

## Patterns of Action in Early Marriage: A Literature Review from Religious and Systems Theory Perspective

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**ABSTRACT.** Early marriage remains a complex social phenomenon influenced by cultural traditions, religious values, economic conditions, and social structures. This study aims to analyze the patterns of action underlying early marriage practices through the perspectives of social action theory, systems theory, and religion. The research employed a qualitative literature review method by analyzing scientific publications, books, journal articles, and research reports obtained from reputable databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. A total of 52 relevant sources published between 2015 and 2025 were selected through screening and thematic classification processes. The findings indicate that early marriage is predominantly driven by non-rational social actions, particularly affective and traditional actions shaped by emotions, customs, and social pressures. However, religion also functions as a form of value-oriented rationality, where marriage is viewed as a moral effort to avoid deviant behavior and preserve social values. From the perspective of Talcott Parsons' systems theory, early marriage represents a mechanism of social adaptation, integration, goal attainment, and cultural maintenance within society. Meanwhile, Niklas Luhmann's General Systems Theory explains that family systems create internal communication boundaries and agreements that legitimize early marriage practices. This study contributes theoretically by integrating social action theory, systems theory, and religious perspectives into a comprehensive framework for understanding early marriage as both an individual and systemic social phenomenon. The study recommends strengthening educational access, reproductive health literacy, and contextual religious understanding to reduce the prevalence of early marriage in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** *Early marriage, social action, religion, system theory*

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### INTRODUCTION

Early marriage remains a complex social phenomenon that continues to attract global scholarly attention because of its multidimensional impacts on education, health, social relations, and family resilience. The United Nations Population Fund reports that millions of girls worldwide are still married before reaching adulthood, particularly in developing countries where cultural traditions, economic limitations, and religious interpretations strongly influence family decisions (Pourtaheri et al., 2023). In Indonesia, although the government has revised the minimum legal age for marriage through Law No. 16 of 2019, cases of underage marriage continue to increase in several regions, particularly through applications for marriage dispensation in Religious Courts. This indicates that legal reform alone has not been sufficient to reduce the practice of early marriage, as social, cultural, and religious dimensions continue to shape community behavior.

Previous studies have generally examined early marriage from psychological, economic, health, or educational perspectives (Fitria et al., 2024) (Nhampoca & Maritz, 2024). Factors such as poverty, low educational attainment, parental influence, and adolescent emotional immaturity as dominant causes of early marriage (Dini et al., 2024). More recent studies also highlight the influence of social media exposure, weak reproductive health literacy, and patriarchal cultural systems on the persistence of child marriage practices in Southeast Asia (Subramanee et al., 2022) (Retnowulandari et al., 2024). However, most existing studies focus primarily on causal factors and social impacts, while limited attention has been given to understanding early marriage as a form of social action shaped by subjective meanings, religious motivations, and systemic social interactions. Theoretically, studies on early marriage are still fragmented. Research grounded in sociological perspectives often emphasizes either individual agency or structural determinants separately. Very few studies integrate Max Weber's theory of social action with systems theories developed by Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann to explain how early marriage emerges through interactions between personal motives, religious values, family systems, and broader social structures (Deflem, 1998). In addition, religion is frequently positioned merely as a normative justification for marriage, rather than being critically analyzed as a motivational system that shapes rational and non-rational social actions. This theoretical gap demonstrates the need for a more integrative analysis that combines religious perspectives with systems theory to understand the patterns of action underlying early marriage practices.

From Weber's perspective, social action is closely related to subjective meaning and rationality. Early marriage can therefore be interpreted not only as an emotional or traditional action but also as a value-oriented rational action influenced by religious beliefs and moral considerations (Arikarani & Mahersal, 2024). Meanwhile, Parsons' systems theory explains that society functions through interconnected structures that maintain social equilibrium through adaptation, integration, goal attainment, and latency (AGIL). In this context, early marriage can be understood as part of a social mechanism used by families and communities to maintain social order and cultural stability. Furthermore, Luhmann's systems theory provides an important perspective for understanding how family systems construct communication boundaries and internal agreements that legitimize early marriage practices within their own social environments. Although religion often encourages marriage as a means of preserving morality and preventing deviant behavior, religious teachings also emphasize psychological, emotional, and economic readiness in establishing a family (In'am Awaluddin, 2025). Consequently, the relationship between religion and early marriage becomes sociologically dynamic and cannot be understood solely through normative interpretations. This issue becomes increasingly relevant in contemporary Muslim societies where religious values intersect with legal systems, local traditions, and social expectations.

Based on these issues, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: How can early marriage be understood as a form of social action from Weber's perspective? How do Parsons' and Luhmann's systems theories explain the patterns and dynamics of early marriage practices? And How do religious values shape the motivations and legitimacy of early marriage within social systems? Therefore, this study aims to analyze the patterns of action in early marriage through a literature review by integrating perspectives from social action theory, systems theory, and religion. The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of sociological studies on early marriage and practically to provide a more comprehensive understanding for policymakers, educators, and religious institutions in addressing early marriage issues in contemporary society.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative literature review method to analyze patterns of action in early marriage from the perspectives of religion and systems theory. A literature review was selected because it enables researchers to synthesize findings from previous studies, identify theoretical trends, and critically examine conceptual relationships among early marriage, religious values, and

sociological systems theory. According to Mestika Zed, literature review research involves systematic activities of collecting, evaluating, interpreting, and synthesizing scientific literature relevant to a particular topic.

The data sources used in this study consisted of secondary data obtained from reputable academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Garuda Portal. The literature included international and national journal articles, books, research reports, conference proceedings, and official documents related to early marriage, sociology of religion, and systems theory. To maintain the relevance and novelty of the analysis, the study prioritized publications from the last ten years (2015–2025), although several classical sociological references were also included to strengthen the theoretical framework, particularly the works of Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, and Niklas Luhmann. The literature search process used several keywords and keyword combinations, including “early marriage,” “child marriage,” “social action theory,” “systems theory,” “religion and marriage,” “Weber social action,” “Parsons AGIL,” and “Luhmann systems theory.” The search process initially identified approximately 85 scientific publications. After conducting screening based on relevance, publication quality, duplication, and alignment with the research objectives, 52 articles and scholarly sources were selected for in-depth analysis. The inclusion criteria in this study consisted of: publications discussing early marriage or child marriage, studies related to sociological, religious, or systems theory perspectives, peer-reviewed journal articles or reputable academic publications, literature published in Indonesian or English.

Meanwhile, literature lacking clear methodological explanations, non-academic opinion articles, and sources unrelated to the focus of the study were excluded from the analysis. The data analysis technique employed was qualitative content analysis combined with thematic analysis. The selected literature was systematically read, classified, compared, and interpreted based on several analytical themes, including factors causing early marriage, forms of social action, religious motivations, family systems, social structures, and patterns of social interaction. The analysis process further involved synthesizing the theories of Weber, Parsons, and Luhmann to construct an integrative conceptual understanding of early marriage as a social phenomenon shaped by subjective meaning, religious values, and systemic social relations. Through this approach, the study aimed to generate a comprehensive and critical interpretation of the patterns of action underlying early marriage practices in contemporary society.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

The literature review reveals that early marriage is a complex social phenomenon shaped by the interaction of religious, cultural, economic, familial, and societal factors. From a religious perspective, early marriage is often influenced by values, norms, and interpretations of religious teachings, while systems theory highlights the interconnected roles of family, community, educational institutions, and broader social structures in shaping individual decisions. The analysis identifies several recurring patterns of action that explain how these factors interact and contribute to the occurrence of early marriage, as presented in the following sections.

Table 1. Summary of literature findings on patterns of action in early marriage

Author	Research Focus	Main Findings	Theoretical Perspective	Relevance to This Study
(Suryani & Kudus, 2022)	Factors causing early marriage in Banten	Early marriage is influenced by education, economy, psychology, environment, and parental factors	Sociological approach	Shows that early marriage is strongly shaped by social and structural conditions

(Elisabet, 2016)	Causes and impacts of early marriage among adolescents	Parents' approval and adolescents' personal desire are dominant causes	Social behavior perspective	Explains the role of family interaction in decision-making
Max Weber	Social action theory	Early marriage may occur through affective, traditional, and value-oriented rational actions	Social action theory	Provides analytical framework for understanding motivations behind early marriage
Talcott Parsons	Systems and AGIL theory	Society maintains social stability through adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency	Structural functionalism	Explains how communities normalize and regulate early marriage practices
Niklas Luhmann	General systems theory	Family systems create communication boundaries and internal agreements regarding marriage	Systems theory	Clarifies how family systems legitimize early marriage internally
(Ernawati et al., 2023)	Child marriage in Southeast Asia	Poverty, digital media exposure, and weak reproductive literacy increase early marriage practices	Contemporary sociological analysis	Demonstrates modernization factors affecting adolescent marriage decisions
(Wilkinson et al., 2024)	Religious and cultural influences on child marriage	Religious interpretation and local traditions often reinforce early marriage legitimacy	Sociology of religion	Supports analysis of religion as a value-oriented rational motive
(Hjelm, 2018)	Religion and social legitimacy	Religion functions as social legitimization for collective norms and actions	Sociology of religion	Explains how religion strengthens social acceptance of early marriage
(Mustofa, 2019)	Religion and social solidarity	Religion creates shared morality and collective consciousness	Functional sociology	Shows the role of religion in maintaining social cohesion through marriage norms
(Munib, A., Sukmana, O., Soedarwo, 2024)	Marriage dispensation dynamics in Indonesia	Many underage marriage dispensations are driven by premarital pregnancy and social pressure	Legal-sociological approach	Demonstrates interaction between legal systems, family pressure, and social values

## Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that early marriage is not merely an individual decision but a complex social action shaped by the interaction of cultural traditions, religious values,

emotional considerations, economic pressures, and social systems. Based on the literature analyzed, most early marriage practices tend to emerge from non-rational forms of social action, particularly affective and traditional actions, as conceptualized by Max Weber. Affective action is reflected in adolescents' emotional attachment and impulsive decisions to marry based on feelings of love or social pressure, while traditional action appears through inherited customs and cultural expectations that normalize marriage at a young age. These findings are consistent with studies showing that communities with strong patriarchal traditions and low educational attainment are more likely to sustain early marriage practices (Afunugo, 2025) (Kebingin, Benedikta & Riyanto, 2022).

However, this study also found that religion may function as a form of value-oriented rationality. In Weberian terms, value-oriented rational action occurs when individuals perform actions based on deeply held values regardless of practical consequences (Fatah, 2024). In many Muslim communities, marriage is perceived as a moral solution to avoid premarital relationships and adultery, thereby positioning early marriage as a religiously meaningful action. This finding supports the sociological argument of Peter L. Berger that religion serves as a legitimizing system that gives moral meaning to social actions and institutions (Hasanzadeh & Elmi, 2025). Religion therefore becomes both a moral framework and a social justification for early marriage practices. Nevertheless, Islamic teachings also emphasize the importance of physical, psychological, and economic maturity before entering marriage, indicating that religious arguments supporting early marriage are often interpreted selectively within particular social contexts. From the perspective of Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism, early marriage can be understood as part of a broader social system that seeks to maintain equilibrium and collective order. Parsons believed that four essential requirements must be met for a society to function. These four requirements are known as AGIL, an acronym for Adaptation (A), Goal Attainment (G), Integration (I), and Latency (L) (Chotim, 2022). For a society to survive, it must carry out these functions, as illustrated in Figure 1.



Fig. 1. Interrelationship between AGIL components in Parson's theory

Through Parsons' AGIL framework, the practice of early marriage reflects adaptation to community norms, particularly norms concerning family honor, sexuality, and social morality (Rohman & Rifqi, 2024). Families and communities attempt to achieve collective goals by encouraging marriage as a mechanism for preserving social stability and preventing social deviance. The integration function is visible in the involvement of religious leaders, community figures, and local authorities in legitimizing and facilitating marriage processes, especially in cases requiring legal dispensation. Meanwhile, the latency function operates through the transmission of cultural and religious values across generations, allowing early marriage traditions to persist within certain communities.

The findings further indicate that social structures significantly influence adolescents' decisions to marry early. Economic hardship remains one of the strongest contributing factors identified in the literature. Families experiencing poverty often perceive marriage as a strategy to reduce economic burdens or secure social protection for their children. This finding aligns with structural sociological perspectives that individual actions are closely connected to broader socioeconomic conditions (Manstead, 2018). Low educational attainment also reinforces the cycle

of early marriage because limited access to education reduces adolescents' opportunities to develop critical thinking, reproductive health literacy, and future career aspirations. Consequently, early marriage becomes normalized as a practical life pathway rather than a social problem (Zulfa et al., 2024). The analysis using Niklas Luhmann's General Systems Theory provides a deeper understanding of how family systems operate in early marriage practices. Luhmann argues that social systems are autopoietic, meaning they reproduce and regulate themselves through internal communication (Nielsen, 2024). In the context of early marriage, two families form a closed communication system in which agreements, negotiations, and decisions regarding marriage are managed internally (Almencion et al., 2024). External actor such as communities, village authorities, or Religious Courts become involved only when necessary to legitimize or facilitate the marriage process (Rosyadi & Kahar, 2023). This finding suggests that early marriage is not solely an individual action but also a product of family-based communication systems that prioritize internal stability and collective reputation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that early marriage is a multidimensional social phenomenon shaped by the interaction between individual motivations, religious values, cultural traditions, family systems, and broader social structures. Based on Max Weber's social action theory, most early marriage practices can be categorized as non-rational actions, particularly affective and traditional actions influenced by emotions, customs, and social pressures. Nevertheless, religion also functions as a form of value-oriented rationality, where marriage is perceived as a moral effort to avoid sinful behavior and preserve social morality. From the perspective of Talcott Parsons' systems theory, early marriage reflects a mechanism through which society seeks to maintain equilibrium, social order, and cultural continuity through adaptation, integration, goal attainment, and latency functions. Meanwhile, Niklas Luhmann's General Systems Theory demonstrates that family systems operate through internal communication and self-regulating agreements that legitimize and sustain early marriage practices. Theoretically, this study contributes to sociological discourse by integrating social action theory, systems theory, and religious perspectives into a comprehensive framework for understanding the persistence of early marriage in contemporary society.

The findings imply that efforts to reduce early marriage should not focus solely on legal regulations but also address religious interpretations, educational inequality, economic vulnerability, and family communication patterns. Strengthening adolescents' access to education, reproductive health literacy, and family resilience programs is essential to minimize the structural and cultural factors encouraging early marriage. Religious leaders and community institutions also need to promote contextual understandings of marriage that emphasize psychological, emotional, and economic maturity in accordance with religious teachings. This study is limited to a literature review approach; therefore, future research is recommended to employ empirical methods such as qualitative field studies, ethnography, or mixed-method research to explore the lived experiences of adolescents, families, and religious institutions involved in early marriage practices across different sociocultural contexts.

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