



## Early-married and sexually abused girls differ in their psychiatric outcomes



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### ABSTRACT

Early marriage and sexual abuse are the two of the most frequent types of childhood abuse. Although early marriage is also a type of sexual abuse, it is associated with different physical, social, and mental outcomes than sexual abuse alone. The purpose of this study was to compare early-married girls and sexually abused girls who were referred for forensic evaluation in Turkey in terms of their sociodemographic characteristics, mental disorder rates, and mental symptom severity. We included 63 adolescent girls for whom a judicial report had been demanded and who were under 15 years old when they were married but were not yet 18 years old during the evaluation ( $15.51 \pm 0.78$ ) and 72 sexually abused adolescent girls between 14 and 18 years old ( $15.80 \pm 1.10$ ) in this study. Following a psychiatric evaluation, the study participants completed the Child Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Reaction Index (CPTS-RI) and the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI). We used the Windows SPSS 16.0 software program to assess the results. At least one psychiatric disorder was determined in 44.4% of the early-married and 77.8% of the sexually abused cases ( $p < 0.001$ ). A diagnosis of PTSD or ASD was observed in 11.1% of the early-married cases and in 54.2% of the sexually abused victims ( $p < 0.001$ ). MDD was determined in 33.3% of the early-married cases and 56.9% of the sexually abused cases ( $p = 0.006$ ). The CPTS-RI scores of the sexually abused victims were higher than those of the early-married cases ( $p < 0.001$ ). All of the subscale scores of the BSI were higher in the sexually abused adolescents than in the early-married cases ( $p < 0.001$ ). Although early marriage has severe physical, social and mental outcomes, it is not as severe as sexual abuse in terms of psychiatric disorder rates and the psychiatric symptom severity it causes.

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### Introduction

Rooted in human history, child negligence and abuse are important public health problems, the extent of which is not precisely known because they usually remain a secret (Fallon et al., 2010; Teeuw, Derkx, Koster, & Van Rijn, 2012). Of all the types of negligence and abuse, sexual abuse is probably the most destructive for children and their families (Aktepe, 2009). Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, including prostitution, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening (Glaser, 2008). The global prevalence of the sexual abuse of children

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is constantly increasing. According to some social studies, 4–9% of men and 12–35% of women are exposed to this type of abuse before the age of 18 (Putnam, 2003).

One of the most frequent forms of child abuse worldwide is child marriage (UNICEF, 2005). Child marriage generally refers to the marriage of a child who is under 18 years of age (UNICEF, 2012; Nour, 2009). Because the majority of these marriages are performed without the conscious consent of the child, they are also defined as “early and forceful marriages” (Özcebe & Biçer, 2013). Early marriage interrupts the childhood of girls and takes away their fundamental rights such as being able to leave their parents of their own volition, freedom of expression, education, entertainment, playing games, and protection from sexual abuse (Santhya, 2011). Thus, child marriages are considered an abuse (Özcebe & Biçer, 2013).

Although many countries have legal arrangements for early marriage, these are not sufficient preventative measures, due to factors such as poverty and a need to reinforce social bonds and beliefs. Therefore, child marriages continue (Nour, 2006). It has been indicated that 36% of women worldwide between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before reaching the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2006). Moreover, in a 2008 study that focused on the Turkish population and health, it was determined that 14.0% of women between the ages of 20 and 24 were forced into marriage before reaching the age of 18 (Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies, 2009). According to the Turkish Civil Code, the marriage age is 17 for both women and men and is 16 in cases that are judicially determined to be urgent (Turkish Civil Code, 2001). However, the Turkish Penal Code does not include any guidance to individuals who marry before reaching this age. In the event of discovering early marriages, if those involved are not 15 years old, the marriages are regarded as “sexual child abuse” and punishments are given on this basis (Turkish Penal Code, 2004).

The literature includes a number of studies that have examined the mental effects of sexual abuse on children and adolescents (Bedi et al., 2011; Bernard-Bonnin, Hébert, Daignault, & Allard-Dansereau, 2008; Dube et al., 2005; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; McLeer, Deblinger, Henry, & Orvaschel, 1992; Mullers & Dowling, 2008). Sexual abuse in children may result in psychiatric disorders including behavioral problems, anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal behavior, borderline personality disorder, depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Hornor, 2010). In contrast, the studies that have been conducted on early marriages have generally focused on the social, sexual, and pregnancy problems of these marriages (Clark, Bruce, & Dude, 2006; Ertem, Saka, Ceylan, Değer, & Çiftçi, 2008; Nour, 2009; Santhya, 2011). Juristically, early marriage is evaluated as sexual abuse in Turkey, and the judicial process is conducted accordingly (Turkish Penal Code, 2004). However, social values and cultural beliefs have normalized early marriages in some regions of Turkey, where they are frequently observed (Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Committee on Equality of Opportunity for Women and Men, 2009). Moreover, the individuals involved are exposed to sexual abuse and a number of psychosocial stressors associated with early marriage (Nour, 2009). Early marriage is also assessed as sexual abuse; however, we hypothesized that its mental, physical, and social outcomes differ from those of sexual abuse due to the reasons mentioned earlier. Because early marriage is normalized by a section of society, we expected the rates of mental disorders and the severity of mental symptoms to be lower in these cases than in cases of sexual abuse alone. Thus, in this study conducted in Turkey, we compared girls who had been forced into early marriage and had experienced similar forensic and mental evaluations with sexually abused girls in terms of their sociodemographic characteristics, rates of psychiatric disorders caused by a traumatic event and severity of psychiatric symptoms.

## Method

### *Study Population*

The study included 63 early-married girls, who had been sent to the Child Psychiatry Outpatient Department of Gaziantep Children's Hospital, Turkey for treatment and a judicial report between 1 June 2011 and 31 December 2012, and 72 sexually abused girls, who had been sent to the same hospital for the same reasons between 1 June 2012 and 31 December 2012. The early marriage group consisted of girls who were not yet 15 years old when they married and who were younger than 18 during the evaluation. The sexually abused group was composed of girls in the same age group who had been exposed to sexual abuse including touching (penetration, petting, sexual touching, and being forced into prostitution). In the clinical evaluation, the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (Wechsler, 1974) or Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale – Fourth Edition (Wechsler, 2008) was administered to girls who were thought to have an intellectual disability. An intellectual disability was not determined in any of the girls who had been forced into early marriage. In the sexually abused group, the 7 girls who were found to have an intellectual disability were not included in the study. Of those forced into early marriage, 4 gave the answer “none” to all of the questions in the Child Posttraumatic Stress Reaction Index and Brief Symptom Inventory, which was inconsistent with the findings of the psychiatric examination. Because these 4 girls were thought to be hiding their symptoms, they were not included in the study.

### *Materials*

*Sociodemographic Information Form.* This form, which was generated by those conducting the study based on a review of the current literature, asked the participants to provide information regarding their sociodemographic characteristics, education, family characteristics, the educational levels of their parents, their history of smoking and alcohol or substance use, and having been forced into marriage or abuse.

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