

Self-Esteem Experiences among Women in Early Marriage: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Early marriage which is commonly defined as marriage before the age of 18 still exists in various parts of the world whether it be in cultural context or traditional settings or due to economically vulnerable situations which clearly disregards the significance it has on a woman's psychological development and well-being. Self-esteem being a core component of self-concept and personal growth plays a crucial role in shaping a woman's emotional adjustment and life satisfaction and will be focused upon in this paper. The paper aims to review and synthesize the existing qualitative and quantitative literature which explores self-esteem experiences among women who had marriages at an early age. For the methodology for this paper a narrative review was taken and five studies published within the years 2005 to 2025 were selected which shows how the concept of early marriage is still relevant in various areas. The selected studies were finalized and further analyzed to identify themes and patterns related to self-esteem early marriage and other psychological components such as depression anxiety and PTSD. The findings through the literature review were associated with autonomy identity disruption self-worth low self-esteem and helping components such as education and familial support. Studies also highlighted how self-esteem becomes important in marital roles through validation and approval from mothers and spouses. Overall, the literature suggests that the impact of early marriage on self-esteem is complex and influenced by various cultural norms and social expectations. It is also affected by social support and an individual's coping mechanisms. The findings also highlight the importance of interventions and empowerment based approaches to support positive self-esteem among women in early marriage.

Keywords: *Early Marriage, Self-Esteem, Narrative Review*

In many areas early marriage is practiced as a traditional and cultural practice but it is often not clearly understood how it affects a woman's mental health. People often justify early marriage through cultural and traditional beliefs even though it is known that it is illegal in many parts of the world. However early marriage is more than just a traditional practice in a woman's life because it can affect many aspects such as self-esteem confidence quality of life and overall psychological well-being. Self-esteem is an important psychological concept in understanding this impact and it is usually understood as how a person evaluates their own worth. It also influences emotional regulation how a person

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functions in society and their resilience. Some theories related to this concept were given by Rosenberg who explained how people interpret their life experiences and relationships with others. High self-esteem is usually linked with confidence better coping and emotional stability whereas low self-esteem can be related to self-doubt sensitivity to criticism and higher chances of anxiety and depressive symptoms, During major life transitions such as marriage the role of self-esteem becomes more important. From a humanistic perspective Rogers also talked about this concept and explained that self-worth can sometimes become fragile and conditional. Young women who marry early may face environments where they become dependent on others, which can gradually affect their self-esteem, especially when their autonomy is limited and expectations are performance-based. Many instances show that autonomy and quality of life are closely linked in early marriages.

Another theory was given by Festinger, who emphasized that individuals tend to compare their abilities and lives with others. In many societies, women are often idealized and expected to behave according to certain standards, especially within marital settings. They may feel pressure to behave in a particular way, which can influence their thinking and their self-concept. Frequent comparison can increase psychological pressure and shape how women perceive themselves. Women with lower self-esteem are more likely to interpret marital conflicts as a result of their own inadequacy, whereas those with stronger self-worth may show greater resilience and adaptive coping.

While variables such as depression, anxiety, and other forms of psychological distress are often studied, self-esteem is not always prioritized as the main variable. Early marriage can significantly affect a woman's self-esteem, her ability to explore her own life, her way of thinking, and her way of living. Societal expectations and limited autonomy can further reduce self-esteem, especially when women are not treated with support and respect.

In the present study, which is a narrative review, the focus is on understanding how early marriage affects women's lives through various studies, while positioning self-esteem as the central psychological construct rather than just a subtopic. This review aims to deepen the understanding of women's lived experiences and to highlight for future researchers how important self-esteem is, alongside other psychological factors such as depression and anxiety.

METHOD

The current paper is written as a narrative review, which studies the existing literature and research on self-esteem among women in early marriage. However, self-esteem was not always the core concept in the available studies, and therefore other related aspects were also included to show that self-esteem is still less discussed in the context of early marriages. The research papers and studies were mainly found through Google Scholar and the Google search engine. The studies that were selected were published between 2005 and 2025, which also demonstrates that the topic is still relevant in the present time. Many of the studies included self-esteem as a sub-topic rather than the main focus, but they still contributed to the understanding required for this narrative review. These papers helped in understanding how women's mental health can be affected by early marriage.

Some research papers that mainly focused on reproductive health were not included and were therefore excluded from the review. After reviewing several studies, only five studies met the criteria, as they included self-esteem as a part of their research. The results from these studies were then organized into themes to highlight the main patterns and

psychological challenges faced by women in early marriages. The review also considered cultural influences and identified areas that require further research.

THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

Theme 1: Decline in Self-Esteem Following Early Marriage

The first theme discussed in this review is the decline in self-esteem in early marriages. Throughout the reviewed literature, early marriage was consistently associated with a decline in self-esteem among young women. Studies such as Ahmed et al. (2015) found that early married girls reported relatively normal levels of self-esteem before marriage, whereas married adolescents showed significantly lower levels, often due to domestic pressures and limited social support, especially from their families. Another study by Lubeton et al. (2020) showed that low self-esteem was a recurring psychosocial consequence of early marriage across different cultural contexts. Similarly, a third study by Azizi et al. (2021) supported the idea of declining self-esteem and demonstrated that exposure to partner violence intensified feelings of inadequacy and reduced self-worth, which further contributed to lower levels of self-esteem among women.

Theme 2: Restricted Autonomy and Power Imbalance

Another theme which emerged was restricted autonomy and power imbalance, which was very common in early marriage. It was shown that girls who married early showed repetitive results of limited autonomy and decision making in their own families. It also showed financial dependence on their husbands and families, which restricted their mobility as well. The studies by Ahmed et al. reported that the fear of in-laws and husbands contributed to reduced confidence and self-expression. Further study by Azizi et al. showed that economic dependence and patriarchal norms after marriage, along with enlarged age gaps between spouses, led to significant risk factors that affected a woman's vulnerability. Further, the study by Lubethon et al. noticed that early marriages diminished the decision-making power of women and that they were often unheard in their families, to the extent that they lost confidence and it affected their mental health. Studies by Hake et al. indirectly showed how pandemics such as COVID-19 increased exposure to restrictive marital environments. These imbalances play a central role in weakening self-esteem while limiting personal independence.

Theme 3: Educational Disruption and Loss of Developmental Opportunities

One of the most important themes that emerged throughout the studies was education and the loss of developmental opportunities. Since women who married early discontinued their education, this significantly showed lower self-esteem and confidence. The studies also discussed how school closures during the pandemic heightened the risk of early marriage, especially in economically vulnerable settings. Research by Ahmed et al. in 2015 and Loubaton et al. in 2020 both emphasized that women who married young, and the women who were deprived of educational opportunities, limited their confidence, knowledge, and long-term independence. Moreover, Gözüylmaz and Baran (2010) found that higher education levels were strongly associated with higher self-esteem in married adolescents, especially in women. This shows that education not only protects against early marriage but also serves as a main factor in strengthening self-esteem, self-worth, and identity formation.

Theme 4: Violence, Psychological Distress, and Inferiority

Studies which were associated with Aziz et al. in (2021), Loubaton et al. in (2020), and Ahmed et al. in (2015) highlighted the connection between early marriage and psychological distress. Another theme which was noticed was closely associated or directed towards

violence, psychological distress, and inferiority in women. The study by Aziz et al. in 2021 highlighted that the rate of physical, sexual, and emotional violence by men on women married as children linked these experiences to depression, PTSD, and low self-esteem. Furthermore, other studies by Loubaton et al. in 2020 reported increased vulnerability to domestic abuse and social withdrawal. Ahmed et al. in 2015 also showed that women were exposed to depression and isolation in married adolescents. Such findings indicated that repeated exposure to violent environments contributed to emotional instability, and the feelings of inferiority further affected self-esteem.

Theme 5: Protective Factors: Education, Social Support, and Personal Agency

A protective factor which emerged in these studies mainly focused on education and social support. Despite the negative outcomes of early marriage in many studies the literature also showed some protective factors that can work against the low self-esteem caused by early marriage. Studies by Ahmed et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of social support from families especially from mothers friends and healthcare professionals in promoting a more positive self-perception. Studies by Azizi et al. (2021) also identified that education employment and autonomy can act as protective factors against violence and dependency because they are directly linked to independence and reduced risk of dependence. Additionally, Gözüylmaz and Baran (2010) found that planned pregnancies and education after marriage were also connected with stronger self-esteem among married adolescents. These findings suggest that even though early marriage can create many risks supportive relationships access to education and better opportunities can help women develop resilience and a healthier sense of identity after marriage.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, the present narrative review mainly highlights that early marriage was significantly linked to women's self-esteem. The complex psychological and social norms which were associated with early marriages, and patriarchal control over a woman's life, influenced the way of her self-perception. Throughout the reviewed studies, common themes that emerged, such as reduced autonomy, identity disruption, diminished self-worth, and the protective role of education and support, were found. Women who married at an early age experienced restricted decision-making power after their marriage, adult responsibilities, and limited educational opportunities, which were too much on their mental health. And hence, it took a toll which led to various aspects such as lower self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and PTSD. All of these aspects shape self-esteem, somehow or the other.

While some studies showed that planned pregnancy and a supportive marital environment can reduce the effects of overall lower self-esteem, the studies also suggest that early marriage increases vulnerability to low self-esteem despite the support, because age also plays an important factor in it. In most of the studies, education remained a constant factor which was associated with higher self-worth and confidence.

Moreover, the review also identifies several gaps in the existing literature. Many studies relied heavily on quantitative methods, small sample sizes, and focused more on physical or reproductive health outcomes rather than lived psychological experiences of self-esteem. Because according to me, such experiences should be studied more in a qualitative manner rather than in a quantitative method, as it highlights a much deeper understanding of the way it is rather than just a few numbers. It also showed that there was a clear need for deeper evaluation on the qualitative part to show how women experience and negotiate their self-worth within early marital contexts.

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Therefore, research adopting qualitative approaches is essential to provide a better understanding of self-esteem experiences among women in early marriage, which could contribute to better psychological interventions, policy development, and women empowerment.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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