



A multidimensional model of adolescent girls' elopement and related factors in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Elopement among adolescent girls is a growing problem in Saudi Arabia. The complex contributing factors to this often intersect. Existing efforts to understand elopement and possible related factors, however, have yet to empirically operationalize a multidimensional model of teenage girls' elopement and to assess its associations to different factors.

Methods: This mixed methods research explored the related factors to girls' elopement qualitatively from a volunteered sample of 20 foster care experts. Based on their answers, a conceptual model was hypothesized and a structural questionnaire was developed and administered to a sample of teenage girls ($N = 450$, 16–18 years).

Results: Adolescent girls' elopement was significantly and directly associated with deviant friends and low religious faith, as well as with media and technology use; but not with being in love and having fun, and age. The indirect relationship between elopement and family conflict and relationships was significant when deviant friends and low religious faith was a mediator.

Conclusions: Adolescent girls' elopement is a complex problem especially when studying it in a traditional society and religious culture such as in Saudi Arabia. This complexity can be seen in the direct and indirect relationships between elopement and its related factors.

1. Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the possible factors related to adolescent girls' elopement in Saudi Arabia, and the empirical relationships between these factors. Elopement, in this context, means teenage females leaving home of their own volition and desire and go with, or to, unrelated men (e.g. boyfriends) without having the intention to marry. Whereas the term (running away) was not used in this study because its meaning is broad and includes running away from threat sources such as domestic violence, which is out of the current paper scope. In this sense elopement is a moral crime in Saudi Arabia (GPPVPV, 2008).

Although adolescents' elopement from home is a universal phenomenon (Paradise & Cauce, 2002; Schaffner, 1998), it is not yet a phenomenon in Saudi Arabia. Saudi society is a traditional and religious one that looks at elopement with suspicion, condemnation, and rejection (GPPVPV, 2008). An Arabic study conducted by the General Presidency of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vices (GPPVPV), which is a governmental entity, found that there were only 109 reported cases of eloped girls in Saudi Arabia during a period of six months; nevertheless the researchers highlighted the fact that the figure was increasing during that period from a previous rate (GPPVPV,

2008). Therefore, it has become important to explore and understand the possible adolescent risk factors associated with elopement even though only little is known about it (Tucker, Edelen, Ellickson, & Klein, 2011).

Traditionally, researchers explained adolescents' elopement in terms of their abnormality and pathological traits (i.e. they linked between adolescents' elopement and that there adolescents suffer from mental disorders) that prevented them from merging with their families and societies (Feitel, Margetson, Chamas, & Lipman, 1992). In more recent years, researchers have focused more on other diverse factors, such as: an individual's interaction with their community and social environment (Jibeen, 2014; Paradise & Cauce, 2002); engagement in anti-social behaviours (Williams & Lindsey, 2006); deficiencies in family functioning (Hyde, 2005; Peled & Cohavi, 2009); adolescent-parent conflict (Hyde, 2005; Paradise & Cauce, 2002; Safyer, Thompson, Maccio, Zittel-Palamara, & Forehand, 2004; Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2004); having relationships with deviant friends (Chen, Thrane, & Adams, 2012); and rejecting traditional religious practices (Williams & Lindsey, 2006). However, this does not necessarily mean that these factors, which were investigated in non-Arab societies, hold true regarding girls' elopement in Saudi Arabia. GPPVPV (2008) explored nine factors that may link to girls' elopement with unrelated men in Saudi Arabia:

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deviant female friends (deviant from Saudi societal and religious norms); low religious faith and neglect of prayers; having forbidden relationships (and flirting) with foreign men; media and technology use (e.g. having a mobile phone and using the Internet and social media to communicate with unrelated men); family conflict; parental styles (e.g. cruelty and neglect); low economic status of the family; drug use; and personal reasons (e.g. they want to be independent and are not thinking about the consequences of elopement). However GPPVPV (2008) did not investigate the empirical relationships between these factors.

There is no single model which fully explains the problem of teenage girls' elopement (Jibeen, 2014), especially when taking into account the complexities of the associated contributing factors - which often intersect (Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010). Therefore, this study will explore the factors which are possibly related to adolescent girls' elopement in Saudi Arabia, and then will use confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) approaches to address the following objectives: (1) to evaluate the structural validity and internal consistency of the hypothesized model; (2) to assess the empirical relationships between the underlying factors of girls' elopement; and (3) to understand the direct and indirect relationships between these factors.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and participants

This exploratory study used a mixed methods approach with a sequential and dominant status design (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). First, an initial, and brief, qualitative investigation took place. The foster care organization for girls approved the protocol and consented to collect qualitative data by using a semi-structured questionnaire from the sample of 20 women's experts, all female, who are working in the foster care system and have been dealing with eloped girls, and who consented in writing to voluntarily participate in this investigation. The aim of this qualitative stage was only to explore the possible factors that link to girls' elopement from the specialists' perspective, which would be used as a guideline to hypothesize the conceptual model, and to develop a structured questionnaire (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007).

Then, quantitative data, which represents the major part of this study, was collected from a survey sample of non-eloped girls comprised of 450 students (age: $M = 17.01$; $SD = 0.847$), representing all the students from two secondary schools in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The ethical boards in both schools approved the protocol and consented to the distribution of the questionnaire among the students, and the girls consented orally to participate and their parents (or guardians) consented in written. The questionnaire was administered to the students with the help of their teachers, as the male researcher could not gain access to the females' schools because of the adopted gender segregation policy in Saudi Arabia (Table 1).

It is worth drawing attention here to the difficulties in reaching girls who have actually eloped with men. First, eloped girls who are based in the foster care system are under forensic investigation (GPPVPV, 2008), and, therefore, one is not allowed to make any communication with them even by sending them a research questionnaire. Second, in addition to the girls who have eloped with men, foster care has other cases such as girls who run away because of domestic violence or drug abuse, and these are both out of the scope of the current study. Third, foster care does not have a survey sample of eloped girls, i.e. hundreds (GPPVPV, 2008) (an essential sample size to conduct SEM (Kline, 2011)), which could be used in the current study. Furthermore, the current sample may involve girls who might elope in the future, so this sample can be considered as a semi-proactive sample. Therefore, the decision was taken to investigate adolescent girls' elopement from the perspective of non-eloped girls.

Table 1
Samples, characteristics, size (n) and percentage %.

Samples	Characteristic	%(n)
Female specialists (total = 20) <i>Sample of the qualitative investigation</i>	Major	
	Psychology	45(9)
	Social services	40(8)
	Sociology	10(2)
	Others	5(1)
	Experience	
	< 5 years	55(11)
From 5 to < 10 years	20(4)	
From 10 to < 15	5(1)	
15 years and over	20(4)	
Saudi adolescent girls (total = 450) <i>Sample of the quantitative study</i>	Age, years	
	16	35.1(158)
	17	28.4(128)
	18	36.5(164)

2.2. Qualitative data

To collect the qualitative data, and because of the adopted gender segregation policy in Saudi Arabia, an online semi-structured questionnaire was developed in Arabic (the mother tongue of the experts sample) by using Google Forms, and the link was sent to the 20 specialists' WhatsApp accounts, as this application is commonly used in Saudi Arabia. This questionnaire includes two demographic questions: the specialist major and the total years of experience with eloped girls; no personal identifiable information was asked for. In addition, there was one open-ended question about the possible factors related to girls' elopement: "In your opinion, what does adolescent girls' elopement mean? And what are the possible factors related to adolescent girls' elopement?" The specialists' answers were collected within two weeks, and they were categorized into five categories: adolescent girls' elopement, deviant friends and low religious faith, media and technology use, being in love and having fun, and family conflict and relationships (Table 2).

2.3. Model development

Analysis was initiated with the generation of a conceptual model based on the experts' answers and the related literature. The conceptual model hypothesized that deviant friends and low religious faith, media and technology use, being in love and having fun, and age are directly related to a girl's elopement. However, family conflict and relationships was not expected to have such a direct link with elopement. The Saudi family is responsible for teaching Islamic values and social control mechanisms, e.g. cohesion and integration (Metz, 1993), and one of its main features is the collective identity, i.e. loyalty to the tribe and extent of family honor (Thue, 1998). Therefore, it was not assumed that family conflict would be a direct factor in girls' elopement. However, the assumption here is that family conflict and relationships links to deviant friends (Dishion, Nelson, & Bullock, 2004) and also links to low religious faith (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003); and so relates indirectly to girls' elopement. In the language of SEM, family conflict and relationships provides an indirect link with elopement when deviant friends and low religious faith is a mediator. It can be seen, also, that the conceptual model assumed that deviant friends and low religious faith should be presented as a single factor since GPPVPV (2008) emphasized the strong association between them. The model hypothesized also a direct relationship between age and elopement, that is the chance of elopement among younger teenager girls may be higher than with their older peers, as some experts highlighted in the qualitative data (Fig. 1).

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