

1. Literature review

Global literature on child marriage is heavily skewed towards social, demographic and health implications. In particular, most of these studies have reported differences in health, education and employment outcomes for girls married before and after turning 18 years old. Few studies have documented the economic cost of child marriage, particularly the macroeconomic costs (e.g. percentage of GDP loss due to child marriage). The literature constraint is more significant for the Arab region than other regions of the world; thus, we have utilized both global and Arab region studies to build conceptual and analytical frameworks for the current study. We have organized the literature review into three sections: (1) drivers of child marriage; (2) economic costs; and (3) child marriage in the context of the Arab region.

Drivers: The documentation on child marriage consistently highlights several structural factors that generate and intensify child marriage, ranging from economic factors such as poverty and limited work opportunities; sociocultural factors such as education, social practices, religious beliefs, ethnicity, class and gender norms; and political factors such as instability, including conflict, displacement and natural disasters. All these factors jeopardize a

“Structural determinants are the socioeconomic and political processes that structure hierarchical power relations, stratifying societies based on class, occupational status, level of education, gender, etc”.

Solar and Irwin, 2010.

girl’s voice and autonomy, putting her in the loop of early marriage and its eventual consequences.⁹ The poorest countries, regions and households often confront the greatest prevalence of child marriage,¹⁰ with poor girls residing in rural regions as the most vulnerable.¹¹ Moreover, the lack of work opportunities for girls due to social norms and practices may cause parents to consider it unnecessary to invest in their schooling.¹²

More often than not, as the growing evidence shows, the level of education tends to determine a girl’s age at marriage; as such, lower education attainment is associated with a lower age at marriage. Furthermore, child marriage has been demonstrated to be

deeply entrenched in social practices and traditions. Diverse settings serve as drivers for child marriage that are prevalent in respective set-ups, notably the practice of dowry or bride wealth, which can generate instant economic gains for a family;¹³ community pressure to conform to societal norms;¹⁴ using the marriage of girls

to settle family disputes;¹⁵ the fear of sexual harassment or sexual violence;¹⁶ the desire to control girls’ sexuality to avoid unwanted pregnancies or jeopardizing the family’s

honour;¹⁷ and internalized social norms whereby girls themselves desire to marry early due to perceived vulnerabilities and a lack of alternatives.¹⁸

Conflict and war impact women and girls in uniquely gendered ways, albeit varying based on the location, earnings, social set-up and cultural setting.¹⁹ Conflict-induced instability generates fear of injury and death, escalates incidents of sexual violence, triggers food insecurity and deepens gender stereotypes. Such instability leads to a low mean age for females at the time of marriage, higher child marriage rates and low female literacy rates.²⁰ For families in conflict zones, child marriage becomes

a negative coping mechanism to “save” the girl from perceived exploitation while conserving limited resources by passing responsibility for her to another household. Child marriage, therefore, can be interpreted as a social exchange of girls by the family to maximize their resources and safety nets.²¹

The economic costs of child marriage: Age at marriage is a significant determinant of population dynamics, given that it sets the foundation for forthcoming factors in deciding a girl’s quality of life. While child marriage is widely addressed as a human and women’s rights issue, lately, studies have highlighted and quantified the economic costs of child marriage (table 1).²²

Table 1. Review of literature on multi-country estimates of economic costs of child marriage

Authors	Countries covered	Data and methodology	Main findings
Wodon and others, 2017	Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Uganda, Zambia	Demographic and health survey (DHS), living standards measurement study (LSMS), economic impacts of child marriage (EICM)/ regression analysis	Growth, health, education, labour force participation and decision-making: areas most negatively impacted by child marriage are fertility and population growth, education and earnings, and the health of the children born to young mothers. Eradicating child marriage would generate a global savings of approximately \$4 trillion in annual welfare expenditures by 2030.
Mitra and others, 2020	76 emerging and developing countries (EMDCs)	International Monetary Fund, UNICEF, World Bank database/growth model	Economic growth: eradicating child marriage would significantly enhance economic growth – if child marriage were ended today, long-term annual per capita real GDP growth in EMDCs would rise by 1.04 percentage points.
Goli, 2016	India	Census of India, DHS and India human development survey	Demographic, health, education and economic outcomes: GDP loss for India due to child marriage is 1.7 per cent.

Source: Authors’ compilation.

Note: Two studies that quantified the economic cost of child marriage have certain limitations, and this study attempts to address some of them. For instance, neither of these studies extensively covered the Arab region. While Wodon and others (2017) included only Egypt, Mitra and others (2020) studied EMDCs as a whole.

The economic cost of violence against women and girls (child marriage, in this case), defined in the UN-Women report “The costs of violence”, is the direct and indirect tangible cost with a monetary value. These could be the private costs endured by young girls and their next generation, or public costs such as an increased burden on the government’s health-care and education systems. The total costs tend to have a multiplier effect on GDP and economic development, triggering the vicious cycle of inter-generational poverty and inequality.

Child marriage directly lowers women’s work prospects and financial returns due to low educational levels. At the same time, it indirectly increases the proportion of their unpaid household work resulting from higher lifetime fertility. To corroborate, Savadogo and Wodon (2017a) found that child marriage reduces earnings in adulthood for women marrying early by 9 per cent through its impact on education. In some countries, it has been noted to affect decision-making and bargaining power.

Therefore, economic costs are the closest channels affecting the GDP of a State through the low employment rate of women married as children, the low wage rate of their unskilled jobs, and lower earnings, savings and hence a lower tax generation for the State.

Child marriage in Arab countries: Like many other regions in the world, the Arab region has patriarchal norms whereby women are expected to prioritize their family before their own rights as individuals.

This includes the institutionalization of policies that work to preserve the patriarchal status quo that ultimately governs economic, political and social decision-making.

In the past decade, conflict has tended to drive the many instances of child marriage

in the region, resulting in refugees and displaced families resorting to the practice to protect girls from sexual violence and thus safeguard the family’s honour.

In some cases, child marriage is linked to kidnapping and trafficking by armed groups and militias; the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq have recorded such instances of the abduction of girls.

In Jordan, child marriage incidents have increased since the onset of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic in 2011, particularly among Syrian refugees. For example, the rate of child marriage among Syrian girls in Jordan increased from 33.1 per cent in 2010 to 43.8 per cent in 2015, impacting their sexual and reproductive health in terms of untimely pregnancies, domestic violence, social alienation, mental health issues and a loss of work opportunities.

There is strong evidence of the relationship between child marriage and deep-rooted cultural beliefs and discriminatory gender norms in the Arab region. For instance, in Egypt, child marriage is linked with community notions related to female genital mutilation (FGM), while in the Syrian Arab Republic, young girls are persuaded to marry at a young age due to their sexual inexperience.

Poverty is another factor that engenders child marriage in countries such as Egypt, Libya, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

The trend is also noted in Iraq, Jordan and Morocco, where girls in low-income families, viewed as a financial burden, were twice as likely to marry young than in wealthier households in 2006–2011.

A study on Syrian refugees in Egypt highlights that underperforming girls in

school were better off married, and girls interested in education were retained in school to continue their studies and had their marriages postponed.

Among other factors are a worsening economy and growing inflation rates that negatively impact the survival of low-income families, particularly with young women, in these regions.

Phase I of this exercise explored the costs of child marriage on women and

girls in four Arab countries and is the only comprehensive study that has highlighted the social and health costs of child marriage at different stages of women's lives. Women and girls who are married young in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Tunisia experienced serious ramifications at each stage of life in terms of fertility, decision-making, education, autonomy, labour force participation and mortality rates of their children. Hence, Phase II builds on these findings to focus on the loss of income (or GDP) for the Arab region.