



# A Qualitative Study on the Perspectives of Adolescents on Early Marriage at Small Island in Indonesia

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## Abstract

**BACKGROUND:** Early marriage is subject to the loss of crucial moments in adolescence. Therefore, the current research focuses on how adolescents consider early marriage.

**AIM:** This study aimed to explore adolescents' perspectives on small islands regarding early marriage.

**METHOD:** In this case, the perspective of eight adolescents as an actor and non-actor of early marriage and the influence of society on their perspectives was revealed using a phenomenological design. Domain analysis was used to explain facts of the sub-themes that appeared in the adolescent's minds while responding to early marriage.

**RESULTS:** The results showed that some adolescents considered early marriage an obstacle to success, depriving them of opportunities to enjoy adolescence. Meanwhile, others argued that it saves them from promiscuity, a form of devotion to their parents, and an acceptance of social norms by communities in the archipelago.

**CONCLUSIONS:** The perspectives imply the need to form support groups such as adolescent role models, providers, parents, and community leaders that straighten their perspective on early marriage in island areas.

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## Introduction

Early marriage leads to the end of an individual's adolescence, a phase where they develop physically, emotionally, and socially. Furthermore, it makes them miss an important moment in their life cycle. Although it has a consequence and is still a reaping controversy in many circles, almost every country still has the opportunity to allow this practice with the consent of the parents or legally approved. Early marriage limits future educational opportunities and leads to freedom loss by male and female adolescents in Afghanistan [1]. Conversely, for most female adolescents in Iran, it is seen as a social, emotional, and sexual need because they see marriage as an effort to achieve social freedom and identity and an important part of the transition to adulthood [2]. In different countries, early marriage has different interpretations based on the age limit of adolescence. For example, in some states in America, the minimum legal age for marriage is 16 years old, although some are allowed at a younger age with parental consent. Till today, this practice still takes place in the United States [3]. In some cases, it

happens before a child or adolescent turns 18 years old and before they become physically, physiologically, and psychologically mature to be responsible for marriage and the children that result [4].

In 2018, one out of nine female adolescents in Indonesia were married, indicating that early marriage is still common in many country regions. It is estimated that 1.2 million women aged 20–24 years old marry before 18 years old. This figure places Indonesia amongst the ten countries with the highest absolute number of early marriages globally [5]. Various factors trigger this practice in urban and rural areas in Indonesia and small islands, including education, environment, mass media, economy, local culture, and knowledge [6]. For example, the percentage of early marriage in Kabalutan Island, Central Sulawesi Province is high at 30% [7]. Some parents believe that working adolescents are considered adults, although they are under 19 years old. In this region, adolescents that have been able to earn a living and have a source of income have the association that no longer receives supervision from their parents. Another study conducted in one of the small islands in Indonesia, namely, Selayar Island, mentions a negative understanding of the local community about

early marriage among adolescents. They assume that marriage at an early age will affect adolescents' economy, education, social, and psychology. However, teenagers often do not have the power to refuse the arranged marriage of their parents [8].

Adolescents' perspective regarding the urge to marry early is influenced by several factors, including avoiding promiscuity, personal desire because they feel physically and emotionally mature, and approval from parents. Some are also triggered by socio-cultural factors or local customs that do not question early marriage. The educational level is also a contributing factor since they are no longer in school and the workplace. Besides, they are also influenced by the assumption that getting married early will save the family's economic condition [9], [10], [11], [12], [13]. This perception has the same position with various aspects, including knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, values, and social norms that play a role in early marriage. The study was carried out in Bondowoso, Indonesia, revealing that the lower the adolescents' knowledge about early marriage, the higher the tendency to perform the practice [6]. Social norms refer to empirical and normative expectations contributing to early marriage for adolescents <18 years old in Malawi [14]. Some countries in Latin America, such as Brazil, Guatemala, and Honduras, dictate how female and male adolescents should act indirectly, leading to early marriage. Then, it regulates actions that female adolescents may accept. These adolescents may use a transformative context to fight social norms considered dangerous [15].

Another discovery in Ethiopia highlights the importance of cultivating descriptive social and favorable norms for enhancing adolescent self-confidence. Preferred social norms help build the confidence of female adolescents to defend their rights. Furthermore, it was discovered that they have more opportunities to make choices respected by society and have the autonomy to decide on their right to health, including postponing early marriage [16]. Regarding this decision, Muslim women in Israel decided to perform early marriage to fulfill their need for freedom, the desire to experience respectable love culturally, and to escape poverty and difficult family conditions. Conversely, there is an assumption that a high price has to be paid for early marriage, for taking away freedom, creating intense new problems, and not providing solutions to previous problems. Early marriage is practiced based on the respect received. However, certain regrets arise due to the lack of opportunity to study, sustainable loneliness, and lack of money. Regarding financial and social motivations, it was discovered that the decision of the female adolescent to perform early marriage was not due to love or as passive members of society, but rather due to active pragmatic decisions made when faced with limited options [17].

This study examined adolescents' perspectives

regarding early marriage on a small island in Indonesia. Furthermore, it aimed to elaborate their perspective on early marriage, which is common in the region. A phenomenological approach was used to explore the emerging themes based on their perspective. Therefore, the questions answered through this study are (1). What is the perspective on early marriage for married and unmarried adolescents? (2). How do the socio-cultural aspects and society contribute to adolescents' perspectives on early marriage?

## Methods

This type of research was qualitative. A phenomenological design was used to trace adolescents' perspectives on early marriage. This design was considered appropriate in revealing the phenomenon and problems of early marriage at the study site, Kabalutan Island. This island is located in Tojo Una-Una District, Central Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. Efforts to ensure the accuracy of research methods and findings based on the following aspects: (1) Credibility aspect through extends observation period, increases persistence, triangulates data collection techniques, namely, in addition to in-depth interviews, unstructured observations are also carried out, discussions with colleagues, and member checks; (2) transferability aspect through describes in detail, clearly, systematically the research methodology used; (3) dependability aspect through member check, equalization of perception (if anyone helps in data collection), conduct training for observers; and (4) conformability aspect through data verification, extending observation period, and triangulating information sources.

### Informants

This study involved eight adolescents, consisting of five females and three males who did early marriage and those that did not. Apart from adolescents, several parents, community leaders, and providers were also involved in triangulating information sources. The criteria for the inclusion of informants were teenagers who did early marriage and teenagers who did not marry early, parents who had children who did early marriage. The community leaders were who understand the social situation and the problem of early marriage. The process of determining the informants who were the subject of this research was done by snowballing.

Figure 1 shows the process of determining research informants using the snowball technique. The participant who was met for the 1<sup>st</sup> time was the provider. The provider was also directed to meet and

interview community leaders 1 and 2. Furthermore, each community leader recommended the name of the adolescent's parent. Then, each parent met allowed their teenager who was married at a young age to be interviewed. There were other participants from the two adolescents (their friends), both married and unmarried. The number of informants in this study was 12 people collected based on the snowballing technique. The selection of married adolescents was based on the need for information about their perspectives on the early marriage they lived in. Meanwhile, the selection of unmarried adolescents was meant to gain a different perspective, including the reason for getting early married when many of their friends chose that option.

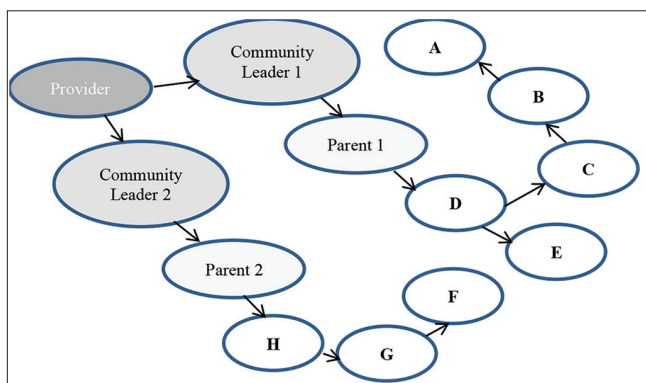


Figure 1: Determination of research informants using snowballing techniques

### Instruments

The instruments used in data collection were interview guides (containing questions with in-depth interview techniques), recording devices, writing instruments, notebooks, and digital cameras. The questions were flexible, following the development of information results in the interview process. Several questions were followed by the extraction of information, for example, regarding their reason to do early marriage and the people influencing this decision. Although this study used various instruments, the researchers themselves became the main instruments in data collection. As the main instrument in the qualitative study, researchers play a major role in capturing the expressions presented by informants when making statements.

### Data analysis

The retrieval of information was carried out using an in-depth interview technique. The information was discovered from the expression of the study subject on the issue of early marriage, which was studied using domain analysis. This analysis was used to explore and analyze the general description of the study subjects. Based on this general description, the interview results were compiled to produce a category or domain of

the social situation under study, that is, the problem of early marriage. Furthermore, a semantic relationship model was developed according to the field data discovered. The steps carried out in domain analysis were: (1) Choosing a semantic relationship pattern based on the information or facts in the field note sheet; (2) setting up domain analysis work; (3) selecting the data equality from the field note sheet; (4) looking for the parent concept and symbolic category of a particular domain according to the semantic relationship pattern; (4) arranging structural questions for each domain; and (5) listing all domains from the existing data.

## Results

### Participant profile

#### Participant A

Participant A was a 15-year-old female junior high school adolescent classified as an outstanding student and had participated in poetry and speech reading competitions. She was the youngest of all adolescent informants that participated in this study. Participant A strongly opposed the idea of early marriage, which led to her election as a planning generation ambassador for her region's national family planning program. Furthermore, she was quite independent about the idea of early marriage, had the autonomy to decide for herself, and was not influenced by anyone.

#### Participant B

Participant B was a 17-year-old female adolescent living with her brother due to her parent's divorce. She was a high school graduate and was one of the female adolescents opposing the idea of early marriage due to her desire to focus on continuing her studies and passion for becoming a midwife. Although many of her peers had gotten married early in her surrounding environment, B was not affected by this situation. According to her, early marriage was for pregnant women outside wedlock.

#### Participant C

C was an 18-year-old female adolescent that had dropped out of school. When this study was carried out, C was married to a 23-year-old man and was currently in 1-month pregnancy. Initially, she refused to marry at a young age because she wanted to continue her studies and reach her dream of becoming a midwife. However, she was powerless against the will of her parents. She considered that early marriage was prevalent on the island due to local customs and culture.

C's husband had the same job as her father's, that is, a fisherman. She believed that marriage is a relationship between two people as husband and wife. According to her, a family means togetherness and happiness under any circumstances.

*Participant D*

Like C, informant D was an 18-year-old female adolescent who dropped out of school and married. In contrast with C, D performed early marriage because she became pregnant outside wedlock. At the time of this study, she was 7 months pregnant. Her father worked as a fisherman forced to marry her boyfriend, and she agreed that as devotion to her parents.

*Participant E*

Participant E was a 19-year-old married female adolescent who was currently 7 months pregnant. She dropped out of school when she was 15 years old, with the excuse of helping her parents work. Her father was a fisherman, and her mother was a food seller. The perspective of informant E toward marriage was that the people who are eligible to get married are women able to cater to the household and men who already had jobs.

*Participant F*

Participant F was a 23-year-old male adolescent, the second of five children that got married after graduating from high school. He worked as a fisherman like his father and was skilled at making exiled marine fish. Informant F accepted the idea of early marriage because he felt that he was already established, able to support his family, and had a permanent job. His father influenced this perspective.

*Participant G*

Participant G was a 19-year-old male adolescent, the third of five children, and a high school student living with his mother and two younger siblings. G became the family's breadwinner, working as a fisherman because his father had passed away. He left the decision of performing early marriage to his mother and family. He considered a good decision by the mother and his family and would comply with marrying at a young age. This indicates that his peers heavily influenced the concept of early marriage as understood by G.

*Participant H*

Participant H was a 17-year male adolescent, the first of three siblings currently staying in Grade II

of high school. H worked as a fisherman during school holidays. H disagreed with the concept of early marriage because of his desire to leave the island and work far from his hometown. His uncle influenced his perspective on early marriage.

**Results of domain analysis**

Based on the information traced to adolescents and people that have a role in the perspectives of adolescents on early marriage, a scheme of several domains or themes that emerged in the elaboration process is presented as follows Figure 2:

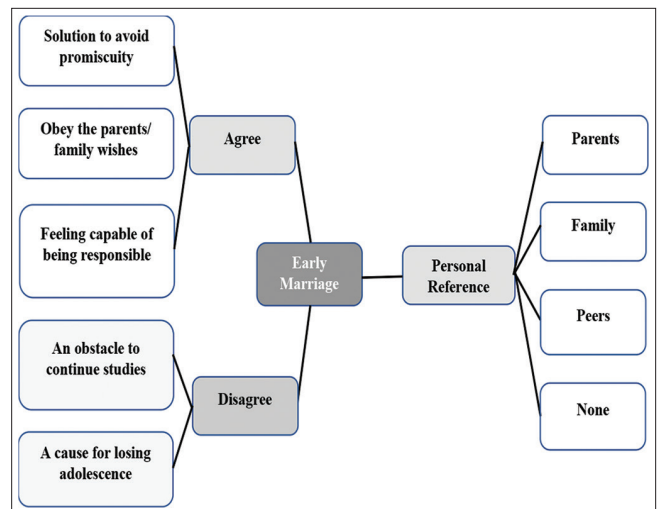


Figure 2: Scheme of the domain analysis regarding adolescent perspectives on early marriage and personal reference

Based on Figure 2, adolescents who agreed with the concept of early marriage believed that it was a solution to avoid promiscuity, obeyed their parents or family wishes, and their feeling that they were capable of taking responsibility as individuals who are ready to marry. Meanwhile, adolescents that disagree with the concept of early marriage believe that it might hinder their steps from continuing their studies and make them lose their adolescence. This scheme observed that the people influencing adolescents' perspectives on early marriage are parents, families, and peers.

Based on the scheme in Figure 3, it was observed that there were two adolescent positions, namely actors and non-actors of early marriage. Most of the conditions that made adolescents become the actors of early marriage included; (1) Being forced to follow the wishes of their parents although they did not want it; (2) pregnancy out of wedlock; and (3) the presence of a permanent job which further leads them to feel capable of supporting their family. Meanwhile, the adolescent position as non-actors of early marriage includes; (1) factors that trigger them to continue their education; (2) desire to achieve their dreams; (3) the hope that they would leave the island and work far from their hometowns or wander; and (4) their position as



outstanding students in their schools. Furthermore, scheme 2 shows the main reasons early marriage actors accepted the idea, including the desire to be devoted to their parents, influenced by their peers who were also the actors of early marriage, and the desire to help the family's economic condition. They believe that by getting married at a young age, they reduce the financial burden on the family. Conversely, the adolescents who are the non-actors of early marriage have several reasons why they did not perform such practice, including their desire to enjoy their adolescence; they did not want to be influenced by local customs, and an obsession with being a successful adolescent.

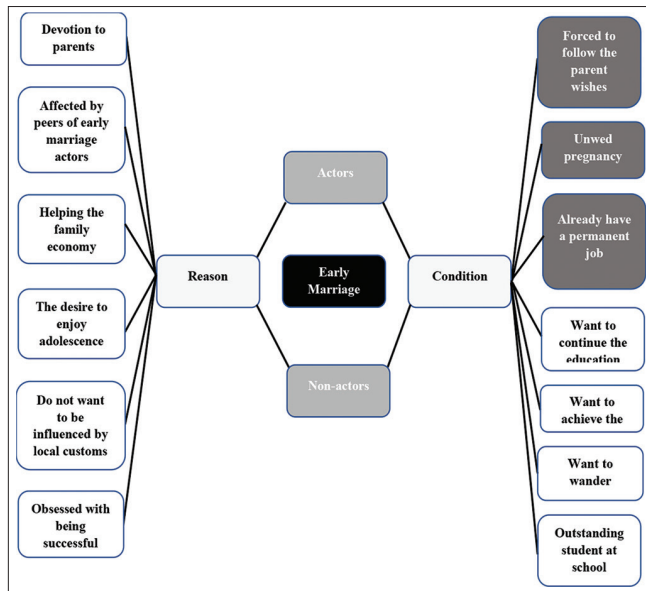


Figure 3: The scheme of the domain analysis on the adolescent perspective as actors and not actors, conditions, and reasons for early marriage

## Discussion

### Perspectives on early marriage

Regarding the idea of early marriage, this study indicates that there are adolescents that agree and disagree with this concept. In addition, adolescents in Somalia accepted early marriage because of social norms against premarital sex. This contributes to their decision to marry, and it became the parent's obligation to agree to the marriage based on the adolescent's will [18]. One of the five female adolescents involved in this study had premarital sexual behavior, which put her in the position to perform early marriage due to her parent's insistence. It is not proper that this case be seen from one point of view, that is, premarital sex actors involve only the female adolescent because she has a male adolescent partner. There are results regarding gender role attitudes and adolescent permissiveness towards premarital sex in three cities, namely, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Shanghai. In Shanghai, female respondents with traditional gender role attitudes were

more likely to use double standards concerning males than females in premarital sex (odds ratio = 1.18) [19].

A similar view was discovered in adolescents as actors of early marriage with low education levels, including middle and upper economies in Banjarbaru, South Kalimantan, Indonesia. There are results that early marriage is performed because of their desires as a necessity, matchmaking by parents, and unwed pregnancy [20]. The strong desire of adolescents to perform early marriage based on their own will is called an intention which is the tendency to marry in their adolescence or under the age of 20. The increasing intention of early marriage may be overcome by providing psycho-education, which is a method for educating and helping the target develop support sources in facing life challenges. This method is expected to decrease the intention of adolescents to perform early marriage [21].

In this study, several factors triggered the adolescent acceptance of the idea of early marriage, such as it is a solution to avoid promiscuity, a form of devotion to parents, and a feeling that they can take responsibility in building a household. Other factors may arise in early marriage, including the adolescents that marry earlier, have the potential to become pregnant at a young age, have children immediately, and in most cases, 23% of them have five or more children during their lifetime. Early marriage is also associated with an increased risk of dropping out of school and living in poverty. In addition, it is explained that early marriage is not long-lasting. In most cases, approximately a quarter of them had separated or divorced by 18 years old [3].

Most adolescents who disagreed with the concept of early marriage believe that getting married at a young age hinders their desire to continue or finish their education and takes away their opportunity to enjoy adolescence. The same perspective is discovered in adolescents in Afghanistan, where they believe that early marriage limits future educational opportunities. These adolescents believe that early marriage increases exposure to domestic violence in some violence. About 10% reported that female adolescents lose their freedom and options if they marry before 18 years old [1].

### Personal reference

The results of this study place parents, families, and peers in a role in building the adolescents' perspectives on the concept of early marriage. It is different from the context of early marriage interpreted by adolescents in Nigeria, where religious leaders, through preaching activities become personal references that affect their perspective regarding early marriage [22]. Related to this study, in the case of the adolescents that performed early marriage in small islands, the parent role is significant in encouraging them to get married although they have not reached

the age of 20. In addition, in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam, the quality of parental relationships and communication is protective against the early marriage of female adolescents, although communication facilitates marriage as soon as the adolescents finish the education [23]. Peer groups are also a reference figure for adolescents, apart from parents and families. The previous study in Bogor, Indonesia, concluded that peer group education improves the knowledge and attitudes of urban and rural adolescents related to early marriage, with  $p < 0.001$ . This peer group education may be implemented in various areas; therefore, support from various parties is needed to train peer educators for adolescents (Rahman *et al.*, 2015). Other studies that also focus on personal references related to early marriage in adolescents mentions that parties such as parents and peer health workers have contributed to the perspective of adolescent on issues of early marriage [7].

### **Conditions and reasons for early marriage**

In this study, adolescents' practice of early marriage on small islands is not separated from their perspective on the conditions that trigger it. Their position as children often has no bargaining value in making decisions independently. Some of the adolescents as actors of early marriage stated that they were forced to follow their parents' decision to perform the early marriage, although they still have the desire to continue their education. In addition, female adolescents in Iran have low autonomy to voice their willingness to postpone the marriage offered by their parents [2]. However, this does not occur in Somalia, where female adolescents have personal autonomy to decide their partner and the person they will marry. Unexpectedly, early marriages in this region often happen at the will of the adolescents themselves. In this case, the parents only agree with the adolescent's desire. Most social norms contrary to premarital sexual behavior are often used as a reference for performing early marriage [18]. Besides following their parents' wishes, female adolescents who perform early marriage on a small island also argued that unwed pregnancy is a situation that motivated them to get married immediately. Meanwhile, male adolescents who chose to perform early marriage revealed that they already had a permanent job as the household head, although they were not yet 20 years old. Research findings on a small island called Selayar, located in Indonesia, showed that one reason for adolescents' early marriage is economic problems. In this case, teens did not continue their studies because they could not afford to pay to choose to get married. They have values and principles not to burden their family. The parents of teenagers on this small island have a *Siri* culture, a culture that means that young women close to men are immediately married not to embarrass their family [8].

### **Follow-up efforts**

Follow-up efforts are needed to improve adolescents' perspectives on early marriage and prevent them from practicing it. The existence of people as personal references influencing their perspective forms the basis for further efforts. The study carried out in Bangladesh showed that it can reduce the prevalence of early marriage in a relatively short period. This was executed by working with communities to implement holistic programs called the Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills, Income and Knowledge for Adolescents in building adolescent skills. This aims to empower children and adolescents, especially female adolescents, with skills that significantly reduce the risk of early marriage in the community. These community-based programs provide safe spaces for female adolescents to meet and access mentors and skill training opportunities [24].

Based on this study, a health service should be provided according to the needs of the adolescent. These health services may be in the form of adolescent problem counseling. In this case, the counselor needs to have the characteristics or behavior expected by adolescents, namely being able to communicate, act like friends, and understand their character. These health services for adolescents may be provided by forming a special team that deals with their problems and the health facilities provided in a comfortable and closed room. Services may be carried out at the health center, school, or outside after school hours or during recess. It is very necessary to use multimedia during counseling and training sessions. In addition, social media are needed as a means of communication and information [25], [26], [27].

### **Conclusion**

The perspective on early marriage comes from two adolescent positions, married and not married. Married adolescents see early marriage as a solution to avoid promiscuity, a form of devotion to their parents, and acceptance of social norms by people in the archipelago. Conversely, unmarried adolescents see it as an obstacle to achieving future goals and eliminating opportunities to enjoy adolescence. In this study, the adolescent's perspective was formed by the surrounding individuals and environments such as parents, families, peers, and the local custom on the islands that marry off their children at an early age.

Furthermore, adolescents' perspective in small islands implies a need to provide support for them and set the right point of view regarding the issue of early marriage. This support may come from role models in the archipelago, providers, parents, and community leaders who care about adolescent problems. Further

study may be developed in the form of interventions to reduce the number of cases. This may be carried out through entry points to improve their perspective on early marriage.

Based on the findings, in this study, it requires commitment and collaboration from stakeholders, including the school, the government at the village level in the archipelago, the religious affairs office, and the family planning coordinating body. These stakeholders need to work together to embrace community leaders and parents who have teenagers provide the proper literacy about the importance of delaying marriage age for adolescents and preparing them physically and mentally to enter marriage life.

## Ethical Considerations

Before data collection took place at the study location, ethical permission was obtained from the Faculty of Public Health ethics committee at Universitas Hasanuddin Number 4490/UN4.14.8/TP.02.02/2019. The approval forms of informant involvement were obtained from each adolescent and all participants involved in this study.

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