

Socio-cultural and Economic Dynamics of Early Marriage: A Qualitative Study in Rural Areas

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ABSTRACT

Despite the enactment of legal restrictions on early marriage, the issue persists, particularly in rural areas of Central Java, where rates have increased. This study's main problem is the significant knowledge gap regarding how formal age-restriction policies are mediated and often undermined by deeply ingrained social and cultural norms at the community level. While previous studies have provided a broad overview of the impacts, they often lack a nuanced, micro-level understanding of the complex tensions between policy intentions and local realities. This research, therefore, provides a focused, qualitative analysis of the socio-economic dynamics of early marriage in a specific case study of rural Jepara, Indonesia. The study's primary objectives were to analyze the social and economic impacts of the policy, identify community-level challenges, and offer actionable recommendations. A qualitative case study design involved in-depth interviews with 30 purposively selected informants, including adolescents, parents, community leaders, and government officials. The data, collected through interviews and observations, were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal a compelling tension between the policy's aims and strong traditional norms, such as the stigma of delaying marriage. While the policy has positively influenced families to prioritize education and long-term economic welfare, social pressure has significantly hampered its effectiveness. This study's unique contribution lies in its in-depth exploration of this tension, providing a grounded basis for future policy and community interventions. The conclusion clarifies how these findings address the research objectives and offers concrete recommendations for a more holistic approach that combines legal measures with targeted, community-based support and dialogue.

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1. Introduction

In Indonesia, the issue of early marriage has become increasingly critical as the government and various non-governmental organizations strive to protect children's rights and promote family welfare (Ratnaningsih et al., 2022; Kamarusdiana & Farohah, 2022). The prevalence of early marriage in Central Java has risen significantly, with cases increasing from 12,049 in 2019 to 13,595 in 2021 (Arafah & Purwanto, 2023). This concerning trend persists despite the landmark revision of Law No. 16 of 2019, which raised the minimum legal age for marriage to 19 years. The discrepancy between this legal mandate and the social reality underscores a fundamental challenge in policy implementation. In many rural communities, deeply ingrained traditions, cultural norms, and economic pressures often take precedence over formal laws (Hidayat et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2024), creating a significant tension between the state's vision for child protection and the community's customary practices. This complexity highlights why early marriage is not merely a legal issue but a deeply structural one, rooted in socio-cultural and economic factors that are difficult to change through legislation alone.

The consequences of early marriage are well-documented and far-reaching, particularly in the Indonesian context. At the individual level, it often leads to a cessation of education, limiting a girl's human capital development and future career prospects (Scott et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is associated with significant health risks, including complications during pregnancy and childbirth due to physical immaturity, as well as a higher risk of domestic violence and social isolation (Huzaimah et al., 2023; Jayawardana, 2022; Wibowo et al., 2021). At the societal level, the persistence of early marriage perpetuates a cycle of poverty and gender inequality, hindering progress toward national development goals (Torabi, 2024). Understanding this issue's underlying drivers is crucial for developing effective, targeted interventions that can genuinely make a difference.

A significant body of research has already explored various dimensions of this problem. Several quantitative studies, for instance, have used large-scale demographic data to establish correlations between marriage age and socio-economic outcomes, such as the negative impacts on adolescent reproductive health and the decline in female school enrolment (Melesse et al., 2021; Sagalova et al., 2021). These studies have been instrumental in building a macro-level understanding of the issue. Concurrently, other qualitative studies, often ethnographic, have explored the socio-cultural drivers of early marriage, examining the role of poverty, tradition, and gender inequality in different regions of the world (Kohnno et al., 2020; Lowe et al., 2020). While these works highlight the importance of local context, few have specifically investigated the dynamic interplay between a new, top-down legal policy and the bottom-up, grassroots response of a particular rural community in Indonesia.

This study aims to fill a significant research gap by providing a micro-level, contextual analysis of how a community with distinct cultural characteristics in rural Jepara, Indonesia, perceives and actively navigates the early marriage policy. Most existing studies offer either a broad statistical overview or a generalized qualitative account, without deeply exploring the nuanced local realities mediating national policies' effects. Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in its focused exploration of the lived experiences and local dynamics, revealing the tensions between formal law, informal social norms, and personal aspirations. The study offers a more grounded and actionable basis for developing effective interventions by providing this rich, qualitative insight.

This research has several primary objectives: (1) to analyze the social impacts of early marriage policies in rural Jepara, including changes in societal norms and values; (2) to assess the economic implications of the policy, such as its influence on family welfare and access to education; and (3) to provide policy recommendations based on the research findings to enhance the effectiveness of these regulations within a specific social and economic context.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to understand the social and economic implications of early marriage in rural Jepara, Indonesia. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore the views, experiences, and perceptions of individuals within their natural context, which is crucial for uncovering the complex sociocultural dynamics of this issue (Lebni et al., 2023). The case study design, focusing on several villages in Jepara, was adopted to provide a comprehensive understanding of how marriage policies are implemented and their specific impacts on the local community. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the interaction between policy enforcement and the study location's unique social and economic realities.

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from UNISNU Jepara Ethics Committee. To ensure the rights and welfare of all participants were protected, ethical procedures were strictly followed. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, and parental consent alongside child assent was secured for participants under 18 years. Participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity, and their data were stored securely to prevent unauthorized access. The research process was conducted with utmost respect for the local culture and community norms.

This study utilizes multiple qualitative data collection methods: in-depth interviews and participant observation. In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 purposively selected informants to ensure a diversity of perspectives (Campbell et al., 2020). The informants included 10 adolescents who had experienced or were in the process of early marriage, 10 parents of adolescent children, five community leaders, and five representatives from government institutions involved in marriage policy management. The informants included 10 adolescents who had experienced or were in the process of early marriage, 10 parents of adolescent children, five community leaders, and five representatives from government institutions involved in marriage policy management. The semi-structured interviews explored personal experiences, beliefs, and perceptions related to early marriage. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Concurrently, participant observation was carried out over three months to gain a deeper understanding of the social dynamics within the communities, focusing on how traditional norms and values shape societal views on early marriage (Kohn et al., 2020). This combination of qualitative methods allows the research to explore individual experiences and the collective cultural context, providing a comprehensive and holistic view of the issue.

Data collected through interviews and observations were analyzed using a detailed thematic analysis technique. The analysis process involved several systematic steps: (1) transcription of all interview recordings; (2) initial coding to identify key phrases and concepts; (3) grouping codes into broader themes aligned with the research objectives; (4) reviewing and refining the themes; and (5) interpreting the data to develop a narrative that illustrates the social and economic implications of the policy. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was employed by cross-referencing information from interviews, observations, and relevant documents. The results of the data analysis are presented in the form of descriptive narratives, illustrating the social and economic implications of the policy (Batyra & Pesando, 2021). By adopting this rigorous approach, the study aims to contribute meaningfully to the understanding of the impacts of early marriage in the context of rural communities.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Social Impacts of Early Marriage Restrictions

The implementation of the legal age restriction for marriage has served as a powerful catalyst for initiating social change within the rural communities of Jepara. While the policy has effectively raised awareness and sparked a community-wide discourse, the findings reveal a significant and persistent tension between evolving adolescent aspirations and deeply entrenched traditional norms. Data from interviews and direct observations confirm that while a new generation increasingly values education and personal autonomy, these modern aspirations often conflict with traditional expectations. This internal and external conflict is the most prominent social impact of the new policy. The following table summarizes the key social impacts identified from the interviews:

Table 1 Summary of interview findings: social impacts of early marriage restrictions

Informant	Interview Findings
Adolescent 1	"Now, many of my friends choose to finish their education before getting married."
Adolescent 2	"I feel more confident about continuing my education, but sometimes people doubt my decision."
Parent 1	"We are starting to realize that our children's education is more important, but there is still pressure to marry."
Parent 2	"The tradition in this village is very strong. I'm worried my daughter won't find a spouse if she marries too late."
Community Leader 1	"This policy is good, but many still hold on to traditions. Change is not easy."

Based on the findings in Table 1, the policy has initiated a positive shift in the community's mindset, particularly among adolescents, who increasingly prioritize education. This progress, however, is met with significant resistance from deep-seated traditional norms and social pressures. The tension between personal aspirations and communal expectations creates a conflict that profoundly influences individual and family decisions, highlighting that social change is a gradual and complex process in these rural communities. The data demonstrate a compelling push-and-pull dynamic shaping how individuals navigate their choices.

3.1.2. Economic Implications of Early Marriage Restrictions

From an economic perspective, the early marriage restriction policy has been shown to have profoundly positive implications for family welfare and adolescents' access to education. Interviews with parents and adolescents consistently revealed a growing recognition of the long-term economic benefits of delaying marriage. The new legal framework has prompted families to re-evaluate their investment strategies, shifting from the traditional view that marriage is a form of economic security to a more modern perspective where education is seen as the primary investment for sustainable prosperity. This is reflected in the conscious decision by many families to reallocate resources that would have been used for wedding ceremonies and dowries toward educational expenses. This change in spending reflects a fundamental re-evaluation of what constitutes a valuable investment for the family's future. The key economic implications derived from the interviews are presented below:

Table 2 Interview results on the economic implications of early marriage restrictions

Informant	Interview Findings
Parent 3	"Our daughter can continue her schooling, and this has greatly helped our family."
Adolescent 3	"By not marrying at a young age, I can work and help my parents."
Parent 4	"I feel relieved seeing my children focus on education before marriage."
Adolescent 4	"Now I can study more. I might want to become a teacher or a doctor."
Community Leader 2	"We see that families who delay marriage tend to be more prosperous."

Table 2 unequivocally highlights a shared understanding within the community that postponing marriage represents a more beneficial investment in human capital. Families have shifted their focus from the short-term costs of wedding ceremonies to the long-term economic gains from education, which has the potential to significantly improve household welfare. This indicates that the policy has successfully altered family economic priorities, positioning education as a primary path toward sustainable stability and prosperity. This mental and financial shift serves as a concrete example of the policy's positive impact on socio-economic conditions.

3.1.3. Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the observable progress, rural communities still face significant challenges in effectively implementing early marriage policies. The most prominent barrier is social pressure and the stigma associated with delaying marriage. This challenge is often rooted in a fear of social exclusion or the perception that an unmarried young woman has failed to fulfil her traditional role. However, the study also reveals a crucial opportunity for change emerging from within the community: a growing desire for open dialogue and collective action. This indicates that while the community is grappling with change, there is an underlying readiness to find new ways of thinking. The following table summarizes the key challenges and opportunities as highlighted by the informants:

Table 3 Challenges and opportunities from early marriage restrictions

Informant	Interview Findings
Adolescent 5	"Although I want to continue my education, sometimes people in the village still see me as odd."
Parent 5	"There is a stigma if a daughter is not married by a certain age. This remains an issue."
Community Leader 3	"We need more dialogue to support our children in choosing their life path."
Adolescent 6	"I have heard many stories about my friends who married young and could not continue their studies."
Parent 6	"If the government could provide training or support, it would help us a lot."

In summary, Table 3 confirms that social pressure remains a powerful obstacle to the policy's success. The stigma experienced by individuals who choose to delay marriage demonstrates how informal norms can often override formal regulations. However, these findings also reveal a critical opportunity: a growing desire for community dialogue and better support systems. This indicates a gap that can be filled by integrated interventions from the government, schools, and local leaders to create a more supportive environment, thereby

reinforcing policy implementation and empowering adolescents to pursue their aspirations more confidently.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Social Impacts

The findings of this study confirm that early marriage restrictions have acted as a crucial catalyst for social change, prompting discussions and shifts in societal norms. This aligns directly with Social Change Theory, which posits that external factors, such as government policies, can initiate a transformative process within a society (González, 2024; Vadrot, 2020). However, this study provides a nuanced perspective by demonstrating that such changes are not uniform or straightforward. They are often met with significant resistance due to deeply entrenched traditional norms. Our findings from Jepara, where community members express a firm adherence to tradition, are highly consistent with research from other rural contexts, such as the qualitative study in Ethiopia by Tewahido et al. (2022), which also found that social norms effectively "trap" adolescents in early marriage despite policy interventions. This resistance is not a simple rejection of the law but a complex reaction rooted in the community's fear of social stigma, cultural disruption, and the loss of traditional values. This analysis underscores why social transformation is a slow and challenging process, requiring more than just legal frameworks to overcome the powerful barrier of social stigma associated with delaying marriage.

Furthermore, the observed tension between adolescents' evolving aspirations and persistent family and community expectations strongly supports Socialization Theory. This theory suggests that individuals' behaviors and values are heavily influenced by their social environment, with a particular focus on the family and peer networks (Chen et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). In rural Jepara, the socialization process creates a profound dilemma where adolescents feel caught between their desires for education and the societal pressure to conform to the traditional norm of early marriage. This conflict is particularly acute for young women, who their peers may praise for pursuing higher education, yet simultaneously face subtle or explicit pressure from family and elders to marry young. This dynamic is a key factor explaining why, even with increased awareness and legal backing, the practice of early marriage persists. The findings suggest that interventions must not only target adolescents but also strategically focus on changing the attitudes of parents and the wider community to cultivate a truly supportive environment that values education and individual choice over outdated norms.

In essence, the social impacts of the early marriage policy are a complex interplay between formal rules and informal social systems. The policy has successfully introduced a new legal framework, but the existing social architecture continually tests its effectiveness. The true challenge is not just enforcing the law but facilitating a bottom-up social transformation. This process requires continuous community engagement and dialogue to actively challenge outdated practices, deconstruct the social stigma surrounding delayed marriage, and build a new consensus that aligns with the policy's objectives. By providing specific, qualitative evidence of this tension in the Jepara context, this study expands upon the work of Lowe et al. (2020). It provides a grounded understanding of the social dynamics that must be addressed for any policy to be impactful and sustainable.

3.2.2. Economic Implications

This study also reveals significant economic benefits of early marriage restrictions, particularly concerning family welfare and access to education. These findings are directly

consistent with the principles of Human Capital Theory, which posits that investments in education and skill development can increase individual productivity and, consequently, family income (Deming, 2022). By delaying marriage, adolescents in rural Jepara can acquire more skills, knowledge, and educational qualifications. This extended education period, whether in formal schooling or vocational training, is increasingly perceived by families as a long-term economic investment with a high rate of return. The data indicate a growing understanding that this human capital directly translates into better job opportunities, higher wages, and improved family economic stability. This aligns with findings from a study by Fitria et al. (2024), which highlighted the crucial role of education in preventing early marriage, and supports the broader observation of Cameron et al. (2023) regarding the positive relationship between delayed marriage and economic outcomes.

Furthermore, the data reveal a profound shift in family resource allocation and decision-making processes. This phenomenon is best understood through the lens of Family Economic Theory, which suggests that households operate as rational economic units that evaluate the costs and benefits of various life decisions (Quan & Zhang, 2024). The early marriage policy serves as a powerful catalyst, influencing families to reallocate funds that would traditionally be spent on costly wedding ceremonies and dowries. These resources are now being consciously redirected toward educational expenses, such as school fees, books, and living costs. This change in spending reflects a fundamental re-evaluation of what constitutes a valuable investment for the family's future. It signifies a move away from the traditional view of early marriage as a way to relieve financial burden, toward an understanding that investing in education provides a more sustainable path to economic security and prosperity.

In essence, the policy has not only altered individual life trajectories but has also fundamentally reshaped the economic logic of the household in Jepara. The policy has created a positive feedback loop by increasing the perceived opportunity cost of early marriage and highlighting the long-term value of education. Families who invest in their children's education now witness tangible returns in higher income and enhanced stability, strengthening their belief in the value of human capital development. This virtuous cycle has the potential to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and empower families to build a more secure and prosperous future, demonstrating the transformative power of a well-implemented policy at the grassroots level.

3.2.3. *Challenges and Opportunities*

Implementing early marriage restrictions in rural areas faces significant challenges, primarily related to deeply ingrained social norms and traditional values (Tewahido et al., 2022; Wibowo et al., 2021). These findings strongly confirm the influence of Social Norms Theory, which posits that individual behavior is heavily shaped by community expectations and collective beliefs (Lin & Shek, 2022). The data from this study provides a compelling example of this phenomenon, where the social pressure and stigma felt by adolescents who choose education over early marriage can be a more powerful force than formal policy. This is not an isolated issue in Jepara; rather, it is a consistent challenge identified in a comprehensive systematic review on the factors associated with child marriage (Pourtaheri et al., 2023), highlighting that such barriers are a global issue. This analysis underscores a critical point: policy alone is not a sufficient solution. Its effectiveness is contingent upon a fundamental shift in local perceptions and values, which requires more than just legal enforcement.

Conversely, the study identifies a crucial opportunity for change through the emergence of community dialogues and nascent support systems. This positive development resonates with Social Support Theory, which suggests that positive social networks and peer support can act as a buffer against negative social pressures (Oti-Boadi et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022). While the findings show that community support for education is growing, there is a clear and

demonstrable gap between this goodwill and concrete action, such as implementing skills training and economic empowerment programs. This gap highlights a critical inflection point where grassroots initiatives can bolster policy. The increasing frequency of community dialogues points to a vital opportunity to formalize these discussions into structured support networks that can actively challenge stigma and reinforce the policy's objectives. Mobilizing these informal networks can strategically create a 'new normal' that supports delayed marriage.

A concerted, collaborative approach is essential to bridge the divide between policy, community norms, and aspirations. For real and sustainable change to occur, there must be a synergy between government institutions, educational sectors, and community leaders. The policy's true power lies not just in its legal authority, but in its ability to be reinforced by a strong, positive social network that creates an enabling environment for adolescents. This collaborative approach is vital for overcoming the deeply entrenched structural barriers and ensuring that the early marriage policy can be implemented effectively and sustainably, ultimately moving from mere compliance to genuine social and economic transformation. Such a comprehensive strategy would involve enforcing the law and investing in human capital through targeted programs and fostering a supportive social environment, thereby addressing the issue from multiple angles.

4. Conclusion

This study successfully achieved its primary objectives by providing a deep, qualitative insight into the socio-economic dynamics of early marriage in rural Jepara, Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that while the government's age restriction policy is a critical catalyst for social change, its effectiveness is profoundly mediated by deeply ingrained traditional norms and community expectations. We found that there is a growing awareness among adolescents and parents about the benefits of delaying marriage for education; however, this positive shift is often met with strong social pressure and stigma. This highlights a significant and persistent gap between the policy's intentions and community-level implementation. From an economic perspective, the study affirms that early marriage restrictions have a tangible, positive impact on family welfare and human capital development. Families increasingly make conscious economic decisions consistent with Human Capital Theory by prioritizing education over early marriage. The findings reveal a fundamental shift in family resource allocation, moving spending from marriage expenses to educational investments. This conscious redirection of funds contributes to long-term economic stability and improved access to adolescent education. This provides a concrete, contextual example of how a policy intervention can trigger a positive domino effect, reshaping household economic logic and leading to a more prosperous future for the community. The core novelty of this research lies in its in-depth, qualitative exploration of the specific tensions between formal government policies and informal social systems in a localized context. Unlike previous studies that often provide a broad, quantitative overview, this case study offers a nuanced understanding of how these dynamics play out in rural communities. By capturing the lived experiences, motivations, and conflicts of individuals and families, this research provides a more grounded and actionable basis for designing future interventions. It moves beyond statistical correlation to explain the "why" and "how" behind the policy's successes and failures on the ground.

Based on these findings, we offer several concrete recommendations. *First*, policymakers should not rely solely on legal restrictions. However, they must also invest in sustained, community-based programs that facilitate open dialogue and challenge the social stigma associated with delaying marriage. *Second*, government and educational institutions should collaborate to provide specific economic support, such as scholarships and skill-training programs, to adolescents and their families. This will alleviate the economic pressures

that often drive early marriage and reinforce the value of education. *Third*, future interventions should actively engage and empower community leaders and local influencers to become advocates for delayed marriage, utilizing their trusted position to create a supportive social network for adolescents. A primary limitation of this study is its qualitative nature, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other rural contexts. Future research could address this by conducting a broader comparative study across different rural communities in Indonesia to identify both universal and context-specific factors. Additionally, further research could explore the long-term impacts of these policy interventions through a longitudinal study, tracing the life trajectories of individuals who delayed marriage versus those who did not. This would provide robust quantitative evidence to complement the qualitative insights from this study.

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