

Child Marriage: An Exploratory Study in Aik Mual, West Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara

Puji Hariyanti¹, Ibnu Darmawan², Desyatri Parawahyu Mayangsari³

¹Department of Communication, Universitas Islam Indonesia (puji.hariyanti@uii.ac.id)

²Department of Communication, Universitas Islam Indonesia (ibnu.darmawan@uii.ac.id)

³Department of Communication, Universitas Islam Indonesia (desyatri.parawahyu@uii.ac.id)

ABSTRACT. West Nusa Tenggara (WNT) is one of the Indonesian provinces suffering a high rate of child marriage. According to data from the Ministry of Religion's Regional Office for WNT Province, West Lombok Regency (Praya), in 2020, there were 135 marriage dispensation applications. Furthermore, data from the Praya Religious Court indicates 136 child marriages from February to June 2021. The significant prevalence of the case has influenced the local community's social, economic, and educational status. Based on these factors, this exploratory qualitative study attempts to investigate the phenomenon of child marriage in Aik Mual, East Sekotong Village, Lembar District, West Lombok Regency, WNT. The findings of this study imply that several variables, including the economy, a lack of education, and the Merariq Kodeq custom, drive child marriage. To reduce the number of cases, the local government implements various policies and programs concerning women's empowerment and child protection, ultimately changing people's perceptions of options for children other than marriage at an early age.

KEYWORDS: child marriage; gamaq; custom; merariq kodeq; 3T area

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has the highest rate of child marriages in the Asia Pacific area. According to a report released by BAPPENAS and UNICEF (2019), Indonesia ranks seventh in the world regarding the number of cases. According to the most recent data from the 2020 National Socioeconomic Survey (SUSENAS), 27.35% of women are married between the ages of 16 and 18. In the meantime, just 6.40% of men in that age group were married. West Nusa Tenggara (WNT), particularly West Lombok, has a relatively high rate of child marriages in Indonesia. According to data from the Ministry of Religion's Regional Office for WNT Province, West Lombok Regency (Praya), 135 marriage dispensation applications were made in 2020. Furthermore, Praya Religious Court records show 136 child marriages from February to June 2021.

The rising rate of child marriage cases in WNT Province, West Lombok (Praya) Regency, is a critical problem that has to be addressed. Several studies have found that it hurts actors' financial status, educational achievement, labor force participation, maternal health issues, and mental health concerns (Erensu et al., 2020). In addition, it has ripple effects across generations because it affects not just women but also their children's health and education levels. (Finlay et al., 2011). The substantial number of child marriages in West Nusa Tenggara Province and the numerous negative consequences of it prompted researchers to conduct a deeper examination of the issue in Aik Mual, East Sekotong Village, Lembar District.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have found that child marriage harms actors' socio-economic status, educational attainment, and labor force participation (Parsons et al., 2015; 2018; Bajracharya et al., 2019). Low-income families frequently choose to decrease their household burden by marrying off their daughters to men seen as capable of improving the family economy and providing a shortcut to a better life (Singh & Vennam, 2016). However, according to BPS data from 2016, the majority of women aged 20-24 who

were involved in child marriage were still poor. One of the indicators is that 40.1% of the cases occurred among women living in low-quality housing.

Prior research studies have linked the prevalence of child marriage to one's awareness of social constructs that form in the environment, peer pressure, legal, social, and religious norms, and local cultural values (Bawono et al., 2019; BPS, 2020). Previous research found that it happens in numerous Indonesian regions due to cultural norms that encourage the practice (Pratiwi et al., 2019). Furthermore, with the existence of social constructions formed in society regarding child marriage, such as the emergence of feelings of shame if there are unmarried female adolescents in a family, a strong notion that the education of boys is more important, and marrying off children at the age of teens can help reduce the families' financial burden (Laksono & Wulandari, 2019). Furthermore, according to other studies, adultery is a crucial contributing factor to child marriage in Indonesia (Grijns & Horii, 2018).

Education is also one of the most significant drivers of child marriage. Laksono et al. (2001) found that education level is a determining factor for women in rural Indonesia to participate in such actions. The lesser a woman's education in rural settings, the greater her likelihood of child marriage. Aside from that, women cannot handle their life difficulties due to restricted access to information and knowledge literacy regarding its consequences (BPS, 2020). Parents' education level significantly impacts children's proclivity to marry children. Parents unaware of the consequences may encourage their children to marry (Singh & Vennam, 2016; Bawono et al., 2019). However, Bates et al. (2007) discovered that higher educational attainment brings opportunities in parents' lives, such as better jobs, more cosmopolitan values, and a proclivity to provide a good education for their children, all of which influenced child marriage deferral.

Family communication has long been linked to adolescent decision-making (Xia et al., 2004). According to Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006), family communication patterns impact children's attitudes and ways of thinking. As a result, family communication patterns influence decision-making and define what is good and harmful for children. Family communication patterns also enable a child to grasp family bonds, societal interactions, and interpret or evaluate adaptive conduct, as defined by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses an exploratory qualitative research approach to describe the phenomenon of child marriage in Aik Mual, East Sekotong Village, Lembar District, West Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara. The exploratory method implies an examination that tries to investigate the causes of occurrences and discover new knowledge to identify a problem that exists or may exist based on the analysis and interpretation of text and data from interviews. From August to November 2022, we employed the snowball sampling technique to acquire considerable data from three significant sources through in-depth interviews.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social Economics and Educational Conditions in Aik Mual

Geographically, the area of Aik Mual, Sekotong Timur village reaches 11.01 km² with a population of around 4,765 people. The condition of the area is hilly, with inadequate road access and educational facilities, causing the low ability of its community to participate in education. This condition has been considered one of the factors causing the rise of child marriage. However, since the schools' establishment, the education level has improved, and the mindset of the people has become more advanced. They desire to continue their education to a higher level or work outside the area instead of getting married early. This shift in perception of the age of marriage is crucial since adolescents play an essential role in community development. According to demographic data, adolescents have a larger population than other age groups as agents of change and have control over development (Sawyer et al., 2012). Meanwhile, teenagers typically perform the cases (Johnson et al., 2011).

Numerous variables, including the economy and education, cause child marriage in the Aik Mual community. In some cases, it aims to reduce the financial burden on the family. Furthermore, limited access to educational institutions caused the preceding generations' adolescents to miss out on education. However, as educational infrastructure developed, some people realized the value of

education, and the desire to encourage the younger generation to attend school led to the construction of a Madrasa as a source of education.

"The economic factor to reduce the financial burden on parents has been the main factor of child marriage, followed by the factor of inadequate education..." (Multazam, Headmen of Aik Mual village, September 28, 2022).

"...despite the fact that my in-laws did not complete elementary school, they are concerned about education." They considered how to keep their children from marrying too soon, so they built a Madrasah." (Asmi Irayani, Al-Hidayah Tarbiyah Islamiyah NW Aik Mual, September 15, 2022).

According to the information presented above, it is possible to conclude that the low level of economics and education in Aik Mual significantly impacts child marriage. This condition is explained by the fact that Aik Mual Hamlet has limited infrastructure and a poor economic level, leading the local community, particularly the preceding generation, to marry at a young age. According to Laksono et al. (2021), prosperity and low education levels are risk factors for child marriage in rural women in Indonesia. In addition, parents are encouraged to marry their children regardless of age, demonstrating that parents are unaware of its consequences, whereas the extent to which parents understand this is critical. Parents unaware of the consequences of child marriage are more likely to marry off their daughters to avert unwanted pregnancies, although, medically, it is extremely harmful to women's health (Hidayana et al., 2016).

Marriage Customs and the Phenomenon of Child Marriage in West Nusa Tenggara

Child marriage is considered to be influenced by local norms. The merariq kodeq, which is accused of being a Sasak marriage tradition with ramifications for the case, is similar. At the same time, the Sasak people can socially embrace this culture and believe in a valued identity that must be considered through merariq practice. Even though they go hand in hand with Islamic values as the religion of the majority of the Sasak tribe and legal norms in the context of holding marriages enforced by the state (Bemmelen et al., 2018), the values and consequences of this process are still very much attached to the Sasak community. According to the secretary of the West Lombok Regency Women's Empowerment, Child Protection, Population Control, and Family Planning Service (DP2KBP3A), the Lombok community generally believes that if their daughters have experienced merariq, they should marry off their daughters immediately, regardless of the child's age. Failure of such a norm will result in adverse reactions or societal taboos. Aside from merariq, certain villages in Lombok have laws requiring females to marry off if they come home after 10 p.m., regardless of the cause for the child's need to leave the house.

"Suppose a child has already been taken away or left the house. In that case, it is considered taboo when they return home not to be married off... regardless of their initial intention to get married or want to go for a walk, if they are late to come home, the parents must marry off their child... Some villages have a regulation that if a youngster returns home late after 10 p.m, they must be married off." (Erni Suryana, Secretary of DP2KBP3A West Lombok, November 18, 2022).

Traditions and social norms have played an essential role in the prevalence of child marriages, such as the merariq custom and rules to promptly marry off their daughters if they are late returning home. People are concerned and ashamed if they do not adhere to the beliefs that are thought to be shared in the environment in which they live. This also demonstrates constraints on a daughter's ability to make marriage-related decisions. Prevalent societal norms continue to ensure that women have a limited voice on issues affecting them and face numerous challenges to openly expressing themselves about harmful behaviors (Mackie, 2009).

GAMAQ and Child Marriage Prevention in Aik Mual

The Anti Merariq Kodeq Movement (GAMAQ), which began in 2016, is a concrete effort implemented by the local government to prevent child marriage. The West Lombok District Government is attempting to deepen its relationship with the Yes I Do Alliance to enhance GAMAQ. This organization has participated in cross-sectoral coordination initiatives known as the District Working Group (DWG). DWG is made up of numerous institutions that are concerned with child protection and gender equality. The presence of the DWG collaboration was very influential in the establishment of West Lombok Regency Regional Regulation Number 9 of 2019 concerning the Maturity of Marriage Age, which is defined GAMAQ as a community social movement carried out in a planned, integrated, mass, and sustainable manner to reduce and prevent the occurrence of child marriages. The Regional Regulations were subsequently translated into village regulations covering women's and children's protection.

"We couldn't do it alone, so we used to be engaged in the DWG (District Working Group), which was a district-level working group that included all components... From there, we attempted to develop regional regulation No. 9 of 2019 on Marriage Maturity... We pushed for the creation of Village Regulations as a derivative." (Erni Suryana, Secretary of DP2KBP3A West Lombok, November 18, 2022).

The West Lombok District Government has also established a village-level Child Protection Agency. According to Erni Suryana, there are almost no child marriages in certain areas with child protection regulations and institutions. This is further supported by the function of local village government officials who will carry out the separation of couples under the age or *belas* as part of GAMAQ.

"Even though there are marriages at an early age, in Lombok, we will do *belas* or separate them directly, pick them up at the man's house." (Multazam, Headmen of Aik Mual village, September 28, 2022).

Furthermore, the Technical Implementation Unit for the Protection of Women and Children (UPT PPA) assists children immediately following the implementation of *belas*, including a psychological assistance program involving psychologists, access to education at several Islamic boarding schools, safe houses, and BAZNAS (Badan Amil Zakat Nasional) funding for the mentoring program's implementation.

In addition, the Regional Government also cooperates with the Religious Courts because there is a need for strict regulations on the granting of marriage dispensation. Many cases arise due to the ease with which child couples get the dispensation, granted without regard for empirical proof, such as confessing that the child has had sex or is pregnant and parental encouragement.

DP2KBP3A carried out several activities to campaign for a series of programs to reduce child marriage rates, including holding workshops, sexual and reproductive health rights education (HKSR), and forming a forum to disseminate regulations and encourage village governments to make village regulations, becoming a women-friendly village, and caring for children (DRPPA), and also budgeting for activities at the village level related to issues concerning children and women empowerment. In addition, DP2KBP3A collaborates with several media to generate content media about child marriage issues in the form of comedy and *da'wah*, video productions, shadow puppet shows (*wayang kulit*), and direct teaching activities.

"To become a child-friendly district, we work together with the media to make comedy and *da'wah*, films, and shadow puppets." (Erni Suryana, Secretary of DP2KBP3A West Lombok, November 18, 2022).

"Yes, when there is a child marriage, it would be considered an inappropriate situation." (Erni Suryana, Secretary of DP2KBP3A West Lombok, November 18, 2022).

The case of child marriage in Aik Mual can now be suppressed because of the efforts of numerous parties cooperating simultaneously. Furthermore, according to Erni, there has been a shift in the community perspective of the case, which was formerly regarded as typical and now considered inappropriate. According to the data analysis obtained above, attempts to counteract occurrences of child marriage should not only target a single path but comprehensively reach various parties from upstream to downstream. It must hold knowledge and capacity-building programs for parents, the general public, children as vulnerable groups, local governments, and other relevant authorities, and provide infrastructure and facilities.

5. CONCLUSION

Child marriages in Aik Mual, East Sekotong Village, Lembar District, West Lombok Regency, and West Nusa Tenggara occurred due to economic factors, low levels of education, and merariq practices. However, with the government and the private sector's establishment of educational facilities in this area, Aik Mual inhabitants' educational engagement has increased. This considerably impacts the reduction of early marriages in this community. The West Lombok Regency government's policies that are pretty influential in reducing the number of early marriages are GAMAQ (Anti Merariq Kodeq Movement), local regulations concerning the protection of women and children, child protection institutions at the village level, women-friendly villages and caring for children (DRPPA) and providing funding for village-level educational initiatives connected to women's empowerment and child protection. Among all the policies put in place by the government, the shifting perception of child marriage cases within the Aik Mual community is critical, and people recognize that education is an essential choice than marrying at an early age.

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