

Early Marriage and Divorce among Meranao Women

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Abstract- This is an exploratory case study on the experiences of the Meranao women who were married at an early age and got divorced later. Specifically, it sought to answer the reasons behind the early marriage, the consequences of their early marriages, the reasons behind their divorce and the effect of the divorce to their lives.

The study used both qualitative and quantitative research design. Questionnaires were administered to twenty-two (22) Meranao women who were married before they reached the age of 19. The 22 respondents were asked to fill up questionnaires. From the 22 respondents, 7 of them were also asked personally by the researchers about their personal experiences in marriage and divorce. The interviews were recorded. Findings revealed that in Meranao marriage, age is not a major factor to be considered because maturity is not in the age, it is in the mental and physical capabilities of the person. Marriage is not even a question of whether it is a personal choice of the women or their parents but rather a collective decision. The parents do not decide without the consent of their daughters, and the women do not decide without the consent of the parents. Parents generally decide for the benefits of their children, and children decide also for their benefits as well.

Key words: Meranao, Early Marriage, Divorce.

I. INTRODUCTION

Early marriage is commonly practiced by the Meranaos (one of the major Muslim tribes in Southern Philippines). There are two reasons behind early marriage: it is either because of love or arranged marriage. In Meranao society, some parents arranged the marriage of their children because of economic considerations and to establish close alliances with other family so that in times of need, there are other families that could help them i.e. when election comes they can help, during economic crises many can share. In Islamic point of view early marriage is encouraged to avoid *fitna* (fornication) and *zina* (adultery). Whatever reasons for engaging the children in early marriage, it is claimed that the marriage will not last long because they are not matured enough to hold responsibilities of being married.

Child marriage, also known as early marriage, is defined as any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years old, before the girl is physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and child bearing [15].

Child marriage occurs when one or both of the spouses are below the age of 18 [37]. In Islam, early marriage is encouraged under the article 16 of the Muslim code, the minimum marrying age is 15 for both male and female [16].

Reference [30] as cited by [20], in rural customary practice in India, parental decision plays a larger role in determining marriages, specifically for their daughters. The girl has no choice as to whom she will marry or when is the time to marry. Without regarding cultural aspects, economic motives shall be the main driver of early marriage. In modern days, these practices were made unacceptable since 2001 by the UNICEF, and the practice of child marriage was classified as violation of human rights [20].

Marriage before 18 is a violation of human rights, compromising the development of girls and often resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, with little education and poor vocational training reinforcing the gendered nature of poverty [39]. Reference [40] recognized that marriage before the age of 18 years old should not be permitted since children do not have the 'full maturity and capacity to act. Reference [27] stated that once married, the girl is expected to assume the multiple roles of wife, daughter-in-law, housekeeper, caretaker and a mother. This transition can be psychologically and emotionally stressful for a young girl.

Reference [19] as cited by [44] was of the opinion that early marriage will likely results to early divorce that is why it is not surprising that teenage marriages usually fail. The probability of divorce in the early marriage was nearly four times as high for couples married while still under twenty years old than for couples who were twenty five years or older at the time of marriage. An early marriage is associated in the long term with a higher probability of divorce and separation. In turn, marriage dissolution creates social and economic challenges for women who, as a single parent, often assume full responsibility for dependent family members [34]. Studies of marital happiness tend to show that there is a definite relationship between early marriage and subsequent unhappiness and divorce ([17] as cited by [23]).

The researchers observed that most Meranaos are still practicing early marriage. Because of this observation this case study aims to know the reasons behind early marriage and divorce among Meranao women in Lanao del Sur and what are the experiences and challenges that the marriage and the divorce provided to their lives. Using the narratives elicited from the participants this study hopes to understand the individual experiences of Meranao women on their early marriage and divorce.

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II. METHODOLOGY

This is an exploratory case study on early marriage and divorce among Meranao women using in-depth interview and survey questionnaires.

The researchers prepared questionnaires and administered them to the 22 respondents in different places in Lanao del Sur and Marawi City. These respondents were Meranao women who were married before they reached the age of 19 and who were divorced later. The researchers selected them according to their availability. Snowball technique was employed by asking friends and relatives who knew Meranao women married when they were young and later divorced. Twenty-two respondents were identified in the following places and/or institutions, the composition follows: 8 respondents from Malabang, Lanao del Sur; 5 from Philippine Muslim Teachers College in Marawi City; 1 from Barangay Mapandi, Marawi City; 1 from Bacolod Municipality of Lanao del Sur; 3 from MSU campus, Marawi City; 1 from Tubok National High School, Malabang, Lanao del Sur; 1 respondent from Municipality of Buadi Puso Buntong, Lanao del Sur; 1 respondent from Barangay Lilod Madaya, Marawi City and 1 respondent from Jamiatul Philippine Al Islamia, Marawi City. From the 22 respondents, 7 of them gone through depth interviews. The researchers asked about their personal experiences in marriage and divorce. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and content analysis was used in analyzing the data. Pseudonyms were assigned to the interviewees to protect their identity.

III. FINDINGS

This study explored the experiences of Meranao girls who were married at an early age and later divorced. Their experiences were revealed in the questionnaires they were asked to fill up and in the personal interviews conducted by the researchers with them. In this study many interesting and intriguing findings have been discovered, most of them are contrary to the related literatures.

Findings revealed that the marriages arranged by parents and personal choice of the girl have almost the same frequency count. Personal decision of the girl means that the girl was the one who initiated for the marriage because she was in love with the boy and her parents have to agree for her marriage; or the parents knew that their daughter was seriously in love to a boy and so they have to find way to marry off their daughter.

The data have important findings relative to popularly spreading ideas claiming that in Meranao society girl has no say in her marriage. Data shows that 46% of the marriages were initiated by the girls.

Meranao parents interfere in the marriage of their children for some reasons. Our informants claimed that their parents married them off in order to strengthen their family ties with other family. This is consistent with many studies on family. For instance, [14] asserted that early marriage in China, India, Japan and Arabia is prevalent among clans and lineages which gave economic and social support to newly married couples, and to strengthen and sustain clan. In Meranao society this is the most common reason why parents engage their children in early marriage, since they wanted their

children to be married off to the family that could provide strong ties with them. While the reason why girls made personal decision to marry was actually for love alone, they did not think of their future.

TABLE I. NATURE OF MARRIAG/PERSON WHO DECIDED FOR THE MARRIAGE

Person who decided for the marriage	f	%	Total
Parents	12	54	12
Personal decision of the girl	10	46	10
Total	22	100	22

The respondents claimed that there were many changes in their lives when they were married: they became responsible, time conscious, financially wise in spending, and more. The disadvantages of marrying early are: they have difficulty adjusting to their new roles as wife, daughter-in-law, (some became mothers), as student-wife; difficulty of casting away old habits of being children, and more. However, more advantages than disadvantages were claimed by most of them.

Findings also revealed the cause of their divorce was because of their attitudes towards each other. The next reason was the intervention of their mother-in-law.

His attitude towards me and there was a time that he hurt me, not physically. It's not that he hurt me physically like slapping me but it's just some sort of misunderstanding which lead us to argue with each other. (Informant 1)

We divorce maybe because his tired of me. My attitude before did not change. I always have my friends company and I am always not in the house and going home at late hour. Yes because I am not comfortable being with him. (Informant 2)

I am a good wife to him. It was because of his parents that we don't agree with each other. Our financial is good. My mother in law do everything to break us. Yes, because of my mother in law. (Informant 4)

Our relationship was really good. We are more like best friends than couple. The problem was just because of the misunderstanding of our families. We were included in their conflict. (Informant 5)

The reason why we divorced is because of financial matters. I'd let him handle our business or financial matters only to find out that he was using it for drug using. He was always telling lies like he was being snatched, where in fact he was just using it for his vice, drugs. So that was the reason of our divorced. (Informant 6).

TABLE II: CAUSES OF DIVORCE

Causes	f	%	Total
Incompatible	12	54	12
Husband has another wife	2	9	2
In-laws interference	5	22	5
Family conflict	1	4	1
Finance	1	4	1
Role of failure of the wife	1	4	1
Total	22	97	22

It is expected that divorce has effects on the lives of the informants. These effects may be beneficial or disadvantageous to them. Generally, the informants are glad that they were divorced by their husbands. They are free again as they said it. It means that during their marriage life, they were actually captives. The table below will give us some points to consider.

TABLE III: EFFECT OF DIVORCE TO THE GIRL/WIFE

Effect of divorce to the girls	f	%	Total
Happy	3	42	3
Ashamed	2	28	2
No effect	2	28	2
Total	7	100	7

There were 7 informants who were asked about their views on early marriage. Majority of the informants said that as long as the girl is matured enough to enter into marriage it is alright. The following are their answers:

1. Girls must enjoy life first before getting married. It means that when a girl is married she could hardly enjoy.
2. Early marriage should not be permitted. In other words it is not good to be married early in life.
3. Girls should think of the future first before getting married, the couples should have work. Couples who have no sufficient income are facing difficulty in life. Love alone is not a reason to get married.
4. Marriage should be at the right age in order to understand each other.
5. Early marriage has advantages and disadvantages, it is good and bad. Good in a way that you have company and bad because you cannot balance your time with your studies and husband.
6. Early marriage is a burden if both couples are not financially stable. It is also the source of conflict between the couples.
7. There are many responsibilities in getting married, girls should think about them seriously first before getting married.

IV. CONCLUSION

Findings revealed that in Meranao marriage, age is not a major factor to be considered because maturity is not in the age, it is in the mental and physical capabilities of the person. Marriage is not even a question of whether it is a personal choice of the girl or the parents. In the Meranao society it is

both a decision of parents and girls. The Parents do not decide without the consent of their daughters, and the girls do not decide without the consent of the parents. Is this not perfect arrangement for marriage?

Meranao society also allows divorce when the relationship becomes worst and cannot be patched up anymore. Why keep couples to stay together when they could not see each other eye to eye? And when divorce is done, couples became very happy. The girl can ask for divorce also; it is not only the boy who has the right to do so.

The role adjustment difficulty is always there no matter how young or old a person. The researchers would even think that it is easier among young people than those who are older. So this is not a hindrance to marriage.

In Meranao society, in-laws (especially mother-in-laws) are always the problem in marital union. At present there are many Islamic seminars for women, and this topic on in-laws interference should be the major topic for discussion. Islamic prescription on in-laws relationship must be treated in length.

Lastly, the researchers believe that the findings are not conclusive and it is therefore suggested that more studies must be conducted on the same topic.

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