



A Two-Sided Dilemma: Gender Construction and The Struggle For Equality In Early Marriage In Indonesia

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Abstract

*Traditional gender stereotypes domesticate women, making their roles subordinated, marginalized, stigmatized, and burdened with multiple responsibilities while exposing them to violence. Early marriage often occurs before the legal age of 19 years as stipulated in Law Number 16 of 2019. This study examines the factors causing early marriage and its implications for fulfilling conjugal rights in Brangsong village during the first three years of marriage – a period prone to conflict. Using qualitative-descriptive methodology with a historical sociological approach and purposive sampling, the research involved early-married couples, parents, and village officials. The results revealed that the primary factor driving early marriage is adolescent curiosity about sexual intercourse motivated by dating relationships despite strong parental control, socialization, and religious knowledge. The implications for marital rights fulfillment belonged into three categories: first, couples who responsibly work toward marriage goals with gender-equal roles; second, those using marriage to escape problems; and third, couples failing to achieve *sakinah, mawadah, and rahmah* due to gender inequality, resulting in divorce. This research demonstrates that successful marriages require deconstructing patriarchal frameworks and establishing equitable partnerships regardless of age.*

Keywords: *Gender; Early Marriage; Fulfilment of Husband-Wife's Right; Brangsong.*

Abstract

Stereotip gender tradisional mendomestikasi perempuan, membuat peran mereka tersubordinasi, terpinggirkan, terstigmatisasi, dan dibebani dengan tanggung jawab ganda sekaligus membuat mereka rentan terhadap kekerasan. Pernikahan dini sering kali terjadi sebelum usia 19 tahun sebagaimana diatur dalam Undang-Undang Nomor 16 Tahun 2019. Penelitian ini mengkaji faktor-faktor penyebab pernikahan dini dan implikasinya terhadap pemenuhan hak-hak suami-istri di Desa Brangsong pada tiga tahun pertama pernikahan - periode yang rentan terhadap konflik. Menggunakan metodologi kualitatif-deskriptif dengan pendekatan sosiologis historis dan pengambilan sampel secara purposif, penelitian ini melibatkan pasangan yang menikah dini, orang tua, dan perangkat desa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa faktor utama pendorong pernikahan dini adalah keingintahuan remaja terhadap hubungan seksual yang dimotivasi oleh hubungan pacaran, terlepas dari kuatnya pengawasan orang tua, sosialisasi, dan pengetahuan agama. Implikasi terhadap pemenuhan hak-hak pernikahan terbagi dalam tiga kategori: pertama, pasangan yang secara bertanggung jawab berupaya mencapai tujuan pernikahan dengan peran yang setara secara gender; kedua, mereka yang menggunakan pernikahan untuk melarikan diri dari masalah;

dan ketiga, pasangan yang gagal mencapai sakinah, mawadah, dan rahmah karena ketidaksetaraan gender, yang berujung pada perceraian. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa pernikahan yang sukses membutuhkan dekonstruksi kerangka kerja patriarki dan membangun kemitraan yang adil tanpa memandang usia.

Kata Kunci : Gender; pernikahan dini; pemenuhan hak suami-istri; Brangsong.

Introduction

Early marriage is often perceived merely as a personal or family decision. However, this practice is deeply rooted in broader social structures where gender construction and patriarchy play a significant role. In patriarchal societies, women are frequently positioned as domestic subjects expected to marry early, while their individual rights are often overlooked (Desiyanti, 2015). This phenomenon not only affects the quality of young couples' marital lives but also perpetuates cycles of gender inequality, gender-based violence, and the marginalization of women in legal and social spheres.

This study focuses on how religious and socio-cultural constructions surrounding women, family, and marriage contribute to the normalization of early marriage. Through an analysis of six underage married couples in Brangsong Village, Kendal, this research explores how power relations, gender roles, and the understanding of marital rights and obligations are negotiated during the first three years of marriage. Dominant perspectives on masculinity and male superiority, along with traditional expectations of women's domestic roles, form an invisible yet powerful framework that shapes these relationships.

Islamic law does not explicitly set a minimum age for marriage but emphasizes intellectual and moral maturity (Rulistyana, 2017). However, Indonesia's Law No. 16 of 2019 sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 19 (Indonesia, 2019). In practice, early marriages continue to occur, often justified by religious interpretations that reflect gender bias or social pressures to protect family "honor," especially in cases of premarital pregnancy. When families, educational institutions, and communities fail to provide adequate support and protection for adolescents, early marriage becomes a shortcut solution that compromises the rights of young people, particularly girls (Sahara, 2022).

The urgency of this research lies on its aim to deconstruct the structural and religious frameworks that support early marriage and to examine how young couples in early marriages engage with gender roles and power relations in their domestic lives. Using a critical sociological approach, this study seeks not only to document existing practices but also to contribute to the discourse on gender justice and women's rights.

Understanding early marriage as a structural issue, rather than solely a personal one, is essential for advancing gender equality and legal reform.

Brangsong Village was selected as the research site based on several important considerations. First, the village exhibits a relatively high occurrence of early marriage despite widespread access to religious education through madrasahs and Islamic boarding schools. This emerges a paradox worth investigating: why does a strong religious foundation not prevent underage marriage? Second, Brangsong's social and familial dynamics are marked by openness and active parental engagement, yet traditional gender norms remain firmly in place. Third, the presence of six young married couples from diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds allows for a rich and layered exploration of how patriarchy and gender roles are constructed, internalized, or resisted in everyday family life. In short, Brangsong offers a sociologically fertile ground for in-depth analysis of early marriage as a gendered social phenomenon.

Research Method

This research utilises a qualitative-descriptive research method and critical paradigm with a historical sociological approach and purposive sampling. The aim is to obtain detailed and in-depth information related to social phenomena as a critical process that seeks to reveal the true structure. In addition, it is also to increase social awareness in order to be able to improve and change the conditions of human life (Langbroek et al., 2017). Meanwhile, the use of the critical paradigm aims at social criticism, transformation, emancipation, and social empowerment. The nature of the critical paradigm is to always be suspicious and question the situation of social society (Ishaya, 2016). Researchers used a critical paradigm on the fulfilment of the rights of husband and wife who married outside of normality (early marriage due to adultery) in the first three years of marriage. The researcher tries to reveal how the causes or factors of early marriage and its implications for the fulfilment of husband-wife rights in Brangsong village in the first three years of marriage are prone to conflict and division. Researchers aim to reveal how the husband and wife support gender equality through equal roles in the family. While the approach used is qualitative which has the advantage of simplicity and can be analysed directly because it has a form of scale and value that can be interpreted (Emzir, 2012).

Results and Discussion

The findings of this research reveal that early marriage tends to reinforce unequal gender roles in which women disproportionately bear the

consequences of domestic responsibilities, emotional labor, and reproductive duties (Any Ismayawati, 2022). In most cases studied in Brangsong Village, the fulfillment of marital rights is strongly influenced by patriarchal values that position men as dominant decision-makers while relegating women to subordinate, service-oriented roles within the household.

Traditional gender norms assign domestic and reproductive responsibilities almost exclusively to women, even when the wives are still minors and lack sufficient physical, emotional, and financial readiness (Azizah, 2021). These expectations place an unjust burden on young wives who are required not only to manage household chores but also to fulfill their husbands' emotional and sexual needs (Nur Aisyah, 2013), despite their own developmental immaturity and lack of autonomy. The label of wife is imposed prematurely, stripping these girls of their right to education, personal development, and agency (Zulaiha, 2018).

Although some husbands may participate in household affairs or express emotional support, such instances do not nullify the systemic imbalance of power. Women's roles are naturalized and depoliticized through cultural and religious justifications that demand submission and patience from wives, regardless of their readiness or consent (Wardatun & Smith, 2020). In contrast, men's shortcomings in fulfilling marital obligations such as financial provision, emotional presence, or shared domestic labor are often tolerated or excused due to their supposed headship or public responsibilities (Supriadi, 2020).

In families where early marriage occurred due to premarital pregnancy, the responsibility for the consequences is overwhelmingly borne by the female partner (Kasjim, 2016). Social stigma targets the wife more than the husband, and in cases of marital failure, it is the woman who is typically blamed for being disobedient or incapable, even when structural and emotional support are absent (Wiwatwongwana, 2018). Moreover, the failure to establish equal partnership within these marriages often leads to psychological distress, emotional neglect, and, in some cases, abandonment—further highlighting how the denial of equal rights undermines the well-being of women (Monica Bozzano, Paola Profeta, Riccardo Puglisi, 2024).

In several of the studied couples, particularly couples C, D, and E, the absence of financial and emotional support from the husband severely affected the wives' capacity to sustain the household and care for their children (Couple C, 2023; Couple D, 2023; Couple E, 2023). In Couple F, although mutual support was observed in managing daily needs, the burden of domestic labor still fell largely on the wife, who had to adapt to adult responsibilities while still being a child herself (Couple F, 2023). This reflects not a balance but rather a form of survival under constrained

conditions where the young wife internalizes the gendered expectation to make the marriage work at all costs (Subekti, Sri, Liliana Tedjosaputro, 2020).

These findings confirm that the fulfillment of marital rights in early marriage is gendered and unjust. The concept of mutual rights and obligations becomes distorted when the structure of marriage itself is built upon unequal foundations. Instead of promoting partnership, early marriage often becomes a place of silent endurance for girls – where their youth, dreams, and rights are sacrificed on behalf of the social order and religious conformity.

Role-Sharing Discourse: Gender Justice

Before discussing the roles split within the family such as who is responsible for household chores, child-watching, and decision-making, it's important to clarify the distinction between gender equality or equal rights, and gender justice are providing access and opportunities based on the needs and conditions of each individual (Mujuzi, 2021). It is also crucial to address social changes and initiatives aimed at achieving gender equality.

For instance, phrases like "*Mum, take me to school quickly, I'll be late,*" or "*Mum, I peed on the sofa,*" or "*Mum, where are my clothes?*" are often heard, even when Mum is working as fast as possible to manage the housework. Many people still view the role of housewives as equivalent to being unemployed. In reality, they are not unemployed – they are engaged in work that often goes unrecognized. Domestic work, which should be appreciated, is frequently overlooked, and unfortunately, some women even face domestic violence (Banda & Carlson, 2022). If domestic work were outsourced to domestic workers, they would certainly be paid for their labor, which highlights the need to appreciate couples who choose to embrace the role of managing domestic duties (Ingrid Walker, Madeline Mineo, Luisa Vaca Condado, 2021). In households where the wife focuses on maintaining the home and the husband provides for the family, there is often a division of income: one part for the husband, one part for the wife, and the rest for daily expenses, children's education, savings, and so on (Solikin & Wasik, 2023).

Preventing gender injustice is not only the responsibility of women; it also requires men's active involvement in the prevention of gender-based violence and discrimination. As we often witness cases of domestic violence, sexual harassment, and rape, the perpetrators are mostly men. Therefore, it is insufficient to focus solely on empowering women. The movement also encourages men to fight against violence and contribute in building a more just and equal society (Alifiyah, R., & Anshori, 2023). This raises the question: "How to involve men in campaigns and movements?" One approach is to create educational campaigns for men that align with the existing women's

movements. This could involve creating spaces to discuss masculinity and violence. These spaces serve as the first step in bridging the perceived divide between men and women, allowing for the emergence of a "new man". One community has adopted this concept, Aliansi Laki-laki Baru, which was founded in 2009 (Larasati & Astuti, 2019).

Issues of violence are generally associated with unequal relations and can be experienced by anyone. Both can be understood if resistance to violence is no longer about men vs women, but resistance to oppressive structures. Bell Hooks' definition of feminism is the struggle against oppression of the sexes or sexism, not oppression of women. Take male privilege, which is often difficult to discuss because many are in denial. Privilege is something abstract and hard to feel, so make it visible. For example, the question, "*How often do you worry about being harassed on public transport? How often do you feel afraid of being raped when walking alone? Or how often do you feel guilty when you leave and your homework isn't done?*". These are questions that can be asked to make male privilege visible by listening to women's answers.

The next step is for a man to learn, unlearn, and relearn about masculinity; The key is reflection. For example, if a couple cares about each other's happiness, is bossing and dominating part of their happiness? Is doing all the housework part of your partner's happiness? Reflection tries to recognise the negative consequences of the norms or common views that are often practised, such as the demands and expectations of men should be equally burdened. Do these two things make us happy? If not, try to stop and think of alternatives by being a supportive partner.

Early Marriage Family Relations

The impact of young marriage will give rise to rights and obligations between both parties, in terms of the relationship between husband and wife, children or family of origin. The undesirable incident (KTD) that gave rise to early marriage in Brangsong village, Kendal had the following background and conditions in the first three years. Husband and wife A married at the age of 17 and became pregnant out of wedlock, having been in a relationship for 3 years. The personal background of the male partner is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree, has no career yet, and is categorized as being equipped with strong religious teachings, Islamic boarding school, with the origin of the family being economically well off, high school graduates, a strong religion and having a religious-socialist-nationalist personality (Any Ismayawati, 2022). In the first three years of marriage, couple A understands and implements the fulfillment of the rights and obligations of husband and wife, such as providing physical and spiritual support (Lesmono, 2024). The scope of fulfilling a living comes in

the form of meeting the costs of household needs and the personal needs of the couple, carried out by both parties by working together in Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (UMKM) by selling dimsum as a form of independence and family responsibility (Couple A, 2023). Management and production ideas are fully borne by the husband as head of the household. Meanwhile, mental sustenance in the form of sexual relations, love, affection, and attention, household comfort, tolerance and mutually caring relationships between partners has been implemented (Agustina, 2023). Couple A is categorized as post-modern, where they understand how to validate and upgrade their personality from the social justification of being pregnant out of wedlock with negative connotations. Another supporting factor is the existence of a nuclear family, which is the father and mother of couple A as a support system. The nuclear family admits their child's mistakes but does not isolate and punish the couple, they process negative energy into improvement, in the form of financial support because they realize that the role of parents is still needed so that their child can survive in domestic life, emotional support and a feeling of comfort where space for advice is given. and emotional processing as well as providing freedom of decision making in the household. Couple A does not live at home with the nuclear family.

Couple B got married at the age of 19 (husband) and 18 (wife), having a 2-year dating relationship. The condition of the first 3 years of marriage of couple B is not far from couple A, understanding and implementing the fulfilment of the rights and obligations of husband and wife, such as fulfilling family financial needs and personal needs of each partner such as clothing, skincare, or hobbies. Couple B applies the postmodern concept, where they want to create independence and joint responsibility with their spouse and reduce the help of the nuclear family. However, it does not mean that they do not get help, the nuclear family remains a support system for couple B, where the family supports living away from the nuclear family, supports the decision on the household model that couple B wants, and financial assistance in starting a household. Couple B's background is still a high school student, provided with religious education such as *madrasah diniyah* and *pesantren*, does not have a definite income but has started a business in the form of a chicken noodle shop (Couple B, 2023). Being married at a young age, couple B understands how to personally validate and how to upgrade their personality from the social justification of being pregnant outside of marriage with negative connotations so that they can create a *sakinah, mawadah warrahmah* household and go through a critical period in the first three years.

Married couple C was married at the age of 17 (husband) and wife 17 (wife), dating for 1 year. Couple C is still a high school student, provided with religious teachings until *madrasah diniyah* and has not worked. Couple

C understands the fulfilment of the rights and obligations of husband and wife, but has not maximally understood and applied it, because it is constrained by the personal abilities of the couple and the blessing of parents. Parents do not support the perpetuation of marriage in the form of separating the husband from the wife-children, which causes the husband's hidden relationship, while the husband does not have the strength to maintain the household or prove as the head of the household in the form of responsibility to be present as a husband in public and provide finance (Couple C, 2023). The needs of the children of couple C are fulfilled by the husband's family and the working wife, while the husband has no intention of having an income. Spouse mental provision is done secretly, so that family comfort is not fulfilled, while love, affection, and attention can still be done intensely helped by communication tools such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Telegram. The husband's family background is financially well-off, religious-socialist-nationalist, and has a university education. However, the nuclear family background that is categorized as good is not a strong factor in perpetuating marriage and fulfilling the needs of husband and wife.

Couple D got married at the age of 18 (husband) and 15 (wife), and had a three-year courtship. Couple D, the husband is already working while the wife is still a junior high school student, both have religious education at *madrasah diniyah*. Couple D understands the fulfilment of the rights and obligations of husband and wife, both try to complement each other. However, due to the constraints of financial inadequacy and emotional management, they stabbed each other so that in the first three years they experienced a crisis of trust and family warmth. Other external factors also influenced, such as feelings of shame and anger about the condition of being pregnant outside of marriage facing the community, while the nuclear family also criticized and ostracized couple D for this condition (Couple D, 2023).

Married couple E married at the age of 24 (Husband) and 18 (Wife), dating for 1 year. Couple E, from a family background, is less respectful and indifferent, both are not provided with religious education, the husband has worked with enough income for basic daily needs, especially the wife is still in school and does not work. In the first three years of marriage, the wife still blames the situation for being pregnant outside of marriage, has not completed high school education, and does not have financial independence. As a result, the wife is often depressed and reluctant to create a *sakinah, mawadah and rahmah* family. Although both of them understand the concept, the husband still has the ethics to be responsible and supportive (Couple F, 2023).

Married couple F, is the child of couple E. The marriage of couple F was motivated by pregnancy outside of marriage at the age of 14 years (wife)

and 16 years (husband), undergoing a 2-year dating relationship. Both are still junior high school students, not working, from middle to lower class families, lack of religious education, lack of family harmony. However, because of these limitations, both of them know, understand and apply the concept of fulfilling the rights of husband and wife by carrying financial capabilities and mutual comfort without disputing the condition of pregnant status outside of marriage. The role sharing and gender equality applied is quite simple, such as doing domestic work, but it is enough to make couple F go through the first three years of marriage with love.

Based on the case descriptions of couples A to F, it appears that there is a fairly consistent pattern in determining the roles of husbands and wives in young families who marry at an early age. The gender construction at work in these marriages generally places the man as the head of the household and the main economically responsible person, while the woman, although still a teenager, is expected to automatically take on domestic and emotional roles in the family.

In the case of couples A and B, although the narratives illustrate that both of them play a joint role in household economic enterprises, such as dim sum and chicken noodle stalls, the division of roles still shows the husband's dominance in leadership and initiative, while the wife plays the role of executor. Sentences such as management and production ideas are fully borne by the husband as the head of the household reflect that the leadership role is still attached to the husband. On the other hand, aspects of mental fulfillment, such as affection, household comfort, and emotional communication, are still implicitly assigned to the wife.

In couples C, D, and E, the determination of roles is even more unequal. Wives who are still students or unemployed are required to continue carrying out household and caregiving roles, even when their husbands do not show financial responsibility or emotional presence. In the case of couple C, for example, the husband did not even have the intention to work and was in a clandestine relationship, but the needs of the children were still borne by the wife and extended family.

The case of couple F, while appearing to demonstrate simple equality, such as sharing domestic work, still shows that domestic roles are framed as women's natural duties. Equality here is more of a survival adaptation amidst limitations, rather than the result of a critical awareness of equal roles.

Gender inequality is most evident in aspects such as access to education, economic independence, and participation in decision-making. Wives are often in more vulnerable positions, as seen in the cases of wives in couples D and E who did not complete secondary education. They lack independent income and depend on their families or husbands for financial support. Additionally, they bear the social and psychological burden of out-

of-wedlock pregnancies, while the husbands do not face comparable social pressure. In cases like those of couples C and E, the absence of emotional and financial support from husbands further burdens the wives, who are not yet ready to take on adult responsibilities. Furthermore, religious and cultural justifications used by families and communities to legitimize early marriage reinforce this inequality, constantly instilling the duty for wives to be obedient, patient, and adaptable without allowing women the space to question or negotiate their roles and rights.

Conclusion

The results of the study show that, first, the main factor that is the reason for early marriage in Brangsong village is due to teenagers' curiosity about sexual intercourse based on the bond of "dating". In this case, the majority shows that the indicators of parental control, socialisation and religious knowledge are categorised as strong, not showing weak prevention. Second, the implications of fulfilling the rights of the husband and wife of early marriage in Brangsong village are three categories, First, being responsible and working on the goals of marriage by applying equality of roles without anyone and regardless of gender. Second, running away from problems and hiding in marriage bonds. Third, the purpose of marriage (sakinah, mawadah and rahmah) and equality of gender roles are not found, leading to divorce. The goals of marriage (sakinah, mawadah, rahmah) and gender role equality are not achieved, leading to divorce. Although on the surface some couples appear to be able to fulfill their roles together, in-depth analysis shows that gender and patriarchal constructions are still very influential. Women, even as teenagers, are expected to take on domestic and emotional roles, while men are positioned as the head of the household and the main breadwinner. This inequality is reflected in access to education, economic independence and participation in decision-making, where women are often in a more vulnerable position.

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