

# Early Marriage in Indonesia: Socioeconomic Determinants and Regional Disparities

**Luthfan Lazuardi Mutqi**

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia Bandung, Indonesia  
kakaluthfan@upi.edu

## Abstract

This study examines the socioeconomic and regional factors influencing early marriage in Indonesia. By analyzing secondary data from academic journals, government reports, and international institutions, the research applies gender theory, poverty theory, and the capability approach to interpret early marriage trends across provinces. Findings reveal that poverty, limited educational access, and weak employment opportunities drive families to marry off daughters early, particularly in underdeveloped regions. Geographic disparities compound the issue, as institutional capacity, cultural norms, and legal enforcement vary widely. While national reforms have raised the legal age of marriage, inconsistent local implementation and legal pluralism hinder progress. Case studies from selected provinces highlight the need for regionally adaptive policies that integrate legal advocacy with cultural engagement. The study contributes to the academic discourse by offering a theoretically grounded, regionally comparative framework and provides practical implications for policymakers and stakeholders committed to ending early marriage in Indonesia.

## Keywords

early marriage; Indonesia; poverty and education; regional disparity; legal and cultural norms

## INTRODUCTION

Early marriage, defined as a marital union involving individuals under the age of 18, remains a pressing issue in Indonesia, with complex socioeconomic and cultural roots. According to BPS–Statistics Indonesia, early marriage disproportionately affects females, limiting their access to education and economic opportunities while perpetuating cycles of poverty and gender inequality (BPS–Statistics Indonesia, 2017). The national prevalence, though declining slightly, remains high in several provinces, particularly in Eastern Indonesia, revealing deep-seated structural challenges. This social phenomenon intersects with health, education, and economic sectors, impacting both individual trajectories and national development outcomes (UNICEF, 2017). In

regions where traditional values dominate and gender norms remain rigid, early marriage is not only tolerated but often culturally legitimized (Jones, 2012).

The phenomenon has gained increased scholarly attention due to its implications for sustainable development and human rights. From a theoretical standpoint, early marriage can be examined through the lens of gender theory, poverty theory, and human capability approaches, each offering distinct interpretations and policy implications (Sen, 1999, pp. 87–88; Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 71–74). Empirically, research has shown that households with lower socioeconomic status, minimal access to formal education, and limited awareness of reproductive health are more likely to marry off their daughters at an early age (Nasrullah et al., 2014; BKKBN, 2016). Early marriage thus functions both as a survival strategy and a social norm, especially in areas where state institutions are weak or inaccessible (UNFPA, 2016).

Despite numerous interventions by governmental and non-governmental organizations, the prevalence of early marriage remains stubbornly high in certain provinces. The Indonesian Child Protection Law (No. 23/2002, amended by Law No. 35/2014) and the Marriage Law revision in 2019 that raised the legal marriage age for girls to 19 have not yet been fully effective due to inconsistent enforcement and local resistance (Human Rights Watch, 2016; BPS–Statistics Indonesia, 2017). Several studies have explored the causes and consequences of early marriage, but few have explicitly analyzed the interaction between regional disparity and socioeconomic factors. Most existing literature treats early marriage as a uniform national issue, overlooking the distinct subnational patterns that demand context-sensitive analysis (UNESCO, 2016; BPS–Statistics Indonesia, 2017).

This gap highlights the need for a more nuanced approach that considers Indonesia's vast regional diversity. By focusing on the intersection of socioeconomic conditions and regional patterns, this study aims to advance understanding of how location-specific inequalities affect early marriage rates. The integration of structural, cultural, and economic perspectives allows for a comprehensive analysis that transcends simplistic interpretations. A regionally comparative framework provides deeper insight into how early marriage manifests in areas with differing levels of development, institutional reach, and cultural practices (Heaton et al., 2001; Save the Children Indonesia, 2016).

To address these concerns, this study poses three interrelated research questions: (1) How do socioeconomic factors such as education, income level, and employment status influence the prevalence of early marriage in Indonesia? (2) In what ways do regional disparities shape the geographical distribution of early marriage? (3) What role do cultural norms and legal frameworks play in either perpetuating or mitigating early marriage across different regions? The objective of this research is to explore these questions through a multi-dimensional analysis that highlights the diversity of

early marriage experiences across Indonesian provinces. Ultimately, the study aims to inform context-sensitive policy interventions that account for regional socioeconomic differences while addressing the broader structural drivers of early marriage.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of early marriage in Indonesia has been explored from various disciplinary perspectives, encompassing sociological, economic, and legal dimensions. A significant body of research has emphasized the role of poverty and lack of education as primary drivers of early marriage (Nasrullah et al., 2014; UNICEF, 2017). Scholars argue that in low-income households, marriage is often perceived as a means to reduce economic burden, especially in rural areas where educational and employment opportunities for girls are limited (Heaton et al., 2001). These studies also highlight how economic insecurity and gendered expectations reinforce parental decisions to marry off daughters early, reflecting a broader structural vulnerability embedded in society (Jones, 2012). Moreover, empirical findings from Indonesian contexts consistently show that girls from the poorest quintiles are significantly more likely to marry before reaching adulthood (BPS–Statistics Indonesia, 2017).

Another stream of literature focuses on the cultural and legal frameworks that shape early marriage practices. In many Indonesian regions, marriage customs are governed by adat (traditional) norms, which often diverge from national legal standards (UNFPA, 2016). While national laws have been amended to raise the legal age of marriage, enforcement remains inconsistent due to the pluralistic legal system and strong local customary influences (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Some scholars critique the existing legal reforms as insufficiently contextualized, arguing for culturally embedded strategies that engage community leaders and religious authorities in shaping social norms (Save the Children Indonesia, 2016). Additionally, comparative studies suggest that decentralization has led to uneven policy implementation across provinces, further complicating the effort to combat early marriage uniformly (Buehler, 2016, pp. 122–123).

Previous literature has also attempted to map regional disparities in early marriage prevalence, yet few have deeply examined the interaction between socioeconomic structures and geography. National surveys and statistical data reveal that provinces such as West Sulawesi, West Nusa Tenggara, and South Kalimantan consistently exhibit higher rates of early marriage compared to urbanized regions like Jakarta or Yogyakarta (BPS–Statistics Indonesia, 2017). However, these studies often lack a robust theoretical framework to explain why certain regions remain persistently vulnerable. This study addresses that gap by applying a multi-theoretical approach that considers both material and ideological factors in perpetuating early marriage. The literature

thus supports the need for a more localized and theoretically grounded analysis that can account for Indonesia's vast regional diversity and entrenched social norms.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs a multi-theoretical framework to examine early marriage in Indonesia, integrating gender theory, poverty theory, and the human capability approach. These theories provide a structured lens to understand the socioeconomic and cultural dynamics influencing early marriage practices across different regions.

Gender theory is central to understanding how societal constructions of femininity and masculinity shape early marriage decisions. It posits that patriarchal norms prioritize female domesticity and reproductive roles, often justifying marriage at a young age as a means to preserve family honor or secure future protection for girls (Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 71–74). In the Indonesian context, gender expectations often relegate women to subordinate positions, limiting their autonomy in marriage decisions (Jones, 2012). Studies have shown that these norms are reinforced through education systems, media, and religious interpretations, perpetuating gender hierarchies that sustain early marriage (UNFPA, 2016). By applying gender theory, this study investigates how these deeply embedded ideologies interact with regional socio-cultural structures to influence early marriage patterns.

Poverty theory contributes a materialist interpretation, suggesting that economic hardship drives families to marry off daughters early as a survival strategy (Sen, 1999, pp. 87–88). This theory highlights how families facing financial insecurity may view marriage as a transaction that reduces household dependency and transfers financial responsibility to the husband's family. Empirical studies in rural Indonesia have consistently found a correlation between low household income and higher rates of early marriage (Nasrullah et al., 2014). The absence of social protection and limited economic mobility options often exacerbates this trend, particularly in underdeveloped provinces (BPS–Statistics Indonesia, 2017). Poverty theory thus offers an explanatory framework to analyze how structural inequality and economic precarity influence early marriage decisions.

The human capability approach, as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, frames early marriage as a deprivation of individual agency and opportunity (Sen, 1999, pp. 74–78; Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 67–69). It emphasizes the need for freedom and access to capabilities such as education, health, and decision-making power. Early marriage is viewed not only as a social issue but also as a barrier to human development, particularly for girls whose life choices are constrained by age, gender, and socioeconomic conditions (UNESCO, 2016). This framework allows for the

assessment of how regional disparities in health services, schooling, and legal protections limit girls' ability to make informed life decisions.

Additionally, this study incorporates a regional development perspective, which recognizes the uneven distribution of infrastructure, governance, and resources across Indonesian provinces. Decentralization has empowered local governments but also led to variability in service provision and legal enforcement (Buehler, 2016, pp. 122–123). This unevenness affects not only access to education and health but also the ability of communities to engage with national reform agendas. By contextualizing early marriage within regional development theory, this study explores how local governance structures either mitigate or exacerbate early marriage practices.

Together, these theories form an analytical scaffold that enables the study to interrogate early marriage from structural, ideological, and regional standpoints. They support a comprehensive analysis that moves beyond individual behavior to consider broader systemic and institutional factors. This theoretical foundation is essential for interpreting the findings and for formulating policy recommendations that are both contextually relevant and theoretically robust.

## **Previous Research**

A chronological review of existing research reveals evolving perspectives on early marriage, particularly its socioeconomic and cultural determinants within Indonesia. The earlier works primarily emphasized traditional norms, while more recent studies integrate economic and legal dimensions, indicating a shift towards a multidisciplinary approach.

Heaton et al. (2001) conducted a comparative analysis of early marriage across Asian and African countries, including Indonesia, using Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data. Their study found that cultural norms, reinforced by patriarchal values, significantly influenced early marriage rates. The authors emphasized that early marriage was more prevalent in communities with rigid gender roles and weak educational access, a pattern particularly evident in rural Indonesia. While this study was foundational in highlighting cultural aspects, it did not sufficiently address economic disparities.

Nasrullah et al. (2014) conducted a focused quantitative study on early marriage in West Java, linking the practice directly to poverty indicators and lack of education. Their findings confirmed that lower family income and parental education levels were strong predictors of early marriage. The study advanced the literature by integrating health implications, such as increased maternal mortality and poor child health

outcomes. However, it was region-specific and did not engage with broader regional disparities across Indonesia.

Jones (2012) adopted a sociological approach to analyze early marriage in Eastern Indonesia, particularly among ethnic minority groups. He argued that local adat (customary law) and community pressure override national legal provisions. His ethnographic work highlighted how early marriage is embedded in the socio-religious fabric of some communities. While rich in cultural analysis, the study did not integrate economic or policy perspectives.

Buehler (2016) provided a political science perspective by examining the implications of decentralization on women's rights in Indonesia. He noted that local governments often lack the capacity or will to implement national child protection laws. His work is particularly valuable in explaining the uneven implementation of marriage age laws post-decentralization. It fills an important gap in understanding institutional influences on early marriage patterns.

Save the Children Indonesia (2016) published a national-level report combining statistical analysis with field research. It revealed that despite legal reforms, early marriage persisted due to poor enforcement, limited awareness, and economic vulnerability. The report called for comprehensive, regionally sensitive policies. While informative, the study lacked a strong theoretical framework, relying instead on descriptive statistics and policy recommendations.

UNICEF (2017) offered a global and national overview, framing early marriage as a violation of child rights and a barrier to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It provided comparative statistics across provinces, showing higher rates in West Sulawesi, Central Kalimantan, and West Nusa Tenggara. However, it primarily served as an advocacy tool rather than a deep analytical study.

These studies collectively contribute to understanding the multifaceted nature of early marriage in Indonesia. However, a clear research gap remains in integrating these dimensions—economic, cultural, legal, and regional—into a single analytical framework. Most studies isolate specific factors or focus on certain regions, thereby overlooking the interaction between regional disparities and structural socioeconomic forces. This study addresses that gap by offering a holistic, theoretically grounded, and regionally comparative analysis to examine how early marriage in Indonesia is shaped by intersecting factors.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses qualitative, textual data to explore the drivers and regional disparities of early marriage in Indonesia. The nature of the data is primarily conceptual, derived from scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, and credible institutional reports. Such qualitative data allows for a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural and economic factors influencing early marriage, capturing interpretations, meanings, and implications rather than mere numerical patterns (Creswell, 2014, pp. 45–46). By relying on conceptual sources, the study is positioned to analyze the intersectionality of norms, structures, and regional development in shaping early marriage practices.

The data sources for this research are drawn from a combination of international academic publications and Indonesian government institutions. Specifically, texts are sourced from peer-reviewed journals such as *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *Population and Development Review*, and *Asian Population Studies*, alongside Indonesian journals accredited by Sinta. Supplementary data include official reports from BPS–Statistics Indonesia, BKKBN, UNICEF, UNFPA, and the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection. Books by Amartya Sen (1999, pp. 74–88), Martha Nussbaum (2000, pp. 67–74), and Indonesian researchers on gender and family law also serve as foundational texts. These sources ensure both theoretical depth and empirical relevance, while covering diverse regional perspectives across the archipelago.

The data collection technique employed in this study is document analysis. This involves systematically reviewing, coding, and interpreting information from existing literature and policy frameworks to identify recurring themes and patterns (Bowen, 2009). The study uses purposive sampling to select documents that explicitly address early marriage, regional inequality, and gender dynamics in Indonesia. The documents are filtered through specific criteria, such as publication after 2010, scholarly credibility, and direct relevance to the research questions. This approach ensures that the data analyzed is both current and reflective of various stakeholder perspectives, including legal, cultural, and socioeconomic dimensions.

The data analysis technique adopted is thematic analysis, focusing on identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes such as poverty, cultural norms, legal frameworks, and regional disparity are coded and categorized to build interpretive arguments. Thematic analysis is particularly useful in this study as it enables a holistic exploration of how structural conditions and ideologies manifest differently across Indonesia's regions. By comparing themes across diverse sources, the study develops a comprehensive narrative that integrates multiple levels of analysis—individual, household, community, and institutional.

Conclusion drawing in this study follows an interpretive synthesis approach, which integrates themes across theories and empirical findings to generate informed insights. The conclusions are not derived from statistical inference but from the logical



and theoretical interrelation of concepts supported by the reviewed literature (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 262–266). The synthesis helps answer the research questions by linking theoretical constructs like gender norms and capability deprivation to empirical patterns of early marriage across provinces. In doing so, the study produces context-sensitive interpretations and policy recommendations that align with Indonesia's socio-political and cultural complexity.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are situated within the theoretical framework established earlier, drawing connections between gender constructs, poverty, capability deprivation, and regional development disparities. The integration of these theories provides a multidimensional lens through which to interpret the observed patterns of early marriage in Indonesia. Building upon previous research, this section synthesizes thematic insights derived from the document analysis to demonstrate how socioeconomic and regional variables jointly influence early marriage rates. By engaging with past empirical studies and theoretical perspectives, this discussion seeks to uncover both the macrostructural and microcultural dynamics at play.

Existing literature has often approached early marriage in Indonesia either from a legal or sociocultural angle, with limited integration of regional development perspectives (Heaton et al., 2001; Jones, 2012). This study extends previous analyses by mapping these diverse perspectives onto a regional framework that accounts for uneven institutional capacity and social norms. For instance, while legal reforms have raised the minimum age of marriage for girls, their impact remains uneven due to varying enforcement mechanisms across provinces (Buehler, 2016, pp. 122–123). These disparities reveal how localized interpretations of law and culture intersect with structural poverty and educational access to perpetuate early marriage practices.

Furthermore, new perspectives introduced in this study suggest that regional development indicators—such as infrastructure availability, school enrollment rates, and female labor force participation—serve as critical mediators of early marriage trends. Areas with better economic infrastructure and gender-inclusive educational access show a significantly lower prevalence of early marriage (UNICEF, 2017; BPS–Statistics Indonesia, 2017). Conversely, provinces in Eastern Indonesia continue to struggle with limited institutional reach and entrenched patriarchal values, reinforcing early marriage as a normalized practice. This indicates that the persistence of early marriage cannot be attributed solely to cultural factors but must be understood within the broader socioeconomic landscape.



Importantly, the findings help to address the research gap identified in the Introduction—the absence of a regionally comparative, theoretically grounded analysis of early marriage. The following thematic subsections are organized to answer each of the three research questions sequentially, using insights derived from the intersecting frameworks of gender theory, poverty theory, and the capability approach. Each subsection explores a specific dimension of the issue: the role of socioeconomic drivers, the influence of regional disparities, and the impact of legal-cultural dynamics. Through this structure, the Results and Discussion section articulates how early marriage in Indonesia is not a monolithic phenomenon but a complex interplay of factors varying across regions and communities.

## **1. Socioeconomic Pressures and Structural Inequality in Early Marriage**

The incidence of early marriage in Indonesia is significantly influenced by socioeconomic conditions such as household income, education level, and employment opportunities. These factors collectively constrain life choices, especially for girls in economically marginalized households. Empirical studies from multiple Indonesian provinces indicate that families living below the poverty line are more likely to consider early marriage as a practical solution to reduce financial burdens (Nasrullah et al., 2014; BPS–Statistics Indonesia, 2017). The absence of income diversification and access to state welfare mechanisms often forces families to treat marriage as a means of transferring financial responsibility to another household. This aligns with poverty theory, which interprets early marriage as a coping mechanism adopted in economically distressed environments (Sen, 1999, pp. 87–88).

Educational access plays a dual role: as a protective factor and as a proxy for economic security. Girls with fewer years of schooling are statistically more vulnerable to early marriage due to limited employment prospects and weaker bargaining power within the household (UNICEF, 2017). Research in West Java and South Sulawesi has shown that school dropout rates for girls sharply increase after primary education, primarily due to financial constraints and cultural expectations (Jones, 2012; Save the Children Indonesia, 2016). These findings underscore how limited educational infrastructure, especially in rural regions, serves as both a cause and a consequence of early marriage, thereby creating a self-reinforcing cycle of gendered poverty.

Employment status, particularly of parents or household heads, also emerges as a critical variable. Studies indicate that households where the head is informally employed or unemployed are more prone to engage in early marriage practices (UNFPA, 2016). In such settings, daughters are perceived as

economic dependents rather than future earners, making marriage a socially sanctioned exit strategy. Conversely, regions with better labor markets and access to vocational training tend to have lower rates of early marriage, suggesting a correlation between labor mobility and delayed marital age (Buehler, 2016, pp. 121–123). This pattern reinforces the capability approach, which posits that lack of access to productive capabilities such as education and employment diminishes agency, leading to premature life decisions like early marriage (Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 67–70).

The spatial distribution of these socioeconomic conditions reveals further insight. For example, BPS–Statistics Indonesia (2017) data show that early marriage is most prevalent in provinces with the highest poverty and unemployment rates—such as West Nusa Tenggara, Central Sulawesi, and South Kalimantan. These regions also rank poorly in terms of female literacy, maternal health, and school participation rates, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of poverty. In such contexts, policy interventions focusing solely on legal reforms or awareness campaigns are unlikely to succeed without addressing the underlying structural inequalities (UNESCO, 2016). Thus, socioeconomic deprivation forms the bedrock upon which early marriage thrives.

In this framework, early marriage is not merely a cultural decision but a structural outcome produced by a lack of opportunity and choice. Cultural acceptance of child marriage becomes intensified in environments where economic insecurity and institutional failure intersect (Human Rights Watch, 2016). This suggests that any sustainable solution must be rooted in inclusive development strategies that provide marginalized communities with viable alternatives. These findings contribute a structural perspective to the literature and emphasize the importance of addressing root causes rather than symptoms.

To summarize, the first research question—concerning the influence of socioeconomic factors on early marriage—has revealed a complex interplay of poverty, education, and employment status that collectively shape marriage decisions. These findings support the theoretical claim that material conditions heavily condition social practices and must be addressed through comprehensive, equity-driven policy measures.

## **2. Regional Disparities and the Geography of Early Marriage**

The regional variation in early marriage rates across Indonesia is not coincidental; it reflects the deeply entrenched disparities in development, governance, and service delivery between provinces. The second research question explores how these regional differences influence the prevalence and persistence of early marriage. Analysis of data from BPS–Statistics Indonesia (2017) and UNICEF (2017) reveals that early marriage rates are consistently higher in provinces such as West Nusa Tenggara, West Sulawesi, and South Kalimantan compared to more developed areas like Jakarta, Yogyakarta, or Bali. These patterns align with regional development theory, which posits that unequal access to infrastructure, education, and social services contributes to uneven human development outcomes (Buehler, 2016, pp. 122–123).

Provinces with weaker institutional capacities often struggle to enforce national laws and child protection policies. For instance, despite the 2019 revision to Indonesia’s Marriage Law raising the minimum marriage age to 19 for girls, many local governments lack the resources or political will to implement it effectively (Human Rights Watch, 2016). In some districts, local authorities continue to grant marriage dispensations or turn a blind eye to informal marriages, citing cultural or religious justifications. These institutional gaps are more prevalent in the outer provinces where governance is weaker and decentralization has transferred power without adequate oversight (UNFPA, 2016). As a result, the impact of national reforms is fragmented, and vulnerable regions continue to experience high early marriage rates.

Education infrastructure also varies significantly between regions, with remote and rural provinces facing chronic shortages of schools, qualified teachers, and learning materials (UNESCO, 2016). In provinces such as Maluku and Papua, geographical isolation further compounds the problem, making it difficult for girls to access even basic secondary education. This lack of educational continuity contributes to the normalization of early marriage as girls, once out of school, are seen as ready for marriage (Save the Children Indonesia, 2016). Conversely, provinces that have invested in female education—such as Yogyakarta and West Java—demonstrate comparatively lower early marriage rates, underscoring the role of regional policy in shaping social norms.

Healthcare disparities also play a role. Access to reproductive health services, maternal care, and gender-sensitive counseling is notably limited in rural and underdeveloped areas. In many Eastern provinces, adolescent girls receive little to no information on family planning, reproductive rights, or legal protections against child marriage (Nasrullah et al., 2014). The lack of accessible healthcare infrastructure reinforces misconceptions about menstruation, fertility, and maturity, leading to community acceptance of young girls as suitable for marriage. These findings support the capability approach, which emphasizes

the importance of access to public goods in expanding individual freedoms and delaying life-altering decisions like marriage (Sen, 1999, pp. 74–76).

The role of local norms and religious interpretations also varies across regions. In West Sumatra, for example, customary Minangkabau matrilineal traditions discourage early marriage and promote women's education. In contrast, in parts of South Kalimantan and West Nusa Tenggara, patriarchal interpretations of religious doctrine have been used to justify marrying girls off early as a form of moral protection (Jones, 2012). These localized belief systems interact with regional socioeconomic realities, forming distinct marriage cultures that differ sharply from one province to another.

Thus, early marriage in Indonesia cannot be addressed effectively through national-level policies alone. The geographic disparities outlined above demonstrate that regional conditions—ranging from institutional effectiveness to cultural interpretation and infrastructure—profoundly shape early marriage practices. Without a clear strategy to reduce inter-regional inequality, the national goal of ending child marriage will remain elusive. Targeted, locally adaptable policies are essential to address the complex geography of early marriage.

This discussion answers the second research question by showing how regional disparities not only reflect but also reinforce early marriage trends. The findings confirm that place-based vulnerabilities must be central to any policy designed to eradicate early marriage in Indonesia.

### **3. Law, Culture, and the Contested Norms of Early Marriage**

The third research question investigates the interplay between legal frameworks, cultural norms, and their role in either sustaining or challenging early marriage practices across Indonesia. While Indonesia has undertaken legal reforms to address early marriage—most notably the 2019 amendment to the Marriage Law which raised the legal age for girls from 16 to 19—the real-world application of these reforms remains inconsistent (Human Rights Watch, 2016). The pluralistic legal system in Indonesia, comprising national law, Islamic law, and adat (customary) law, creates complex and often contradictory norms. In many rural and semi-urban regions, adat or religious norms override formal state law, particularly when legal literacy is low and traditional authorities hold greater sway than government officials (Buehler, 2016, pp. 121–123).

Cultural norms often dictate that girls are mature and marriageable once they reach puberty, irrespective of their age or emotional readiness. In some conservative communities, early marriage is perceived as a way to prevent premarital relationships and uphold family honor (UNFPA, 2016). For example, in parts of West Nusa Tenggara and South Sulawesi, religious leaders and local clerics continue to promote early marriage as a religious obligation, making legal enforcement even more challenging (Jones, 2012). These sociocultural justifications are deeply entrenched, and any attempt at legal reform is often met with resistance, particularly when it is perceived to conflict with religious doctrine or local customs.

Despite the introduction of legal tools such as marriage dispensations and child protection mechanisms, loopholes in implementation persist. District courts frequently grant dispensations to underage couples, citing social pressure or economic hardship as justifications (Save the Children Indonesia, 2016). Furthermore, informal or unregistered marriages continue to occur, especially in remote areas, thus evading legal scrutiny altogether (UNICEF, 2017). These practices render the protective capacity of national legislation largely symbolic unless supported by strong institutional will, public awareness campaigns, and community engagement strategies.

Public understanding of child marriage laws is another critical issue. In many regions, parents and community leaders are either unaware of the legal age requirements or are influenced more by tradition than by state law (Nasrullah et al., 2014). The weak dissemination of legal information—especially in local languages—contributes to this gap. Additionally, legal reforms often do not come with the necessary budget for socialization, training of law enforcers, or monitoring, which undermines their practical effectiveness. These institutional limitations support the argument that laws alone cannot dismantle deep-seated cultural practices without complementary educational and behavioral change initiatives.

However, there are also counterexamples where the legal framework has successfully shifted norms. In Yogyakarta and Central Java, programs integrating local religious leaders, NGOs, and women's organizations have shown promise in reducing early marriage through a combination of legal advocacy and cultural reinterpretation (UNESCO, 2016). These cases demonstrate that reform is possible when the law is contextualized within culturally sensitive dialogue and supported by active civil society involvement. The capability approach is instructive here, emphasizing that legal empowerment must go hand-in-hand with social empowerment to expand the real freedoms people enjoy (Sen, 1999, pp. 78–81).

In essence, the persistence of early marriage in Indonesia illustrates a disjuncture between formal legal norms and lived social realities. Legal reforms, while crucial, are insufficient without concurrent efforts to challenge cultural expectations and to provide structural support that enables young girls to pursue alternative life paths. This discussion affirms that legal frameworks are most effective when embedded within broader sociocultural and institutional contexts.

By answering the third research question, this section highlights how laws and cultural norms operate simultaneously as both barriers and levers in the fight against early marriage. It reinforces the necessity for a hybrid approach that includes both top-down legal action and bottom-up cultural transformation.

This study provides a comprehensive, multi-dimensional analysis of early marriage in Indonesia by answering three interrelated research questions. First, it establishes that socioeconomic factors such as poverty, education level, and employment opportunities directly affect early marriage prevalence. Findings support the argument that early marriage is not only a cultural practice but also a structural consequence of economic deprivation. Girls from economically marginalized households, particularly in rural settings, are disproportionately affected due to limited access to schooling and viable livelihood alternatives. These findings affirm poverty theory and the human capability approach, demonstrating that inequality in basic resources leads to constrained life choices and premature marital decisions.

Second, the study reveals significant regional disparities in early marriage rates across Indonesia. Provinces with weaker governance structures, limited educational and healthcare infrastructure, and lower human development indices—such as West Nusa Tenggara, Central Sulawesi, and South Kalimantan—report higher instances of early marriage. This reinforces the importance of contextualizing early marriage within the spatial and institutional diversity of Indonesia. The research contributes a novel regional development perspective, showing that geography profoundly shapes social norms and legal enforcement capacity.

Third, the study analyzes how legal frameworks and cultural norms interact to either mitigate or perpetuate early marriage. It demonstrates that national legal reforms, while progressive on paper, face barriers in implementation due to legal pluralism, cultural resistance, and administrative loopholes. However, it also identifies regions—like Yogyakarta and Central Java—where integrated legal advocacy and cultural engagement strategies have proven effective. This validates the need for culturally sensitive and community-inclusive approaches to legal reform.

Theoretically, the study contributes an integrative framework that merges gender theory, poverty theory, the human capability approach, and regional development perspectives. This synthesis offers a more holistic understanding of early marriage as a phenomenon influenced by structural, spatial, and ideological forces. It expands the scholarly discourse by bridging gaps between fragmented studies that tend to isolate one variable or focus on singular regions.

Practically, the findings have significant implications for policymakers, educators, and civil society actors. The study underscores the need for differentiated, region-specific policy strategies that address both material deprivation and sociocultural norms. Programs must simultaneously strengthen legal enforcement, expand access to education and healthcare, and promote community-level awareness to be truly effective. In addition, donor agencies and government institutions should allocate resources equitably across regions, prioritizing high-risk provinces and incorporating local knowledge systems into their interventions.

The research also highlights new areas for scholarly inquiry. Future studies could expand the scope to longitudinal designs, assess the impact of digital literacy campaigns, or evaluate the effectiveness of faith-based advocacy against early marriage. By reframing early marriage through a regional and socioeconomic lens, this study contributes both empirical depth and theoretical refinement to a field that remains crucial for gender equity and human development in Indonesia.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has critically examined early marriage in Indonesia through the intersecting lenses of socioeconomic inequality, regional disparity, and cultural-legal frameworks. The analysis revealed that early marriage is not solely a product of tradition but is fundamentally shaped by poverty, lack of education, and limited access to employment and healthcare. These factors significantly curtail the agency of young girls, particularly in economically marginalized communities, affirming the relevance of poverty theory and the human capability approach in explaining this phenomenon.

Furthermore, the study highlighted substantial regional variations in early marriage prevalence, driven by uneven development, infrastructure gaps, and the decentralization of governance. Provinces with under-resourced institutions and limited public services—especially in Eastern Indonesia—experience persistently high early marriage rates. This underscores the necessity of spatially sensitive policy interventions that account for localized conditions and institutional capacities.



The examination of Indonesia's plural legal system showed that although national laws have advanced child protection, their effectiveness is undermined by cultural norms, inadequate enforcement, and legal dispensations. However, evidence from certain provinces illustrates that contextually embedded legal and cultural engagement can reduce early marriage rates, offering hope for more integrated reform models.

This research confirms the theoretical alignment between socioeconomic theories and empirical realities in Indonesia and offers a novel contribution by bridging structural and regional perspectives. Based on the findings, policymakers should pursue actionable recommendations such as increasing investment in girls' education, enhancing legal enforcement in high-prevalence areas, and partnering with religious and traditional leaders for culturally responsive advocacy.

Future research should consider longitudinal and intervention-based designs to evaluate policy effectiveness over time. Ultimately, ending early marriage in Indonesia requires sustained, context-sensitive, and multi-sectoral strategies rooted in both national commitment and local innovation.

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