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Controversy of Early Marriage Between Religious Doctrine and Customs in Minority Areas in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The early marriage controversy is a significant issue that affects people's views regarding marriage within the framework of Islamic religious doctrine and customs in Indonesia. This article examines how Islamic law adapts in response to socio-cultural changes, especially in regions with Muslim minority populations, which have mixed interpretations of the age of marriage. This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with data collection through news and literature relevant to the keyword "Early marriage controversy in Indonesia." The analysis was carried out inductively to identify the forms, factors, and impacts of early marriage controversies on the lives of young couples, both from the perspective of health, quality of life, and religious and cultural norms. The results of the study show that this controversy reflects the challenges of integrating Islamic religious doctrine with local customary values, creating both positive and negative consequences for couples who marry young. In the context of Muslim minorities, this article recommends a flexible and responsive approach to Islamic law to socio-cultural dynamics, in order to achieve a balance between religious norms and the social needs of diverse communities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early marriage has reached an alarming stage in Indonesia. In the last five years, about 46 million early marriages occurred out of a total of 255 million children in Indonesia between the ages of 10 and 19, which means about 375 teenagers get married every day (Budianto, 2024). According to Grijns & Horii (2018), the high rate of early marriage often triggers controversy related to values, norms, and regulations in society. This controversy has raised polemics about whether early marriage is acceptable, healthy, or important for couples who choose to marry at a young age (Rohmayanti & Mareta, 2020; Seff et al., 2020; Steinhaus et al., 2019). This complexity is increasingly prominent in the context of a diverse society such as Indonesia, where cultural norms and religious doctrines play a major role in shaping society's views regarding the ideal age of marriage (Duran & Tepehan Eraslan, 2019).

As a country with a high level of pluralism, Indonesian society shows a diversity of ethnic, cultural, and religious influences each other (Hoon, 2017). This diversity creates various perspectives and attitudes in understanding social issues, including early marriage (Gede Agung et al., 2024; Larson, 2022). In the context of minority Muslim communities, differences in interpretation of Islamic law and the influence of local customs often trigger dilemmas in determining the ideal age limit for marriage. This pluralistic perspective reflects the variation in values, norms, and regulations that underlie the practice of early marriage, and creates complex controversies regarding the view of Islamic law and its application in society (Muhammad Ishfaq et al., 2024; Nasir, 2020).

The phenomenon of early marriage in the context of minority Muslim communities has also attracted attention in previous studies that focused on the attitudes of couples who choose to marry young (Permatasari Wadjaudje et al., 2019; Tomar et al., 2021; Keskiner, 2020), reproductive health of young couples (Sezgin & Punamäki, 2020; Mehra et al., 2018; Sychareun et al., 2018). The studies highlight the controversy of early marriage as a focal point in understanding the consequences, prevalence, and motivations behind this practice. Religious views often value early marriage as part of a religious obligation that is integrated with social practices and traditions. Therefore, an understanding of the early marriage controversy is important to assess the role of religion and culture in responding to this issue and provide comprehensive insights into its social implications (Scott et al., 2021).

The controversy related to early marriage in Indonesia has affected people's knowledge and attitudes towards the principles of marriage, especially in the context of Islamic religious teachings and local cultural traditions. However, most of the existing research focuses on the reasons, risks, and formal regulations in examining early marriage as a controversial issue. According to Scott et al. (2021), the complexity of early marriage in society's knowledge and attitudes requires a thorough explanation of the form, factors, and implications of this controversy on the quality of life of young couples. Therefore, this study not only closes the existing research gap on the early marriage controversy, but also analyzes the forms, factors, and implications of early marriage on the quality of life of young couples from the point of view of Islamic law, especially in minority Muslim communities.

This controversy illustrates the significant differences of opinion between religious and customary doctrines, which often raises tensions in society. Debates about early marriage are often driven by differences of opinion on values, norms, and regulations, reflecting complex social

dilemmas (Nyangweso, 2022; Anagol, 2020; Jones, 2017). Nguyen & Catalan-Matamoros (2020) note that controversies often arise from different perspectives in understanding certain information and situations. This is evident in the controversy of early marriage, which creates a dilemmatic and tends to be controversial social attitudes (Nurhikmah et al., 2021).

Early marriage, which involves adolescents under the age of 18 (Manandhar & Joshi, 2020; Bezie & Addisu, 2019; Rumble et al., 2018) or under 20 years old (Astutik & Nurmala, 2020), are often considered immature to live married life. However, in some communities, early marriage is considered a tradition that serves to ease the economic burden or protect children from social threats, thus giving rise to a demand for the legitimacy of this practice even though it is not legally appropriate (Tsany, 2017). Therefore, this practice remains controversial with diverse understandings in Indonesian society. This article explores the dynamics of the early marriage controversy from the perspective of religious doctrine and cultural traditions in Indonesia, especially in minority Muslim communities.

Drawing on cultural, legal, and religious perspectives, this study examines three main questions: (1) How is the early marriage controversy manifested in Indonesian society? (2) What are the factors that cause misunderstandings related to early marriage in the community? (3) How does the controversy of early marriage affect the quality of life of young couples from a religious and cultural point of view? By analyzing this issue, this article argues that the practice of early marriage in Indonesia has given rise to controversies rooted in religious doctrines and cultural traditions in the social life of the Muslim minority community in Indonesia. This study explores the controversy of early marriage from a cultural, legal, and religious perspective to identify the factors underlying the practice of early marriage and its implications for children's reproductive rights and child protection.

2. METHODS

The study comes amid a rise in cases of early marriage in Indonesia, which has sparked controversy over religious and cultural values, especially among minority Muslim communities. Therefore, this study focuses on the controversy surrounding early marriage in Indonesia based on three main considerations: (1) The controversy of early marriage in Indonesia is a central issue that has not been studied comprehensively, especially from the perspective of religion and customs in the context of minority Muslim communities; (2) The controversy of early marriage in Indonesia is a phenomenon that requires a more contextual understanding, with significant motivation to be analyzed through religious and cultural approaches, in order to identify the forms, factors, and implications of this phenomenon; (3) The controversy of early marriage also has an impact on the quality of life of children, especially in a society with diverse religious values and traditions. These three reasons are the basis for choosing the focus of this study on the early marriage controversy in Indonesia.

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach by utilizing primary and secondary data (Gioia, 2021). The primary data consisted of excerpts of news text descriptions obtained through the reading process with the keyword "Early marriage controversy in Indonesia" on the author's computer. The news search and reading process was carried out from September 1 to October 20, 2022, with an emphasis on news headlines related to the form, factors, and implications of the early marriage controversy in Indonesia. This process resulted in three general classifications of

the issue of early marriage controversy in Indonesia, which are presented as the main findings in this study.

Data analysis in this study is carried out through three stages: (1) Data reduction, which is the process of systematically compiling data to identify and group information according to the purpose of the study; (2) Data presentation, which involves the presentation of research data in the form of a table containing a summary of news text excerpts; (3) Data verification, which is the process of drawing conclusions based on the trends identified in the collected data (Miles et al., 2018). Through these three stages, the data collected is analyzed inductively and described to produce interpretations regarding the forms, factors, and implications of the early marriage controversy in Indonesia. This approach also aims to identify how Islamic law can adapt in response to dynamic sociocultural changes, particularly in the context of minority Muslim communities that have varied values and norms related to early marriage.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Early Marriage Dilemma

The controversy of early marriage in Indonesian society not only negatively impacts the quality of life of young married couples, but also affects the view of religious doctrines and cultural norms. Early marriage reflects a complex knowledge system and often leads to misunderstandings, both from a religious and cultural perspective. In Indonesia's minority Muslim community, early marriage is often a social dilemma as to whether the practice is allowed, healthy, or important, as well as whether it reflects a socio-cultural responsibility or simply a religious obligation. This dilemma often creates controversy in the choice of different attitudes between religious and customary values.

Tarka (2018) argues that differences in views between the public and the government often trigger dilemmas around early marriage. In this context, as Jones (2017) explains, differences in knowledge and attitudes between informal authorities (such as traditional customs) and formal authorities affiliated with religious views often influence the values, norms, and regulations that govern the practice of early marriage, thus bringing this issue to a more significant level of controversy. In the case of minority Muslim communities, the response of Islamic law to this practice is increasingly complex, especially due to the variation in interpretation between religious rules and state laws that support the minimum age of marriage.

Early marriage reflects a dilemma in the legitimacy of questionable societies and religions, particularly in the context of Indonesia's Muslim minority. Although early marriage remains a common practice in many regions, including among Muslim communities, the legitimacy of the practice is still debated. Grijns & Horii (2018) stated that the legitimacy of early marriage is a controversial process, especially due to the existence of contradictory interpretations between society and religion. In the context of religion, marriage is considered valid when both individuals have reached maturity, with the minimum age regulated by the country's law being 19 years old. However, in indigenous peoples, the age of marriage allowed can vary, especially in regions that consider early marriage as part of tradition.

The study identifies three main aspects of the early marriage controversy in Indonesia: regulation, age, and risk. Here are some of the key findings:

Table 1. Forms of Early Marriage Controversy

Aspect	News Excerpt
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The law states that marriage is only permitted when both the man and woman have reached the age of 19. Additionally, individuals under 21 must obtain parental consent to marry. Based on this provision, Indonesian marriage law essentially prohibits underage marriage (Harruma, 2022).

Regulation

The law in Indonesia stipulates that marriage is only allowed when a man and a woman have reached the age of 19. For individuals under the age of 21, parental permission is required to marry. This provision basically prohibits underage marriage (Harruma, 2022). However, in some local traditions such as in Java, marriage for women at around the age of 16 is still common, where early marriage is considered a way to maintain family honor. In religious view, marriage is also seen as a sacred bond carried out in the name of God, without setting a special age limit (Rustiana et al., 2020).

Law No. 2019 in Indonesia stipulates that the minimum age for marriage is 19 years for both men and women, which is in line with the provisions of the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection. However, in some traditional communities such as in Madura (East Java), Indramayu (West Java), and West Sulawesi, marriage at a younger age is considered normal and sometimes occurs at the age of 13 to 15 years or even younger (Diputra, 2016). On the other hand, Islamic law itself does not set a definite age limit, which can create flexibility in the midst of local values in determining the age of marriage

Early marriage is often associated with significant health risks, such as an increased chance of miscarriage, risk of high blood pressure, and anemia in young pregnancies. In addition, there is a risk of premature babies and an increase in maternal mortality during childbirth, as well as mental health problems for young mothers and their children (Yudha & Wicaksono, 2018). Alvin, a teenager who married at the age of 17, had to ask for state permission to marry because of his underage age. In the view of some religious leaders, early marriage is sometimes advised to avoid actions that are considered immoral (Aliansyah, 2016).

Source: document analysis (2024)

In Indonesia, the controversy surrounding early marriage illustrates the social dilemma between regulation, age, and the risks that surround it. This debate often shows that there is a difference in the minimum age for marriage which ranges from 16 to 19 years, as well as risks that can be both positive and negative for young couples in the context of formal and informal regulations. Religiously, marriage is often seen as a bond between a man and a woman that is also considered a form of worship and obedience to God. However, the flexibility of Islamic law in responding to local customary and cultural values remains necessary, especially in the context of minority Muslim societies that have distinctive social norms.

Age

Risk

These findings suggest that in minority Muslim societies, the adaptation of Islamic law to sociocultural changes is essential to deal with controversies related to early marriage. A responsive and contextual approach to Islamic law can help create a balance between religious and customary values, thus being able to respond to dynamic socio-cultural needs in a pluralist society.

Misconceptions about Early Marriage: Between Dogma and Culture

Apart from being considered a sacred practice, marriage is also interpreted as an effort to unite men and women in a legitimate bond. Indonesian people consider marriage valid if it meets the values, norms, and formal and informal rules that are mutually agreed. However, in practice, people often experience misunderstandings in interpreting and applying generally accepted values, norms, and rules of marriage. This misunderstanding can be seen in the orientation or principle that encourages people to choose early marriage. For communities that practice early marriage, this is seen as a solution to economic problems or as a way to protect children from various social hazards. According to Poppe & Wolff (2017), misconceptions about the principle of marriage often lead the purpose of marriage in a negative, manipulative, and transactional direction (Wahhaj, 2018).

Early marriage has sparked controversy from various perspectives, especially in Islamic law which classifies the legality of marriage in various categories—encouraged, mandatory, permissible, makruh, and even forbidden—depending on existing conditions and realities. In practice, however, early marriage in society is often driven by religious imperatives to prevent moral issues that may arise in the future. However, its implementation is often considered to deviate from the religious purpose of marriage, with the high rate of early marriage contributing to the high divorce rate in Indonesia (Dewi, 2022). This prompted the government to set a minimum age limit for marriage to reduce the divorce rate, although the regulation often clashes with religious views and customs that have been passed down from generation to generation, such as the tradition of "kidah-kidahan" of child marriage in Muara Enim Regency (Ria et al., 2023).

Misconceptions held by the public about the orientation or principle of early marriage are often caused by complex factors related to religious knowledge, values, and attitudes. In the social context of a particular community, early marriage is often interpreted as a legitimate practice according to their values, norms, and rules. Similarly, Umah (2020) argues that early marriage in the plural interpretation of society often generates controversy around values, norms, and regulations. In the context of minority Muslim communities, these factors give rise to different interpretations among community leaders, who respond to early marriage as an acceptable or unacceptable practice regarding health, risk, and regulatory aspects. As a result, social misunderstandings in interpreting the principles of early marriage greatly affect the views of communities, which often see early marriage as an alternative solution to certain social issues and lead to an increase in early marriage over time (Ngarawula & Weni, 2019).

This study identifies three main factors that drive misconceptions and controversies related to early marriage in Indonesian society: knowledge, values, and attitudes.

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Table 2. Causes of Early Marriage Controversy in Indonesia

Factor	News Excerpt
Knowledge	In some areas with minority Muslim communities, such as North Sulawesi, parents often have the view that marrying children at a young age can ease the family's economic burden. In some cases, unmarried children are considered dependents who burden the family's finances. This is similar to the belief in the Toraja community, where some people still consider that teenage girls who have reached physical maturity, such as menstruation, are considered ready to marry. In the view of local customs, marrying late for women often carries a social stigma as "not selling," which can affect the status and social acceptance of the community.
values	Strong traditional values also influence the high rate of child marriage in some minority communities, such as in North Sulawesi and Toraja. Many people still view education as a less important priority for girls, and prioritize early marriage as a form of social protection and maintaining family status. In some villages in Toraja, parents feel proud when their daughters are proposed to at a young age, as this is considered to reduce concerns about the child's future in terms of marital status.
Attitudes	In small communities in North Sulawesi, early marriage is often chosen as an effort to avoid gossip or negative stigma from the surrounding community. For example, some families in this area may feel pressured to marry their daughters at a young age in order to avoid negative conversations in the community, especially if the child is considered physically mature. In some villages, parents allow their children to marry early on the grounds that this will protect them from promiscuity or other moral risks that are considered more dangerous.

Source: document analysis (2024)

Table 2 highlights that the factors of knowledge, values, and religious and cultural attitudes greatly influence the controversy surrounding early marriage in Indonesia. These driving factors include the belief that marriage can reduce the economic burden on parents, the perception that menstruating girls are considered ready to marry, conservative values that support early marriage, pride in accepting proposals at a young age, and a desire to avoid social stigma. These factors are seen in various regions such as West Java, Sleman, Lumajang, Wonogiri, South Sulawesi, and West Nusa Tenggara.

The results of this study show the importance of responsive adaptation of Islamic law in responding to local values and customary views, especially in minority Muslim communities that still adhere to the practice of early marriage. With a flexible approach to Islamic law, Muslim societies can create a balance between religious doctrine and local cultural values, allowing Islamic law to serve as a relevant and contextual normative guideline in addressing the controversy of early marriage in pluralist societies.

Preferences for Early Marriage

Early marriage has become a fairly prevalent practice in some regions of Indonesia and is influenced by cultural, social, and religious factors, especially in regions with minority Muslim populations. In some Muslim minority communities such as North Sulawesi and Toraja, early marriage is often seen as part of an effort to preserve cultural and religious values (Makka et al., 2021; Sumiaty et al., 2023). This preference not only reflects the family's choice to marry their children at a young age, but also indicates a different understanding of social and economic responsibility in society. In the context of Islamic law, views regarding early marriage often vary, as Islamic law allows marriage when a person has reached physical and mental maturity, whose interpretation can vary between communities (Fithriani et al., 2024; Makka et al., 2021).

The implications of early marriage have shown mixed impacts on couples' quality of life. Some cases suggest that early marriage can limit the well-being and health of young couples, especially in terms of psychological and economic readiness. Therefore, although early marriage is quite socially acceptable in some communities, formal institutions generally only legitimize early marriage within the legal framework that regulates the minimum age (Alia et al., 2024; Bukido & Aminah, 2024). The community's preference for early marriage in some minority areas is also often interpreted as a form of preservation of religious values and efforts to protect children from potential social problems.

In the context of minority Muslim communities, the preference for early marriage indicates the need to strike a balance between religious, cultural, and legal values. In some areas, public views regarding the age of readiness for marriage and its impact on family life have been a source of debate. The negative impact of early marriage can be seen in the increasing divorce rate, domestic violence, and the loss of educational opportunities for girls. Example:

Table 3. The Controversy of Early Marriage and Its Impact on Children's Quality of Life in Muslim Minority Communities

Implications	News Excerpt
Decline in Quality of Life	In North Sulawesi, there are cases of children who drop out of school because they are married at a young age, where this marriage is arranged by the family for economic or social reasons (Rosdalina et al., 2016). This condition creates psychological pressure for girls who have to bear household responsibilities in unstable economic conditions, as seen in communities in Toraja, which still view early marriage as a cultural norm (Sumiaty et al., 2023).
Divorce	The phenomenon of early marriage in several minority Muslim communities in Indonesia is also often one of the factors that trigger the high divorce rate. BKKBN reports that many divorces occur in couples aged 20-24 who marry at a young age, mainly due to unpreparedness in living a married life. In the context of the Toraja and North Sulawesi communities, early marriage that is not accompanied by mental readiness often ends in divorce due to the inability of the couple to face the existing responsibilities (Anagol, 2020; Saday Duman et al., 2017).

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Domestic Violence In some minority areas, there have also been cases of domestic violence involving young couples, both physically and verbally. A young girl in Toraja reportedly experienced domestic violence due to her young age and unpreparedness to face domestic pressure (Manandhar & Joshi, 2020; Tomar et al., 2021). This indicates that the preference for early marriage requires more serious attention in order to protect the rights of girls and ensure that they receive adequate education.

Source: document analysis (2024)

The implications of the controversy surrounding early marriage often have a negative impact on the quality of life of young couples. Table 3 shows that the impact of this controversial practice significantly affects quality of life, increases the risk of divorce, as well as cases of domestic violence, both verbally and physically. In minority Muslim communities in North Sulawesi, Toraja, and several other regions, the consequences of the preference for early marriage indicate the need for more effective policies to protect children's rights and provide clearer guidance in balancing religious, cultural, and legal values.

These findings show the importance of adapting Islamic law in responding to local values and norms in the context of cultural plurality. With a flexible approach to Islamic law, minority Muslim communities can strike a balance between religious doctrine and local cultural values, while ensuring protection for girls from the negative effects of early marriage. This approach not only helps in accommodating the preferences of local communities, but also provides relevant guidelines for family life and child protection in pluralist societies.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the controversy surrounding early marriage from the perspective of religion and tradition in Indonesia, especially in the minority Muslim community, not only affects people's knowledge and attitudes but also has an impact on the quality of life of young couples. Although often viewed negatively, some communities view early marriage positively as an effort to preserve religious values and protect from social problems. The results of this study underscore that the impact of early marriage not only reflects public perceptions but also reveals the extent to which religious, cultural, and government systems respond to people's choices regarding this practice. In the context of minority Muslim communities, this controversy reflects the importance of adapting Islamic law that is responsive to local socio-cultural values. Existing formal regulations have not been fully effective in dealing with deep-rooted local preferences, so adaptive Islamic law is needed as a contextual and relevant guideline capable of integrating religious and customary norms. In addition, the results of this study show that although early marriage can negatively impact the quality of life of young couples, a flexible and contextual approach to Islamic law can support the social well-being of pluralistic societies. This research encourages further studies with an in-depth empirical approach to build a comprehensive framework that analyzes the forms, factors, and implications of early marriage, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the adaptation of Islamic law to support social well-being in diverse cultural contexts.

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