

Girl marriage and marginalisation of women in the cities of East Java

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ABSTRACT: This study focuses on how the practices of early girl marriage encourage the process of marginalisation of women. Using a sociological analysis with a gender perspective, this study also aims to examine how the practices of early girl marriage harm the lives of young women and their children. This study was conducted in two regions of East Java Province, Indonesia, with different cultural backgrounds, namely Bangkalan Regency with its Maduranese culture and Blitar Regency with its Javanese culture. The subjects included in this study were young wives, their husbands, parents, parents-in-law, neighbours and local community leaders. Data were collected using a questionnaire administered to 100 respondents and an in-depth interview with 20 informants. The results from this study reveal the role of patriarchal hegemonic culture in the lives of poor communities who still practice early marriage. Women are marginalised for several reasons as follows: a) they are kept in subordinate positions in their families and communities; b) they live in poor conditions; c) they have no protection for their reproductive health. This paper argues that practices of early girl marriage are not a religious but a gender issue.

Keywords: Feminist Perspective, Gender, Girl Marriage, Poverty

1 INTRODUCTION

Early girl marriage is still common in Indonesia although various policies and regulations have been framed to strictly curb these practices. Compared with other regions in Indonesia, the number of early girl marriages in East Java Province is quite large. According to the Indonesia Population Data Survey (IDHS, 2007), the proportion of under-aged girl marriages (i.e. <16 years old) in East Java was 39.4%. Meanwhile, one out of three women (about 40%) who were married for the first time in Java was under the age of 16, especially in West and East Java. A study conducted in Madura has also shown that in order to ease the burden on the family economy, parents encourage girls to marry even though they have not yet attained 18 years of age and still go to school (Susanti H., Emy: 2015).

This study mainly focuses on girls who become victims of early marriage, regardless of the age of their husbands. In an early marriage, women bear more losses because they get pregnant and give birth early. Using a sociological analysis with a gender perspective, this study aims to explain the mechanism of social reproduction of gender-based power relations that support the ongoing practices of girl marriage.

The study not only focuses on the violations of the human rights of women but also aims to reveal the marginalisation of women in the practices of early marriage. It also aims to examine how unequal gender-based power relations in the practice of girl marriage have been reproduced eventually and harm the lives of girls. More specifically, the aim of this study was to reveal how practices of early girl marriage encourage the marginalisation of women in any positions and statuses of women.

2 METHOD

This was a qualitative study supported by quantitative data analysis conducted in two regions in East Java Province, Indonesia. These two places have different cultural backgrounds, for example Bangkalan Regency with its Maduranese culture and Blitar Regency with its Javanese culture. The subjects included in this study were women who were victims of early marriages, their husbands, biological mothers and fathers, parents-in-law, neighbours and community leaders. Data were collected using a questionnaire administered to 100 respondents and an in-depth interview with 20 informants.

3 GIRL MARRIAGE, MARGINALISATION AND POVERTY

The theory of poverty was applied in this study to explain how the reality of poverty continues in the community to influence the practices of early marriage. Poverty is generally associated with deprivation of health, education, food, knowledge, influence over one's environment and so on, which make the differences between truly living and merely surviving. There is another universal aspect of poverty, which makes it particularly painful and difficult to escape. The poor are more vulnerable than any other group to health hazards, economic down-turns and man-made violence (Chambers, 2006).

Furthermore, since women are kept in a subordinate position, vulnerability among poor women is more pronounced. Meanwhile, for poor people, social solidarity is one of the most important assets available to them. To maintain this solidarity and the emotional and physical security it provides, people are willing to make considerable sacrifices to ensure that these social bonds are preserved.

The discussion about cultural bonds and gender relations cannot be separated from power relations analysis. Theories of power relations conceive power as repressive, and suggest that power is viewed as something that can be acquired, like a commodity, and can be exchanged from one person to another through a contractual act. Meanwhile, seeking a non-economist analysis of power, Foucault states that the analysis of power should not be concerned with power in its central location, but rather in its extremities where power overcomes the rules of right. Foucault questions how power is embodied in the institutions at a local and regional level (Foucault, 2002).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study found that marriage of girls under the age of 18 years is common, and girl marriage is even considered as a tradition. When a girl has already begun menstruation or graduated from elementary school, usually she will soon be forced to marry by her parents. The results from this study indicate that the majority of girls in the regencies of Bangkalan and Blitar are married at 11–14 years of age (Bangkalan 64% and Blitar 68%). Some of them are even married at 11 years of age (Bangkalan 16% and Blitar 20%).

Most of the people in these poor communities see the practice of girl marriage as a way to reduce the economic burden of their families. Some of the mothers of girls who were already married before 14 years of age revealed that their families did not have the money to continue their children's education. For these poor communities, marrying off their girls at a young age or under the age of 18 is considered advantageous to help the economic conditions of their families.

Furthermore, the results indicate that the practice of girl marriage in fact exacerbates poverty. Girls are shackled to domestic duties and parenting, making it impossible to engage in productive activities. A woman who got married at a young age said that before being married, she helped her parents in the fields and earned some income. After marriage, she could no longer work in the rice fields, while her husband's income was very low and not always enough to buy milk and supplementary food for their toddler children. This fact shows that girls who are married early become "victims".

The study shows that within her marital household, a young wife only has little bargaining power and ability to make decisions regarding various aspects of her life. A woman's husband and mother-in-law mainly determine her role in the family and control her access to or participation in the outside world. This often remains the case throughout her life and translates to weaker control over resources in her household, tighter constraints on her time, more restricted access to information and health services, and poorer health conditions.

The lack of power and decision-making autonomy has a significant influence on economic decisions. Where women have decision-making power and their priorities are reflected in how household resources are allocated, household expenditures on key areas such as education and health tend to be higher.

Girls subjected to early marriage portray a marginalisation of economic, social, cultural and political conditions. Marginalisation of poor women is more pronounced because they are kept in a subordinate position in gender relations. Unequal gender relations are supported by cultural norms in communities. Therefore, the number of poor women is increasing over time. These symptoms are referred to as symptoms of feminisation of poverty among women who are married at young ages. Married girls suffer due to prolonged poor economic and social conditions. The marriages of these girls often serve to fulfil the gender values of the communities where the status of widows is considered to be much more honourable than unmarried women who are often interpreted as being "not married" or "old spinsters". Gender values treat boys and girls differently.

Because of their low level of education, married girls are often not considered by their husbands and parents-in-law as being capable of making money and/or managing finances or making financial decisions for the household. Married girls who work have less control over their income, face isolation from school, friends and the workplace, and have limited access to social capital and networks.

Young brides often experience overlapping marginalisation because they are still young, often poor and less educated. This affects the resources and assets they can bring into their marital households, thus reducing their decision-making abilities. Child marriage places a girl under the control of her husband and often the in-laws, limiting her ability to voice her opinion and form and pursue her own plans and aspirations.

This study found unequal power relations between a young wife and her husband, parents and in-laws. These unequal gender values are continuously reproduced without considering the "harm" inflicted on the girl's life. Using Foucault's theory (Foucault, 2002), gender-based power relations must be understood by revealing how a triangle of power, rights and knowledge takes place in the lives of poor communities. It is clear that power relates to the rules of the rights that formally delimit power and the effects of truth or knowledge produced and transmitted by power, which, in turn, reproduce this power.

5 CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicate that the impact of girl marriage practices is bad for the lives of girls and their children. The consequences of child marriage have profound effects in the form of lost earnings and intergenerational transmissions of patriarchal and poverty systems.

Based on these results, this study argues that women are marginalised for several reasons as follows: a) they are kept in subordinate positions in their families and communities; b) they live in poor conditions; c) they have no protection for their reproductive health. The practices of early girl marriage are not a religious but a gender issue. The patriarchal system as a social norm and system hegemonises the gender relations in the family and community.

This study also reveals that power relations between young wives and their husbands, parents and in-laws are unequal. The economic impacts and costs of child marriage are likely to be very high for girls who marry early, for their children, families and communities, as well as for society at large. In the light of these facts, unequal gender-based power relations are reproduced in the practices of girl marriage in poor communities.

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