, 2021) and mental disorders (Fakhari et al., 2020; Yüksel & Koçtürk, 2021) imply negative impacts on people’s physical and mental health. Besides, these people assume the heavy responsibility of becoming parents at a very young age (Gastón et al., 2019; UN Women, 2021). In addition, it is emphasized in the literature that especially women are exposed to violence by their spouse or by the spouse’s family (Aslan-Cevheroğlu & Kışlak, 2022; Baysak et al., 2020). On the other hand, men have to undertake the responsibility of a household at a child’s age (Mukherjee & Sekher, 2017; Yıldız & Poyraz, 2020).

Every marriage that takes place before the age of 18, regardless of gender, is a violation of human rights (UNICEF, 2022). While there were many studies on the marriage of girls in the relevant literature, it was noticed that there were few studies on boys (Chauhan et al., 2020; Gastón et al., 2019; Mukherjee & Sekher, 2017). In addition, Greene et al. (2015) emphasized the limitation of focusing on a single gender in marital studies. As a matter of fact, studies generally focus only on the experiences of women or only men. However, marriage is a union established by individuals of both genders. In order to address the problem of child marriage in a holistic way and to produce effective solutions, it is considered important to understand this experience from the perspectives of both men and women. In this regard, the present study aims to understand and reveal the early experiences of women and men who married as children in the context of gender. In line with this general purpose, two basic research questions were addressed: (1) What are the experiences of women and men regarding child marriage?, (2) What is the reflection of gender in the experiences of child marriage for both women and men?

## Child Marriage in Turkey

According to the Turkish Civil Code, only civil marriage is valid in Turkey and the legal age for marriage is 18. However, a child who reaches the age of seventeen can marry with the permission of his/her parent or, if he/she does not have a parent, with the permission of his/her guardian or guardianship authority. A child who is sixteen years old can engage in an official marriage with the court permission. On the other hand, a child who is fifteen years old cannot marry even if he is declared an adult by the court. According to the Turkish Penal Code, if the person who marries a child is an adult, depending on the age of the victim and the way the sexual behavior is carried out, he is considered to have committed the crime of sexual abuse of the child and/or sexual intercourse with a minor (Tosun, 2021).

In Turkey, despite a decline, the issue of child marriages still exists (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2021). According to the data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (2023), while the percentage of legally married girls between the ages of 16 and 17 was 7.3% of all legally recognized weddings in 2002, this percentage dropped to 2.0% by 2022. Compared to 2002, when the official marriage rate for boys in the same age group was 0.5%, by 2022 it had dropped to 0.1%. However, official statistics may not accurately reflect a true picture of child marriages in Turkey, as religious ceremonies performed without official marriage are still widespread. Concerning this, Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies (HUIPS) provides national level information on child marriage among women through Turkey

Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS) published at five-year intervals. Unlike statistics that are limited only to civil marriage, TDHS data also include religious marriage and cohabitation. In the latest report published in 2018, interviews were conducted with 7345 women between the ages of 15–49. According to the data, 14.7% of women between the ages 20 and 24 started living with their first spouse/partner before the age of 18, and 2.0% before the age of 15. Among women in the age group between 25 and 49, 20.9% started living with their first spouse/partner before the age of 18, and 3.9% before the age of 15 (HUIPS, 2019).

Due to ongoing socio-cultural values and religious practices, child marriage is not perceived as a problem in some regions of Turkey and is accepted as a part of tradition (Tuna-Uysal et al., 2019b). The perception of morality is mostly built on women, and thus, especially girls are married off by their family elders on the grounds that they protect them from evil (extramarital sexual intercourse, gossip, neighborhood pressure, etc.) (Çağırkan, 2019). In addition, patriarchal discourses such as “You won’t find someone to marry”, “No one will marry you if you get older” (Yiğit, 2015), a fatalistic way of thinking that the spouses they will marry are determined by God (Şimşek, 2019), and ongoing consanguineous marriages due to economic concerns and cultural codes (Kahraman & Şenates, 2018) also result in child marriage.

Turkey signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, which considers every individual below the age of eighteen as a child, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which emphasizes the right to marry with free and full consent, in 1985. Therefore, in accordance with Sustainable Development Goals Target 5.3, it is committed to preventing child marriages by 2030 (Temur & Binbir, 2021). An important step was taken to prevent child marriage by increasing the duration of compulsory education implemented in line with the 7th Development Plan, which was prepared in five-year periods and covered the years 1996–2000. For the first time, a special title to prevent child marriage was included in the 10th Development Plan (2014–2018) and the necessary measures were listed in the National Action Plan to Combat Violence Against Women (2016–2020). In addition, studies are carried out to prevent child marriages and increase social awareness in line with the Women’s Empowerment Strategy Document and Action Plan (2018–2023) and the Provincial Action Plans for Combating Early and Forced Marriages under the coordination of the Ministry of Family and Social Services (Presidency of Strategy and Budget, 2019).

## Methodology

Qualitative research method was used in this study, which was conducted to understand the experiences of women and

men who were engaged in child marriage within the context of gender.

## Participants

In the study, purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods were employed to reach participants. Quota strategy was also used as the representation of both men and women was emphasized while exploring experiences of child marriage. Robinson (2014) also points out the importance of the quota strategy in terms of representing key groups in the sample. Considering the fact that men face the problem of child marriage less than women (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2023), the quota strategy was adopted to ensure the representation of both genders and to prevent the overrepresentation of women.

The study group consisted of adult women and men who experienced child marriage. Being married at or before the age of 18 was determined as the criterion for inclusion in the study. In the study, in order to reveal the experiences related to child marriages in depth, importance was given to the diversity of the age groups, city of residence and educational status of the participants. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 male and 10 female participants who agreed to participate in the study.

Table 1 gives the participants’ details. During data collection, it was seen that the ages of male participants ranged between 29 and 64, whereas female participants ranged between 33 and 63. All of the participants were married before they turned 18, mostly at age 17. While male participants had a maximum of eight children, female participants had a maximum of seven children. While there were male participants with university education, the highest education level of female participants was high school. While only one of the female participants run a market, the other female participants were housewives. While some male participants worked in areas that require strength, such as construction work, plumbing and operators, others stated that they were retired.

## Data Collection

The research team consisted of 3 researchers: 2 social work academics and 1 midwifery academic. They are interested in gender and masculinity issues and previously conducted scientific studies focusing on these topics. While one of the researchers is an experienced qualitative researcher who teaches qualitative research courses at the graduate level, the other two researchers took a course on qualitative research methods before the research. Designing their study from the perspective offered by the interpretive paradigm and regarding child marriages as a reflection of socially constructed and reproduced gender practices and a violation

**Table 1** Introductory Information About the Participants

Participant	Sex	Age	Age at the Marriage	Number of Children	Educational Status
<b>P1</b>	Male	50	17	3	Primary School
<b>P2</b>	Male	57	16	6	Primary School
<b>P3</b>	Male	41	17	2	High School
<b>P4</b>	Male	29	17	3	Secondary School
<b>P5</b>	Male	45	17	4	High School
<b>P6</b>	Male	64	16	7	Primary School
<b>P7</b>	Male	54	18	2	Primary School
<b>P8</b>	Male	63	17	4	Secondary School
<b>P9</b>	Male	44	18	2	University
<b>P10</b>	Male	49	18	8	University
<b>P11</b>	Female	39	17	3	Primary School
<b>P12</b>	Female	38	16	4	Secondary School
<b>P13</b>	Female	41	17	3	High School
<b>P14</b>	Female	59	14	2	Primary School
<b>P15</b>	Female	49	15	3	Primary School
<b>P16</b>	Female	51	16	3	Primary School
<b>P17</b>	Female	63	14	7	Primary School
<b>P18</b>	Female	36	17	2	High School
<b>P19</b>	Female	45	17	3	Primary School
<b>P20</b>	Female	33	17	3	Secondary School

of human rights, the researchers aimed to understand the problem of child marriages in a multidimensional way, taking into account the social context. In this context, the researchers exhibited an egalitarian attitude with the participants and an effort to understand them during the data collection process.

At the beginning of the data collection process, a literature review was conducted on the subheadings determined for the research subject and a semi-structured interview form was created in this direction. The form included questions about the socio-demographic information, perceptions about marriage and marriage experiences of individuals who were engaged in child marriage. The semi-structured interview form was finalized after three pilot studies and with an expert opinion.

During the data collection process, a poster containing research information was prepared first and this poster was announced on the researchers' social media accounts, ensuring that people who met the criteria for inclusion in the study were directed to the researchers. Two key people were also consulted to reach the participants. One of them served as a headman and guided the researchers on how to reach potential participants. The other key person was a university student. This student shared his research information in WhatsApp groups with students, and the students referred people in their social circles who had experienced child marriage to the researchers. In addition, each participant who met the criteria for inclusion in the research was

informed about the research and those who were willing to participate in the research were directed to the researchers. In line with this, the data collection process was carried out between 12 March and 30 August 2021 with 20 participants who agreed to participate in the research. In the beginning, a total of 28 people were contacted and 8 of them could not be included in the research for various reasons. 4 of them refused to participate in the research; 1 of them wanted to participate in the research and canceled the interview even though the interview time was planned, 1 of them did not call stating that he would call back later, and the interviews with 2 people were excluded from the study because the interviews were too short and not productive.

The sample size was determined according to inductive thematic saturation and data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). While continuing the interviews within the scope of inductive thematic saturation, coding was done simultaneously and the interviews continued until no new codes and themes emerged. Within the scope of data saturation, interviews continued until the answers repeated each other. Although data saturation was reached with a total of 16 participants, 8 women and 8 men; 4 more participants were interviewed to confirm the saturation.

In-depth interviews took place online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the preferences of the participants, Zoom (7 participants) and WhatsApp (13 participants) programs were used for online interviews. Before the interviews, audio recordings were started with the

permission of the participants. The interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes.

In this study, methodological details such as selection of participants, characteristics of participants, data collection method, and data collection process were tried to be included. These methodological details are important in terms of transferability, which is defined as “the extent to which findings can be transferred to or have applicability in other settings or groups” (Polit & Beck, 2017, p.788).

### Ethical Considerations

Data were collected after the approval of the KTO Karatay University Pharmaceutical and Non-Medical Device Research Ethics Committee with the decision number 2021/019. Prior to the interview, the participants were informed about the purpose and importance of the research and how the data will be used, and their consent was obtained in terms of participating in the research and taking voice recordings. Research was conducted only with volunteer participants. The participants were informed that the interview records would be kept confidential and used only as scientific research data. Each of the participants was given a nickname as P1-P20 without using their real names.

### Data Analysis

Research data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method. The stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed during the thematic analysis process, which was carried out concurrently with data collecting. MAXQDA 20 program was used to manage and analyze the data. After each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed and the data were read over and over again to ensure that the researchers became familiar with it. In the second stage, coding was done in line with the problem and purpose of the research. Coding was carried out independently by the researchers. Although the researchers mostly relied on the data during the coding stage, they also benefited from the gender perspective, which offers an important perspective on child marriages. In the third stage, the coding made was collected under more comprehensive sub-themes. In the next stage, the researchers reviewed and compared the codes they had made independently and reached a consensus regarding the different coding or sub-themes. Following that, three researchers discussed the emerging sub-themes together and four themes were agreed upon. In the fifth stage, the implied “essence” of the themes was defined and the “story” told by the theme was named appropriately. Finally, quotations were selected and findings were supported by participant quotations. The results of the analysis were discussed with reference to the literature and the analysis was reported.

## Results

As a result of the analysis of the data obtained in this study, four main themes were reached: unlived childhood, reflections on marriage, reflections on the relationship with the child, and health problems.

### Theme 1: Unlived Childhood

Unlived childhood is the theme that includes the reflections of child marriage on the participants’ childhood experiences. The subjects, who were seeking an identity because of the developmental stage they were in at the time of their marriage, were forced to embrace a new identity that was deemed appropriate for them within the gender hierarchy. They were unable to enjoy their childhood fully while, at the same time, they had to play the gender roles that were expected of them because of the weight of the responsibilities they assumed with this identification and their lack of readiness. This theme includes the following sub-themes: starting life too early, seeking out play, gender-based role expectations and becoming a child parent.

#### Starting life too early

One of the prominent emphasis of individuals who married as children was that they started life too early and had to grow up too fast. Due to the role changes brought about by child marriage, the participants had to make a rapid transition to adulthood. The role changes seen in both male and female participants showed that gender norms forced both genders to become adults before completing their childhood. This compulsory change was reflected in the participants discourses as ‘growing up too fast’ or ‘maturing early’ as follows:

You start life early, you mature early...Because you become a child mother, you also act like a child as you grow up with them. (P16, female, 51 years old, primary school graduate)

But then when this marriage thing happened to us, when you have to come under this, you have to grow fast, so you have to start life earlier or you have to figure out the things better. (P9, male, 44 years old, university graduate)

It was clear that despite differences in social categories like gender, age, and educational status, P16, who was 51 years old and only received primary school education because girls’ access to educational opportunities was not appropriate at the time, and P9, who was 44 years old and received university education, had similar experiences. The emergence of this theme as a common experience was influenced by the fact that women assumed great responsibilities at a very young age due to domestic activities and biological reproduction, and men assumed great

responsibilities at a very young age due to non-household roles and tried to learn about an unfamiliar life by experience.

### Seeking out play

While games play an important role for the cognitive and emotional development of a child in early childhood, it also mediates the child's independence and socialization in adolescence. With the help of games, the participants attempted to recreate the childhood they were deprived of as a result of child marriages. P13, who married at the age of 17, made the following statements that depict the situation:

For example, I would throw water at my mother-in-law so that she would chase me down the stairs. I mean, my husband and I would play with matches, I would play categories game. I mean, because I couldn't live my childhood... as I said before, my husband... she also played with me. (P13, female, 41 years old, high school graduate)

The games that female participants could not play due to the pressure of the family members in early childhood could not be played now due to gender-based responsibilities that emerged in the child marriage process. Stating that she could not play games before getting married, P14 indicated that she went out to play with her friends after fulfilling her domestic responsibilities even when she was pregnant:

When our elders went to the mosque in Ramadan, we went out, too. I would tell the girls to wash the pots quickly as we were going to play games. They would wash the pots very quickly and I would come together with them. I would play games. A 20-year-old bride, playing games... We, adult pregnant women, would play 'yumbala' (hide-and-seek). (P14, female, 59 years old, primary school graduate)

Like female participants, male participants also continued to seek out play. However, unlike women, men, who were seen as adults in adolescence just because they got married, were rejected by their peers and inclined away from their playmates:

I was embarrassed when I went to play with my friends. I mean, my friends used to make fun of me, they would say your wife is waiting for you at home, don't play here. They wouldn't let me in... (P4, male, 29 years old, secondary school graduate)

It is normal and expected for children to seek out play in accordance with the developmental characteristics of childhood and to explore life through play. However, this situation turned into an identity confusion between childhood and adulthood for individuals who experienced marriage in childhood within the context of the study.

### Gender-based role expectations

In many societies, adulthood is determined not by age but by gender-based norms and roles. The idea that marriage

gives children adult status has brought along gender-based role expectations. Especially with the marriage in the patriarchal order, female participants were expected to stay home and take on household duties and have children, and men were expected to be the head of the household and earn a livelihood. It was often an ignored fact that male and female participants in child marriage were still children even though they were expected to conform to gender norms.

Because you are a child, but you are a bride in the end... You have a cow in the barn, you will take care of them, you go and feed it, you cook for the people in the house, you will do all the work. Because you are the bride. (P15, female, 49 years old, primary school graduate)

Before I got married, how can I say, I would go out in the morning and come home in the evening. We didn't care about anything, because we were kids, we didn't have specific duties. After you get married, you grow up, you become a man, you'll take care of your house, you'll work. (P4, male, 29 years old, secondary school graduate)

Although the participants perceive these responsibilities as a burden and express their fatigue, the expectation of the society 'brides serve and men earn the living' has resulted in them internalizing their gender roles. This internalization was also reflected in the expectations of the participants from the opposite sex within the marriage union:

Now, what the man has to do is go work, bring home the bread. He has to do it. He will earn a living for, let's say, his wife, children, everything. It's what men have to do. To work. (P11, female, 39 years old, primary school graduate)

So, we need to settle down, get married, and then we need someone to take care of the household. Who will it be? It will be the bride, there's no other way. (P8, male, 63 years old, secondary school graduate)

Female and male participants internalized gender roles as a result of the gender-based socialization process from the moment they were born and became a part of the self-reproducing mechanism of the gender order.

### Becoming a child parent

The initiation of reproductive activities in the child marriage resulted in participants becoming child parents. They described having children as "a child having a child". They assumed the responsibility of caring and raising their child. However, fulfilling these responsibilities was quite difficult for both male and female participants. Although this sub-theme was commonly experienced by both genders, there were some differences in terms of its reflections on the lives of male and female participants. A young female participant defined becoming a child parent as an increase in responsibilities while men described it as not being aware of what was happening. While male participants were forced to

realize their roles as fathers, they also needed some time to become aware of their responsibilities. The following statement of a male participant is noteworthy:

I think you're a child as a 19-year-old. A 19-year-old boy has a child in his arms, do you understand? My own child... but these children are... I mean... You think you are playing house (chuckles). You see what I mean? Usually we come to this conclusion, but this is because of the inability to mindfully comprehend that moment. (P9, male, 44 years old, university graduate)

Women experience the consciousness of having children at an earlier stage. This situation makes their living conditions even more difficult and affects them physically and psychologically. Especially for a child woman without social support, it may turn into a life struggle to be achieved as in the following excerpt:

I had a child when I was a child, I had a hard time because of this. I didn't get to know my husband, I didn't get to know his family, and when I had a child with these, I had a hard time. I had a child when I was a kid, and I had a hard time raising him. (P12, female, 38 years old, secondary school graduate)

## Theme 2: Reflections on Marriage

Reflections on marriage is the theme that includes the reflections of child marriage on the spousal relationships and marital lives of the participants. Reflections on the patriarchal societal structure and its effects on gender relations can be noticed in this theme. The participants' marriage lives were susceptible to being influenced by the man's root family. Participants seemed to have diverse perspectives on their marriages based on their individual experiences. It is thought that this situation was caused by women experiencing gender-based roles in the private sphere and men in the public sphere. This theme incorporates sub-themes of failure to live in a separate house, failure to make independent decisions and the spouse not taking responsibility.

### Failure to live in a separate house

If men marry at a child's age, it is likely that their wives are also children. For this reason, participants lived with the root family of the man, especially in the first years of marriage. For male participants, the family elders tried to assume the responsibilities of marriage. This situation was favored by men due to the sharing of responsibility and the continuation of the convention before marriage. According to them, the root family plays an important role in the continuation of marriages, maintaining balance and solving problems:

You're a child, your partner is a child. It's up to mom and dad to manage. If it wasn't for their guidance, if they didn't

rule us, we wouldn't know what marriage was when we were both children. Three and a half years later, we might have broken up. (P7, male, 54 years old, primary school graduate)

A male participant described living with one's root family as a continuation of the patriarchal system in the statement below:

We lived as a family; at that time, it was not possible to live independently. Well, back then, I was working, making money, and living comfortably, but because it was the way our family was structured (P2, male, 57 years old, primary school graduate)

Male participants view living with the root family as continuing the family's unity, which leads to poor life experiences for female participants. The failure to live in a separate house has further deepened the negative experiences of the woman who is currently trapped in private sphere. In their narratives, women stated that they were not at peace with the root family and were frequently criticized by their elders. While the burden of men was lightening, the responsibility of women increased more:

All responsibility in the house is on you; your husband's, your own, your mother-in-law's, your father-in-law's. They're starting to ask too much of you. I mean, for example, you will do this, you will do that. You're being treated like a slave. (P20, female, 33 years old, secondary school graduate)

### Failure to make independent decisions

Participants who were not given a say in making the marriage decision were not given a say in their decisions about their marriage life. Participants continued their lives with the guidance of their parents during the period they lived with the root family of the man. While adult marriage was considered appropriate for individuals who married before they were 18, being able to make independent decisions was not considered appropriate for them. In this way, the lives of the individuals in question were taken under control and the gender order was reproduced:

Until our time, these married people were managing their parents because they stayed with them. It was what they said it was. They stayed there and the marriages went on like that. (P10, male, 49 years old, university graduate)

Women who had to adapt to both a marriage life and a new family also had to submit to the decisions of their elders. As a result, women stated that they experienced problems such as inability to express themselves, being a victim of injustice, and inability to defend themselves:

You couldn't act freely or do something on your own will. Always with the order of someone, commandment, saying do it... You can't do it on your own. They'd be mad if you did. (P12, female, 38 years old, secondary school graduate)

Associating decision-making mechanisms with masculinity gave men the opportunity to have a more privileged position while strengthening the secondary status of women, even while the inability to make independent decisions keeps the lives of both male and female participants under control:

You get along well with your mother-in-law, in-laws, uncles, spouse, and everyone else. you follow their instructions, after all. So, you never step out of line other than what they say. Because you are small. But that's why there are no problems in your marriage. But you can't defend yourself at all. That's why you endure every injustice as a victim. So, there's nothing to do. (P19, female, 45 years old, primary school graduate)

### The spouse not taking responsibility

Marriage brings with it many responsibilities for both men and women. It is difficult for individuals who marry at a child's age to realize their marital responsibilities and fulfill them. However, research findings show that female participants, unlike male participants, were forced to adapt to the responsibilities of child marriage despite all the difficulties. This situation causes the gender-based roles and responsibilities that women are expected to fulfill to increase and the problems caused by child marriage to deepen. For female participants, the primary task of the man was to support the house. Some women complained that their spouses did not take enough responsibility to support them at the following point:

Well... He didn't take care of the kid; he didn't take care of the house. He didn't want to meet the needs of the house. He was like he should get his salary, no one should intervene with him, he should eat, drink, stay out as his friends were young too. He actually wanted to live as if he was single. So, he didn't want to take responsibility. (P12, female, 38 years old, secondary school graduate)

Another issue that female participants complained about was that they did not receive the support they expected from their spouses due to the severity of their domestic responsibilities. This is perceived by women as a situation that increases the difficulties of child marriage and puts the marriage in a deadlock:

There was no support from my husband. Support, it is the biggest thing. I don't want to generalize, but my husband was that way. But that's how they were raised. He's a man. It's not his responsibility. Don't spoil women. (P16, female, 51 years old, primary school graduate)

### Theme 3: Reflections on the Relationship with the Child

This theme includes the reflections of child marriage on the participants' way of raising their children and their

relationships with their children. As a result of the difficulties and pressures of being a child, participants had concerns about raising children. However, since the most basic roles that society assigns to women are "being a mother" and "giving care", women in particular experienced these concerns more severely. This theme involves the sub-themes of failure to take care of the child, inadequate emotional relationship with the child and compensation for un-lived childhood.

#### Failure to take care of the child

Participants who became child parents at their child marriage stated that they could not take enough care of their children for various reasons. The first of these reasons was that the participants did not know about child care due to their young age:

Maybe... You can't raise the kids the way you want because you are just a kid yourself. Then I think our kids are traumatized all the time because we were not that conscious. (P16, female, 51 years old, primary school graduate)

In parallel with the emphasis of female participants on the lack of responsibility of their spouses, men also mentioned that they could not comprehend the meaning of being a parent and that they saw their children as only lovable subjects, not to be raised:

You're not... I mean... like a father back then. Okay, you're a father, but you're just a father to love your child. I mean... You don't know anything about your child's needs, diseases, etc. You are not that much of a father yet. (P10, male, 49 years old, university graduate)

Women, on the other hand, could not devote time to the care of children from the burden of their domestic responsibilities. P14 stated that she lost her child after she left him alone to do laundry in the laundry room:

When I came back from the washery, my child cried, cried, turned black. He died... Should I weep over my child dying, should I get to the laundry in the washery, or should I take care of the messy house? (P14, female, 59 years old, primary school graduate)

#### Inadequate emotional relationship with the child

The participants who became parents during adolescence had a limited emotional connection with their children because they lacked parenting knowledge and skills. Instead of the participants who could not take care of the children, the care was provided by the root family of the men. So much so that one participant stated that their children called them 'brother' and 'sister':

They wouldn't let my children call me mom. They wouldn't let them call their father dad. When I left home, I had four children. One of them had passed away. They called their father brother, and me, sister. (P17, female, 63 years old, primary school graduate)



The patriarchal structure shaping the way children get married did not allow male participants to love their children and spend time as they wanted:

I love my kids right now... I mean... I hold them. Back then in the village, it would be a shame to hold children in the presence of your mother and father. (P4, male, 29 years old, secondary school graduate)

In the narratives of women, it was seen that they were supposed to take care of housework rather than child care. Female participants stated that they were only able to take care of their children to the extent allowed by their mother-in-law and father-in-law, and that their in-laws did not even allow them to hold their children claiming that it was not in children's favor to get used to their mothers and their smell.

I gave birth and I could not take any of my children in my arms and breastfeed them by the stove in presence of my in-laws. No child would ever be held in our custom. You'd put it on the swing and leave it there, take it from there and breastfeed it if in-laws would let you. If they wouldn't let you, you wouldn't get the baby even if he broke out from crying. (P17, female, 63 years old, primary school graduate)

The ongoing support provided by the root family to the male and female participants, both of whom were children at the time, impaired the bond with their children. Both male and female participants felt the lack of emotional bond they experienced with their children, but compensation for this was left to older ages.

### Compensation for unived childhood

The participants tried to compensate for the emotions they could not feel in their childhood, the good times they could not spend and the sufficient care they could not receive by raising their children with care:

I try to fulfill all their needs and wishes. I mean, the favorable ones. I'm trying to spend time with them. I want to go sightseeing; I want to show them around. So, I want to spend time with them as a friend, not as a mother. (P20, female, 33 years old, secondary school graduate)

I don't want them to regret about their past, about the places they didn't see, the things they didn't do, when they get married tomorrow. So, I gave my daughter all this. (P1, male, 50 years old, primary school graduate)

Women, on the other hand, specifically ensured that their daughters received sufficient education not given to them. For them, the priority is for their children to study and have a profession rather than marriage:

We sent her to classrooms, private courses or whatever to contribute to her level of education. So that she could have a profession and be able to stand on her own feet. After that, we think she could get married. (P19, female, 45 years old, primary school graduate)

The awareness and consciousness levels of the participants who were inadequate in child care and emotional relationships in their children's early years as a result of having children at a young age increased in the following years. They could behave more sensitively to avoid their children from going through the same hardships by taking a critical approach toward the issues they had already encountered.

### Theme 4: Health Problems

One of the reflections of child marriage is the health problems experienced by the participants. It was observed that these health problems were experienced only by women. Male participants, on the other hand, reported that child marriages did not have any negative effects on their health. These problems are related to reproductive health and mental health.

#### Reproductive health problems

Many of the female participants reported having issues with their reproductive health. Child brides are more likely to become pregnant too early and frequently because of early sexual intercourse. Problems such as miscarriage, abortion, and newborn mortality are more common in the participants' pregnancies, and it increases the risk of maternal and newborn death for unknown reasons. P14, one of the women who married at the youngest age among the participants, expressed her painful experience as follows:

I got pregnant after 8 months. I gave birth, I forced birth, it was very difficult. After that, he lived for 8 months, then he died 8 months later. I got pregnant again a year later, and she died eight months later. I couldn't have kids for seven years after that. (P14, female, 59 years old, primary school graduate)

It was revealed that female participants who married before they were 18 had very frequent childbearing, could not receive care at delivery, and had difficult giving births because they were physically immature.

Three kids, two years apart. There was no one my age with three kids like that. I'd be proud when everybody thought of me like that. (P16, female, 51 years old, primary school graduate)

But you're in the village, there's nothing to do. I delivered my youngest brother-in-law, I cut his cord, I mean I helped my mother-in-law's delivery, I washed the baby, I put him in the cradle. What else could I do? There's no one but us. She delivered my child and I delivered hers. I've never had a doctor or a midwife. All by myself. At home by myself, indeed. No one knew. They would only see me so when I got up and went out. But you are left in despair, girl, you're in the village and no one's taking you anywhere. No

one cares. (P17, female, 63 years old, primary school graduate)

Due to the low level of education, the secondary status of women and the confinement of women to the private sphere, it became more difficult for female participants to cope with the reproductive health problems and access to care and services.

### Mental health issues

Another problem expressed by women in the study was the reflection of child marriages on women's mental health. Women remember their experiences as bad memories. There seems to be an increase in the mental health problems of the female participants, who reported that they were not given enough care at childhood, had children instead of living their childhood, and were traumatized due to their severe gender roles. Although child marriage alone is a risk factor for mental health, the occurrence of adolescent pregnancies along with child marriages may lead to an increase in mental health problems of the participants. P12, who gave birth to her first child at the age of 17, says the following:

I mean, it left many imprints on my mind. As I lay my head on the pillow, I feel very annoyed and mentally depressed as I think of those days. Why did no one care about me? Why did they force me to marry as a kid? Why were they not with me at birth? Why did I get pregnant right away? Would it be better otherwise? Why did this happen? (P12, female, 38 years old, secondary school graduate)

Female participants emphasized the transfer of trauma by stating that the traumas experienced during the child marriage process affect their lives as well as causing traumas on their children:

Trauma happens more often in the mother, but that traumatized mother is trying to raise a child in a traumatic way. We are doing the biggest damage to our children. There is a huge difference between the way we raise children today and the way we did it in the past. (P16, female, 51 years old, primary school graduate)

From this perspective, it may be assumed that the children of individuals who experience child marriage, which is a form of child abuse, are also at risk of child neglect and abuse, and this raises the idea that this may cause a cyclical process in which negative childhood life experiences are transferred from generation to generation.

### Discussion

This study provides an opportunity to explore the reflections of child marriage on the lives of both men and women by investigating the experiences of women and men engaged in

child marriage from a gender perspective. Four themes emerged regarding the participants' child marriage experiences: (a) unlived childhood, (b) reflections on marriage, (c) reflections on the relationship with the child, and (d) health problems.

"Childhood" appears as the main motive that is reflected on the lives of the individuals participating in the study and its traces are observed in each and every theme. The theme "Unlived Childhood" takes its origin from gender-based role expectations. It causes individuals to start life early, have children at a very young age, and seek out play as a result of unlived childhood. In child marriages based on gender, individuals behave according to the roles attributed to them by the social structure (Uzun et al., 2017). Women engage in household affairs that are not suitable for their development, give birth to children and deal with worse reproductive health problems (de Groot et al., 2018; Tenkorang, 2019) in a more disadvantageous way than men (Myers & Harvey, 2011). While the role assigned to men in traditional societies is to work outside the house and meet the financial needs of the household (Markoç, 2020), as a result of child marriages, men become fathers at a child's age and have to struggle with many problems such as lack of access to education and career opportunities (Gastón et al., 2019). In the study, it is evident that male and female participants tended to appraise this situation positively, but its reflection on their lives was apparently negative. Specifically, having a child at a child's age is interpreted differently among male and female participants. The study revealed that female participants became aware of their roles as parents earlier than men because they experienced pregnancy and birth, while a male participant defined being a child parent as "playing house". In the literature, it is reported that women who get married at an early age have children at a child's age without realizing it, but they also face many difficulties in life for their children (Burcu et al., 2015; Gezer-Tuğrul, 2018). In Turkish society, attributing the responsibility of providing the livelihood of the house to the man causes the man not to spend enough time with his child, to be unable to get close, and to have difficulty in realizing that he has a child. In the study, one of the issues emphasized by the participants who experienced child marriage within the theme "unlived childhood" is the continuation of seeking out play. Participants who strived hard to fulfill the obligations given by social roles tried to meet their needs for playing games in some way or continued their lives by feeling the regret. Participants of both genders expressed this need. The fact that the participants were seeking out play in the first years of their marriage is due to their rapid transition to adulthood. Child brides/grooms who were deprived of their individual freedoms, personal development opportunities and education rights after their victimization were also deprived of their rights to be

children (Gezer-Tuğrul, 2018). However, an important finding revealed in the study is that they still claimed their rights of being a child, which was taken from them. This is because an adolescent is an individual who has not yet completed his socialization. Adolescent individuals who see themselves as adults on one hand continue their childhood on the other hand (Şahin & Özçelik, 2016). In a qualitative study by Çakır (2013) examining child marriages in terms of socio-cultural and economic aspects, it was reported that although the participants were married, they could not leave their friends and playgroups, that they were ‘caught between childhood and adulthood’ and that this situation led to marital adjustment problems.

Another theme revealed in the study was reflections on marriage. As a result of the large family structure frequently seen in traditional Turkish society (Şenol, 2020), the participants lived with the root family of the man when they got married (Amoah et al., 2021; Roy & Tam, 2022). The situation, which was perceived by men as a support mechanism, had negative consequences on women’s lives. Because in this process, while men shared their responsibilities with their parents (Hidayana et al., 2016), women had to assume the responsibilities not only of their spouses but also of their families. In the literature, it is emphasized that women who are married off during their childhood experience adjusting problems (Yorgun, 2021) and communication problems (Kohan et al., 2021) with their husbands’ family, that they are exposed to physical and psychological violence by family elders (Burcu et al., 2015; Roupetz et al., 2020); and that they complain about the burden of their domestic roles (Şener-Taplak & Alp-Yılmaz, 2022). The phenomenon of living in the same house, which is a physical necessity, has brought about a decrease in the decision-making authority of the participants. Astuti et al. (2021) stated in their study with adolescent fathers that the participants were exposed to parental intervention. It was seen that women were not given a say in the decisions taken (Gezer-Tuğrul, 2018; Tuna-Uysal et al., 2019b), they became dependent on their spouses and mothers-in-law (Sarfo et al., 2022) and thus experienced a loss of autonomy over their lives (Sekine & Carter, 2019). Besides, in the context of patriarchal society structure, the role of men in providing livelihood was reflected in the discourses of female participants (Yaşar & Şaşman-Kaylı, 2021). The failure of their spouses to fulfill these roles emerged as a challenge in marital life for women who already assumed the burden of in-house care. In a study conducted with women with child marriage experiences, the participants stated that they suffered from poverty because their spouses did not take the financial responsibility of the house (Çay-Padalihasanoğlu & Yaman, 2022).

With child marriage, participants had to assume the role of parenting early (Salusky, 2013). In accordance with the literature, the participants who did not have sufficient parenting skills because they were too young (Chinyere Anozie

et al., 2018; Kohan et al., 2021) stated that they did not have qualifications for child care (DeVito, 2010) and could not take care of their children due to their domestic responsibilities (Hagaman et al., 2022; Mangeli et al., 2017). Studies have emphasized that this situation makes men feel desperate (Uengwongsapat, 2020) and leads women to depression (Gbogbo, 2020). However, due to the role of ‘motherhood’ assigned to women, especially in societies where traditional gender roles are dominant (Ngum Chi Watts et al., 2015), it was observed that excerpts from female participants’ comments on childcare stood out in this study. In addition, it was found that participants were unable to establish a bond with their children because the society considers it immoral for a man to show care for his children (Yorgun, 2021) and family elders usually take care of newborn babies (Aslan-Cevheroğlu & Kışlak, 2022; Şener-Taplak & Alp-Yılmaz, 2022). In the following years, the participants made an effort to compensate for both their childhood and attention they could not give to their children. In the findings of the previous research, it was revealed that the participants did not want to marry off their children early (Gezer-Tuğrul, 2018; Yıldız & Poyraz, 2020), and that they strived for their children to receive education and to have a profession (Gbogbo, 2020; Tuna-Uysal et al., 2019b).

Although it has been reported not to be associated with impaired functionality in women (Vikram, 2021); women are usually the focus of studies investigating the health-related and psychological reflections of child marriages (Fakhari et al., 2020; Godha et al., 2013; Kaya et al., 2022). Similarly, in this study, it was reported by male participants that child marriages did not have any negative effects on their health. In their study evaluating child marriages from the perspective of men and women, Cameron et al. (2023) reported that although male participants experienced negative problems in terms of mental health, this finding was not statistically significant. Unlike them, female participants were reported to have “reproductive health” and “mental health” problems. Age at the first marriage has a significant effect on fertility. This is because there is an increased risk of becoming pregnant as a child bride (Çınar & Hıra, 2017). In the present study, it was found that women had reproductive health problems such as adolescent pregnancy, miscarriage, complicated births, multiple and frequent births. In addition to being a human rights violation, marriages in childhood are considered as the most common form of sexual abuse for girls (Soylu et al., 2014) and individual tragedies as well as a public health problem and a social risk (Sezgin & Punamäki, 2020). It is supported by a body of research that women who marry in childhood experience reproductive health problems more frequently (Baysak et al., 2020; Godha et al., 2013; Irani & Roudsari, 2019). Another reflection of child marriages on health is “mental health” problems. Although a study conducted in

Ghana reported that child marriages were associated with lower levels of stress (de Groot et al., 2018); women who married in childhood were revealed to be more frequently diagnosed with mental illnesses than those who married at an adult age (Kaya et al., 2022; Le Strat et al., 2011; Soyulu et al., 2014). Similar to the literature, it was found that female participants who participated in the study experienced mental health problems. The fact that this period coincides with adolescence may particularly increase the risk of mental health problems. In a large-scale study examining the relationship between child marriage and adolescent pregnancy with women's current mental and somatic health problems, it was reported that mental health problems differed according to both adolescent pregnancy and child marriages, and adolescent pregnancy posed a more comprehensive risk than child marriage (Sezgin & Punamäki, 2020). In addition to adolescents, their children were also reported to have higher cognitive and social-emotional development difficulties in the literature (Huang et al., 2014; Letourneau et al., 2004). In the study, it was reported by the participants that female participants caused trauma on their children as a result of struggling to fulfill their maternal duties together with the mental health problems they experienced. However, it is thought that men did not specify mental health problems in this study due to the fact that mental health does not coincide with masculinity norms and gender roles related to emotional control and power (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Tang et al., 2014), insufficient awareness of men about mental health (Akçay, 2018), unwillingness to seek help (O'Brien et al., 2005) and refusal to benefit from health services (Courtenay, 2000).

Although studies that uncover the experiences of both women and men regarding child marriage are limited, a small number of studies were found in the literature (Tuna-Uysal et al., 2019a; Wahi et al. (2019); Yıldız & Poyraz, 2020). These studies conducted with adults who married at a young age generally focused on the participants' perceptions of child marriage, their reasons for marriage, and the difficulties they experienced during the marriage process. Findings such as the participants' perceiving their child marriage as a game, their difficulties due to the responsibilities of marriage and having children at a young age are consistent with the results of the present study. However, this study is distinguished from other studies in that it displays the reflections of child marriage on the participants' childhood experiences, spousal and marital lives, relationships with their children and health status, and focuses on child marriage from a gender perspective.

### Strengths and limitations

The data of this study, which focus on the child marriage problem, were based on the experiences of both women and

men. The inclusion of men who experienced child marriage in the study is the originality and strength of this study. In addition, the fact that the participants in the study group had different characteristics in terms of age, educational status, etc. enabled the creation of a wealth of data. The research has limitations as well as strengths. The findings of this qualitative study, which aims to understand the child marriage experiences of men and women, are not generalizable. Besides, the findings of the study were obtained from in-depth interviews with the participants and were based on the data reported by the participants. During the in-depth interviews, although the researchers tried to increase volunteering and create a trusting relationship, the participants may have been worried about transferring sensitive information or given socially acceptable responses. Finally, although child marriages are a multidimensional problem that concerns stakeholders such as professional staff and community leaders, the only data source of the research is individuals who experienced child marriage.

### Research and Policy Implications

The findings of the research show that gender is an important determinant in the problem of child marriage and that child marriages have long-term impacts in the lives of individuals. For this reason, there is a need to prevent child marriages for child welfare and public health, and to produce policies and services that focus on individuals and families who are already engaged in child marriages.

One of the most important and fundamental ways to prevent child marriage is to support policies to ensure gender equality. In this context, programs and services to empower girls and women should be encouraged, such as increasing their access to education and economic opportunities. In educational dimensions, it can be ensured that professionals do the necessary follow-ups regarding the participation of girls in compulsory education and courses related to gender equality can be included in the curricula.

According to the Civil Law in Turkey, it is stated that men and women cannot marry until they are seventeen years old, but in an extraordinary situation, those who are sixteen years old can get married by court decision. However, despite the existing laws, child marriage arranged as a 'religious marriage' is still a problem. In order to prevent this situation and change the cultural norms related to child marriages, public awareness activities should be carried out together with all actors such as the government, religious leaders, media and non-governmental organizations. Moreover, health practices that can prevent child marriages, ways of persuading young people, raising the awareness of primary healthcare personnel, and social workers working in regions with high early marriage potential should be supported in this regard. It is also necessary to create a conscious awareness among

children regarding their rights. For a holistic and comprehensive intervention, the relationship of gender inequalities with structural factors should be taken into account, young people should be empowered to develop their capacity to make choices and decisions over their lives, and children's active participation in the process should be encouraged in line with a 'bottom-up' approach with a macro focus.

In addition to the policies to ensure the prevention of child marriages, policies to reduce the devastating effects of existing child marriages should also be developed. Child marriages cause the individuals to be deprived of living their childhood, to face gender-based roles and responsibilities in childhood, and to face difficult experiences such as having children when they are still a child. These traumatic experiences constitute an important risk factor for the mental health of the individual. As a matter of fact, the research participants frequently emphasized the mental health problems they encountered. Moreover, the problem of child marriage exerts negative influence not only on the individual but also on their children. As a result of the lack of knowledge and skills required to raise children, the research participants emphasized that they could not take good care of their children and had an inadequate emotional relationship with the child. This raises the risk of reproducing and transferring childhood traumas from generation to generation. In this context, it is necessary to identify individuals and their families who were married as children, to identify their problems, to monitor them at regular intervals, and to provide psychological support for the traumatic life experiences of these individuals. At the same time, efforts should be made to support women with inadequate support mechanisms by eliminating the lack of knowledge about child care. It should be taken into account that the individuals who have experienced child marriages and the professionals who will work with their families are gender-sensitive and that individuals may have different problems and needs due to gender.

Finally, there is a need for research focusing on different dimensions related to this problem related to child marriages. Further research is needed on the children, parents, partners of individuals who have experienced child marriage, or authorities and relevant policy makers concerned with child marriage. In addition, it is recommended to deepen evidence-based knowledge by conducting studies that examine the effectiveness of programs and services created for child marriages. In this way, policy makers will develop a more comprehensive and evidence-based practice by drawing on the findings of the research.

## Conclusion

Child marriage is an experience that affects children throughout life and is characterized by negative social and

health consequences. Although it is obvious that this experience affects the lives of girls, it is generally ignored in the literature that boys also experience child marriages. Due to the limitation of single gender focus, this study has tried to fill the gap in the literature in order to explore the child marriage experiences of individuals of both genders. In addition, this experience as a child was revealed to have significant reflections on the adulthood of the participants.

The findings of the study showed that the participants with child marriage experiences had an unlived childhood and a suspended adulthood. The fact that they were still children was neglected in the marriage. Considering that child marriage is a significant human rights violation for both women and men, this study has also emphasized gender-based differences. Female participants commented on the following issues which are associated with being a woman: their lives trapped in private sphere, the reproductive health problems they experienced due to their biological structures and their roles in providing care. Male participants, on the other hand, stated that they assumed the role of being the head of the household and providing economic support when they were children, and that they could not realize their roles as fathers because they were too young. All in all, this qualitative research conducted with individuals with child marriage experiences revealed that the experiences of women and men regarding child marriage differed in many aspects as a reflection of gender, but that child marriage was an important determinant in the lives of both women and men. The essence of the experiences of the participants who experienced child marriages appears to be that child marriages are a control mechanism that ensures the reinforcement of gender-based discrimination practices and the reproduction of the gender order.

**Acknowledgements** We sincerely thank all the participants who contributed to our research by sharing their experiences.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declared no competing interests.

**Ethical approval** KTO Karatay University Pharmaceutical and Non-Medical Device Research Ethics Committee with the decision number 2021/019.

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