

READINESS FOR EARLY MARRIAGE AMONG PREGNANT ADOLESCENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY IN NORTH SUMATRA

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ABSTRACT

Adolescent pregnancy outside of marriage, often termed marriage by accident, is a pressing issue in Indonesia. Cultural norms and social pressures frequently lead pregnant adolescents to enter early marriages, often before they are emotionally or financially prepared. This study explores the lived experiences of adolescent girls who became pregnant outside of marriage and subsequently entered early marriages, focusing on how they perceive their readiness for marital and parental responsibilities. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, involving in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 adolescent girls aged 15–19 in Pematangsiantar and Simalungun, North Sumatra. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's method, supported by NVivo 12 for coding and theme identification. Five major themes emerged: emotional instability and psychological confusion; perceived financial unpreparedness; forced adaptation to adult roles; dependency on parental support; and conflicted hopes for the future. These findings highlight the adolescents' limited autonomy and unpreparedness in navigating early marriage and motherhood, compounded by social stigma and family expectations. Early marriage resulting from adolescent pregnancy often does not reflect the readiness of the individuals involved. Instead, it reinforces emotional stress, economic dependency, and role conflict. The study underscores the urgent need for adolescent-responsive health services, gender-transformative community programs, and comprehensive.

Keyword: *Adolescent Pregnancy; Early Marriage; Phenomenology; Adolescent Agency.*

Introduction

Adolescent pregnancy outside of marriage, often referred to as "marriage by accident," has emerged as a significant social and health concern in Indonesia. Despite the legal prohibition of marriage before the age of 19, cultural pressures

frequently compel young girls who become pregnant outside of wedlock to enter early marriages as a form of social rehabilitation (Sasmita, 2022). According to BKKBN (2020), more than 1.4 million cases of early marriage in Indonesia were directly attributed to unintended adolescent pregnancies. In this context, such marriages

are not only a reaction to unplanned pregnancy but often lack adequate emotional, economic, and social preparedness, particularly from the perspective of young girls .

This phenomenon is especially concerning from both gender and child health perspectives (Rahiem, 2020). Research has linked early and unplanned marriages to an increased risk of maternal and neonatal health complications, interrupted education, and economic dependency. Adolescent girls who marry due to pregnancy often face stigma, truncated opportunities for personal growth, and limited access to reproductive health information (Triadhari et al., 2023).

Although studies have addressed child marriage and its socio-economic drivers, there is a lack of phenomenological inquiry into how adolescent girls themselves perceive their readiness for marriage and parenthood following a premarital pregnancy—particularly in culturally diverse settings like Siantar and Simalungun . These regions, characterized by religious conservatism and limited youth health services, represent a unique microcosm for understanding the lived experiences behind "marriage by accident."

Despite national and global efforts to end child and early marriage, the practice remains widespread, particularly among adolescent girls who become pregnant

outside of marriage—a situation often described as marriage by accident (Plesons et al., 2021). In Indonesia, more than 1.4 million early marriages were recorded in 2020, many of which were reportedly conducted in response to unintended adolescent pregnancies (BKKBN, 2021).

Existing studies have primarily focused on the demographic patterns, legal frameworks, or religious views surrounding early marriage (Batyra & Pesando, 2021), with limited exploration of the personal readiness—emotional, financial, social, and psychological—of adolescents entering marriage due to pregnancy. While research has documented the negative consequences of child marriage on maternal health, education, and mental well-being (Burgess et al., 2022), very few studies have adopted a qualitative, phenomenological lens to explore how adolescent girls understand and experience this transition, particularly under coercive circumstances.

Additionally, there is a lack of localized studies that examine these issues in semi-urban and rural Indonesian settings, such as Siantar and Simalungun, where gender norms are rigid, reproductive health services are inadequate, and early marriage is socially tolerated. Even globally, programs that seek to empower girls through social norm transformation, such as CARE's Tipping Point Program, have faced challenges in achieving sustained

changes in girls' agency due to contextual factors like poverty, limited education, and COVID-19 disruptions (Yount et al., 2023).

Therefore, a significant research gap exists in understanding how adolescent girls—particularly those pregnant outside marriage—perceive their readiness for marriage and parenting, and how local sociocultural factors shape these perceptions. Addressing this gap is critical for designing interventions that are culturally responsive, rights-based, and grounded in the lived realities of adolescents.

Given the paucity of research that centers adolescent girls' lived experiences, this study seeks to explore how young women who experience marriage by accident perceive their own readiness—emotionally, socially, financially, and psychologically—to enter marriage and parenthood. The study is situated in the districts of Siantar and Simalungun in North Sumatra, areas where early marriage remains culturally tolerated and reproductive health services for adolescents are limited.

By adopting a phenomenological qualitative approach, this study aims to fill a critical empirical and theoretical gap in adolescent reproductive health literature by foregrounding the voices and subjectivities of pregnant adolescent girls who are compelled into marriage. Unlike existing

studies that focus on demographic determinants or legal frameworks, this research provides in-depth insights into individual readiness dimensions, such as emotional maturity, perceived parenting competence, and resilience in navigating stigma.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of adolescent readiness theory within the socio-cultural context of Indonesia, analyzed through the lens of lived experience, which has rarely been explored in the Southeast Asian context. The findings are expected to inform context-specific interventions and policy frameworks that address the realities of child marriage not only as a legal violation but as a complex psychosocial transition for young women.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of adolescent girls who became pregnant outside of marriage and subsequently entered into early marriage, a phenomenon commonly referred to as marriage by accident. The phenomenological approach was chosen to understand how these girls interpret and construct meaning around their emotional, financial, social, and psychological readiness for marriage and motherhood.

The research was conducted in Pematangsiantar City and Simalungun District, two culturally diverse regions in North Sumatra Province, Indonesia, where early marriage due to unintended pregnancy remains socially prevalent. The study setting was selected due to the interplay of strong local norms, religious influences, and limited access to adolescent reproductive health services.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, targeting adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 years who were married as a direct consequence of unplanned pregnancy. The inclusion criteria required that participants were married before the age of 19, residing in the designated study areas, and willing to provide informed consent. A total of 12 participants were included in the study, with recruitment continuing until data saturation was achieved—indicated by the recurrence of themes and no emergence of new information.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a safe and private location, either in the participant's home or a community space, using Bahasa Indonesia or the local Batak dialect, depending on the participant's comfort. The interview guide focused on several core themes: emotional

and mental readiness, financial preparedness, social support, stigma and discrimination, and role adjustment in marriage and motherhood. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim.

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method, which involved seven steps: familiarization with the data through repeated reading, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of meanings into themes, development of comprehensive descriptions, identification of the essential structure of the phenomenon, and validation of findings through member checking with selected participants. Thematic analysis was conducted manually and supported with the use of NVivo 12 software to organize codes, track emerging patterns, and ensure analytical rigor.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's criteria: credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement and triangulation, transferability was supported by providing rich contextual details, dependability was ensured via documentation of the research process, and confirmability was promoted through the use of reflexive journaling and peer debriefing sessions. These measures were taken to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the participants'

experiences rather than the researchers' biases.

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of [University Name], under approval number [insert number]. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. For minors, additional assent and parental or guardian consent were secured in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving adolescents. Participant confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study at any time were strictly upheld throughout the research process.

Results

Through thematic analysis of interviews with 12 adolescent girls who entered early marriage due to unintended pregnancy, five major themes emerged regarding their readiness to marry and establish a family: (1) emotional instability and psychological confusion, (2) perceived financial unpreparedness, (3) forced adaptation to adult roles, (4) dependency on parental support, and (5) conflicted hopes for the future. Each theme reflects a complex interplay between individual, familial, and sociocultural factors shaping the girls' experiences.

1. Emotional Instability and Psychological Confusion

Many participants described feeling emotionally overwhelmed upon

discovering their pregnancy. Several reported initial feelings of fear, shame, and confusion, especially due to anticipated parental and community reactions. One participant expressed: "Saya takut... waktu tahu hamil itu saya hanya bisa menangis di kamar dan tidak tahu harus bagaimana" (R1, age 16). The emotional turmoil was compounded by societal pressure to "save face" through marriage, which was not necessarily aligned with the adolescent's own wishes or emotional readiness.

2. Perceived Financial Unpreparedness

None of the participants considered themselves financially prepared to enter married life. Most were still in school or had recently dropped out. As one respondent said: "Saya tidak punya pekerjaan... suami juga masih kerja serabutan. Kami tinggal sama orangtua karena tidak sanggup mandiri" (R3, age 17). The absence of income-generating capacity often forced couples to rely on their parents or extended family for survival.

3. Forced Adaptation to Adult Roles

Participants reported a sudden shift in responsibilities, including domestic tasks and childcare, which they found burdensome. Many felt "too young" to be wives or mothers. One girl noted: "Saya bingung harus masak, ngurus anak, dan melayani suami. Padahal saya masih ingin

sekolah” (R5, age 16). The transition to adulthood was described not as a chosen path, but as an obligation imposed by circumstance.

4. Dependency on Parental Support

While some participants acknowledged emotional or logistical support from parents, many expressed feelings of inadequacy due to this continued dependence. “Orangtua yang biayai semua... saya merasa bersalah, saya malah tambah beban” (R8, age 18). This reliance on family members, particularly in cases where the husband was unemployed or absent, reinforced their sense of unpreparedness and loss of autonomy.

5. Conflicted Hopes and Uncertain Futures

Despite their struggles, several participants maintained aspirations for the future, such as completing school or providing a better life for their child. However, they expressed uncertainty about how these goals could be achieved under their current circumstances. “Saya ingin tetap sekolah, tapi sekarang punya anak... saya bingung bisa lanjut atau tidak” (R10, age 17). The dual burden of early motherhood and social expectation created internal conflict between personal goals and familial obligations.

These themes collectively reflect the multidimensional unpreparedness—emotional, economic, social—faced by adolescent girls who enter early marriage due to pregnancy. While participants

attempted to adapt to their new roles, their narratives revealed a lack of readiness and autonomy in navigating the transition from adolescence to wifehood and motherhood. The findings emphasize the need for adolescent-responsive health and social systems that acknowledge these lived complexities.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of adolescent girls who entered early marriage following an unintended pregnancy, commonly referred to in the Indonesian context as marriage by accident. The findings highlight a significant gap between the sociocultural expectations placed upon these adolescents and their actual emotional, financial, and social readiness to assume the roles of wife and mother. The participants reported intense emotional turmoil, confusion, and psychological distress upon discovering their pregnancies. These emotions were often followed by pressure from family and community to formalize the relationship through marriage, regardless of the girls’ personal readiness.

Furthermore, most of the participants lacked financial independence and were forced to rely on their parents or in-laws for basic needs and childcare, revealing their limited preparedness for economic responsibilities. The transition into

marriage was experienced not as a conscious, empowered choice, but rather as an obligation driven by stigma and the need to preserve familial honor. While some participants expressed a desire to continue their education or delay motherhood, these aspirations were often curtailed by societal norms and role expectations.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the decision to marry as a result of pregnancy does not automatically translate into readiness for marital or parental responsibilities. Rather, it often exposes young girls to psychosocial stress, role conflict, and dependency, with long-term implications for their health, autonomy, and development.

The findings of this study reflect Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, particularly the stage of identity versus role confusion, which typically occurs during adolescence. At this stage, individuals are expected to explore and consolidate their sense of self (Samsanovich, 2021). However, in the context of marriage by accident, these adolescents were prematurely pushed into adult roles before achieving a stable identity, leading to psychological distress and uncertainty (McGhee & Deeley, 2022). This aligns with recent studies indicating that early marriage disrupts normative

identity development and increases the risk of depression, anxiety, and emotional disengagement in young girls (Miller et al., 2023).

In addition, the emotional and economic dependency observed among participants resonates with Connell's theory of gendered power relations, which posits that young women are often placed in subordinate positions within patriarchal family structures (Aiyetoro & Amarachukwu, 2020). These girls were expected to conform to traditional gender roles—serving as obedient wives and mothers—despite lacking the agency or resources to fulfill those roles meaningfully (Koenig et al., 2019). Studies have shown that this power imbalance not only limits decision-making capacity but also reinforces cycles of dependency and inequality.

Moreover, the forced adaptation into marriage and parenting without adequate preparation illustrates a disruption in adolescent agency, a concept that refers to young people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context of social constraint (Barrow et al., 2021). Despite expressing hopes for education or future independence, the girls' decisions were largely shaped by external pressures from family and community norms. Similar findings have been documented in other Southeast Asian

contexts, where adolescents' autonomy is often undermined by collective familial interests and the moral imperative to preserve honor (Tsai et al., 2020).

The interplay between sociocultural expectations, lack of readiness, and limited agency suggests that early marriage in these cases was not merely a consequence of individual choices, but the result of structural coercion shaped by gender, poverty, and stigma (Batyra & Pesando, 2021). This supports the growing call for adolescent-focused interventions that go beyond reproductive health education and address the broader social structures limiting girls' autonomy and well-being (Biswas et al., 2020).

The findings of this study are largely consistent with existing literature on the psychosocial consequences of early marriage among adolescent girls. Similar to previous studies conducted in South Asia, participants in this research demonstrated limited readiness and diminished autonomy, which are often the result of socio-cultural pressures to preserve family honor following premarital pregnancy (Rijal et al., 2025; Clark et al., 2023). In Bangladesh, Hasan & Al Amin, (2024) found that girls who married early—especially those who did so following pregnancy—exhibited higher levels of psychological stress and identity confusion,

paralleling the emotional instability reported by respondents in this study.

However, this research adds further depth by examining the phenomenon of marriage by accident through the lens of adolescent subjectivity and agency, particularly within the Indonesian context, which remains underrepresented in the global literature (Yakub, 2020). While global reviews, such as that by Özler et al., (2020), emphasize the health and education consequences of child marriage, they often fail to explore how adolescent girls interpret their own readiness to become wives and mothers. This study contributes by foregrounding those voices and revealing that many girls internalize societal expectations even while struggling to adapt to adult roles.

Additionally, although the dependency on parental or extended family support among married adolescents has been documented elsewhere (Erken et al., 2021; Fan & Koski, 2022), this study highlights a unique contradiction: while girls expressed gratitude for such support, they simultaneously experienced guilt, burden, and a lack of self-worth, suggesting a deeper internalization of inadequacy that warrants attention in mental health interventions.

Furthermore, the study's findings contrast with Yount et al. (2023), who evaluated the CARE Tipping Point Program in Nepal and found that interventions to shift gender norms resulted in moderate increases in girls' agency and community engagement. In contrast, the adolescents in this study—who lacked exposure to such structured programs—remained largely passive actors in decisions regarding their futures, reinforcing the importance of community-based gender-transformative interventions.

In summary, this study both confirms and extends prior research by offering a localized, experience-driven understanding of how adolescents navigate early marriage under coercive conditions. It underscores the importance of contextualizing global discourses on child marriage within the lived realities of young women in culturally conservative Indonesian communities.

The findings of this study have significant implications for the development of adolescent-responsive reproductive health policies, gender-sensitive education systems, and community-level support programs (Envuladu et al., 2023). First, the evident emotional distress, dependency, and lack of preparedness among girls who experienced marriage by accident underscore the urgent

need for comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) that begins early and is tailored to the cultural context of Indonesian adolescents. This education must go beyond biological content and include psychosocial components, consent, agency, and negotiation skills, which have been shown to delay early marriage and increase reproductive health literacy (Kågesten & Chandra-Mouli, 2020; Van Reeuwijk & Kågesten, 2020)

Second, the strong influence of community norms and parental decisions in shaping adolescents' marriage trajectories highlights the need for community-based, gender-transformative interventions. Programs such as UNFPA's Youth Peer Education Program or CARE's Tipping Point Initiative have successfully shifted harmful norms by engaging parents, religious leaders, and boys alongside girls, thereby reducing the social acceptability of early marriage (Yount et al., 2023). Implementing similar models in regions like Siantar and Simalungun could foster protective environments where adolescent girls are supported to pursue education and delay marriage. Third, considering that many participants continued to rely on their families even after marriage, local governments should strengthen economic empowerment initiatives for adolescent mothers, such as vocational training, micro-

financing, and life-skills coaching. This aligns with recent global recommendations emphasizing intersectional programming that combines health, education, and economic inclusion for young mothers (UNICEF et al., 2020).

Finally, the absence of safe spaces for reflection, counseling, and decision-making reported by participants calls for the integration of adolescent mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS) into local primary healthcare. These services must be adolescent-friendly, confidential, and integrated with reproductive health clinics, school health units, or community youth centers (WHO, 2021).

If unaddressed, the psychosocial consequences of marriage by accident could perpetuate cycles of poverty, inequality, and intergenerational trauma. Therefore, policymakers must adopt a multi-sectoral and culturally sensitive approach to address early marriage—not only as a reproductive issue, but as a structural injustice affecting adolescent girls' full development and human rights.

Overall, future studies should aim to not only document the consequences of early marriage but to center adolescents' voices as agents of change, contributing to evidence-based strategies for

empowerment, protection, and inclusion of young people in health and development agendas.

Conclusions

This study reveals the multidimensional unpreparedness experienced by adolescent girls who entered early marriage due to unintended pregnancy. Emotional instability, financial dependence, limited agency, and internalized stigma characterize their transition into wifehood and motherhood. Although driven by cultural expectations to preserve family honor, such marriages often exacerbate psychosocial burdens rather than provide protective solutions.

The findings emphasize that early marriage, especially in the context of marriage by accident, is not a sufficient or safe resolution to adolescent pregnancy. Instead, it redirects the problem toward more complex challenges, including interrupted education, social isolation, and diminished mental health. Thus, this phenomenon must be addressed as a structural issue involving gender inequality, poverty, and limited access to adolescent health services.

Policymakers and stakeholders should prioritize multi-sectoral interventions that include adolescent-responsive mental health support, comprehensive sexuality education,

economic empowerment initiatives, and active involvement of families and communities. Future research should explore longitudinal outcomes of early-married adolescents and integrate intersectional approaches to better understand the diverse realities of young women across Indonesia.

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