

## **The Feminization of Poverty: Causes and Implications of early child marriage in Iran**

**Kameel Ahmady**

<sup>1</sup> *Researcher, Anthropologist, University of Kent, Research Methods and MA in Anthropology*  
Kameel.ahmady@gmail.com.

### **Abstract**

In many countries child marriage is linked with poverty. This is because it affects particularly the poorest in the population, and helps to reinforce cycles of poverty. The underlying causes for women's poverty vary across countries but generally fall into one of the main categories which is early child marriage. This research<sup>2</sup> has studied the most unflinching causes of child marriage in Iran. The results showed that poverty is one of the most important contributing factors to child marriage and is linked to its prevalence in Iran. Poverty has become a noticeable variable and a significant cause and consequence of early child marriage. ECM and divorce under the age of 18 as a symptom and a driver of poverty leaves girls vulnerable to the health risks and social and economic costs of early and forced marriage. Some recommendations to reduce child marriage, which has long-run negative effects on the development of children, have also been presented in this article. For instance, policymakers need to focus on economic issues and distribution of wages, thus decreasing the economic incentives or requirements of families to accept the practice of child marriage.

**Keywords:** Early Child Marriage, Culture, Religion, Poverty, Iran

### **Introduction**

One of the issues that deprive children, especially girls, of their rights is considered to be early child marriage<sup>3</sup>. In principle, a marriage arranged by a protector on behalf of the child who is less than the legal age is called early child marriage. The issue of child marriage has been recently drawing the attention of Iranian society<sup>4</sup>. The effects of early marriage on the life one woman and her descendants is representative of the negative and far-reaching effects that early marriage can have on the lives of women<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.kameelahmady.com](http://www.kameelahmady.com)

<sup>a</sup> Ahmady, Kameel. 2017. *An Echo of Silence: A Comprehensive Research Study on Early Child Marriage in Iran*. Nava publishing, USA

<sup>3</sup> <sup>1</sup>Raj, A. (2010). When the mother is a child: the impact of child marriage on the health and human rights of girls. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 95(11), 931–935.

<sup>4</sup> <sup>2</sup><https://observers.france24.com/en/20190906-video-11-year-old-bride-iran>

<sup>5</sup> Naana Otoo-Oyortey and Sonita Pobi (2003), *Early Marriage and Poverty: Exploring Links and Key Policy Issues*. *Gender and Development* Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 42-51.

Feminization of poverty is a largely contested idea with a multitude of meanings and layers, besides linking with early child marriage. This can be due to the effects of child marriage on the poorest in the society. It also helps to reinforce cycles of poverty. Child wives attend to have more children and fewer independent income options. However, the fragmentation of families can be one of vulnerabilities caused by early child marriage. Child brides are often more likely to experience domestic violence and least likely to take action against this abuse. The majority of affected girls become convicted to a life of financial and social uncertainty. Poverty eventually fuels child marriage, which in turn continues the feminization of poverty<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, national and international goals for the lessening of poverty will be unbreakable to reach if practices like early child marriage which undermine the livelihood capacities of large sections of society persist.

There is no doubt that investing in girls, developing their social and economic assets and ensuring their access to education and health services is a vibrant sign of gender equality that will translate into stronger societies and vibrant economies. Education is often seen as the key to prevent ECM (UNICEF 2004). Women who are educated are healthier, participate more in the formal labour market, earn more income, have fewer children, and provide better healthcare and education to their children compared to women with little or no education (UNICEF 2001). With worldwide care and support, the levels of ECM are generally declining although a substantial proportion of young children are still married under the legal age of their society. One clear egregious example of this is Iran.

### **Iran-Situational Analysis and Strategic Context:**

According to the Iranian religious structure, puberty and menarche are considered to be the transitional pivotal turning point from childhood to adulthood. Reaching this biological threshold means becoming eligible for marriage regardless of age. Although ECM marriage is applicable to both boys and girls, the harsh reality is that the impact is greater on young girls. It is a global issue but rates vary dramatically, both within and between countries. Nevertheless, in terms of proportions and numbers, most ECM takes place in rural sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (UNICEF 2001).

Although little data is available on child marriage in Iran and in absence of credible and independent studies, official Iranian government statistics show that tens of thousands of girls and boys under the age of 15 are married off by their families each year in Iran. The numbers may actually even be quite higher. Some families in Iran do not register underage marriages, or do so illegally. According to Iran's Association of Children's Rights, the number of girls married in Iran under the age of 15 went from 33,383 in 2006 to 43,459 in 2009, a 30% increase in three years. This is due to cultural norm and local customs, deepening poverty and parents' desire to control their daughter's sexuality.

According to the report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the legal age of marriage for girls in the Iran is 13 years, but girls as young as 9 years of age may be married with permission from a court. In 2013, a legislative attempt to declare the marriage of a custodian to his adopted daughter illegal was also voided by the Council. The amended text of the relevant law now in effect recognizes the legitimacy of such a marriage provided that a competent court considers it to be in the best interest of the child. At least 48,580 girls between 10 and 14 years of age were married in 2011, 48,567 of whom were reported to have had at least one child before they reached 15 years of age. Some 40,635 marriages of girls fewer than 15 years of age were also registered between March 2012 and March 2013, of which more than 8,000 involved men who were at least 10 years older. Furthermore, at least 1,537 marriages of girls less than 10 years of age were registered in 2012, which is a significant increase compared with the 716 registered between

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<sup>6</sup> <sup>4</sup>International Centre on Research on Women. (2006) *Too Young to Wed: Education & Action towards Ending Child Marriage Advocacy Toolkit*. New York: ICRW

March 2010 and March 2011. 22 The number of registered divorces for girls under 15 years of age has also consistently increased since 2010. The Government responded to the foregoing by stating that the law prohibits forced marriage, meaning that all marriages in the country are consensual.<sup>7</sup>

Statistics in Iran from the past five years show a significant drop in the number of students enrolled in (all-girl) schools. For the past five years, an increasing number of girl's schools have been experiencing a significant drop in the number of students enrolled<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the mortality rate for married girls below the age of 15 is five times higher than those over the age of twenty<sup>9</sup>.

For the first time this study aims at analysing the prevalence of ECM in Iran by focusing on the prominent socio-cultural factors that mirror this deep-rooted inequality that is responsible for its continual existence and adherence. The rationale for this study is to demonstrate the evidence and prevalence of this harmful practice in Iran and to assist decision makers in sharpening their focus on this urgent protection of girls' human rights. Respect for girls' human rights requires that we prevent and eradicate child marriage and actively support those girls who are already married. It is the only course by which we can avert what otherwise is the human tragedy of ECM. This study is an effort to bring to the surface the problem of early marriage in Iran.

#### RESEARCH BACKGROUND & Objectives

The recent study on early marriage prevalence in Iran initially occurred in 2013 when Kameel Ahmady conducted the first large scale survey on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM/C) in Iran (Ahmady, 2016). In most of the areas, ECM was found on par with FGM. This research survey on ECM was conceived when the study on FGM was on going. At that time the international community was unaware of FGM's existence. Even within Iran, Iranians were unaware of FGM's existence.<sup>10</sup> In part, due to the study on FGM, it became abundantly clear that a study was warranted to gauge the consequences of ECM.

In Iran there has been a meagre pool of information on this subject. Very few individuals have conducted studies to try to identify the depth and prevalence of the problem. Government data is lacking. Iran with its considerable high rates of this gender based social norm has never been the recipient of any sort in-depth research methodologies. Whilst some descriptive statistics provide a global picture of ECM they do not provide an analysis of the net effects of the examined variables on a girl's risk of being married as a child. What little has been mentioned is superficial, confined to university thesis, media, internet activism reports and/or in some reports of a non-analytical nature regarding the statistics about the registered rates of ECM. In most cases the study of ECM in Iran and has gone no further than a local micro-level analysis. What was sorely needed was a practical problem-centred and issue-oriented research based specifically on Iran and ECM's prevalence. During the history of ECM research in Iran, what became abundantly clear was the absence of an in-depth approach in order to bring the origins of ECM issues to the surface and go beyond what has been occasionally done in this area of research.

In order to accomplish this, much more was needed to ascertain, discover and gather the information, facts and statistical data available for the public. From the onset it was quite difficult to get accurate data on the true extent of early marriages. This is because some marriages are not officially registered, and many parents resort to fabricating girls' ages. In rural areas this lack of official registration is made easier by virtue of the fact that birth certificates are often non-existent or not

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<sup>7</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran

<sup>8</sup> <http://womensissues.about.com/od/violenceagainstwomen/tp/TenFactsAboutChildBrides.htm>

<sup>9</sup> <http://womensissues.about.com/od/violenceagainstwomen/tp/TenFactsAboutChildBrides.htm>

<sup>10</sup> **Ibid.**

properly recorded. This means that ECM is not under the legal scrutiny of a court thus denying girls the benefit of a measure designed to safeguard their interests (UNICEF, 2014, 1). Moreover, not registering a marriage can lead to a lack of legal protection for the spouse and future children.<sup>11</sup>

### **Objective of the Research Study**

As mentioned in the preceding part, Iran is a country where early marriages are taking place in abundance. Some of these marriages are arranged to settle financial debt or for other materialistic reasons. However, most of them are unregistered which is a contributing factor in scarcity of data on the said topic. Due to lack of data, it is easy for the authorities and for the people to deny the facts about the prevalence of early marriages in Iran. This study through has explored the hidden data to reveal the existence of the early marriages in Iran. This is the first and only comprehensive study in Iran which would bring into surface the unregistered number of marriages which took place in early age.

The objective of this study is to present available empirical evidence obtained through household questionnaires in order to estimate the prevalence of ECM and to identify and understand the factors associated with child marriage in Iran.

### **Research Methodology**

The methodological approach adopted by this research is designed as a qualitative large-scale method. As no previous sort of research was available to refer to, or known methodology had been already implemented in Iran as a comparative analysis, research methodology compatible to the subject matter was absent. This clearly point to a need for a comparative study of different states with high prevalence rates of child marriage within Iran that would help in identifying the similarities and differences in the factors leading to child marriage. The genuineness of the research and its novelty of scale and purpose determined the steps and forms of each method.

Considering the fact that hardly any research of this dimension of ECM in Iran been undertaken in this field, the task was highly challenging and the methodology evolved was dynamic. Methodological decisions were completely flexible depending on the different variations that the research faced in each step. Population size, sample size, sampling method, number of interviews in each district and even the time spent in a particular province was a reflection of the prevalence percentage of ECM. Considering all the variations and differences, the methodology of research was adopted to fulfil what is needed in this crucial step. It is worth mentioning that the methodological decisions are unique and tailored for this sort of gender sensitive research, based on the program areas' unique characteristics. These decisions might not be applicable in other contexts.

To explore the program areas, the study narrowed the search to selected designated areas of interest by using the data from the National Organization for Civil Registration.<sup>12</sup> Seven provinces with the highest rates of registered child marriages were selected.

The provinces were chosen by analysing the recent decade's available data on registered marriage cases. This was based on calculated demographical information of the most recent decade. It

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<sup>11</sup> Amani Campaign, Interagency child protection and gender based violence campaign, Jordan 2014 p 12, [data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/](http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/)

<sup>12</sup> The National Organization for Civil Registration organisation is considered as a dependent part of the ministry of interior. The National Organization for Civil Registration" is active throughout the country and is the most referred to governmental organization .According to an act in June 1928 the "Birth Certificate and Statistics Administration" was established as part of the ministry of interior and began working. In 1940 according to a new law and after editing a new set of regulations, the name of this organization changed to "The Office of Statistics and Civil Registration». In July 1976 "The National Organization for Civil Registration" was formed.

is to be noted that the ranking order in this list is not the same as the lists previously published by the government, as the ranking order is was based on choosing the provinces with the highest ranks of ECM's prevalence. Accordingly the seven provinces are as follows: 1. Razavi Khorasan, 2. East Azerbaijan, 3. Khuzestan, 4. Sistan and Baluchestan, 5. West Azerbaijan, 6. Hormozgan and 7. Isfahan.

The context and indicators related to ECM was sorted through the examination of three age groups: less than 10', '10 to 14' and '15 to 19' years of age that were selected and ranked. Though seven ranked lists of marriage events (categorized by age groups, gender and total numbers of each) within the last ten years were drawn upon.

Table 3-1; Marriage ranks in 2014 sorted by age groups and gender  
Girls' marriage Boy's marriage Totals

Up to 10	10-14	15-19
<b>Sistan and Baluchestan</b> <b>33</b>	Razavi Khorasan 7629	Razavi Khorasan 24362
<b>Khuzestan</b> <b>31</b>	East Azarbaijan 4244	Khuzestan 15354
<b>Zanjan</b> <b>11</b>	Khuzestan 2256	East Azarbaijan 12566
<b>Kohgiluyeh and Buyer Ahmad</b> <b>10</b>	Hamedan 1893	Fars 11475
<b>Kermanshah</b> <b>9</b>	Sistan and Baluchestan 1841	West Azarbaijan 11277
<b>Fars</b> <b>8</b>	Fars 1829	Sistan and Baluchestan 10296
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The broadness of the program areas, budget and time constraints, and limitation of funding necessitated the use of cluster sampling functional.<sup>13</sup> By using cluster sampling, several towns located in the north, south, east and west of Iran were selected for the first cluster. Accordingly some villages of each town were selected as the next cluster.

The number of interviews in each province was based on its rank in the latest rank table. Accordingly all program areas had required different numbers of interviews. Although the questionnaire used in them was a local edition of Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) questionnaires<sup>14</sup> a great part of which was researcher-made. The study utilized household survey data from DHS to assess child marriage levels by country and provide further analysis of how ECM correlates with additional indicators. DHS are nationally representative household surveys designed to measure the health and nutrition status of women and children in developing countries.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Cluster sampling is the sampling method where different groups within a population are used as a sample.

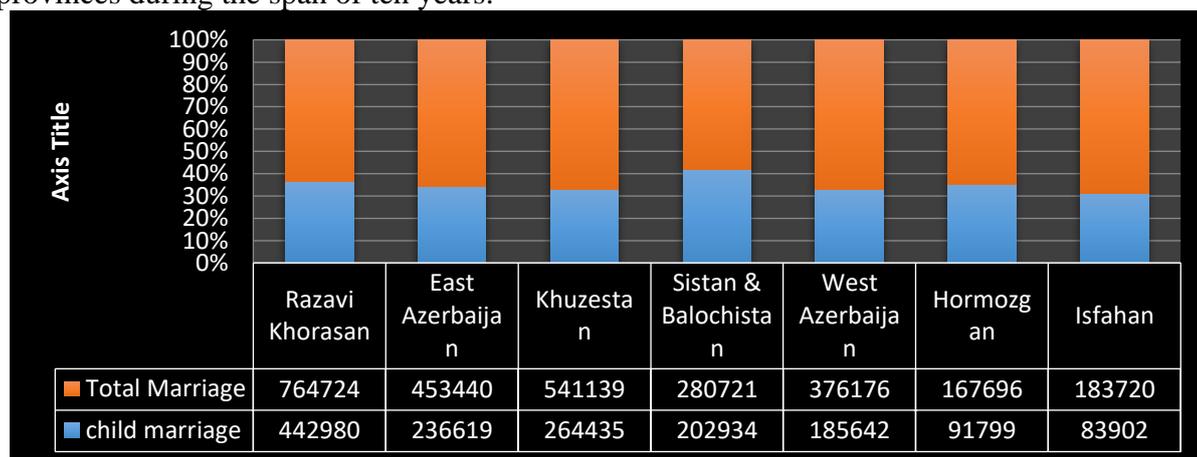
<sup>14</sup> <http://dhsprogram.com/>

<sup>15</sup> For more information about DHS refer to [www.measuredhs.com](http://www.measuredhs.com)

In order to use DHS standard questionnaires in this study, it was vital to make some changes and modification in order to translate the questions into local languages and make it user-friendly. Based on the specific cultural differences and variations in each district, adjustments were necessary. Structured questions, as well as observations, were obtained through interviews and used in the categories of Background, Marriage, Marriage Decision, Female Reproduction, Male Reproduction, Gender Attitudes, Female Sexual Violence and Male Domestic Violence questions. The questionnaire focused on the prevalence and causes of child marriage in the surveyed areas. This above mentioned type of questionnaire was used in interviewing only local people. The study that also contains viewpoints and interviews with authorities, governmental figures and religious and community leaders influenced and changed the types of questions asked. The procedure tends to vary structurally.

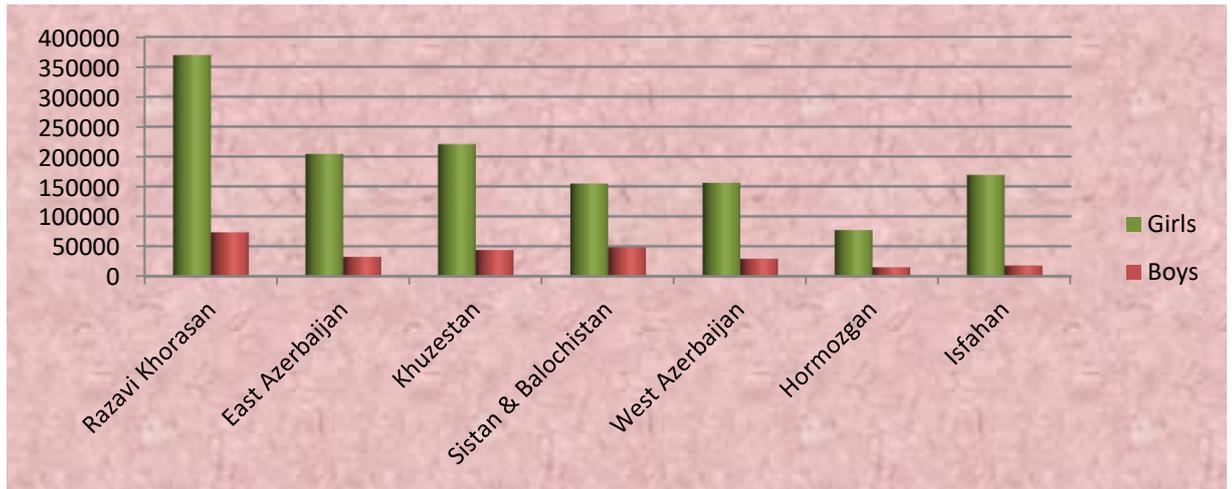
### Survey Results

The research establishes that family type (and/or household structure), interacted with gender, dramatically affects the likelihood of poverty. Our findings confirm that single-parent households—which are overwhelmingly female headed in all of these provinces face the greatest risk of poverty. Women who are married this young become invisible in their communities; it is both a human rights violation and something that perpetuates the cycle of poverty. The research has gauged three variables and triangulate through grounded theory that how ECM constitutes a base for the gendered poverty. The first variable is highlighting the ratio of ECM in respective provinces by mentioning total marriages vs child marriages. It gave us a clear picture that the ratio of child marriages is quite high in Razavi Khorasan and Khuzestan provinces. Altogether the ratio of ECM is 54% in seven of the provinces during the span of ten years.



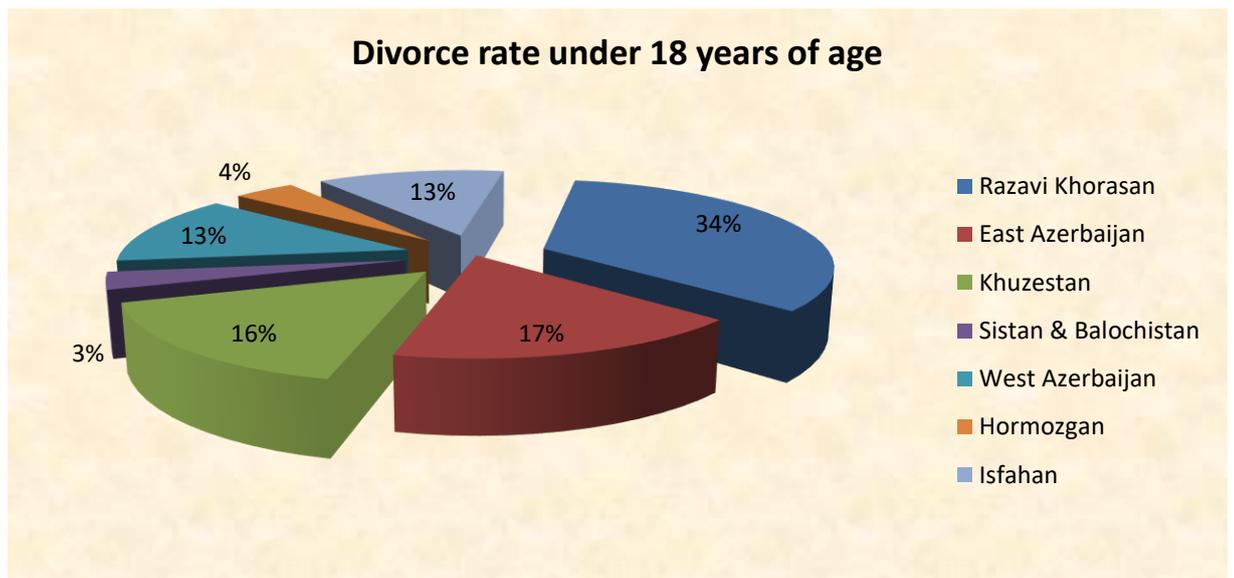
**Diagram 1. Ratio of ECM in each province in ten years (2005-2014)**

Diagram 1 shows ECM’s prevalence in the last 10 years in the selected seven provinces in Iran. As per the diagram, ECM is still practiced in high ranges. However, the percentage of ECM is alarmingly high for girls rather than boys. As shown in Figure 2, within the last ten years a comparative analysis of under aged girls and boys reveals that marriages for young girls under the age of 18 are much higher than in the levels of boys’ marriage.



**Diagram 2. Marriage under the age of 18 in seven provinces within ten years (2005-2014)**

Along with the ECM high rate, there has correspondingly been an increase rate in divorce in comparison to the previous decade. As seen in the chart, the rates differ based on gender, meaning that ECM is more of an issue for girls than boys.



**Diagram 2. Divorce under 18 years of age in seven provinces during the span of ten years (2005-2014)**

In contrast to marriage ages, divorce ages are increasingly targeting younger children. Each year higher numbers of children in the age groups under 18, are either divorcing or becoming child widows. Again, the issue targets more female than males, meaning that vulnerable divorced or widow girls under 18 are more visible than vulnerable widowed boys.

As per the following diagram, divorce rates are increasing yearly for both genders but the increasing levels is higher in girls under the 18 in comparison to boys. This means that each year the numbers of child divorcees/widows are augmenting particularly when a very young girls is married to a significantly older man. Because of the stigma associated with divorce, and the position of women in the community, broken marriages leave many girls living alone and raising children with no support.

A close analysis of both diagrams reveals that ECM has a dramatic effect on girls than boys. Whilst boys are sometimes subjected to early marriage, girls are disproportionately affected and form the vast majority of the victims of child marriage.<sup>16</sup> For girls the affects go well beyond adolescence.<sup>17</sup> Many aspects of their lives are controlled by older men who considered the girls little more than sexual and domestic servants. The greater the age difference, the more likely girls are to be disempowered and at risk of violence, abuse or exploitation. Sometimes the girls' problems began only after making it home with their babies, where they were frequently abandoned by their husbands.<sup>18</sup>

The main driving forces are patriarchal notions and the desire to subjugate women in order to control her sexuality. The complex issue of ECM is rooted in gender inequality and the belief that girls and women are somehow inferior to boys and men. Poverty, lack of education, cultural practices, and insecurity fuel and sustain ECM's existence as girls are not valued as much as boys. They are seen as a burden on their family. Marrying a young girl at a young age can be viewed as a way to ease economic hardship by transferring this 'burden' to her husband's family.<sup>19</sup> ECM is also driven by patriarchal values and the desire to control female sexuality, for instance, how a girl should behave, how she should dress, who she should be allowed to see, to marry, etc.

Similarly, divorce rates are also increased in young girls in comparison to boys due to multiple factors that magnify the increasing number of social issues for girls. There are number of young marriages that come to an early end in the province. Girls who marry young, are more prone to be divorced at an early age. Child brides are often disempowered and dependent on their husbands. The occurrence of divorce is annually increasing leaving girls with more social problems that they as child divorcees or widows are simply not capable of handling. The enormous responsibility for a young girl to go from a life, then mother and now a divorcee or widow is catastrophic. These girls are more vulnerable to persistent poverty if their spouses die, abandon, or divorce them.<sup>20</sup> Given that girls in ECM are often significantly younger than their husbands, they become widowed earlier in life and may face associated economic and social challenges for a greater portion of their life than women who marry later. This problem threatens to increase with the expanding youth population in the developing world.<sup>21</sup> In addition as ECM is considered an interfamilial binding contract, the breaking of it, i.e. divorce can have serious consequences both for the families and for the girl. Even those girls with the option of divorcing an abusive spouse are vulnerable because they have little earning power, education, and financial support.<sup>22</sup> Widowhood is one of the most neglected gender and human rights issues within ECM. These young girls, long invisible in many countries are most vulnerable. This is particularly acute in rural areas, where traditions, customs and discriminatory interpretations of religious codes often dominate and where there is a glaring lack of the modern age of marriage legislation. The consequences of widowhood which include social ostracisation, economic dependency, marginalisation, legal discrimination, political insensitivity and human rights violations. All these consequences are intensified by the fact that they are being faced by young child widows who are extremely vulnerable.<sup>23</sup> Child widows are the legacy of ECM.

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<sup>16</sup> Girls Not Brides - Official Site [www.girlsnotbrides.org](http://www.girlsnotbrides.org)

<sup>17</sup> Q & A: Child Marriage and Violations of Girls' Rights - Human Rights Watch". [hrw.org](http://hrw.org).

<sup>18</sup> International Centre for Research on Women, New Insights on Preventing Child Marriage: A global analysis of factors and programs, 2007, p 10; Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Sub-Working Group Jordan, Findings from the Inter-Agency Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Assessment in the Za'atari Refugee Camp, July 2013, p 2

<sup>19</sup> Save the Children UK, Rights of Passage, 2003

<sup>20</sup> Q & A: Child Marriage and Violations of Girls' Rights, supra at 24.

<sup>21</sup> Child Marriages: 39,000 Every Day | Press centre | ...[www.unicef.org/media/media\\_](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_)

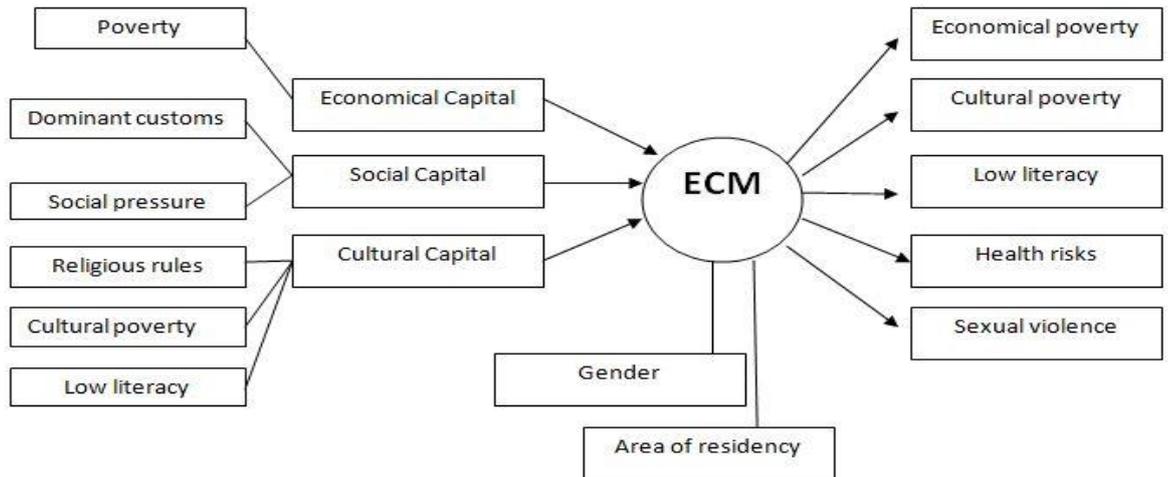
<sup>22</sup> [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org), peace-conflict-and-human-rights / child- marriage

<sup>23</sup> Speech by Ruby Goddard Young Widows: A neglected Gender and Human Rights Issue [www.nawo.org.uk/wp-content](http://www.nawo.org.uk/wp-content)

An analysis of the ECM ratio in the last decades shows that the child marriage quotas in total marriage frequencies have always been more than 35 %. This is a reflection of the cultural norms that flourish within the social system to carry on with the practice of ECM.

## Discussion

The findings of the research and survey results can be briefly summarized in the following analytical model that depicts the relationship amongst the numerous independent variables that trigger ECM. The consequence of ECM as a new independent variable that shape dependent variables are on the right side of the model. Gender and area of residency (urban or rural areas) are considered as control variables.



**Chart 1. Analytical model of the study**

A closer look on the model give us a prominent overview that how poverty is become a prominent variable and a leading cause and consequence of ECM. Poverty and child marriage are closely interlinked. Both a symptom and a driver of poverty, child marriage precludes the possibility of education, employment and other economic development, and exposes girls to a multiplicity of vulnerabilities.<sup>24</sup>

Poverty and not being able to pay the fees were the more common reasons in Hormozgan province. In East Azerbaijan schools that were far away also were contributing factors that explained why respondents dropped out of school. Details on school dropout reasons are provided as an example. Child marriage perpetuates the cycle of poverty by cutting short girls' education, pushing them into early and repeated pregnancies, and limiting their opportunities for employment.

The discontinuance of the privileges of childhood also encompasses the discontinuance of education. ECM and school dropout are the twin events that mark the exit of young girls lives. The findings of the research were overwhelming in this regard. ECM is accompanied by a parallel and interconnected incident of dropping out of school. More so in a poor household, the value of pursuing girls education is directly related to the prospect of improving employment and earning opportunities. Low levels of education restrict girls' economic autonomy, thus increasing their vulnerability. In the case of a girl child, aspirations in the education and professional spheres may be stifled by predetermined gender roles that see a woman confined within domestic walls. In such cases, investing in girls' education clashes with the economics of poor households. What little resources that are available for the future of their daughter's money is invested in paying for wedding expenses and a dowry, rather than extending education.

<sup>24</sup> Sanlaap, "Child Marriage: West Bengal Scenario", (n.d.), p.4.

## **Conclusion & Recommendations:**

Our review of the survey findings, literature and our empirical analyses shed light on gendered outcomes of ECM which directly lead to an increase in gendered poverty. Our findings reveal how ECM intersects with various social institutions to shape women's risk of poverty, both absolutely and relative to men's. While the relationship between gender and poverty is complex, several elements of this relationship are evident.

ECM's dominance position in the gender inequality chain continues to flourish against the background of poverty, social expectations, sexual violence culturally-embedded sexual norms, gender stereotypes, social pressure and family hardship. This demands the necessity of finding new policies and solutions and acceptance of norms that reflect gender equality.

By placing children in adulthood roles, ECM affects the present and the next generation in terms of multiple pregnancies, restricted access to education and income generation opportunities, enforced social seclusion, early widowhood and abandonment and trapping survivors in a generational cycle of outdated roles and rules. The acute gender based oppression permeates into the collective thinking process and passes on to the next generation.

Regardless of geographical and cultural setting, child marriage seems to directly correlate with conditions that typically characterise poor development, such as rural residence, low or no education, and poverty, with pronounced disparities emerging in the prevalence of ECM. "This in turn affects efforts to eradicate extreme poverty (goal one), since child brides miss out on the educational and economic opportunities needed to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. Poverty, both a key determinant and a manifestation of child marriage as witnessed in Bangladesh, Mali, Mozambique and Niger where more than half of the girls are married before age 18. In these above cited countries, more than 75% of people live on less than \$2 a day. Mali is an example of this dire economic survival.<sup>25</sup>

Responses to ECM may geographically and culturally vary. What may efficiently work in some province can exacerbate the phenomenon in others and what is deemed acceptable in one nationality or culture may not hold true in the other. For instance the means in which preventive messages about ECM are transferred to people are different depending on the region. A holistic, comprehensive and coordinated policy must factor the specificities of each respective culture as a one size fits all approach may not simply be feasible. This requires adaptability and flexibility. Policies must be cognisance of differences and variation when enacting a core action programme to eradicate ECM.

There remains much to be done to combat ECM marriage in Iran. Based on the findings from the analysis and input from participants in the survey, the recommendations of the study are listed below. Many of the recommendations reinforce existing child marriage prevention programs and emphasize that multifaceted holistic approaches needed to tackle the problem of child marriage.

The complexity of ECM requires that effective legal, policy and programme measures be taken by coordinating efforts at international, national and local levels. There are a range of approaches needed to address child marriage, and crucially everyone has a role to play. This means there must be long-term, sustainable interventions that are coordinated, well-resourced and reflected the empowerment of girls, mobilisation of families and communities, access to services and establishment and implementation of laws and policies.

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<sup>25</sup> Population Reference Bureau (2005). 2005 World Population Data Sheet. Population Reference Bureau: Washington D.C.

- Official Registration of All Births and Marriages is mandated in order to negate existing child marriage by making it impossible. With a limited or lack of reliable official records of birth, it is difficult to determine a bride's age with certainty. Parental estimates can be inaccurate, false, and simply a lie. Registration is a critical step to counter the practice of ECM as it provides the proof of girls' age. Sound marriage registration is only possible if it can rely on timely and rigorous birth registration. Birth registration is a fundamental human right which supports the enjoyment of a host of other entitlements. In countries where birth registration is not compulsory or is implemented inconsistently, marriage registration is liable to hinge on non-existent or unreliable birth certificates. According to UNICEF, the gap in recording births facilitates the falsification of the age and the identity of the child, particularly of girls being sought for early marriage. When a girl's birth is properly certified, the advantages are priceless: her identity is protected, her capacity to access basic services is heightened and her protective rights are greatly enhanced. Registering births and marriages helps prevent ECM by proving the age of a girl and her partner and allows girls and women to seek financial and legal redress if the marriage ends.
- The role of government is pivotal. Government, as the origin of every country's power base, can be a crucial in ECM's prevention. A clear governmental commitment is needed to ensure the law is adequately enforced, particularly as social and cultural norms tend to override legal norms. Governments must show strong political leadership by making ECM of national importance and providing adequate financial resourcing across ministries to tackle the issue holistically. Government can further coordinating organizations' policies, provide funds for studies on ECM and other related research projects in order to diffuse the message to the populace about ECM. This is crucial to ensure protective and non-discriminatory legal frameworks, strict implementation of laws and policies, as well as provision of effective education and protection services, reproductive sexual health care and legal remedies to both married and unmarried girls.
- Evidence widely shows that keeping a girl in school is crucial. As ECM interferes with girls' education, the education of girls pushes back child marriage. According to research by the International Centre for Research on Women, in 18 out of the 20 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage, the level of education a girl reaches is the most powerful predictor of the marriage age. Consistently, in all regions, girls with higher education levels were less likely to marry as children.
- *Educate the public about ECM and raising their general literacy is a must.* Based on the findings of this study, the respondents showed various ranges of glaring ignorance and or little or no knowledge about ECM's detrimental and overall general harmful effects. ECM is both a cause of illiteracy and an effect of it. Any step in tackling ECM must include the necessity of diffusing the negative outcomes to the public. This is when the power of technology comes into play by using mass media campaigns and other innovative methods such as radio, TV, mobile phones and digital media to raise awareness of girls' rights and the impact of child marriage. Without this important factor, advancement is an unreal outer force that cannot be permanent.
- Legislation defining age for compulsory education should progressively align with the minimum age for marriage. In Iran changing the laws on the legal marriage age, which currently is 13 years old for girls ( and a shocking 9 years old with a court permission) and 15 for boys, demands an elevated marriage age. It is important to note that whilst most countries legislate for a minimum legal age of marriage, the age of marriage is often higher for men than it is for women and many countries continue to have a legal age of marriage lower than in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- The practice of ECM in many communities has flourished due to a lack of knowledge and awareness of the negative drawbacks and consequences of the practice. It is imperative that efforts be undertaken to mobilize communities with the provision of knowledge and education about its negative physical, psychological and social impacts. Community involvement in ECM

must be reinforced. A comprehensive advocacy plan should be designed and implemented to promote the empowerment of children, girls in particular, as a social norm.

- Working with men and boys is a critical part of ending ECM. In many communities it is the men who hold the power and make the decisions. Interventions targeting fathers, brothers, husbands and future husbands are important in helping men and boys reflect on the gender based status quo and to see the benefits of a community which values and supports girls and women to fulfil their potential.
- Community programs should be conceived to benefit the families with financial incentive including helplines for victims, shelter and other safe places for girls. In addition to that, capacity building and education for community leaders and other key actors on the negative impact caused by ECM marriage will further help to ensure that it does not continue.
- a multi facet holistic approach is require by involving all players from civil society, communities and government actors to look at all of the factors that limit women's development and respond accordingly with an integrated approach, including interventions at the community level and strengthening national policies.
- Religious leaders have been key agents of change. It is therefore essential that religious leaders receive training on the adverse effects of child marriage. Given the influence of religion, approaching the issue through the enforcement of Sharia law may be an effective strategy. A comprehensive method must be thought of to train and consult these religious leaders in order to diffuse the preventive message. In communities where religious leaders play a prominent role in decision-making or influencing the prevailing norms, it is necessary to target their support as positive advocates for change.
- The widespread traditional practice of temporary marriages further fuels the intensity of child marriages in Iran. Often following the initial removal of a young girl from her parental home, under the pretext of marriage, she can be sold into the sex trade, or just sold to another husband, as in the case of so-called fake or temporary child marriages. Men may engage in serial unions, marrying a girl for a limited time until she conceives a child (hopefully a boy, if the previous or present regular marriage has failed to produce one), or assists in economic activities. These young girls are then abandoned (and her child, if unwanted) once she is no longer required. Once girls are abandoned, they are unmarriageable and forced to continue a life of exclusion. Child marriage thus turns into human trafficking, free labour, prostitution, or, in short, enslaving a girl for the purpose of indiscriminate exploitation. This is one of the prominent contributory factors to the increasing trend of child marriages in Iran. Tracking of such marriages is not easy as they are not registered transactions. This is no doubt a fact that registration of temporary marriages would not only highlight the ratio of the ECM prevalence in Iran but also would help in prevention of sex trafficking and child prostitution.
- Empowering girls by giving them the opportunity to build skills and knowledge to understand and exercise their rights and to develop support networks, plays an important part in ending child marriage. As girls are the victims and later the survivors they are also the agents of change. Girls are the key to social transformation around early marriage. Young girls should be helped to develop the necessary resilience to defend themselves from attempts made by adults, even well-meaning parents or elders, to marry them before they attain majority. In addition to protecting itself, a well-informed, aware and proactive new generation should provide the backbone of initiatives being set in motion in their communities, countries and internationally to progressively make child marriage an echo of a no longer existent tradition. Knowledge of marriage laws and reproductive right could be integrated into their life skills training in order to improve girls' knowledge about their reproductive health and legal rights including the right not to marry before age 18 and the right to give free and full consent to marriage. Activities could also include increasing girls' self-confidence and ability to negotiate key life decisions including continued schooling and annulling marriage.

- It is high time for Iranian legal authorities to incorporate international laws into their legal system or practice. As a signatory to CEDAW and the CRC, Iran has the legal responsibility, evidence by their signature to the conventions, to take all necessary legislative, judicial, administrative and other measures to ensure the full attainment of women's and children's rights which are an integral part of these conventions.
- A range of policy and programmatic actions are needed to assess and reduce early marriage and its impact. This includes data research. At present, there is a serious lack of data on all aspects of ECM, let alone ECM in Iran. These gaps need to be filled urgently, since data influences and guides policies and programmes and provide a basis for effective advocacy. Existing demographic data may be disaggregated and used in ways that tell us more about the prevalence of early marriage.
- A substantial and significant shortage of available material on child marriages in Iran is a matter of immense concern. There is lack of awareness from the populace and deliberate indifference from the government. In Iran, the contemporary research bodies analyse child and gender based issues such as domestic violence and child education. ECM however has been largely ignored. This attitude of indifference towards ECM has resulted in a scarcity of data on the issue which has limited the knowledge about the issue to the domestic and international community. Many have no idea about the presence of ECM in Iran. Consequently in many global reports on child marriage, Iran is scarcely mentioned undoubtedly due to this lack of available data.
- It is vital that more research on the topic is undertaken so that the world is cognisant that ECM in Iran is highly prevalent. The research would also facilitate the government, law makers, civil institution, analysts and policy makers in Iran to identified and combat the issue. Academic society, scholars and university researchers are needed to undertake more in-depth studies and country size reports on ECM to document the nature and prevalence child marriage and its ensuing sexual violence.
- The Iranian government desperately needs to develop comprehensive social safety net programs, reduction of poverty level and proving economic opportunities to encourage families to end ECM. In the world wide battle to eliminate ECM, Iran has been neglectful and neglected.

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