

The Dynamics of Family Harmony in Early Marriage Couples: A Qualitative Study in Ranto Panjang Village

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Abstract

Early marriage remains a significant social phenomenon in Indonesia and has a significant impact on family dynamics. This study aims to analyze in depth the impact of early marriage on family harmony among young couples in Ranto Panjang Village, Muara Batang Gadis District. A qualitative approach using case study methods was used to understand the subjective experiences of couples who married early. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, naturalistic observations, and documentation, then analyzed using the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The results showed that early marriage was influenced by cultural factors, social pressure, and family economic conditions. The impact of early marriage is seen in emotional, psychological, social, and economic aspects, including stress, income instability, domestic conflict, and limitations in parenting and decision-making. However, family harmony can still be achieved through effective communication, extended family support, religious values, and role adaptation in the household. These findings confirm that family harmony in young couples is greatly influenced by the interaction between individual, social, and structural factors. This study makes an important contribution to efforts to prevent early marriage and strengthen families through educational interventions, counseling, and economic empowerment.

Keywords: early marriage, family harmony, household dynamics, qualitative study, young couples.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of early marriage remains a pressing social issue in various regions of Indonesia. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS, 2021) shows that the rate of marriage among 15–19-year-olds is still as high as 21.4%, making Indonesia one of the countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage in Southeast Asia. Early marriage is not only related to the violation of children's rights but also has multidimensional impacts, ranging from reproductive health and psychological issues to social dynamics within the family (UNICEF, 2020). This condition shows that child marriage is still a structural problem that requires academic attention and social intervention.

Psychologically and socially, early marriage has the potential to hinder the achievement of a harmonious family. Individuals who marry as teenagers generally do not have the emotional readiness, problem-solving skills, and adequate psychosocial maturity to live a married life (Dariyo, 2007; Lestari, 2012). Adolescents who marry early tend to face new stressors such as domestic conflict, economic burdens, and unstable parenting patterns. These factors can affect the quality of the husband-wife relationship and have an impact on family harmony.

Previous studies have shown that early marriage contributes to an increased risk of divorce, domestic violence, and poor quality of child rearing (Febriani, 2020; Adam, 2019). However, most studies are still quantitative and populational in nature, thus failing to explore the subjective experiences of families who have experienced early marriage. On the other hand, a qualitative approach is considered capable of providing an in-depth picture of how young couples deal with household dynamics and build harmony after marriage.

In the local context, Ranto Panjang Village, Muara Batang Gadis Subdistrict, is an area with a relatively high rate of early marriage. Initial observations show that some couples who marry early

face pressures in terms of economics, child care, and family role adjustment. The lack of in-depth research on the dynamics of family harmony among couples who marry early in this village indicates a research gap that needs to be addressed.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze in depth the impact of early marriage on family harmony among couples who married early in Ranto Panjang Village. Case studies were chosen to explore personal experiences, sources of conflict, adjustment strategies, and factors that support or hinder family harmony. The results of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the literature on early marriage and practically to the village government, educational institutions, and family counselors in formulating prevention programs.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of families who marry early. This approach is in line with Yin's (2018) view that case studies are effective for exploring social phenomena in real contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and contexts are difficult to separate. This approach was also chosen because it allows researchers to explore subjective meanings, interaction dynamics, and factors that influence family harmony.

The research location was in Ranto Panjang Village, Muara Batang Gadis Subdistrict, Mandailing Natal Regency. This location was chosen purposively because of the high number of early marriages found based on preliminary observations. Data collection was carried out over two months after the research permit was issued by the faculty, taking into account research ethics and the comfort of the informants.

Research informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques. The main informants were couples who married early, while supporting informants included parents, siblings, and community leaders. The number of informants was adjusted as needed until *data saturation* was achieved. This approach is in line with Patton's (2015) recommendation that the quality of informants is more important than quantity in qualitative research.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, naturalistic observations, and documentation. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to allow for narrative exploration. Observations were conducted to observe family interactions, communication dynamics, and parenting patterns. Documentation in the form of photographs, field notes, and family archives were used to reinforce the findings.

Data analysis used the interactive model of Miles, Huberman & Saldaña (2014), which includes the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis process was carried out in stages from the beginning of data collection using the *code–category–theme* technique. To maintain data validity, the study used source triangulation, method triangulation, *member checking*, and audit trails. These steps were taken to ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the data in accordance with qualitative research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The research results were obtained through in-depth interviews, focused observations, and documentation of couples who married early and their immediate families. The findings are

presented based on themes that emerged from data analysis, namely: (1) Factors triggering early marriage, (2) Emotional and psychological impacts, (3) Social and economic impacts, (4) Dynamics of relationships and domestic conflicts, and (5) Efforts to maintain family harmony.

1. Triggering Factors of Early Marriage

The findings show that early marriage in Ranto Panjang Village is driven by three main factors: (a) social and cultural pressure, (b) family economic conditions, and (c) lack of education and understanding of the consequences of early marriage. Cultural factors emerged as the dominant reason, where the community views marriage at a young age as normal and even a form of salvation from extramarital relationships. Several informants stated that marrying at a young age is a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation and is still considered a "safe choice."

Economic factors also play a significant role. Couples who marry early generally come from families with low levels of education and limited economic conditions. Marriage is seen as a way out to ease the burden on the family or to gain a new social status. This is in line with UNICEF's (2020) findings, which note that low-income families are more likely to encourage their children to marry early as a short-term economic solution.

2. Emotional and Psychological Impact

Emotional impacts vary among couples who marry early. Female informants showed higher levels of stress, particularly related to their dual roles as wives, mothers, and household managers. Their young age and lack of emotional readiness led to anxiety, role confusion, and frustration when facing household pressures. Some informants even reported experiencing mild symptoms of depression, especially at the beginning of their married life.

Meanwhile, male informants showed different emotional pressures. Some of them felt burdened by economic responsibilities because at a young age they did not yet have permanent jobs. This situation often led to feelings of failure, low self-esteem, and anger, which sometimes erupted in the form of domestic conflict. This is in line with the findings of Lestari (2012) and Dariyo (2007), who stated that psychological immaturity is a major factor causing disharmony in early marriage.

3. Social and Economic Impact

Early marriage has a direct impact on the social and economic conditions of the family. Informants revealed that after marriage, they experienced limitations in access to education and employment. Female informants had to drop out of school, thus losing the opportunity to improve their competence and economic mobility. As a result, their dependence on their husbands became high, and when their husbands lost their jobs, the family's economic stability was disrupted.

The economic burden is the biggest source of conflict in young couples' households. Low income often makes it difficult for couples to meet basic needs such as food, health, and children's needs. Some couples rely on assistance from parents or extended family, which can lead to discomfort and conflict between families. These findings are in line with Febriani's (2020) research, which shows that economic instability is a strong predictor of domestic conflict in couples who marry early.

4. Relationship Dynamics and Domestic Conflict

The dynamics of husband-wife relationships among couples who marry early tend to be influenced by mental immaturity and limited experience. Conflicts that often arise are related to

role sharing, interpersonal communication, and decision making. Female informants often feel that their partners do not understand their role as head of the family, while male informants consider their partners to be too demanding or emotional.

In some cases, conflicts escalate into intense verbal arguments, and some informants mention incidents of mild violence (e.g., yelling or pushing). However, most couples try to avoid physical conflict due to religious norms and social pressure from the community. This is in line with Adam's (2019) findings, which state that emotional tension in early marriages often increases but does not always manifest as physical violence due to strong social norms.

5. Strategies for Maintaining Family Harmony

Despite facing challenges, some couples are able to build family harmony through a number of strategies. First, open communication is the most commonly used method to reduce conflict. Couples who are able to discuss issues calmly show lower levels of stress. Second, extended family support is a very decisive factor. The involvement of parents in helping with finances and providing guidance reduces the burden on young couples.

Third, religious values and moral responsibility have proven to be important components in maintaining marital stability. Some informants stated that they remained in their marriages because they held religious principles and a commitment to their children. Fourth, role adaptation is a strategy that develops over time. Couples who were initially unprepared eventually learn to share domestic tasks, manage finances, and solve problems collectively.

DISCUSSION

1. Early Marriage and Psychological Unpreparedness

The findings show that psychological unpreparedness is a major aspect that affects the harmony of couples who marry early. This is in line with Erikson's psychosocial development theory, in which adolescents have not yet reached the stage of adult role maturity. As a result, couples who marry early often lack the skills of emotional regulation, decision-making, and conflict resolution. This condition explains why conflicts occur in the early stages of marriage, especially regarding the division of roles and economic responsibilities.

Psychological unpreparedness also affects the couple's ability to cope with pressure. Female informants are more prone to stress due to drastic role changes than males. This is in line with the findings of Lestari's (2012) study, which states that women experience emotional exhaustion more quickly due to the multiple burdens of early marriage.

2. Economic Impact as the Main Trigger of Conflict

The results of the study clarify that economic factors are the most dominant source of conflict. Early marriage limits couples' access to education and employment, so their ability to meet family needs tends to be low. Economic instability creates feelings of failure for husbands and insecurity for wives, leading to emotional conflict and relationship tension. Previous research by Rahmawati & Dewi (2022) also found that early marriage increases the risk of long-term poverty due to limited family income.

In the context of Ranto Panjang Village, the economy is a critical factor because most young couples depend on informal work. When income is uncertain, domestic conflicts increase significantly. This proves that early marriage cannot be separated from structural dimensions such as poverty, access to education, and employment opportunities.

3. The Role of Culture and Social Norms

Local culture plays a very strong role in shaping early marriage decisions and the dynamics of couple relationships. Social norms that consider early marriage "normal" make young couples feel they must adapt even if they are not yet psychologically or economically ready. Cultural pressure also encourages couples to maintain their marriage even when facing difficulties. These findings are consistent with a UNICEF report (2020) that child marriage in Indonesia often stems from a cultural construct that considers it better for women to marry early to avoid social stigma.

However, strong culture also has a positive side, namely the role of the extended family in supporting household stability. The norms of mutual cooperation, family solidarity, and religious principles are significant protective factors. This explains why some couples are able to remain in their marriages and build harmony despite facing serious challenges.

4. Communication and Family Support as Key Factors for Harmony

This study found that couples who have good communication tend to be more harmonious than couples who are not open with each other. Communication has been proven to reduce the intensity of conflict and improve problem-solving skills. This is in line with Olson's (2000) view in the *Circumplex Model* theory, which emphasizes that communication is at the core of a healthy family.

Support from extended family has also been shown to be an important factor for couples who marry early. Both emotional support, such as advice, and instrumental support, such as financial assistance, can reduce pressure on young couples. These findings support the research of Rueger et al. (2016), which states that social support increases the psychological resilience of individuals facing severe stress.

5. Implications of Findings for Policy and Social Practice

The results of this study have important implications for village governments, educational institutions, and family counselors. First, educational programs on the risks of early marriage for adolescents and parents are needed. Second, psychosocial assistance must be strengthened, especially for newly married couples. Third, economic empowerment programs for young couples are needed to reduce economic pressures that trigger conflict.

For educational institutions, early marriage can be prevented through counseling on reproductive health, emotional regulation, and career education so that adolescents have a more mature vision of the future. For family counselors, these findings provide a basis for creating consultation services that focus on couple communication, conflict management, and emotional stability.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that early marriage among young couples in Ranto Panjang Village is a phenomenon influenced by cultural factors, social pressure, and family economic conditions. Psychological and emotional unpreparedness is a major challenge that hinders the achievement of family harmony. The impact of early marriage is not only seen in psychological aspects such as stress, anxiety, and role confusion, but also in social and economic conditions that limit access to education, employment, and household income stability.

The dynamics of husband-wife relationships in couples who marry early reveal challenges in role sharing, interpersonal communication, and decision making, which have the potential to trigger domestic conflicts. However, the results of the study show that family harmony can still be

achieved through open communication, extended family support, religious values, and the couple's ability to adapt to new roles.

These findings emphasize the importance of education-based interventions, family counseling, and economic empowerment as efforts to prevent early marriage and strengthen young families. Collaborative efforts between village governments, educational institutions, and family counselors are needed to ensure that young couples have the psychological readiness, economic capabilities, and relational skills necessary to build harmonious families.

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