

Getting Married is a Simple Matter: Early Marriage among Indonesian Muslim Girls in Rural Areas of Java

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Abstract

The high rate of child marriage has become a global community concern, including in Indonesia as the world's biggest Muslim country. This study explores the views and experiences of Muslim girls and local actors about early marriage in rural areas of Java, Indonesia. The case study was performed in a hamlet on Mount Sumbing, approximately 10 km from Temanggung District, Central Java, Indonesia. Eighteen female informants were interviewed, consisting of girls married before 18 years old during the 1990-2020 periods. The data were also collected from several vital informants: community figures, parents, and married couples. This study concluded that women who married at a young age still consider early marriage normal and acceptable from a socio-cultural perspective. For the local community, marrying their child at a very young age will guarantee labor availability, psychological security in old age and strengthen family bonds. On the other hand, the seriousness of life's challenges towards adulthood leads marriage at a young age to become a choice of socio-psychological coping mechanisms idealized by some young women. This phenomenon is also influenced by the existing local socio-cultural values that place marriage as a solution to socio-economic, socio-cultural problems and guarantee future generations' continuity. The seriousness of life's challenges towards maturity lead youth marriage as a socio-psychological coping mechanism was idealized by some young women due to gaps in knowledge about the impact of young married labor. This perspective is also influenced by the existing local socio-cultural values that place marriage as a solution to socio-economic problems and a simple procedure for marrying young through marriage dispensation.

Tingginya angka perkawinan anak telah menjadi keprihatinan masyarakat global. Namun demikian, data menunjukkan bahwa fenomena ini akan terus bertahan dalam jangka panjang, termasuk di negara Muslim terbesar di dunia, Indonesia. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pandangan dan pengalaman perempuan muda muslim dan aktor-aktor lokal tentang pernikahan usia dini di pedesaan Jawa, Indonesia. Studi kasus dilakukan di sebuah dusun di lereng gunung sumbing, kurang lebih 10 km dari pusat kota Kabupaten Temanggung Jawa tengah, Indonesia. Sebanyak 18 informan terdiri dari perempuan-perempuan muda usia yang menikah pada usia kurang dari 18 tahun pada periode 1990-2020 diwawancarai. Selain itu, data juga dikumpulkan dari sejumlah informan kunci yang terdiri dari tokoh masyarakat, orang tua dan pasangan. Penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa secara sosio-kultural, perempuan yang menikah pada usia muda masih menganggap perkawinan dini sebagai hal biasa dan bisa diterima. Bagi masyarakat setempat, menikahkan anak pada usia muda memberikan jaminan ketersediaan tenaga kerja, keamanan psikologis diusia tua, dan memperkuat ikatan kekeluargaan. Beratnya tantangan hidup menuju kedewasaan menyebabkan pernikahan usia muda menjadi mekanisme koping sosio-psikologis diidealkan oleh sebagian remaja putri karena kesenjangan pengetahuan tentang dampak persalinan usia muda. Perspektif ini juga dipengaruhi oleh nilai-nilai sosial budaya lokal yang ada yang menempatkan perkawinan sebagai solusi masalah sosial ekonomi dan tata cara perkawinan muda yang sederhana melalui dispensasi perkawinan.

Keywords: early marriage; child marriage; rural areas of Java; Muslim girl

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Introduction

Early marriage has become an international concern, particularly for the development policies in low and medium-income countries (LMICs) (Pesando and Abufhele 2019), including Indonesia. The country, with more than 255 million people living in 34 provinces, 416 districts, and 98 cities, is home to the largest Muslim population in the world with its great diversity of geographical and social-cultural conditions (Rumble et al. 2018) and has 16.2% of early marriage in women aged 18-22 years (Malé and Wodon 2016).

Based on the National Basic Health Research (*Riset Kesehatan Dasar - Rikesdas*) in 2010, Indonesian girls married according to first marriage had the highest 41.9%, aged 15-19 years. The lowest was 0.6% aged 35 years over (Lestari 2015). According to the 2014 *Survei Sosial Ekonomi Nasional* (SUSENAS) data, 33% of people married at under 19 (Perdana 2015). Research in several places shows that early marriage is still high, where 40 married women and men were married at the age of 14-19 years at 2012 (Purwaningsih and Setyaningsih 2014). Early marriage in Madura is around 60% (Sakdiyah and Ningsih 2013).

Referring to the early marriage rate of 27.84%, Banjarnegara is included in the top 10 districts out of 35 districts with the highest number of early marriages in Central Java. There was a significant increase in early marriages from 2008 to 2012 in Banjarnegara District (Wulanuari, Anggraini, and Suparman 2017). In 2006-2010, there were still quite many women who got early marriage (around one in three women got married early) (Setyawati, Noviati,

and Salimar 2013). Some provinces in Indonesia are declared to have high rates of early marriage under 18 years, both in percentage and populations aged 20-24 years, such as South Kalimantan, West Sulawesi, Central Kalimantan, Central Sulawesi, West Kalimantan, and Jambi (Soleman and Elindawati 2019).

Bondowoso is a district with its highest rate of early marriage, reaching 52.93% of the total rate in 2012. In 2013, the number of early marriages under the age of 20 years in Pakem Subdistrict, Bondowoso was 53.18%, and it reached 67.02% in 2014 (Anisa, Ramani, and Prasetyowati 2015). Data from the Religious Affairs Office (KUA) of Babakancikao subdistrict recorded 82 teenagers who got early marriages during 2015, i.e., 18.43% of the number of marriages in the same year. There were 4.88% of middle adolescents (13-15 years) and 95.12% of late adolescents (16-19 years) who got early marriages (Khairunnisa, Hidayati, and Setiawan 2016).

Early marriage in Rembang District reached 1183 cases. The high number of child marriages causes various health problems, including mothers aged under 18 years that have a 35% to 55% higher risk for giving birth to babies with low birth weight babies (LBW) (Tati and Indarjo 2017).

In Purworejo Regency until 2005, 2157 women were married with various age variations of the first marriage; 5.8% married at the age under 16 years, 14.8% married at the age between 16-20 years, 51.3% married at the age of 21-25 years, 13.8% married at the age of 26-30 years, 5.6% were married at the age of 31-35 years and 8.7% were married at the age of more than 36 years (Emilia and Wahyuni 2009).

The terms “child marriage” and “early marriage” are often used interchangeably with forced marriage, as it is perceived that children are not able to give their free, prior, and informed consent. It is also known as forced marriage, in which one of the partners aged under 18 years, with or without informed consent (Rumble et al. 2018). The United Nations Human Rights Council approves child marriage as “dangerous practices that violate, abuse, and impair human rights” (Gastón, Misunas, and Cappa 2019). It affects most rural girls with low education status and increases the social and medical risk for the very young mothers and their children (Raj 2010). In the case of Indonesia, the Indonesian Demographic and Health Survey in 2012 showed a maternal mortality rate that increased to 359 of 228 per 100,000 births (Husna, Demartoto, and Respati 2016).

Child marriage is regarded as a broad neglect of the health rights and the development of young girls and women (UNFPA and IPPF 2006), as a result of the idea that marriage is considered a family prerogative, so the children are rarely required to have a discussion (Blackburn and Bessell 1997). The poor value placed in girls and women perpetuates child marriage acts and acceptance (Parsons et al. 2015). Interestingly, a long journey of child marriage traditions has led to a change of perceptions on the essence of child marriage. Research on early marriage in the rural areas of Java shows that being a young mother due to an earlier marriage is addressed differently among generations for various reasons (Widyastari, Isarabhakdi, and Shaluhiyah 2020).

This article attempts to explain girls' views and various social agencies related to the cause's

early marriage. Based on the previous studies, early marriage is generally performed due to several reasons: 1) to avoid pre-marital sex (known as *zinā*) which is forbidden in Islam; 2) economic factors, such as marrying the girls, help to improve the economic burden of the family; 3) cultural tradition; 4) relatively low aspirations about education, considering that marriage is more important than education; and 5) unwanted pregnancy (Hidayana et al. 2016). The actors' views will reveal early marriage and explore four socio-cultural, socio-economic, structural, and motivational aspects in this study. Child marriage is seen from the actor's perspective and social system that form perception, an essential context in this study. Perception of the actor is caused by an interplay of social norms, economics, structures, and familial motivations (Hodgkinson 2016).

The social system has goals and manages to achieve the goals by maintaining patterns and boundaries (Lundqvist 2016). This approach is quite appropriate, given the diversity of culture and social systems of Indonesia that consists of hundreds of ethnic groups and thousands of local customs as well as local languages. Meanwhile, the agency's perspective is essential considering that it is a conceptual figure of culture that can act differently in different places and at other times. Agency is the socio-cultural mediated capacity to act (Kooij 2016).

This study is an anthropological research project to examine local situational by analyzing early marriages in rural areas. This study chose rural areas compared to urban areas since Riskesdas 2013 showed that 48.3% of marriages at the age of 15-19 years occurred in rural areas,

while those happened in urban areas reached 35.6% (Follona, Raksanagara, and Purwara 2014). This approach and method significantly contribute to providing a comprehensive description and in-depth understanding of early marriages in rural Indonesia.

Qualitative research methods allowed the researchers to understand behaviors relating to early marriages from the actors' frames of reference. This information is essential to forward children's voices, especially girls and other actors in the local contexts relating to early marriages. Refer to UNICEF (UNICEF Indonesia 2016) analysis shows that child marriage is strongly related to rural residence, lack of housing conditions, and households with lower expenditure, all categories associated with poverty. Child marriage in rural Indonesia is more than 1.5 times higher in rural compared to urban areas (27.1% and 17.1% in 2015, respectively).

The qualitative study was conducted through observation participation, and FGDs participated by children, parents, and local elite at the selected village. There are six FGDs and 20 in-depth interviews in the selected village, chosen from the family and child marriage. Besides FGDs, married girls' life histories have taken place at selected villages. The in-depth interview has been done for 20 married girls aged 15 to 17 years old when they got married. Semi-structured interviews have also been carried towards several stakeholders who significantly influence early marriage practices: religious figures, school teachers, community figures, head of the village, head of the subdistrict, Civil Register Office for Non-muslim, Religious Affair Office.

Early Marriage as Socio-economic and Cultural Coping Mechanism

The results showed that the household economic status, perceptions and knowledge of children about marriage, and perceptions and understanding of parents about marriage have a significant relationship with child marriage.

The socio-economic function includes strengthening the availability of labor for agriculture cultivation. The existence of this workforce provides guarantees for parents and provides psychological conformity. "I became more comfortable. There was a substitute for land management. I could have grandchildren when I was young" (informant, Manu. 50 years old).

The rejection of the marriage proposal had never happened since the child was still a student. It occurs because a man will never target children who are still students. However, once a child is graduating from junior high school or even elementary school and no longer continuing her study, the man will soon come and propose that she be his wife. The mothers in this village would be easier to overcome the social pressure by asking their daughters to get married earlier if their daughters have graduated (Jain and Kurz 2007).

Interestingly, the four factors that influence the adolescent's decision to marry at a young age are permissive cultural values, obedience to parents, distrust of health risks due to early marriage, desire to follow husband's rules, and strict rules at school. These factors are relevant to this study's context that the rural people do not have a tradition of high mobility. It is different from findings that showed economic

and biological factors as a dominant factor which is the strongest effect in making adolescent decisions to get married at a young age (Bahar, Tarigan, and Bangun 2014).

The results confirmed that the household's economic status, child's perception and knowledge about marriage, and the parents' perception and knowledge about marriage has a relationship to the occurrence of early marriage. However, it indirectly influences the decision to reject the marriage. Qualitative data shows that culture is a major factor in child marriage and this is in line with other studies in Indonesia (Kartika, Sadharta, and Tukiran 2012). Other factors, such as parents, community attitudes, and structural contexts (government institutions that regulate the marriage system) are also quite influential. The various factors turned out to bring up the sustainability of the early marriage phenomena.

The reason why someone passes the pre-marital requirement at an early age is for the common purpose. For this reason, it is understandable that early marriage rates are not declined in the rural areas of Java. Moreover, it is supported by the marriage age dispensation process, which is seen as the best choice for couples. Many problems will arise if a couple is not married, including sin, illegal marriage, and legal uncertainty (Ahyani 2016). The effect of the dispensation mechanism is the increase of early marriage cases. Cases from Indramayu, there are several cases of early marriage in Plosokerep Village, where children who have just graduated from elementary school are allowed to get married (Rumekti and Pinasti 2016).

Parent Psychological Security in Old Age

For the villagers, there are other advantages when early marriages occur to their children. One of them is that they are still young when they have grandchildren and problems with their children and grandchildren. It is also beneficial for managing households since their son-in-law can help them work in the field while caring for their grandchildren at home. Therefore, when the local people have a child who has already been proposed, they will let their child live with their husband without thinking too long. "*Nek wis ana sing nembung marani kok ra gelem ki, mengko dadi perawan kawak*" (If there is a man who has proposed my daughter but she refused it, I'm afraid that she might become an old virgin).

It might happen because local economic conditions influence the decision made by the women to get married at a young age, and this relationship, to some extent, is affected by gender and socio-economic background (Nobles and Bутtenheim 2008). Cultural factors become important determinants of child marriage (Kartika et al. 2012) in rural areas of Java. This study confirmed that the mothers whose daughters will be married at a young age do not have a greater chance to plan their daughter's future. Dropping out of school is an obstacle for parents to keep their daughters from getting an early marriage. Social pressure in the form of a belief of being an old virgin when rejecting the man's proposal is hard to avoid.

Theoretically, early marriage is believed to cause many problems, one of which is premature birth. Child marriage (early) makes the family, community, and even the country have difficulty getting out of poverty. Another

impact is the low quality of health and well-being of both children and families (Yendi, Ardi, and Ildil 2013). Interestingly, there are three factors of the results of research that influence the decision of teenagers to marry at a young age. It is illustrated by the cumulative variance of 15.187% and the tradition factor of 13.682%. Economic and biological factors are the dominant factors that are the strongest influences in making adolescents' decisions to marry at a young age (Bahar et al. 2014).

Other factors that influence the average age of a woman's first marriage are the area of residence, namely rural and urban areas. Rikesdas 20103 showed 48.3% of marriages at the age of 15-19 years occurred in rural areas, while in urban areas, 35.6%. (Follona et al. 2014). Based on the National Basic Health Research (*Rikesdas*) in 2010, Indonesian girls who got married according to the age of first marriage showed the highest rate of 41.9% (aged 15-19 years) while the lowest rate was 0.6% (aged 35 years and older) (Lestari 2015). However, this qualitative study indicated that of 18 couples who got early marriages, only one couple had a child's health problem.

Simple Procedure for Marriage

However, local people have different values related to it. "*Why is child marriage a problem? So far we are fine*". Early marriage is considered a means of controlling deviant sexual behavior, a quick solution for teenagers who are already pregnant, and a bonding between two families. For this reason, it's needed simple marriage procedure for the child or young woman who have pregnant.

The crucial factor underlying the presence of early marriages in rural areas of Java is an open and accommodating behavior over the efforts of falsifying the girl's age (bride-to-be). This study found that falsification of marriage certificate data was common in this village, as told by Atik, a woman who married early at the age of 15 in 2004.

"I got married by falsifying my birth certificate, that is adding my age y five years, so I was 20 years old at that time. This is commonly performed to anticipate the Law regulating the age limit for marriage in 16 years."

Another informant revealed,

"Getting married at a young age is a land of money for village officials. The costs for court and gratuity are something common. When the couple gets married too young, the more expensive it costs, the faster the expected service speed will be given" (Lilis, 15 years old).

Lilis married by a dispensation. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the causes of child marriage in the view of the actors.

The research in rural areas of Java showed exciting dynamics. The local community had different views and assessments related to child marriage. "*Why is a child marriage a problem? We are fine so far*".

The idea that girls who marry before the age of 18 have a worse life experience than those who marry at an older age because they will have more children, less future income, lower education, and poor health (Khan 2016) were not experienced by women in this village. Also, a finding indicated the low quality of health and welfare of children and family (Yendi et al. 2013). It is not proven to happen in this village.

In terms of demographics, the results of this study are in line with other developing countries that there are of early marriages under the age of 18 years with the husbands at older age (Naved 2016). The age gap between the wife and the husband is 5 to 15 years. Therefore, the marriages in this village are child marriages with adult men.

The role of local elites in early marriage in the research area can be seen from the looseness of rules and permissive behavior. In this village, the local elite with the most prominent role is the head of hamlet and the Islamic religious officer at village level (known as *modin*) who lead the prayer for feast.

The Lack of Knowledge about the Early Marriage Risk

Lack of the reproduction health risk of early marriage is one important factor remains the emergence of this case. Case studies at Kedungrejo, showing that parents with a low understanding of early marriage (Cholipah, Supriyo, and Setyowani 2013). The research in Tuban shows that socio-economic factors are more important than socio-cultural aspects. The early marriage of women in urban and rural Tuban districts is influenced by social factors, including respondents' residence and level of education rather than cultural factors. Economic factors include employment and income. While cultural factors, which include perceptions of dating and perceptions of "old maid" do not influence young female marriages in urban and rural areas of Tuban district (Qibtiyah 2014). However, the perception factor of parents has an important role. There is a relationship between

parents' perceptions with early marriage in Ratahan Timur District, Southeast Minahasa Regency (Pandaleke, Raule, and Tumurang 2016).

Various determinants for child marriage are cultural norms or values of 'siri' (shame) for family honor; family prestige and kinship; uneducated parents; the economic burden for family and inconsistency in legislation (Kasjim 2016). The finding of this study is different from that of the association placing pregnant events due to free sex as a shameful thing and parents avoid (Webster 2015), and there was only one case of pregnancy causing the early marriage to one case. The factor driving the high number of early marriages in rural areas is the presence of marriage dispensation mechanisms which is seen as the best choice for couples. If the couple is not getting married yet, many problems may occur, including sin, illegal marriage, and legal uncertainty (Ahyani 2016). It is not a typical case in the research location, but it almost becomes a structural problem in Indonesia. Based on the cases in Indramayu, there were several cases of early marriage in Pluscanep Village, where children who just graduated from elementary school were allowed to get married (Rumekti and Pinasti 2016).

Child marriage is one of the first fields of gender-related inequalities in which the perspective of social and gender norms has been implemented. The focus on gender norms in child marriage has reflected appreciation about how difficult it is for individuals to decide independently to get married later or for their children to get married later, even if they think it is the right thing to do. Patriarchal rules underlie

most marriage systems, and understanding gender norms is crucial to explain and try to end the hazardous practice for girls in many parts of this world (Greene and Stiefvater 2019).

The lack of knowledge about the risks of early marriage is one of the essential factors to early marriage cases in the research area. It also confirms the results in various regions in Indonesia, such as the results of the case study in Kedungrejo, which showed that parents with an understanding of early marriage would be more permissive to let their children marry at a young age (Cholipah et al. 2013). A study conducted in Tuban shows that socio-economic aspects are more important than socio-cultural aspects. Early marriages among women in urban and rural areas in Tuban Regency is influenced by social factors, including residence and respondent's education level rather than the cultural factors. Economic factors include employment and income.

Meanwhile, the cultural factors that include perceptions of dating and "old servants" do not influence early marriage among women in urban and rural areas in Tuban Regency (Qibtiah 2014). However, parents' perceptic factors have an important role. There is a relationship between parents' perception and early marriages in East Ratahan Regency, Southeast Minahasa Regency (Pandaleke et al. 2016).

This study revealed that child marriage in both countries is mainly driven by several factors, such as poverty, economic dependence, lack of education, and dowry in Bangladesh case. *Second*, the author describes a child marriage varies by perpetuating violence in child marriage or critically describing a child marriage as

deviant practices of patriarchy. Overall, child brides play their respective roles as winners, survivors, or victims (Dewi 2018). The influence of cultural and solid perceptions of societies, differences in religious interpretations, and family honor are several factors that may play an essential role in the sustainability of child marriage practices (Hardiani and Junaidi, 2018).

The finding that shows high divorce rates is supported by early matchmakers, strong economic bonds with parents, and facilities for divorce. The age and duration of marriage were not proven to be one of the strongest predictors of marital disorders. High divorce rates are managed into the normal operation of the wedding system, where couples get married first and then use personal choices to decide whether or not to remain together (Heaton, Cammack, and Young 2001).

The exciting thing is that there was no violence in young couple households. It is in contrast to the conclusion that married women are prone to victims of domestic violence (Putra, Pradnyani, and Parwangsa 2019). The participation of young married women also remains high, especially in the agricultural sector, unlike the findings stating that marriage will reduce women's participation in the world of work (AIPEG 2017).

Conclusion

This study confirmed and amplified the results of a previous study that concluded that child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and supported by cultural and social norms, poverty, and lack of opportunity. The findings of this study indicated that socio-cultural factors in the

form of social values in society believed by girls, couples, parents, and local elites are the essential factors affecting an early marriage. It is different from the other study that examined one's factors and relationships between the parents and the couple as a self-marriage preserver. It is also different from the study indicating that child marriage is rooted in the lack of economic rather than household religiosity.

The increasing access to sexual and reproductive health services in the area with high child marriage rates and developing strategies to change behavior and social norm is important. The increasing service quality for reproductive health and counseling, increasing women's education, and improving family economic status are equally essential to prevent early marriage and enhance the health of Indonesian mothers and children. Besides that, various direct assistance programs effectively prevent early marriage.

The interpretation of the state law at the village level is one of the obstacles in preventing child marriage. On the other hand, there is a greater need to give an insight to the adolescents with actual data about unwanted pregnancy in Indonesia today and early marriage to improve the readiness of young people for future generation planning and healthy reproduction. A program that offers incentives and efforts to empower girls can effectively prevent child marriage and encourage relatively quick change based on various studies. The answer that had not been found in this study is if early marriage in girls' channels social norm transmission, especially the norms related to roles and gender rights in households.

The worrying thing in this study is that young couples do not have strong views and values about the future of social-economic life since they still have strong ties with their families. The findings did not prove the main concern for boys about marriage: whether or not they will be able to support the family and the girls, which are often worried that marriage will mess up their aspirations about education and work.

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