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Transitioning Into Womanhood: Indonesian Women's Experience on Intergenerational Early Marriage

การเปลี่ยนผ่านสู่ความเป็นผู้หญิงเต็มวัย:
ประสบการณ์จากสตรีอินโดนีเซียที่แต่งงานและมีลูกเมื่ออายุน้อย

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Dyah Anantalia Widyastari¹

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Key messages

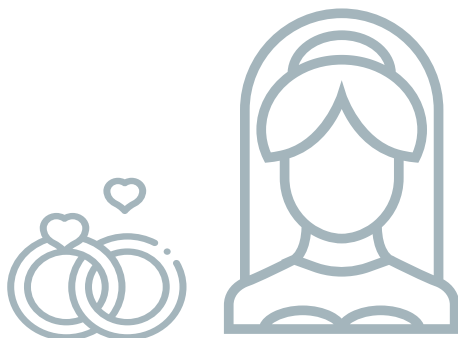
Transitioning to womanhood should be a natural and pleasant experience. Unfortunately, for some women, this transition is often started by a forced (early) marriage. Not only the timing and how it affects women's life trajectories, early marriage remains a vital discourse due to its intergenerational transfer between women and their descendants.

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Introduction

Marriage is a significant marker in a woman's life course. It signifies the transition into adulthood and womanhood, indicated by role shifting from a daughter to a wife and change of state from singleness to couple.



Transitioning to womanhood should be a natural and pleasant experience. But for some women, this transition is often started by a forced (early) marriage. Early marriage is acceptable for most Indonesians, as the desire for marriage follows the Quran and Hadith to prevent 'zina'[premarital sexual intercourse] between unmarried males and females (Pakasi, 2019; Susilo et al., 2021). Following Muslim teaching, teenage marriage is believed to preserve a girl's 'value' and protect her innocence, mainly since virginity at first marriage is considered a woman's worth (Martin-Anatias, 2019). Muslims also believe that the timing of marriage is God-given and should not be prevented (Guest, 1992; Jones, 2001; Widyastari & Isarabhakdi, 2016). The traditional construction of Indonesian Muslims also disadvantages young girls since parents or elders often make marriage decisions (Susilo et al., 2021).

Marriage is a significant marker in a woman's life course (Shanahan, 2000). It signifies the transition into adulthood and womanhood, indicated by role shifting from a daughter to a wife and change of state from singleness to couple. The transit also sometimes involves leaving the parental home to form a union and reside with in-laws or start living independently from parents of both sides (Nilan, 2008; Widyastari et al., 2020). Life course perspectives suggest that the timing

and decision-making in the marriage determine their future trajectories (Nilan, 2008; Shanahan, 2000). Prepared and mature women are more likely to welcome their journey into womanhood with joy, whereas those unprepared (being forced) will be more likely to experience unpleasant transit. Early marriages, however, are often accompanied by a forced or arranged union by parents or the elders (Hugo et al., 1986; Jones, 2001; Susilo et al., 2021). In addition, the consequences of early marriage will often last throughout a women's life course. Women who married earlier are more likely to attain a low level of education, have a lower labor force participation, and have lower socioeconomic status than their counterparts who married much later (Gorry, 2019; Uddin, 2021; Widyastari et al., 2020).

Not only the timing and how it affects women's life trajectories, but early marriage remains a vital discourse due to its intergenerational transfer between women and their descendants. Girls whose mothers married in their teens are more likely to start a union earlier than their friends whose mothers married later. Living and being brought up in an environment where the norms accept early marriages have implanted the idea of starting a union early among young girls just by observing their mothers' life experiences (Hendrick & Maslowsky, 2019; Kavas, 2022; Widyastari et al., 2020). This research brief aims to present and discuss rural Indonesian women's transition into womanhood by exploring the significant life-changing experiences among three generations of women whose first marriage occurred in their teens.

Methodology

This was a qualitative approach with multiple case studies. A total of six in-depth interviews were undertaken with women of farmer and *asongan*² families who had their daughter or mother and themselves married before the age of 18. Eighteen years of age was defined as the cut-off point of early marriage considering the completion of secondary school education in Indonesia. The interviews were conducted

and recorded at respondents' homes upon their consent. The key informants were asked to describe their life experiences of their first marriage and how their marriage affected their life trajectories. Qualitative content analysis was employed to interpret the data context through a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

²Asongan refers to a type of merchant who has no store, typically selling food and drinks by carrying around their goods, and offering the bus passengers before departing.

Findings

Intergenerational transit into womanhood

The entry into a marital union marks the transition into womanhood. This experience was described differently among women from three generations (grandmothers, mothers, and daughters). Women from the oldest generation described their transition as accompanied by fear, as parents enforced marriages. On the one hand, parents were depressed by sociocultural norms that dictated having unmarried grownup daughters as a shame. On the other hand, young Indonesian women in the past were taught to practice *manut* [an expression of obedience whereby the daughters abide by their parents' wishes without question]. Therefore, objection toward the marriage proposal was never an option for the grandmothers.

While fear dominated the grandmothers' experience toward their transition to marriage in both farmer and asongan families, the mothers (second generation) expressed a mixture of fear and joy. Fear of leaving the parental home and

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I was afraid of my parents, that's all. Especially my father. He forced me to marry him [husband], and because I was so afraid of him, I did not say anything. I just followed his order. I understand my father forced me to marry [my husband] because he was afraid I would become a spinster.
 ”

(YM, 61, grandmother, asongan)

following the husband's family was accompanied by excitement in embracing the new stage of life for the mother of an asongan family. For the mother of a farmer family, however, leaving the parental home was interpreted as a source of joy, mainly because the marriage also aimed at acquiring a better socioeconomic status in the husband's family.

The feeling of the youngest cohort toward early marriage was somewhat different from the older generations. The daughters were confident in deciding their marriage (self-choice) by learning from their mothers and grandmothers. It should be noted that the daughters indeed had their preferences and agreed on their marriage independently. However, their decision was constructed from their childhood norms, which they learned from their parents' direct teaching or daily observations. Studies have shown that children who live in an environment where they can observe their parents are learning from their surroundings and impart the norms that they actively sought or passively accepted, and finally express similar attitudes throughout their lifespan (Barber, 2000; Perrier, 2013; Van Bavel & Kok, 2009).

Socioeconomic consequences of early marriage throughout women's life trajectories

As a significant life marker, the first marriage is an unforgettable experience for women. It was a fresh memory for all women in the study, although, for the grandmothers, it occurred more than three decades ago. Unfortunately, not only the memory that lasts for a lifetime but the socioeconomic consequences of early marriage persist throughout their lifespan. Confirming previous studies on the long-term effects of early marriage, women in the study attained low levels of education and had limited options in labor force participation.

Generally, the educational attainment pattern was similar in the three generations of the two families. The younger generation attained a higher education level than the older generation. While granddaughters have completed junior secondary (Grade 11, incomplete senior high school), mothers only achieved primary, and the grandmothers, as the oldest sample, have never completed primary.

In the grandmothers' generation, school was not an option for girls. The sociocultural and religious construction of Indonesian Muslims encouraged parents to send their daughters off for marriage instead of school to prevent the family shame of having an unsaleable maiden. The second generation (mothers) had better education opportunities, owing to Indonesia's socioeconomic development. With the compulsory education policy, the mother's generation had the advantage of completing at least primary school. The daughters in postmodern Indonesia are more autonomous in choosing their mates and deciding when to marry. Therefore, the third generation in the present study would instead claim economic reasons as the underlying cause of quitting school and starting a union early (instead of parents' influence).

Attaining a low level of education, women in the study had limited options for earning opportunities. The mothers inherited their grandmothers' occupation (i.e., farmer or asongan), whereas the granddaughters were unemployed post-childbirth. Both grandmother and mother of asongan families regretted their parents'

decision to marry them off early and quit schooling altogether. They understood that, because of their low level of education, they could not secure a better occupation.

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Actually, I did not want to marry early. I wanted to work and earn money to support myself and help my mother. But my husband proposed, and our parents agreed. Finally, I ended up ngasong [working as an asongan seller] like my mother because I couldn't get a better occupation.

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(EM, 43, mother, asongan)

Compared to their asongan counterparts, the farmer family had a better socioeconomic status. The father of the farmer's family was a village head, and therefore he was granted a piece of land in addition to the rice field inherited from his family. The farmer's family planted rice, corn, and fruits and raised livestock (i.e., chicken, cows, goats) for daily consumption. This family sold their cattle and wood between harvesting periods to earn additional income.



Policy recommendation



Amidst the socioeconomic development of Indonesia, early intergenerational marriage remains an important issue to be addressed appropriately, considering its effects throughout women's life course and their families. The present study has shown that women who married early have been unable to improve their socioeconomic status, partly because they attained a lower level of education, and early childbearing restricted them from securing better jobs. Keeping the girls at school seems to be the most plausible strategy to prevent early marriage and improve

their socioeconomic later in life. While the compulsory education policy has guaranteed nine free years of education for all Indonesians, it is not entirely cost-free. Depending on the local government's capability in financing education, pupils and their parents often have to

contribute substantially to books, teaching materials, uniforms, and transportation costs. Therefore, the central government's intervention remained crucial in providing equal education access to all Indonesians during the decentralized era of postmodern Indonesia.

Remark

This research brief is an excerpt from a published article: Widyastari, D. A., Isarabhakdi, P., & Shaluhiyah, Z. (2020). Intergenerational patterns of early marriage and childbearing

in Rural Central Java, Indonesia. *Journal of Population and Social Studies*, 28(3), 250–264. <https://doi.org/10.25133/jpssv28n3.017>

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