

“You Know How People Talk,” Reasons Behind Child Marriage among Female Youth in The North-Eastern State of West Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Over the past decade, Kelantan has consistently ranked among the top three states in Malaysia for the highest number of registered child marriages, garnering attention in local and international news. However, little is understood about the local factors influencing girls' decisions to marry young. This study aimed to explore these reasons from the perspective of young women involved in child marriages in Kelantan, Malaysia. **MATERIALS AND METHODS:** Fourteen women aged 16-30, married before 18, participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using NVivo® software. Thematic analysis, drawing from phenomenology and socioecological theory, revealed three overlapping themes. **RESULTS:** Themes emerged were: (1) self-fulfilment, (2) marriage brings security, and (3) avoidance of public ridicule. **CONCLUSION:** The study underscores societal and familial pressures, alongside low socioeconomic status, and religious factors, as central to child marriage in Malaysia. By amplifying the voices of these women, efforts can focus on preventing the consequences and devising solutions to curb this practice in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Many efforts have been made internationally as well as in local governance to curb the practice of child marriage (CM). In 2018, UNICEF prioritised protecting children from violence, including CM.¹ This led Malaysia to consider increasing the minimum marriage age. A 5-year national plan, involving 61 agencies, was launched in 2020.² Yet, only Selangor and federal territories set the minimum age at 18. Seven states, including Kelantan, still resisted change.³ Kelantan defends underage marriage under Sharia law, requiring court approval.⁴ In 2020, Malaysia's Syariah Judiciary Department reported 520 CM applications. Sarawak led with 83 cases, followed by Kelantan with 80 cases.³

In 2018, UNICEF Malaysia reported that low household income, dropping out of school, and poor understanding of sexual and reproductive health issues as the risk factors for CM in Malaysia.⁵ While a recent study found family poverty, health risk behaviour, marriage as fate, and family disharmony were the determining factors of CM in Sarawak.⁶ As a diverse country with different religions, ethnicities, and cultural practices, there is a need to explore the social constructions of CM practices from the perspective of these different groups in Malaysia. Thus, this study aimed to explore the reasons leading to CM in Kelantan, where it is still commonly practiced.

Previous studies utilised the socio-ecological model to analyse factors of CM, covering various levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, and community.^{7,8} This model suggested that these variables may influence behaviour and choices, a theoretical framework adopted in this study.⁹

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a phenomenological approach in its qualitative design to deeply interpret the reasons behind girls' decisions to marry as children. Recognising the significance of respondents' own words, this method allowed women to freely express their experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, offering insights not available in quantitative approaches.¹⁰

Participants

Using purposive sampling, multiple strategies were employed to distribute posters and invitation letters to suitable participants for this study.¹¹ Key informants from Health Centres in Kelantan were briefed about the study and encouraged to advertise it to potential clients. Interested clients could either contact the researchers directly or share their phone numbers with key informants, with the clients' permission. Advertisements were also posted on social media and in WhatsApp groups of related non-governmental organizations. Additionally, the snowball method was used once young women started enrolling in the study.¹¹ Invitation letters were given directly by key informants to those interested in joining or sent through WhatsApp by the main researcher if potential participants contacted or messaged the researcher directly. A total of 18 respondents in Kelantan who married before the age of 18 were invited. However, four women from our study renounced their participation due to their inability to commit to the interview scheduling during the COVID-19 movement restriction order. The study was conducted over 18 months between October 2019 to February 2021. The enrolment process was stopped once recurrent patterns had emerged, and data saturation was achieved following interview from 14 participants.¹²

The data collection process started with an invitation letter which also included participants information sheet to the participants, followed by the signing of written consent to conduct the study. The respondents made clear that their participation was voluntary and the option to withdraw from participating at any time is available without facing any consequence. The research purpose was clarified before consent. Face-to-face interviews, conducted in the participants' mother tongue and audio-recorded by the

first author (NA), aimed to capture nuanced meanings. Interview locations were chosen based on participant preference, ensuring privacy. A pilot study with three participants tested key questions and art-based data collection methods but found participants preferred in-depth interviews exclusively. Art-based methods involved using various forms of art for data collection, analysis, and presentation in qualitative research.^{13,14} These forms include visual arts, performance, music, dance, and creative writing.^{13,14} This innovative approach effectively explores complex human experiences by making visible what is often hard to verbalize or difficult to elicit during in-depth interviews.¹⁴ On average, respondents spent 45-60 minutes answering questions.

Procedures

The interviews were set for two sessions with the first part beginning with demographic and social background information of the participants. As rapport built, more questions were asked to inquire about the reasons and circumstances that led to their decision to marry. The second interview was scheduled two weeks following the first interview, providing us ample time to identify incomplete data and provided space for the participants to add any substantial information to be informed about the subsequent interview. The second interview aimed to visualize their live experiences using the complementary arts-based method. Initially, all fourteen participants agreed to photovoice during the first interview, however only three participants completed the exercise. Due to the pandemic and movement restrictions, the second interview was not continued for 11 participants, but phone calls were made to each participant after the initial interviews to confirm the data given for better triangulation. Data prepared by the first author in fieldnotes reflecting her point of view on this matter was not included in the analysis to maintain the objectivity of this study.

Data Analyses

The data underwent thematic analysis to ensure thorough exploration.¹⁰ Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and entered NVivo® for organisation. The main researcher and a co-researcher coded the first three transcripts independently, creating an initial list of nodes. Nodes were

refined through discussions with co-authors, with new ones added as needed. Coded items, reflecting both participants' words and researchers' interpretations, were clustered to develop sub-themes, then grouped into main themes.¹⁰ Rigorous selection of main themes involved extensive discussion among researchers (internal and external audit with D.S), including a qualitative expert help to ensure the rigor of this study.¹¹ To verify data credibility, participants confirmed transcript accuracy and emergent themes during the second interview or via phone calls, with all participants consenting.¹¹

RESULTS

This study involved interviews with 14 women from various sociodemographic backgrounds (Table I).

Table I: Sociodemographic data of participants (n=14)

Code	Age at marriage	Current age	Age of husband at marriage	Level of education	Marriage status
P01	16	30	20	Secondary	Still married
P02	14	19	22	Secondary	Still married
P03	16	30	19	Secondary	Still married
P04	16	20	24	Secondary	Still married
P05	16	17	17	Secondary	Still married
P06	17	17	18	Secondary	Still married
P07	17	26	19	Diploma	Divorced at 20
P08	16	24	18	Secondary	Still married
P09	17	19	22	Secondary	Still married
P10	17	18	20	Secondary	Still married
P11	17	30	19	Secondary	Divorced at 23
P12	16	27	19	Secondary	Divorced at 17
P13	15	18	29	Primary	Still married
P14	17	18	17	Secondary	Still married

From the interview sessions, three themes emerged as (1) Self-fulfilment, (2) Marriage brings security, and (3) Avoidance of public ridicule (Table II).

Theme 1: Self-Fulfilment

Thirteen out of 14 women admitted to agreeing and seeking out their marriages to someone with whom they have had a romantic relationship; instead of being pushed into an arranged marriage to strangers. They willingly consented to marry despite their youth, with some deciding before informing their parents. This theme was further categorized into two subthemes: (1) marriage for happiness and (2) a longing for affection.

Table II: Reasons influencing child marriage among female youth in Kelantan.

Themes	Subthemes	Explanation
1. Self-fulfilment (At individual level)	i. Looking for happiness ii. Desire for affection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feelings of desire and infatuation The belief that marriage leads to a happy ending.
2. Marriage brings security. (At individual + family level)	i. Rescue from a life of poverty ii. Freedom from parental control iii. Escaping past trauma (History of a broken family with physical abuse/ sexual abuse.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having a sense of security and dependability when the partner can provide financially. Transfer of guardianship from parent to partner is deemed less controlling with more freedom. Partner as a saviour from past abuse. Filling a gap, by starting own family from the ground up.
3. Avoidance of public ridicule (Interaction individual-family and community level)	i. Mingling between sexes as negative social behaviour ii. Pressure from family members iii. A solution to premarital sex and teenage pregnancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Socializing between boys and girls considered <i>kbahwat</i> <i>Kbahwat</i> leads to sexual intercourse/ promiscuity/ rape. The family sees marriage as protection for children from gossip. Pre-marital sex and pregnancy brings shame and dishonour and dealt with immediate marriage with or without consent of the girl involved

Marriage for Happiness

Three women saw marriage as akin to a fairy tale happy ending due to their youth. They believed in enduring love and relationships, influenced by friends and family. P12, who married twice before 18, viewed marriage as a blissful conclusion.

“Yeab, there was a school friend of mine in year 3 (fifteen years old) who got married earlier than I did. She looked blissful, and I wanted to feel the same thing too.”

The adolescents' naivety was evident as they focused on possibilities rather than consequences when making decisions. Many were in pre-existing relationships, with P11 describing her idealistic, romantic view of marriage.

“At the time, I thought that if I married him, I would be with him forever. Until I was old and grey... until I had great-grandchildren. I didn't think about divorce at all (divorced at 23).”

A Longing for Affection

While some women seek happiness and security innocently, others openly desired affection and intimacy, viewing it as a need for physical closeness that, if not addressed through marriage, could lead to prohibited sexual acts. P01 said,

"I knew in my head that I wanted him. Because I was afraid of things (physically) happening between us because I was bubbling with desire. So, we didn't want anything untoward to happen before we married."

Despite a tumultuous family background, with divorced parents and two stepmothers, P05 did not anticipate marrying so young. Yet, after meeting her partner, they spent just two weeks getting acquainted before expressing their desire to marry to their families.

"I wanted to get married because I had developed feelings. Before meeting him, I didn't even think of marriage. (Laughs) my father was surprised when I told him my plan (to get married)."

Theme 2: Marriage Brings Security

The predominant theme among participants was viewing marriage as a source of self-security and an escape from their challenging past lives. The subthemes were (1) rescue from a life of poverty, (2) freedom from parental control, and (3) escaping past trauma.

Rescue from a Life of Poverty

Five women viewed marriage as an escape from poverty. They left school early to support their families financially. Believing their husbands would provide, they saw their partners' pre-marital financial gestures as evidence of future security. P03 shared,

"(I Married) ...because of the difficult life... hard to get food. When I met my husband, he gave me a life. He was always giving me money to buy anything I needed. He bought me clothes all the time because he had a job as a gardener, so he had money."

This belief was echoed by families, with P02 mentioning her mother's approval based on the future husband's ability to provide monetary gifts during courtship. Many parents shared this belief, seeing such actions as a sign of the man's ability to provide a secure and stable home for their daughter.

"Ooh...he started giving me money, and through that... my mother too felt confident he could take care of me... if he asked for my hand in marriage then I would marry him there and then."

Freedom from Parental Control

As adolescents, some women felt their parents controlled their movements and decisions. Observing female relatives moving out after marriage gave them the impression that marriage offered freedom to live independently from their parents. P08 expressed,

"I just copied my sister... she looked happy after getting married. It looked easier, you know not having to live with my grandma, not to live with my mother."

For P09, transitioning control from parent to husband felt smoother. Her partner's confident and assertive demeanour demonstrated leadership qualities, increasing her sense of security and interest.

"He looked confident you know. When we were just dating, he had a lot of things he didn't want me to do. He didn't allow me to go out with other boys, and many more... so I felt he could take care of me."

Escaping Past Trauma

Some women tearfully recounted how marriage signified a fresh start, reflecting on strained relationships with their parents. P04, neglected by a parent and raised by her grandmother, felt a void. Finding caring partners was a blessing, offering hope for a better life through marriage.

"Nobody really talked about it (marriage). My mother did not love me...It was only me and him (husband). So, he (husband) asked my grandmother (for permission). My grandmother said, she doesn't have a father. Anybody who can protect her, she will agree."

P10, close to her parents but living with her uncle after her father's death, decided to marry after finding comfort and reliance in her future husband.

"At the time, my father had already passed...and he (husband) always provided me with money for food. He was caring and took care of me. He knew my family members were far away... he cared. And whenever I had any problems, I would tell him, and he would come over so quickly."

Theme 3: Avoidance of Public Ridicule

Each participant's story revealed a common thread: the fear of community persecution drove their decision to marry. This fear stemmed from societal perceptions of their behaviour, leading to three subthemes: (1) dating as negative social behaviour, (2) pressure from family members, and (3) marriage as a solution to pre-marital sex and teenage pregnancy.

Dating as Negative Social Behaviour

Community perceptions of girls and their social relationships heavily influence women's decisions to marry. P14 initially had no thoughts of marriage but succumbed to community pressure to avoid gossip and judgment.

"At first, I didn't think I wanted to marry, but rather than have the village folks saying things about me that aren't true...as they say... we (me and my boyfriend) aren't supposed to go out in public just the two of us."

P01, working at her mother's coffee shop when she met her partner, felt uncomfortable with neighbours' gossip, despite meeting him in public spaces.

"You know because my mums' shop, (next to it) is someone's house, then someone else's house. So, when I was just sitting at the shop with him (husband) you know like couples do (dating)...it became the talk of the village and they were saying (bad) things about us."

Pressure from Family Members

The burden of gossip extends beyond the girls to their families. A child's actions reflect on her parents, impacting family honour. Thus, parents play a role in decision-making, nudging them towards marriage. Women believe their families act to protect them and uphold morality, as described by P09.

"My father told me; we can't just be boyfriend and girlfriend. We must marry. In case you know what if he (boyfriend) doesn't want me anymore when we are just a couple... What would I do then? So, I told my father... it's okay, as it's you and mother's choice to decide for me to marry him, then I'll just accept that."

For P11, her mother's encouragement stemmed from a desire to protect the family's reputation and name.

"Because my mum did not feel good about me having a boyfriend. She feared what the villagers would say about me because we had many relatives living nearby. So, she said, if he wants it (to marry me), we will do it (have a wedding)"

Solution to Pre-Marital Sex and Teenage Pregnancy

For two women, marriage resulted from their parents' discovery of their pregnancy. It is viewed as shameful in Islam, where premarital sex is forbidden. Marrying before the pregnancy becomes public protects family honour and the unborn child. P06 told us,

"I didn't get my period for a month... I had palpitations. After the second month, I was ready to tell him. He didn't want to believe me. After we talked it out in about a week, his mother wanted to come over. We felt we were both ready, we both wanted it (the baby), so we told our parents we wanted to marry,"

However, P07, despite her pregnancy, initially did not want to marry the man who impregnated her, as she was a rape victim. The situation was traumatic, especially since he was a childhood friend who denied the pregnancy and disappeared for months. Her parents attempted a quick wedding to legitimise the child, but it was delayed due to his absence. Four months after giving birth, she was married without knowing, as she had no contact with the father since her pregnancy. Reflecting, she believed her father acted in her best interest, preferring marriage over single parenthood, however she divorced at the age of 23.

DISCUSSION

This study looked into why child marriage (CM) happens from women's viewpoint in Kelantan, Malaysia. The social-ecological model was used to analyse the influences on decision-making (Figure 1), starting with the individual perspective, focusing on self-fulfilment.

Females are highly romantic and more attuned to marriage readiness, linked to desire fulfillment.¹⁶ Marrying at the onset of adolescence coincides with the emergence of

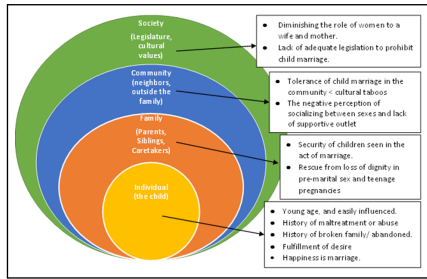


Figure 1: The socio-ecological model to reasons of child marriage in Kelantan.

sexual desires, evident in their longing for affection and intimacy. Their youthfulness makes them susceptible to viewing marriage as a route to happiness. In a study on youth sexuality in Malaysia, it revealed gender differences in motivations and perceptions of sex. Girls often face negative experiences, including unprotected sex, STDs, pregnancy, and abortion.¹⁷ To satisfy their need for intimacy within societal and religious bounds, women view marriage as a solution.^{16,17}

Marriage often brings a sense of security for both girls and parents, a deeply held personal and family belief. Girls facing hardship and poverty find relief when men offer financial and emotional support voluntarily, heightening their desire to marry. Similarly, in the Syrian refugee community, early marriage is seen as a safeguard against harsh refugee life,¹⁸ while in Bangladesh, parents believe early marriage ensures daughters' financial security.¹⁹ One woman, facing abuse from her extended family, found solace in her marriage, describing it as an escape. This aligns with research showing that girls from unstable family backgrounds are more vulnerable to early marriage, often decided by parents.^{20,21}

The predominant theme across participants is the avoidance of public ridicule, deeply intertwined with both individual and interpersonal levels. These women and their families highly regard public opinion and societal perception, striving to evade negative gossip. They view mingling between sexes and dating as sinful and socially unacceptable, rooted in cultural and religious norms, especially in a majority Muslim country.²² Actions like "khalwat" (close proximity) are considered morally offensive in Islam, potentially leading to premarital sex and pregnancy, seen as grave sins.²³ Family members play important roles in persuasion, arranging quick marriages,

and even forcing unions to prevent shame. Similar situations in Indonesia attribute teenage pregnancy and premarital sex to CM, often resulting in rushed and coerced unions.²⁴

Additionally, girls married due to pregnancy lacked contraception knowledge, facing stigma and blamed for their situation. Victim blaming and limited sexual health education hindered their ability to seek assistance, aligning with studies highlighting education gaps as contributors to CM.²⁵⁻²⁷ In Ethiopia however,²⁸ although more than 50% reported having been pressured into marriage by their parents at around 15 years old, the husband was chosen from men unknown to their children, while in our study all the women were married to people known to them; even establishing a romantic relationship before the marriage. This shows how environment, family, and culture play a part in each circle in line with the ecological model. This also falls in line with previous literature that cites how social norms of the local society sustain CM practices as the biggest influence.^{20,26,29,30}

This study has limitations, including its focus on late adolescent Malay brides from diverse socio-demographic backgrounds. Different themes may emerge among early adolescent brides of varying ethnicities, religions, and socio-demographic profiles, warranting further exploration. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic hindered the implementation of innovative methods, potentially affecting the study's findings.

CONCLUSIONS

This study is among the few locally conducted to explore reasons for child marriage (CM) in Malaysia. It identifies three key themes aligned with the social-ecological model: (1) fulfilling desires at individual level, (2) marriage as security at individual and family levels, and (3) avoidance of public ridicule at societal level. It underscores societal pressure and family influence, alongside socioeconomic factors, and religion, as central to CM in Malaysia. However, it acknowledges the innate desire for happiness among young girls. Despite recent intervention programs, more action is needed. Collaboration among experts in the area is crucial to improve policies.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (ETHIC COMMITTEE)

Participant safety, particularly for vulnerable adolescents, was a priority in the study. We ensured privacy in data collection and management. Parental consent was not required for IDI with participants over 15, as Malaysian law considers minors of this age mature enough to consent to marriage.¹⁵ Ethical board approval for study procedures was obtained from The Human Research Ethics Committee of USM (JEPeM) coded USM/JEPeM/19030166.

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