

Early Marriage and its Impact: A Study on the Reality of the Muslim Society in Cambodia

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Abstract

Early marriage is a part of tradition and cultural customs within the Islamic society in Cambodia, however, it is often associated with an increasing divorce rate. This study aims to identify the key factors that drive young individuals toward early marriage and examine its impact on society. To achieve these objectives, the study employs a qualitative approach. Data were collected through direct interviews with judges overseeing marriage contracts and members of the Islamic council in Cambodia. The obtained data were analyzed using a descriptive approach to gain deeper insights. The findings reveal two primary factors contributing to the prevalence of early marriage: poverty, which hinders young individuals from completing their education; and cultural customs, which regard early marriage as a source of family pride. Additionally, this study highlights several negative consequences of early marriage, including a rising divorce rate, the perpetuation of the poverty cycle, and educational neglect leading to increased illiteracy rates in society. However, the study also identifies some positive aspects, such as reducing the risk of delayed marriage for women, preserving family honor by preventing immoral acts, and decreasing infertility issues often linked to late marriage. The findings of this study serve as a reference for critically reassessing the practice of early marriage, with the goal of enhancing individual and societal well-being.

Keywords: Early Marriage, Islamic Society, Muslims in Cambodia, Muslim Minority

Introduction

Early marriage is often associated with negative implications, including a higher divorce rate. Previous studies have shown that the majority of early marriages, particularly among individuals aged 18 to 22, have resulted in a 70% increase in divorce cases. Additionally, 75% of couples who married at a young age were unable to resolve family conflicts, ultimately

leading to divorce (Budoukha & Foudad, 2017). In Cambodia, the number of early divorce cases is increasing, especially among couples who enter marriage without adequate preparation. Research has shown that the main factors contributing to early divorce include a lack of knowledge and experience in managing a household, unpreparedness in assuming marital responsibilities, as well as economic and social pressures (Fasirah, 2021). Thus, marriage is not merely a union between two individuals, but it requires maturity and deep awareness of the rights and responsibilities of each spouse, along with the ability to face the challenges of married life. Therefore, this study aims to explore this issue in depth by examining the factors that drive early marriage and its effects on couples and society. Given these concerns, this study aims to examine the factors contributing to the prevalence of early marriage in the Muslim community in Cambodia and analyze its effects on individuals and society. Specifically, it seeks to understand the underlying causes that lead to early marriage and how it impacts both couples and the broader Muslim society. However, this research is limited in several ways. The study focuses solely on the issue of early marriage, examining its causes and consequences without exploring other aspects of marital life. Geographically, it is confined to the Muslim community in Cambodia, which may limit the generalizability of its findings to other populations. Additionally, the study relies on recent data from 2023 onwards, meaning it does not take into account long-term historical trends. Despite these limitations, the research provides valuable insights into the growing concern of early marriage and aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of its social and personal implications.

Literature Review

After reviewing various studies on "Early Marriage and Its Effects: A Study on the Reality of the Muslim Community in Cambodia," the researcher found that, to the best of their knowledge, there is no specific study that directly addresses this topic. However, several books and studies discuss this issue in a general context. Among them are:

1. A master's thesis titled "*At-Talāq Al-Mubakkir fī Dawlat Kambūdyā: Asbābuhu wa Ḥulūluhu – Dirāsah Fiqhiyyah Taḥlīliyyah Maydāniyyah*," written by Rasad (2021). This study briefly examines the causes of early divorce in Cambodia and proposes solutions. However, it does not focus on the primary factors leading to such divorces, as early divorce is actually a subset of general divorce issues. If divorce occurs in the early stages of marriage, it becomes a major problem due to its rapid occurrence, whereas divorce after many years of marriage presents more complex challenges, especially if children are involved.

This study also highlights weaknesses in marital education, emphasizing the role of scholars and preachers in developing educational modules for couples before marriage. Although this study is relevant, it does not specifically address the key factors that lead to early marriage and its effects on the Muslim community in Cambodia. This gap is what makes the current study significant.

2. An academic article titled "*Az-Zawāj Al-Mubakkir wa Āthāruhu ‘alā Irtifā’ Mu‘addalāt At-Talāq – Dirāsah Maydāniyyah fī Ar-Rīf Al-Jazā’irī*," by Budoukha Maryam and Karima (2017). This study aims to identify the effects of early marriage and demonstrates that marriage at a young age is often a major contributing factor to the rising divorce rate in rural areas. The primary factors identified include a lack of experience in handling the challenges of married life and low educational attainment among young couples.

However, this study does not examine the factors leading to early marriage within the context of Cambodian society. Therefore, the present study will specifically focus on identifying the factors that contribute to early marriage in Cambodia in a more comprehensive manner.

3. An academic article titled "Zawāj As-Sighār wa Āthāru At-Taghayyurāt Al-Ijtimā'iyah 'Alayhi," by Khalid et al. (2018). This study highlights some positive effects of early marriage, including achieving security and dignity, the ability to manage one's own life, increased maturity, and a sense of responsibility. Additionally, early marriage is said to reduce the phenomenon of unmarried women (Andalusia).

However, the study also discusses the negative effects of early marriage, such as the rising divorce rate, limited educational opportunities, and the deprivation of children's rights. Unlike the present study, previous studies have primarily focused on the effects of early marriage without exploring the factors that contribute to it. Therefore, this study will examine early marriage within the Cambodian context by analyzing both its causes and its impact on the Muslim community in the country.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach aimed at exploring the phenomenon of early marriage in the Muslim community in Cambodia by analyzing its causes and impacts on society. The research design includes the following elements: Library Research: Involves the study and analysis of religious texts (Qur'an and hadith) related to marriage, as well as reviewing previous studies on early marriage. Interview Method: Interviews are conducted to collect direct data from involved individuals, such as imams and members of the Supreme Islamic Council. This aligns with the study of Hua, A. K. (2016), which found that in-depth interviews help researchers understand various aspects of life, individual experiences, and current situations faced by respondents. Descriptive-Analytical Approach: Used to examine the reality of early marriage in the Muslim community in Cambodia and analyze data obtained from interviews and written sources. Additionally, this approach helps in analyzing the factors contributing to the spread of early marriage and assessing both its positive and negative effects on society.

Findings and Discussion

The Concept of Early Marriage and its Causes

The age of marriage plays a crucial role in strengthening the stability of a marital relationship, and it has a positive impact on future generations. Couples with emotional maturity and economic stability are better equipped to face the challenges of married life, provide a stable family environment, and raise children with good values and morals, ultimately contributing to the development of a virtuous and successful generation.

The Concept of Early Marriage

Early marriage refers to a marriage that takes place before reaching maturity or immediately after reaching it (Budoukha et al., 2017). In this study, the defined age for early marriage among divorced individuals is below 18 years for females and below 21 years for males. According to Abdul Syakur (2025), a similar situation occurs among the Muslim community in Cambodia, where many get married at a young age, often before turning 20. Some even marry as early as 16 years old, and in some cases, as young as 14.

Islamic Rulings on Early Marriage

From an Islamic legal perspective, marriage can be classified under different rulings depending on an individual's circumstances: **Wajib (Obligatory)**: If a Muslim is financially capable of providing for their spouse and fulfilling marital responsibilities, and they fear falling into sinful acts (such as fornication) if they do not marry. **Sunnah (Recommended)**: If they can meet all marital requirements but do not necessarily fear committing sin if they remain unmarried. **Haram (Prohibited)**: If they are certain that they will oppress or mistreat their spouse. **Makruh (Discouraged)**: If there is a concern that marriage will lead to injustice toward the spouse. (Khilaf, 1938).

Early marriage is strongly encouraged for those who are financially stable and physically capable of fulfilling marital obligations (Islamweb, n.d.). This is based on an authentic hadith narrated by Ibn Mas'ūd (RA), where the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:

"O young men, whoever among you is able to marry, let him do so, for it is better in lowering the gaze and guarding chastity. But whoever is not able, let him fast, as it will be a restraint for him." (Muslim, 1955).

This hadith encourages young people to marry if they are able, as it helps them maintain their modesty and avoid immoral acts. For those who cannot afford marriage due to financial constraints or other reasons, the Prophet ﷺ advised fasting, as it helps in controlling desires and maintaining self-discipline (Al-Bassām, 2006).

Factors Contributing to the Prevalence of Early Marriage in the Muslim Community of Cambodia

The reasons for early marriage may vary from one country to another. Based on interviews conducted in this study, the contributing factors to early marriage among the Muslim community in Cambodia include the following:

Poverty

According to an interview with Arafat (2025), some parents cannot afford to support their children's higher education, leading them to arrange early marriages. Similarly, Sulaimān (2024) emphasized that many young people are unable to continue their education due to their families' economic struggles. Additionally, pursuing higher education is challenging because Cambodia lacks Islamic universities. Most parents prefer not to send their children to secular universities, which are often located far from their villages. They also fear that their children may be exposed to social and moral issues due to inadequate religious education and limited parental supervision. As a result, parents opt for early marriage to help their children start a new life and become self-reliant.

According to Abd al-Shakūr (2025), financial constraints are the primary reason behind early marriage. This finding aligns with the study by Massia & Tharshini (2023), which revealed that most impoverished families decide to marry off their children at a young age.

Social Norms and Cultural Expectations

Sulaimān (2024) explained that early marriage is now widely encouraged in Cambodian Muslim society. Unlike in the past, when marrying at a young age was considered shameful,

it is now seen as a source of pride. Some parents even take pride in having their children marry young, while looking down on those who marry later. According to Arafat (2025), social status is a major concern in their community. Parents worry that their children may struggle to find a spouse if they wait too long or be labeled as "spinster". Consequently, when a marriage opportunity arises, they decide to marry off their children early.

Effects of Early Marriage

Early marriage in Muslim societies, including Cambodia, has both positive and negative effects.

Positive Effects

Early marriage also has positive effects. Based on my interview, there are three most noticeable positive impacts, namely:

Reducing the Number of Unmarried Men and Women

Early marriage helps decrease the number of individuals who marry late, fostering social cohesion and harmony within the community. Arafat (2025) stated: "In our Muslim community here, it is rare to find someone still unmarried at the age of 30. In other words, they would be called 'old maid.' This opinion is also shared by several other judges."

Preserving Religious and Moral Values

Islam encourages marriage as a means to maintain purity and honor, thereby fostering a society that upholds religious and moral values while preventing the spread of immorality. According to Abd al-Shakūr (2025), cases of illicit relationships or baby abandonment are rarely heard of in the Muslim community in Cambodia compared to other countries. In an interview, he stated that early marriage positively impacts the community as it helps preserve religion and family honor, with inappropriate cases being very rare. Arafat (2025) remarked:

"I observe that early marriage in our society is one of the ways encouraged by Islamic law to protect oneself from falling into sin." This finding aligns with the study conducted by Makawi, Muhammad Said (2022), which explains that a significant portion of moral corruption and illicit relationships occurs among teenagers. If society makes efforts to marry off the youth earlier, many social ills can be prevented.

Reducing Infertility Issues

Early marriage provides an opportunity for couples to have righteous children. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: "When a person dies, all their deeds come to an end except for three: continuous charity, beneficial knowledge, or a righteous child who prays for them." (*Sahih Muslim*, Volume 5, Hadith 1631, p. 73).

Thus, early marriage increases the chances of having pious offspring, ensuring a continuous legacy of good deeds after one's passing (Al-Duwaysh, Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Ibrahim, 1432 H). stated that marrying early and having children at a young age allows parents to spend a longer period raising them compared to those who marry later in life Arafat (2025). According to Sulaimān (2024), in their village, couples who marry young rarely experience infertility or difficulties in conceiving children, as most are blessed with offspring. This aligns

with the objectives of Islamic law, which encourages marriage as a means of building families and increasing the Muslim population.

As mentioned in the Qur'an, Allah says:

"He gives daughters to whom He wills, and He gives sons to whom He wills." (Surah Ash-Shura, 49). This verse highlights that children are a gift from Allah, and early marriage enables couples to receive this blessing with His permission. Early marriage not only contributes to fertility but also strengthens family stability and reinforces societal bonds. With an increase in birth rates, new generations can be nurtured, fostering strong and large families that align with the Islamic objective of expanding the Muslim ummah. Ultimately, early marriage benefits not only individual families but also the broader community, promoting social and religious stability.

Negative Effects

There are three most noticeable negative effects in the Muslim community in Cambodia due to early marriage, namely:

Increased Divorce Rates

Early marriage is considered one of the primary causes of divorce, with significant psychological and social consequences (Al-Qarala & Al-Khatib, 2023). Marriage at a young age, particularly before 18, often leads to negative effects, including a higher rate of early divorces. As a result, many women regret their decision and struggle to manage marital responsibilities due to a lack of emotional, psychological, and physical preparedness (Al-Qarala & Al-Khatib, 2023).

According to Sulaimān (2024), young couples are more likely to divorce because their minds are not yet fully mature. They tend to argue over trivial matters like children and usually experience affection only in the early stages of marriage. Once problems arise, conflicts escalate, often leading to separation. Abd al-Shakūr (2025) also emphasized that most divorce cases occur among couples who married young because they lack the maturity to make sound decisions. When minor disputes arise, they immediately consider divorce. Similarly, Arafat (2025) noted that early marriage makes it difficult for couples to endure the challenges of marital life, ultimately leading to divorce.

Increased Poverty Early Marriage is more Common Among Poorer Communities Worldwide

It also hinders access to higher education and financial stability for both men and women, making poverty and early marriage two interrelated issues (Mawdoo3.com, 2025). According to Sulaimān (2024), young couples who marry early often do not have stable jobs, leading to economic difficulties. Consequently, they live in hardship, negatively impacting their marital happiness due to persistent financial problems.

Arafat (2025) also confirmed that most couples who marry young lack financial stability, which significantly affects their household life, causing instability and disharmony within the family. This aligns with previous studies, such as that of Saim et al. (2018), which highlighted that financial issues greatly impact young couples starting their married life. If they cannot manage their finances well, it can lead to serious family problems.

Neglect of Education and Spread of Illiteracy

According to Sulaimān (2024), young couples who marry early often do not continue their education, leading to a lack of knowledge and awareness. This deficiency affects their ability to educate and raise their children properly. Previous studies have shown that early marriage is one of the leading causes of educational dropouts. A lack of education makes it difficult for individuals to raise their children effectively. Furthermore, poor decision-making abilities within the family can lead to problems such as domestic violence (Elezaby et al., 2023). In many societies, married or engaged girls face obstacles in continuing their education, with some husbands actively opposing their wives' pursuit of further studies. Additionally, household responsibilities, childcare, and complications from pregnancy often prevent young women from continuing their education (Mawdoo3.com, 2025).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Upon completing this study, several key conclusions and recommendations have been drawn. The primary factors contributing to early marriage include poverty, customs and traditions, and the influence of social media. While early marriage has some positive effects, such as reducing the number of unmarried men and women, preserving religious and moral values, and decreasing infertility issues, it also has significant negative consequences. These include an increased divorce rate, the spread of poverty, educational neglect, and the prevalence of illiteracy. To address these challenges, it is crucial to raise awareness about the dangers and harms of early marriage for girls through lectures and sermons in mosques. Religious institutions should play a more active role in educating society about the importance of postponing marriage until a mature age, ensuring individuals are well-prepared for marital responsibilities. Imams and scholars should strengthen their role in delivering sermons and lectures that emphasize the necessity of maturity before marriage and challenge societal perceptions that view early marriage as a source of pride. Additionally, economic support programs should be provided, including scholarships, vocational training for youth, and easy loans for families in need. Education must also be prioritized, especially for girls, by ensuring their access to education up to the university level. Establishing local Islamic schools and universities near villages can help facilitate continued education for young women. Ultimately, this study has provided an in-depth analysis of early marriage in the Muslim community in Cambodia by examining its causes and effects, both positive and negative. Various methodologies have been employed to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, leading to recommendations that align with Islamic values and societal interests. May this effort be accepted as a righteous deed and bring benefits to the Muslim community in Cambodia and beyond.

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