



Impact of Early Marriage on the Personality Development of Girls: A Review

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Abstract

Background: Early marriage, affecting one in five girls globally, is a critical human rights and developmental issue. While its detrimental effects on health and education are well-documented, its impact on adolescent personality development—a period crucial for identity formation, autonomy, and emotional regulation—remains an understudied area. This review addresses this gap by synthesizing evidence on how early marriage influences the psychosocial and personality trajectories of girls.

Objectives: This review aims to synthesize recent empirical evidence on the impact of early marriage on girls' personality development, identify the key mechanisms underlying this relationship, highlight critical evidence gaps, and propose directions for future research and policy.

Methods: A targeted narrative review was conducted using peer-reviewed literature from 2019 to 2025, sourced from databases including PubMed, BMC journals, The Lancet, and UNICEF evidence reviews. The search focused on studies measuring psychosocial and personality-relevant outcomes such as self-efficacy, autonomy, mental health, and identity. A thematic synthesis was performed, prioritizing longitudinal and mixed-methods studies where available.

Findings: The synthesis reveals that early marriage adversely affects personality development through multiple interconnected pathways: (1) Educational interruption, which constrains identity exploration and limits the development of traits like openness and conscientiousness; (2) Reduced autonomy and agency, hindering the formation of an independent self-concept and internal locus of control; (3) Elevated mental health vulnerabilities, including depression and anxiety, which shape emotional stability and neuroticism; and (4) Exposure to intimate partner violence and trauma, which alters interpersonal trust, coping strategies, and stress regulation.



While evidence for these indirect pathways is strong, a direct measurement of personality trait change is scarce due to methodological limitations.

Conclusion: Early marriage is a significant social determinant that disrupts normative personality development by truncating adolescence and exposing girls to environments that stifle psychosocial growth. The findings underscore that the consequences extend beyond physical health and economics to the core psychological development of individuals.

Implication: There is an urgent need for holistic interventions that integrate psychosocial support with existing efforts to delay marriage and keep girls in school. Future research must employ longitudinal designs with culturally adapted personality measures to establish causality and track trait-level changes, informing more effective policies to safeguard girls' developmental potential.

Keywords: Early Marriage, Child Marriage, Personality Development, Adolescent Girls, Psychosocial Outcomes

1. Introduction

Early marriage—defined as the formal or informal union of a child under the age of 18—remains a pervasive social issue affecting more than 650 million women globally, with the highest prevalence in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2023). Despite significant progress toward reducing rates through education and empowerment initiatives, one in five girls worldwide still marries before the age of 18 (Khan et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2023). Early marriage is not only a violation of human rights but also a critical developmental concern, as it truncates adolescence—a stage fundamental for identity formation, emotional regulation, and psychosocial maturity (Gelchu Adola & Wirtu, 2024; Saroglou & Cohen, 2011). During adolescence, individuals develop self-concept, autonomy, and decision-making capacity—key foundations of personality. Interrupting these processes through premature marital roles may therefore have enduring effects on personality development.

Existing research has extensively documented the health, educational, and economic consequences of early marriage, including maternal mortality, school dropout, and intergenerational poverty (Fan & Koski, 2022; Fitria et al., 2024). However, much less attention has been directed toward the psychosocial and personality dimensions of early marriage, such as the development of self-efficacy, resilience, autonomy, and emotional stability. Studies have indicated that early-married girls are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and reduced life satisfaction (Nishat et al., 2023; Samuels et al., 2024), yet few have systematically examined how these psychological states interact with long-term personality outcomes. The intersection of early marriage and personality development remains understudied, despite its importance for understanding behavioral adaptation, mental health trajectories, and social participation in adulthood.



Moreover, most existing studies approach early marriage from a public health or gender-based violence perspective, focusing on reproductive health and legal outcomes rather than individual psychosocial growth (Gelchu Adola & Wirtu, 2024; Khan et al., 2024). Consequently, the nuanced ways in which early marriage shapes the development of personality traits—such as openness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability—are often overlooked. Adolescents who marry early face restricted socialization, limited autonomy, and heightened dependency, which may hinder the evolution of a confident, independent self (Burgess et al., 2022). Personality development, as a gradual and multidimensional process, requires supportive social contexts and opportunities for self-exploration—conditions rarely available to early-married girls.

A further methodological gap lies in the predominance of cross-sectional studies that establish associations but not causality between early marriage and psychosocial outcomes. Very few longitudinal or mixed-methods studies have tracked changes in girls' personality or mental health before and after marriage (Fan & Koski, 2022; Samuels et al., 2024). Similarly, cultural differences in personality expression and gender roles complicate the interpretation of existing data, as most research originates from limited regional or cultural contexts (Khan et al., 2024). Thus, the evidence base lacks theoretical integration between developmental psychology and socio-cultural determinants of early marriage.

Addressing this research gap is critical because personality development influences life satisfaction, decision-making, and intergenerational patterns of empowerment or subordination. Understanding how early marriage alters these psychological pathways can inform holistic interventions that go beyond education or reproductive health alone. Therefore, this review seeks to synthesize recent empirical and theoretical literature to explore the impact of early marriage on the personality development of girls, identify underlying mechanisms, and propose directions for future research and policy.

Research Objective

This review aims to synthesize recent empirical and review evidence on the impact of early marriage on the personality development of girls, to identify mechanisms linking early marriage to personality and psychosocial outcomes, to highlight evidence gaps, and to provide policy and program recommendations.

2. Methodology

This review used a targeted literature search and narrative synthesis to examine how early marriage affects personality-related outcomes among girls and young women. Databases and sources searched included PubMed/PMC, Frontiers, BMC journals, Scientific Reports, The Lancet family, UNICEF evidence reviews, and other peer-reviewed outlets and open-access repositories. Searches combined terms such as “child marriage,” “early marriage,” “personality,” “identity,” “self-esteem,” “autonomy,” “mental health,” “education,” and



“intimate partner violence,” limited to publications from 2019–2025 to capture the latest evidence. Key program and evidence reviews (e.g., UNICEF and intervention reviews) were included to link empirical findings with evaluated interventions (Gelchu Adola & Wirtu, 2024; Siddiqi et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2023).

We prioritized empirical studies with primary data (cross-sectional, cohort, and qualitative), systematic and narrative reviews, and recent mixed-methods research that explicitly measured psychosocial or personality-relevant outcomes (depression, anxiety, locus of control, self-efficacy, life satisfaction, identity markers). When available, longitudinal and prospective studies were given greater interpretive weight because of their stronger ability to address temporality; where longitudinal evidence was sparse, we described associations and discussed likely mechanisms and potential selection biases. We also included program evaluation studies that measured psychosocial outcomes after interventions to delay marriage or retain girls in school (Fitria et al., 2024; Kidman et al., 2024; Siddiqi et al., 2024).

In addition to the global literature, we reviewed region-specific studies in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Nepal because social norms and schooling systems shape both the prevalence of early marriage and its psychosocial impacts. The synthesis used a thematic narrative approach (education & identity, autonomy & agency, mental health, exposure to violence, life satisfaction) and highlighted research gaps—especially the lack of longitudinal personality measurement across settings (Karki et al., 2021; Mahat et al., 2023; Nhampoca & Maritz, 2024; Shrestha et al., 2024).

3. Results

3.1 Education interruption and constrained identity development

Early marriage frequently precipitates school dropout or prevents educational re-enrolment, cutting short a critical context for adolescent identity exploration and skill acquisition (Neupane et al., 2025). Recent empirical studies show consistent associations between lower attainment and higher risk of early marriage: in Indonesia and other LMIC settings, higher formal education markedly reduces the probability of child marriage and supports sustained aspirations for non-domestic roles. Educational interruption reduces exposure to peers, mentors, and alternative role models—social inputs strongly linked to the development of personality traits such as openness and conscientiousness (Fitria et al., 2024; Gelchu Adola & Wirtu, 2024; Siddiqi et al., 2024).

Qualitative and mixed-methods research further illuminates how losing schooling narrows girls’ possible future identities. Ethnographic and interview-based work in several settings finds that girls who drop out because of marriage experience an enforced role consolidation—early adoption of wife/mother identities with limited opportunity to explore occupational or civic roles. This narrowing of role repertoires is theorized to shift trajectories of identity



formation and reduce the development of agentic self-concepts (self-efficacy, autonomy). Such processes are central to personality formation during adolescence (Gelchu Adola & Wirtu, 2024; Kidman et al., 2024; Nhampoca & Maritz, 2024).

Program evaluations and reviews show that interventions keeping girls in school (scholarships, conditional transfers, safe transport) not only delay marriage but also support psychosocial outcomes linked to personality (higher aspirations, reported agency). However, most program evaluations measure intermediate outcomes (enrolment, age at marriage) rather than validated personality inventories, limiting direct evidence on trait change. This evidence gap—few studies measuring personality constructs pre- and post-intervention—means the educational pathway remains well-supported as a likely mechanism but under-quantified in terms of specific personality trait shifts (Fitria et al., 2024; Siddiqi et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2023).

The regional studies from Nepal focuses on use of social theory to understand the social risk (Karki & Gartoulla, 2017), knowledge, attitude and practice on risk behavior (Karki, 2014), harmful cultural practices (Karki & Khadka, 2019a), youth attitudes (Karki et al., 2024) and social discourses on reduction of discriminatory cultural practices (Karki & Khadka, 2019b) helps contextualize how socio-cultural and educational environments shape youth outlook and risk perceptions that may intersect with marriage decisions and identity formation. These local perspectives underscore the need for country-specific measurement of personality-related outcomes in intervention studies.

3.2 Reduced autonomy, agency, and decision-making

Multiple recent studies document that early-married girls experience constrained mobility, limited decision-making power, and reduced participation in civic or economic activities—conditions that impede the development of an autonomous, agentic identity. Cross-sectional surveys in diverse LMIC contexts report lower reported household decision-making power and reduced perceived self-efficacy among women married before 18 compared to those who married later. These reductions in agency are salient because autonomy and perceived control are central to models of personality development (internal locus of control, assertiveness) (Gelchu Adola & Wirtu, 2024; Nhampoca & Maritz, 2024).

Qualitative studies describe household and spousal dynamics that perpetuate dependency: large spousal age gaps, family or in-law control, and normative constraints on female mobility. Where marriage substitutes familial authority for adolescent autonomy, girls' opportunities to practice independent decision-making are curtailed during formative years. Over time, chronic external control can become internalized, contributing to lower assertiveness and a more dependent interpersonal style—personality patterns that have long-term implications for wellbeing and social participation (Gelchu Adola & Wirtu, 2024; Kidman et al., 2024; Siddiqi et al., 2024).



Intervention literature indicates that empowerment programs (life-skills training, cash transfers conditioned on schooling, community norm-change work) can partially restore agency and decision-making, but program effects vary by context and design. Importantly, most studies measure agency with context-specific scales rather than broad personality inventories. This methodological choice limits comparability with personality trait frameworks (e.g., Big Five), highlighting the need for culturally adapted personality measures to assess whether increased agency translates into measurable personality change over time. Regional research and program reports from Nepal suggest similar dynamics, where community-level interventions can shift norms and thereby expand girls' agency—an outcome that could plausibly influence personality development if sustained (Shrestha et al., 2024; Siddiqi et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2023).

3.3 Mental health vulnerabilities (depression, anxiety, stress)

A growing body of recent empirical work documents elevated rates of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and stress among girls and young women married early. Population-based and clinical surveys conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic show striking prevalence of psychological distress in early-married cohorts; for example, studies from Bangladesh and multi-country reviews report markedly higher depression/anxiety scores among early-married girls. These mental health vulnerabilities relate directly to personality-relevant constructs (neuroticism, emotional stability, coping styles), suggesting early marriage may shift emotional regulation trajectories (Aggarwal et al., 2023; Nhampoca & Maritz, 2024; Nishat et al., 2023).

Longitudinal and prospective studies—while still limited—provide stronger evidence that early marriage precedes sustained psychological distress for many girls. Prospective cohort work in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia shows that girls who marry earlier are more likely over time to report depressive symptoms and lower subjective well-being, even after controlling for baseline socio-economic factors. These patterns indicate that early marriage can be a social determinant of emerging psychopathology, which interacts with the development of stable personality characteristics such as emotional reactivity and resilience (Aggarwal et al., 2023; Kanji et al., 2024; Kidman et al., 2024).

Intervention studies that include mental health components suggest that counselling, group support, and safe spaces for early-married girls reduce symptoms and improve coping, but few RCTs have assessed whether such improvements correspond to changes in personality traits. The literature therefore supports a clear association between early marriage and poorer mental health, with plausible implications for personality trajectories—yet the direct measurement of trait-level changes over time remains an important research priority. Karki's recent work on youth attitudes and psychosocial themes contributes regional evidence on youth mental states and attitudinal patterns that may interact with marriage timing and mental health outcomes in Nepalese contexts (Karki & D'Mello, 2024).



3.4 Exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) and trauma shaping personality

Child marriage is strongly associated with elevated risk of intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual coercion, and other forms of household trauma in multiple settings. Systematic reviews and recent empirical studies indicate that girls married before 18 face higher rates of physical, sexual, and emotional IPV compared with women married as adults. Repeated exposure to violence is well-known to alter cognitive-affective schemas (trust, interpersonal expectations), stress-regulation, and coping strategies—processes that feed directly into the development of personality characteristics like neuroticism, agreeableness (submissiveness vs. assertiveness), and interpersonal trust (Han et al., 2025; Kidman et al., 2024; Swain et al., 2025).

Qualitative research documents how IPV contributes to withdrawal, hypervigilance, and reduced social engagement—behavioral patterns that stabilize into enduring interpersonal styles if the stressors are chronic and unaddressed. Moreover, early childbearing within abusive relationships further compounds stress and limits access to supportive peer networks, deepening personality-related shifts toward guardedness and dependency. Such trauma-driven pathways represent a critical mechanism linking early marriage to long-term personality outcomes (Gelchu Adola & Wirtu, 2024; Kidman et al., 2024; Nishat et al., 2023).

Prevention and support programs that integrate IPV screening, survivor-centered services, and community norm change show promise in reducing harm, but again, few evaluations measure downstream changes in personality or stable interpersonal patterns. The research thus strongly implicates IPV as a mediator of early-marriage effects on personality—but measuring and demonstrating trait-level shifts requires longitudinal designs with validated instruments. Regional literature and practitioner reports (including Nepalese studies and policy reviews) stress integrated approaches that combine legal protection, psychosocial support, and social norm transformation to disrupt these trauma pathways (Shrestha et al., 2024; Siddiqi et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2023).

3.5 Life satisfaction, well-being, and heterogeneity of effects

Aggregate evidence shows that women who married early report, on average, lower life satisfaction and subjective well-being in adulthood, driven by intersecting factors—education loss, economic dependence, health burdens, restricted autonomy, and IPV. Cross-national analyses and country studies demonstrate that these reductions in well-being are consistent across many LMIC settings, although the magnitude varies by social safety nets, cultural context, and whether marriage was coerced or (perceived as) chosen. Lower life satisfaction is both an outcome and a signal of disrupted personality maturation—affecting optimism, future orientation, and psychological flourishing (Kanji et al., 2024; Nhampoca & Maritz, 2024; UNICEF, 2023).

Heterogeneity analyses reveal important moderators: girls who retain schooling, have supportive natal families, or enter relatively equitable unions often show fewer negative



psychosocial outcomes than peers in highly controlling or abusive marriages. In some contexts, early marriage is framed as coping (e.g., escape from extreme poverty or conflict), and some girls report short-term relief; however, longitudinal follow-up often reveals cumulative disadvantages. This nuance underscores that context, voluntariness, and access to support systems shape whether early marriage translates into long-term personality disadvantage (Fitria et al., 2024; Kidman et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2023).

Finally, regionally grounded studies and Nepalese authors emphasize that country-specific norms and youth psychosocial profiles mediate how early marriage affects identity and well-being. Incorporating local evidence and researchers' insights is therefore essential when measuring personality constructs and designing interventions tailored to cultural contexts (Karki & D'Mello, 2024; Shrestha et al., 2024).

4. Discussion

This synthesis finds converging evidence that early marriage adversely affects multiple domains central to personality development—education and identity exploration, autonomy and agency, mental health regulation, exposure to trauma, and subjective well-being. The strongest empirical support is for the indirect pathways (education loss → constrained identity; IPV/trauma → altered emotion regulation), with multiple high-quality recent studies and program reviews corroborating these mechanisms. Nevertheless, most studies use proxies (e.g., depression scores, agency indices) rather than direct, repeated measures of personality traits, limiting definitive conclusions about trait-level change (Gelchu Adola & Wirtu, 2024; Nishat et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2023).

Methodological weaknesses constrain causal inference: a predominance of cross-sectional designs, limited longitudinal cohorts that include personality instruments, and inconsistent measurement approaches across cultures make it difficult to assert how much early marriage *changes* personality versus selects girls with certain pre-existing vulnerabilities into early unions. Where prospective cohorts exist (e.g., longitudinal studies in Malawi and other settings), results suggest that early marriage precedes declines in psychosocial well-being, strengthening the case for causal influence—but more such studies are required across diverse cultural contexts (Aggarwal et al., 2023; Kidman et al., 2024).

Another important consideration is the heterogeneity of effects. The literature makes clear that the psychosocial consequences of early marriage vary by voluntariness, family support, economic context, and intervention exposure. That heterogeneity suggests interventions must be tailored: prevention via education and economic support addresses upstream drivers, while post-marriage psychosocial and IPV services address downstream harm. The work of regional researchers—including analyses of youth attitudes and social influence—highlights the value of embedding psychosocial measurement within culturally-informed research to capture locally



salient personality and attitudinal shifts that global instruments might miss (Fitria et al., 2024; Shrestha et al., 2024).

Finally, the review identifies clear research priorities: (1) longitudinal cohort studies beginning in adolescence with validated personality measures adapted for cultural contexts; (2) quasi-experimental or randomized evaluations of interventions that measure personality-relevant outcomes (self-efficacy, locus of control, emotional stability) as pre-specified endpoints; and (3) mixed-methods work to unpack how normative, familial, and economic pathways produce observed psychosocial trajectories. Doing so will move the field from documenting correlations to understanding mechanisms and testing remedial strategies that can realistically alter life-course personality development for at-risk girls (Kidman et al., 2024; Siddiqi et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2023).

5. Conclusion & Recommendations

The weight of recent evidence indicates that early marriage has substantial and multifaceted negative effects on girls' personality development — primarily through interrupted education, curtailed autonomy, increased exposure to IPV, and elevated mental health problems. While some heterogeneity exists, and some girls may report short-term perceived benefits in constrained contexts, the net impacts on agency, identity development, emotional health, and life satisfaction are concerning. Better longitudinal research and culturally adapted personality measurement are required to strengthen causal understanding.

Future research on the impact of early marriage on girls' personality development should adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches to better capture developmental trajectories across diverse social and cultural settings. Studies should integrate quantitative psychological assessments—such as Big Five personality inventories or resilience and self-esteem scales—with qualitative narratives to understand the lived experiences of early-married girls. Further, there is a need to explore mediating factors such as education, family dynamics, social support systems, and cultural norms that may buffer or exacerbate personality disruptions. Collaborative and interdisciplinary studies combining psychology, sociology, and public health frameworks are essential to identify causal mechanisms and context-specific interventions.

Transparency Statement: The author confirms that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

Data Availability Statement: Author can provide data.

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Authors' Contributions: The author solely conducted all research activities i.e., concept, data collecting, drafting and final review of manuscript.



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