

Early Marriage and Divorce in Indonesia: A Systematic Literature Review of Socioeconomic, Educational, and Health Dimensions

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Abstract:

This article examines the complex relationship between early marriage and divorce in Indonesia, a phenomenon that continues to generate significant social, cultural, and economic implications. The study aims to identify the structural and individual factors driving early marriage and its role in increasing vulnerability to divorce, as well as to highlight the broader impacts on education, reproductive health, and social welfare. Employing a systematic literature review approach, the analysis was conducted through a comprehensive search of open-access academic journals, using inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the credibility and relevance of selected studies. The findings reveal that early marriage often correlates with limited educational attainment, gender inequality, financial instability, and insufficient reproductive health knowledge, all of which contribute to higher divorce rates. Furthermore, the review shows that cultural norms, legal inconsistencies, and the lack of effective policy implementation exacerbate the sustainability challenges of early-age marriages. This study contributes theoretically by deepening the discourse on early marriage and divorce as interconnected issues within family sociology and public health, while practically providing insights for policymakers to design preventive and empowerment-based interventions.

Keywords:

Early marriage, divorce, family sociology, reproductive health, gender inequality, Indonesia.



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INTRODUCTION

Marriage at an early age remains a persistent social issue in Indonesia, where cultural traditions, economic limitations, and insufficient education intersect to perpetuate practices that often lead to fragile households. Early marriage is not only a matter of individual choice but is deeply rooted in sociocultural structures that normalize it as a solution to poverty or as a way of preserving family honor. However, in practice, couples who marry at a young age often lack the emotional maturity, economic readiness, and adequate educational background to sustain a stable family life, thereby increasing the likelihood of conflict and ultimately divorce. The Central Bureau of Statistics and various reports from civil society organizations highlight that early marriage remains significantly associated with the high divorce rates recorded in several provinces of Indonesia, reflecting an urgent need for scholarly investigation into this phenomenon. The consequences of early marriage extend beyond the private domain of the family. Women who marry at an early age

are generally more vulnerable to dropping out of school, limited employment opportunities, reproductive health risks, and economic dependence, which further exacerbate cycles of poverty and gender inequality. From a macro perspective, this phenomenon contributes to structural issues such as limited human resource quality and the perpetuation of intergenerational disparities. Thus, the study of early marriage and its correlation with divorce is not only relevant to the disciplines of sociology and family studies but also to economics, education, and public health. By focusing on the Indonesian context, this research attempts to provide a comprehensive picture of the determinants and consequences of early marriage and divorce, while identifying opportunities for more effective intervention strategies at both the policy and community levels.

The theoretical foundation of this study draws upon the concept of social exchange theory, which explains how individual decisions regarding marriage are influenced by the perceived balance between costs and benefits within relationships. Originating from the works of Blau and Homans, this theory has been widely applied in analyzing marital stability and divorce risk, particularly in contexts where socioeconomic and cultural factors shape household dynamics. In the Indonesian case, early marriage often results from structural pressures rather than individual readiness, making social exchange theory highly relevant in capturing the interplay between cultural expectations, economic conditions, and educational attainment as determinants of marital outcomes. Recent studies have shown that when individuals perceive more losses than gains in marital life, particularly when coupled with limited social support, the risk of divorce tends to increase (Hapsari & Dewi, 2021). Previous research has highlighted the multifaceted consequences of early marriage across different dimensions. For instance, an investigation into reproductive health risks emphasizes that adolescent mothers face higher rates of maternal complications compared to those who marry later (Setiawan et al., 2020). Another study in the field of education demonstrates that early marriage significantly reduces opportunities for women to pursue higher education, reinforcing the cycle of limited socioeconomic mobility (Rahman et al., 2019). Moreover, studies in Indonesia indicate that regions with high prevalence of child marriage also record higher divorce rates, suggesting a direct relationship between age at marriage and marital dissolution (Nurmala et al., 2020). Research from neighboring Southeast Asian countries further confirms this correlation, highlighting the role of inadequate marital preparation and financial instability (Yaya et al., 2019).

Despite the growing number of studies, there remain significant gaps in the literature regarding the long-term socioeconomic and psychological impacts of early marriage and divorce in Indonesia. Many existing studies focus narrowly on reproductive health or education, leaving limited exploration of how early marriage perpetuates intergenerational poverty or influences community resilience. Additionally, while statistical data have documented the rising divorce rates in Indonesia, fewer studies systematically analyze the causal pathways linking early marriage with divorce patterns, particularly using integrative approaches that combine sociological, economic, and psychological perspectives (Widyastuti et al., 2021). This underscores the need for more comprehensive analyses that bridge these disciplinary gaps. This article positions itself as an effort to fill these gaps by conducting a systematic literature review that synthesizes findings across health, education, sociology, and economics to explain the dynamics of early marriage and divorce in Indonesia. By doing so, this study contributes to the enrichment of existing knowledge while

providing a broader theoretical framework for understanding how structural and cultural contexts affect marital outcomes. Specifically, this article contributes by highlighting interconnections across different domains that have previously been studied separately (Pratiwi & Sari, 2022).

From a methodological perspective, prior studies have employed a variety of approaches, including large-scale quantitative surveys (Ali & Syafiq, 2019), qualitative fieldwork focusing on cultural narratives (Fatimah, 2020), and mixed-methods designs (Handayani et al., 2021). The diversity of methods indicates that early marriage is a complex social phenomenon requiring multi-perspective analysis. However, most studies tend to emphasize either health or education, with relatively fewer examining the interconnectedness between socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological factors simultaneously. In synthesizing these findings, this article adopts an integrative framework that views early marriage and divorce not merely as isolated family events but as outcomes of broader structural and cultural forces. This conceptual synthesis lays the groundwork for the methodological choices presented in the subsequent section, emphasizing the importance of systematic literature review as a suitable strategy to map and analyze the multidimensional consequences of early marriage. By combining theoretical insights from social exchange theory with empirical findings across multiple domains, this article establishes a coherent foundation for examining the complexity of early marriage and divorce in the Indonesian context.

METHOD

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to analyze the dynamics of early marriage and divorce in Indonesia. The SLR was chosen because it allows for a structured and comprehensive mapping of existing empirical findings across disciplines, thus minimizing bias and ensuring that the synthesis of literature is both transparent and replicable. The methodological framework followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, which provided a structured flow from identification to final selection of eligible studies. The data collection process began with a comprehensive search across several academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Keywords such as “early marriage,” “child marriage,” “divorce,” “Indonesia,” “socioeconomic factors,” and “education outcomes” were used, both individually and in combination, to ensure the inclusion of relevant studies. The inclusion criteria consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2023, written in English or Bahasa Indonesia, and focusing on the Indonesian context or comparable Southeast Asian settings. Studies that did not provide empirical data, duplicates, or articles with limited methodological rigor were excluded.

The initial search identified 327 articles, which were subsequently screened for eligibility. After removing duplicates and studies outside the research scope, 82 articles were considered relevant. A further in-depth eligibility assessment reduced this number to 42 articles, which were ultimately included in the review. The screening process followed PRISMA’s four key stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Data extraction was conducted by systematically coding each article based on key variables, including author(s), year of publication, research location, methodological approach, sample size (for quantitative studies), and key findings. For qualitative studies, thematic coding was applied to capture recurring patterns and emerging themes.

Quantitative findings were extracted in the form of statistical associations, while mixed-methods studies were reviewed by separating their qualitative and quantitative contributions before integrating them into the analysis.

The synthesis process was conducted in two stages. First, a descriptive synthesis was performed to identify publication characteristics, such as trends over time, disciplinary orientation, and methodological diversity. Second, a thematic synthesis was carried out to categorize findings into broader domains, including health, education, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural norms. Both types of synthesis were intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted consequences of early marriage and divorce. To ensure reliability and validity, two independent reviewers were involved in the coding and analysis process, with any discrepancies resolved through consensus discussion. This triangulation strengthened the credibility of the findings while maintaining methodological rigor. The use of PRISMA also ensured that the review adhered to internationally recognized standards, allowing for a transparent and replicable research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The systematic literature review identified 42 eligible studies that met the inclusion criteria, reflecting diverse disciplinary perspectives such as public health, sociology, education, economics, and gender studies. In terms of publication characteristics, the majority of the articles were published between 2015 and 2023, showing a significant increase in scholarly attention toward early marriage and divorce in Indonesia. Methodologically, quantitative studies dominated the landscape, primarily employing survey and regression-based designs, followed by qualitative studies that highlighted lived experiences, and a smaller portion of mixed-methods research. Regionally, most studies were concentrated in Java, West Nusa Tenggara, and South Sulawesi, though several works offered comparative insights from other Southeast Asian contexts.

The thematic synthesis revealed four major clusters of findings. First, health consequences were a recurring theme, with studies showing that early marriage correlates with higher maternal mortality rates, increased risk of complications during pregnancy, and elevated instances of domestic violence (Alkaff & Hidayah, 2020; Prastowo et al., 2021). Second, in the field of education, early marriage was strongly linked to school dropout rates, decreased literacy levels, and reduced opportunities for higher education (Putri & Kurniawati, 2020; Syahrani, 2022). Third, from a socioeconomic perspective, empirical findings consistently demonstrated that early marriage contributes to cycles of poverty, limited access to employment, and heightened financial vulnerability of young families (Rahmah, 2019; Handayani & Noviana, 2021). Fourth, cultural and legal contexts played a significant role, as customary norms and local religious interpretations often sustained the practice of early marriage, despite legal reforms such as the revision of Indonesia's Marriage Law in 2019 (Fahriani & Setiawan, 2021; Wulandari, 2022).

Findings on divorce trends revealed that a substantial proportion of early marriages in Indonesia ended in divorce, with economic hardship and psychological immaturity emerging as the

primary drivers (Iskandar, 2018; Sulastri & Hakim, 2020). Several studies identified gendered vulnerabilities, showing that women disproportionately faced adverse consequences in terms of childcare responsibilities and economic dependence post-divorce (Yuliani & Saputra, 2021; Andini & Hapsari, 2022). In contrast, a small set of studies documented cases where divorce enabled women to pursue autonomy, education, or entrepreneurship, albeit under challenging social stigma (Rahmah & Setiadi, 2019; Putri, 2020). Overall, the reviewed literature underscores the multi-dimensional implications of early marriage and divorce in Indonesia. Health, education, and socioeconomic impacts intersect with cultural and legal structures, shaping complex outcomes across different communities. The breadth of methodological approaches across the studies further highlighted the interdisciplinary nature of this issue, confirming its position as a critical area of scholarly and policy concern.

Discussion

The main findings of this study reaffirm that early marriage in Indonesia is closely associated with a range of adverse outcomes spanning health, education, and socioeconomic domains, as well as heightened vulnerability to divorce. These results align directly with the research objectives, which sought to identify how early marriage influences marital stability and divorce rates within the Indonesian context. By synthesizing multidisciplinary perspectives, the review demonstrates that the practice of early marriage not only undermines individual well-being but also perpetuates structural inequalities that hinder long-term development. From a theoretical standpoint, the findings can be interpreted through the lens of life course theory, which highlights how premature transitions such as early marriage disrupt normative developmental trajectories and reduce individuals' adaptive capacity (Elder, 1998). Moreover, the family stress model provides explanatory power by linking economic hardship with marital instability, as financial ProClarity amplifies conflicts that often culminate in divorce (Conger et al., 2010). The intersection of these frameworks emphasizes that early marriage serves as a structural determinant of divorce, shaped by socioeconomic vulnerabilities and cultural norms.

The comparison with prior studies indicates a high degree of consistency across contexts. For instance, Indonesian-based studies have reported similar trends of increased maternal health risks and educational discontinuation among child brides (Alkaff & Hidayah, 2020; Prastowo et al., 2021). International research corroborates these results, particularly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where early marriage has likewise been associated with elevated divorce risks and entrenched cycles of poverty (Parsons et al., 2015; Delprato et al., 2017). However, there are nuanced contradictions: certain studies in rural Indonesia note that divorce does not always yield purely negative outcomes, as some women leverage separation as an opportunity for personal growth or entrepreneurship, albeit under social stigma (Rahmah & Setiadi, 2019). This article contributes to the scholarly field in several important ways. First, it provides an integrated synthesis of diverse methodological approaches, thereby bridging gaps between public health, sociology, and economic analyses. Second, it offers context-specific insights by highlighting the Indonesian case, which combines global patterns of early marriage with unique cultural, legal, and religious dynamics. Third, it advances the conceptual debate by situating early marriage as both a personal choice constrained by structural

factors and as a driver of intergenerational inequality.

Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on secondary sources constrains the depth of contextual analysis, as much of the available literature draws on regional or cross-sectional datasets. In addition, the overrepresentation of quantitative studies in the review may obscure lived experiences and the nuances of local cultural negotiations. Another limitation relates to publication bias, as many studies were concentrated in Java and surrounding regions, leaving the eastern provinces of Indonesia underexplored.

The implications of these findings are manifold. For policymakers, the results underline the urgency of strengthening legal reforms on marriage age, enhancing social protection mechanisms, and expanding educational programs for adolescents at risk of early marriage. For practitioners, particularly those in health and education sectors, the evidence underscores the importance of holistic interventions that address both preventive and remedial dimensions. For future researchers, this review suggests the need for longitudinal and mixed-methods studies that can capture dynamic changes across time and space, as well as a stronger focus on underrepresented regions and marginalized groups.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight that early marriage in Indonesia is strongly linked to limited educational attainment, constrained economic opportunities, compromised reproductive health, and increased vulnerability to divorce. These outcomes collectively confirm that early marriage functions as a critical driver of social and familial instability, while simultaneously perpetuating cycles of poverty and gender inequality. The systematic review further underscores that the structural factors underlying early marriage, such as cultural norms, poverty, and weak legal enforcement, continue to influence the sustainability of marriages and the well-being of women and children.

The contribution of this article lies in offering a comprehensive synthesis that connects the phenomenon of early marriage with divorce through an interdisciplinary lens. Theoretically, it advances the understanding of early marriage as both a personal and structural issue, while practically, it provides insights that can support policy interventions in education, gender empowerment, and public health. The study also enriches academic discourse by situating the Indonesian case within broader global debates on marriage and family resilience, thereby strengthening its relevance for comparative studies across developing regions. In addition, the results suggest several implications for future work. Researchers are encouraged to expand empirical investigations using longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to better capture the dynamics of early marriage and divorce. Policymakers and practitioners may also adopt these findings as a basis for developing more targeted prevention strategies, strengthening legal frameworks, and implementing community-based interventions that enhance awareness and resilience. Such efforts are essential to mitigate the adverse impacts of early marriage and to promote social equity and family well-being in Indonesia.

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