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Agency of Children From Ankara-Türkiye Whose Mothers Married Early: "I Would Never get Married at an Early Age"

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Abstract

The agency of children whose mothers married early and the role of their families in such agency are unknown. To contribute to the production of such knowledge, the research has focused on an interpretive re-production approach and the intra-family generational context. The main aim of the study is to discover how their mothers' and the mother's children' agency is in the context of early marriage, and thus to reveal the role of their families of origin in their mothers' and their children' agency. Semi-structured interview forms were employed to conduct in-depth interviews with these children, and Creswell's (2021) 'data analysis spiral' stages were followed in the thematic analysis of the data. Although traditional culture of adults plays a prominent role in the agency of mothers at a very early age, this study is the first sample of breaking away from the tradition of early marriage. Not only from the child's perspective, but also within the family and societal context to which the child belongs, changes in the fiction of child, childhood and young adulthood play a significant role in these children's and their families' opposition to early marriage. This has also shown that children's agency in the context of early marriage lies in the intersection of the intentions and expectations specific to both adult culture and the culture of these children. This research is the first initiative to provide answers as to why families should be the focus in expanding the agency of children in the context of early marriage, and it may guide future research.

Keywords Agency · Children · Early marriage · Family · Generation · Mother

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1 Introduction

Marrying under the age of eighteen is a significant issue on the agenda of many scientific fields, particularly childhood and youth studies. It threatens certain individual and societal values and requires numerous protective, preventive, and rehabilitative interventions. Globally, 19% of women have experienced this issue (UNICEF, 2025). In countries like West and Central Africa where it's less likely that the minimum age for marriage is set at eighteen, rates are high (Arthur et al., 2018; Ebetürk, 2021; UNICEF, 2025).

Studies in China (Fan et al., 2022), the US (Hamilton, 2020; Koski & Heymann, 2018; Wahi et al., 2019), Canada (Koski & Clark, 2021) and the UK (Gangoli et al., 2009) show that these marriages are global and independent of a country's welfare level (O'Quinn, 2019, 2021).

Global indicators for these marriages in recent years include the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Atiqul Haq et al., 2024; Rahiem, 2021; Rawat & Sehrawat, 2022; Rodge et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2021a), extreme weather events associated with climate change (Pope et al., 2023; Asare & Forkuor, 2024; Doherty et al., 2024; Gambir et al., 2024; Ortensi et al., 2025; Pastén et al., 2024; Subramanian, 2025), conflict and displacement (Howe, 2025; Mieth et al., 2025).

The grey literature on under-eighteen marriages is based on studies of adults who had such marriages as children (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2021; UNICEF, 2021a, b, c, UNICEF, 2025). For example, UNICEF reports (2021b, 2025) on under- eighteen marriage statistics are based on the early marriages of adults aged 20–24 at the time of the research. Research in Türkiye shows that the age group of 15 + is evaluated collectively in terms of these marriages, placing the adult perspective at the forefront (Ergöçmen et al., 2020; TurkStat, 2022). This perspective may fall short in understanding the changing aspects of early marriage specific to the period, time, society and conditions in which it takes place.

However, studies conducted with adult women who married at an early age in different countries show that the communities these women live in are characterised by intersecting social and societal gender norms, low status, poverty, illiteracy rates, and religious tendencies. Therefore, it is understood that the culture of adults specific to the time and societal context in which these women experienced early marriage plays an important role in their agency (Al-Hakami & McLaughlin, 2016; Apatinga et al., 2023; Baraka et al., 2022). Ferdousi, 2014; Ibupoto et al., 2018; Madut, 2020; Jailobaeva et al., 2024; Shah et al., 2022; Yulkardi, 2018; Lowe et al., 2025; Ngidi et al., 2025).

Similarly, in Türkiye, poverty, low educational attainment, gender inequality, domestic violence, and religious tendencies are important contextual factors in women's early marriages during childhood (Akçay et al., 2024; Avcil, 2020; Burcu et al., 2015; CalpŞen, 2018; Çağırkan, 2018; Erkan & Yıldız, 2014; Günen & Tacoğlu, 2017; Salik et al., 2024; Tuna-Uysal et al., 2019; Tuna-Uysal, 2024). In fact, the common thread in these studies is the influence of traditional culture within the family in these marriages. However, focusing solely on traditional culture in such families may lead one to believe that children in these families are vulnerable or at risk in terms of these marriages.

Some studies conducted in Türkiye (Burcu et al., 2015; Erkan et al., 2014; Tuna-Uysal et al., 2019; Yakıt Ak et al., 2025) have determined that mothers who married under the age of eighteen expect their children to pursue education and career goals and thus have a profession rather than marry at an early age. As there are no research focusing on children whose mothers married before the age of eighteen, we aimed to explore these children's agency in the context of their intentions to marry early within the intersectionality of intra-family generational expectations.

The article starts by examining the diversity in terminology surrounding marriages involving individuals under the age of eighteen. It then explains why these marriages are conceptualised as 'early marriages in Türkiye'. It then focuses on the CRC (1989) and discusses why a child's agency appears to lie in the intersection of adult and child culture in the context of 'being the child of early marriage'. Thus, it provides for childhood sociologists valuable information on children's agency in the context of early marriage, based on changing perceptions of child(hood), youth, young adult(hood) within families and societies.

1.1 Why is Early Marriage in Türkiye?

Marriages under the age of eighteen may be forced, voluntary in cases such as elopement, or informal like religious marriages (Burcu et al., 2015; Doğancı & Tuncay, 2022; Doherty et al., 2024; Horii, 2020a, b; Kenny et al., 2019). Umbrella terms such as "child marriage," "early marriage," "forced marriage," or "child, early, and forced marriage" are used for the marriages (United Nations General Assembly, 2023; Ergöçmen et al., 2020; UN Women, 2021; UNHRC, 2014; UNICEF, 2005). The combined use of the terms "child," "early," and "forced marriage" may veil the distinctions between these three different concepts (Efevbera ve Bhabha, 2020).

Common conceptualisation of child marriage as early and forced marriage during childhood stems from the lack of an easily measurable common definition of child marriage (Koski et al., 2024). The reason for this is based on the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC, 2014) using the term "child marriage" in accordance with the definition of a child specified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989; section I, article I). This definition covers marriages or unions where at least one of the parties is under the age of eighteen (UNHRC, 2014; United Nations General Assembly, 2023). Furthermore, the minimum and universal age for marriage is eighteen eighteen eighteen eighteen eighteen (0 CEDAW, 1994; CRC, 2003). The concept of child marriage is also used for these marriages in some sociological studies (Jones et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2019; Yount et al., 2016).

Taking into account that these marriages are common among girls, some researchers use the term "girl marriage" instead of "child marriage" (Efevbera & Bhabha, 2020; Paul, 2019). However, it is inappropriate to use the concepts of child and marriage together, as these marriages constitute a violation of the child's human rights and the parent-child relationship is terminated for such an inappropriate purpose. Because marriage, as in Türkiye, is tied to the beliefs and values of society and carries positive connotations (van Coller, 2017). The use of the terms 'child marriage' or 'girl child marriage' for marriages under the age of eighteen is therefore concerning

in the context that it serves a discourse and language that normalises the harm done to these children, and even generates, increases and persists violence against them. This research has chosen not to use the terms child, girl and marriage together in order to avoid the emotional connotations of the concepts of child marriage and girl marriage in this context (Miedema et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the conceptualisation of these marriages as forced marriages generally focuses on the consent of the parties. The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC, 2014) conceptualises 'forced marriages' as marriages that cannot be terminated due to coercion or severe social and family pressure. Some activists and NGOs, such as Equality Now (2014), prefer the term 'forced marriage' for such marriages. However, as sociological studies (Kenny et al., 2019; Lokot et al., 2022) have shown, these marriages may be 'adolescent-led marriages' in the context of children's intensions and decisions. The study of Doğancı and Tuncay (2022) has also shown that these marriages can be love/elopement/consensual and therefore may be child-led in Türkiye. For this reason, the concept of forced marriage has not been preferred for marriages involving individuals under the age of eighteen in the present study.

To understand the dynamics of early marriage and discover why these marriages occur early, there is a need to develop a definition of early marriage (Koski et al., 2024). This is because the concept of early marriage is a relative one, linked not only to local marriage customs but also to perceptions and interpretations of child, childhood, youth and young adulthood. The present study, which focuses on understanding why and how these marriages are considered early from the perspective of a group of children in Türkiye, primarily examines the legal context underpinning such marriages.

In Türkiye, according to the Turkish Penal Code (2004, Articles 103 & 104), those under the age of 15 are considered children, while according to the Child Protection Law (2005, article 3) and under the Turkish Civil Code (2001, article 124), those under the age of 17 are considered children. Although the minimum age for marriage is eighteen (Turkish Civil Code, 2021), in exceptional circumstances such as pregnancy, children may marry after reaching the age of 16 with the consent of their parents or legal guardians.

In UNICEF reports, particularly those from the 2000s (UNICEF, 2005; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001), only informal marriages or unions involving individuals under the age of eighteen, such as official or religious marriages, are defined as early marriage. The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC, 2014) has stated that early marriage encompasses not only marriages of individuals under the age of eighteen, but also marriages of individuals over this age who are not ready for marriage, taking into account factors such as lack of information about their level of development and life choices.

This study examined the minimum biological age limit for marriage (eighteen years) established by Türkiye (Turkish Civil Code, 2001) and international organisations (CEDAW, 1994; CRC, 2003; United Nations General Assembly, 2023) for marriage and the definition of a child for individuals below this age (CRC, 1989). Thus, marriages under the age of eighteen in Türkiye were considered as early marriages, and when identifying children participating in the study, the criterion of their mothers having married under the age of eighteen was applied.

However, in the current study, in understanding what constitutes early marriage for the children, not only age but also the concepts of child, childhood, youth and young adulthood were taken into account. Thus, although eighteen is the minimum age for marriage in Türkiye and those under this age are considered children, it was thought that the children participating in this study might describe not only marriages under the age of eighteen but also those above eighteen as early. Therefore, the marriages of their mothers under the age of eighteen were classified as early, and it was sought to discover which marriages the children themselves defined as early.

1.2 Children's Agency Within the Intrafamilial Generational Context

In assessing children's agencies, who the child is constitutes a key focus (Lokot et al., 2021). The CRC (1989) is an important reference point for understanding who the child is. In the CRC (1989), the child is seen as someone who negotiates by following various stages of development on the path to becoming a rational and independent individual, as required by an individualistic culture (Wyness, 2018).

The CRC (1989) emphasises voice-based rights such as the right to be heard, freedom of thought and expression, and the right to be listened to under children's individual capacities (Articles 12, 13, 15). This implies that, given the opportunity, all children can act in their own best interests and are therefore, in a sense, autonomous and competent citizens capable of making sound decisions. However, since not all children are part of an individualistic culture, assessing children, particularly those in the Global South, based on competencies within the scope of these rights may lead to a failure to take into account the living conditions, social, economic and historical contexts in which they grow up (Reynaert et al., 2009).

On the other hand, children are expected to exercise their right to participation in a manner appropriate to their age and maturity (Spyrou, 2018). However, in some countries, girls marry or are married off for various reasons after reaching puberty, and in some cases even before puberty (Dhankhar, 2018; Wibowo et al., 2021). Even if women marry at an early age of their own free will, choice, or decision (Abera et al., 2020; Bebitova & Güner-Emül, 2018; El-Gazzar et al., 2020; Köseli & Çelik, 2020; Qahar et al., 2024; Taplak & Yılmaz, 2022; Yount et al., 2016) are exposed to physical, sexual, emotional and economic violence, health risks associated with early pregnancy (Agege et al., 2018; Kamal & Ulas, 2021; Menon et al., 2018; Zgambo, 2022) and child-rearing problems (Mieth et al., 2025).

Furthermore, these marriages may lead to suicide attempts or suicide among the women, psychological stress among their husbands, and health problems among their newborn babies (Aslan-Cevheroğlu & Tutarel-Kışlak, 2022; Irani & Latifnejad-Roudsari, 2019; Susilo et al., 2021; Gage, 2013; Koçtürk et al., 2018). These marriages, which constitute a public health issue when perpetuated across generations and pose a significant obstacle to gender equality and sustainable development, reduce the welfare level of societies (Dağ et al., 2021; Efevbera & Bhabha, 2020; UNICEF, 2021b; Warria, 2019). Therefore, when children are actively involved in decision-making processes concerning matters that affect their own lives, such as early marriage, it can be inferred that they are unaware of the consequences of marriage or hold incorrect assumptions about it. Such an inference may also raise the

question of whether these children are competent and mature enough to make the decision to marry (Horii, 2020a). Accordingly, as indicated in the study by Lokot and colleagues (2022), shifting from an outcome-focused understanding of action to an approach that focuses on the intentions of those performing the action may be more productive.

The intentions underlying children's agency are not independent of familial, structural, spatial, and environmental factors (Abebe, 2019) and, consequently, adults (Liebel, 2012). Hence, children's agency in the context of early marriage requires careful analysis in relation to adults' expectations of children.

According to Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. However, narratives of child marriage from women in Türkiye (Bayhantopçu, 2024; Burcu et al., 2015; UN Women, 2021) also show that the influence or pressure of adults in the family, such as the mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, brother, or relatives such as aunts, uncles, or cousins, can be seen in the decision to marry.

It can be said that fear and respect for authoritarian husbands and fathers are influential in decisions to marry early or to obey such marriages, particularly in families affected by intergenerational power relations and where gender role expectations are prominent (Burcu et al., 2015; UN Women, 2021). Therefore, the generational structure or generational position within the family may be significant in the agency of these children (Alanen, 2001a, b). Such a position may be meaningful within a system of relationships structured as material processes or practices (Alanen, 2001a, b, 2009). This position can be reproduced through the mutually dependent relationships between children and adults (Alanen, 2001a, b). However, while hierarchical relationships based on generational structure between adults and children affect the agency of both adults and children, the expectations of the family or parents towards their children may also change (Leonard, 2009, 2016, 2020).

In a study conducted in Brazil, Guatemala, and Honduras (Taylor et al., 2019), found that when families promoted compliance with social norms among unmarried girls, thereby restricting their agency, the girls exhibited either 'oppositional' (rejecting social norms) or 'compliant' (embracing patriarchal values and conforming to them) agency. Murphy-Graham & Leal's (2015) study in Honduras revealed that girls' agency can be simultaneously weak, opportunistic, and oppositional. This also demonstrates that even those considered powerless have the ability to act (Ahern, 2001). Contexts such as age, gender, poverty, place of residence, generational structure, generational order and generational relations can thin or thicken children's agency by limiting or expanding their range of choices (Klocker, 2007). As our research also acknowledges, under the influence of these restrictive or supportive contexts, children's agency may vary in the intersectionality of a series of expectations and intentions specific to their daily lives.

1.3 Children's Agency in the Context of Interpretative Reproduction

Social media has significantly influenced the culture of children and adolescents, particularly in terms of friendships and romantic relationships (Hatchel & Subrahman-

yam, 2018; Raghunandan, 2018). Increased access to media (Mehra et al., 2018), the internet, and smartphone use (Horii, 2020b; Kenny et al., 2019; Lokot et al., 2022) plays a significant role in shaping intergenerational differences, particularly in the context of early marriage, thereby expanding children's agency.

Research in Bali (Horii, 2020b), Somaliland, and Puntland (Kenny et al., 2019) has found that access to technology expands children's social networks and enables them to exercise agency in managing their romantic and sexual relationships despite the power dynamics within families and local communities. This also shows that today's children can choose their marriage partners based on different intentions and expectations, even if these decisions conflict with adult preferences, or they can elope with these partners (Horii, 2020a). When considered as a process involving the circulation of meanings that form the basis of these intentions and preferences, children's culture refers to the daily thoughts, feelings and actions that shape their lives (Hengst, 2005).

Corsaro (Corsaro, 1997; Corsaro et al., 2002) proposes the concept of interpretive reproduction as an alternative to the term socialisation. According to this approach, children create culture together with adults and their peers during this process. Therefore, children create their own unique peer cultures and participate in them by incorporating the knowledge they receive from adults into various areas of society, such as politics, economics, culture, religion, profession, and education, primarily within their families (Corsaro, 1997; Corsaro et al., 2002; Corsaro & Johannesen, 2007).

Corsaro (2000) uses the concept of peer culture in the context of activities or routines, values and interests that children produce and share in interaction with their peers. From this perspective, Corsaro (1997) emphasises children's agency in their reproductions and participation in their own peer cultures. Thus, Corsaro (Corsaro, 1997, 2000; Corsaro et al., 2002) does not view children in the production of peer culture as individuals who learn by imitation or who are passive recipients of socialisation and therefore adopt the adult world without questioning or interpreting it. On the contrary, he recognises them as individuals who creatively extract, interpret, reinterpret, and discover the appropriate information from adult culture. It conceptualises such a process as reproduction. The interpretative concept in this approach emphasises the innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in society.

Recent studies (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2022; Tisdall & Cuevas Parra, 2020) have also shown that if children are given the opportunity, they actually become agents who question the traditional structure of adult culture within the context of early marriage and are not candidates of early marriage.

However, as noted in Horii's work (2020a; 2020c), emphasising 'traditional culture' or 'harmful traditions' in such marriage may lead to family members who marry early being characterised as individuals governed by traditional culture. That is why, in this study, rather than attributing the traditional culture that is prominent in their mothers' early marriages to their children, we focus on an interpretive re-production approach and claim that these mothers' children are not merely a product of this adult culture. We explore children's thoughts and intentions regarding early marriage within the context of their own cultures, as well as adults' expectations of child-age mothers and these children regarding early marriage from the children's perspective.

Thus, we assert that the agency of children in families where the mother had married early is not individual, but rather intersectional with adult and child culture.

The primary aim of this research is to explore how children whose mothers married early evaluate this marriage, how their mothers' and the mother's children' agency is in the context of early marriage, and thus to reveal the role of their families of origin in their mothers' and their children' agency. In order to achieve the aim, answers were sought to the following research questions:

RQ1. How do children make sense of early marriage?
RQ2. How do children assess their mothers' agency in the context of early marriage and the role of their mothers' families of origin in this agency?
*RQ3.*How do children assess whether their mothers give them advice about early marriage or not?
*RQ4.*How do children assess their own agency in the context of early marriage?

2 Method

2.1 Participants and Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative research method. Due to the restrictions imposed during the pandemic, most of the in-depth interviews (with thirteen participants) were conducted online via digital platforms such as Zoom without turning on the camera; only two interviews were conducted face-to-face. In these interviews, a semi-structured interview form was used, which included the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants and their families (Table 1) and the children's perspectives on their mothers' early marriages. In the semi-structured interview form, children were asked when and at what age marriage is considered early, along with the reasons why, in order to discover how they make sense of early marriage (RQ1).

Furthermore, children were asked questions regarding RQ2, such as why their mothers married before the age of eighteen, what or who influenced the decision to marry, the appropriateness of the age of marriage, the reasons for its appropriateness or inappropriateness, the reasons why such a marriage was considered early, and the reasons why it was not considered early. To determine how children assessed whether their mothers gave them advice about early marriage or not (RQ3), the interview form asked children what advice they had received, if any, and what they thought about it.

Finally, in the semi-structured interview form, children were asked whether marrying before the age of eighteen would be appropriate for them in order to seek answers to RQ4. Since all children stated that they would not marry if they were in their mothers' position, they were asked how they would react and challenge such a situation if it were to arise for them.

Early marriages are more common in Central Anatolia (21.4 per cent) and in Ankara (13.0 per cent), one of the three major cities (Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir) in Türkiye (TurkStat, 2022). Therefore, the study's purposeful sample consisted of 15 children living in Ankara, the capital of Türkiye, whose mothers had married early

Table 1 Introductory information about the participants, their families and parents

Code name	Child's level of education	Child's school type	Family type	Economic status of the family	Place where mother and father met - kinship status	Parents' age at marriage	Education level of parents	Continuation of mother's education after marriage	Occupation of parents
P1-F-17	High school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	As much as we can afford	Rural-Not relatives	17–24	Secondary school-Postgraduate	-	Housewife-Retired accountant
P2-M-15	High school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	Quite good	Rural-Relatives	17–23	Primary school- Secondary school-	-	Housewife-Retired worker
P3-M-17	High school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	As much as we can afford	Rural-Not relatives	17–23	Primary school-Primary school	-	Housewife - Tradesman
P4-M-15	High school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	Bad right now	Urban- Not relatives	17–23	High school -Primary school	-	Housewife-Worker
P5-M-16	High school-ongoing	Private	Nuclear	As much as we can afford	Urban- Not relatives	17–24	Associate- High school	Yes	Medical secretary -Retired hospital employee
P6-F-15	High school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	As much as we can afford	Urban- Relatives	17–24	High school- High school	-	Housewife -Electrical technician
P7-F-14	Secondary school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	As much as we can afford	Rural-Not relatives	16–22	Primary school- Secondary school-	-	Housewife-Worker
P8-M-16	High school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	Quite good	Rural-Relatives	16–24	Secondary school–High school	Yes	Housewife - Civil servant
P9-F-14	High school-ongoing	Private	Single parent	Quite good	Urban- Not relatives	17–26	High school- High school	-	Private school manager - Tradesman
P10-F-14	High school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	As much as we can afford	Urban- Relatives	15–16	Literate- Secondary school	-	Part-time dishwasher-reception worker in a hotel
P11-M-15	High school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	As much as we can afford	Rural-Not relatives	17–26	High school- High school	Yes	Housewife-Bus driver
P12-F-17	High school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	Bad right now	Urban- Not relatives	16–20	Literate- Secondary school	-	Part-time House cleaner –Part-time worker

Table 1 (continued)

Code name	Child's level of education	Child's school type	Family type	Economic status of the family	Place where mother and father met - kinship status	Parents' age at marriage	Education level of parents	Continuation of mother's education after marriage	Occupation of parents
P13-F-16	High school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	As much as we can afford	Urban- Not relatives	17–24	Primary school- High school	-	Housewife - Tradesman
P14-F-14	High school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	Quite good	Urban- Relatives	16–23	High school- High school	Yes	School bus service mother-Dental technician
P15-F-15	High school-ongoing	Public	Nuclear	As much as we can afford	Rural-Not relatives	17–23	Secondary school–High school	-	Housewife-Electrical technician

P Participant, *F* Female, *M* Male, 14,15,16,17: The ages of children

and who knew their mothers' age at marriage and their experiences of the early marriage process.

Social workers and teachers in the public sector who provide professional support to participants were identified as key individuals, and other participants were reached through them, thus utilising the snowball technique. Once it was confirmed that sufficient data had been collected to answer the four research questions, i.e. once information power (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was achieved, the data collection process was terminated.

In this study, one of the 15 children had lost his father. Before starting to collect data, it was learned that this child might not want to answer some questions about his father when permission was sought from his mother. The child did not wish to answer certain questions (occupation, level of education, age at marriage to mother, place where he met his mother) about his father, so this information was obtained from his mother. The fact that this information was obtained from the mother rather than the child constituted a significant limitation of the study.

The participants consisted of six males and nine females aged between fifteen and seventeen residing in Ankara. During the study, only one participant attended secondary school, while the others were in sixth form. Two participants were enrolled in private schools, while the rest attended state schools. Most participants lived in nuclear families, and only one child lived in a single-parent family due to the death of his father. Most participants described their families' economic situation as 'as much as we can afford'. Eight of the mothers met their husbands in the city, while the others met their husbands in rural areas. The participants' mothers' early marriage ages ranged from 15 to 17 (mean: 16.6), while their fathers' marriage ages ranged from 16 to 26 (mean: 20.3).

One of the children's mothers was literate, while the others had completed primary, secondary or high school. Some mothers had continued their education after marriage with the support of their husbands. Most of the mothers were housewives or worked in low-status jobs, while the fathers had at least a primary school education and some had postgraduate degrees. The vast majority of fathers worked full-time, while only one father worked part-time (Table 1).

2.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were adhered to before, during, and after data collection for the study. Prior to conducting in-depth interviews, ethical committee approval was obtained from the Hacettepe University Ethics Committee on 14 August 2017 with decision number 5177. Permission was obtained from both the participants and their parents, as all participants were under the age of eighteen. If only one parent of a participant is alive, consent was obtained from that parent; if both parents of the participant are alive, consent was obtained from both parents. During this process, both participants and their parents were informed about the purpose and content of the study, and their verbal and written consent was obtained. As the participants were children, care was taken to ensure that they did not suffer any psychological, emotional or social harm during the interviews.

Participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The two in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted at a location and time convenient for the children and their families. Furthermore, with the consent of all participants and their families, the interviews were audio recorded. The confidentiality of participants was ensured by assigning each a code name such as P1-F-17, P2-M-15 (P: participant, F: female, M: male, 17 and 15: children's ages).

2.3 Data Analysis Procedure

This research employed thematic analysis as the method of data analysis and Creswell's (2021) 'data analysis spiral' five-step process: (i) During the preparation of data, the interviews were transcribed and the Maxqda programme used for data analysis, along with the transcripts of the in-depth interviews, along with the field notes and the non-participant observation notes. (ii) In order to memo emergent ideas, these observations notes and transcripts were read many times, and the data was pre-coded in Maxqda. (iii) Codes were subsequently created in the cycle of describing, classifying, and interpreting the data. While searching for codes and themes within a specific context of the data, the data were identified, developed, and interpreted in the light of the researchers' own views and the literature (Creswell, 2021). During his cycle, the researchers used Strauss & Corbin's (1998) open, axial, and selective coding approach, while coding in Maxqda according to the goal of the research. The "action of not getting married early", as stated by all participants in open coding, was chosen as the central phenomenon of the research. Thus, the child's views related to the central phenomenon determined in 'open coding', were searched by 'axial coding'.

The codes and sub-codes were also rearranged based on additional interviews with the participants when deemed necessary. Therefore, by performing 'axial coding', these codes were combined strategically, and the codes and sub-codes were associated. 'Selective coding' was used to integrate and synthesize the codes and subthemes determined by 'axial coding'. As a result, the codes, sub-codes, themes, and sub-themes were re-examined and synthesized. Hierarchical code-subcode model and code relations model were used to reveal the code and subcode relationships that comprise each emerging theme and subtheme. In the fourth stage of the data analysis spiral (iv), the data were interpreted for abstractions regarding broader meanings beyond codes and themes. In the last stage of the data analysis spiral, the resulting data was visualised and presented as in Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. The final form of the data analysis coding and sub-coding is presented in these figures. The heading at the top of the figure indicates the themes, the headings below the theme represent the sub-themes, the headings below these sub-themes refer to the codes, and the headings below these codes refer to the sub-codes. The dashed connection lines in the arrows in the figures represent the intensity of co-occurrence between subcodes. The boldness of the lines indicates the intensity of the relationship between subcodes (MAXQDA, 2024).

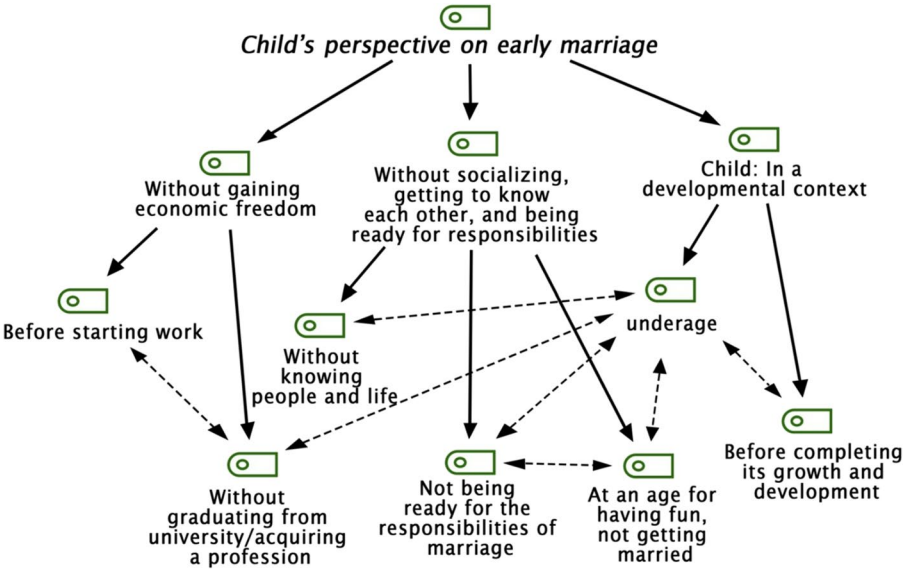

Fig. 1 Model for the theme "child's perspective on early marriage

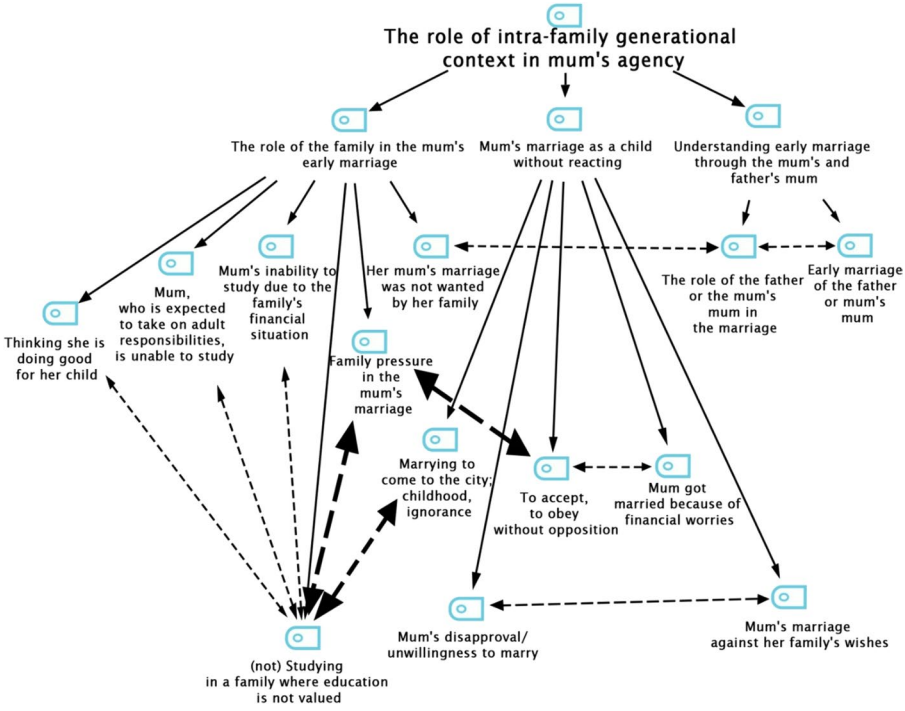

Fig. 2 Model for the theme "the role of intra-family generational context in mum's agency"

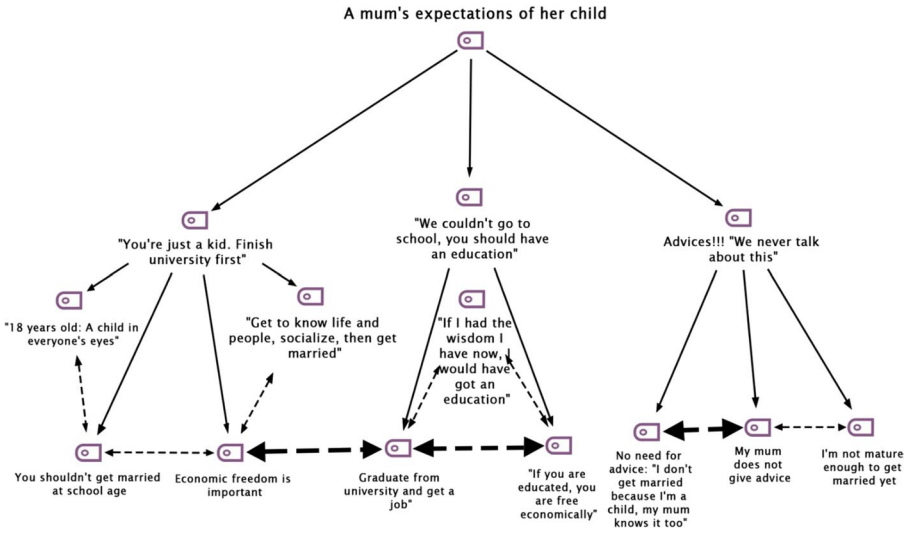

Fig. 3 Model for the theme "a mum's expectations of her child'

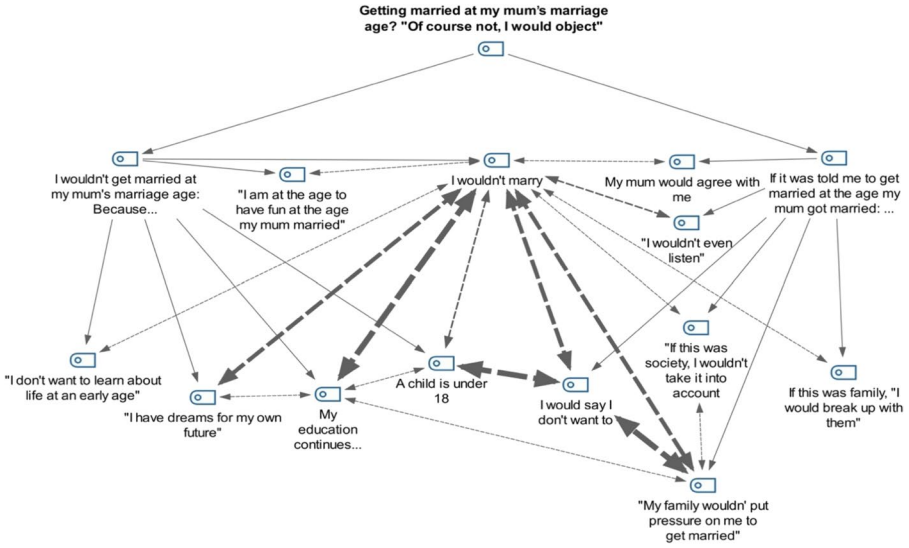

Fig. 4 Model for the theme "getting married at my mum's marriage age? 'Of course not, I would object'

3 Results

3.1 Early Marriage by Children

Within the scope of the first research question (RQ1) of the study, the meaning children attributed to age was important in exploring what early marriage meant. In fact,

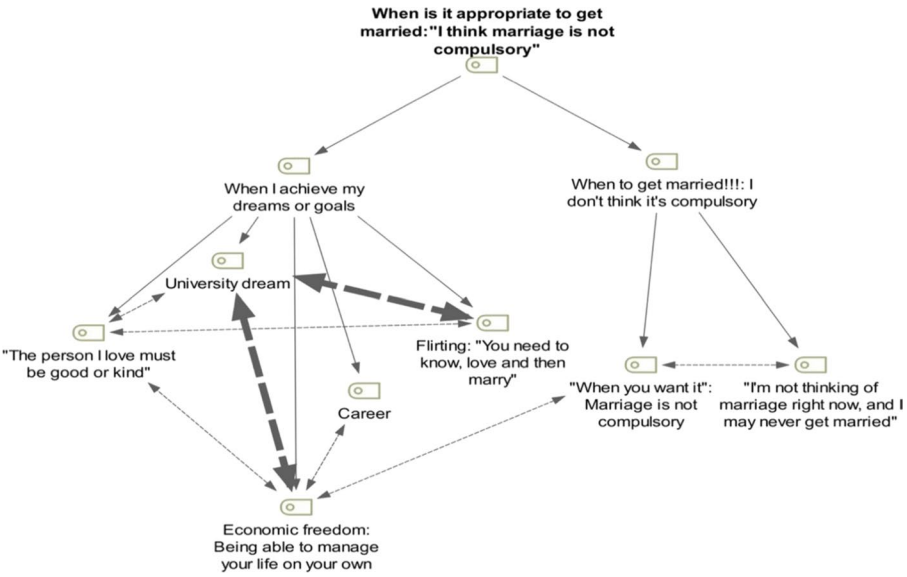

Fig. 5 Model for the theme "when is it appropriate to get married: 'I don't think marriage is compulsory'

as they themselves were under eighteen years of age, they answered by considering early marriage at this age in their own context, and a theme emerged (Fig. 1).

Some children defined under eighteen as early due to incomplete growth and cognitive/mental development.

> *'Because they're not mature yet, they're still children in my opinion, their brains aren't fully developed, they don't know what they're doing… A person must be fully developed physically and mentally…'* (P12-F-17).

> *"When we say eighteen, we are considered adults, but I think even then, the likelihood of us not being able to make the right decisions is very high"* (P14-F-14).

On the other hand, as a girl child (P1-F-17) clearly stated, a child under the age of eighteen is actually at an age when they need the economic, emotional and psychological support of their parents. Therefore, according to this child, a girl or boy cannot bear the burden of responsibilities specific to the social gender roles expected of them at this age. This also showed that early marriage was related to not being prepared in childhood for the material and spiritual responsibilities of marriage, both inside and outside the home.

> *"……Both psychologically and spiritually, as well as financially… responsibilities fall on us. After all, we have to support the household, and at the same time, I think both sides have a duty to carry out the housework… I mean, as I said, when our family is doing everything, suddenly all the responsibility falls on us… At 17, since secondary school isn't finished yet, there are financial difficulties at first. We can't start working immediately, and we're not at an age to*

start a family. Spiritually, I also think… I said she shouldn't be separated from her family… So, the longing and sadness stem from the fact that they're still at an age where they need their parents, and being suddenly separated from them inevitably has an impact, I think" (P1-F-17).

Although one becomes an adult at the age of eighteen, for all participants, marrying before the age of 20 (20–29) was actually considered early, and the reason for this was that it seemed to be related to the goals that children wanted to achieve at this age. For example, as P13-F-17 stated, not being able to finish university and not having a profession at this age meant that economic independence could not be achieved, which was an important contextual factor in qualifying this marriage as early, both for themselves and their peers. These children, as the interpretive reproduction approach also suggests, actually valued taking control of their own lives. Therefore, they described marrying without having such control themselves as early.

"Getting married in your early twenties is too early… and I don't think he would be able to grasp it (marriage) anyway, even if he were of age, he would struggle in marriage…" (P4-M-15).

" … So, after graduating from university, that is, after getting a job, marriage is possible" (P13-F-16).

On the other hand, P3-M-17 considered getting married in the early twenties to be too early, as it would bring with it responsibilities such as raising children and would restrict the individual's freedon. For P5-M-16, marrying at this early ages was not ideal; instead, socialising and getting to know the person they would marry was seen as the ideal path to marriage.

"Well, you know, getting married… travelling, doing things, living your life, I think so, because you get married early, you have children, you have to look after your children, you're married, it affects your hours at home. In that sense, it's early, very early… I mean, officially, you're still a child (P3-M-17).

"…learning through experience, getting to know the people around you, meeting other people and forming relationships, then marriage—a certain amount of time is needed to be more prepared" (P5-M-16).

In describing marriages in the early twenties as early, children prioritised 'education' and 'economic freedom' before taking on adult roles and responsibilities through marriage. Moreover, their narratives specific to their own and their peers' culture—such as socialising, living life, enjoying freedom, having fun, and getting to know the person they will marry—pointed to a central orientation specific to youth or young adulthood for their present and near future.

3.2 The Role of the Intrafamilial Generational Context in the Mothers' Agency

The representation of children is not a concept that can be assessed solely by focusing on the CRC (1989) in an individual context, such as age, maturity, competence, choice and decision-making. As this research also demonstrates, the agency of mothers who married at a child age may not be a capability that they can exercise on their own, without considering the support, acceptance, and expectations of adults (Lansdown, 2009). Therefore, it was desired to explore the role of children's mothers' parents in the mothers' early marriages (RQ2), and a theme emerged (Fig. 2).

It is understood that the mothers of the children had marriages that were legitimised by their mothers' families of origin, their mothers' local communities, and by society at large at the time of their marriage. Indeed, the fact that some children's (P2-M-15 and P3-M-17) grandmothers and some children's (P1-F-17) grandfathers did not react to these marriages was related to the fact that these marriages were also experienced by neighbours in the place where both parents lived. The pressure of the mothers' families of origin, particularly those experiencing poverty or economic insecurity, for such a marriage promoted compliant agency in the mothers. Furthermore, this situation appeared to entail an unquestionable obligation transmitted from generation to generation within the patriarchal family.

"So they're making decisions without asking her… I mean, my mum was going to study at university and be in a higher department, but because they did this without asking my mum (meaning they married her off due to family pressure), my mother is naturally disappointed, so she's getting married" (P4-M-15).

"She gave her consent for the marriage, but she was only 17, so what could she do? I think it was out of necessity… Well, she couldn't read, so she had nothing to work with, so where would she work, you know? It was entirely due to a lack of income, and besides, the family wanted this anyway (meaning they wanted her to marry instead of studying), so I don't think she could have objected because she was only 17, what could she have said?" (P9-M-14).

In this study, it was found that most girls (P1-F-17, P7-F-14, P9-F-14, P13-F-16 and P14-F-14) and boys (P3-M-17, P4-M-15 and P11-M-15) had mothers whose mothers or fathers' mothers had also married early. It was understood that early marriages were passed down from generation to generation, particularly in families with poor economic circumstances, and that participants' mothers, through grandmothers who were influential in the generational order, exhibited compliant agency to get married early. Alternatively, it could be stated that mothers in similar circumstances who viewed marriage as an opportunity to gain better prospects demonstrated opportunistic agency.

"My father's mother first talked to my mother's mother and found out my mother's age, then my mother's mother spoke to my mother. My father's mother then told her son, 'There's this girl who would be good for our family.' My father's mother and my mother's mother said, 'Let's introduce our children to each other. If they like each other, we'll marry them off; if they don't, there's nothing we can do.' That's how my mother and father met and got married… (P13-F-16).

"…my mother's brothers said the girls doesn't study, so they said, and didn't let her continue her education… Since she left school, she married early and didn't want

to stay in the village any longer… She was living in a village and wanted to come to the city. It was childhood; she thought getting married was a good thing (P3-M-17).

In this study, for some girls (P9-F-14) and boys (P4-M-15 and P11-M-15), their mothers' early marriage was not merely an obligation to be fulfilled. It was also a strategy employed by their parents to ensure that their daughters would be 'comfortable,' 'get to know life,' and 'find a good husband.' The expectations these families had of their daughters based on these strategies can be interpreted as a significant factor in their children's compliant agency towards early marriage.

"…I think another factor is that they don't think women and girls will study, and even if they do, they think they won't be able to work. That's why they think they should just get married and live comfortably, as if they can't work or study anyway. That's why they get them married, so they can be more comfortable and have an income this way (referring to her mother's family)" (P9-F-14).

"…… *You know, so she can get married sooner and experience life, but I think she's too young to do that*" (P4-M-15).

"…….. *She didn't study at an early age, at least so she could find a good husband*" (P11-M-15).

"…s*o that she wouldn't go to a bad person in the neighbourhood*" (P10-F-14).

It can be said that P12-F-17's mother, by resisting the normative gendered patterns, norms, and generational order of her patriarchal family with whom she lived in a slum before marriage, demonstrated both oppositional and opportunistic agency in marrying at a younger age. In fact, in the intergenerational negotiations of her mother's family of origin (particularly child's maternal grandmother, maternal grandfather, and maternal uncles), such a marriage was not approved due to reasons such as its early nature and the difficulties associated with the adult responsibilities it entailed. In such a family with limited opportunities, the child's resistance to the normative patterns that encompassed their childhood and adulthood stemmed from the intension to socialise and experience romantic relationships, which gave meaning to the child's life during that period. The fact that the mother of P12-F-17, a girl child, acted both an opposional and opportunistic agency for the early marriage was situated within the intersectionality of her parents' culture, which constrained her childhood-specific behaviours, actions, and relationships. For these children's mothers, eloping with their beloved at a young age appeared to be an opportunity to fulfil their needs for romantic feelings and relationships, as well as socialisation during that period.

" So, in the slums, everyone is very close to each other, everyone knows each other, you know, like in the old days in villages, gossip spreads quickly, in that sense… So it's tradition, family, a family thing, most people don't go out, they do go out, my grandfather would allow them to go out in the mornings but not in the evenings… My mum and dad eloped, my grandfather didn't give my dad permission… My grandfather didn't want my mother to get married at that age… She was a bit younger, so he reacted a bit… My grandfather said, 'Study, save your life, then get married,' but my mother eloped with my dad" (P12-F-17).

P14-F-14's mother lived in an environment where early marriages were common and had been introduced to her husband through relatives. Although her grandmother, grandfather and mother's siblings did not want the marriage, this participant's mother had convinced them. Although the mother's agency in such a marriage may appear

individual, it was not independent of the adults in her close circle who legitimised these marriages, acted as intermediaries, and persuaded the family.

"They got married through an arranged marriage… My father's uncle contacted my grandmother to introduce my mother and father to each other, but my grandmother refused. She was later persuaded and told my grandfather about it. My grandfather was against it, but my mother insisted so much that he was persuaded. Even if my mother wanted to get married, I think it was too early for her to marry, and no one in the family, neither her siblings nor her parents, wanted her to get married" (P14-F-14).

3.3 Mothers' Expectations of their Children

Adults can shape the lives of children, at least to some extent. Children may also be influenced by their parents' assumptions about the everyday world. The present study tried to discover how children interpret their mothers' advice or expectations regarding marriage, if any, by examining the advice given by mothers who married at an early age (RQ3), and a theme emerged (Fig. 3).

This research showed that regardless of whether children's own families advised them to marry early or not, all children's mothers expected their children not to marry early. Some children's mothers (P5-M-16, P8-M-16, P11-M-15, P14-F-14) were able to access education and employment with their husbands' encouragement after marrying young. However, most children (P1-F-17 and P4-M-15, P12-F-17, P14-F-14) had mothers who regretted this marriage because they were unable to travel, enjoy themselves, socialise, continue their education, or acquire a profession. Therefore, mothers who advised their children (P12-F-17 and P7-F-14) not to marry early recommended that their children achieve opportunities and goals that they themselves had been unable to attain because they had married, such as graduating from university and securing a job and career.

'*When you get married, don't expect support from others,' she says. You already have the capacity to earn your own money." When someone asks, 'What did you do with his money when you got married?' I worked and did it with my own earnings.'. I think what my mother said is true"* (P12-F-17).

'*… for example, you don't have to be financially dependent on your husband, you know, because you can study, because you have your own profession, you know, you can meet your own needs…' says Mum… I think Mum's right"* (P7-F-14).

The children criticised early marriage, citing reasons such as not being ready for the responsibilities of marriage, not having had enough socialising, not knowing or loving life or their partner enough, giving in to family pressure and not having gained freedom. Being under the age of early twenties when such a marriage took place appeared to be an obstacle to their agency in managing or controlling these social aspects of life, both for their mothers and for their children.

Mothers' expectations of their children to gain economic independence were not only related to education but also important in terms of children getting to know life and people well and socialising. In fact, mothers who married early encouraged their children to exercise agency in managing the social context of their lives, such

as continuing their education and pursuing a career, rather than marrying early like themselves.

On the other hand, the mother's not advising her child on whether or not to marry early was associated with both the mother/family and all the children in the study being opposed to such a marriage. This showed that early marriage in the family of a child whose mother married early was not simply a matter of cultural transmission or advice from mother to child.

"*So we never really talked about it between us… I mean, I already know the difficulties of marriage… Since there was no possibility of me getting married in any way, and I never said anything like that, nor did they say anything like that to me, the subject was never brought up, and that seems normal to me. … If they realised I was doing something wrong, or if it was a situation like marriage, I think they would object and give advice, but since there's nothing like that right now… and there's no need for advice*" (P1-F-17).

3.4 Child Agency in the Context of Early Marriage

The study revealed that the mothers or parents of all children whose mothers married early did not want their children to marry early. Therefore, when these children were asked whether they would marry if they were the same age as their mothers (RQ4), they stated that they would not marry, neither in their mothers' time nor nowadays, and two themes emerged. (Figures 4 and 5).

3.5 Getting Married at my Mother's Marriage Age? 'Of Course not, I Would Object'

Children's oppositional agency when told to marry at an early age was associated with the fact that they were children like any other individual of that age and that their education continued during childhood (Fig. 4). Dreams and goals such as going to university, acquiring a profession, getting a job, travelling abroad, and saving money can be attributed to their intention to perform their agency in taking control of their lives by achieving these things themselves. As summarised by P13-F-16, a girl child, children's goals were related to the fact that continuing their education at this age to secure their future was more important than their intention to marry. In fact, for these children, these goals were not merely a wish or desire; they were things that their mothers or families also wanted for their children, supporting their agency in this context.

"… No, because… I have school to attend, I have dreams, I want to start a business, I need to achieve these things, right? There are those mindsets. Sometimes, you know, when you get married, your husband can support you, or you can do it with your husband. But why would I do it with my husband? Or why could I do it with the person I marry? I want to achieve it myself, I want to do it myself. That's why, right now, I would never… get married" (P13-F-16).

Furthermore, the argument that children might engage in oppositional agency in the possibility of early marriage was based on the notion that those under eighteen are of an age to enjoy themselves and socialise with their peers by going to the cinema, but not to marry.

On the other hand, in the context of early marriage, the children's oppositional agency was not solely related to routins specific to peer culture, given that they were under the age of eighteen. Such agency, as clearly seen in the narratives of a boy (P4-M-15) who married due to family pressure, stemmed from his unwillingness to experience the difficulties his mother had faced, such as being unable to cope with the domestic responsibilities she had experienced. In this context, oppositional agency was a sign of rebellion to the adult culture that viewed adult roles as a burden at a child age.

"*Because I don't want to experience the difficulties my mother went through*, *even if I were a man. I don't want to learn about life at an early age; I want to get married after I've matured and reached a more advanced age… My mother told me about the family pressure she faced when she got married*, *and she didn't know how to do anything or what to do*, *so my father helped her at home*" (P4-M-15).

All children stated that if they were told to marry, they would challenge this situation by refusing to listen to what was said, ignoring those around them, expressing their unwillingness, and breaking away from their families if pressured. Viewing those under eighteen as children is a significant factor in their lack of intention to marry at this age and in their agenc against such marriages. As can be understood from the narratives of K5-E and K8-E, the fact that their families do not want such a marriage, just like the children themselves, plays a role in the absence of marriage pressure on them from their families. The fact that these children express that they would even challenge their families in the possibility of such a marriage can be attributed to their families/parents encouraging them to show oppositional agency.

"*I can convince my family. They respect my opinion very much. So I know that when I explain the situation*, *that I don't feel ready for marriage yet*, *they won't react badly*" (P5-M-16).

"I would definitely say no. Yes, *yes*, *I know they won't say such a thing. My family already places a lot of importance on my education. They won't want that either"* (P8-M-16).

3.6 When Is It Appropriate To Get Married: 'I Think Marriage Is not Compulsory'

Children criticised their mothers' early marriages, describing when it was appropriate to marry based on their own culture's ideals of marriage (Fig. 5). For children aspiring to become psychologists, lawyers, architects, pharmacists, dentists, doctors, officers, nurses, athletes, prosecutors, police officers or primary school teachers, completing university was an important step towards economic independence. It also appeared to be an important environment for socialising, making friends, dating, falling in love and getting married. Because children did not intend to marry early, as there was no such environment for their mothers, marrying without knowing or loving someone, or marrying someone they thought they loved at a younger age. Because for all the children in the study, the primary goal in their intention to marry was to have economic freedom for their future.

On the other hand, as exemplified by the narratives of a girl (P10-F-14), graduating from university, having economic freedom and having a boyfriend were not sufficient for marriage. Additionally, when one could get married was defined in terms

of the person they were dating at university being a good person, meaning that this person did not drink alcohol or use violence. This girl's thinking was related to the fact that families in her community encouraged early marriage to protect their children from substance abuse. The word 'good' she used when describing the person she would meet and marry at university refers to someone who does not use drugs. This also shows that even if both her mother and father married early, the adult culture in the place where she lives can play an important role in the expectations children have regarding the person they will marry.

"*So when I say it's good*, *I mean that in our neighbourhood they were drinking a lot*, *so there was violence and such. That's why I said it should be good in the sense that they shouldn't drink… For example*, *you meet someone at university*, *and you're already 22 or 23 years old at that point… I would want to marry the person I did that with*, *if it's good with the person I love… So*, *after working*, *if that person is good*, *I'll marry them*" (P10-F-14).

Economic freedom, an important criterion for children to find a suitable marriage partner, was also related to their career goals. The necessity of promotion, gaining work experience, postgraduate education and economic freedom before marriage was exemplified in the statements of P9-F-14.

"*So*, *before getting married*, *you could do a master's degree or a PhD*, *or gain experience in your job*, *get promoted – anything really. I'm thinking of getting married at around 27 or 28. Because… I think you should focus on your education*, *career and travelling first*, *then get married. I don't think there's any need to rush into it*" (P9-F-14).

For many children in this study, it could be said that marriage is appropriate whenever desired after completing their education and gaining economic independence. However, as K8-E, who has a male, summarised, it was understood that marriage should be undertaken when desired, meaning that marriage is not seen as a necessity only for him but also for his peers who think similarly in today's Türkiye.

" *So*, *marriage based on my own choice. if I don't want to*, *I might not get married either.* " (P8-M-16).

4 Discussion

Children can develop individually, but they are part of societal processes throughout their development. Transitions in development and life processes are always societally produced and shared (Corsaro, 2005). According to Corsaro (1997), during these transition periods, socialisation is not only a matter of adapting to and internalising culture, but also a process of rediscovery and reproduction as children engage in collective interaction with those around them. And throughout this process, children are always part of two intertwined cultures: their own culture and the culture of adults (Corsaro, 2009, 2012). The current research, which focuses on these assumptions of the interpretive reproduction approach, has shown that the child's agency gains meaning not only in an individual but also in a societal context, particularly within the intrafamilial generational context. It also reveals that in such agency, children interpret and reproduce meanings related to early marriage, child(hood), youth, and

young adult(hood) in the context of early marriage, thereby revealing that their own culture and, consequently, that of their peers intersects with adult culture.

4.1 The Agency of Mothers Married at an Early Age

Placing adults at the centre of the decision-making process in the context of caring for and protecting children can also lead to negligent or abusive practices towards children. As this research also shows, family expectations across generations and, in particular, family pressure in the early marriages of children's mothers are a specific example of this. The legitimate authority, control and persuasive power of adults, particularly parents in the family of origin, can be effective not only over resources within the home, but also over the agency of children. As protectors and providers, parents can often gain legitimacy for their intergenerational power (Punch, 2005).

According to the CRC (1989), adults have a duty to care for and protect children, but in some cases adults may not play an active role in matters affecting children's lives (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010). Therefore, allowing parents to decide what is good for children or what is in their best interests may position today's children as passive recipients of top-down ideas (Nieuwenhuys & Hanson, 2023) or vulnerable individuals (Brown & McCormack, 2005). Such a perspective, as this research also demonstrates, may play a role in the seemingly individual yet compliant agency of mothers who marry at childhood age. This is because it is patriarchal families who believe they are protecting their children and providing them with economic and social security (Baraka et al., 2022), or who legitimise this practice within their close surroundings and society by passing it down from generation to generation. In this context, social norms within the family that encourage male dominance and female obedience (Taylor et al., 2019) can be cited as a significant factor in the children's mothers demonstrating compliant agency towards early marriage in the face of expectations specific to this adult culture.

Additionally, women in significant positions within the generational hierarchy, such as aunts, grandmothers or great-grandmothers, who embrace or obey masculine values during the courtship process that leads to marriage or who marry at an early age, can be said to persuade these young mothers to engage in compliant agency (Burcu et al., 2015; United Nations Women, 2021). In this study, these mothers' limited educational and financial opportunities and their academic underachievement played a significant role in their opportunistic agency, which was motivated by a desire for better opportunities, such as living in the city.

This research showed that early marriages of mothers deprived them of experiences of protection, care and emotional development. These mothers were taken on multiple adult roles at a younger age, such as caregiver, housewife, spouse, and womanhood, along with responsibilities such as childcare, providing for the household, and feeding, by marrying at a young age. This early transition into adult roles blurs the distinction between childhood and adulthood (Diala, 2019). The fact that the mothers of the children in this study were adults at a young age calls into question the sharp and traditional distinction between childhood and adulthood in a Western context (Myers, 2001).

On the other hand, this research revealed that when children's mothers marry, the mother, father or brothers in a patriarchal family may not approve of the marriage of these mothers who are still children themselves. It can be said that in these families, girls who are considered not modern (Horii, 2020b) exhibit weak agency and, simultaneously, oppositional and opportunistic agency due to their limited choices or opportunities. Their oppositional and opportunistic agency is linked to their flirting with boys, socialising and sexuality being under their parents' strict control. These girls may wish to marry even at a very early age with the intention of removing parental control (Murphy & Graham, 2015). In this context, the present study demonstrated that it is important to consider not only the expectations specific to the culture of adults in the agency of mother who marry early, but also the mother's own culture in terms of her intention or expectations to marry as a child. Because these mothers, who are still children themselves, have taken control of their own marriages by challenging the normative sexist expectations of adults, even though they face familial or societal constraints regarding marriage, which affects their own lives.

The fact that girls menstruate and are able to perform household duties may legitimise their early marriage in Turkish society as a sign that these girls are adults and have grown up. On the other hand, compulsory military service in Türkiye is an important turning point for men, enabling them to become disciplined and subsequently gain economic independence (UN Women, 2021). In Türkiye, this perspective on girls and boys leads to boys waiting to marry until they have completed their military service, while girls are believed to grow up with the responsibilities and capabilities they take on before marrying at a very young age. In the present study, the belief that daughters at an early age are sufficiently mature for marriage aand adulthood may have been influential in the mothers' families of origin.

4.2 The Changing Fiction of Child(hood)

Being a member of a community and a family can create meaning for agency in the context of early marriage. In this study, while the traditional culture of adults is an important contextual factor in the agency of mothers who married early, it can be said that these mothers who exercise their agency are not governed by this traditional culture. Because these mothers, having married at a very early age, were deprived of their childhood and youth, as well as education and employment opportunities, they did not want their children to experience these hardships. The fact that mothers do not expect their children to marry early and do not advise them to do so can be discussed in the context of the changing value of children in the family and the changing expectations of childhood in contemporary Türkiye.

This research has shown that, for children, under the age of eighteen in today's Turkish society is the age when they need their family in terms of psychological, emotional, economic and biological development. Therefore, children of this age are not yet ready for the responsibilities of marriage, such as childbirth and housework. The basis for defining marriage at this age as 'early' is also based on this perspective. Therefore, it can be said that the traditional cultural perception of 'adulthood at a very early age', which frames the early marriage of mothers, is not only unacceptable to the child but also to the child's family and the society in which they live.

In Türkiye, after the 1980 s, marriages began to be delayed, the number of children decreased, and the number of individuals living in cities increased (Özbay, 2015: p. 17). Since 2020, the number of couples both marrying and divorcing has increased, and by 2021, the average age of first marriage has risen for both women (25.4) and men (28.1) . Education, financial earning potential, and job security have become increasingly important factors for women before marriage (Turk-Stat, 2022).

On the other hand, socio-economic development in Türkiye, and in particular the improvement in the status of women, has played a significant role in reducing the economic value of children within the family and thus prioritising their education (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1981). Considering that the mothers of the children in this study generally moved to the city due to limited options and opportunities, continued their education with the support of their husbands, and entered the workforce, it can be said that their families encouraged their children to engage in agency. (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2010). The fact that mothers advise their children not to marry early, contrary to their own families of origin, or do not advise them at all, thinking that they are still children, can be linked to their prioritising investment in their children's psycological value and future over marriage. Because research has shown that families motivate their children to engage in agency in managing the social contexts of their lives, such as education, career, socialisation, and employment. In fact, this finding contradicts previous studies suggesting that low levels of education, low-status occupations, and large families increase the likelihood of early marriage (Kuygun Karci et al., 2021; Nyangas & Aswile, 2022). Because, as Misunas & colleagues (2021) suggest, despite having limited resources, families are increasingly focused on expanding their children's agency and providing them with opportunities beyond the traditional boundaries of early marriage.

4.3 Fiction of Youth and Young Adult(hood)

In this study, continuing education to expand children's agency and the fact that urban working life is more important than obedience to the family (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2010) may be related to these social acquisitions being more important before marriage. In this context, while the children in the study expressed their opposition to these marriages, they did not define only those under the age of eighteen as too young for marriage. In fact, the children's definition of marriage before the age of twenties as too early was related to their peer culture's conceptions of youth and young adulthood and their priorities during these periods before marriage.

In the interpretive reproduction approach, peer culture is important in the context of routines, values and interests that children produce and share in interaction with their peers (Corsaro, 2000). In the present study, it can be said that routines specific to peer culture, such as attending university, dating, going to the cinema, having fun with friends, enjoying life, and experiencing freedom, are important for children during this transition period before they marry in their youth. Because, just as with the mothers' marriages, their children were opposed to their peers marrying too early, without knowing or loving their partners sufficiently during their youth.

Some studies (Pike et al., 2018; Zahra et al., 2021) indicate that the marriage of boys is generally connected to economic freedom. In our study, it can be said

that both girls and boys focus on their education and economic freedom during their youth/young adulthood before marriage. Achieving economic independence, having a profession, pursuing a career, and getting promoted during one's youth/young adulthood before marriage are important requirements not only for children but also for peer culture. It can be said that in challenging their families or society in the possibility of early marriage, these priorities specific to youth and young adulthood prior to marriage play an important role in the culture of children and their peers.

5 Conclusion

This research, based on an interpretive reproduction approach, has demonstrated that mothers' families of origin play a significant role in these mothers' agency. The authority and persuasive power of adults in the generational order of the mothers' families of origin, and the marriage expectations placed upon these mothers, have been found to influence the mothers' agency in different ways: weak/compliant, opportunistic, and/or oppositional. When the intention of these mothers to marry at a child age is taken into focus, it can be said that their agency is beyond their individual competence or capability. As this research also reveals, the impact of significant familial and societal contextual factors, particularly the low value placed on girls and the disregard for their education within their families and communities, is obvious in influencing their agency in the context of early marriage. Therefore, it can be said that the agency of mothers who marry early is constrained during childhood by families and society with patriarchal characteristics.

In the context of early marriage, the agency of these mothers is specific to the conditions of their mothers' families, the roles of male and female actors from different generations within the family in these marriages, and the intentions of these mothers who exercise their agency. Therefore, the agency of mothers of children must be examined not only in terms of patriarchal beliefs, values, and assumptions specific to the adult culture of different generations within their families, but also in terms of the intersectionality of these mothers' intentions regarding child marriage.

Furthermore, this research has revealed that agency in the context of early marriage is not simply a matter of transmission from an early-married mother to her child. This is because it has been determined that the mothers of all children who experienced these marriages at an early age and felt regret were individuals who cared about their children's education, career prospects and their future.

Both girls and boys, together with their mothers/families, react against the perception of girls as adults at a very early age, which is accepted both within the family and in society during the period when their mothers married, and are therefore opposed to early marriage. Indeed, in today's Türkiye, this perception has been replaced by an investment in the psychological value of the child, regardless of whether they are a girl or a boy. In other words, it can be said that during the mother's marriage, the boundaries between childhood, youth and adulthood were more blurred, even intertwined. However, it has been found that in today's families where the mother married early, these boundaries are distinct. Thus, the definition of marriage as early marriage, where the routines, ideals, and goals specific to these life stages are not

realised, is linked to the priorities attributed to these life stages in the culture of each child and, indeed, their peers. In this context, both children and their families oppose such marriages because they consider the priorities specific to childhood, adolescence and young adulthood to be more important than marriage.

The study shows that all children whose mothers married early are aware of priorities specific to young adulthood, such as economic independence and postgraduate education, and that they challenge their families and society in the face of the possibility of early marriage. This indicates that these children are not passive recipients of adults' decisions or expectations, but rather societal beings who actively interpret and question adults' expectations. Such a profile is consistent with the interpretive reproduction approach, which argues that children are not only shaped by adults, but are also entities who create their own identities and futures within the society in which they live.

This study has revealed that families play an important role in and provide significant support for children's agency in realising their ideals, dreams and goals, and in creating their own culture and, consequently, that of their peers. Although this supportive role is common among the families of the participants in this study, these participants are heterogeneous in terms of many factors such as family structure, economic status, education, dreams and goals. We did not investigate this diversity in detail in our study. Future researchers may be advised to investigate children's agency in the context of early marriage more comprehensively, focusing on this diversity. Generating knowledge about such diversity can guide protective, preventive and rehabilitative work for these children. Such efforts can form the basis for collaboration with families to meet the psychological, emotional and economic needs of these children. Therefore, in the context of early marriage, in order to broaden children's agency, child and family policies should take into account not only children but also their families and, in particular, the expectations of both woman and man actors who play an important role in the family's generational order.

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Declarations

Declarations Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. For the current study involving human participants, the ethical approval of Hacettepe University Ethics Committee numbered 5177 was obtained. Data collection and analysis were sponsored by researchers of the study.

Conflict of Interest We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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