

Mental health impacts of early marriage on mothers caring for stunted toddlers

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Abstract

Background: Stunting remains a significant health concern, both nationally and globally. One of the factors contributing to stunting is early marriage. This not only impacts the physical condition of the mother and child, but also impacts the mother's mental health, especially in caring for stunted toddlers.

Objective: This study aims to explore the subjective experiences of mothers who married at an early age and understand the mental health impacts they experience in caring for stunted children in Tanjung Gunung in 2025.

Method: This study employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological design. The total number of participants was six, consisting of four mothers who were involved in early marriage, one village head, and one head of the community health center (Puskesmas).

Results: The results of this study revealed seven main themes that collectively describe the experiences of mothers who entered marriage at an early age. Theme 1: Reasons for early marriage show that such marriages often occur due to accidental circumstances, economic factors, and the influence of love at a young age. Theme 2: changes in roles after marriage highlights the rapid transition young women face as they take on responsibilities as wives and mothers. Theme 3: challenges after marriage, identifies economic hardship as the main difficulty in managing household needs. Theme 4: pressure from psychological and emotional problems, indicates that mothers often experience stress and emotional strain due to limited coping abilities and a lack of support. Theme 5: child development and growth, reveals that children of young mothers are more prone to malnutrition and stunting. Theme 6: social support in dealing with mothers' mental health emphasizes the crucial role of emotional and family support in maintaining mental well-being. Theme 7: The meaning of early marriage for mothers shows that some mothers feel regret, while others find hope and personal growth from their experience. Overall, these themes illustrate that early marriage presents both social and emotional challenges, affecting the personal, psychological, and family aspects of young mothers' lives.

Conclusion: Early marriage has complex impacts on the lives of young mothers, encompassing psychological, social, and economic aspects. Young women who marry at an early age experience rapid role transitions, emotional pressure, and challenges in meeting family needs while supporting their children's growth and development. However, some of them can find positive meaning and hope through these experiences. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of psychosocial support, reproductive health education, and economic empowerment for adolescents and young mothers as both preventive and curative measures to minimize the negative effects of early marriage.

Keywords: Adolescent; Early Marriage; Mental Health; Phenomenology; Stunting.

INTRODUCTION

Stunting in Indonesia is currently a global issue and needs to be handled. The incidence of short stature in toddlers, commonly referred to as stunting, is one of the nutritional problems affecting toddlers globally

today. Toddlers who experience stunting will face difficulties in achieving optimal physical and cognitive development. This condition has a lasting impact on the health and survival of children (1).

The Prevalence of stunting in children under 5 years old worldwide is 148,1 million children, or equivalent to 22,3% (2). The Prevalence of stunting in Indonesia is 21,6%. Although the national stunting prevalence decreased to 19,8% in 2024, this figure is still considered high, considering the National target for 2024 is 14% (3). According to SSGI (2022), the Prevalence of stunting in Bangka Belitung is still quite high, namely in South Bangka 23%, Central Bangka 21,2%, West Bangka 20,5%, Belitung 19,6%, Bangka 16,2%, East Belitung 16,0%, and Pangkal Pinang 12,9% (4).

Early marriage is a trend in Indonesia. Data shows that 5,90% of young people in Indonesia are married or have the status of living together before the age of 18, then the data in the Bangka Belitung Islands shows 8,05% of young people are married at an early age (7).

Early marriage is caused by several factors, including cultural, economic, social, and environmental factors, as well as marriage by accident (8). The results showed that early marriage had a biological impact, such as miscarriage, bleeding, giving birth to stunting children, and maternal and baby death. Early marriage also has a social impact, such as domestic violence, infidelity, and divorce. Early marriage also had a psychological effect, such as experiencing anxiety, stress, depression, and even suicide (9).

Early marriage is directly associated with an increased risk of stunting and mental health disorders. Adolescent mothers are often not physically or emotionally prepared for pregnancy, making them more vulnerable to malnutrition, stress, anxiety, and depression. These conditions can affect their ability to provide adequate care and nutrition for their children, ultimately leading to impaired child growth. Moreover, early marriage commonly occurs in families with low educational and economic backgrounds, which limits access to healthcare and nutritional services. This relationship indicates that early marriage may create a cyclical problem between maternal mental health and child stunting.

Efforts made by the government to tackle early marriage, in addition to making laws governing restrictions on early marriage age, are providing sexual education by providing information and attitudes to make healthy decisions related to sexual health and reproduction. The goal is to form a healthy relationship, manage risk, and understand the importance of sexual health in their lives, with the hope of preventing early marriage and negative impact (10).

This study lies in its integrative approach that directly connects early marriage, maternal mental health, and child stunting within a single analytical framework. Unlike previous studies that generally examined these relationships separately, this research explores how psychological stress and emotional immaturity among young mothers influence caregiving behaviors and nutritional practices, ultimately leading to stunting. Furthermore, the study incorporates the local social and cultural context that shapes the persistence of early marriage practices, thereby providing a more comprehensive and contextually relevant understanding for developing integrated prevention strategies.

METHOD

This research design employs a qualitative approach, specifically a phenomenological research design. Used to explore the personal experience of mothers who experience early marriage and the mental health impacts of caring for stunting children. This requires researchers to plunge directly into the field with a direct interview of the mother who has experienced early marriage. In this study, there were 6 informants consisting of 4 mothers who experienced early marriage, 1 village head, and 1 head of the pustkesmas. Participants are selected using the purposive sampling technique. Inclusion criteria are mothers who experience early marriage, under the age of 18 years, and who have stunted toddlers.

The research was conducted in Tanjung Gunung Village, Pangkalan Baru

District, Central Bangka Regency. The study time was carried out from July 12 to August 12, 2025. The method of this research is inductive, formed by interview guidelines. Collection techniques, including in-depth interviews and semi-structured questions, yield data that is then analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involves reading data, coding, identifying themes, reviewing these themes, and defining and naming them. Furthermore, the researcher conducted member checking with mothers who had experienced early marriage and had children with stunting in order to ensure the credibility of the data and to verify that the researcher's interpretations of the participants' experiences and perspectives were truly consistent with the meanings intended by them.

RESULTS

Participant characteristics

The participants of this study consisted of 6 individuals: 4 mothers who experienced early marriage, 1 village head, and 1 head of health center (Puskesmas). Each participant is given a code (P1-P6) as shown in Table 1.

Code	Age	Sex	Information
P1	17	Female	Mothers who experienced early marriage
P2	17	Female	Mothers who experienced early marriage
P3	17	Female	Mothers who experienced early marriage
P4	16	Female	Mothers who experienced early marriage
P5	42	Male	
P6	36	Female	

Thematic Findings

This study found seven identified themes: theme 1, reasons for early marriage; theme 2, changes in role; theme 3, challenges after marriage; theme 4, pressure of mother's psychological and emotional problems, theme 5 child development and growth, theme 6 social support in facing mother's mental

health, and theme 7 the meaning of early marriage for mothers.

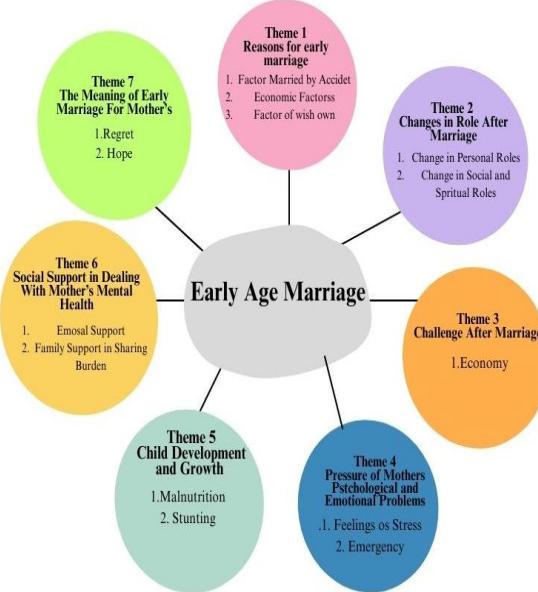


Figure 1 Thematic Findings

Theme 1 : Reasons For Early Marriage

The informants have various reasons for deciding to get married early.

Factor Married By Accident

Among the informants, three people stated that being married by Accident was one of the main triggers for early-age marriages due to pressure from the family to get married immediately to avoid disgrace and maintain the family's good name.

P1: "The beginning was not my desire to get married, but it had already happened, so I had to be married". "... but doing it is not coming from the palace but just from doing it or not to get pregnant..."

P3: "It's been a while since pregnant was told that I was told to be married so that I could not get bad news from the neighborhood."

P5: "...because associations are free from these children, so they cause minors or early marriages."

Economic Factors

One informant said that the economy is one of the risk factors for early marriage.

P2: "The initial problem decided to get married from the economy; I used to be a widow, so I was not able to go to school. So I was able to be so it was so tired, so I was tired, so I got married right away..."

Factor of Wish Own

One informant says that self-desire is also one of the risk factors for early marriage.

P4: "My sister is married because of her own desires... doesn't have other events..."

Theme 2: Changes in Role After Marriage

After marriage, the informant experienced many changes and challenges that were very different from his life before marriage.

Changes in personal roles

Two informants said that there was a personal change they experienced after marriage.

P1 "... In the past, I could still be free if you were married, so I had to be at home, you had to get a fine, you had to take care of all kinds, cooking if you were still in school, go home to school, eating, already so if after marriage everything changed."

P2 "Especially when I get tired of being tired of managing children, they are more ..."

Changes in social and spiritual roles

One informant said there was a change in spiritual and social aspects that he experienced after marriage.

P3: "... just a little bit of sincerity about religion according to the religion of the man ..."

Theme 3: Challenge After Marriage

The informants have challenges after early marriage

Economy

Two informants said they experienced economic challenges he experienced in marriage.

P2: "... Economic problems are also like Essential Girls Free Pacaks Against the New Families to Production E CEM ..."

P4: "They separated because they often quarreled over economic matters, not for other reasons."

Theme 4: Pressure of Mother's Psychological and Emotional Problems

Early marriage will have an impact on the mental health of the mother, as a woman who is still underage is not ready to take care of the household and child, so the mother experiences psychological and emotional pressure, which affects her child.

Feelings of stress

One informant said he experienced negative talk from his partner.

P1: "It looks like a toxic ... his toxic is just as good as it is like this ... it is worth the money, but it's been a while since I've been trying to get it again."

Emergency

Two informants said he had fear and anxiety related to pregnancy outside of marriage and child health.

P3: "... when I found out that she was pregnant outside of marriage panic ... Panic mixed, scared, anxious all mixed ..."

P2: "Feeling anxious, worried when his child was hospitalized when he was 20 days old."

Theme 5: Child Development and Growth

Informants who experience early marriage will have an impact on their children.

Malnutrition

One informant said his nephew had an impact from his mother's mental health.

P4: "... when he was still with his mother, his nephew experienced malnutrition; now, it is even hard to eat, but it is difficult to know that the slave is eating fierce, fibers..."

Stunting

P5: "... in young people who have been caring for children, causing their mentality to be disturbed, which can inhibit the growth of the child, causing stunting in children."

Theme 6: Social Support in dealing with mother's mental health

The role of the family is very important in supporting mothers who experience early marriage.

Emosal support

Four informants say the presence of the family or the closest person helps the mother calm her mind when facing mental pressure.

P1: "... Parents still accept do not

repeat the same mistakes ..." Continue to be independent - anything to be independent, must find work so they can support themselves. And usually go out, to the family's house, to the aunt's house, to Ayuk's house, and like that, so that it can calm the mind. Nobody wants to think about it so that it doesn't continue to be dead ... "

P2: "Usually, let's exchange ideas with parents and ask for advice like what..."

P3: "... exchanging ideas with your husband, keep meeting deliciously while sitting, sitting about the story after that, just tell your parents ..."

P6: "... for our anxiety, there is a mental program earlier, we also have a soul poly ..."

Family support in sharing the burden

Infroman said the importance of sharing burdens with family as a form of lightening the mother's duties.

P2: "... my husband and parents helped in taking care of the child when I was sick, just me alone ..."

P4: Who is the sister -in -law of the respondent said that after the divorce, he chose to take care of his nephew for fear of the health condition of children who experience stunting and developments were disrupted while still with his mother. "Since I separated only around due moon, I took care of this slave ..."

Theme 7: The meaning of early marriage for mothers

All informants voiced regret for the decision of early marriage and emphasized the importance of learning from the experience.

Regret

Two informants expressed regret over the decision to get married early

P1: "... doing things that are not natural anymore ..."

P2: "... Regardless of the content of Essentials of the Men's Nutrition - Satisfaction of the Girl E Begawe continues to help the parents even marry this kayak and I don't know how to help the parents ..."

Hope

Three informants said they hope for him and the generation in the future

P1: "... hope it changes, don't repeat

mistakes, focus again on yourself, learn for yourself."

P3: "I hope that good and not happen to my children and children out there ..."

P4: "... hope that school can be healthy, I can do something like the same thing that you are married to."

DISCUSSION

Early marriage among teenagers is a serious issue that needs attention in stunting prevention efforts. This study identified seven themes, which included:

Theme 1: Reasons for early marriage

Based on the results of the study, there are three main reasons why informants are doing early, namely: married by accident, economic factors, and their own desires.

Married by accident

Two informants stated that they were married because of Married by Accident, which caused pressure from the family to get married immediately to maintain the good name of the family. This is in line with a study that states that social norms and fear of social stigma are one of the main drivers of early marriage (11). Previous research also supports this finding; they state that pregnancy out of wedlock is a significant trigger for early marriage, especially in a society that upholds the value of family honor and religious norms (12).

Economy

Meanwhile, the economic reasons delivered by Mrs. B showed that poverty was also a strong factor that encouraged someone to take shortcuts through marriage.

This is in line with previous research, which states that families with low economic conditions tend to be more vulnerable to marry their children at an early age as a form of survival strategy. Previous studies also show that poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education are the main causes of early marriage, especially in rural areas in Indonesia (13).

Own desire

The informant stated that the decision

to marry early was purely his desire because of the lack of understanding, the influence of the media, or association. This is in line with previous studies explaining that early marriage conducted on personal desires is often based on a limited understanding of domestic life, as well as the influence of media or social environment that normalizes young marriage (14). Previous research also strengthened that some teenage girls married early because they felt they were mature enough and wanted to have their own households, even though the decision had not been accompanied by emotional or economic readiness (15).

Theme 2: Changes in Role After Marriage

The results showed that women who married at an early age face a drastic role change they are required to immediately undergo responsibility as a wife and housewife.

Changes in personal roles

Previous research states that young married women tend to be more vulnerable to psychological pressure because of the double role that must be lived without sufficient preparation. This is in line with the findings of informants who reveal the double burden between taking care of the household, child, and other social demands (16). This finding is also in line with previous research, which explains that women who get married at a young age tend to undergo a sudden and unplanned transition. They must adjust to the responsibility of being a wife and mother, who often cause psychological pressure due to a lack of emotional readiness and experience (17).

Changes in social and spiritual roles

In addition, the challenges experienced are not only related to domestic roles but also to social and religious aspects. One of the informants claimed to have to face the challenges as a convert and adapt to the husband's family. Researchers previously stated that early marriage accompanied by differences in religious and cultural backgrounds can increase the risk of conflict in the household (18). In previous studies, it was also mentioned that spiritual adjustment after early marriage often caused internal

conflict, especially if done without a mature understanding or readiness (19).

Theme 3: Challenges after marriage

In the study of informants said they experienced challenges in their marriage, namely:

Economy

This study shows that early marriage tends to cause unpreparedness in managing the family economy, when the couple is not financially established, conflicts more easily appear, and can even lead to divorce. This is reinforced by previous researchers who state that one of the main impacts of early childhood marriage is that the instability of the household economy eventually becomes a source of conflict in the household. So that divorce for young couples (20). Previous research underlined that couples who married at a young age were more at risk of experiencing divorce because they did not have economic stability (21).

Theme 4 Mother's psychological and emotional problem pressure

The results showed that there was psychological pressure, anxiety, and a negative influence on children due to the mental condition of the mother, who was disturbed.

Feelings of stress

P4 experiences verbal and emotional pressure that reflects psychologically unhealthy household conditions, which can cause feelings of unappreciated, low self-esteem, to depression. This was strengthened by previous studies that explain that young women who are married at an early age are more vulnerable to experiencing verbal and emotional violence from a partner, which triggers feelings of worthlessness and prolonged stress (22). Early marriage is at risk of causing psychological disorders in women because they are not mentally prepared to face the role and responsibilities of the household (23).

Emergency

This is also in line with qualitative study research previously found that adolescents who experience pregnancy outside of

marriage show psychological symptoms such as stress, depression, and severe anxiety. Like the symptoms experienced by P3, according to these findings where the pregnancy is not planned to trigger significant emotional stress (24). Mothers who get married at a young age tend to be immature psychologically and socially, so they are not ready to face household conflict, pregnancy outside of planning, or childcare. This is in accordance with recent research by research which states that mothers who are pregnant in early marriage experience high anxiety due to a lack of emotional knowledge and support (25).

Theme 5: Children's development and growth

Early marriage has a significant impact on child growth and development, especially in aspects of nutritional status and stunting events.

Malnutrition

The impact is not only felt by the mother, but also by children. As stated by P4, children experience malnutrition when with their mother who is experiencing stress. According to previous research, stress and depression in mothers greatly affect parenting and the nutritional status of children (26). This is also in line with previous research that found that mothers with mental disorders have a higher tendency to fail to meet the nutritional needs of children due to fatigue, stress, or loss of motivation to care for (27). Thus, it is important to postpone marriage to a fairly mature age, both physically and psychologically, to prevent negative impacts on the mental health of the mother and the child's development.

Stunting

Previous researchers showed that the age of the mother during childbirth had a significant relationship with the incidence of stunting. Teenage mothers are at higher risk of childbirth with low birth weight and experience growth barriers. This is in line with the informant's quote, which states that children experience stunting due to disturbed parenting patterns, due to the mental readiness of immature mothers (28). Other studies also mention that the readiness of

teenage mothers in caring for children tends to be low, which has an impact on the quality of parenting and growth and development of children (29).

Theme 6: Social support in dealing with mother's mental health

The informants stated that family support, especially from biological mothers, couples, and peers, became emotional support when they experienced pressure after early marriage

Emotional support

Social support is one of the protective factors in maintaining mental health, especially for women who are married at an early age. In this study, it appears that the respondents experienced various emotional pressures, ranging from anxiety, fear, to feelings of being overwhelmed due to great responsibility and unpreparedness in carrying out the role of wife and mother, but the existence of social support from the family and partner became solace as well as a source of strength for respondents. P1 revealed the importance of getting acceptance from the family and trying to find a positive environment to calm the mind. This is in line with previous research, which states that emotional and social support from the surrounding environment can reduce stress and depression levels in young mothers (30). P2 and P3 highlighted the role of couples and parents in providing practical assistance and a place to exchange ideas. The presence of supportive couples and trustworthy parents becomes a positive source of coping in the face of pressure. According to previous research, pairs and nuclear families are important actors in the social support system that affect the psychological stability of a mother (31).

Family support in sharing the burden

In the P4 case, social support actually came from close relatives who took over the role of childcare for the good of the child. Although the form is different, this still shows that the family's social network has important values in maintaining the mental well-being of children and mothers, as stated by previous researchers (that a

positive social environment can protect children and mothers from the long-term impact of chronic stress (32).

Theme 7: Regret and expectations of early marriage

The findings in this study showed that all informants who married early stated that there was regret after undergoing their marriage.

Regret

Regret for the decision to get married early was stated by two informants, where this regret shows the inner conflict between the expectations and the reality they experienced after early marriage. This was evidenced by previous researchers, women who married early revealed similar regret because they felt lost their youth and experienced the pressure of the role of wives and mothers at an age still unstable (33). One of the respondents hopes that no other teenagers repeat the same experience, and emphasizes the importance of stagnation and focus on themselves before entering marriage. This reflects the need for an increase in life literacy, including understanding of emotional, financial, and social readiness before forming a family. This finding is in line with previous research studies that found that women who were married early tend to regret the decision after experiencing severe challenges, such as economic dependence, mental pressure, and dual roles that were not ready (34).

Hope

Hope for yourself, as said the P1 informant, shows the process of growth and re-interpretation of traumatic experiences. Life experiences like this are referred to as a form of transformation of meaning in which individuals reinterpret negative experiences into driving positive changes based on previous research (35).

Regret is also accompanied by the hope that the next generation does not suffer the same fate, according to previous research (36). In the context of this research, the hopes and regrets of informants for their lives and how the experience has a new meaning in their lives as mothers. They not only voiced the dissatisfaction of the past, but also arranged hope for the future of their children

so as not to make mistakes that have been made in their teens. This is also the same as previous research, which shows that women who have been married early tend to have a higher awareness of the importance of education and tend to encourage their children to avoid early marriage (37).

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study show that early marriage has a close relationship with the mental health of the mother and child development, including the risk of stunting. This study found seven identified themes, which included theme 1, reasons for early marriage, because of being married by accident, economic limitations, and their own desires. Theme 2: Changes After Marriage, Theme 3: Challenges After Marriage, Theme 4 Psychological Pressure, and Emotional Mother, Theme 5 Development and Growth of Children, Theme 6 Social Support in Facing Mother's Mental Health, Theme 7 The meaning of early marriage for mothers includes regret and expectations expressed by mothers showing awareness to prevent the next generation from experiencing the same thing. Therefore, integrated interventions are needed, ranging from promotive, preventive, curative, to rehabilitative efforts to reduce early marriage and stunting numbers.

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