

Factors Influencing Early Marriage among Rural Women in Bulusonik Village, Padang Lawas, North Sumatra Province

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: To describe the reasons rural women marry early and the levels of socio-ecological factors that affect early marriage among rural women.

METHODOLOGY: Researchers employed a descriptive quantitative research design to examine the levels of socio-ecological factors affecting early marriage among rural women. A total of 42 early married women were included from Bulusonik Village, Barumon District, Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra Province. Data collection was done in June – July 2024. The questionnaire consists of three levels of socio-ecological factors: individual, interpersonal, and community-social. Data were analyzed descriptively.

RESULTS: The study results found that the reason women marry early is that they are no longer in school, did not know the age limit for marriage >18 years, the religion permitted them to get married, heard a lot about life after marriage, had had sexual intercourse before, and to reduce the burden on the family. It also found that the factors influencing early marriage were present across all levels of socio-ecological factors, with community-social accounting for the greatest influence at 100%.

CONCLUSION: It was concluded that reproductive health education needs to be given to the community, creating a healthy peer environment is one of the keys to avoiding early marriage, and Islamic scholars need to provide an understanding of the maturity required in deciding to marry.

KEYWORDS: Early marriage, women, socio-ecological factors, rural, health, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Target 5.3 of Sustainable Development Goal 5 aims to eliminate all harmful practices, including child marriage, by 2030. Early marriage in Indonesia has decreased over the past two decades, but it has remained high, especially in rural areas. The Central Statistics Agency of Indonesia reported that the rate of early marriage in rural areas was 15.24 per cent. The rate in villages is more than twice that in urban areas, which stood at 6.82 percent. For this reason, the Indonesian government has established regulations to reduce the number of early marriages.

The Indonesian Marriage Law, issued by the Ministry of State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, sets the minimum age for marriage at 19 for both men and women¹. This law was created as an adjustment to the Child Protection Law, which defines a child as anyone aged 18 or under, as established in 2014. However, the United Nations Children's Fund reported in 2025 that 32.1 million (16%) women aged 20-24 in

Indonesia were married before age 18. Even worse, 10.2 million (2%) among them were married before age 15. Those statistics place Indonesia among the four highest-ranked countries in the world in terms of early marriage, after India, Bangladesh, and China².

The negative physiological and psychological impacts of early marriage on health have been reviewed³. The physiological impact of early marriage is miscarriage, premature labor, low birth weight, congenital abnormalities, easy infection, anemia and even maternal death. Meanwhile, the psychological impact is a sense of regret after marriage, leading to frequent quarrels and arguments in the household. Domestic violence in early childhood in couples can lead to divorce.

Multidimensional effect of early marriage qualitatively illustrated as emotional damage, moral damage, a risk factor for maternal and child health, a major cause for girls to drop out of school, poverty, gender-based violence, divorce, and lack of essential life skills⁴. Qualitatively, it is also found that the level of family resilience among early marriage couples is vulnerable, especially in terms of the legality of family integrity, physical resilience, economic resilience, and socio-psychological resilience⁵. The impact of early marriage on early childhood parenting patterns illustrated results in difficulties for parents in raising their children, such as difficulty dealing with unruly children, panic when children are sick, and difficulty controlling emotions when angry⁶. Women who married early experience a trajectory of lower life

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satisfaction, which is evident before marriage. They also found that early marriage negatively affects women's self-reported health and educational attainment⁷. A systematic review had concluded that early marriage significantly impacts adolescent girls' health, including pregnancy complications, perinatal mortality, and mental health issues like anxiety and depression. Educationally, it causes school dropouts, limiting skills and future employment opportunities⁸.

The negative impact of early marriage on women and the high rate of early marriage in Indonesia, despite the marriage law limiting the age of marriage, require efforts to prevent it from occurring. The initial effort is to identify the factors that influence early marriage.

Numerous studies have reported factors influencing early marriage quantitatively with different results. A study reported that the main influential factors of early marriage for the majority were economic, premarital pregnancy and mass media⁹. Another study reported that education level, region of residence, and wealth index were associated with early marriage. In contrast, employment and the interval between marriages and the birth of the first child were not¹⁰. An earlier study reported that factors influencing early marriage included education, family economic status, and peer influence¹¹. Another study found that the causes of early marriage are premarital sex, personal desires, economic factors, educational factors, and cultural factors¹².

A systematic review of factors influencing early marriage based on socio-ecological factors¹³. The findings classified factors into four levels: individual, interpersonal, community, and societal. Individual factors were summarized as including education level, activity, knowledge of marriage laws, pregnancy, sexual activity before the age of 17, and concerns about engaging in premarital sexual behaviour prohibited by religion. Interpersonal factors included family income, parental education level, following parental wishes, following peers, and exposure to information about life after marriage. Meanwhile, community and societal factors included prevailing cultural norms, religious values that permit marriage, and the culture of arranged marriages.

Bulusonik is one of the 303 villages in Padang Lawas Regency of North Sumatra Province of Indonesia. It is located at the lowest point of North Sumatra Province and borders West Sumatra, another province in Indonesia. The primary livelihoods of the population are agriculture and plantations. It is only 7 kilometres from the district capital. However, it's quite a distance from the provincial capital, over 429 kilometres. The distance to the nation's capital is even further. This study aimed to describe the factors influencing early marriage among rural women in Bulusonik village, using the socio-ecological model.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This research used a descriptive, cross-sectional design.

Population and Sample

The population in this study comprised women who entered early marriage in Bulusonik Village, Barumun District, in the last five years (2019-2023). Early marriage in this study is defined as stipulated by Indonesian marriage law, namely, marriage before the age of 19. A survey conducted found 42 women who engaged in early marriage, which was obtained through a house-to-house survey.

Data Collection and Instrument

Data collection was conducted by a researcher over two months, from June to July 2024. The researchers developed the instrument used in this study based on the levels of the socio-ecological factors. It was pilot-tested with 30 early-marriage women in Harang village, Barumun District. The results of the validity test using Pearson correlation and the reliability test using Cronbach's alpha show that the instrument is valid and reliable. The p-value of the correlation test is < 0,05 and the reliability coefficient is 0,759. The instrument contains 12 questions, divided into five sections: 4 questions on interpersonal factors and 3 on community or social factors.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed descriptively using SPSS version 30.0.0. Each variable related to respondent characteristics and respondents' answers to questions about reasons for early marriage is calculated and displayed in a table. Respondents' answers to questions about their reasons for marrying early were categorized by the presence or absence of socio-ecological factors and grouped into two categories: none and present.

Ethical Statement

Ethical approval was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Sumatera Utara (code number 690/KEPK/USU/2024). Before the interview, each respondent received an explanation of the research objectives and procedures. It was stated that the information collected from respondents will be used solely for research purposes and that they may withdraw from the research process at any time. Finally, all respondents signed a consent form.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Respondent

All respondents in the study were Muslim, were housewives, and had parents' incomes below the provincial minimum wage. Half of the respondents were married at 16. Respondents and both their parents have low levels of education, junior high school and elementary school. (**Table I**)

Table I: Respondent Characteristics

Characteristics	n	%
1. Current age		
- ≤ 19	11	26,2
- 20 – 23	32	73,8
2. Age at marriage		
- 15	3	7,1
- 16	21	50,0
- 17	5	11,9
- 18	13	31,0
3. Ethnic group		
- Bataknese	37	88,1
- Javanese	5	11,9
4. Education		
- Elementary school	3	7,1
- Junior high school	28	66,7
- Senior high school	11	26,2
5. Father's education		
- No school	3	7,1
- Elementary school	26	61,9
- Junior high school	13	31,0
- Senior high school	0	0,0
6. Mother's education		
- No school	2	4,8
- Elementary school	30	71,4
- Junior high school	9	21,4
- Senior high school	1	2,4

Factors Influencing Early Marriage

The factors that influence respondents' early marriage are divided into 2, namely the reasons for early marriage and the existence of socio-ecological factors that influence it.

Reasons for early marriage

All respondents stated that they married at a young age because religion allows it. Most respondents

Table II: Reasons for early marriage (n=42)

Questions	Yes	No
Not attending school and working	35	7
Not knowing the marriage age limit was >18 years	37	5
Pregnancy	0	42
Having had sexual intercourse before	1	41
Worried about engaging in sexual behaviour prohibited by religion	0	42
Parents asking for marriage	0	42
To reduce the family burden	1	41
Many peers are married	30	11
Having heard a lot about life after marriage	9	33
Community norms/culture require early marriage	0	42
Religion permits marriage at a young age	42	0
Marrying because parents arranged it	0	42

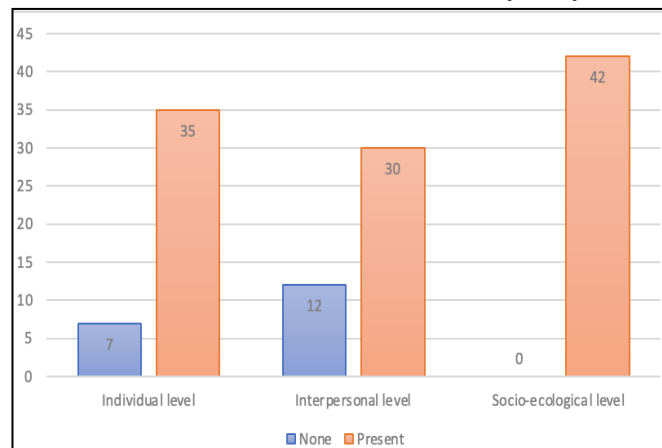
stated they decided to get married because they were no longer in school and they were not working, they did not know the age limit for marriage was >18 years, and because many of their peers were already married. Few stated that they heard a lot about life after marriage. A respondent stated that the reason for deciding to get married was that they had had sexual intercourse before, and to reduce the burden on the family. The reasons for early marriage are shown in **Table II**.

The existence of socio-ecological factors influencing the level of early marriage

The level of socio-ecological factors was used to categorize respondents' answers to questions about their reasons for deciding to marry. It was found that the factors influencing early marriage of respondents in this study were present at all levels of socio-ecological factors. The highest is at the community level. 2. The existence of socio-ecological factors that influence the level of early marriage is depicted in **Figure 1**.

Individual Factors

Eighty-three respondents had socio-ecological factors at the individual level. These factors are "not attending school or not working" and "not knowing the marriage age limit according to state law". The respondents in this study had only a low level of education. Both of parents also have low levels of education. The level of education influences the decision to marry early among women in Indonesia, especially in rural area¹⁴. Women's access to higher education is still limited in rural areas. Thus, education plays a key role in preventing early marriage. It is highlighted that access to higher education may be a powerful tool for preventing early marriage. Education prevents early marriage by increasing knowledge and skills, enabling women to make wiser decisions. Education also raises women's awareness of the importance of physical and social maturity in determining marriage decisions. Women with low levels of education are more vulnerable to social and economic pressures, which can influence their decision to marry early.

**Figure 1: Existence of socio-ecological factors at the level of early marriage**

Higher education level, good knowledge about marriage decisions can protect women from the risks of early marriage¹⁵. Knowledge of the ideal age for marriage can also prevent early marriage¹⁶.

Premarital sexual behaviour can also be a reason for early marriage. Worse still, it can lead to pregnancy outside of marriage. There is a link between adolescent social interactions and the likelihood of early marriage¹⁷. Parents whose children have engaged in premarital sexual behavior are at a higher risk of marrying their children at an early age than parents who do not have children who have engaged in premarital sexual behaviour.

In general, Indonesian society's perception of premarital pregnancy is negative and views it as a social deviation. Pregnancies occurring outside of marriage are considered a disgrace. To conceal the issue, parents often marry the girl off. This view is influenced by Indonesia's religious norms, customs, and laws in force.

The majority of Indonesia's population (87.2%) is Muslim¹⁸. In Islam, extramarital sex, known as adultery, is prohibited and considered a major sin with its own legal provisions. The verse of the Quran that forbids it is Surah Al-Isra' verse 32, which states, "And do not come near adultery; indeed, it is an abomination and an evil way"¹⁸. Furthermore, Surah An-Nur verse 2 states the punishment for adultery for those who are not married¹⁹.

In the Batak community, the majority ethnic group of respondents in this study, premarital pregnancy is considered a disgrace. To cover up this shame, women will marry the man who caused the pregnancy or another man. However, if one or both parents disapprove, elopement often occurs. This type of marriage is called Mangalua²⁰. The community traditionally ostracizes Mangalua couples for being considered disobedient, ignorant of tradition, and even disrespectful of it²⁰.

Interpersonal Factors

The interpersonal factor identified in this study was the influence of married peers. There are studies that found that early marriage is influenced by the social environment consisting of peers who are already married^{21, 22}. Peers often encourage other adolescents to marry at a young age²². Therefore, it is crucial to be careful when selecting friendships, as the types of friendships they choose can help them become better individuals. It is also stated that the decision to marry is made consensually and without coercion. Young men and women do not want to be left behind by their peers and tend to follow what they see others do. Creating a healthy peer environment is one of the keys to avoiding early marriage. Women need opportunities to engage in productive activities.

Community-Societal Factors

All respondents were Muslim. The word of the Prophet Muhammad SAW called on young people who had reached *ba'ah* to get married. The word *ba'ah* is perceived differently by the Muslim community. There

is a chance that those under 19 years of age will be allowed to marry because they are considered to have reached puberty. Most view the Prophet's words as simply meaning that in Islam, there is no minimum age limit for men and women to marry. Whereas, the main thing that *ba'ah* actually means is that a marriage also requires physical maturity, mental and economic readiness²³. Islamic legal experts have varying understandings of the term and definition of early marriage, generally defining it as marriage between individuals who have not reached puberty, which is when a man experiences wet dreams and a woman begins menstruating. Therefore, the age of early marriage cannot be determined precisely, as each child reaches puberty at a different time²³.

Although religion does not explicitly prohibit early marriage or set a marriageable age, the most important thing to emphasize is the individual's readiness to marry²⁴. Delaying marriage is preferable if the negative effects outweigh the positive. To maintain the quality of offspring and future generations, it's crucial to avoid the risks posed by early marriage.

CONCLUSION

Half of the women who married early in this study were married at 16 years old, and all are Muslim. Socio-ecological factors that lead respondents to marry at a young age exist at all levels, namely the individual, interpersonal, and community/society levels. The highest level was at the community/society level. Health education about early marriage for women and the community in Bulusonik Village, Barumon District, is needed to prevent the continuation of early marriage. Access to higher education is also crucial.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Erniyati: Contributed to designing the study, selection of articles, developing the instrument, data collection and data analysis, writing the manuscript.

Lubis MK: Contribute to designing the study, selection of articles, developing the instrument, data collection and data analysis, writing the manuscript.

Nasution SS: Contributed to reviewing the study design, instrument, data analysis and final manuscript.

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