

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriage in Iran

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Child marriage or early marriage are marriages under the age of 18 years that can affect the life and health of children. Given a well-established fact in the literature, girls are more vulnerable than boys due to their weaker social status [1–3]. Each year, more than 12 million girls in the world experience early marriage, of whom 95% are from poor and middle-class countries [4]. It was estimated that between 2010 and 2030, there will be 130 million early marriages in the world [5]. Iran is also one of the countries, where child marriage is common. Reportedly, the rate of child marriages in rural areas was 19.6 as opposed to 13.7 in the urban areas. However, researchers believe that this statistics could be underestimated as many child marriages in Iran are not legally registered for several reasons [6]. Child marriage generally occurs under the influence of different factors, such as cultural beliefs, social customs, religion, poverty, low education, etc. [7–10] and is often followed by consequences, such as early pregnancy, death of mother and child, domestic violence, suicide, school dropout, etc. [3,11,12].

The COVID-19 – which originated from Wuhan, China, in December 2019 - quickly affected all countries of the world and became the main global health challenge [13–17]. A majority of countries faced the economic, social, psychological and other downturns [13,14,18,19]. Iran was also one of the countries affected by COVID-19, as of September 16, 2021, a total of 5,378,408 people in Iran were infected with COVID-19, and 116,072 were died due to this disease [20–23]. Iran, like many other countries, used a quarantine strategy to fight the spread of the disease, which resulted in the closure of many businesses and people faced many economic problems. Experience has shown that women are discriminated against and abused during natural disasters and crisis more than before [19], and child marriage as an example of such violence can increase during the COVID-19 crisis, as it has increased in wars and previous social and health crisis [25–27].

It was projected that in the next 5 years, 2.5 million girls in the world will be at risk of early marriage due to the consequences of COVID-19 [28]. This increase in child marriage can take place in Iran for various reasons. The first and perhaps most important reason is that during the COVID-19 epidemic in Iran, most businesses were closed and those who were open no longer had the previous income. Also, Iran has faced severe economic hardships due to the US sanctions. As a result, some families may use the marriage of their young daughters as a way to reduce costs or even make money through it. Another reason for the impact of COVID-19 is that in poor families, most of the children are engaged in activities such as peddling as a labor force outside the home, which with the spread of COVID-19 and the emptiness of the streets, people were afraid to buy from peddlers, this issue causes that children no longer have income for their families. Therefore, families do not have the financial ability to take care of them, and this issue can also affect their early marriage. Another reason is that in the past, education has always been considered as one of the obstacles to early marriage [29–31], however with the outbreak of COVID-19, all schools were closed or continued to operate virtually, and this closure can remove this obstacle to early marriage as families no longer have an excuse to delay their daughters' marriage. But that is not the whole story, as COVID-19 not only can increase the number of child marriages, but also exacerbates the consequences associated with it. For instance, violence against women increased with house quarantine [8,31]; adolescent women can experience more violence due to their fragile conditions. Also, husbands being at home and not having proper access to contraceptives can impose early and unwanted pregnancies on them. Most of these women have experience of early pregnancy and face more medical problems during pregnancy so they need to be under medical monitoring. COVID-19 has caused most of this care to be discontinued and the health of adolescent women and their children is at risk more than before.

Therefore, as the first step, educating families and getting help from the country's education system, girls should be prevented from dropping out from the school. It is also possible to prevent young girls from marrying early through providing financial assistance to families experiencing financial problems and giving material and immaterial help. As a next step, we should try to teach adolescent women the ways of contraception by using education platforms and preparing various instructional materials, and provide them with the necessary contraceptives free of charge in order to delay their pregnancy. And, in the event of pregnancy, health facilities and counseling should be available to them, and also their husbands should be taught ways to control anger and aggression at home so that women would be less the subject of violence.

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