

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

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Abstract: This study examines the psychological, social, and health-related consequences of child marriage, which remains a persistent issue in many regions worldwide. Child marriage, defined as formal or informal union before the age of 18, has been shown to negatively impact emotional well-being, social adaptation, personal identity formation, and mental health outcomes. Key contributing factors include socio-economic deprivation, limited access to education, and traditional or cultural norms. Research indicates that girls married early experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and social isolation. The study underscores the importance of preventive interventions, including access to education, psychological support, and community-centered programs, to mitigate the adverse effects of early marriage and promote the well-being of affected girls.

Keywords: child marriage, girls, psychological development, emotional well-being, mental health, social adaptation, identity, stress, depression, gender equality, education, socio-economic factors, family relations.

Child marriage — defined as formal or informal union before the age of 18 — remains a significant global issue, affecting millions of girls and young women worldwide. Despite legal efforts and policy interventions to reduce its prevalence, child marriage continues to have profound psychological consequences for those who enter into marital relationships during childhood or early adolescence. Recent research identifies a range of mental health challenges associated with child marriage, highlighting that the practice extends far beyond a socio-economic or demographic phenomenon and deeply impacts emotional and psychological well-being. One of the most comprehensive ways to understand the psychological effects of child marriage is through evaluative research that synthesizes mental health outcomes across different cultural contexts. For example, narrative reviews

of the literature illustrate that child marriage is associated with elevated rates of depression, anxiety, psychological distress, and reduced overall well-being among women who were married as children. Depression is consistently reported as the most common mental health outcome, with intense emotional suffering linked to social isolation, loss of autonomy, and early assumption of adult responsibilities. Other documented effects include stress, phobias, negative self-perception, substance misuse, and even features of anti-social personality in some contexts. Empirical evidence from population-based studies further supports these conclusions. A study conducted in Niger and Ethiopia using large cross-sectional survey data found that girls married at age 15 or earlier exhibited significantly lower psychological well-being compared to those married at older ages. Sub-domains of mental health such as depression, anxiety, vitality, positive well-being, and general health were all negatively associated with very early marriage, except for self-control. Qualitative insights from this research also revealed emotional distress and depressive symptoms among early brides, illustrating how the sudden transition from childhood to adult roles can exacerbate psychological vulnerability. Beyond individual case studies, broader reviews indicate that child marriage interacts with social determinants in ways that compound psychological harm. Social isolation, intimate partner violence, and poverty — conditions that often accompany early marriage — have been found to correlate with worse mental health outcomes. Although evidence varies by region, these factors frequently intersect to create environments where emotional distress becomes persistent and debilitating. Moreover, research highlights that child marriage fundamentally disrupts the developmental trajectory of girls. Adolescence is a critical period for the formation of personal identity, autonomy, and emotional regulation. When girls are married before this process is complete, they face premature adult responsibilities that can interrupt or distort psychological growth. This can lead not only to immediate emotional suffering but also long-term challenges in self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and resilience. In conclusion, while the prevalence of child marriage may be decreasing globally due

to policy interventions and educational efforts, its psychological consequences remain significant. The evidence suggests that child marriage adversely affects mental health across multiple dimensions, requiring integrated responses that not only protect girls legally but also provide psychological support, trauma-informed care, and community-centered interventions. Future research should continue to address gaps in long-term mental health outcomes and develop culturally relevant strategies that help survivors reclaim agency and well-being. Child marriage has been widely studied by scholars across disciplines including psychology, sociology, public health, and gender studies. These researchers have examined not only the socio-economic causes of early marriage but also its profound psychological consequences on young girls and women. Among the most influential voices in the field are researchers whose empirical and theoretical contributions have shaped our understanding of child marriage as a global psychosocial issue.

1. Susan M. McAlister Susan M. McAlister's research has focused on the psychological effects of early marriage in low-income contexts. Her work demonstrates that girls who are married before the age of 18 often experience elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and emotional distress due to abrupt role transitions and social isolation. McAlister emphasizes the importance of psychosocial support services for survivors of child marriage and highlights the relationship between early marital responsibilities and long-term mental health outcomes.

2. Nour Nawal M. Nour Dr. Nawal Nour, a physician and researcher, has been a leading voice in highlighting child marriage as a public health and human rights issue. In her widely cited review, Nour systematically articulates how early marriage is linked to poor mental health outcomes, increased risk of trauma, and impaired emotional development. Her work underscores the intersection of psychological distress, reproductive health complications, and the violation of basic rights.

3. S. Raj & A. Salazar In their collaborative studies, Raj and Salazar have explored the relationships between girls' education, early marriage, and psychological well-being. Their findings indicate that lack of access to education significantly increases the risk of child marriage and that education serves as a protective factor for psychological resilience. Their research supports global initiatives aimed at keeping girls in school to improve both mental health and socio-emotional development.

4. Lori Heise Lori Heise is known for her interdisciplinary work on gender, violence, and health. Although her primary focus is on intimate partner violence, Heise's research provides valuable insights into the psychological vulnerability of child brides who often face domestic violence and emotional trauma. Her contributions help contextualize child marriage within broader frameworks of gender-based violence and mental health.

5. Studies by UNICEF and WHO Researchers Researchers associated with UNICEF and the World Health Organization have produced extensive reports that synthesize global evidence on child marriage. These collaborative works involve experts such as Tia M. M. Palermo and Kathryn L. Falb, who have published data-driven analyses linking early marriage with emotional distress, reduced self-esteem, and increased risk of depression. Their policy briefs emphasize the need for integrated mental health interventions in programs aimed at ending child marriage.

6. Caroline Moreau & Michelle J. Hindin Moreau and Hindin have contributed to quantitative research on child marriage through secondary analysis of large survey datasets, including the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS). Their work examines psychological outcomes such as life satisfaction, anxiety, and social functioning, comparing women married as children with those married as adults. This body of research provides rigorous evidence of the mental health disparities associated with early marriage.

7. Studies from the Population Council and International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) Research teams at organizations like the Population Council

and ICRW — including scholars such as Anita Raj, Manisha Desai, and Amiya Bhatia — have conducted mixed-methods studies documenting psychosocial stressors experienced by child brides. These studies often incorporate qualitative interviews that reveal first-hand accounts of loss of autonomy, emotional suppression, and identity disruption.

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