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# PROFESSIONAL DISCOURSES ON EARLY MARRIAGE IN MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:**

Early marriage involves individuals typically aged 18 to 24, though it often encompasses teenagers whose psychological and socio-economic readiness is lacking. Despite global mandates to eliminate child and early marriages, the practice continues in Malaysia due to complex cultural, religious, and socio-economic drivers. This study aims to identify the demographic characteristics, determine the driving factors, and explore professional perceptions regarding early marriage among the Malay community in Malaysia. Employing a qualitative cross-sectional design, in-depth interviews were conducted with six professionals—including counsellors, Syariah lawyers, and psychology officers—selected via purposive sampling. The findings reveal that early marriages predominantly involve the low-income (B40)

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demographic. Factors driving these unions include a religious intent to prevent premarital sins, social issues leading to out-of-wedlock pregnancies, problematic family environments, and poverty. Experts display nuanced perceptions; while a minority acknowledge potential positive outcomes given immense family and financial support, the majority strongly discourage the practice due to the severe socio-economic and emotional repercussions it imposes. The study concludes that early marriages severely limit educational and career trajectories, demanding comprehensive interventions such as modern sex education, stringent religious guidance, and accessible family counselling to safeguard the well-being of young adolescents.

**Keyword:**

Early Marriage, Malay Community, Out-Of-Wedlock

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## Introduction

Over the past decade, issues related to early marriage or child marriage garnering attention in local and international news. However, little is understood about the local factors influencing young couples' decisions to marry at a young age especially in the context of Malaysian society specifically on the Malay community. Marriage in simple terms is the union of two people to form a family in which is widely defined as a socially and legally recognized partnership that specifies the partners' responsibilities and rights (Britannica, 2023). As a human, marriage aims to fulfil the desire needs such as psychological, sexual, material, and spiritual needs (Bilal & Rasool, 2020) by offering intimacy, commitment, friendship, affection, sexual satisfaction, companionship, and opportunities for emotional growth (Bhattarai et al., 2022).

Malaysia, as a Muslim-majority country, aware that the issues related to early marriage is not an issue that exist solely, but it is a combination of different causes and affect tangled to one another in which related to cultural norms, legal dualities, and religious principles. Generally, the minimum age of marriage according to Islamic Family Law is 18 for men and 16 for women (Sahwa & Sivabalan, 2023). In many parts of Malaysia, the practice remains culturally accepted. Most of the couple who involved or experience with early marriage, prone to face higher risk of experiencing or suffering with school dropouts and enduring long-term monetary poverty (Rahayu & Wahyuni, 2020). Divorce rate a mong young Muslim couples indicates that about 45.8% accredited to emotional immaturity as well as financial instability (Adnan, 2023). The cultural importance of early marriages is determined by the impact of religious, traditional, and cultural norms. Communities use specific motives to encourage young people to get married, and these reasons are closely connected to their attitudes towards sex and sexuality. For example, women are often forced to become mothers at an early age due to cultural and religiously motivated beliefs that sexuality is only sacred when it is aimed at creating new life

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(Miedema et. al., 2021). Additionally, early marriage is often justified by referring to potential benefits that it can bring to the family and the community (Lowe et. al., 2019). Therefore, it is of particular interest to study the phenomenon in those countries which still actively encourage the early marriage of women. Such countries are Bangladesh, Nepal, Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Gambia (Miedema et. al., 2021), where the percentage of early marriages decreased from 58 to 30% during the last two decades but is still relatively high, and several countries of the Middle East (Lowe et. al., 2019). This study aims to discover the main characteristics of early marriages in the Malay community and explore the views of professionals who have been involved in related cases.

## Literature Review

### *Characteristics of Those Involved in Early Marriages*

Recent local and international studies demonstrate a link between low socio-economic status and low academic achievement. Syifana et al. (2023) and Kohno et al. (2020) establish that early marriage is characteristic of family poverty, as parents often seek to offload the financial responsibility of raising a daughter onto her husband. In addition, Massia & Tarshini (2023) argue that early marriage diminishes a woman's chances of attaining higher education, which limits the wife's socioeconomic independence, increasing the likelihood of intergenerational transmission of poverty and domestic violence. Early marriage also hastens the mother's fertility rate and has negative consequences for the well-being of the bride and her children (Sagalova et al., 2021).

### *Factors Driving Early Marriages*

Early marriages are often influenced by economic, unplanned pregnancies, and religion-related factors. A girl's likelihood to wed before reaching adulthood increases in families living in poverty (Belachew et al., 2022). For impoverished families, teenage pregnancy presents an additional challenge, as poverty often drives parents to encourage their daughters to enter into marital ties early since such unions could be seen as an option to reduce pressure on the family's finances, shifting the responsibility to the groom (Belachew et al., 2022). However, a parent's responsibility is to ensure the wellbeing and future of their offspring. In the Malaysian context, the avoidance of zina (adultery) is advanced as a prime reason for early marriage (Kohno et al., 2020). In a similar manner, societal-related issues, such as avoiding bring shame upon the family due to out-of-wedlock pregnancy, can prompt parents to ensure their daughters are married despite their young age (Saleh et al., 2022).

In addition, family problems and broken homes can also trigger a minor into an early marriage as a means to escape their troubled family or abusive parents. Within the Malaysian context, the desire to avoid zina (premarital sexual relations) is often cited as a key reason for early marriage (Kohno et al., 2020). Likewise, societal issues such as unplanned pregnancy outside of marriage can compel parents into arranging early marriages to avoid bringing shame to the family (Saleh et al.2022).

Inaddition, unhealthy home life or disturbed families can also be a contributing factor that encourages teens to get married early as a means to escape.

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### *Social and Psychological Implications*

The modern literature highlights the significant social and psychological challenges associated with early marriages. Javad Yoosefi Lebni et al. claim that forced marriages lead to gender inequalities, deprivation of women's freedom and domestic violence (Lebni et al., 2023). Eliner et al. (2022) emphasize that teenage pregnancy might result in maternal complications, including eclampsia and preterm birth. In general, all the cited sources agree that early marriages are associated with severe social, medical, and psychological outcomes (Lebni et al., 2023). Hynek et al. and Nishat et al. add that young brides often experience stress, anxiety, and a low sense of life due to the loss of financial independence and the inability to handle family problems effectively (Nishat et al., 2023).

### *Theoretical Framework*

To understand the precocious matrimony phenomenon, this study will rely on the theoretical framework of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). According to TPB, human behaviour depends on three variables: the person's attitude towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Syifana et al., 2023). In relation to early marriage, attitude reflects how people view the phenomenon and the factors affecting them. In turn, subjective norms explain how the fears of social disapproval influence young people's decisions to marry early. Lastly, perceived behavioural control highlights how socio-economic factors contribute to the problem (Syifana et al., 2023).

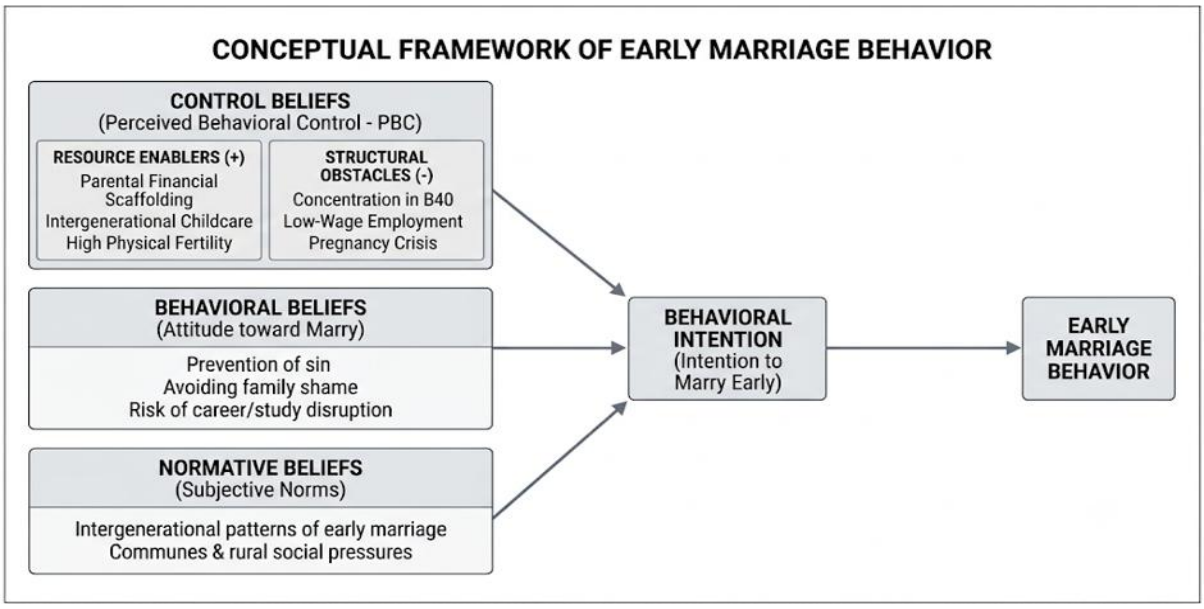



**Figure 1: Adaption and Adoption of Theory of Planned Behaviour Framework**

In the context of the Malay-Muslim community, the perspectives on early marriage are informed by a combination of ethical and pragmatic approaches. According to the predominant religious beliefs, early marriage is viewed as a necessary measure to prevent premarital sex among the young people (zina). In addition, marriages are considered a means to restore the honour of families that have brought up a pregnant daughter. Besides, marriage is a tool to protect the young people from the burden of the ongoing pregnancy. Malay community subjective norms can be very influential throughout the individual's life. Families which have

International Journal of Modern Trends in Social Sciences
IJMTSS
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Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 55-70

a history of early marriage and regard it as normal have a strong influence on their children and hold views about early marriage. Such subjective norms are dependent on the location. Communities in rural areas have limited opportunities for education and have early marriages due to cultural traditions. However, in urban and suburban locations, close contact with peers can make adolescents more vulnerable. Thus, instead of viewing early marriage as a tradition, families choose it as a way to protect their children from negative external influences.

According to the perception of control theory, the tendency of these young couples to plan to get married can be explained by the fact that for them, the prospect of marriage is an "illusion of control." The main reason for this is their low level of education and often only secondary employment. Most often, these young people belong to the B40 of society and have no or limited opportunities for independent income. Hence, the aspiration to create their own household in the near future seems distant and unrealistic, and they are ready to rely even on the resources of their parents.

When considering the effects of vulnerability to marital strain, aggravated by the necessity to accommodate unplanned pregnancy, such circumstances eliminate alternative options and force the couples to enter hasty, judicial marriages. Besides, the gap between the couples' sincere desire to build a happy household and the objective lack of their financial prospects and psychological maturity substantially diminishes behavioural control, thus aggravating the likelihood of marital strain and dissolution.

## Methodology

To generate an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of early marriage, this study employed qualitative study using cross-sectional research design (Vasileiou et al., 2018). As opposed to studying the target population of youths, this study focused on the professionals involved in the issues surrounding early marriages. Purposive sampling was used to select six (6) respondents consisting of marriage counsellors, psychology officers, Syariah lawyers, and sociology lecturers who would provide an in-depth insight into the issue from their professional perspective (Mason, 2010). Data was collected via in-depth interviews session lasting between 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis to systematically identify, evaluate, and narrate the overarching patterns within the qualitative data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Informants**

| Informant Code | Gender | Occupation / Professional Role | Area of Expertise | Location | Level of Education | Years of Experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **R01** | Female | Senior Obstetrician & Gynaecologist | Maternal & Reproductive Health | Kuala Lumpur | Doctoral / Specialist Medical Degree | Experienced Specialist (10 years) |
| **R02** | Female | Academic Researcher & Sociology Lecturer | Sociology & Family Development | Johor | PhD / Doctorate | Mid-to-Senior Academic (19 years) |

International Journal of Modern Trends in Social Sciences
IJMTSS
EISSN: 2600-8777
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 55-70

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **R03** | Male | District Kadi / Syariah Court Marriage Registrar | Islamic Family Law & Marital Affairs | Johor | Bachelor / Master in Syariah | Senior (20 years) |
| **R04** | Female | Syariah Lawyer & Family Law Practitioner | Syariah Family Litigation | Selangor | Bachelor in Syariah Law (LLB Syariah) | Mid-Career Professional (17 years) |
| **R05** | Male | Psychology Officer & Shelter Home Caseworker | Adolescent Psychology & Rehabilitation | Negeri Sembilan | Degree in Psychology / Social Work | Mid-Career Professional (15 years) |
| **R06** | Male | School Counsellor & Community Welfare Officer | Student Counselling & Social Welfare | Johor | Degree in Counselling / Education | Experienced School Counsellor (23 years) |

## Findings

### *Characteristics of the Malay Community in Early Marriages*

***Age Gaps of Malay Young Couples in Early Marriage:*** Professionals noted that most couples marrying early are in their early 20s, often right after finishing SPM or during college. Apart from that, there are alarming instances of teenagers marrying during or immediately after high school. It was also indicated that large age gaps happen usually with an older man in which they provide financial stability. Moreover, specific family pressures or circumstances like rehabilitation or unplanned pregnancies found to be an exceptional case involving some of the young teen.

*"Most of those getting married are on average in their 20s... They were recent high school graduates, students. It's rare that we receive couples younger than that. But there are cases, though they are quite rare."*

(R03/ 21 June 2024/ 9:00 pm/ Johor)

*"I have experience visiting children's shelters. Many of the 16-year-olds, particularly Malays, get married either during or immediately after completing their rehabilitation at the shelter, especially those who are pregnant."*

(R05/ 25 June 2024/ 10:00 pm/ Negeri Sembilan)

*"There are also cases where they are the same age... Usually, this happens in the final semester (STPM). But those who marry right after SPM are probably fewer now. Even then, it might be due to family pressure..."*

(R02/ 21 June 2024/ 4:00 pm/ Johor)

*"I've seen cases where the girl is 19 and the man is sometimes 25 or 27... there's an age gap of about 3 to 5 years."*

(R04/ 25 June 2024/ 3:00 pm/ Selangor)

International Journal of Modern Trends in Social Sciences
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Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 55-70

*"But there are also cases where individuals under 16 or 18 years old get married... Many of the 16-year-olds... get married either during or immediately after completing their rehabilitation..."*

(R05/ 25 June 2024/ 10:00 pm/ Negeri Sembilan)

***Educational Attainment***: Education levels among these young couples vary widely in which many halt their education after obtaining their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). The professional also indicates that it also mixes, ranging from those who dropped out around Form 4 to those who successfully navigated higher education. This is due to the trend is shifting away from marrying immediately after high school, with many now holding at least a diploma or degree.

*"...there are those who did not complete their schooling, meaning they only reached Form 4, and there are also students who completed SPM, as well as those who went on to obtain a degree."*

(R06/ 26 June 2024/ 3:00 pm/ Johor)

*"So, nowadays, it's rare to hear of someone who, right after SPM or STPM, gets married immediately. At least they will continue, either by pursuing a diploma... or continuing with their first degree..."*

(R02/ 21 June 2024/ 4:00 pm/ Johor)

***Couple and Family Social Economic background***: Most of them, frequently marrying within their own socioeconomic circles. Socio-economically, early marriages are heavily concentrated among the B40 (lower-income) demographic. A lack of parental guidance sometimes pushes youth toward early marriage, but this is only on the cases involving severe poverty. Informants highlighted that financial desperation often shapes the route of these youths.

*"On average, they all come from the B40 group. I haven't come across extreme poverty yet. But on average, they are indeed from the B40 group... There's no extreme poverty, just typical B40. That's what I've observed."*

*(R06/ 26 June 2024/ 3:00 pm/ Johor)*

*"However, most of those who marry early are from the moderate and low-income groups."*

*(R05/ 25 June 2024/ 10:00 pm/ Negeri Sembilan)*

*"On average, they all come from the B40 group... parents like that, if they don't educate their children properly, tend to influence their children not to work, marry, start families, and have many children..."*

(R06/ 26 June 2024/ 3:00 pm/ Johor)

**Family Planning Perspectives**: For most of these couples, having a large family isn't a top priority. In relation to this, modern young couples do not immediately prioritize having large families this is due to economic constraints and a growing awareness of family planning.

International Journal of Modern Trends in Social Sciences
IJMTSS
EISSN: 2600-8777
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 55-70

*"Most of them understand that it's not necessary to have many children, but quality is important. Or they depend on their income."*

(R02/ 21 June 2024/ 4:00 pm/ Johor)

*"But it's rare to find those with many children. I think it depends on their background, education, exposure to contraception..."*

(R01/ 21 June 2024/ 9:40 am/ Kuala Lumpur)

***Maturity:*** Stepping into adult roles forces many young couples to mature rapidly and drastically. This lead them struggles with emotional control and a desire to "win" arguments are common while some couples adapt due to the sudden onset of responsibilities.

*"Sometimes, you see, when they marry young, one of the issues is that they're young, they can't control their feelings... everyone wants to have their say, everyone wants to win, and that's what causes various problems."*

(R03/ 21 June 2024/ 9:00 pm/ Johor)

*"Maturation is present... Because they have done something big in their lives, it means they need to learn quickly and as they quickly learn, they mature quickly for them to adapt... Especially in managing their family."*

(R02/ 21 June 2024/ 4:00 pm/ Johor)

***Maternal Readiness:*** Even though many young mothers handle the physical strain surprisingly well, experts warned that physiological readiness does not equate to psychological readiness, particularly those getting pregnant under 18 as well as when marriages are rushed due to accidental pregnancies.

*"But you need to see at what age they got pregnant. Meaning to say, as the mother, her growth is already complete or not... if they get pregnant too early, like in 14 or 15, or even 16, some women their bone developments are not yet complete."*

(R01/ 21 June 2024/ 9:40 am/ Kuala Lumpur)

*"Because most of them, if you ask, they don't even want to get married. But because of unplanned pregnancies and such."*

(R05/ 25 June 2024/ 10:00 pm/ Negeri Sembilan)

***Financial Independence***: Financial independence remains a critical hurdle. It was indicates that many young couples relying on low-wage jobs or remaining financially tethered to their parents. Some of them relied on entry-level jobs as their financial survival.

*"They don't have a job. They work at gas stations or become cashiers. They don't have stable employment that guarantees a future. What they have is their piggy banks, Pa & Ma, their Papa and Mama."*

(R06/ 26 June 2024/ 3:00 pm/ Johor)

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(R06/ 26 June 2024/ 3:00 pm/ Johor)

**Factors Driving Early Marriages Among the Malay Community**

*Religious Perspective (Understanding of Islam):* The cultural and religious desire become a dominant factor to prevent premarital sexual relations (*zina*). Families often encourage young couples to marry rather than risk unauthorized relationships because they view early marriage as a proactive, faith-based decision that was guided by Islamic teachings to avoid sin.

*"What makes this happen among Malay Muslims mostly is probably due to experiences from past generations or, most importantly, the meaning of Islam itself. Meaning they take from what the Prophet advises meaning to avoid committing sins before marriage..."*

(R02/ 21 June 2024/ 4:00 pm/ Johor)

*"From what I've found, they are indeed ready for early marriage. This means that their parents are aware of early marriage and permit it to happen in order to avoid potential issues."*

(R04/ 25 June 2024/ 3:00 pm/ Selangor)

*"Maybe, it could be religion, right? You don't want your child to go around with boys and have relationships. So maybe that's why they lead their kids to get married early."*

(R01/ 21 June 2024/ 9:40 am/ Kuala Lumpur)

***Involvement in Social Issues:*** Informants bluntly identified that modern social issues and unplanned teenage pregnancies are primary catalysts for rapid, early marriages designed to preserve family dignity. Families often rush them into marriage when they engage in premarital sex and face unplanned pregnancies in order to avoid social stigma. It is marriage used as a reactive measure to "cover up" a mistake of their kids.

*"The initial factor might be to avoid zina (illicit sex) or to cover up a shame that has already occurred... Sometimes, they have already gone too far and there is a baby on the way, right? That's why they have to marry early."*

(R03/ 21 June 2024/ 9:00 pm/ Johor)

*"It may also occur when there are social problems, such as teenage pregnancy, which can eventually lead to marriage... "In certain instances, marriage functions primarily as a mechanism to conceal or rectify social transgressions. Consequently, it is not always pursued as a romantic ideal, but rather as a pragmatic resolution."*

(R05/ 25 June 2024/ 10:00 pm/ Negeri Sembilan)

***Problematic Family Backgrounds:*** The youths who come from troubled or abusive homes view marriage as an opportunity to escape and a tool to flee from their problems. The respondents argued that most of the affected young people do not have the willingness to start married life, but they do it because of the lack of security at home and they view their spouses as a different and new family and a better place to be.

International Journal of Modern Trends in Social Sciences
IJMTSS
EISSN: 2600-8777
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 55-70

*"We have quite a number of such cases. Take broken families, for instance. If a father dies and the mother remarries, the teenager feels as if they do not belong in the new family. Therefore, as soon as they find a partner, they try to escape through early marriage."*

*(R05/ 25 June 2024/ 10:00 pm/ Negeri Sembilan)*

*"Yes, I remembered about cases like this in which there is a couple. The guy comes from a broken family and then meets a girl. The girl's mother pretends not to accept him but eventually does because the girl is deeply in love with him. The guy was essentially abandoned by his family, and eventually, they got married at a young age."*

(R06/ 26 June 2024/ 3:00 pm/ Johor

***Poverty and Economic Pressure:*** Impoverished parents sometimes view their children as a financial burden. Therefore, they encourage a child to marry, hoping the new spouse can offer a better life than they can provide. It is also seen as a shift of economic responsibilities.

*"Economics is also a reason why early marriages often occur in our society... They want to try something to give their child a better life. Perhaps the parents can no longer afford it, so to change their child's fate, out of pity, they encourage their child to marry."*

*(R02/ 21 June 2024/ 4:00 pm/ Johor)*

*"If individuals come from families with low income or impoverished backgrounds, they might view marriage for their children as a way to transfer their burden to someone else, to their son-in-law or daughter-in-law."*

(R03/ 21 June 2024/ 9:00 pm/ Johor

***Location of Residence:*** Early marriages are more likely driven on where a youth lives such as based on the urban or suburban areas. While occurring universally, youths in remote or rural settings are perceived to be at a higher risk due to a lack of educational and career mobility.

*"In fact, for urban, suburban, rural, and remote areas, there is indeed an influence on early marriage. I believe that remote areas or indigenous communities within the same environment have a high potential for early marriage if they do not pursue further education."*

*(R06/ 26 June 2024/ 3:00 pm/ Johor)*

**Experts' Perception Towards Early Marriages**

***Positive or Negative Perspectives:*** Professional views early marriage from two different angles which are from positive as well as negative perspectives. According to them, marriage under 20 normally will lead to the negative context in which it related towards economic instability, disrupted education, and to a lesser extent, health risks. Whereby, early marriage form the positive stand points indicate that young wife who receives strong support from her family and husband especially if that support encourages her to continue her education, improve her economic standing, and not just act as a stay-at-home mother tend to be more acceptable.
*"In my opinion, early marriage if under 20 is more negative than positive... In terms of negatives, it might be due to economic issues, education, or health..."*

*(R01/ 21 June 2024/ 9:40 am/ Kuala Lumpur)*

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*"However, it can become a positive situation if the woman receives family support from both the partner and husband... It's also about giving the woman a chance to further her education or improve her economic status. It's not just about staying at home to take care of the children... Family and partner support is very important."*

(R01/ 21 June 2024/ 9:40 am/ Kuala Lumpur)

***Support and Encouragement:*** Experts are deeply divided on whether early marriage should be encouraged. Based on the finding, majority of experts discouraged the normalization of early marriage within the Malay community. In relation to this, those experts who firmly discourage the practice, believing the potential negative consequences outweigh any benefits for young couples today. Conversely, as long as the couple can prove they are completely prepared for married life, then experts who say early marriage is okay will only agree to it.

*"If asking my opinion, I am more inclined to not support early marriage especially within the Malay community."*

*(R06/ 26 June 2024/ 3:00 pm/ Johor)*

*" I support it as long as she is fully prepared in every aspect."*

(R03/ 21 June 2024/ 9:00 pm/ Johor)

***Justification to Encourage Early Marriage:*** The few experts who support early marriage only agree to it if the couple is completely healthy and fully prepared. Experts' belief that younger bodies are healthier and better equipped for pregnancy.

*"Actually, marrying young is a good thing because the body is still healthy, right? I mean, even if they get pregnant, their body is still okay, right?"*

*(R03/ 21 June 2024/ 9:00 pm/ Johor)*

*"Because I don't see that as an obstacle"*

(R04/ 25 June 2024/ 3:00 pm/ Selangor)

***Justification to Discourage Early Marriage:*** Experts who discourage early marriage warn against the dangers of unreadiness. Professionals argued that lacking emotional maturity and economic stability inevitably leads to marital harm due to entering a marriage unprepared.

*"If they are not ready, and if their marriage could potentially cause harm to themselves and their partner, then I do not support it."*

*(R03/ 21 June 2024/ 9:00 pm/ Johor)*

*"If they have a supportive family, the child might have more opportunities. But again! It depends on what kind of family they come from. If they come from a broken family, sometimes history might repeat itself, which is very difficult."*

(R01/ 21 June 2024/ 9:40 am/ Kuala Lumpur)

International Journal of Modern Trends in Social Sciences
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## Conclusion

This study explored the characteristics and underlying factors of early marriage within the Malay community through a professional lens. The findings reveal that the characteristics of the Malay community involved in early marriages can be identified through several traits, including age, gender, living status with family, academic background and place of residence. Apart from that, early marriage within the Malay community in Malaysia is a deeply underage and early marriage remain as entrenched, multifaceted phenomenon heavily driven by socio-economic challenges, religious misinterpretations aimed at preventing sin, and societal pressures surrounding out-of-wedlock pregnancies. Furthermore, the factors influencing the Malay community to engage in early marriages include the increased religious understanding by parents and the youth, social issues, problematic family backgrounds, the area of residence, and more. Lastly, this study highlights experts' perspectives on the issue of early marriage within the Malay community to understand their views on whether to encourage or discourage early marriages and the improvements that can be made to create beautiful and quality marriages. Thus, while the community's attitude is often driven by moral and spiritual benefits, the experts' attitude is shaped by the pragmatic socio-economic risks associated with marrying young. However, this study has a few limitations. The qualitative method, which allows for in-depth description, has limitations for generalizability beyond specific states. The informants were small and comprised only professional representatives, which may not reflect variation at the district or operational level especially the young Malay couple who experience early marriage. Based on these limitations, future research can broaden the informant's representation such as those couple who have experienced early marriage not specifically on the Malay community but also to other races.

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