Early Marriages and Their Causes in Azerbaijan: A Study in Barda Region

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Introduction

Early marriage refers to the union of individuals who have not yet reached legal adulthood. This term includes the marriage of persons under the age of 18, and according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, individuals below this age are considered children (UNFPA, 2025). Early marriages especially deprive girls of educational opportunities. They negatively impact their psychological and physical development and lead them into a socially and economically dependent life.

Global research has shown that millions of children, especially girls, marry at an early age every year. Around the world, one in five girls is married before turning 18 (UNICEF 2023). This phenomenon is not limited to developing countries. Cases of early marriage are also observed in high-income countries due to various social and cultural reasons.

The consequences of early marriages are visible at both individual and societal levels. From a health perspective, early pregnancies are associated with complications, maternal and infant mortality, birth-related issues and an increase in sexually transmitted infections. The psychological effects are also significant. Girls who marry young often experience depression, suicidal tendencies, social isolation and psychosocial trauma. In addition, early marriages result in school dropout and long-term economic dependency. Early marriages deepen gender inequality in society and restrict women’s rights. Thus, early marriage is not just a personal issue. It is a complex problem that negatively affects the

social, economic and cultural structures of society as a whole.

In Azerbaijan, early marriage remains a serious social issue. In some families, girls are forced to marry early due to the influence of traditions and religious beliefs. In others, economic hardship plays a major role. Official statistics provide a general overview of the situation. However, the real picture is often obscured by the prevalence of unofficial and unregistered marriages.

This article is based on focus group discussions held with parents and local government representatives in ten villages of Barda. The purpose of the article is to analyze the causes of early marriage in Azerbaijan, its impact on individuals and society, the legal context and the measures being taken to address it. The article also presents the attitudes of respondents toward the problem and the solutions they propose, based on the results of the focus group discussions. The aim is to understand the root causes of early marriage and to propose practical and legal strategies for addressing the issue.

Early Marriages in Azerbaijan

In Azerbaijan, there are two key conditions for the registration of a marriage. The marriage must be entered into voluntarily and the parties must meet the legal age requirement (family.gov.az). According to Article 10 of the Family Code, the minimum age for marriage is 18. However, in special cases such as a parent’s severe or terminal illness or if the girl is pregnant, the relevant local authority may permit a reduction in the minimum age by up to one year, based on the request of the parties involved (family.gov.az, 2021). In 2024, changes to the Family Code abolished these exceptions. Articles 10.2 and 27.2 were repealed. As a result, the legal age for marriage in Azerbaijan is now uniformly set at 18 for everyone. Additionally, marriages between close

relatives will not be allowed. The new law will take effect on July 1, 2025 (qanun.az).

The penalties stipulated by law are also quite strict. Article 152 of the Criminal Code states that engaging in sexual relations or other sexual acts with a person under the age of 16 is punishable by up to three-years imprisonment. Article 176 outlines that coercing someone into marriage or facilitating early marriage is punishable by two to four years in prison or large fines. However, these laws are not seriously enforced.

Recent legal reforms and international commitments have created a foundation for Azerbaijan to make progress in combating early marriage. However, it remains crucial to raise public awareness and strengthen implementation mechanisms. Understanding the real scope and causes of early marriage requires not only relying on official statistics but also conducting field research and local studies. That is because many early marriages take place informally and go unreported in official statistics. According to the State Statistics Committee's data from 2023, 223 girls officially married before the age of 18 (stat.gov.az). However, the number of early marriages through unofficial and religious ceremonies may be several times higher than the reported figures (Mammadov 2018).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the causes of early marriage in Azerbaijan and to uncover how the issue is perceived in the local context. To achieve this, a qualitative research methodology was used. Focus group discussions served as the main method of data collection.

The focus groups were held between June and November 2024 in ten villages of Barda district, where early marriages are more prevalent. Meetings were conducted with parents, representatives of local authorities and teachers. These

meetings gathered personal experiences, observations and prevailing attitudes about early marriage.

Each focus group had between four and twelve participants. A total of 76 individuals participated, including 28 women and 48 men. Most participants were over 25 years old. The discussions were based on structured questions, with the primary focus on identifying the causes of early marriage and possible solutions. Data were recorded in writing by a moderator and two team members. The discussions were held in an environment of mutual trust and open dialogue. The collected data were analyzed thematically.

Causes of Early Marriages

The focus group discussions conducted in ten villages of Barda clearly revealed the causes of early marriage and the solutions proposed to address the issue. Participants analyzed the topic in depth and explained the factors contributing to the spread of early marriage from various perspectives.

The first and most significant cause is economic hardship. Families who lack a stable source of income and face poverty often try to reduce the financial burden on the household by marrying off their daughters early. In many cases, parents see this as a practical solution. This is more common in rural areas where the head of the household works as a day laborer and has no stable income. According to participants, daughters are viewed as an economic burden, and their future is often determined by parental decision at a young age. Many believe that marrying girls early will ease the family’s financial strain. “A poor farmer survives by working odd jobs, mostly planting crops or doing compulsory labor in someone else’s fields for five to ten manats a day. There is no steady income. The lack of a stable job and earnings leads them to see early marriage as the best option for their daughters” (participant 1, 2024).

The second reason is the lack of education or the poor quality

of education. Girls dropping out of school, having secondary status in the household and receiving less attention from parents all contribute to the proliferation of early marriage. In some families, educational resources are allocated primarily to boys. In such cases, the girls' education is not even considered, and their future prospects are limited. The lack of qualified teachers and poor quality of schooling also lead to distrust in education among parents. "The quality of education is very low. Most of the teachers are poorly educated. They come to class and talk about soap operas or other nonsense. What can an ignorant teacher teach the children?" (participant 3, 2024).

The third major factor is religious and cultural influence. In many parts of society, patriarchal thinking based on tradition and religion still prevails. In this mindset, a woman is seen as someone who must obey the male head of the household, protect the family's honor and play a limited role in public life. Within this framework, girls are expected to marry, become mothers and submit to their husbands at an early age. Often, girls have no say in these decisions, and their opinions are ignored. "The father's approval is the main factor. Every parent wants their daughter to be happy. They choose what they believe is best based on their own life experience. What matters most is that the daughter adjusts to her new home. Education and a career are not that important, since her husband will earn and support her anyway" (participant 2, 2024).

The fourth reason is the weak enforcement of legal mechanisms. Although early marriage is a crime, in many cases these laws are not enforced. Bribery, corruption and the inactivity of law enforcement lead to impunity. Some participants mentioned that families obtain fake medical certificates and approval letters to hide the legal violations. Especially in rural areas where everyone knows each other and most people are related, people hesitate to report early marriages to the authorities. They do not want to be labeled as informants.

“When the police find out, nothing is solved. The family pays a bribe, and the person who reported it becomes the target. As they say, the ‘bad guy’ ends up being the one who speaks up” (participant 4, 2024).

The fifth factor is the influence of technology and digital media. Content circulating on social media platforms has made it harder for families to monitor their daughters’ behavior. This has prompted some parents to marry off their daughters at a younger age. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram have been viewed by parents as morally dangerous. As a result, some families have decided to arrange early marriages to *protect* their daughters. These actions represent attempts to contain and control their daughters’ sexuality and autonomy. Concerned about their daughters’ future, some parents try to shield them from what they perceive as potential social and moral risks by encouraging them to marry early. “Young people are losing their manners and immorality is spreading. Parents with daughters worry a lot about their children’s future. They think that by marrying them off early, they can prevent bigger problems later” (participant 5, 2024).

Proposed Solutions

Focus group participants proposed several solutions to prevent early marriages.

The first proposal is to strengthen awareness efforts. Holding regular meetings with families, especially with parents, organizing training sessions in schools and arranging seminars in public spaces are seen as essential steps. “Teachers already provide information throughout the year about the importance of education and the harms of early marriage. The main issue lies with the parents because they are the ones forcing their children into it” (participant 7, 2024). Respondents also criticized some television programs for being morally harmful. They emphasized the need to replace these shows with more educational broadcasts. “TV channels show

matchmaking programs and soap operas all day long. Instead of educating the public, these shows harm the upbringing of young people, girls and brides. It would be better to replace them with useful, educational programs so that people watch and learn and do not marry off their daughters early" (participant 8, 2024).

The second proposal is to expand economic support programs. Suggestions included providing child benefits to families, increasing employment opportunities in rural areas and improving social welfare. "When a family has many daughters, parents try to 'get rid of them' quickly" (participant 9, 2024). Such measures could help families see alternatives to early marriage.

The third proposal is to improve the enforcement of existing laws. Along with harsher penalties, mechanisms should be established to ensure that these penalties are actually applied and that corruption is prevented. Article 176 of the Criminal Code states that forcing someone under the legal age into marriage is punishable by a fine of between 3000 and 4000 manats or by up to four years in prison. Respondents believe that unless bribery is eradicated, efforts to fight early marriage will remain on paper only. "If bribery is eliminated and penalties are made stricter, parents will think twice before marrying off their children early" (participant 10, 2024). Another participant added, "You cannot convince the parent. When you say it is illegal and has consequences, the answer is 'I took care of it.' You ask how, and they say they had the money. When that happens, our hands are tied. If someone gets approval from the police or other offices, do you think they will listen to us?" (participant 14, 2024). Another issue raised by citizens is that parents bribe doctors to receive medical documents confirming the girl is fit for marriage even before she turns 18. "They arrange fake pregnancy papers to avoid any legal obstacles to the marriage" (participant 15, 2024).

The fourth proposal is to improve the quality of education. Encouraging girls to stay in school and explaining the importance of education to parents is considered essential. Better-educated girls can grow into more independent and empowered individuals, which contributes to the overall development of society.

The fifth proposal is to foster public disapproval of early marriage. Families who resort to early marriage should not be accepted by society. There should be stronger social resistance to the practice and more support for initiatives that protect young people's rights. "I tried to explain to a man who had promised his daughter to a man at 16 that this was wrong, that it was illegal and she was still a child. I told him to wait until she was of legal age. His reply was, 'You're just jealous because no one has proposed to your daughter'" (participant 12, 2024). Another respondent said, "I went to the local authorities to report a family that was marrying off their daughter too early. I expected them to intervene. Instead, they blamed me and said it was none of my business how people raise their children" (participant 13, 2024).

Discussion and Conclusion

The focus group discussions held in Barda showed that early marriage is not just a legal or administrative issue. It is the result of a complex process with deep social, economic, cultural and institutional roots. The collected data illustrated how this problem manifests itself at different levels—individual, familial, community and state—and why it continues to persist.

According to the participants, the main driver of early marriage is economic hardship. For parents, encouraging their daughters to marry young is seen as a way to reduce the family's burden and escape financial responsibility. In some cases, early marriage is perceived as a way to protect girls from future risks, such as inappropriate behavior or moral

decline. This practice is especially common among rural families who lack stable income.

Poor education and widespread illiteracy are also major contributors to early marriage. The lack of interest shown by parents, and at times, even teachers, in the education of girls restricts their chances of building a future beyond the household. In some schools, even when early marriage is known to be happening, it is either hidden or treated as a social norm. This weakens the role of schools as educational and awareness-raising institutions and reduces them to passive observers.

Institutional issues also stand out in this context. Although the law outlines penalties against early marriage, they are rarely enforced in practice. Based on the participants' comments, it became clear that the efforts of law enforcement are often blocked by bribery and informal arrangements. As a result, the legal mechanisms intended to prevent early marriage do not function properly.

The influence of technology and digital media must also be reconsidered in today's context. The circulation of content deemed inappropriate on social media platforms has generated parental anxiety. This anxiety stems less from proven harms to adolescents' psychosocial development and more from parents' fears about losing control over their daughters' sexuality and behavior. Parents' concerns represent a form of moral panic that predates platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Such anxieties about controlling daughters' virginity have historical roots that current social media merely intensifies rather than creates. In some cases, this leads them to consider early marriage as a *protective measure*. Families encourage their daughters to marry as a way of avoiding perceived moral and social threats. However, this decision often makes the girls' future even more difficult.

The analysis showed that although participants expressed

concerns about early marriage, most cited social conformity and fear of judgment as the reasons why the practice continues. Even when some parents understand the harm it causes, pressure from the community, the weight of tradition and fear of change force them to stay silent and comply. This reveals a clear gap between personal beliefs and public behavior.

Therefore, solving the problem of early marriage cannot be achieved through legal and administrative measures alone. A comprehensive approach is needed. Social, economic, cultural and institutional efforts must work in parallel. Improvements in education, economic well-being, public awareness and anti-corruption mechanisms should be seen as key pillars in ensuring a sustainable solution to the issue.

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