Exploring adolescent girls' involvement in decision-making processes regarding child marriage: A systematic review

Sri Wahyuningsih[1], Sri Widati[2]*, Nunik Puspitasari[2], Lutfi A. Salim[2] and **Mohammad W. Azkiya[3]**

[1]Doctoral Program in Public Health, Faculty of Public Health, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia; [2]Department of Epidemiology, Biostatistics, Population Studies and Health Promotion, Faculty of Public Health, Univesitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia; [3]Faculty of Nursing, Universitas Jember, Jember, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: sri-widati@fkm.unair.ac.id

Abstract

Child marriage often involves adolescents aged 10–19 years and poses significant health risks and challenges to gender equality. The aim of this systematic review was to examine the involvement of adolescent girls in decision-making processes regarding child marriage and identify influencing factors. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, this review covered studies published between January 2014 and July 2024. The databases searched included ScienceDirect, Springer Link, PubMed, and Taylor & Francis, using terms related to adolescent girls, decision-making, and child marriage. Inclusion criteria targeted studies involving girls aged 10–19, with methods including qualitative, quantitative, longitudinal, and mixed-method, published in English. Data extraction and quality assessment followed the standards of the Joanna Briggs Institute. Of 6,967 articles, 29 met the inclusion criteria, spanning 26 countries across three continents, with 51.7% being qualitative studies. Economic pressure was identified as the primary driver of child marriage, with significant parental and community influences restricting the girls' decision-making autonomy. Parents, especially fathers, often force girls into marriage to reduce economic burdens and enhance family honor. Some adolescent girls initiate marriage to escape adverse home conditions or societal stigma. Education and strong family support emerged as protective factors, while entrenched social norms perpetuated early marriages. Comprehensive approaches including educational improvement, economic support, and social norm transformation are essential. Addressing child marriage requires multidimensional strategies, encompassing enhanced educational opportunities, economic support, and changing entrenched social norms. Future research should focus on interventions that boost adolescent girls' life skills and decision-making autonomy to delay marriage and enable informed choices.

Keywords: Child marriage, adolescent girls, decision-making, economic pressure, social norms

Introduction

Child marriage, often involving adolescents aged 10 to 19 years in marital unions with adults or peers, persists a critical global issue with profound implications for health, gender equality, and human rights [1,2]. It remains as a significant barrier to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those focused on gender equality and women's empowerment [3]. As

a fundamental violation of human rights, child marriage stems from entrenched gender inequality and perpetuates cycles of poverty and disempowerment. It undermines autonomy of adolescent girls, denying them the ability to decide when and whom to marry while exposing them to severe health risks and limiting educational and economic opportunities [2,4,5]. Despite numerous initiatives aimed at delaying marriage, socio-economic constraints, and rigid gender norms persistently erode adolescent girls' agenscy, sustaining high rates of child marriage in many parts of the world [6,7]. This practice disproportionately affects girls, leaving them vulnerable to a range of adverse outcomes, including early pregnancies, domestic violence, and limited life prospects.

Globally, child marriage affects an estimated 640 million women according to the 2023 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) [8], with approximately 12 million girls entering marriage before the age of 18 each year, equivalent to 28 girls every minute [1]. Asia accounts for the largest proportion, with 422 million women reported to have married before reaching adulthood [8]. In Indonesia alone, as of 2018, nearly 1.2 million girls had married before the age of 18, ranking the country among the top ten globally with the highest prevalence of child marriage [8,9]. This alarming statistic underscores the multifaceted nature of the issue, driven primarily by poverty and deeply rooted social norms, which hinder adolescent girls' access to resources, education, and decision-making power [10,11].

Systematic reviews on child marriage have largely focused on its health consequences, underlying causes, and intervention strategies [4,12,13]. However, a critical gap remains in understanding the extent to which adolescent girls participate in marriage-related decision-making processes. Their involvement is pivotal to addressing the structural and cultural barriers that perpetuate the practice and for empowering them to exercise greater control over their futures. To address this gap, the aim of this systematic review was to explore the role of adolescent girls in the decision-making process regarding child marriage.

Methods

Information sources and search strategy
This review adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines [14], and was registered under PROSPERO (CRD42024563694). The aim of this study was to synthesize evidence on the involvement of adolescent girls in decision-making processes regarding child marriage, focusing on studies published between January 2014 and July 2024. A systematic and comprehensive search strategy was designed to ensure broad coverage of relevant literature. Electronic databases utilized for the search included ScienceDirect, Springer Link, PubMed, and Taylor and Francis. The search strategy incorporated the following keywords and Boolean operators: "adolescent girl" OR "teenage girl" OR "young girls" OR "female adolescent" AND "decision-making" OR "decision making" OR "decision-making processes" OR "involvement in decision-making" AND "child marriage" OR "early marriage" OR "marriage of minor." These terms were tailored to capture diverse terminologies and contexts related to the research question, ensuring the inclusion of all pertinent studies.

Eligibility criteria
Articles were included if they met the following criteria: (1) studies involving adolescent girls (aged 10–19 years) and encompassing girls who were already married or at risk of child marriage; (2) studies exploring the involvement of adolescent girls in the decision-making process regarding child marriage and studies examining the factors influencing this involvement, such as education, awareness of reproductive rights, family support, and social norms; (3) qualitative studies (e.g., in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies), quantitative studies (e.g., surveys), longitudinal studies and mix-method studies exploring the involvement of adolescent girls in the decision-making process regarding child marriage; (4) articles published in English; and (5) articles published between January 2014 and July 2024.

Data extraction
Search results were exported to Mendeley reference management software, and duplicates were removed. Given the volume of research obtained, titles and abstracts were screened by one

author, with assistance from another. All three investigators assessed full-text articles for review to ensure their suitability for inclusion. Disagreements regarding inclusion were resolved through discussion among the three investigators. Following PRISMA standards for screening and selection, we retrieved essential data, including title, author, year, journal, country, study design, population, research aims, and outcomes, as descriptive information.

Study risk of bias assessment

In this systematic review, the quality assessment of included articles utilized the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist for Quantitative Studies, JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Cohort Studies and the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research [15]. The former evaluated aspects such as sampling strategy and statistical analysis, while the latter assessed research design and data analysis methods [16]. Each checklist facilitated a thorough evaluation of methodological quality and risk of bias, informing the interpretation of study findings [15].

Synthesis method

Thematic synthesis was employed in this systematic review, which enables the identification of patterns and key themes from diverse data sources. The included studies were categorized based on population type, study design, and research outcomes to facilitate an in-depth analysis of adolescent girls' involvement in decision-making regarding child marriage. The findings were mapped into predefined themes, aligned with the objectives of this systematic review, such as adolescent autonomy, economic pressures, social norms, and the role of education. This process ensured that the synthesis was conducted systematically and transparently, enabling a comprehensive analysis from various perspectives. The resulting themes were then further analyzed to identify research gaps and opportunities for future studies.

Results

Study selection

The literature review process, utilizing ScienceDirect, Springer Link, PubMed, and Taylor & Francis databases, resulted in the identification of 6,967 relevant articles (**Figure 1**). We then restricted the results to articles published between January 2014 and July 2024 and performed a duplication check, resulting in 3,907 articles. Following the screening of titles, abstracts, and full texts, a total of 29 articles met our inclusion criteria. All of the included study characteristics are presented in **Table 1**.

The 29 selected articles predominantly originated from 2022 (n=8, 27.6%), with notable contributions from 2018 (n=5, 17.2%), followed by 2021 (n=4, 13.8%), and smaller distributions from 2019 (n=3, 10.3%), 2020 (n=3, 10.3%), and 2023 (n=3, 10.3%). Articles published in 2016, 2017, and 2024 each accounted for a minor share (n=1, 3.4% per year). These studies represented 26 countries across Africa, Asia, and America, as illustrated in **Figure 2.** In terms of research design, qualitative studies were the most common (n=15, 51.7%), followed by cross-sectional designs (n=8, 27.5%), mixed-method approaches (n=3, 10.3%), and longitudinal studies (n=2, 6.8%).

The results of the analysis of the various thematic areas and the findings across the selected literature are presented under two main themes: adolescent girls' involvement in decision-making and factors influencing decision-making.

Risk of bias assessment

The quality assessment of the included articles was conducted using the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Quantitative Studies, the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Cohort Studies, and the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research. The results of the qualitative research assessment are presented in **Table 2**, the cross-sectional study assessment in **Table 3**, and the cohort study assessment in **Table 4**.
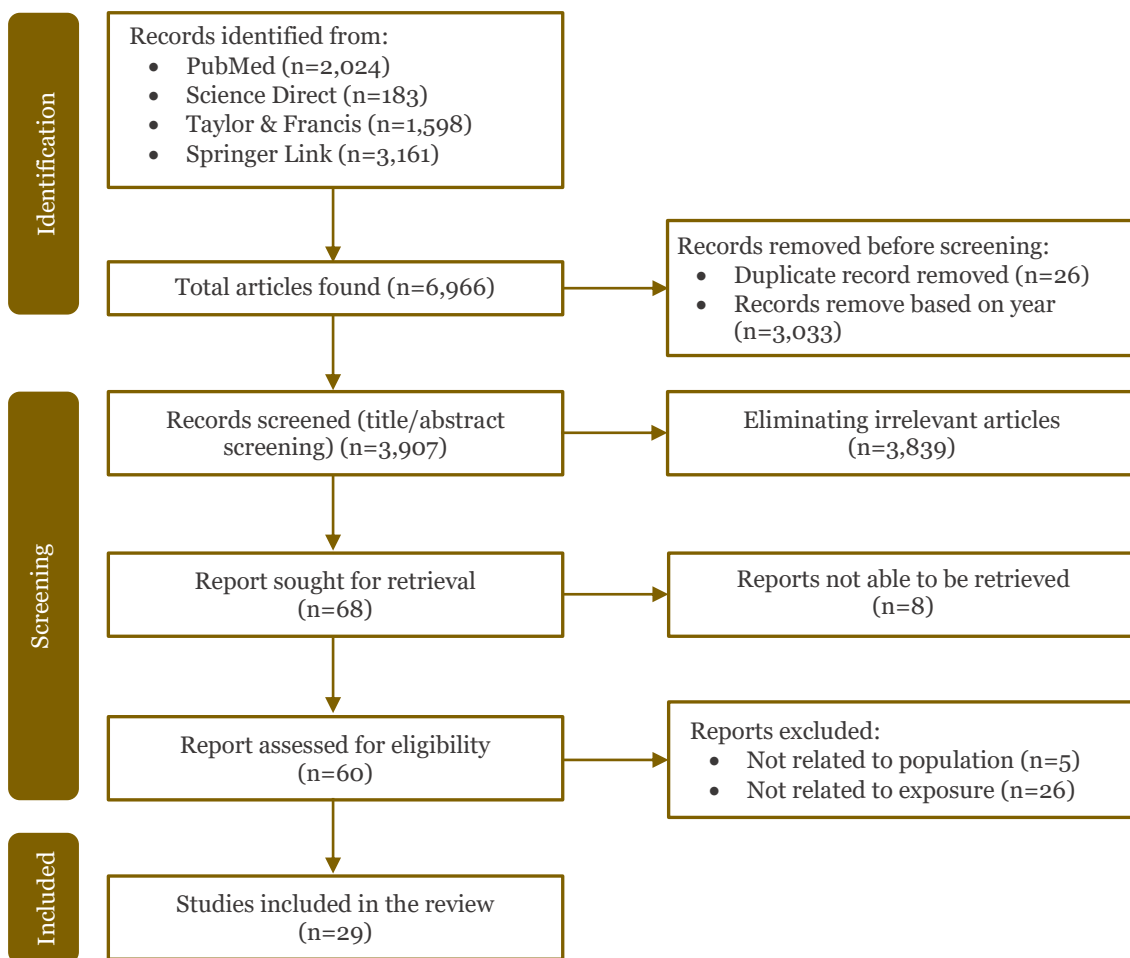
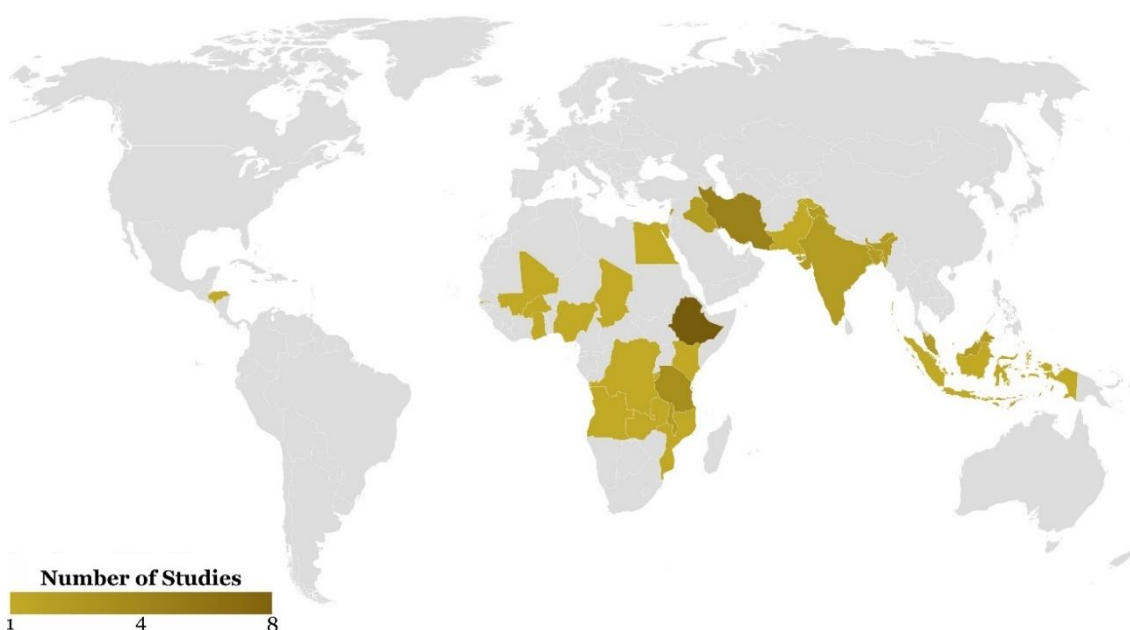Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart for the selection process of the articles.

Figure 2. Distribution map of studies included in this systematic review.

Table 1. Studies in adolescent girls' involvement in decision-making processes regarding child marriage

Author (year)	Citation	Country	Study design	Analysis methods	Result
Montazeri *et al.* (2016)	[17]	Iran	Qualitative	Conventional content analysis	Key determinants include family structure, low autonomy in decision-making, and responses to social, emotional, and sexual needs
Knox (2017)	[18]	Lebanon	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Adolescent girls made marriage decisions in consultation with their families, driven by economic hardship, insecurity, and loneliness due to post-conflict conditions
Rumble *et al.* (2018)	[19]	Indonesia	Cross-sectional	Multivariate probit regression analysis	Significant determinants include lower education levels, rural residence, lower household wealth, and limited media exposure; approximately 17% of women were married before 18, and 6% before 16
McDougal *et al.* (2018)	[20]	Ethiopia and India	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Social norms and the loss of a parent were identified as stressors sustaining early marriage, with the decision-making process divided into initiation, negotiation, and final decision-making stages
Stark (2018)	[21]	Tanzania	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Poverty and gendered economic disparities motivate girls to engage in transactional sex, leading to early marriage as a risk-reduction measure; high costs of education limit opportunities, making marriage a culturally approved pathway to adulthood
Bartels *et al.* (2018)	[22]	Lebanon	Mixed-methods	Statistical analysis	The study identified a complex array of factors contributing to early marriage, including poverty, lack of educational opportunities, and concerns about sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)
Mardi *et al.* (2018)	[23]	Iran	Qualitative	Graneheim and Landman strategies	Three main categories were identified: "a false sense of sexual development," "death of dreams," and "threatened independence"
Kohno *et al.* (2019)	[24]	Malaysia	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Three themes emerged: immaturity in decision-making, family poverty, and religious and cultural norms
Schaffnit *et al.* (2019)	[25]	Tanzania	Qualitative	Framework analysis	Women often have significant autonomy in choosing when and whom to marry; marriage is seen as a way to gain social status and respect within the community
Bezie *et al.* (2019)	[26]	Ethiopia	Cross-sectional	Multivariable logistic regression, with adjusted odds ratios (AOR)	The prevalence of early marriage was 44.8%, influenced by factors such as the father's non-formal education, family income below 1000 Ethiopian birr, family size of seven or more, and the respondents' non-formal education
Tekile *et al.* (2020)	[27]	Ethiopia	Cross-sectional	Multivariable binary logistic regression and AOR	The prevalence of early marriage was 48.57%; significant factors included education level, family income, residence, literacy level, and knowledge of the legal marital age
Alem *et al.* (2020)	[28]	Ethiopia	Cross-sectional	Multilevel logistic regression and spatial analysis	Early marriage in Ethiopia varied, with hotspots in Tigray, Amhara, and Afar. Higher odds were linked to no or limited education and parental decisions, particularly in Afar, Amhara, and Gambela.
Kohno *et al.* (2020)	[29]	Malaysia	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Four overarching themes were identified: health risk behavior, family poverty, early marriage as fate, and family disharmony. Early marriage was often a result of unprotected intercourse leading to pre-marital conception, financial struggles, and family conflicts.
Emirie *et al.* (2021)	[30]	Ethiopia	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Economic and gender norms are significant drivers, with context-specific variations in how adolescent-initiated and parent-arranged marriages affect girls and boys differently

Author (year)	Citation	Country	Study design	Analysis methods	Result
Elnakib *et al.* (2021)	[31]	Egypt	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Displacement-specific challenges, such as disruptions to education, protection concerns, and livelihood insecurity, exacerbate girls' vulnerability to child marriage, while some families have adapted by delaying marriage due to changed social norms
Naghizadeh *et al.* (2021)	[32]	Iran	Cross-sectional	Descriptive statistics and multivariate logistic regression	The study found that the majority of girls (85.4%) disagreed with marriage before the age of 18. Key reasons for child marriage included lack of parental education, family problems, and economic issues. The main consequences identified were deprivation of education and increased psychological problems.
Saleheen *et al.* (2021)	[33]	Bangladesh, Ghana, and Iraq	Cross-sectional	Chi-square tests and logistic regression	Significant factors included education levels of household heads and women, wealth status, mass media exposure, number of household members, and residence. Women with no formal education and primary education were more likely to marry early compared to those with secondary or higher education.
Naved *et al.* (2022)	[34]	Bangladesh	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Social norms restricting girls' mobility, limiting their engagement with male peers, and minimizing their decision-making roles in marriage perpetuate child marriage
Tewahido *et al.* (2022)	[35]	Ethiopia	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Early marriage is strongly encouraged by social norms perpetuated by peers and influential adults, with significant sanctions for girls and their families who refuse marriage proposals
Belachew *et al.* (2022)	[36]	Niger, Congo, Mali, Chad, Angola, Burundi, Nigeria, Gambia, and Burkina Faso	Cross-sectional	Multilevel mixed-effect binary logistic regression, using AOR	Significant factors associated with early marriage included women's educational status, employment, wealth index, family size, community-level poverty, and rural residency
Saleh *et al.* (2022)	[37]	Iraq	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	The study identified multiple reasons for early marriage, including poor economic status, protection of girls and boys, low educational level, and adherence to traditional practices. The main disadvantages highlighted were divorce and violence against women.
Pacheco-Montoya *et al.* (2022)	[7]	Honduras	Mixed-methods	Exploratory factor analysis and thematic analysis	Girls who scored higher on traditional gender norms were more likely to marry early; control over girls' mobility and sexuality due to rigid gender norms influenced their decision-making processes
Abdurahman *et al.* (2022)	[38]	Ethiopia	Cross-sectional	Log-binomial regression was used to calculate adjusted prevalence ratios (APR)	Strong social norms supporting early marriage significantly influence parents' intentions, with higher prevalence in rural areas and among parents with favorable attitudes toward early marriage
Hosseini *et al.* (2022)	[39]	Iran	Qualitative	Conventional content analysis	Three main categories emerged: (1) early marriage as transcendental coercion, (2) early marriage as a solution or a type of problem-solving, and (3) early marriage as a voluntary act
Baraka *et al.* (2022)	[40]	Tanzania	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Early marriage is influenced by economic insecurity, cultural norms, and the perceived benefits of marriage for social and economic stability. Parents and adolescent girls both play roles in the decision, with girls sometimes marrying against parental wishes. Gendered conflict was evident as girls were often lured into unstable relationships by men.

Author (year)	Citation	Country	Study design	Analysis methods	Result
Kakal *et al.* (2023)	[41]	Pakistan	Qualitative	Thematic content analysis using NVivo software	Many young people wish to delay marriage, but child marriage is often used as a strategy to cope with poverty and prevent pre-marital sexual activity; young women are relegated to domestic roles with limited decision-making power
Kok *et al.* (2023)	[42]	Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia	Mixed-methods	Logistic regression and inductive coding	Lack of education, economic hardship, social norms around teenage pregnancy, and limited perceived alternatives were key drivers of child marriage. Fathers' education was a protective factor in some contexts, and child marriage was sometimes seen as a means to avoid premarital sex or pregnancy.
Paul *et al.* (2023)	[11]	India	Longitudinal study	Multinomial regression	The study found that parental discussions around school performance, friendship, and personal issues were positively associated with girls remaining unmarried or delaying marriage. However, discussions about menstruation were negatively associated with delayed marriage. Parental engagement on personal issues was positively associated with joint decision-making regarding husband selection.
Kidman *et al.* (2024)	[43]	Malawi	Longitudinal study	Hazard ratios	Significant factors include delays in schooling, community disapproval of child marriage, and knowledge of the law, with a surprising positive association between knowledge of the law and child marriage rates

Table 2. JBI critical appraisal checklist of the included qualitative (n=16) and mixed-methods studies (n=3)

First author, year	Joanna-Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal domain for qualitative research										Bias
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Montazeri *et al.* (2016) [17]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Knox (2017) [18]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
McDougal *et al.* (2018) [20]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Stark (2018) [21]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Bartels *et al.* (2018) [22]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Mardi *et al.* (2018) [23]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Kohno *et al.* (2019) [24]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Schaffnit *et al.* (2019) [25]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Kohno *et al.* (2020) [29]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Emirie *et al.* (2021) [30]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Elnakib *et al.* (2021) [31]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Naved *et al.* (2022) [34]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Tewahido *et al.* (2022) [35]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Saleh *et al.* (2022) [37]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Pacheco-Montoya *et al.* (2022) [7]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Hosseini *et al.* (2022) [39]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Baraka *et al.* (2022) [40]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Kakal *et al.* (2023) [41]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Kok *et al.* (2023) [42]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk

Table 3. JBI critical appraisal checklist of the included cross-sectional (n=8) and mixed-methods studies (n=3)

First author, year	Joanna-Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal domain for cross-sectional research								Bias
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Rumble *et al.* (2018) [19]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Bartels *et al.* (2018) [22]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Bezie *et al.* (2019) [26]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Tekile *et al.* (2020) [27]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Alem *et al.* (2020) [28]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Naghizadeh *et al.* (2021) [32]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Saleheen *et al.* (2021) [33]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Belachew *et al.* (2022) [36]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Pacheco-Montoya *et al.* (2022) [7]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Abdurahman *et al.* (2022) [38]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Kok *et al.* (2023) [42]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk

Table 4. JBI critical appraisal checklist of the included cohort studies (n=2)

First author, year	Joanna-Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal domain for qualitative research											Bias
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Paul *et al.* (2023) [11]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk
Kidman *et al.* (2024) [43]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low risk

Early marriage initiation

The initiation of early marriage among adolescent girls is a complex process influenced by various factors. Research findings on this topic highlighted diverse dynamics. A common theme was the significant role of parents, particularly fathers, in initiating or even pressuring adolescent girls to marry early [20,22,25,28,34,40]. Parents frequently encourage their children to marry with the intention of providing a better life, greater security, and preserving family honor. This perspective was frequently tied to beliefs that early marriage reduces the family's economic burden and elevates social status. Additionally, religious and cultural norms often frame marriage as a means to avoid sin or pre-marital relationships deemed inappropriate [24]. Some parents perceive marriage as a protective measure against potential risks or social stigma associated with remaining unmarried at an older age [21,37]. However, the motivations and driving factors for early marriage are stronger in rural areas compared to urban settings. Studies conducted in Bangladesh, Ghana, and Iraq indicated that the driving factors for early marriage are more prevalent in rural areas due to strong social norms, strict community surveillance, and lower parental education levels [33]. These factors often intensify the pressure on families to marry off their daughters at an earlier age, primarily to preserve family honor and prevent social stigma [33]. Another finding in Iran, a relatively underdeveloped area, indicated that the majority of the community continues to uphold traditional customs that tend to normalize early marriage [39].

Conversely, early marriage initiation can also stem from the adolescent girls themselves. Factors such as love for their partners, a desire to escape unfavorable home conditions, or a quest for greater freedom often drive their decisions [20,22,39]. The desire for marriage among adolescent girls, often driven by love, is frequently based on the expectation of living together with their loved partner, where each assumes complementary roles. For instance, women typically take on household responsibilities such as cooking, while men are expected to provide financial support to meet the family's needs [25]. In conflict-affected regions, adolescent girls often marry as a result of prolonged conflict, which leads to feelings of loneliness [18]. This desire is further reinforced by unfavorable home conditions, such as economic limitations, lack of family support, family discord, weak emotional bonds among family members, and other family-related issues [39]. For some, marriage is viewed as a way to uphold their honor and avoid societal stigma [34]. In other instances, marriage proposals are seen as opportunities not to be missed, particularly when the prospective partner is viewed as having promising economic prospects and a stable future [23,35]. Peer pressure can also be a triggering factor for the desire to marry early. Findings from Ethiopia revealed that adolescent girls are often compelled to marry to avoid ridicule from their peers, driven by fears of having fewer options in choosing a partner. Additionally, norms surrounding dominant masculinity may contribute to sexual violence if they refuse to marry [30].

Autonomy of adolescent girls in decision-making

The autonomy of adolescent girls in decision-making is heavily influenced by their educational, economic, and socio-cultural environments [17,19,28,31]. Limited autonomy, stemming from a lack of life skills such as decision-making, problem-solving, negotiation, and critical thinking, is a significant factor contributing to early marriage [17]. In many instances, adolescent girls have minimal involvement in decisions regarding their marriages. Studies indicate that in certain regions, their autonomy is almost nonexistent or deemed unimportant [18,36]. This is due to the persistent presence of gender norms that often undermine women's autonomy [41]. In rural areas or communities with deeply rooted traditions, marriage decisions are frequently regarded as a family responsibility, where parents, particularly fathers, have complete control over the process. It is common in some areas for marriage proposals to be directed to parents, who then decide without consulting their daughters [40]. Furthermore, some parents impose their preferences, believing that daughters should comply with their decisions [41]. In contrast, there are contexts where adolescent girls are granted slightly more autonomy in marriage-related decisions. This is often influenced by the family's economic status and the parents' level of education, which provides adolescent girls with greater opportunities to express their opinions regarding marriage [43]. However, even in such cases, their decisions to marry are often made spontaneously, intuitively, and without thorough consideration. In most instances, they lack an understanding

of what marriage entails due to limited experience and knowledge, leading them to perceive early marriage as an unavoidable destiny [24].

Education as a factor in influencing decision-making in early marriage

The decision to marry early or to marry off adolescent girls is significantly shaped by their education levels. Adolescents with higher education tend to have greater autonomy, enabling them to challenge inappropriate beliefs and enhance their decision-making abilities [32]. However, economic constraints often force adolescent girls to drop out of school, which increases their vulnerability to early marriage [24]. Consequently, the likelihood of early marriage is higher among girls with lower education levels [27]. Delaying marriage requires more than just individual educational attainment; it also involves adherence to social norms in interactions and parental recognition of the value of education [34]. Parents play a pivotal role in perpetuating or preventing early marriage, with their knowledge and attitudes often influenced by their own educational backgrounds. Research conducted in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Ghana, Bangladesh, and Iraq highlights that higher paternal education levels serve as a protective factor against early marriage [26,33,42]. Specifically, the higher the father's education level, the lower the likelihood of early marriage for their daughters [26,33,42].

Family support as a factor in influencing decision-making in early marriage

Child marriage is often driven by family encouragement, with parents promoting early marriage for a variety of reasons, including preserving cultural traditions, ensuring security for their daughters, and viewing them as a potential family burden [37-39]. In some cultures, child marriage is also seen as a means of enhancing the family's social and economic status [18,36,40]. Parents may view their daughters' marriages as opportunities to secure a dowry, which could improve the family's financial situation [18,36,40].

The pressure for early marriage is frequently linked to concerns about protecting daughters' safety and honor, particularly in regions where insecurity and gender-based violence are prevalent [37]. Child marriage is often perceived as a means of controlling the sexual behavior of adolescent girls, driven by parents' fears of behaviors such as dating, elopement, or actions that violate societal norms [7]. For instance, in countries like Indonesia and Ethiopia, preserving a girl's virginity until marriage is a cultural norm closely tied to family honor [42].

In some cases, parental decisions to force early marriage stem from conflict or instability within their country. Findings from Syria during the conflict revealed that parents were compelled to marry off their daughters as a means of protecting them from sexual harassment and violence while living in refugee camps [22]. On the other hand, the conflict resulted in adolescents experiencing loneliness due to separation from their peers and economic hardships, which fostered a desire to marry [18].

However, research also indicates that a positive relationship between parents and daughters can help delay early marriage [11]. Parents with higher levels of education, knowledge of health, and awareness of the consequences of early marriage are more likely to oppose its continuation and protect their adolescent daughters from entering into such marriages [38,43].

Social and cultural norms as a factor in influencing decision-making in early marriage

Social and cultural norms play a significant role in driving early marriage, especially in areas where these practices are deeply ingrained. In many rural regions, early marriage is still viewed as a long-standing tradition and a social necessity [31]. For example, early marriage is often seen as a means of protecting girls from social stigma, particularly in interactions with the opposite sex. Additionally, the practice of receiving a marriage dowry can incentivize parents to support early marriage [7,30]. Adolescent girls are often subject to stronger pressure from gender norms compared to boys, as societal expectations place a heavier burden on them [7]. In some cases, refusal to marry may lead to sanctions from peers, family, and the broader community, further reinforcing the pressure to conform [35]. Moreover, early marriage is sometimes framed as a religious obligation or a way to protect family honor, providing additional justification for parents to force their daughters into marriage [29].

Awareness and knowledge of reproductive rights as a factor in influencing decision-making in early marriage

Awareness and knowledge of reproductive rights are crucial factors in the decision-making process regarding early marriage. In many cases, reproductive health topics are not adequately addressed either at home or in school, resulting in limited knowledge about reproductive rights among adolescents [17]. Similarly, parents may lack awareness of reproductive rights, the laws prohibiting early marriage, and the health risks associated with marrying at a young age [38]. This lack of knowledge significantly impacts adolescent girls, making them less aware of the potential consequences of early marriage and pregnancy [31]. However, greater awareness of reproductive rights can empower adolescent girls to make more informed decisions about when and whom they marry. This knowledge not only allows them to better understand the implications of early marriage but also gives them the tools to assert control over their own lives and health choices.

Economic status as a factor in influencing decision-making in early marriage

The economic status of a family plays a significant role in the decision to marry off adolescent girls early. Families with low economic conditions often view early marriage as a solution to alleviate financial burdens and secure the future of their daughters [40]. Social norms, such as the requirement for dowry payments, further influence this decision, as parents may believe that marrying off their daughters can help ease their financial strain [40]. The perception of daughters as financial burdens leads some parents to marry them off quickly in an attempt to reduce responsibility [41]. This dynamic is also evident in research from rural Tanzania, where daughters are sometimes forced to marry older men for the economic benefit of their families, particularly their fathers [25]. Similarly, a study in Indonesia indicated that families with lower economic status are more likely to arrange early marriages in the hope that the union will bring financial stability to the family [19].

Community and environmental pressure as a factor in influencing decision-making in early marriage

Community and environmental pressure play a significant role in driving early marriage practices in many societies. Social norms and community expectations often pressure families to marry off their daughters early to maintain family honor and avoid social stigma [34]. Peer influence is another powerful force, as adolescent girls may feel pressured to marry early in order to avoid ridicule or the fear of being left without a partner [30]. In some communities, such as those in Honduras [7], and Tanzania [32] early marriage is seen as a way to ensure the protection of girls from the risks of premarital relationships deemed inappropriate.

Discussion

Early marriage remains a complex and multidimensional global issue, influenced by factors such as individual, family, economic, and social and cultural norms. This systematic review highlights the interplay between these factors and their cumulative impact on girls' autonomy and decision-making processes. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive, context-sensitive interventions that tackle the root causes and mitigate the long-term effects of early marriage.

One of the key findings is that economic pressure is a significant driver of early marriage. Families with low economic status often view early marriage as a solution to reduce the financial burden and improve the family's social status [40,41]. In some cases, parents believe that girls' marriages can bring economic stability through dowries or support from husbands, which can help improve the family's economic situation [22,25]. This belief reflects systemic inequalities that result in limited education and long-term productivity for women. On the other hand, early marriage has significant impacts on maternal health (such as anemia, intimate partner violence, miscarriage/abortion/stillbirth), which require greater financial resources and ultimately affect both family and national economic stability [44]. Findings from Nigeria indicated that women who married during childhood earn 12% less than they would have without early marriage [45]. This income gap is estimated to cost Nigeria over US$10 billion annually [45]. Therefore, economic interventions must not only reduce financial pressures but also expand access for

adolescent girls to continue their education, whether through formal or non-formal pathways, with a focus on developing relevant skills to support their independence. Conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs have proven effective in reducing the prevalence of early marriage by encouraging families to prioritize education over marriage. A study on CCT conducted in Mataram, Indonesia, demonstrated its ability to raise awareness among respondents about the importance of education for their children, providing a foundation for preventing early marriage [46]. Furthermore, programs focused on empowerment and life skills development can serve as economic solutions [4]. Thus, the combination of these economic interventions can be an effective strategy to break the cycle of early marriage and sustainably improve the social and economic well-being of families.

Community pressure and social norms also play a large role in reinforcing the practice of early marriage. These deeply rooted social norms create an environment that limits girls' freedom to make their own decisions regarding their marriages [39]. Transforming these norms requires collaborative efforts involving community leaders, religious figures, and educators. In rural areas of Senegal, the implementation of the Girls Holistic Development (GHD) program, focused on enhancing recognition, knowledge, and empowerment of women in the community, strengthening inter-community communication, and advocating for the interests and aspirations of girls has proven effective in shifting social norms surrounding early marriage [47]. Community-based approaches like this demonstrate that with targeted collaboration and sustained support, social norm transformation can be achieved, creating an environment that better supports the rights and autonomy of girls.

The initiation of early marriage often comes from parents, especially fathers [38]. Parents initiate this with the intention of providing a better life and maintaining family honor [28,40]. Other findings showed that the family's initiative to marry off their children is strongly related to the education level of the family, especially the head of the family [38,48]. On the other hand, the initiation of early marriage does not always come from parents but also from the adolescent girls themselves [30]. This highlighted the need for awareness interventions to engage parents in shifting paradigms related to early marriage and for interventions focused on strengthening parent-child relationships as a form of primary prevention. Cohort studies conducted in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam showed that the quality of parent-child relationships and communication during early adolescence serves as a protective factor against early marriage for girls [49]. Therefore, fostering harmonious relationships between parents and children is a crucial key to creating an environment that protects girls from the risks of early marriage.

Girls' autonomy in marriage-related decision-making is strongly influenced by their education, economic status, and socio-cultural context [28,31]. Girls with low levels of education and lacking life skills, such as decision-making and negotiation skills, often lack the ability to resist early marriage [17]. Although in some contexts they have more freedom, these decisions are often taken without careful consideration due to a lack of adequate knowledge and experience about the long-term consequences of early marriage [18]. Educational interventions play a crucial role in addressing these gaps. In addition to increasing access, programs should focus on equipping individuals with critical thinking and life skills while encouraging family support.

The participation of stakeholders, community leaders, teachers, health workers, and parents to create a strong social norm transformation and awareness raising on reproductive rights is needed to create an environment that supports girls' autonomy in marriage-related decision-making [50]. The success of these efforts lies in a sustainable collaborative approach that integrates cultural sensitivity with evidence-based strategies to overcome barriers and build a society that supports girls' autonomy and rights.

This systematic review seeks to look beyond the evidence on the role and involvement of adolescent girls in decision-making processes related to early marriage, and the factors that influence this. However, it is important to acknowledge some limitations of this review. The review did not address studies reported in languages other than English. This is a significant limitation as findings from countries with high rates of early marriage are not always published in English.

Conclusion

This systematic review underscores the intricate web of factors influencing early marriage among adolescent girls, with economic hardship being a major driver. Families often perceive early marriage as a way to alleviate financial burdens and enhance social status. The decision-making autonomy of these girls is significantly limited by low education levels, lack of life skills, and strong parental control, particularly from fathers. Additionally, community pressures and entrenched social norms compel families to adhere to traditional practices to avoid social stigma. To address this issue, interventions need to be multifaceted, focusing on improving economic conditions, increasing access to education, and shifting harmful social norms. Future research should explore the effectiveness of interventions aimed at enhancing the life skills and decision-making autonomy of adolescent girls, enabling them to delay marriage and make informed choices about their futures. Longitudinal studies are essential for developing culturally sensitive and impactful strategies and interventions to reduce the prevalence of early marriage.

Ethics approval

Not required.

Competing interests

All the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Underlying data

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

Declaration of artificial intelligence use

This study used artificial intelligence (AI) tools for manuscript writing support, specifically ChatGPT. The use of ChatGPT was employed for language refinement, specifically to improve grammar and sentence structure. We confirm that all AI-assisted processes were critically reviewed by the authors to ensure the integrity and reliability of the results. The final decisions and interpretations presented in this article were solely made by the authors.

How to cite

Wahyuningsih S, Widati S, Puspitasari N, *et al*. Exploring adolescent girls' involvement in decision-making processes regarding child marriage: A systematic review. Narra J 2025; 5 (1): e1656 - http://doi.org/10.52225/narra.v5i1.1656.

References

1. United Nations Children's Fund. Child marriage. Available from: https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage. Accessed: 9 November 2024.

2. United Nations Population Fund. Child marriage. Available from: https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage#readmore-expand. Accessed: 9 November 2024.

3. Wahyuningsih S, Sulistyono RE, Hayati N, *et al.* Sinergi Ranupani menghapus pernikahan dini. Sleman: Deepublish; 2021.

4. Malhotra A, Elnakib S. 20 years of the evidence base on what works to prevent child marriage: A systematic review. J Adolesc Health 2021;68(5):847-862.

5. Islam MM, Khan MN, Rahman MM. Factors affecting child marriage and contraceptive use among Rohingya girls in refugee camps. Lancet Reg Health West Paci 2021;12:100175.

6. Abera M, Nega A, Tefera Y, Gelagay AA. Early marriage and women's empowerment: The case of child-brides in Amhara National Regional State, Ethiopia. BMC Int Health Hum Rights 2020;20(1):30.

7. Pacheco-Montoya D, Murphy-Graham E, Valencia López EE, Cohen AK. Gender norms, control over girls' sexuality, and child marriage: A Honduran case study. J Adolesc Health 2022;70(3S):S22-S27.

8. United Nations Children's Fund. Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach? Latest trends and future prospects. 2023 update. New York: UNICEF; 2023.

9. BPS, Bappenas, UNICEF, PUSKAPA. Pencegahan perkawinan anak. Percepatan yang tidak bisa ditunda. Jakarta: BPS; 2020.

10. Malunga G, Sangong S, Saah FI, Bain LE. Prevalence and factors associated with adolescent pregnancies in Zambia: A systematic review from 2000–2022. Arch Public Health 2023;81(1):27.

11. Paul P, Closson K, Raj A. Is parental engagement associated with subsequent delayed marriage and marital choices of adolescent girls? Evidence from the Understanding the Lives of Adolescents and Young Adults (UDAYA) survey in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, India. SSM Popul Health 2023;24:101523.

12. Fan S, Koski A. The health consequences of child marriage: A systematic review of the evidence. BMC Public Health 2022;22(1):309.

13. Psaki SR, Melnikas AJ, Haque E, *et al.* What are the drivers of child marriage? A conceptual framework to guide policies and programs. J Adolesc Health 2021;69(6S):S13-S22.

14. Parums DV. Editorial: Review articles, systematic reviews, meta-analysis, and the updated Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines. Med Sci Monit 2021;27:e934475.

15. Munn Z, Barker TH, Moola S, *et al.* Methodological quality of case series studies: An introduction to the JBI critical appraisal tool. JBI Evid Synth 2020;18(10):2127-2133.

16. Munn Z, Dias M, Tufanaru C, *et al.* The "quality" of JBI qualitative research synthesis: A methodological investigation into the adherence of meta-aggregative systematic reviews to reporting standards and methodological guidance. JBI Evid Synth 2021;19(5):1119-1139.

17. Montazeri S, Gharacheh M, Mohammadi N, *et al.* Determinants of early marriage from married girls' perspectives in Iranian setting: A qualitative study. J Environ Public Health 2016;2016:8615929.

18. Knox SE. How they see it: Young women's views on early marriage in a post-conflict setting. Reprod Health Matters 2017;25 Suppl 1:S96-S106.

19. Rumble L, Peterman A, Irdiana N, *et al.* An empirical exploration of female child marriage determinants in Indonesia. BMC Public Health 2018;18(1):1–13.

20. McDougal L, Jackson EC, McClendon KA, *et al.* Beyond the statistic: Exploring the process of early marriage decision-making using qualitative findings from Ethiopia and India. BMC Womens Health 2018;18(1):144.

21. Stark L. Early marriage and cultural constructions of adulthood in two slums in Dar es Salaam. Cult Health Sex 2018;20(8):888-901.

22. Bartels SA, Michael S, Roupetz S, *et al.* Making sense of child, early and forced marriage among Syrian refugee girls: A mixed methods study in Lebanon. BMJ Glob Health 2018;3(1):e000509.

23. Mardi A, Ebadi A, Moghadam ZB, Shabhazi S. Perceptions of teenage women about marriage in adolescence in an Iranian setting: A qualitative study. Electron Physician 2018;10(2):6292-6298.

24. Kohno A, Dahlui M, Nik Farid ND, *et al.* In-depth examination of issues surrounding the reasons for child marriage in Kelantan, Malaysia: A qualitative study. BMJ Open 2019;9(9):e027377.

25. Schaffnit SB, Urassa M, Lawson DW. "Child marriage" in context: Exploring local attitudes towards early marriage in rural Tanzania. Sex Reprod Health Matters 2019;27(1):1571304.

26. Bezie M, Addisu D. Determinants of early marriage among married women in Injibara town, north West Ethiopia: Community-based cross-sectional study. BMC Womens Health 2019;19(1):134.

27. Tekile AK, Woya AA, Basha GW. Determinants of early marriage among female children in Amhara region, Ethiopia. Afr Health Sci 2020;20(3):1190-1195.

28. Alem AZ, Yeshaw Y, Kebede SA, et al. Spatial distribution and determinants of early marriage among married women in Ethiopia: A spatial and multilevel analysis. BMC Womens Health 2020;20(1):207.

29. Kohno A, Dahlui M, Nik Farid ND, et al. Why girls get married early in Sarawak, Malaysia - An exploratory qualitative study. BMC Womens Health 2020;20(1):46.

30. Emirie G, Jones N, Kebede M. 'The school was closed, so when they brought me a husband i couldn't say no': Exploring the gendered experiences of child marriage amongst adolescent girls and boys in Ethiopia. Eur J Dev Res 2021;33:1252-1273.

31. Elnakib S, Hussein SA, Hafez S, et al. Drivers and consequences of child marriage in a context of protracted displacement: A qualitative study among Syrian refugees in Egypt. BMC Public Health 2021;21(1):674.

32. Naghizadeh S, Mirghafourvand M, Mohammadi A, et al. Knowledge and viewpoint of adolescent girls regarding child marriage, its causes and consequences. BMC Womens Health 2021;21(1):351.

33. Saleheen AAS, Afrin S, Kabir S, et al. Sociodemographic factors and early marriage among women in Bangladesh, Ghana and Iraq: An illustration from multiple indicator cluster survey. Heliyon 2021;7(5):e07111.

34. Naved RT, Kalra S, Talukder A, et al. An exploration of social norms that restrict girls' sexuality and facilitate child marriage in Bangladesh to inform policies and programs. J Adolesc Health 2022;70(3S):S17-S21.

35. Tewahido D, Worku A, Tadesse AW, et al. Adolescent girls trapped in early marriage social norm in rural Ethiopia: A vignette-based qualitative exploration. PLoS One 2022;17(2):e0263987.

36. Belachew TB, Negash WD, Kefale GT, et al. Determinants of early marriage among married women in nine high fertility sub-Saharan African countries: A multilevel analysis of recent demographic and health surveys. BMC Public Health 2022;22(1):2355.

37. Saleh AM, Othman SM, Ismail KH, Shabila NP. Exploring Iraqi people's perception about early marriage: A qualitative study. BMC Womens Health 2022;22(1):393.

38. Abdurahman D, Assefa N, Berhane Y. Parents' intention toward early marriage of their adolescent girls in eastern Ethiopia: A community-based cross-sectional study from a social norms perspective. Front Glob Women's Health 2022;3:911648.

39. Hosseini M, Asadisarvestani K. Reasons for early marriage of women in Zahedan, Iran: A qualitative study. BMC Womens Health 2022;22(1):542.

40. Baraka J, Lawson DW, Schaffnit SB, et al. Why marry early? Parental influence, agency and gendered conflict in Tanzanian marriages. Evol Hum Sci 2022;4:e49.

41. Kakal T, Kok M, Jawad M. "You are a child and this is not your business": Decision-making on child marriage in Sindh, Pakistan. PLoS One 2023;18(9):e0266865.

42. Kok MC, Kakal T, Kassegne AB, et al. Drivers of child marriage in specific settings of Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia - Findings from the Yes I Do! baseline study. BMC Public Health 2023;23(1):794.

43. Kidman R, Breton E, Mwera J, et al. Drivers of child marriages for girls: A prospective study in a low-income African setting. Glob Public Health 2024;19(1):2335356.

44. Parsons J, Edmeades J, Kes A, et al. Economic impacts of child marriage: A review of the literature. Rev Faith Int Aff 2015;13(3):12-22.

45. Fang X, Fry D, Ren J, et al. The economic burden of child marriage in Nigeria. Child Abuse Negl 2024;158:107135.

46. Hartarto RB, Wibowo WT. Conditional cash transfer and early marriage: A case study of Mataram City, West Nusa Tenggara. Int J Dev Issues 2023;22(1):57-71.

47. Kohli A, Shaw B, Guntzberger M, et al. Transforming social norms to improve girl-child health and well-being: A realist evaluation of the Girls' Holistic Development program in rural Senegal. Reprod Health 2021;18(1):243.

48. Rhena DP. The relationship between education and parents' income with the incidence of child marriage. IJPH 2020;15(2):236-244.

49. Bhan N, Gautsch L, McDougal L, et al. Effects of parent–child relationships on child marriage of girls in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam: Evidence from a prospective cohort. J Adolesc Health 2019;65(4):498-506.

50. Kohno A, Techasrivichien T, Suguimoto SP, et al. Investigation of the key factors that influence the girls to enter into child marriage : A meta-synthesis of qualitative evidence. PLoS One 2020;15(7):e0235959.