

# Early Marriage and Women's Empowerment in Rural Areas

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Early marriage is a persistent problem in Indonesia, especially in rural areas. This study aimed to uncover how early marriage occurs and its causal factors in rural communities. This research was conducted in a village community in East Java which has both Javanese and Madura cultures. This study employed a qualitative approach. The study found that in Madurese and Javanese cultures, girls were always associated with economic value for the family. Madura and Javanese girls experience cultural and structural pressure in the phenomenon of early marriage, especially girls who come from poor families. Empowerment to reduce early marriage in rural communities can be done through existing social institutions in rural areas.

**Keywords:** *Children, Java, Madura, Women, Villages.*

## Introduction

Early marriage is a persistent problem in Indonesia, especially in rural areas. This case is imposed on girls when they are considered adults after their first menstruation (Fadlyana et al., 2009). Ghosh's study (2011) stated that parents in rural areas prefer to marry off their children in the context of early marriage because of the social status stigma and strangeness when getting married in adulthood. The National Population and Family Planning Board (BKKBN) in 2018 recorded that 20 per cent of the national marriage records in Indonesia were child marriages. According to the 2015 National Socio-Economic Survey, the rate of child marriage in rural areas is higher than the national rate of child marriage. The two Provinces in Indonesia with the highest child marriage rates are West Sulawesi (34.22 per cent), and South Kalimantan (33.68 per cent).

A study conducted by Astuty (2013) pointed out that early marriage is a recurring cycle phenomenon, in which society is affected by a lack of awareness and knowledge about the good and bad of marriage. Early marriage indicates a lack of awareness of the importance of

health and family planning, so that the actors do not think of the worst consequences (Ertem et al., 2008; Sumbulah et al., 2012).

In a study on child marriage, Devi, (2012) conducted research in Bangli. The results illustrated that sociologically, the state of the social structure can influence the emergence of child marriages. Child marriage is a manifestation of the symptoms and social structure in society (Izzah, 2016; Neff et al., 2009).

Marlina (2013), using a psychological approach, examined the relationship between parental education level and emotional maturity, with the tendency to get married early. Teen education and parental education influence complex ways of thinking and maturity in making marriage decisions (Desiyanti, 2015; Wodon et al., 2016; Maertens, 2013). Parents with low education tend to marry off their children at a young age due to social factors, where women who marry at an adult age are considered taboo. Previous studies have concluded that the stigma of being a spinster causes women to become victims of early marriage (Rifiani, 2011; Palermo et al., 2009; Cahyani, 2015).

Trigiyatno (2013) revealed that poverty in Batang contributes to early marriage. Afifah's study (2011) mentioned that the economic factor influences parents to marry off their children, in the hope that their children can live independently. In this case, parents are unable to pay for their children's lives and meet their school fees, therefore parents can escape the responsibility of paying for their children through marriage (Hanum et al., 2015; Otoo-Oyortey et al., 2003; Dahl, 2010).

Economic factors are greatly from the parents, and not married children. That is, the occupation and social status of parents influences the early marriage decision-making to lessen the burden of their families (Wulanuari et al., 2017). Previous studies have shown that young women become 'stepping-stones' to escape the burden of family poverty (Tsany, 2015; Walker, 2012; Triningtyas et al., 2017).

The daily phenomenon of village communities includes the early involvement of boys and girls in working processes to help the family economy. This certainly has implications for the continuity of rural children's education. In general, the education of rural communities is relatively low, and therefore it affects their way of thinking. The Landung et al. study (2009) pointed out that early marriage in rural areas is a social form of the division of roles and responsibilities of a wife to her husband. Previous studies stated that early marriage in rural areas does not seem to violate the rules because the Marriage Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 1 of 1974 is still considered relevant (Kurniawan, 2010; Mahfudin et al., 2016).

Even worse, girls already have to leave behind their childhood sooner than boys because they have to get married at an early age. Roqib's study (2010) explained that early marriage clearly deprives children's right to enjoy their childhood in the form of playing and getting an education. Early marriage is seen as a playful marriage because children are not old enough and their emotions are not stable (Astuty, 2013; Parsons et al., 2015; Nasrullah et al., 2014). Therefore, this study sought to reveal how early marriages occur and their causes in rural communities.

## **Research Methods**

This research was conducted in Bondowoso, Lamongan, Trenggalek, and Sampang, in East Java. A qualitative approach was employed to obtain more in-depth information about the phenomenon of early marriage in rural areas. There were 100 informants consisting of girls who had married early, parents who had married girls at an early age, community leaders, village officials, religious leaders, leaders of local organisations, and teachers. This study emphasised more on analysing qualitative data. The qualitative data analysis consisted of three activities that occurred simultaneously, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction is a process of selecting, focussing on simplifying, abstracting and transforming raw data that arises from written records in the field or in the results of interviews. Data presentation is a collection of structured information that provides the possibility of drawing conclusions and taking action.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Historiography of Early Marriage in Rural Communities***

The objects of the rural community chosen in this study lived, grew, and developed in agricultural and coastal areas. In terms of social construction, the communities in rural areas and coastal communities are part of the social construction that works dependently on nature. However, in coastal villages, where most of the population earns a living as fishermen, fish farmers, or in aquaculture, the fishing culture has a major influence on the formation of the cultural identity of coastal communities, as a whole (Ginkel, 2007). The culture of coastal communities is influenced by the socio-cultural values passed down from generation to generation (Warsilah, 2013). Previous studies showed that culture formation in a particular place is influenced by the physical of the natural environment, which indirectly influences the character and personality of the people (Fadjrie, 2017; Paprocki et al., 2014; Corbett, 2005).

Uncertain income conditions from the agricultural sector positions the village community to adapt to the conditions of an unstable income. The uncertain income situation causes rural people in the community to be categorised as poor. A poor household has income that falls in

the poverty line, which is influenced by factors of age, level of education, working hours, number of dependants, and capital (Putri et al., 2013). Poverty occurs due to low productivity and skills, simple production facilities, low education, high family dependants, and low savings (Sartika et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2007). The circumstances of poor families, which becomes the economic foundation of the family, is not only in the head of the family, but also in the children and wives.

### ***Women's Contribution in Supporting Household Income***

A study conducted by Handayani et al. (2009) found that income from housewives, although smaller than their husbands, contributes to increasing the family income. Previous studies showed that women provide a large contribution to poor families because they help sustain the family life (Haryanto, 2008; Ahmed, 2011; Bhusal, 2010) by engaging in economic activities, such as opening a small grocery store, being farm laborers, and opening a food stall. The large contribution of wives to the household economy is one form of the ability and independence of women in rural areas in trying to support the family economy.

The role of women in supporting the needs of poor families cannot be separated from their role in national development (Wawansyah et al., 2012). Previous studies showed that the role and contribution of women (wives) can be seen from the amount of time they spend on productive, reproductive, and social activities (Ariwidodo, 2016; Mohyuddin et al., 2012; Sukiyono et al., 2008).

The cause of early marriage — especially to girls — in the rural areas of the East Java coast starts from family poverty, and continues to low education, low levels of health and moneylenders, and so on, to the degree that the poverty chain shackles the community. The victims of the poverty chain are generally girls due to the gender discrimination that occurs in any society that adopts a patriarchal system. The concept of patriarchy, in the narrow sense, refers to the power of the father or 'patriarch'. In a broader meaning, patriarchy is used more generally to refer to male power, the power relationship of men dominating women, and to refer to systems that keep women by being ruled in various ways (Toffanin, 2012).

Dwinanda's study (2015) stated that low educated families have a risk of having an early marriage at 4.286 times that of a highly educated family. This indicates that the lower-middle class family sees early marriage as a natural thing and as a way to escape from family burden. Previous studies noted that people with a low education do not know the effects of early marriage, and they neglect education because of limited costs (Mambaya, 2011; Montazeri et al., 2016; Maertens, 2013).

The girls in the rural areas of East Java are considered as more of an economic asset, compared to seeing them as a whole person. Therefore, education is not very important for girls because the village community thinks that they can make money, even without attending schools. Moreover, travelling a considerable distance to continue education after primary school becomes another problem because they have to leave the village. For instance, junior high school is only located in the sub-district town, while senior high school is even further away and located in the district capital, which is about an hour away by motorcycle. This indicates that sending girls to school requires a lot of funds, in addition to school fees, but also transportation costs.

Djamilah and Kartikawati's study (2015) found that parental education affects children's marriages. Parents think of high education costs and that they cannot afford it. In this case, rural families with poor conditions assess education not only in terms of monthly costs or semesters, but in the various equipment and support for education, which is difficult for them. Previous studies showed that girls from poor families are deemed unnecessary to pursue higher education but are encouraged to work or get married, thereby depriving them of their socio-economic rights (Syafuruddin et al., 2018; Mahmud et al., 2006; Field et al., 2008).

On the one hand, education is very much needed by the community, but poverty in the village community results in the inability to provide adequate education for children, especially formal education (Yuniarti, 2000). The value of the child in the family and social status is also considered to influence the level of formal education. The value of children is the role they play in the lives of their parents. This role includes the role play for parents (alive or dead) which can be viewed from religious, social, and psychological factors (Ihromi, 1999).

### ***Experience and Reasons of Women Committing Early Marriage***

Girls in Javanese and Madurese families are married more quickly than boys because it can reduce the economic burden or family expenses. However, this will provide additional labour because her husband is considered as a new worker in the family, while increasing the family economy. The field data on the reasons for entering early marriage showed that each rural area had its own peculiarities.

Firstly, being married by accident (MbA) or an unwanted pregnancy. Mrs. Lilik is one of the village leaders. She married at 17, while her husband was around 29. She argued that the level of early marriage in her village is relatively high; even her neighbour got married at 16. According to the informant, this was due to a lack of insight and unfavourable environmental influences. Mrs. Lilik stated that early marriage in the village occurred due to several factors, including the environment, family, and economy. Some cases occurred due to out-of-wedlock pregnancy. As teenagers are now free to choose their life partner, they tend to not have

control on their relationships. Mrs. Lilik stated that changes in society that lean towards modern living cause the loss of matchmaking but also increase the potential of young marriages due to out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

This study also found that early marriage was not planned by parents, as told by Dewi. Dewi was a third year high school student who had a 25-year-old boyfriend. She got pregnant, as they made a mistake of having a relationship like a married couple. After making that relationship, Dewi did not realise that she was pregnant. She felt nauseous and decided to check, and discovered she was two months pregnant. Dewi felt very afraid to tell her parents, and shut herself in her room. However, because of her endless nausea, her parents took her to the doctor. She was then discovered by her parents to be pregnant.

Dewi stated that she was asked by her parents about who she was having the relationship with. Knowing that it was Dewi's boyfriend, her parents asked for the responsibility of Dewi's boyfriend to immediately marry her. The news about Dewi's pregnancy made her parents very angry, remembering that Dewi's parents were very hopeful that their only child would be able to continue her education to college. However, the mistakes made by their child made Dewi's parents bury this hope. Even so, they remained angry and did not talk to Dewi or her husband until, in the end, the anger slowly faded when Dewi's child was born.

The marriage of Dewi and her boyfriend was carried out secretly. Her extended family were not notified and the wedding was not celebrated with any party. Dewi also admitted that when having a relationship with her boyfriend, her parents knew, and even Dewi was often delivered home from school. Dewi now has two sons. The first child is 12 years old (elementary grade six) and the second child is nine years old (elementary grade three). Dewi's second child is looked after by Dewi's parents. Dewi currently works as a day labourer at the Fish Auction Place (TPI) in the Brondong Sub-District. Likewise, Dewi's husband also works as a freelance worker.

The data above indicated that teenagers are now free to choose their future life partner. Many teenagers are no longer committed to early marriage due to an arranged marriage, but because they both like each other (dating). Many of them also get married young because they get pregnant first. The number of out-of-wedlock pregnancies in the Camplong District makes parents not hesitate to marry off their children, if they already have a boyfriend. Even though the age of the child is still young, the parents are forced to marry off their children to avoid shame to the family. Therefore, early marriage is considered better and to prevent or resolve a child's promiscuous behaviour.

Prabowo's study (2013) pointed out that early marriage, even though due to out-of-wedlock pregnancy, still collides with the law, even though it ultimately gets dispensation. The law

does not see marriage as a solution to depriving children of their rights and eliminating their protection. Previous studies found that early marriage due to out-of-wedlock pregnancy is a last resort to avoid the social impact on women, children, and their families (Ahyani, 2016; Martino et al., 2004; Gassanov et al., 2008).

The second reason is because of economic problems. One of the goals of the community in the Solor Village, Cerme Subdistrict, Bondowoso Regency, is to get married at an early age or marry off their young children to have offspring quickly. The community thinks that if the number of family members increases, the work will be quickly completed or it can reduce the workload of parents. Married children are not immediately separated from their parents, a tradition in the community of the Solor Village, Cerme Subdistrict, Bondowoso Regency. After the children get married, the bride and groom will remain in their parents' homes. The husband will also stay at the bride's parents' home. In this case, the parent's economic burden does not change, and it can even increase if the son-in-law does not work. Therefore, parents are still responsible for their food, bathing, etc.

Early marriage is one way to move to another social status. Sudarto's study (2014) found that young couples, due to early marriage, remain a burden to their parents because they still live with extended families, and their children are cared for by parents (grandparents). Previous studies explained that economic conditions provide justification for parents with low education to marry their daughters on the grounds of helping their family income (Muhadara et al., 2016; Bunting, 2005; Tallman et al., 2004).

The third reason is culture. A few months ago, the local village head told Ms. Yuli, as a cadre, that he wanted his children to continue their education to college institutions so that they could become village officials there. It turned out, that one week after the conversation, it was discovered that his daughter had a siri marriage (unregistered marriage) and then became pregnant, even though she was around 14–16 years old. The surrounding residents were not too surprised because many similar incidents had occurred. In the second case, matchmaking in the Cerme Village begins with the engagement. There is one case, that at the age of seven months, children have been engaged to people who are considered suitable by their parents. Later when they get older, the children will have a siri marriage, and when they are old enough, they get married with state registration.

Children who get married early in the Cerme Village continue to go to school and carry out activities as usual. The teachers tolerate the situation because most students have had early marriages. Ms. Yuli gave an example of a routine in which there was a husband who was a junior high school student delivering his wife who was still in elementary school, in grade six. The routine was known by teachers and school friends, but this was considered normal. Meanwhile, the community in the Cerme Village considers it unusual for women reaching 18

years, and 21 years for men, who do not immediately get married. People of that age will be considered spinsters.

The community of the Solor Village, Cerme Subdistrict, Bondowoso Regency, consider that women who get married over the age of 20 will be regarded as spinsters in the village. Therefore, if someone proposes to their children, the parents immediately agree to give their blessing. This community also have a tradition of pairing their children at birth with their neighbours or distant relatives, so they will have a marriage at the right age. Most of them get married at the ages of 11–15 for women, and 13–20 for men.

Mrs. Hanipa stated that there is a unique myth held by the community of the Solor Village, Cerme Subdistrict, Bondowoso District. The community believes that by marrying off their children at an early age, it can prevent an apocalypse. However, this community indeed does not know the definition of an apocalypse. If their children do not get married soon, they will not obtain happiness until the end of the apocalypse or in a broad sense, the children face a delay in achieving happiness.

The informant added that most girls in the Sedayu Lawas Village are getting married soon after graduating from high school because they are afraid of the myth of being "bypassed by the princess". The parents believe, if a man has proposed to their daughter but they do not get married soon, they fear that she will be "bypassed by the princess". This then results in what the community believes are spinsters. According to the informant, this myth affects the higher number of early marriage cases.

The informant also added that the number of girls in the Sedayu Lawas Village was less than the number of boys. The age of marriage for boys is estimated to be above 20, because according to the informant, men must be more mature in all respects. Therefore, it is common for men to get married above the age of 20, because there is no stigma like the spinster for women who do not get married.

There is a unique process of introducing their children with their husbands, namely with the help of social media platforms such as Facebook, until a face-to-face meeting takes place. It has become a concern for most Camplong residents, if there are young women and men often riding a motorcycle together. Therefore, to avoid unwanted things, Siti Rohaela, decided to get married with the agreement of both parties. There is an unwritten guideline among Camplong residents, in which, if a woman decides to remain working at home, the choice is to get married.

A study conducted by Qibtiyah (2014) found that the primary cultural factor that influences early marriage is the perception of women who do not get married becoming spinsters.

Previous studies found that early marriage caused by cultural factors is considered reasonable and difficult to eliminate because they are beliefs and traditions that are still maintained (Rumekti et al., 2016; Tilson et al., 2000; Xu et al., 2001). Basically, societies with a patriarchal culture tend to consider women as second-class citizens, lending that early marriage is the impact of the existence of such stigma. A patriarchal society is usually very supportive of the practice of early marriage. A study conducted by Redjeki et al. (2016) in the Kotabaru District showed that 91.3 per cent of respondents stated that they supported early marriage because it had become a deep-rooted culture.

The fourth reason is religion. In rural communities, there are religious values that are adopted by local communities in marrying children and the role of villages in the presence of early marriage:

"It has become a habit here to marry off children at a young age. There are still many who get married early at around 15 or 16. You (the researcher) come to the right place if you are looking for a place with many young marriage phenomena. Certainly, according to available data from all villages in Sampang, Camplong Dharma Village has the highest number of children getting married at an early age. Indeed, the marriage comes from parents and wishes of their children too Redjeki et al. (2016). It is also supported by the environment, in relation to religious leaders such as *kiai* — maybe — because the community here is still religious enough, so parents better marry off their children to protect them from unwanted things. Moreover, the child's lifestyle is increasingly free. There are many cases of out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Not to mention the pressure from the environment. If a girl doesn't get married, the community sees her as an old spinster. Yes, it might still be quite valid here".

"Because there are many girls getting married at a young age, the village finally facilitates this activity following the above considerations. Therefore, for those who are married under the age of 19, Qibtiyah (2014) because 19 is the minimum age for women to get married according to the Marriage Act, the officials change the age in [the] family card. This is sought so that children can be legally married, both according to religion and law. There are no young marriages or siri marriages here. It is very unfortunate for women if they get [a] siri marriage, therefore the village officials help".

"Thus far, the village has no excessive concerns regarding early marriage. In addition, due to a family planning program, there might be a fear of population growth if there are many young marriages. Qibtiyah (2014) But because the family planning program is going well, the village has never made a problem, as long as they want to. In the last few years, there have been seven cases of out-of-wedlock pregnancy in this village. Compared to this case, it is better for the two parties to get married if they are ready".

According to Yuli, parents are afraid when they see their children (especially girls) riding a motorcycle with the opposite sex. Parents think that physical contact between the opposite sex is not legally permitted before marriage. Therefore, parents in the Cerme Subdistrict decide to marry off their children in a *siri* way to avoid unwanted things. If they had a *siri* marriage, regardless of age, the couple is free to visit and even stay overnight in both family homes. If a man or woman does not go home but stays at the house of the opposite sex, it is certainly enough for the couple to get married, both in a *siri* way and officially. A *Siri* marriage is conducted in several versions, some closed, while some invite the closest neighbours and hold a significant celebration.

In addition to interviewing mother and child informants, the data was obtained by interviewing respondents from the BKKBN (Badan Koordinasi Keluarga Berencana Nasional) in Bondowoso, East Java. Harris (28 years old) stated that Bondowoso has several villages with a large percentage of early marriages, including Cerme, Maesan, and Wringin. He stated that early marriages mostly occur in remote areas. There are some factors affecting early marriage, including the parent's hereditary customs, so the child must obey the commands of the parents. Second, religious factors are also the role models of the community. To avoid the act of committing a sin, the child must be married off immediately. Third, promiscuity also fosters children's desire to get married soon, rather than continuing their education. Fourth, economic factors, which are indeed insufficient to support their children in school.

In the Madurese society, social structure is very much influenced by religious life. In this case, it is Islam. Parents make the decision to marry off their daughter at an early age due to religion, for example to avoid adultery.

Due to religious reasons, such as avoiding adultery, protecting themselves from crime and damage, and fulfilling religious vocation, they have become justifications for early marriage to take place (Novita et al., 2016). Previous studies showed that marriage is one of religious teachings because marriage protects people from sin (Hasanah, 2018; Uecker et al., 2008; Le et al., 2013). Therefore, the practice of early marriage in the coastal villages of Java and Madura becomes a common occurrence and is difficult to eliminate because it is affected by many and varied reasons.

## **Conclusion**

Early marriage among girls in rural Java is a result of cultural, social, and economic conditions. The patriarchal culture, women's powerlessness, and poverty, are strong barriers to gender equality. The Javanese and Madurese cultures, which adhere to patriarchal values, view women only as human beings who have an economic value. These patriarchal values



are obtained by members of the community, starting from the socialisation process in the family environment, to the community, and then it becomes the perspective and belief of the people of Java and Madura. Women, especially girls in rural areas, cannot fight alone to show their existence as men in the public sphere. This situation arises because of the strong patriarchal culture, which refers to the thoughts and actions that exist in a society that values men more than it does women. Therefore, the first step taken is to reconstruct public awareness that women also have an important role in the family and community development, through revitalising existing social institutions in rural communities.

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