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Fertility in Child Marriage Families: In-Depth Investigation In Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Fertility is a primary determinant of population growth rate. Theoretically, child marriage families have a higher chance of fertility. Accordingly, this study aims to comprehend the interpretation of fertility among the family from child marriage. The interpretation of fertility was observed in depth using phenomenology (causal motives) through data collection and analysis. The research participants were married women who had children or were 16 years old or younger and did not yet have a child. The analysis results indicate that child marriage families interpret fertility as a burden, marriage reinforcement, and investment. The families from child marriage are motivated to have fewer children and space them out in terms of age. It is important to note that no child-free doctrine was discovered, as it goes against Islamic principles. Additionally, having children is believed to improve marital relations within the child marriage community on Bawean Island. Children are often viewed as an economic investment and a guarantee for future parental care. Child marriage on Bawean Island did not have a discernible impact on the population growth rate.

KEYWORDS

children, child marriage, child marriage families, fertility, Indonesia, phenomenology

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HUMAN SUBJECTS

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Introduction and Background

According to the 2020 Population Census, Indonesia's population was 270,203,917 people (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2021), positioning Indonesia in the top four most populous countries in the world. Although the population growth rate has decreased slightly, it remains at 1.25% in 2020, 1.27% in 2022, and is projected to be 1.29% in 2023 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023). According to a report by the United Nations, from 2017 to 2050, approximately half of the world's population growth will be concentrated in nine countries, including India, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, Ethiopia, the United Republic of Tanzania, United States, Uganda, and Indonesia (ranked by expected contribution to total growth) (United Nations, n.d.).

The population of Bawean Island was 80,289 people in 2020, with a population growth rate of 1.98% (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Gresik, 2021), exceeding the national population growth rate of 1.25% during the same period (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2021). This population growth on Bawean Island is determined by fertility, with a total fertility rate (TFR) reaching 2.11 (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Gresik, 2021). This rate is lower than the national TFR of 2.19 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2021). The high fertility rate is caused by a variety of factors, including women's education, media access to family planning information, economic status, marriage age (child marriage), and perceptions of the ideal number of children (Gayatri, 2020; Onagoruwa & Wodon, 2018; Vander Borgh & Wyns, 2018).

Child marriage occurs throughout Indonesia (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2020; Badan Pusat Statistik et al., 2020), including in remote parts of the island of Bawean. During 2010 and 2019, 7% of child marriage cases were reported, involving those aged between 15–16 years (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2020). On Bawean Island, there were 689 cases of early marriage among 15–16-year-olds from 2015–2020 (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2021). Meanwhile, there were 119 divorce cases that occurred on the Island in 2020 (Mahkamah Agung Republik Indonesia, 2020). Meanwhile, the data also showed 13.5% maternal mortality and 1.7% infant mortality rates (Dinas Kesehatan Kabupaten Gresik, 2021). Further, the life expectancy in Bawean in 2020 was 72.66 years old (BPS Provinsi Jawa Timur, 2021), which is lower than the national average of 73.93 years old.

Several other developing countries also reported determinants of adolescent girls engaging in early marriage practices. For instance, in Iraq, the fertility rate of adolescents (15–18 years) has increased by 30% (Cetorelli, 2014). Meanwhile, in Colombia, the fertility rate of women between 15 and 19 years in urban areas was reported to be higher, particularly between 2012 and 2016 (Ramos Jaraba et al., 2020). Child marriage is common in areas with low incomes and a high population growth (Liang et al., 2021). A secondary cross-case analysis of three qualitative studies conducted in Brazil, Guatemala, and Honduras revealed that social norms play a significant role in regulating acceptable actions by girls, contributing to the exercise of agency, and accommodating girls into early marriage (Taylor et al., 2019).

Bawean Island has a population of 25,119 families, with almost 2.3% of them affected by child marriage. The prevalence of child marriage on Bawean Island is mainly due to low levels of education, with only 36,224 people graduating from elementary and junior high school (Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan Dan Perlindungan Anak, 2021). Further, child marriage also hinders the child's education continuation. In Honduras, many girls drop out of school due to financial constraints or personal choice rather than solely due to marriage or motherhood (Murphy-Graham et al., 2020). In India, the dropout rate for female actors is high (Ashburn et al., 2017), while Iraq reports an increased prevalence of early marriage, especially among women with low education (Cetorelli, 2014). In Kosovo, there is a low level of motivation among those engaging in early marriage to continue their education (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2020). This issue has also been reported in Nigeria (Polyakova, 2018).

Aside from education level, economic status has also been acknowledged as a factor affecting fertility. There are 76% of child marriage families that belong to the low-income group (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Gresik, 2021). The low economic status of child marriage families is primarily due to the husband being the main source of income. On Bawean Island, most wives of child marriage families work as housewives (Susilo, Istiawati, Deffinika, & Budijanto, 2021). Therefore, women who marry at child age have lower participation in family income (Parsons et al., 2015).

To date, there have been no phenomenological studies that observe the interpretation of fertility among child marriage families. It is important to examine the various meanings that child marriage families attribute to fertility, as it occurs due to child marriage (Ojala et al., 2017). Bawean Island was selected as a research venue due to the continuous complexity of its problems, which include high population growth rates due to fertility, high rates of child marriage, as well as economically and educationally marginalized families who practice child marriage. Therefore, this research investigates the interpretation of fertility among child marriage families. A qualitative–phenomenological approach has been applied to examine the motives behind child marriage families' interpretation of fertility.

Qualitative research has been claimed to generate empirical data as it involves observation, according to common sense, and does not produce anything speculative (Blokker, 2011). Additionally, a qualitative approach can be used to perceive the values present in society (Sejati et al., 2023) and observe the social interaction of the community with the environment (Angriani et al., 2018). A qualitative approach

has also been used to study the manifestation of gender construction (Defi et al., 2022). Similarly, research into early marriages in Indonesia with a qualitative-phenomenological approach has been carried out (Rahiem, 2021; Susilo, Istiawati, Aliman, & Alghani, 2021; Susilo et al., 2022).

Focusing on the global prevalence of early conservation is crucial to protecting human rights, particularly the welfare of children (Mehra et al., 2018; Samuri et al., 2022). In Honduras, early marriage has a significant effect on intimate partner violence (Huber-Krum et al., 2024). Consequently, the United Nations led the campaign to resolve this issue, which was participated in by various countries. For instance, a joint campaign by local and national agencies and UN partners in the Dominican Republic aimed to support legal reform on the age of marriage. This campaign brought attention to such issues as child marriage, equality, and early marriage in Parliament (UNICEF, n.d.). In Colombia, the National Development Plan (2018–2022) includes a goal aimed at eliminating child and early marriage (UNICEF, n.d.). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the reduction in the prevalence of cases of early marriage is set through a special target of early marriage in the 2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (Badan Pusat Statistik et al., 2020).

This research seeks to explore how families engaged in child marriage interpret fertility and its impact on population growth. To achieve a deeper understanding, individuals can explore the principles of life (virtue) in depth (Ayuningtyas & Riyono, 2023). Further, the results of in-depth studies can be used by authorities to prevent or change attitudes and practices in child marriage families towards fertility, which can have a significant impact on population growth.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach from Alfred Schutz's perspective to examine the social context and determine the meaning of fertility for child marriage families on Bawean Island, Indonesia. Phenomenology is a process of understanding the world through direct experience, allowing researchers to obtain meaningful insights from participants regarding a phenomenon. This is achieved by exploring their personal background, memories, thoughts, views, purpose, hopes, and feelings (Hammersley, 2019; vom Lehn, 2019). The participants were selected based on the minimum marriage age described in the Republic of Indonesia's Law No. 1 of 1974 concerning Marriage, Chapter II Marriage Requirements, Article 7 Paragraph 1. Despite the fact that the minimum age for marriage was raised to 19 years in 2019, we discovered that the participants who met the criteria were women who were married with children or unmarried and under 16 years old (Undang-undang Nomor 16, 2019).

The phenomenological approach uncovers the because-motives and in-order-to motives of child marriage families in interpreting fertility. The researcher served as the main data collection instrument to identify participants' experiences of context and social reality, as well as their goals (expectations) related to fertility. The questions developed by the researcher covered the topic of because-motives and in-order-to motives related to fertility. This study also employed data collection techniques to

facilitate fieldwork, which was adopted from reliable sources, including the importance of field observation and participant observation (Moleong, 2018). Meanwhile, the interactive data analysis was completed using the stages adopted from Miles and Huberman (1994). The field observations that connected the early marriage phenomenon among the villagers of Bawean Island for two weeks were described, including the problem’s specifics and the initial data collection procedure, as well as the names of female actors. For the collection of authentic data and information, the researchers physically presented at the research location. The complex structure of the interpretation of the meaning of fertility was explored through observation and in-depth interviews. The following factors were considered in understanding the research participants’ interpretation of fertility: (a) the desired number of children in the future, (b) the preferred child gender, (c) the preferred age gap between children, and (d) the reasons for delaying childbirth.

The researcher’s participation is essential as a research instrument and data collector (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007; Fatchan, 2011). Specifically, the research was conducted in Daun Village (163 incidences) and Sungairujing Village (132 incidences), Sangkapura District, Bawean Island, Indonesia (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2020), which has the highest prevalence of child marriage on the island. This research focused on child marriage families on the women’s side. Participants were determined using a *snowball sampling technique*. Information such as the participant’s name, age, education, and occupation were obtained from the Office of Religious Affairs in Sangkapura District. This research was completed in 2022. In total, this research involved 37 wives from child marriage families, as this number exceeded saturation and met the research objectives (Hennink & Bonnie, 2022). Table 1 summarises the characteristics of these participants.

Table 1
Social Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	No. of participants (%)
Age at Marriage	
Age 15	12 (32.4)
Age 16	25 (67.6)
Occupation	
Housewife	32 (86.4)
Shopkeeper	4 (10.8)
Wedding Singer	1 (2.8)
Education	
Middle School Graduate	27 (72.9)
Elementary School Graduate	10 (27.1)
Current Children	
No Children Yet	3 (8.2)

Table 1 Continued

Characteristic	No. of participants (%)
Pregnant	2 (5.4)
1	21 (56.7)
2	9 (24.3)
3	2 (5.4)

Note. Source: Adapted from Al'Ghani et al. (2024).

The primary data were collected from the wives of families engaging in child marriage, while the secondary data were garnered from the parents and husbands who were present during the interview. As part of the data-gathering process, the research participants were interviewed in person at their homes. On average, each interview took almost half a day. The secondary data from the participants' parents and spouses may complete the primary data. The data collected from in-depth interviews were transcribed into written transcripts (Moleong, 2018).

To facilitate communication and comprehension, the researcher enlisted the help of two local village authorities, Mr. S and Mr. D, to assist with direct interactions regarding the issue of child marriage. During the interviews, some participants used words in Bawean that were unfamiliar to the researchers. Therefore, the presence of Mr. S and Mr. D helped put the participants at ease. In addition, these local authorities also minimize any awkwardness between the researcher and the respondents. However, their role did not affect the originality of the data collected. The researcher was present to establish familiarity with the participants, with the hope of establishing an environment where they did not feel like they were being researched. This allowed for spontaneous, free, and honest responses (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007).

The study findings were validated for credibility, confirmability, and dependability (Palmer & Bolderston, 2006). Additionally, triangulation was used to compare data from participants, parents, husbands, and supervisors in the field of competence with outcomes (Döringer, 2021). The garnered data were analyzed using Schutz phenomenology by grouping the "in-order-to motive" and "because-motive" used by the child marriage families in interpreting fertility. Then, the data were coded by analyzing the behavior and action patterns of child marriage families related to fertility. Additionally, the statements of each respondent, which were previously triangulated, were analyzed. This analysis involved categorizing the motives or causes of action related to fertility, as well as the expectations about fertility. The conclusions drawn from this coding indicate the understanding of fertility among respondents.

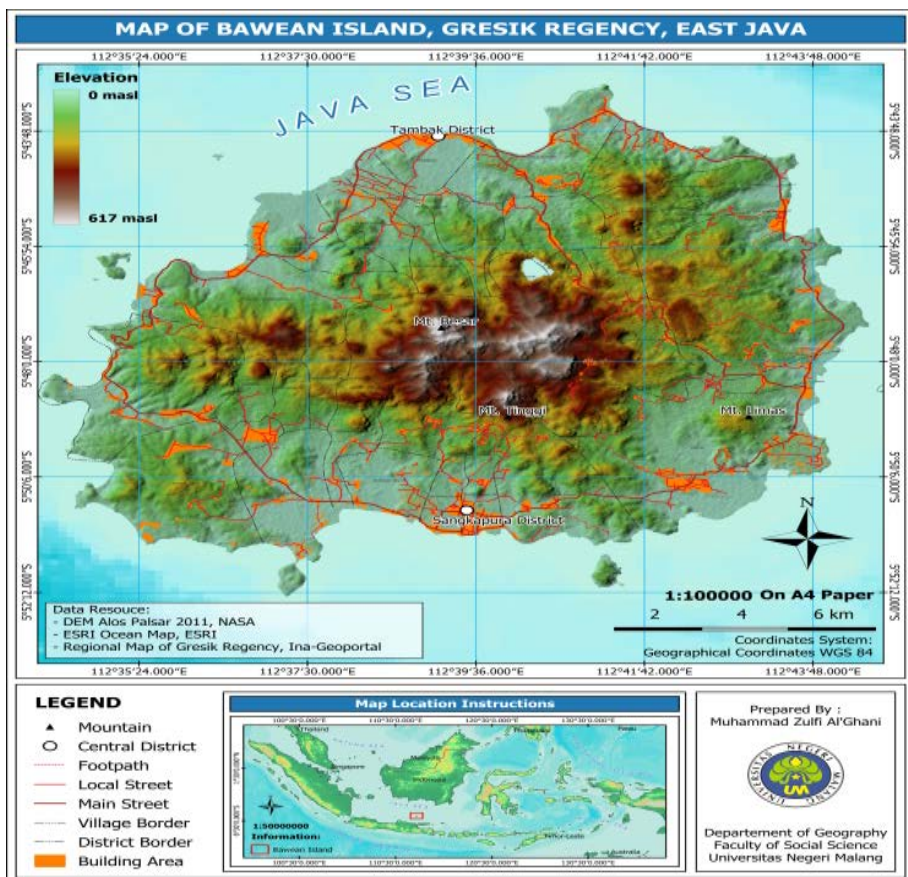
Results

Social Context

Bawean Island is located in the Java Sea, East Java Province, Indonesia. It comprises two sub-districts, namely Sangkapura and Tambak, which account for over 52% of the total area of land use. With only 50% of its population working as farmers, the rest of

its residents choose to migrate due to a lack of sufficient employment opportunities to meet household needs. Among these people, the male population in the dominant 17–45 age group migrates to search for work outside of Bawean Island. Most overseas destinations are neighboring countries, such as Singapore and Malaysia, or other islands (Kalimantan, Java, Sulawesi, or Papua). The economic condition of Bawean Island is classified as lower middle class, with the population’s livelihoods primarily consisting of migrant workers and fishers. The migrant residents are primarily family leaders, unmarried males, or teens. In addition, the high poverty level on Bawean Island is attributed to the fact that the population has only completed elementary and junior high school (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Gresik, 2021; Susilo, Istiawati, Aliman, & Alghani, 2021). This condition limits their employment opportunity. Therefore, the island’s poverty level remains high, with 9,490 families. Research locations are illustrated on the map in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Map of Bawean Island

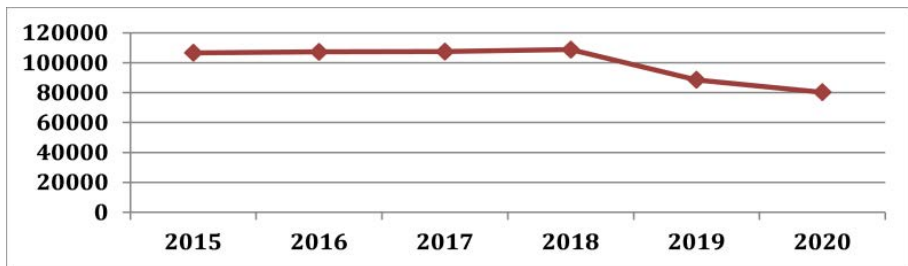


Note. Source: Adapted from Al'Ghani et al. (2024).

In 2018, the total population of Bawean Island was 108,766 people. From 2015 to 2018, Bawean Island's population grew consistently. However, the annual population growth rate from 2018 to 2020 dropped sharply to 19.49% in Sangkapura District and 16.93% in Tambak District (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Gresik, 2021). The detailed population and the annual increase in child marriage cases of Bawean Island are depicted in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2

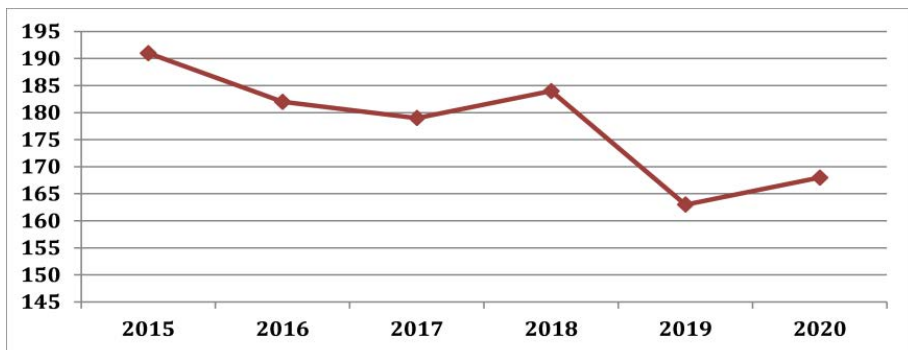
Total Population in Bawean Island



Note. Source: Adapted from Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Gresik (2021).

Figure 3

Child Marriage Cases on Bawean Island



Note. Source: Adapted from Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Gresik (2021).

Findings

The primary objective of marriage is to have children. However, there are different goals associated with the desire to have children, such as the number, gender, age gaps, and even purposeful or unintended delays, with a variety of causes. In this study, we carefully analyzed the codes and categories, followed by the identification of three phenomenological themes from the study. The interpretation of fertility for child marriage families on Bawean Island from the results of in-depth interviews is shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2
Data Analysis Process and Research Findings

Open Coding Sub-Coding	Categorizing		Finding Themes
	The because of-motives	In order to motives	
The husbands of the families engage in early weddings are employed outside of Bawean Island, in other nations around the world.	Feeling lonely	Pleased husband	Fertility as a marriage reinforcement
The young mothers and wives must care for their children by themselves at home	Feeling lonely	–	
Wife who was pregnant	Feeling lonely	Continued progeny	
Wives who were married young and haven't had children	Feeling lonely	Continued progeny	
		Making the family perfect	
Difficulty in caring for children (limited parenting)	Difficulty raising children	–	Fertility as burden
Limitations on delivery's carrying capacity (costs and health facilities)	Poverty	–	
Concerns about their ability to provide for their children's needs in the future	Poverty	Expensive for children's needs	
With only the husband's income, the family has just enough to get by	Poverty	–	
Getting parental inheritance (gardens or rice fields)	Poverty	Working in the field further	Children as an investment
Future desire to be looked for by children	–	Taking care of parents	
Increase family income	Poverty	Increase family income	

Note. Source: Adapted from Al'Ghani et al. (2024).

Table 3
The Interpretation of Child Marriage Families Based on Schutz's Phenomenology Perspectives

Participant	Current Child	The because of-motives	The order to-motives	Interpretation
1	No children yet	Feeling lonely	Continued progeny	Marriage reinforcement
2	1	–	Vontinued progeny	Marriage reinforcement
3	1	Feeling lonely	Making family perfect	Marriage reinforcement
4	1	–	Pleased husband	Marriage reinforcement
5	1	Poverty	Increase family income	Investment
6	1	Poverty	Expensive children's needs	Burden (cost)

Table 3 Continued

Participant	Current Child	The because of-motives	The order to-motives	Interpretation
7	2	Poverty	Increase family income	Investment
8	2	Poverty	–	Burden (cost)
9	1	Poverty	Working further in the fields	Investment
10	1	Difficulty raising children	–	Burden (cost)
11	1	Poverty	Expensive for children's needs	Burden (cost)
12	2	Poverty	Expensive for children's needs	Burden (cost)
13	3	Poverty	Increase family income	Investment
14	1	Poverty	Expensive for children's needs	Burden (cost)
15	Pregnant	Feeling lonely	Continued progeny	Marriage reinforcement
16	No children yet	Feeling lonely	Continued progeny	Marriage reinforcement
17	2	–	Taking care of parents	Investment
18	1	Poverty	Expensive for children's needs	Burden (cost)
19	No children yet	Feeling lonely	Continued progeny	Marriage reinforcement
20	2	Poverty	Increase family income	Investment
21	1	Poverty	Increase family income	Investment
22	1	Feeling lonely	Continued progeny	Marriage reinforcement
23	3	Poverty	Expensive children's needs	Burden (cost)
24	2	Poverty	Increase family income	Investment
25	2	Poverty	Expensive children's needs	Burden (cost)
26	1	Poverty	Increase family income	Investment
27	Pregnant	Feeling lonely	Making family perfect	Marriage reinforcement
28	2	Poverty	Expensive children's needs	Burden (cost)
29	1	Feeling lonely	Making family perfect	Marriage reinforcement
30	1	Feeling lonely	Continued progeny	Marriage reinforcement
31	1	Poverty	Increase family income	Investment
32	1	Difficulty raising children	Expensive children's needs	Burden (cost)
33	1	Poverty	Expensive children's needs	Burden (cost)

Table 3 Continued

Participant	Current Child	The because of-motives	The order to-motives	Interpretation
34	1	Poverty	Expensive children's needs	Burden (cost)
35	1	Poverty	Increase family income	Investment
36	2	Poverty	Expensive children's needs	Burden (cost)
37	1	Poverty	Increase family income	Investment

Note. Source: Adapted from Al’Ghani et al. (2024).

Fertility as a Burden (Cost)

The participants view having children within a family as a burden, although this does not necessarily imply that they do not desire or attempt to have children. The findings indicated a tendency to limit the number of children and the age gap, which could eventually add to the life burden if left unchecked. The burden mentioned by participants remains fundamental, as noted by participants 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 18, 23, 25, 28, 32, 33, 34, and 36. Participant 8 reported difficulties during childbirth, while participants 6, 10, and 18 expressed the challenges and exhaustion of raising children. Participants 11, 12, 23, 25, 28, 32, 33, 34, and 36 expressed a desire to limit the number of children because they feared they would be unable to support their children’s needs.

During the interview, Participant 8, a homemaker, revealed that she has two children. The participant’s description of the complicated birth process for both children sheds light on the perception of children as a burden. Further, Participant 8 also revealed that the delivery she was dealing with was not a natural process but a Caesar section. As a result, she had to undergo the procedure outside of Bawean Island Hospital, delivering her two children at Gresik City Regional General Hospital. This was due to the unavailability of health facilities, particularly those for Caesarean deliveries, on Bawean Island. The distance between Bawean Island and the Regional General Hospital (RSUD) of Gresik Regency is approximately 100 km. This significant distance is crossed by two modes of transportation, the sea and land, with an estimated travel time of more than four hours. This is certainly difficult for a mother during the final minutes of the delivery procedure, as described by the participant in the following excerpt.

Now I have two children. The first is a boy, 5 years old, and the other, a girl, just 2 months old. The distance between the first and second children was 5 years, thanks to the doctor’s recommendation. Both deliveries had to be performed by the Caesar section. The doctor said my physical condition did not allow me to give birth except through the Caesar section. My two children were born by cesarean section at the General Hospital (RSUD) of Gresik, Indonesia because that is the only one that has health coverage programs (BPJS), and the tools are available. (Participant 8; Trans. by Muhammad Zulfi Al’Ghani, Budijanto, Sumarmi, & Singgih Susilo—M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

From her experience with the first child, Participant 8 prepared for the birth of her second child by visiting Gresik City a week prior, accompanied by her husband, requiring her to pay for a week's stay in Gresik City. The study assumed that Participant 8 views fertility as a burden because of the high expense of delivery, accommodation, and transportation costs. Besides, the distance to the location may pose a challenge for pregnant women.

In addition, the interviews with participants 6, 10, and 18 indicated that they viewed fertility as an added expense. The participants married at 16, shortly after completing junior high school. They were instantly blessed with a child during their first year of marriage. As they were still too young to take on the responsibility of childcare, they found it quite challenging. Therefore, the research concluded that the participants viewed fertility as a cost, as shown in the following excerpts.

Caring for children is difficulted, especially for the first child. We are unversed. (Participant 6; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

We limited the number of children because caring for them takes up much of our time. (Participant 10; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Having a lot of children is very difficult. (Participant 18; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

The interpretation of fertility as a burden (cost) was explored using the interview results of participants 11, 12, 23, 25, 28, 32, 33, 34, and 36, who are peers and classmates in the community. Participants 11 and 12, who are neighbors, interpret fertility as a cost and prefer to limit childbirth. Meanwhile, participants 11, 12, 23, 25, and 33 expressed their concern about their ability to meet their children's needs in the future, particularly in financing their education, as suggested in the following excerpts.

We decided not to have many children. The cost of education is expensive. It's a pity for children if they can't go to high school in this era. (Participant 11; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

My husband and I plan to have only two children because we are worried that we will not be able to meet the need for education, which is getting more and more expensive. My husband and I will feel guilty if we cannot meet the needs of our children, so I decided to have two children. (Participant 12; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

We have been blessed with three children, that's more than enough. All three of them were born relatively close together. It will be a hassle when they go to school together. (Participant 23; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

I plan to have only two children, according to our financial means. (Participant 25; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

My husband and I desire to have two children, following the government program. We hope to provide our family's future prosper. (Participant 33; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Participants 14, 28, 32, 34, and 36 expressed their concern about their ability to meet their children's current and future daily needs. They perceived these needs to be increasingly expensive, as already described in the following excerpt.

I feel worried about the daily needs that are getting more expensive every day. (Participant 14; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

As a housewife with two children who relies solely on my husband's income, I feel worried about the increasingly expensive daily needs. (Participant 28; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Although we are blessed with a son, we still feel that in this era, raising a child is very expensive. (Participant 32; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

We are currently blessed with a daughter, two years old. We recognize the financial demands of raising a child. At this time, we are not considering expanding our family and are instead prioritizing the care of our daughter. (Participant 34; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

We have two daughters now and have no plans for more children. The cost of daily necessities and education is high, especially considering the added responsibility of arranging marriages for our daughters. This can be quite expensive. (Participant 36; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Fertility as a Marriage Reinforcement

Wandering has become a way of life for Bawean men in their productive years due to limited job opportunities on the island. This is the main reason why they leave the island to seek better economic prospects. Similarly, the majority of husbands leave the island to improve their financial status, with 23 out of 27 husbands of the participants in this study working as migrant workers outside the island. On average, these wandering husbands return to their hometown twice a year.

The absence of their husbands often causes the participants to feel lonely. In general, wives want to be present for their kids and be there for them when they are alone despite spending most of their time caring for them. Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 15, 16, 19, 22, 27, 29, and 30 view their child as a friend at home due to their husband's absence. Participants 1, 2, and 3 remain friends even though their migrant husbands work in the same location and occupation. Meanwhile, participants 15 and 16 are siblings. Participants 2, 22, 29, and 30 felt lonely at home because their husbands worked as migrant workers and interpreted fertility as a marriage reinforcement, as shown in the following excerpts.

I have two brothers. My sister lives at her husband's house, and my mother often goes to Pasuruan Regency to visit my father, who was hospitalized there, while my husband works in Singapore. Currently, they have one child, the daughter is only one year old. In the past, I wanted to have children immediately after marriage so I wouldn't be lonely when my husband left me. (Participant 2; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

My husband works in Malaysia. I'm here with my children. I wouldn't be lonely when my husband left me. (Participant 22; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Before marrying me, my husband worked in Singapore for several years. After marriage, two years later he went back to work in Singapore. Thankfully, we have been blessed with a child, so it is not lonely when my husband is away working. (Participant 29; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

In my opinion, having children can provide companionship and continue the family line. They can also offer comfort when a spouse is working abroad. (Participant 30; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Participants 3 and 4 interpret fertility as a marriage reinforcement through a grateful expression, as shown in the following excerpts.

Although we are still blessed with one child, we are already very grateful. (Participant 3; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

We are very grateful to have been blessed with a boy, now three years old, and my husband is also very happy. (Participant 4; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

During the interview, participants 1, 15, 16, 19, and 27 revealed that they did not have children at the time. However, unlike the other four participants, participants 1 and 27 refused to participate in the family planning program, indicating their desire to have children soon. Participant 1 stated that the four participants share a desire to fulfill their husbands' wishes by having children in the near future.

I was married in a year. At the moment, I have not been blessed with children. Therefore, when my husband works, I feel lonely at home. (Participant 1; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Although I have been married for two years, I must register with the village's family planning program. I truly hope to start a family soon so that my husband will be content. (Participant 15; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

It feels very lonely at home because my husband works in Malaysia. But next year, my husband will come home, he will not work abroad anymore. We are planning to join a pregnancy program. (Participant 16; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Children are the ones continued progeny, so we really hope that in the near future, we will be blessed with children. (Participant 19; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

I am currently pregnant. After having children, I won't be lonely anymore. (Participant 27; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Children as an Investment

The 27 participants are from families classified as having low economic status, thereby, they face challenges in fulfilling their needs. Therefore, these participants believed that having children is a future investment. Children as an investment contribute to increasing the family income. In addition, children were considered an investment, ensuring the next generation of bloodline and their parents' future care. For this aspect,

the research specifically analyzed the responses from twelve participants, namely participants 5, 7, 9, 13, 17, 20, 21, 24, 26, 31, 35, and 37.

Participant 7 is the youngest of three female siblings. At the age of 7, Participant 7 was abandoned by her biological father and was subsequently raised by her mother and uncle, who struggled to provide for her basic needs. Her uncle was only able to aid her in enrolling in a junior high school. At the time of the interview, Participant 7 has been blessed with two daughters. This fact describes the participant's desire for a male child due to the family's social and economic situation. The participant hopes that a son will be able to contribute to the family's income, as shown in the below excerpt.

I am the youngest child of three siblings. My sisters are now with their respective husbands. Women are used to being housewives. My family only relies on my mother, who works in the market as a **rencek** [seasonal] fish trader, and my uncle, who works in Bawean. Finally, my uncle could only send me to junior high school. (Participant 7; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

The concept of investment can also encompass the preservation of family-owned assets. For instance, in an agricultural family, individuals such as participants 5, 9, 13, 24, 26, and 35 may be brought up with this mindset. Participant 9, the eldest of two siblings, expressed her desire to have a son who could take care of the family's rice fields in the future, as described by participant 9 in the following excerpt.

From a young age, we teach our sons to help with work in the fields so that when they grow up, they will be used to this work. (Participant 5; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Currently, my husband is employed, maintaining my parents' rice farms. I hope to have a boy so that he can assist his father in the fields and continue to care for them. (Participant 9; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

I currently have three children. Two of them are boys. I hope to continue cultivating the family farm. (Participant 13; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

I hope my two sons, when they grow up, can help work in the fields. (Participant 24; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

For us, cultivating agricultural land is a family tradition. We don't want the tradition to break. Even if you work for another job, farming can be a side job. (Participant 26; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Our family is accustomed to managing agricultural land, even for side jobs, passed down from generation to generation. We have no intention of selling it. My husband and I hope that one day our children can continue this family tradition. (Participant 35; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

In addition, participants 17, 20, 21, 31, and 37 consider children as an investment to ensure the continuity of offspring and the care of parents in the future, as stated in the below excerpt.

If we have children, when we are old, there will be someone to take care of us. (Participant 17; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

I hope that I will always be given good health, even if my children can help take care of us in our old age. (Participant 20; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Children are a gift that we should be grateful for, and we take good care of them. Later on, it will be our children who take care of us in our old age. (Participant 21; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

In religious teachings, children must also be filial to their parents, including taking care of us later. (Participant 31; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

From a young age, I will teach my children that their duty is to be filial to their parents, to make their parents happy and other good values. (Participant 37; Trans. by M. Z. A., B., S., & S. S.)

Discussion

Fertility as a Burden (Cost)

Participants perceive having children in the family as a burden (cost). This finding contradicts the results of other interpretations identified in this study and other studies, which view children as an investment. It is important to note that this interpretation does not reflect the choice of child-free lifestyles or child marriage families to accept the philosophy of not having children. The decision to be child-free is a well-established life choice that can be based on various factors, including religious beliefs (Caulk, 2021), economic burden, risk, relationship happiness, and psychological health (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). In several Latin American countries, such as Haiti, Guatemala, Trinidad and Tobago, and Costa Rica, a high level of religiosity affects the level of education and a high contraceptive prevalence rate of women, which negatively affects the decision to have many children (Götmark & Andersson, 2020). The postponement of childbearing is a significant change in the modern family era. In recent decades, the number of couples who refuse to have children has increased dramatically worldwide (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Höglund & Hildingsson, 2023).

Child-free topics have gained increased popularity over the years due to a number of factors, including demographic and motivational factors, such as rational decisions, sociological factors, psychological aspects, traditional stereotypes, and psychosocial factors (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). In contrast to the child-free principle, research from several Latin American countries reports that childlessness is influenced by the role of health and poverty (Castro & Tapia, 2021). Our analysis concludes that no single-child married family has the notion of being child-free. On this island, the decision of a child-married family to continue having children is consensual.

Research has shown that if the husband is the one who decides, he is more likely to agree, whereas if it is the wife's decision, the husband is less likely to agree, and divorce becomes a more likely outcome (Marciano, 1978). While the study findings indicated that fertility is a burden, this view eliminated the possibility of childfree as an individual choice. All individuals stated that they wanted and expected to have children as lineage successors, although some participants in the interview had not

yet been blessed with children. The participants are more concerned with reducing the number of children and the age gap. Besides, families who practice child marriage aim to avoid a bigger burden by restricting the number of children they have and the age gap between them. Larger families may provide less financial support, placing a greater burden on the family head to meet their needs (Hartoyo, 1998). This, further carries a negative influence on child investment (education) (Leibowitz, 1974). Thus, child marriage families can effectively provide children with investing activities (Lampropoulou, 2018). Meanwhile, parents' investment in their children is critical in ensuring their future welfare (Hedges et al., 2016). Parental performance is greatly influenced by socioeconomic status. However, economic factors are not the sole justification for delaying or restricting fertility. Social and health factors can also play a significant role (Condorelli & Demeestere, 2019; Radon et al., 2015).

Fertility as a Marriage Reinforcement

All married couples strive to maintain their relationship until death. To sustain a marriage, commitment is critical for husband and wife, both personally and morally, as dictated by cultural and religious norms (Artina, 2022; Davies, 2011). Reinforcing the marriage bond involves making an effort to spend quality time together. Latinos are believed to have a stronger family network and exhibit greater feelings of loyalty and reciprocity compared to other ethnic groups (Gallo et al., 2009). His assumption of family values is associated with improved psychological well-being (Mogro-Wilson, 2011).

Our analysis results suggest that families engaging in child marriages interpret fertility as strengthening marriage. This is because most (95%) of husbands from child-married families who work in non-agricultural jobs have migrated far from Bawean Island, both domestically and abroad. In a typical year, husbands and wives from families with children return home 2–3 times (around Idul Fitri, Idul Adha, and the end of the year). As a result, the wives from child marriage families experience loneliness at home without their husbands.

On the other hand, having a child at home to accompany the mother can provide comfort and joy. Psychologically, having children at home is valued as pleasure, pride, fun, teaching, friendship, and love received from parents (Fahmi & Pinem, 2018; Hansen, 2012). Among Latino, parental control may be motivated by the desire to spend a lot of time together at home and to instill cultural values such as *familismo* (familyism), *respeto* (respect), and education (moral education) in order to positively impact child development (Halgunseth et al., 2006). Even so, the psychological impact of having children exceeds the economic and social value (Villa et al., 2020). Having children can strengthen the bond between spouses by fostering a commitment to togetherness. However, it is important to note that on Bawean Island, activities within child marriages are often separated by location.

Fertility Interpreted as an Investment

Families engaging in child marriage also define fertility as a potential investment. Therefore, having children equals investing all available resources to profit from the future (Matsai & Raniga, 2021). The benefits gained from having children in child

marriage families motivate future goals, such as contributing to the family's economic source, ensuring the lineage's successor generations, and caring for their parents in the future. Children provide profits and material stability for their parents in their old age. The prevalence of child marriage is largely attributed to the low-income status of the families involved. Additionally, the wives in these families, who are predominantly homemakers, lack economic power.

The economic value of having children is often associated with caring, loving, and accompanying. Intelligent children are anticipated to be able to provide for their parents' future needs. Besides, children are also perceived as the lineage generation's successors. Children are also seen as successors to the lineage of their family and as caretakers for their parents in their old age (Kasnodirahardjo, 2016; Nuutila & Salanterä, 2006). Having children is a long-term investment in well-being (Parker et al., 2019). This supports the argument in child marriage families that view children as investments.

The Suitability of Child Marriage Families to the Government Program

On Bawean Island, families who engage in child marriage primarily view children as a burden. Although it has already been stated, the claim of those who engage in child marriage families does not support the idea of childlessness. Those who engage in child marriage want and anticipate having children as the line's future heirs, although some participants at the time of the interview have not been blessed with children. Couples who marry as children but have not yet had children do not qualify as supporters of family planning. Like those who have children, the majority of couples adopt family planning practices to reduce the number of children and their geographical spread.

The presented outcome is unforeseen, as it contradicts the main hypothesis that child marriage has a significant impact on fertility. This hypothesis was based on the assumption that child marriage provides a longer reproductive time and thus increases the chances of fertility contributions (Ondiba & Matsui, 2019). However, further analysis has revealed additional factors, such as the difficulty of socioeconomic access, which have led to a better understanding of the situation. This choice is easy to defend, considering the affordability of the location, job availability, and increasing economic demands.

The paper presents findings related to significant issues. Specifically, we address several anomalies, including the large age difference between husbands and wives in child marriage families. The average age of wives in these families is 16 years old, while husbands are 30 years old at the time of marriage. This age difference constitutes child exploitation and is considered child abuse from a legal perspective (Rumble et al., 2020; Wismayanti et al., 2019). Second, the data shows that although the prevalence of child marriage tends to increase annually, the annual growth rate has significantly decreased over the past three years, reaching -18.21% (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Gresik, 2021). This indicates the success of Indonesia's family planning program (Utomo et al., 2021).

In many Latin American countries, such as Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Mexico, family planning activities, policies, or programs were initiated and expanded in the 1960s and 1970s. These initiatives have marked success in recent years (Götmark & Andersson, 2020). Although Brazil does not have a formal family planning program, certain related services have been incorporated into the national maternal and child health program in recognition of the right of individuals and couples to access family planning and reproductive health information and supplies (Leite & Gupta, 2007). Brazil faced a long period of lack of population information regarding contraceptive behavior, especially regarding the broader availability of contraceptive methods (da Silva-Filho et al., 2022). Furthermore, reports indicate that in Brazil, the leading causes of mortality among women of reproductive age per 100,000 are neoplasms (25.34), diseases of the circulatory system (20.15), external causes (18.69), infectious and parasitic conditions (8.79), and respiratory system diseases (6.37) (Albert et al., 2023).

Third, the understanding of child marriage offenders should consider the age gap and number of children. On the other hand, it is necessary to prevent the occurrence of child marriage by motivating and financially supporting women to complete their studies. Contrarily, the readiness of child marriage offenders to adopt family planning and participate in the village-level family planning program has little effect on the pace of population growth. This is because individuals must be informed or understand how to interpret fertility. Regulating marriage by law, regardless of educational and economic reach, is far less effective.

Conclusion

The study results show that fertility is interpreted in three ways among families engaging in child marriage in Bawean Island: as a burden (cost), as a means to strengthen marriage, and investment. The interpretation of fertility as a burden contradicts the views of child-free individuals who choose not to have children. All study participants reported that they intended to have children. Families who practice child marriage aim to regulate the number of children they have and the age gap between them to avoid the economic burden. In these families, fertility is considered crucial for maintaining the marriage. The expectation is that having children will bring comfort and happiness to mothers at home and strengthen marital ties through a commitment to togetherness. This is particularly true for child marriage families on Bawean Island. Fertility is often viewed as an investment, with children expected to provide utilitarian (economic) value by becoming guardians and caregivers for their parents in the future, as well as contributing to family income. Child marriage families often make arrangements to limit the gap between births and the number of children due to economic circumstances. Future research should test the hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between the population growth rate and the increase in child marriage practices on Bawean Island. The success of Indonesia's family planning program has attracted all families, including those who practice child marriage. Additional research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the family planning program policies implemented by policymakers.

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