

“Courage in Ignorance”: Mothers’ Retrospective Accounts of Early Childbearing in Turkey

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Abstract: Although extensive research investigates the consequences of teenage motherhood, there is still very limited research exploring young mothers’ experiences in their own voices. This gap is particularly evident for those non-Western developing countries in which women’s voices are largely muted. This paper explores women’s perceptions and evaluations of their early motherhood, drawing on their lived experiences and retrospective accounts. This study also investigates how early first birth influences these mother’s subsequent fertility. The study adopts a qualitative method based on interviews with a total of 17 women in several cities in Turkey who had their first birth at a young age (ages 17-22). A qualitative approach is most suitable for this research area, which aims to explore young mothers’ interpretations of their fertility timing and the consequences of this event for their lives in general, including subjective evaluations and subtle meanings. A key finding of this study is that the interviewees describe early childbearing as a negative event in their life course, convey regret for having had an early first birth, and report a feeling of dissatisfaction with being a young mother. A second finding concerns the influence of early first birth on subsequent childbearing. The women’s accounts indicate that subsequent fertility operated as a compensation for the missed feelings of motherhood and served as an opportunity to heal from hurtful experiences. This study points to the importance of social context in determining the consequences of early fertility.

Keywords: Young motherhood · Turkey · Qualitative interviews · Retrospective accounts

1 Introduction

Women's experiences of early childbearing and societal attitudes towards young motherhood vary by cultural context. For example, in Western societies, teenage childbearing, especially below the age of 18 and below is often considered undesirable and problematic (Luker 1996; Furstenberg 2003; Geronimus 1996), with extensive research reporting that both teen mothers and their children are disadvantaged in various areas. Mothers in their teens and early 20s in Western countries are more likely to have lower educational attainment and earnings and to experience poverty than women who delay fertility (e.g., Hofferth 1987; Diaz/Fiel 2016; Chevalier/Vitanen 2003; Lee 2010; Coley/Chase-Lansdale 1998). Children born to young mothers have less access to resources, display lower cognitive skills at school and are more likely to become young parents themselves (e.g., Furstenberg *et al.* 1987; Coley/Chase-Lansdale 1998). Moreover, young mothers in these settings face stigma and are often socially excluded (Geronimus 1996; Whitley/Kirmayer 2008; Diaz/Fiel 2016).

However, in many developing countries in non-Western settings, having a child in adolescence is more acceptable and, in some cases, even a praiseworthy step (Luker 1996; Mardi *et al.* 2018; Bates *et al.* 2007). For the most part, early fertility takes place within marriage in many of these countries, and kin support to overcome the related hardships is normatively expected. However, this does not mean that young mothers are safe from the adverse consequences of early childbearing, with the most serious outcomes usually being health hazards for mothers and children (Bates *et al.* 2007). Importantly, in many ways, the social acceptance of early fertility and kin support may obscure many of the challenges and hardships young mothers experience.

This study makes several important contributions. First, it aims to extend the literature by providing additional data from different settings in a non-Western region of the world. Although international research documents various consequences of young motherhood, scant attention is paid to the complexity and variance of social context. This is a significant gap in our knowledge, given that social context matters in shaping the perception and consequences of early childbearing.

Studying Turkey is important because even though early fertility persists and its health consequences are well-reported, little attention is paid to many other aspects of young motherhood. For example, there is limited research on young women's unique perspectives on their early childbirth, its impact on their transition to second or higher-order births, and the role of family support in handling the hardship. There is a general lack of research on early fertility in the non-Western developing world, and work on the subject mainly draws on data from the South Asian context (Avogo/Somefun 2019). Therefore, this study adds to current research; having its own distinctive family and gender norms, data from Turkey provides a comparative perspective.

Another important contribution of this article is the investigation of women's perceptions and evaluations of their early motherhood drawing on their lived experiences and retrospective accounts. Much of the existing literature focuses

on structural consequences, such as educational attainment, employment, health-related outcomes, etc., and evidence on how early child-bearers evaluate their own fertility timing and motherhood is limited. As research indicates, young parenthood is a complex phenomenon in terms of its precursors and consequences and accordingly calls for a multifaceted approach to studying its various dimensions (Luker 1996). In this sense, this study aims to investigate how young mothers make sense of having a child at a young age. Moreover, this article explores, for the first time, the effects of young motherhood on young women’s second or higher-order births, particularly in terms of their relationships with their first and subsequent children and provides insight into women’s comparative evaluation of their early and later motherhood.

Finally, this study uses a qualitative methodology that offers channels through which women’s lived experiences are explored in greater detail, uncovering information related to an issue as complex and sensitive as childbearing at a young age. The importance of this approach is that “we hear interviewees’ own articulation of their reasoning, and this opens a window into what they view as desirable, what they view as possible, and why” (Brinton *et al.* 2018: 282).

I study the context of Turkey, where young marital motherhood is neither stigmatized nor explicitly encouraged in public; legal norms prohibit early marriage and fertility and public policy discourse discourages women and their families from early family formation (Child, Early and Forced Marriage, *CEFM* 2020). Early marriage and early childbirth are defined as marriage and fertility taking place before the age of 18 by the Turkish civil code. However, in line with the decades-long rise in age at first marriage and first birth (see Table 1), first marriage or birth in the early twenties are societally considered “early.” In line with this perspective, in this study, participants who had their first birth between the ages of 17 and 22 are defined as young mothers. Moreover, since most early fertility takes place within marriage in Turkey (*HUIPS* 2018), I examine both early marriage and early fertility.

2 Background

2.1 Research on early family formation

In most Western societies, early fertility (e.g., teenage pregnancy) has been treated as a social problem with moral and economic overtones and has aroused a great deal of public worry since the early 1970s (Luker 1996). In line with these public attitudes, most research focuses on the adverse consequences of early fertility for both women and their children. For example, previous research documents that in the Western context, young mothers in their teens or early 20s tend to come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Manlove 1997; Kahn/Anderson 1992; McLanahan/Percheski 2008; Smith *et al.* 2018); they are generally unmarried and are more likely to raise their children as single parents (Morgan/Rindfuss 1999; Johansen *et al.* 2020); they tend to have lower levels of educational attainment and are more likely to live on welfare than older mothers (Furstenberg *et al.* 1987; Manlove 1997;

Morgan/Rindfuss 1999; *Diaz/Fiel* 2016; *Coley/Chase-Lansdale* 1998). Importantly, these negative long-term consequences are reported for both for young women and men, even in the context of Nordic welfare states with substantial state support (*Johansen et al.* 2020). Studies also show that early fertility has intergenerational consequences; children of teenage mothers are more likely to become young parents themselves (*Barber* 2001; *Kahn/Anderson* 1992; *Manlove* 1997; *Morosow/Trappe* 2018).

While numerous studies straightforwardly associate early childbearing with adverse outcomes in numerous areas, a strand of research challenges the establishment of a causal link. Qualitative studies explore the perspectives of young mothers and suggest that young mothers' unique perspectives on early childbearing offer important insights for our understanding of this phenomenon (*Brubaker/Wright* 2006). Some of these studies challenge the mostly negative depictions of teenage motherhood and suggest exploring the meanings teenagers give their experiences and the identity transformation they undergo during the early childbearing process (*Geronimus* 2003; *Anwar/Stanistreet* 2014; *Brubaker/Wright* 2006).

This body of research points to the role of cultural ideals regarding fertility timing and appropriate family structure in framing early childbearing straightforwardly as a *social problem* with negative outcomes for young mothers and their children (*Geronimus* 2003; *Whitley/Kirmayer* 2008). According to these scholars, fertility timing norms may prevent social scientists and policymakers from having a multifaceted understanding of young women's early childbearing experiences. Numerous studies report that although young mothers are aware of the negative consequences of early childbearing, they also perceive benefits to it (e.g., *Anwar/Stanistreet* 2014; *Rocca et al.* 2013; *Rosengard et al.* 2006; *Kendall et al.* 2005; *Edin/Kefalas* 2005; *Brubaker/Wright* 2006). For example, in a classic work, *Geronimus* (2003) argues that for many African American populations who do not have equal access to advanced education, careers, and health care services, early fertility is an 'adaptive practice' in the face of structural constraints that decrease life expectancy among this population. In another study, young mothers reported the benefits of early childbearing including that "it would require them to grow up and take more responsibility in their lives and provide themselves with a purpose for their lives" (*Rosengard et al.* 2006: 506). In a qualitative study conducted in the UK, *Anwar* and *Stanistreet* (2014) found that young mothers didn't let teenage motherhood ruin their lives, as they continued to work toward their future aspirations. Interestingly, all the young mothers in their study expressed a positive view about continuing their education and securing employment to be able to build a better future. In another study, *Brubaker* and *Wright* (2006) found that in addition to the hardship of early childbirth, young mothers struggled with the negative reactions of other people, which were disruptive to their identities. With their struggles and motivations to turn early motherhood into an advantage in their lives, these women's experiences "provided a counter story to the master narrative of self-indulgent teenagers who become pregnant intentionally" (*Brubaker/Wright* 2006: 1226).

In contrast, a different picture emerges in the non-Western, developing world, where early childbearing usually takes place within marriage and is socially more

acceptable (Singh/Samara 1996; Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu/Akadlı-Ergöçmen 2014; Luker 1996). Similarly to the scholarship in the West on teenage mothers’ perceptions of the benefits of early fertility, emerging literature points to positive aspects of young marital motherhood in non-Western settings through a different lens. Jensen/Thornton (2003) report that having children early in the life course provides young women in the developing world with longer reproductive lives in which they have an increased chance to have multiple children. In a Middle Eastern society where desired fertility and rate of infant mortality are high, having a larger family is a privileged status for a mother, thus, in many ways, early fertility is an asset for young women (Mardi et al. 2018; Jensen/Thornton 2003; Mathur et al. 2003). Moreover, early fertility helps young women to secure wellbeing in the family since “a woman who does not succeed in giving birth to a child can be abused and neglected and even the continuation of her marital life can be compromised” (Mardi et al. 2018: 5). Therefore, in these settings, many young women may benefit from early entry into parenthood. As Mathur et al. (2003: 4) state, “the adolescent experience of girls in many developing countries may be defined almost entirely in terms of entry into the marital state; emphasis is placed on domestic work and obedience, traits seen as essential to being good wives and mothers”.

In summary, international research documents various consequences facing young mothers, showing that social context matters in shaping the consequences of early fertility. This is important because a young mother does not make a reproductive decision nor experience its consequences in a vacuum; “her behaviors and decisions occur in the context of the models, values, expectations, responses, and anticipated responses of the elders and peers who are important to her” (Geronimus 1996: 327). Although extensive research investigates the consequences of teenage motherhood, there is still very limited research exploring young mothers’ own perspectives in their own voices. It is therefore important to provide multidimensional and in-depth perspectives to better understand young mothers’ perceptions. Moreover, eliciting young mothers’ own perspectives is important not only for more comprehensive research, but also for more effective policymaking.

2.2 Early family formation in Turkey

2.2.1 The demographics of early family formation

Turkey is an interesting case because policy efforts to modernize the country since the founding of the republic, movements opposing these changes, and massive urbanization since the 1950s have all had important influences on people’s demographic behaviors (Cindoğlu et al. 2008; Kavas/Thornton 2013). Many changes have been observed in family life for the past several decades, including a rise in age at marriage, a persistent decline in fertility from a high of 7.1 children per woman in 1930 to 2.3 in 2018 (HUIPS 2018), and changes in marriage modes toward more self-choice marriages (Nauck/Klaus 2008; Marriage preferences survey 2015). As the statistics below indicate, in line with the changes regarding norms of marriage and childbearing, early family formation patterns have changed as well.

The average age of marriage has increased over the past several decades. For example, in 1978, the average age of women at first marriage was 17.7 – Thus, what is now defined as teen marriage was a norm then. This is also the case for young motherhood: In 1988 alone, the mean age of women at first childbearing was 18.6. These ages have changed drastically over the years, currently, according to a recent demographic and health survey, among women aged 25-49, the median age at first marriage is 21.4 and the median age at first birth is 23.3 years. As Table 1 shows, in addition to the rise in marriage and childbearing ages, there is a considerable decline in early marriage and childbirth. Currently, among women aged 25-49, marrying before age 18 declined from 39 percent in 1993 to 21 percent in 2018, and having a first child by age 18 fell from 21 percent in 1993 to a low of 9.4 percent (*HUIPS* 2018). Most recently, among adolescents, pregnancy at ages 15-19 is 4 percent, and pregnancy before age 17 is rare, with the higher proportions skewing to later teen ages (*HUIPS* 2018).

Tab. 1: Turkish women’s median age at first marriage and first birth, age 15-49, DHS data (1993-2018)*

Year	Women’s age at first marriage		Women’s age at first birth	
	Median age	Women (25-49) having first marriage by age 18 (%)	Median age	Women (25-49) having first birth by age 18 (%)
1993	19.0	38.8	20.5	21.53*
1998	19.3	34.8	21.3	19.17*
2003	20.0	29.5	21.8	14.98
2008	20.8	24.3	22.3	12.2
2013	21.0	22.0	22.9	10.2
2018	21.4	20.9	23.3	9.4

* These estimations (1993 and 1998) also include age 19.

Source: DHS data, HUIPS

In Turkey, marriage is universal, with 66 percent of women aged 15-49 currently married, 30 percent never having been married, and 4 percent being divorced or widowed (*HUIPS* 2018). Childbearing out of wedlock is uncommon, only 2 percent of never-married women have a child (*TurkStat* 2020). In 2002, Turkey made legal arrangements in the civil code and increased the minimum legal age for marriage to 18 years for both men and women, which had previously been 17 for men and 15 for women. However, the law allows young women to marry at the age of 17 with the consent of their parents or legal guardians, as well as at the age of 16 with permission from the courts under exceptional circumstances and on vital grounds. In some cases, parents marry off their daughters and sons through religious marriages, which is especially common among the rural populations. However, these marriages are not legally recognized and are registered when the spouses

have turned 18 (CEFM 2020). Note that this leads to complexity in collecting data on age at first marriage particularly from register data, which captures only legal marriages (Nauck/Klaus 2008; *Marriage preferences survey* 2015).

2.2.2 Determinants of early family formation

Various socioeconomic and cultural factors are determinants of early family formation in Turkey, with education being the leading one. Studies point to the crucial role educational attainment plays in delaying both marriage and fertility timing (*Family structure survey* 2016; Yağbasan/Tekdemir 2017; Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu/Akadli-Ergöçmen 2012; Yavuz 2010; Kırdar et al. 2016). Turkey’s extension of the basic educational requirement for both girls and boys from five to eight years in 1997 and then from eight to twelve years in 2012 coincided with a 33 percent decline in adolescents’ fertility (Kırdar et al. 2016; Güneş 2015; Yavuz 2010).

Moreover, parents’ low education and low income are usually cited as the main drivers of marrying off daughters at an early age (Güler/Küçüker 2010; Anık/Barlin 2017; Gökçe et al. 2007). Low-income parents find it hard to provide for their children, especially when they have multiple children, and are usually motivated to view marrying off their daughters to decrease the economic burden for the family (CEFM 2020). In some cases, parents see their daughters’ early marriage not only as alleviating economic hardship but also as an economic opportunity, especially when they receive bride money for this marriage (Kara 2015) – a practice that was common in times past yet persists today, especially among rural populations. 10 percent of married men aged 25-34 report having paid a bride money before marriage according to a sample survey (*Family structure survey* 2016). It may be that daughters also consider early marriage as a solution to poverty; an opportunity to live an economically better life in the husband’s family (Gökçe et al. 2007). Often, young women live with their husband’s family upon marriage and are expected to perform housework under the supervision of their husband, mother-in-law, and the more senior female members of the household (Cindoğlu et al. 2008).

Variation across regions and urban vs. rural residences are salient dimensions of early family formation, for example, early marriage and fertility are higher in the eastern regions of Turkey, particularly among rural populations (HUIPS 2018; CEFM 2020). In Turkey, regional variation displays economic and structural inequality, with eastern Turkey being the country’s least developed region. Traditional family structures characterize domestic life in this region; the extended household is more common and patrilocal residence (living with the husbands’ family) is favored, while both are relatively rare occurrences in western Turkey among urban populations (Cindoğlu et al. 2008). The level of education among women is still extremely low, early marriages, particularly with religious matrimones, are much higher among Kurds and Arabs than among Turks, and polygamy is performed despite the legal ban. Fertility shows significant variations across the regions; the total fertility rate (TFR) is 3.2 in eastern Turkey, compared to 2.0 and 1.6 in western and northern Turkey, respectively (HUIPS 2018).

Another dimension of early marriage and motherhood is that consanguineous marriages, marrying a close relative, particularly a cross-cousin, is a common practice in Turkey; according to a demographic and health survey, 24 percent of married women said that they are related to their husbands either as cousin or close relative (*HUIPS* 2018). This rate is even higher among early-married women, at 31 percent. A sizeable literature reports on consanguineous marriages facilitating early marriage decisions (*CEFM* 2020; *Kayı et al.* 2018; *Nauck/Klaus* 2008; *Güler/Küçüker* 2010). As *Nauck and Klaus* state (2008), parents arranging marriages with close relatives or extended family members not only accelerates the marriage process but also stimulates premature marriages of their daughters or sons.

It is important to note that early marriages are not necessarily forced marriages, nor do they take place only in the eastern regions and among rural populations. First, early marriage and childbearing are observed in urban centers of the country as well, and not all early marriages are forced or arranged by the parents without young women's consent. While parents may play a considerable role arranging an early marriage, in many of the cases women make their own decision and, in some cases, they marry by quitting school and eloping (*Güler/Küçüker* 2010; *Anık/Barlin* 2017; *Marriage preferences survey* 2015). For example, in a qualitative study, *Anık and Barlin* (2017) explored the motives of early family formation in a small city in western Turkey. The authors found that most of the study participants chose to enter marital life themselves, without any influence from their parents. This study also reports that disadvantageous and conflicting family backgrounds motivate young women to marry early. Young women consider marriage as an escape from a conflicting or violent family environment and as an opportunity to live a better life (*Anık/Barlin* 2017; *Gökçe et al.* 2007).

Another important factor pertains to social norms and values. Patriarchy is a persistent phenomenon and many aspects of family norms and values including marital and fertility timing are shaped by these norms. In Turkey, a conflicting gender culture exists; official discourse and policy efforts promote gender equality, while traditional gender roles and authoritarian practices persist (*Kandiyoti* 1987). These norms urge women to conform to rigid norms about the necessity of getting married and marriage timing. For example, marrying later than the expected marriage age is disapproved of, as it is deemed to reduce a woman's chance of finding a suitable husband. According to a recent sample survey (*Family structure survey* 2016), 47 percent of Turks believe that 20-24 is the ideal age range for a woman to get married, while 54 percent say that it is 25-29 for men. Marrying after 30 is deemed the ideal age for men (20 percent) far more commonly than for women (5 percent).

It is important to note that conformity to normative gender roles shows variation across social classes; for the most part, educated and high-income populations are more likely to embrace egalitarian gender roles. However, among uneducated, low-income populations, traditional norms continue to guide people regarding men's and women's roles in the family and in society (*Kandiyoti* 1987). This variation is manifest in attitudes toward the division of labor in the household. In urban, middle-class, and professional populations in Turkey, gender roles are changing to more egalitarian patterns, with women more active in professional work life and more

men contributing to domestic work (Aycan 2004). Other studies also note small changes toward a more equal division of domestic work in low income, urban groups (e.g., Cindođlu *et al.* 2008). However, some norms cut across socioeconomic classes and regions; the concept of honor is an important example. The notion of family “honour” (*namus*) is related to female sexuality, particularly women’s chastity and virginity, which are family matters rather than individual choices (Cindođlu 1997). Patriarchal control over women’s bodies creates social anxiety over women’s chastity and virginity, and this anxiety often drives families to marry off their daughters before they become involved in a socially unacceptable sexual relationship. Within marriage, young women are expected to begin childbearing quickly, it is typical in Turkey for parents and in-laws to encourage and even pressure young married women to proceed with childbirth (Ertem *et al.* 2008; Kavas/De Jong 2020).

2.2.3 Consequences of early family formation

As elsewhere, early marriage and motherhood have negative consequences for young women and their children in Turkey. One important adverse outcome is related to young women’s contraceptive and fertility behavior. Most young married women do not have sufficient knowledge about family planning methods, which results in low rates of contraceptive use and high rates of unwanted pregnancy (Özşahin *et al.* 2006; Koç/Ünalın 2001; HUIPS 2018; Uslu/Çoban 2020). According to a recent demographic and health survey, the rate of contraceptive use among young married women aged 15-19 is 31 percent and increases to 53 percent among women who married at age 20-24. It may be that even if these younger women want to prevent pregnancy, they may not be able to do so because they lack access to contraceptive services and supplies (Özşahin *et al.* 2006). While lack of access to contraceptive services is expected in rural parts of the country, according to Özşahin *et al.*’s study, it is also true for the urban areas of western Turkey. Importantly, research has found a significant association between the age disparity of spouses and low contraceptive use. This research has shown that young women are unable to negotiate about contraceptive use when their spouses object to it, as, in many ways, a significant age difference with their husband diminishes women’s power in the household (Yavuz 2010).

To give a more complete picture of the experiences of young mothers and to better contextualize early marital motherhood in Turkey, it is important to provide information related to the health hazards of this phenomenon as well. Several studies document that hypertension, preeclampsia, anemia, preterm delivery, and low birth weight are common occurrences mostly resulting from lack of access to antenatal birth services (e.g., Uslu/Çoban 2020; Edirne *et al.* 2010; Şen/Kavlak 2011). This research also draws attention to the higher risk of infant and maternal mortality among early child-bearers (Uslu/Çoban 2020; Edirne *et al.* 2010; Ertem *et al.* 2008; Koç/Ünalın 2001). Some studies focus on psychological consequences and report that young mothers suffer from psychological distress and trauma deriving from their premature transition to adulthood, assuming childrearing responsibility at a

very young age, and from social isolation (*Yağbasan/Tekdemir 2017; Koç/Ünalın 2001*). Most of these health hazards derive from young mothers' vulnerability in the face of access to health care services. Problems in obtaining proper health services range from the availability of services and ease of access to young women's diminished power to express themselves about their health needs or to act without the permission of their husbands or in-laws (*Yavuz 2010; Mathur et al. 2003*).

Another severe consequence of early family formation in Turkey is domestic violence. Young women have a higher risk of facing domestic violence both from their partner and their in-laws (*Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu/Akadli-Ergöçmen 2014; Edirne et al. 2010*). Importantly, studies report that the age gap between spouses shapes power relations within the household to the detriment of young women, early-marrying women have lower bargaining power when negotiating important decisions and face physical and psychological violence (*Yavuz 2010; Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu/Akadli-Ergöçmen 2014; Mathur et al. 2003*).

2.3 Research questions

The significance of the current study is that it draws on retrospective accounts of mothers' lived experiences regarding how they made sense of early childbearing. This approach investigates how this early experience influenced these mothers' overall fertility, including their transition to second and higher-order births. Mothers' perceptions of early fertility provide a broader perspective to examine the impact of the early first birth on these women's reproductive practices as well as on their personal lives. To date, most qualitative research has interviewed young mothers who gave birth recently (e.g., *Geronimus 1996; Whitley/Kirmayer 2008; Anwar/Stanistreet 2014; Rosengard et al. 2006*). However, these studies do not report on the first birth's effects on subsequent fertility. No qualitative research, to our knowledge, has examined the retrospective accounts of mothers to explore the experience of early childbearing and its impact on women's overall fertility. This study aims to fill this gap in evidence by interviewing mothers currently aged 24-41 who had their first birth between the ages of 17-22.

To this end, the study aims to expand qualitative family scholarship that investigates the perspectives of young mothers and sets out to explore young mothers' experiences of early childbearing by drawing on their unique perspectives. In particular, this study asks the following questions: How do young mothers make sense of their early marital motherhood? How do they perceive the advantages and disadvantages of having formed a family – e.g., marrying and having a child – at a young age? And how does their early first birth influence their second and higher-order births?

3 Method

3.1 Data collection and participants

The qualitative interviews were conducted between June 2015 and January 2016 and were part of a larger survey project that studied fertility and family life in urban Turkey. The qualitative component of the project primarily focused on *Social Network and Fertility Decisions*, interviewing a total of 51 mothers. However, the semi-structured interview guide also covered areas relevant to studying various aspects of Turkish women’s fertility decision-making, and young mothers’ evaluations of their own motherhood were one significant focus of the study.

A total of 17 mothers who ranged in age from 24 to 41 at the time of the interview and who had their first child between the ages of 17 and 22 comprised the sample for this article. The author conducted the interviews together with two trained research assistants. A snowball sampling technique was used to identify the participants; they were initially recruited from a daycare center in downtown Istanbul. These participants were then asked to identify other eligible women with at least one child living in their communities or social and familial networks. While most of the respondents resided in Istanbul, several additional cities in various regions of Turkey were visited during this recruiting process.¹ As Table 2 shows, the study sample displays heterogeneity with respect to the region of residence. Even though I didn’t attempt to select different regions of Turkey systematically, our recruitment approach led to this diversity. Despite the considerable heterogeneity concerning the region of residence, this study focused on a nonrepresentative sample of young mothers both because it didn’t reach rural areas in these regions, where a grimmer picture of early childbearing tends to prevail, and because the study used a non-probability sampling method (i.e., snowball sampling).

Before the interview, all respondents provided informed consent and were informed about the process and the option to withdraw at any time. Approval for the study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the institution that the author was affiliated with. All interviews were conducted in the respondents’ mother tongue (Turkish) and primarily conducted in the respondents’ homes. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim in Turkish by the two research assistants, and representative quotations were translated into English by the author. Interviews lasted for about an hour. Pseudonyms are used to ensure respondents’ anonymity.

The interviews were semi-structured, the interview guide listed relevant areas to cover, including experiences of early marriage and motherhood, social support, women’s perceived cost and benefits of early motherhood, and their feelings of subsequent childbearing. We asked how the respondents decided to get pregnant, whether it was a planned/intended or wanted/unwanted pregnancy; whether they received kin support along the process; how they felt about this support; and how

¹ These cities include Ankara, İzmir, Bursa, Antalya, Edirne, Eskişehir, Urfa, Trabzon, and Malatya.

Tab. 2: Sample characteristics

	Age	Age at first birth	Number of children	Region of residence	Education	Employment
Derya	36	18	2	Western	Middle school	Works part time
Ezgi	29	20	1	Western	High school	Former factory worker
Feryal	28	18	2	Southern	Middle school	Former factory worker
Figen	41	20	3	Eastern	Middle school	Babysitter
Fulya	32	22	2	Northern	Middle school	Seasonal worker/agriculture
Gizem	24	22	1	Western	High school	Graphic designer
Gonca	33	17	2	Western	Middle school	Former factory worker
Gülay	36	18	3	Eastern	Primary school	Cleaning staff
Hasibe	27	21	2	Southern	Middle school	Assistant teacher
Hümevra	35	22	3	Eastern	Primary school	Unemployed/housewife
Imran	35	18	2	Northern Turkey	High school	Unemployed/housewife
Keriman	31	18	2	Central	University	Former receptionist
Lale	25	19	4	Eastern	No education	Unemployed/housewife
Melis	28	22	3	Central	High school	Unemployed/housewife
Perihan	27	20	1	Central	High school	Preschool teacher
Sevgi	25	18	2	Southern	Middle school	Customer service representative
Tülay	32	18	2	Central	High school	Former factory worker

Source: survey "Fertility and family life in urban Turkey", own design

they evaluated the early marriage/pregnancy/delivery/childrearing experience overall. This included how they felt about having a child at an early age; what they considered as the advantages and disadvantages of being a young mother; how they decided to have a second or third child; whether these further children were planned/intended/wanted; how they felt about having a second or third child; and how they compare the second and third birth experiences to the first birth (was it easier, harder, etc.).

Table 2 presents some of the characteristic features of the study sample. As this table illustrates, at the time of their first births, respondents were between 17 and 22 years old. All of them were married during their first birth and at the time of the interview, except for one case of divorce. For the most part participants’ marriages were voluntary, with the nature of marriages ranging from own-choice marriages with parental consent (n=8) to arranged marriages with participant consent (n=7) to elopements (n=2); none reported a forced marriage. The information related to education is based on respondents’ reports of their education level at the time of the interview. Education levels were quite mixed, with the highest level of education being high school for most of the participants; only one participant had a university degree, and one participant had no formal education. Participation in full employment was low, as most young mothers were not currently working, either because they left work temporarily due to childbearing or were not employed at all (59 percent, n=10). Generally, all employed women had low-paying jobs.

Five participants joined their husbands’ parental house after marriage and 4 of these women were living with in-laws during their first childbirth. The study data exemplified the discrepancies between the eastern and western regions with respect to marriage and childbearing patterns. Participants from eastern Turkey (n=4) had more children (at least 3), they have no or low formal education, and were living in extended households in their husbands’ parental house at the time of their first childbirth.

The literature provides evidence that there is an association between early childbearing and higher completed fertility, with young mothers having a longer period in which to have multiple births (*Morgan/Rindfuss* 1999). However, this may not be true for the young child-bearers in this study. As Table 2 shows, even though these young mothers seem to have more years in which to decide to have additional children, most stopped at two children. Hence, for the majority of sampled women, it can be assumed that they seemed to conform to the dominant childbearing norm of having two children in Turkey (*HUIPS* 2018).

3.2 Analysis

This study aimed to explore women’s perspectives on the consequences of their early childbearing by drawing on their retrospective accounts. In order to do so, common themes in women’s narratives were examined. After an initial reading of the transcriptions, a thematic analysis was performed (*Strauss/Corbin* 2015), preliminary codes were generated based on the recurrence of themes, and pervasive patterns were identified. In the second stage of the analyses, the authors

reviewed all data, noted dominant themes and representative quotes and generated additional codes and emergent themes. Then, the codes most relevant for the study purpose were chosen and sorted into conceptual divisions and subdivisions by their content and meaning. Finally, the authors re-read the transcripts to compare codes and quotations against the original text to minimize any potential confusion.

4 Results

The analysis of the young mothers' descriptions of their early first births revealed three prominent themes. First, many respondents reflected a certain regret over their immature childbearing, with one interviewee calling it "courage in ignorance." Second, respondents offered their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of being a young mother. Third and finally, the mothers evaluated their continued childbearing and described making better sense of motherhood in their subsequent childbearing. The next section discusses each of these themes and presents representative quotations.

4.1 Views on early childbearing: "Having an early birth is courage in ignorance"

An important theme that emerged from interviews was study participants' descriptions of their early childbearing as immature and undesirable. Interestingly, although these women's marriages were generally voluntary and childbearing after marriage is socially expected, most of the participants (n=8) reported that their first pregnancy was unplanned, and even unexpected for some. For the remaining participants, early pregnancy after an early marriage was expected. However, only two participants explicitly stated that they planned their pregnancy and negotiated with their husband for it. For other participants (n=7), it seems that planning for the first childbirth was not a conscious and independent decision. Women's accounts indicate that these women's decisions to have their first child was significantly shaped by parents and in-laws. The following quotations are illustrative:

"I wasn't thinking of having a baby, neither was my husband, but because of my mother-in-law's extreme pressure on me..." [Keriman].

P: As a matter of fact, they pushed us quite a lot for my first birth.

I: Were these people your parents or your in-laws?

P: Both, both sides were insistent, but particularly my grandpa! He kept talking about it, he was keen to see his grandchild before it was too late [Imran]

Importantly, as these women's accounts display, fertility decision-making varies regionally in Turkey. In eastern Turkey, upon marriage, a young woman is

expected to live with her husband’s family and the young couple is expected to obey the husband’s parents. Among the respondents in this study, most of the early child-bearers who resided in eastern Turkey ceded control over their reproductive behaviour to elders based on social customs. From the narratives, it was clear that these women accepted the idea that elders have the right to shape childbearing decisions, as two respondents residing in eastern Turkey reported:

“Well, I don’t really know what I felt, what I thought about having my first child. I was young and she [my mother-in-law] kept talking about it [having a child]. I didn’t understand anything. It was like a family duty, you know, they [mothers and mothers-in-law in general] expect you to do it.” [Lale]

“I got married in February, I think that I got pregnant the day I married! It was a surprise, no... No, it was not planned at all, but everyone was so looking forward to it, my son is the first grandson of my husband’s parents you know, so my mother-in-law was desperately expecting it.” [Humeyra]

Regardless of their plan for the first child, all the early child-bearers reported that their first birth was too early. Assessing their early fertility in hindsight, from a more mature perspective, they saw that giving birth at a very young age could have led to a lot of negative outcomes, including health risks both for the mother and the child. Several respondents pointed to this fact and described their experience as nothing but running the risk. For instance, the word “cahil” (unknowledgeable/ignorant) was frequently used when describing their mental and emotional situation at the time of their first birth: The following statements are illustrative:

“I was a child myself when I had my first baby, I was scared of it, especially when he started crying, you know, I was so ignorant [çok *cahildim*, çok!]. [Gülay].

“My first child! Ohhh... you know what they say it [having a baby at that age] was ‘courage in ignorance’ [*cahil cesareti*]; you have no idea about motherhood, you don’t understand anything.” [Tülay]

“Well, you are just ignorant of many things [*pek çok konuda cahil oluyorsunuz*], you don’t understand what is really happening.” [Fulya].

“I think it is not a good thing at all to have a child when you are totally ignorant [*zır cahilken çocuk sahibi olmak hiç iyi bir şey değil*].” [Keriman].

The feeling of unpreparedness at the time of first childbirth was repeatedly reported in women’s interviews. Their narratives indicate that this sentiment most likely led them to stay disconnected from the entire process of childbirth. For example, they often remarked that they were not fully involved in their first childbirth nor did they experience the feeling of motherhood. When asked how she

felt about her first childbirth, Lale said: “I couldn’t make sense of it at all”, another respondent (Sevgi) said: “I was not aware that I became a mother, all I felt was pain, concern, and fear”, a third respondent (Keriman) said: “I was so young I couldn’t feel like I was becoming a mother.”

Almost all the young mothers interviewed relied on family support to handle the difficulties and concerns related to their early first birth, with most of this family support providing both financial (e.g., money lending, housing) and instrumental support (e.g., assistance with daily tasks), as well as childcare. The women studied stressed the importance of the family support they received, from own mothers in particular, in overcoming the hardship of the stressful transition to motherhood, particularly the overwhelming feeling of “not knowing what to expect” (Sevgi, aged 18 at first birth). For example, in one case, the young mother, Hümeyra, lived with her mother-in-law for five years. Ceding all mothering responsibilities to her mother-in-law, she reported that she felt as if “she was raised together with her baby by her mother-in-law during these years”. Sevgi said that since she could not care for her baby and was “not even able to hold the baby in her arm properly”, her mother took charge entirely during the baby’s infancy and cared for her until the baby turned four.

On the one hand, grandmothers’ support is a lifeline for these women. On the other hand, this support might contribute to their feelings of estrangement from their first child. Although there were no critical remarks about grandmothers’ over-involvement in caring for the first child, the narrative accounts indicate that grandmothers’ taking charge completely may have prevented these women from developing closer mother–infant interactions. Research shows that early fertility may motivate a woman to push herself for her baby’s sake; it can enhance a young woman’s self-esteem since it enables her to do something productive, nurturing, and socially responsible (see *Luker 1996; Anwar/Stanistreet 2014; Brubaker/Wright 2006*). However, when these young mothers gave all the responsibility to family members whose support is normatively expected and assured, they seemed to miss an opportunity to benefit from their experience of early childbearing. For many of the women studied, it appeared that they missed the feeling of motherhood in their first childbirth experience. This may be part of the reason why these mothers desired to have a second child – an issue that I will discuss later.

Moreover, even though the decision to become a parent is usually made in the context of a partnership, and the husband’s influence is as important as the wife’s influence in the transition to parenthood (*Stein et al. 2014*), in this study this does not seem to be the case. During the interviews, the women rarely talked about their husbands’ role in their childbearing decision process. Instead, community norms and elders’ opinions played a stronger role in their decision-making. It could be that due to their young age and inexperience regarding childbearing, the young mothers valued and trusted elders’ experiences and followed their advice. Moreover, as a previous study in Turkey showed, parents and in-laws exert pressure over the couples’ transition to parenthood and parity progression, and with their young age and inexperience, young mothers in particular readily submit to parental (or in-law) pressure to transition to parenthood at a young age (*Kavas/de Jong 2020*).

Ezgi revealed her rationale for relinquishing all the responsibility to the child’s grandmothers:

“I was ignorant, I was just 20! I knew nothing about caring for a baby, but they did, they were experienced, they cared for him better than me and my husband. I trusted them endlessly.”

4.2 Perceived advantages and disadvantages

To fully understand the mothers’ perceptions of early motherhood in other domains of life, I asked them what they thought the advantages and disadvantages of having a child at a young age are, specifically with respect to life choices such as education, their career, and social life. The women studied generally emphasized the disadvantages more palpably than the advantages. For example, Gonca said that early marriage and childbearing isolated her from her circle of friends who were still in school at the time. She found herself in a circle of mothers who were both older than her and more attuned to domestic life, which was not interesting to her. Gülay reported that her early motherhood did not have any positive effect on her life, in that “[she] was a child herself when [she] had a baby and [she] continued to be a child with lots of increasing responsibilities”. Another respondent, Sevgi, said that her early motherhood terminated her education, though she was a bright student in high school and determined to go to university. Moreover, she viewed her early transition to parenthood as a barrier to the recovery of her life prospects:

“Well you know what they say, ‘you can still do both’ – No! It never works. Shall I study my courses or take care of the kids? You cannot do both. Also, I am the kind of mother who wants the best for her kids, for example, I want my daughter to have ballet lessons, I frequently visit physical education teachers to talk to about this, I investigate things on the internet for my children and there are lots of other similar things that keep me very busy.”

With early marriage and motherhood, the women seemed to consider that their lives were largely limited to the domestic sphere, and that they irrevocably missed the opportunity to have career prospects. This sentiment was explicit in the narratives of some participants, such as Sevgi. In other cases, the women seemed to transfer their unfulfilled ambitions onto their children. The narrative accounts of Derya and Figen are cases in point. Derya and Figen talked extensively about their regret for leaving school early; however, despite their broken dreams and relatively young age (Table 2), they didn’t have any career expectations for themselves. Instead, they transferred their aspirations onto their children. In many ways, they seem to attain their unfulfilled dreams through their children’s school achievements:

“Well, education-wise, we couldn’t go to school; we were four siblings and we had a difficult life, we had a lot of (economic) hardship. I was able to study

only until middle school. I wanted to study beyond it but I could not make it because of, you know, the conditions. I suffered a lot, so it is my aim that I will do my best to provide for them [her children], send them schools, they will have an education and they will have everything they need to have a golden ticket [get a job], God willing [*insallah*]" [Derya].

"My daughter is a university student, she is studying law, I keep telling her that she should continue her education until the very end. Because it was something I was longing for, my dad didn't let me go to middle school. He didn't let my sisters either, I was lucky that at least I went to primary school." [Figen]

Interestingly, while the women studied overwhelmingly focused on the disruptive outcomes of early parenting for their education, career, and social life, some of them also identified some positive aspects. For example, one respondent said that when her children grow up, her young motherhood will transform from a disadvantage into an advantage as "[she] will still be young after 15-20 years and be like a friend to [her] kids" [Melis]. Another respondent, Keriman, who reiterated the drawbacks of young motherhood throughout the interview, also noted that it may benefit her since, she may end up having the joy of being a parent close in age with her daughters:

"...there is a large age gap between me and Mom, a gaping *chasm* of 36 years. Thus, we never had the sort of closeness I saw in my friends' relationships, we never got along well and we still don't understand each other... But in my relationship with my daughters, we don't have this large age gap and we talk, we talk about their friends, relationships and stuff. As a matter of fact, it is good for me, because I don't like to have breakfast alone, they are with me and we set the table, eat, and talk together. It is a lot of fun; we are friends now and we are gonna be good friends when they grow up."

4.3 The second child as a remedy and compensation

A striking finding from this qualitative data concerned the effects of early first birth on mothers' subsequent fertility. While a vast majority of the studied mothers described the negative emotions and challenges of their early childbearing, for many of them, the experience did not necessarily discourage continued childbearing. In contrast, most reported that their subsequent fertility was desired and planned. Interestingly, the transition to second and higher-order births had a different dynamic for these early child-bearers than their first birth, with many of them seizing fulfillment only in their subsequent births. This theme was frequently voiced during the interviews. The women interviewed commonly pointed to the circumstances, including their young age at their first childbirth, as the reason for missing the fulfillment in being a mother. The following quotations are particularly illustrative:

“I wanted to have the second [child] so much, he was not planned either, but the thing is that I wanted him... when I learned about it [the pregnancy] I could not sleep all night because of my excitement, it was like I was having a baby for the first time in my life! [...] It was a very different feeling, I hadn’t had it before, you know, I was too young at my first childbirth and my parents were not talking to me [they resented her because she married by eloping], I didn’t feel it [motherhood] back then.” [Gonca, aged 26 at second birth].

“I enjoyed raising my second child and liked the feeling of motherhood, my mother and people around me told me that I was behaving weirdly, you know, as if it was my first childbirth. Well, I was just telling them that I wasn’t in the right mood at that time [referring to first birth], I mean I didn’t live through it [motherhood] at that young age, I was a child myself! It’s hard to say, but I feel exactly like I am raising my first child now.” [Keriman, aged 28 at second birth].

The following quotation is even more explicit and emphatic in conveying this sentiment:

“Back then [first childbirth], raising a child sounded to me like torture, but with this kid [the second child], I came to understand motherhood. I mean, if I hadn’t had him, I would never have understood how it feels to be a mother. It is only now that I came to have that feeling.” [Hasibe, aged 27 at second birth].

The women’s accounts also indicate that making better sense of motherhood may have intensified the bond between the mother and the subsequent child, making the mother feel even more attached to the subsequent child. For example, one young mother, Lale, who gave birth to her first three children successively, all spaced very closely – 18, 20, 21 and 24 – told me that she only came to “feel like a mother” with her fourth childbirth:

“Well, I don’t really know what I felt, what I thought in my first three childbirths, I was too young, I did not understand anything. It was only when I had Samet [her fourth child] [...] Believe it or not, I didn’t have this feeling in my first three childbirths, I was so young and they were one after another, I really suffered a lot, but for Samet it was different, I felt like a mother when I had him, he has a different place in my heart, I am fond of him.”

Interestingly, for some of these mothers, second and higher-order childbearing served to heal from hurtful experiences and acted as a compensation for the sense of guilt of not feeling like a mother at their first birth. For example, Keriman said:

“This second child was good to me, it was all good for his sister and for my husband too, he was like a therapy to us. [...] [B]ecause I came to understand my mistakes, I didn’t repeat them in my second childbirth, you know what

they say, 'second children are always lucky' – that is so true. [...] I grew up and I grew mature, so I was way better."

A particularly poignant remark came from another early child-bearer, Gülay, a young mother of three children, aged 20 at her second birth. Being overwhelmed by the feelings of regret for not being a "good mother" to her three children, Gülay hopes that if she has one more child sometime soon, she will have a chance to compensate for the hurtful experiences and will be able to live through the substantive feeling of motherhood:

"...if I give birth to one more child, this child will be very different in my eyes, I will be able to get over my longing for real motherhood, you know why? Because when I was rearing them while they were crying, I was literally crying too, but if I have a new baby now, I will know what it wants, how I can help it. I will have one more child just-for-this-reason".

5 Discussion

This study investigated mothers' perceptions and evaluations of their early first birth, drawing on their retrospective accounts and subjective interpretations. One of the substantive findings of this study is that early age at first birth and overreliance on family support led most of the interviewed women to feel estranged from the entire process of childbirth and childcare. Many of these women only partially took on the responsibility of childcare and delayed the feeling of motherhood to the next child. A second theme concerned the perceived costs and benefits of childbearing at a young age. The women who participated in this study predominantly reported disruptive outcomes; the description of hardships and feelings of unfulfillment of being a mother were dominant discourses. The final theme concerned the influence of early first birth on subsequent childbearing; women's accounts indicated that subsequent fertility operated as a compensation for the missed feelings of motherhood. Moreover, second and higher-order births served as an opportunity to heal from hurtful experiences and feelings of guilt from not being able to care for their firstborn children.

This study makes important contributions to the research on young motherhood, particularly to qualitative research which explores the perspectives of the young mothers themselves and challenges the long-established and mostly negative depictions of teenage motherhood. First, this study argues that studying Turkey provides a non-Western perspective to the research on the Middle East, where specific norms and meanings attributed to early family formation shape women's perceptions of having a child at a young age. For example, this study finds that young women's experiences and perceptions of early fertility differ from that in Western countries, where early childbearing is conceptualized as deviant demographic behavior. A sizeable literature from the Western context documents that young mothers redefine their pregnancies in positive terms; redefining themselves

as mothers by becoming more responsible, and by considering their pregnancy as something that brings a sense of order to their lives (*Luker 1996; Brubaker/Wright 2006; Anwar/Stanistreet 2014*). For example, in *Brubaker and Wright's* study (2006), early motherhood became a turning point for some young mothers to assert themselves not only for themselves, but also for their children. *Anwar and Stanistreet's* study (2014) found that becoming a mother gave the interviewed young women a greater appreciation of education and employment. Creating a positive identity and sense of purpose in life was reported by other studies of Western contexts as well (e.g., *Seamark/Lings 2004; Horowitz 1995; Rosengard et al. 2006*).

However, the findings of this study revealed that in contrast to young women who evinced a more "resilient mothering," the studied women in Turkey exhibited less resilient and less assertive identities. This is an unexpected finding, because in Turkey, early marriage and childbearing are socially acceptable. Therefore, with early marital motherhood, young women do not deviate from social norms as such, and they are justified in expecting family support. However, despite this relatively supportive environment, the women studied reported mostly negative views about their experiences of early motherhood. It is a general rule in Turkey that parents are involved in their adult children's childbearing and childrearing processes. In the case of the interviewees, the elders who provided support may have perceived the women as still dependent and embraced the role of mother on their behalf. Many of the participants relinquished their reproductive agency and caregiving activities to their mothers or in-laws. Thus, it may be that while drawing on grandparents' support aided them to cope with the practical hardships, in many ways, it also led to feelings of unfulfillment as a mother. Thus, I propose that grandparents' over-involvement in their daughters' childbearing and caring processes may have snatched away the opportunity for these women to create a positive sense of identity and purpose in life. Such a sense of purpose could have potentially contributed to the young mothers' psychological wellbeing, a favorable mother-child relationship, and future aspirations to continue education and employment.

Second, the qualitative data that I analyzed in this study enabled me to understand young motherhood from young mothers' own perspectives. Moreover, this mode of data collection allowed me to identify the complexities and subtleties inherent in fertility decision-making (*Miller et al. 2004*). For example, it helped me explore an interesting aspect of having a child at an immature age, in that the study participants reported that they missed the feeling of being a mother after their first childbirth and were only able to feel fulfilled as a mother following their second or higher-order births.

There are limitations to this research as well. First, this study reports on a small sample of 17 women and used a non-probability sampling method (i.e., snowball sampling) to identify potential participants, both of which limit my ability to draw generalizable conclusions. Given the study's exploratory nature, it aimed to produce detailed knowledge "grounded in real data" (*Whitley/Kirmayer 2008: 9*), rather than presenting data that are generalizable to a broader population (*Matthew 2005*). A further limitation is that the study sample is restricted to data exclusively from

young mothers who were married at the time of childbirth. Thus, the data do not allow us to analyze the experience of early fertility among unmarried women, which would yield additional and varied data. Nevertheless, since early motherhood out of wedlock is rare in Turkey, study findings may be transferrable to the general populations of young mothers in Turkey.

A final limitation is the retrospective nature of the study, which drew on participants' self-reports on their early marriage and motherhood. Self-reported retrospective information is subject to recall bias, meaning that participants may not remember their marriage and childbearing experiences accurately or omit details (e.g., *Gorin/Stone* 2001). Nevertheless, given that marriage and childbearing are among the most important events of many women's life courses, I argue that respondents tend to recall the timing of these milestones accurately. Moreover, since most of these mothers yielded data from their lived experiences of early first marriage and childbirth that took place in the not-too-distant past, they are less likely to make cognitive errors in reporting their family formation experiences.

Despite these limitations, I argue that mothers' retrospective accounts provide sufficient data to explore women's perceptions of their early fertility. Further studies with larger sample sizes and married and unmarried respondents should continue exploring the consequences of early childbearing, recognizing the importance of social context in shaping these experiences.

I conclude by suggesting that policy analysts should consider young mothers' voices and understand their perceptions of early fertility. This approach is important to better understand young mothers' problems and formulate relevant policies to minimize the negative consequences for young mothers and their children.

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