

# BMJ Open In-depth examination of issues surrounding the reasons for child marriage in Kelantan, Malaysia: a qualitative study

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective** To examine individual, familial, community and societal issues surrounding the reasons for child marriage in Kelantan, Malaysia.

**Design** Qualitative study by means of semistructured interviews with women and key informants, using social-ecological model as a conceptual framework.

**Setting** Interviews were conducted in Kota Bharu district, Kelantan, a northeast state in Peninsular Malaysia.

**Participants** Eighteen women of reproductive age (18 to 44 years old) that experienced their first marriage below the age of 18, as well as five key informants, consisting of a government officer, a community leader, an officer from religious department and two mothers. The women were recruited from a reproductive health clinic. The key informants who had specialised knowledge related to child marriage were selectively chosen.

**Results** Three themes emerged that aligned with the social-ecological model: immaturity in decision-making, family poverty and religious and cultural norms.

**Conclusions** The findings imply that sex education and awareness-building activities regarding the consequences of child marriage must be implemented to eradicate child marriage in Malaysia. Such implementation must be coordinated as a team-based approach involving experts in such fields as law, religion, psychology, social-welfare and public health. In order to increase the awareness of child marriage consequences, the target for awareness must extend not only to the adolescent girls and their families, but also to the community and society at large by clearly communicating the negative consequences of and addressing the drivers for child marriage.

## INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is a controversial topic, especially in developing countries, and in countries of emerging economies such as Malaysia. We need to examine this problem from the perspective of human rights violations versus maintaining culture and tradition. The United Nations Children's Fund defines child marriage as a formal marriage or informal union in which one or both partners are below the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> Child marriage is perceived in

## Strengths and limitations of this study

- This is one of the earliest studies that explored issues surrounding the reasons for child marriage in Malaysia using the perspectives of the women as well as different stakeholders in the setting.
- This study used the social-ecological model, which describes the sphere of influence in multiple layers of individual, familial, community and societal factors, as a conceptual framework to analyse the data.
- Limitations to this study include the possibility of the women altering their memories with respect to the reasons for child marriage over the years, especially among some of the older participants.

the international community as an issue that needs to be addressed in order to improve gender equality and empower women. Most of the time, the burden of child marriage is placed on the woman. Therefore, the international community is demanding the global elimination of child marriage; this is specified in Goal 5 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>2</sup> For Malaysia, a country that is going through a transition phase to gain the status of a developed nation, we must implement appropriate political, economic and social measures to eradicate child marriage.

A previous study conducted in Morocco in 2015 indicated financial dependence of the adolescents on the family, perception of child marriage as a customary social norm and lack of sufficient legal protection as the risk factors for child marriage.<sup>3</sup> A recent report by UNICEF Malaysia in 2018 indicates low household income, dropping out of school and poor understanding of sexual and reproductive health issues as the risk factors for child marriage in Malaysia.<sup>4</sup> Another research conducted in Lebanon in 2017 established poverty, lack of educational

opportunities and anxiety about protecting the honour of the unmarried adolescent girls as the determinants of child marriage in conflict-ridden settings.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, various implications for the health and well-being of a woman who experiences child marriage are reported globally. These include an increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases, cervical cancer, malaria, death during childbirth, obstetric fistulas, unintended pregnancy, preterm delivery, delivery of low birthweight babies, foetal mortality and violence within marriage.<sup>6–11</sup>

In Malaysia, the law prohibits people from marrying until they are 18 years old. This is outlined in Act 164: Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce) Act 1976 which states that any marriage shall be void if either party is below the age of 18.<sup>12</sup> However, there is an exception to this law. Child marriage is allowed in circumstances where a girl aged 16 or older wishes to be married, if such marriage is authorised by the state chief minister. Furthermore, for Muslims, another rule of law (Syariah) applies. Governed by the Family Law Enactment of Islamic States in Malaysia, the legal minimum age of marriage for Muslim girls is 16 years old, with additional conditions for marriage below the age of 16 to be allowed with the consent of the parents and approval by a Syariah (Islamic) court.<sup>13 14</sup> There are currently no definitive statistics on the prevalence of child marriage in Malaysia. The data vary from 3.8% to 6%, depending on the sources.<sup>15 16</sup> It has been described that the data concerning the prevalence of child marriage in Malaysia is 'outdated, unavailable or cannot be made public'.<sup>4</sup> The most recent record was from the National Population and Family Development Board of Malaysia, which conducted a survey in 2014 and estimated the number of women aged 15 to 19 years old who were married as 52,618 individuals.<sup>15</sup> This amounts to 3.8% of the female population aged 15 to 19 years in relation to the reported figure in the latest (2010) census.<sup>15 16</sup> Furthermore, the 2010 census indicates that the number of men and women who were married and were between the ages of 15 and 19 were 73,428 and 82,382, respectively.<sup>16</sup> Using this figure, the ratio of married women among those aged 15 to 19 becomes 6.0%. Cases of child marriage may be under-reported in Malaysia, due to the lack of updated statistical data and the aforementioned legal framework.

### The social-ecological model (conceptual framework)

We used the social-ecological model as a conceptual framework for this study. It describes the sphere of influence in multiple layers, typically represented as individual, relationship (familial), community and societal factors.<sup>17</sup> This model was first developed by Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s, and many researchers have adopted this theory-based framework in explaining various public health issues, such as family health, HIV and child health.<sup>18–21</sup> In this study, our findings were summarised in alignment with this framework so as to understand the issues surrounding the reasons for child marriage in multiple layers of influence.

### Aim

The aim of this study was to examine the individual, familial, community and societal issues surrounding the reasons for child marriage among women who got married below the age of 18 in Malaysia.

## METHODS

### Study design

This qualitative study was done by conducting individual, semistructured interviews with women who were married below the age of 18, supplemented with interviews with key informants in Malaysia. The area of interest for our research was to examine the perceived reasons for child marriage and to understand the meaning of such reasons for the participants in this study. This study followed the items in Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) guidelines.<sup>22</sup>

### Setting and sampling

This study was conducted in Kota Bharu district, Kelantan state, Malaysia. Kelantan state has a population of 1.83 million as of 2017,<sup>23</sup> and is located in the north-east part of Peninsular Malaysia, bordering southern Thailand. The state is known as one of the most religiously conservative states. It is known to have the largest percentage of Malay population of all the Peninsular states; thus, it is called the 'cradle of Malay culture'.<sup>24</sup> This particular state was chosen because it had the highest percentage of married girls between the ages of 15 and 19 in Peninsular Malaysia, according to the latest census in 2010.<sup>16</sup> A purposive sampling technique was used for the recruitment of the women.<sup>25 26</sup> The women were patients at a reproductive health clinic run by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Kota Bharu, and using a combination of criterion and convenience sampling designs,<sup>27 28</sup> 18 women were selected. In order to identify women who had gotten married as children, we collaborated with the aforementioned NGO. The nurse looked through the patients' records which include date of marriage and the candidates who met the criteria were selected. The inclusion criteria were as follows: Malaysian women of reproductive age (18 to 49 years old) at the time of the interview, whose first marriage had occurred before they were 18 years old, with a current marital status of any type (married, separated, divorced or widowed). These candidates were invited to participate via telephone calls by the nurse, and only those who agreed to participate were then contacted by the researcher. A few candidates refused to participate because of a busy schedule or were unable to get permission from their husbands. An individual interview method was selected so that privacy could be maintained during the interview and participants could speak about their personal experiences in a comfortable environment. In addition, five key informants were chosen, based on their ability to fulfil Tremblay's five selection criteria for the key informants: role in the community, knowledge, willingness, communicability and impartiality.<sup>29 30</sup> Potential

key informants were asked to partake in the study via an invitation letter. Follow-ups were then made by telephone calls, and interviews were arranged at a time and place convenient for the key informants. The key informants were recruited from four different groups: a government officer in charge of marital issues, a community leader, an officer from religious department and two mothers. They were selected because of their familiarity with the issue of child marriage. Government officers are involved in providing services and counselling, as well as developing relevant policies related to marriage; community leaders interact closely with the community members and take part in ceremonial events, including marriage ceremonies; officers from religious department give guidance, including on marital issues; and mothers add insights from parental perspectives. We conducted interviews with the women as well as the key informants in order to achieve data source triangulation.<sup>31 32</sup> By interviewing people from various positions on the subject, this study adds more insights into and gains an in-depth understanding about the issue of child marriage from multiple perspectives.<sup>33</sup>

### Instrument development

Three versions of the interview guides were developed: for the women and for the key informants (One for the government officers, community leaders and religious officers, and the other for the mothers. See online supplementary data files 1-3.) They were developed by reviewing the literature on child marriage research conducted in other countries. Based on that, a series of discussions were conducted among the researchers, and revisions were made accordingly to finalise the guides. The interview guide for the women contained questions about the background of the interviewee: current age, age at marriage, age of husband, number of children and education level. Other questions asked included their perceived reasons for getting married below the age of 18; their lived experiences of child marriage; their perception of their health status before and after marriage; childbearing experience; contraception use; their views on the perceptions of community members regarding their early marriage; and what can be done at the government and societal level to prevent child marriage. The interview guide for the key informants included questions about their age, a description of their work, knowledge and perceptions of child marriage, perceived impact of child marriage on the married women as well as on the society, and opinions on the role of family, community and government in preventing child marriage. After the interview guides were developed, they were pilot tested with a woman and a community leader, respectively, who met the inclusion criteria of this study. The purpose of the pilot test was to determine if there were any flaws in the prepared interview guides, and to make necessary modifications before actually implementing the guides.<sup>34</sup> After the pilot tests, some minor modifications to the interview guides were made based on the feedback from the pilot test participants, by

paraphrasing some of the questions to make it easier for the participants to respond to the questions.

### Data collection

#### Interview with women who experienced child marriage

Data were collected from women who had married below the age of 18 (n=18) as well as key informants (n=5). All of them resided in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia. The interviews took place from May to July 2017. The interviews were audio-recorded, and the participants gave their permission for this before the interviews started. In this study, part of the collected data regarding their perceived reasons for child marriage was investigated, and analysis of all other data was to be reported elsewhere. An average interview with an individual participant lasted for about an hour. The interviewer explained the purpose and the general procedures of the study to the participants using a participants' information sheet. On this sheet, the contact information of a local clinic was provided in case the participant felt any adverse effects or psychological distress after participating in this study. The women were informed during the recruitment, and again before the interview began, that participation in the study was purely voluntary, and they could freely choose whether to participate. Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants. The data were collected until the point of data saturation—a state at which no new information is obtained.<sup>35</sup> In this study, we felt that data saturation was achieved by the 16th interview. Two additional interviews were conducted with the aim of reinforcing the findings. The women were given a choice of where they wanted to be interviewed; most of them chose the office of the abovementioned NGO. The interviews were held in a room where we could ensure participants' confidentiality and privacy. Three interviews were conducted in the participants' houses, at these participants' request. These participants did not have access to transportation or could not be away from home as they were taking care of young children. In those instances, privacy was maintained by ensuring that other family members were not present. The interviews were conducted in the Malay language by a research assistant who is a retired nurse and has extensive knowledge and experience on reproductive health. She has over 30 years of experience counselling adolescents, and took part in a country-wide research on adolescents' perception of HIV. Before the start of the interviews, this research assistant received 10 hours of training in qualitative interviewing. During the training, practice interviews were conducted until she could ask questions in a natural manner, and she also learnt how and when to use probing questions. The interviewer learnt the importance of pausing in between the questions in order to allow participants time to respond, as well as how to develop rapport with the participants. The method of a semistructured interview was chosen so that the unique personal stories of each participant could be heard during the interview. In addition to the prepared set of questions according to the semistructured interview

guide, additional probing questions were asked as it was deemed necessary to explore and to elicit the participants' personal narratives. The primary researcher greeted the participants before the interview and briefly explained her background and interests in understanding why child marriage takes place in Malaysia. She stayed in the room while all the interviews were conducted and observed the discourses between the interviewer and the participants. Field notes were taken by the primary researcher to describe any characteristics or behaviour of the interviewees, and she critically reflected on the meanings that were analysed through such observations in order to address reflexivity.<sup>36</sup>

#### Interview with key informants

The interviews with the key informants were conducted in order to use multiple data sources 'to add to the investigator's depth and breadth of understanding' in what was revealed through the interviews with the participants.<sup>37 38</sup> The primary researcher conducted two interviews with the key informants in English as those participants were able to converse in English. The other three interviews were conducted by a research assistant in the Malay language. In all interviews, the same interview guide was used. An average interview with a key informant lasted for an hour.

#### Data analysis

The transcripts were initially made in Malay and translated into English for data analysis. The transcription and translation were conducted by a professional translator who is a native Malay and has sufficient knowledge of local dialects. In addition, field notes were taken by the primary researcher for each interview. It included the descriptions of the observation of the participants as well as the reflections of the primary researcher, denoting any specific issues that were worth mentioning for analysis. Transcripts and field note data were analysed using the six phases of thematic analysis introduced by Braun and Clark.<sup>39</sup> NVivo 11 Pro was used for data management. In this study, initial coding was conducted to create the list of emergent codes for several interview transcripts. After that, the codes were grouped together to find similarities or differences in its contexts, as well as to continue to seek new insights. After initial codes were generated, the data were summarised into categories and themes and aligned with the layers of the social-ecological model: individual, relationship (familial), community and society. The initial coding was conducted by the primary researcher; the list of codes and themes were analysed independently by three researchers and differences of opinion were discussed to resolve any discrepancies. The final themes were reviewed and finalised by all researchers.

#### Patient and public involvement

The development of the research question of this study was informed by the voices and perspectives of the women who experienced child marriage. These perspectives were gathered through a literature review of the previous

**Table 1** Sociodemographic information of the women (n=18)

Mean age in years (Range)	37 (18–44)
Current marital status	
Continued first marriage	14 (78%)
Divorced and remarried	4 (22%)
Mean age of first marriage (Range)	16 (15–17)
Education	
Primary school	3 (17%)
Lower secondary (Form 1–3)	7 (39%)
Upper secondary (Form 4, 5)	8 (44%)
Ethnicity	
Malay	14 (78%)
Chinese	2 (11%)
Others	2 (11%)
Mean age of husband at marriage (Range)	24 (19–31)

studies on child marriage. Two participants were involved in the design of this study by providing feedback during the pilot tests. The feedback obtained from them was used to improve the study guides. The participants were not involved in the recruitment for and conduct of the study. The results of this study will be disseminated to the study participants by asking them if they would like to receive a written summary document which include the results as well as the public health implications of the study.

## RESULTS

### Participant characteristics

A total of 18 women and 5 key informants participated in this study. [table 1](#) presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the women, and [table 2](#) presents the basic information on the key informants. The average age of the women was 37 at the time of the interview, and their mean age of marriage was 16. All of them reached either a primary or secondary level of education. The majority of the women were Malay, with a few Chinese, and the remaining women had migrated from the neighbouring

**Table 2** Basic information about the key informants (n=5)

Occupation and Functions	
Government officer	1
Community leader	1
Religious officer	1
Mothers	2
Mean age in years (Range)	54 (39–70)
Gender	
Male	1
Female	4

country, Thailand, to gain Malaysian citizenship either prior to or at the time of marriage.

We found three pertinent themes: immaturity in decision-making; family poverty; and religious and cultural norms.

### Immaturity in decision-making

The stories told by the participants indicated that the women were still immature when they had to decide on getting married as children. How the interviewed women made their decision as adolescents before their marriage was categorised into three subthemes: an intuitive decision-making style, believing in fate and having no idea what would happen after marriage.

#### Intuitive decision-making style

For most of the participants, the decision to marry at a young age was made quickly and without thorough consideration. The decision seemed spontaneous and intuitive. They seemed unable to think fully about the future and foresee the possible consequences of child marriage at that time, even though the decision would affect the rest of their lives. Some of them described, without hesitation, that they settled for marriage at an early age due to lack of attractive options for their future.

‘At that time, I was a kid, I didn’t think. All I thought about was getting married [laughs]. Back then, I didn’t hang out that much. I didn’t go out to mingle. So I didn’t really enjoy [adolescent life] at that time’. (No. 2, married at 17 years old)

‘Hmm, at that time, I really didn’t think much. I didn’t think about it [marriage at a young age] long enough. At that time, I just thought about wanting to get away from home, so that I wouldn’t be controlled by my parents. That’s what I thought [laughs]’. (No. 8, married at 17 years old)

#### Believing in fate

Intriguingly, the women stated that they believed that getting married as a child was their fate. Many participants thought it was their unavoidable destiny to be married at an early age. They seemed to accept the situation submissively. In the mixed emotions of the interviewed women, we could sense resignation, accepting something undesirable to them and calling it fate.

‘It’s like destiny [that her marriage was early]. It was fated, I was a bit scared, but we had to be patient. Yes, we had to be patient. Go through the tough and happy times together with the husband’. (No. 2, married at 17 years old)

‘I wasn’t planning on getting married. But it was fated that I got married early’. (No. 13, married at 16 years old)

‘I didn’t know my husband before marriage, not long, about a month. My marriage was arranged by my parents. It was my fate. I accepted straight away. It’s fated’. (No. 14, married at 17 years old)

### Having no idea what would happen after marriage

Almost all the participants stated that they did not imagine what would happen after marriage. They were unprepared and did not feel at ease with their new responsibilities as a wife, as a mother, doing housework, and taking care of the husband’s family members.

‘It was never in my mind at that time [about becoming a wife]. Nothing. I didn’t think about all of that. At that time, I just wanted to get married and live with him. That’s all’. (No. 11, married at 15 years old)

‘Imagining what my married life would be? Never thought of that. It was different [after marriage] because before I got married, my mother did everything. Then after I got married, all of that was my responsibility. So it was a little exhausting. It took me some time to learn how to cook. I knew how to clean the house and do the laundry, but I did not know how to cook. But I tried. Tried to cook regardless of whether it was delicious or not. That’s it’. (No. 13, married at 16 years old)

‘I didn’t think about after I get married. Because I was too young. I didn’t think to that level. Because I thought marriage wasn’t... it was just like a game. I just followed. I knew nothing. Even when I was pregnant, I didn’t know what to eat, how to do family planning. I didn’t know. That’s why I gave birth to my three children in three years. Small birth spacing [laugh]’. (No. 20, married at 17 years old)

### Family poverty

Family poverty was an issue that affected the women’s decision to get married at a very young age. We found that family poverty is connected to child marriage as described by the following two subthemes: child marriage to reduce the financial burden, and leaving school due to poverty.

#### Child marriage to reduce the financial burden

Some of the women in this study experienced economic hardships during childhood and adolescence, which led them to want to reduce the burden on their family by getting married at a young age. For some participants, the parents had arranged a child marriage in order to give their daughter a better living environment, and the daughter had accepted the decision with conflicting feelings. Others simply felt pity given the family’s financial difficulties, and decided of their own volition to get married early.

‘My family was poor. My father worked as a rubber tapper. The plantation belonged to others. My mother helped my father. My marriage was arranged by my parents. I was introduced to my husband through my parents. Because he had a good job - he was a teacher. So when they came and proposed, I just accepted’. (No. 14, married at 17 years old)

‘I already knew about it [that if I had sex, I would get pregnant]. But I didn’t care, because at that time we were poor, they [parents] didn’t have the time

and money to care for me. So I felt like if there was a guy who could look after me and marry me, then I was OK. That's how I felt. Of course, I felt that I was forced to get married early. I couldn't have my parents be responsible for me any longer. So I pitied them. I had to get married. If my family was not poor, I don't think I would have married early'. (No. 5, married at 15 years old)

#### Leaving school due to poverty

None of the participants in this study continued their education to the university level. Some had left school in the middle of secondary education, and a few did not even complete elementary school. They were unable to continue their education because of their family's poverty. They were either told by their parents that they could not continue their education, or they voluntarily stopped going to school in order to help with the housework. Three women who left school when they were 11, 15 and 14 years old, respectively, stated their reasons as follows:

'I wanted to [continue school], but my mother was poor. At that time, my mother had to take care of my two other siblings, and there was no one to help her'. (No. 3, married at 17 years old)

'Because I came from a poor family. So, my parents couldn't afford to support me [to send her to school]. I do feel some regret, but what can I do, right?' (No. 16, married at 15 years old)

'I never went to see my teachers and friends because I quit school. When I left school in Form 2 [14 years old], I really wanted to stay. But my mother had no money to spend because my mother was poor, so we had no money to continue my schooling. If it was up to me, I would have stayed in school'. (No. 9, married at 17 years old)

#### Religious and cultural norms

We also examined why child marriage occurred by focusing on the women's perceptions about how their child marriage was received among the community members, as well as by asking the key informants. We gained insight regarding the religious and cultural norms in the community with respect to child marriage. It seemed that religiosity—quality of being religious—was the underlying basis for people's perceptions in accepting child marriage. In addition, there was a basic acceptance in the community that due to unavoidable circumstances such as girls having premarital sex and thus becoming pregnant, child marriage could be tolerated. Under this theme, there are three subthemes: premarital sex as a sinful act, marriage as a quick solution for an unwanted pregnancy and community tolerance of child marriage without interference.

#### Premarital sex as a sinful act

Among both the younger generation and their parents' generation, premarital sex is widely regarded as a sinful

act. This stemmed from the Islamic religious value of avoiding what is forbidden (haram) in Malay-Muslim society. The taboo against premarital sex, however, is sometimes violated in practice. As such, premarital sex is an unspoken but apparently dominant reason for child marriage; the couple were either afraid of having or were already in a sexual relationship outside of marriage. At the same time, there is a widely accepted understanding that, so long as the couple are married, having sex at a young age is not a problem.

'Underage marriage, it is something that... they have pros and cons, you know? In our religion, when our people, our daughters grow up, they have a boyfriend, we cannot just let them be like that. We have something to make them, you know? What we call *halal* [permissible], a *halal* relationship. So, when the parents find out that the girl has a boyfriend, to avoid something bad happening, especially pregnancy, an unwanted child, you know? What we call an unmarried sexual relationship. So from the religious perspective, we have to. We have to suggest that our girls get married, you know? From the age of 16, after puberty. And, it sounds like we are trying to save the society so that they don't accidentally become pregnant and all that'. (Government officer)

'It's just that recently there are more and more of those involved with social problems [of premarital sex]. So we should increase various programs, such as the one that the school and the Religious Department are collaborating on. It's called "Anda Bijak Menjauhi Zina" [You are Wise to Avoid Adultery] program; it is a campaign. So we go and give lectures at schools; we tell stories and problems from the aspects of *Syariah* [Islamic religious] laws. You will be fined if you are caught in *khalwat* [close proximity with those who aren't your spouse], if you act indecently, if you become pregnant out of wedlock, all of those situations. We inform the students so that they are scared'. (An officer from religious department)

#### Marriage as a quick solution for an unwanted pregnancy

Under such circumstances, to cover up the unexpected and unwanted teenage pregnancy, marriage is often permitted by the parents regardless of the daughter's age. Further, society tends to facilitate such a marriage. When parents find out their daughter is pregnant, they will most likely urge the couple to marry quickly so that the couple can hide the fact that they had premarital sex. This pressure from the parents is justified by religious values. The society also sympathises with the family and perceives child marriage as a natural course of action. Ultimately, marriage is a solution for ensuring the baby's family lineage. Most of the women in this study chose to keep the baby when they found out they were pregnant and hurriedly got married, as there is a strong religious and cultural aversion to abortion in Malaysia.

'Some of them are married when they have a problem with an unwanted pregnancy. Meaning that, something happened in their relationship, you

know? Unwanted child. I mean pre-marital sex'. (Government officer)

'It's just that, underage marriages in Kelantan are to handle the problems of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, in which according to Islam, the baby, cannot be *nasab* [attributed] to the father. The baby cannot use the father's name because of *nasab* [family lineage], being a legitimate heir is very important in Islam. If you were a legitimate heir, for example, a legitimate marriage will allow the children to have access to family inheritance, or ensure that they can later be the *wali* [guardian] for their siblings' marriage after the death of their father. That is why, for those who get married young, if they were in their first, second or third month of pregnancy, then the baby can use the husband's name. But, if the marriage, I mean, the wife, the woman was in her fourth, fifth or sixth month of pregnancy, then the baby cannot use their father's name. This is where it gets complicated'. (An officer from religious department)

#### Community tolerance of child marriage without interference

As described in the previous subthemes, it seems that the community's perception on child marriage was that something had happened, such as pregnancy outside of wedlock, and, therefore, marriage below the age of 18 could not be avoided. In such a case, child marriage was tolerated among the community members without interference. It was surprising to hear from the women in this study that none of them experienced any resistance to their marriage at a young age by the community members. However, it did not mean that the community embraced and fully accepted their child marriage either. Although those in the community had some objections, they usually did not express such objections directly to the marrying girls or to their families.

'There was no objection. Nothing. Everybody was supportive of my getting married. Back in my days, there was no objection like today. Back then, I think other people didn't object because they knew my mother had money, she was rich. So, they didn't say anything'. (No. 12, married at 17 years old)

'At first, when I informed my teachers [about my early marriage], they said it's too early to get married. But afterwards, they said, "It's OK to get married early. It's good"'. (No. 4, married at 17 years old)

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the issues surrounding the reasons for child marriage from the perspectives of the women who got married as children, as well as the key informants. The results were in alignment with the social-ecological model and revealed that multiple factors synergistically affected the decision of child marriage. It is important to investigate further the implications behind each of the

issues identified in this study and elaborate how these issues affected the decision of child marriage.

First, we revealed in this study that the women did not seem fully mature when they made the decision to marry as children. Their immaturity was observed, in this study, as an intuitive decision-making style, believing in fate and having no idea what would happen after marriage. By comparison, previous studies reported girls' lack of voice, limited agency and lack of power to make decisions.<sup>40–43</sup> Schvaneveldt and Adams argue that acquiring competency in decision-making style in adolescence is not a linear process but is affected by factors such as age, sex, social class, family situation, temperament, religion and family lifestyle.<sup>44</sup> During a comparative assessment of various decision-making styles among adolescents, Schvaneveldt and Adams introduced the idea that an intuitive decision-making style takes place when the emphasis is put on emotions, feelings and fantasy rather than logic. This idea can be used to enhance the understanding of the decision-making motives of adolescents who wish to enter into child marriage. Albert and Steinberg explained that studies on the judgement and decision-making of the adolescents can be described as a dual-process model, which can be categorised as two modes of information processing: analytic (cold) and experiential (hot).<sup>45</sup> The study also reported that as adolescents in general lack experience with negative outcomes, and thus may show an over-reliance on conscious evaluation of costs and benefits of risky behaviour, in such cases, they are prone to choose risky options. Further analysis is needed to focus on the psychological aspect of the girls' decision-making when they choose the path of child marriage by applying the results from the field of psychology.

With respect to believing in fate, there are studies indicating that religiosity plays a role in believing in fate, which is a teleological belief described as things happening for a reason.<sup>46</sup> Banerjee and Bloom state that believing in fate is a type of social-cognitive bias. When such a biased view is held by an individual, it is justified and embraced as fulfilling their religiosity if a significant life event such as marriage happens unexpectedly, but it is difficult to explain why it happens, other than believing that it is given by God. Therefore, we can hypothesise that believing in fate is associated with the decision of child marriage. This hypothesis should be investigated in future studies.

Numerous studies have shown that family poverty was the root cause of child marriage globally.<sup>8 10 47 48</sup> In this study, we revealed two aspects of family poverty—child marriage to reduce the financial burden, and leaving school due to poverty—that seemingly affected the women in their acceptance of child marriage. A previous study found that parents in poor families are inclined to marry off their daughters because they have incentives 'to ensure their daughter's financial security and to reduce the economic burden daughters place on the family'.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, as long as the condition of family poverty is prolonged, the parents are inclined to endorse child

marriage for their daughters. Moreover, there are studies that suggest requiring the girls to continue their schooling as an effective way to reduce child marriage.<sup>7 47</sup> In this study, there were participants who dropped out of school in their early teens and, after a few years of either working or staying at home, decided to get married. Some of them might have delayed marriage if they had been required to finish secondary school.

Another issue revealed in this study was that premarital sex is widely considered a sinful act. The results of this study highlighted the role of religion in justifying the practice of child marriage in Malaysia. This social norm stems from Islamic religious belief. We also found that unwanted pregnancy prompted child marriage for some of the participants in this study. Under such circumstances, the decision of child marriage was to cover up the perceived sins of premarital sex and pregnancy. By comparison, a study assessing factors relating to teenage premarital pregnancy in Malaysia reported a lack of religiosity as the main reason for such consequences as teenage pregnancy outside of wedlock.<sup>49</sup> While some of the women in this study chose to be married at an early age due to pregnancy, what distinguishes them from unmarried teenage pregnant girls is their sense of religiosity. At an individual level, religiosity was seen to function as a fundamental basis of the women's decision to accept early marriage as a way of admitting that they had committed sins. At the societal level, religiosity is a widely accepted social norm under which child marriage is justified, combined with the pressures of society. Topics related to sex are generally considered a taboo for discussion in Malaysian society.<sup>50</sup> Makol-Abdul explained that sex education is considered a taboo, and therefore, not taught at school in Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia.<sup>51</sup> Although the government has made some recent initiatives to gradually promote sex education among adolescents in the past 10 years or so, because sex education is still considered a controversial topic in Malaysia,<sup>4 52</sup> the implementation of such a programme is not widespread. In fact, all participants in this study replied that they did not receive sex education at school prior to their early marriage. As the initiatives to try to bring changes to the sexual education in Malaysia is challenged by the belief that sex education encourages sexual activity among children, it is difficult to make a transformation about this subject.<sup>4</sup> Due to society's negative perceptions of sexuality, it is difficult to activate lively discussions about sex or to introduce community intervention activities that focus on the emotional aspect of sexuality, and discuss why premarital sex is occurring among young adolescents in Malaysia, in spite of the social pressure and the perception of sex outside of marriage as a sinful act. Adamczyk and Hayes stated that religion, particularly Islam, has a macro-level effect on prohibitions regarding premarital sex.<sup>53</sup> Previous studies have described the widely accepted perception within Islam that premarital sex is a sinful act.<sup>49 54</sup> Therefore, we come to a working hypothesis that religious and cultural norms can be used as one of the

latent indicator variables among adolescent girls in future studies, in order to assess the association of religiosity and child marriage involving premarital sex. In addition, we need to be sensitive as to how the punitive aspect of religion at societal level is connected to the decision of passive and reluctant acceptance of child marriage. There are some studies that examine the association between religiosity and decisions regarding premarital sexual activity among youths in Malaysia and elsewhere.<sup>55 56</sup> In these studies, religion is used to promote premarital sexual abstinence and religiosity is affecting the later timing of coital debut.<sup>55 56</sup> In comparison to the results of our study, there is a gap in the perception of religion and sexuality, and previous approaches may not be sufficient to prevent child marriage. Therefore, other types of approaches with respect to religion and sexuality must be thought through. In order to enhance the understanding on the underlying issues surrounding child marriage, it is important to have an in-depth understanding about the role religion plays in justifying child marriage in Malaysia.

## CONCLUSION

This study is one of the earliest studies to examine the issues surrounding the reasons for child marriage in Peninsular Malaysia, using a qualitative approach. We revealed that immaturity in decision-making, family poverty and religious and cultural norms are the three pertinent themes in alignment with the individual, familial, community and societal layers of the social-ecological model. Further investigation on how these variables are associated with child marriage is needed in order to develop suitable policy and intervention programme to eradicate child marriage in Malaysia. There are ongoing debates on whether to raise the legal minimum age of marriage in Malaysia, in light of the recent media coverage of cases of child marriage in the country. From an academic standpoint, we want to emphasise that the reasons for child marriage are intertwined with various issues concerning the situations of the girls, as well as the family, community and societal backgrounds. Therefore, in order to fill the gaps in the current policy for child marriage and incorporate a holistic perspective, strengthening sex education at school and awareness-building activities in the communities involving all community members must be implemented in Malaysia. In doing so, we need to adopt a team-based approach in which experts from law, religion, psychology, social-welfare and public health fields work together to create a better policy towards child marriage. It is necessary to target not only the adolescent girls and their families but also the community and society, in order to increase social awareness of child marriage. This approach has proven effective in curbing child marriage in India, Nepal, Senegal and Yemen.<sup>7</sup> Providing adequate support and structural changes to eradicate child marriage will benefit the girls as well as the families, community and society, thus bringing hope and greater opportunities for the future.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Why girls get married early in Sarawak, Malaysia - an exploratory qualitative study



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## Abstract

**Background:** Child marriage, a marriage that involves someone under the age of 18 years, is a long-standing social issue in Sarawak state, Malaysia. The state has taken several measures to improve situations of inequity for women who get married early; however, the practice is still a common part of the tradition and culture. The aim of this study was to explore the factors leading to child marriage in Sarawak state, Malaysia.

**Methods:** This was an exploratory qualitative study conducted via semi-structured interviews with twenty-two women who were married when they were younger than 18 years old in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. Participants were recruited through purposive and convenient sampling with the use of data from a reproductive health clinic and recruitment in villages. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis.

**Results:** Four overarching themes were identified: health risk behaviour, family poverty, early marriage as fate, and family disharmony.

**Conclusions:** In-depth understanding of the unique factors leading to child marriage locally will facilitate the introduction of new approaches to interventions to eradicate child marriage in Sarawak state, Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Qualitative research, Child marriage, Sarawak, Malaysia

## Background

Child marriage is a globally occurring social phenomenon in which adolescents are married when they are younger than 18 years old. The United Nations Children's Fund defines child marriage as a formal marriage or informal union in which one or both partners are aged below 18 years old [1]. This study focused on child marriage in Sarawak state, Malaysia. Malaysia is a federal constitutional monarchy in which Islam is the majority religion, and the country's territories encompass Peninsular Malaysia and Malaysian Borneo that include Sarawak state. According to the latest census of 2010, the rates of marriage among female youth aged 15 to 19 years in Sarawak states was 9.4%, comparing with the national rate of

6.1% [2]. For Muslims in Malaysia, Islamic Family Law (Federal Territory) Act 1984 applies, which states that the minimum age for marriage is 18 years for males and 16 years for females [3]. However, in practice, if any Muslim below the abovementioned ages in Malaysia wants to get married, he or she can do so by obtaining the consent of his or her parents or guardian and the approval of a judge in the religious court (Shariah). What makes it difficult to eliminate child marriage is because the voices of those who are affected by child marriage are difficult to hear due to their vulnerability in society. Thus, the prevention of child marriage has not been a subject of public and political debate. In Europe, there has only recently been a debate on forced marriage, including child marriage, as cases of child marriage are closely linked to migration [4].

Previous studies have reported the detrimental effects for girls in child marriages, such as lifetime poverty, low access to health care, and gender inequity. These are perceived to be cumulative factors that affect girls who

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get married below 18 years of age [5]. Previous studies have also reported that child marriage may result in devastating health consequences, such as human immunodeficiency virus/ acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) and sexually transmitted diseases, cervical cancer, malaria during pregnancy and related complications [5–7]. Additionally, child marriage has been reported to be associated with risks to mothers' and children's health due to childbearing at a young age [6, 8, 9]. Because of the immaturity of girls who get married and become pregnant while they are teenagers, some are not physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to take on the responsibility of childbearing [6]. If a girl's pelvic bone is too narrow, she will not be able to deliver the baby and may thus have to deliver by emergency caesarean section; obstructed labour and accompanying obstetric fistula may leave some girls with permanent damage to their health and well-being, and in the worst case scenario, maternal or infant death in childbirth may occur [6, 9]. Thus, child marriage is considered a human rights violation within the international community, by such organisations as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations. However, the factors contributing to child marriage may differ, as they are shaped by the socio-cultural contexts of each country and region.

In this study, a conceptual framework of locus of control was used. This theory was developed by Rotter who described a degree to which people believe that they have control over the outcomes of events in their lives as opposed to attributing these outcomes to external forces beyond their control [10]. According to Fiori et al., people with an external locus of control tend to believe that rewards are largely determined by external forces such as fate, luck, chance, the government, or powerful others [11]. In this study, the findings are analysed in alignment with locus of control theory, so as to unravel the complex psychological perception of the girls as to why they enter into child marriage in Sarawak state.

In order to prevent child marriage in Sarawak state, Malaysia, it is important to have an in-depth understanding of the background factors of child marriage in the local context. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the factors leading to child marriage in Sarawak, where child marriage is still practised according to cultural and societal norms. By examining the factors contributing to child marriage in Sarawak, we can reveal the background socio-cultural determinants that influence girls and their families in their decision to pursue child marriage.

## Methods

### Research design and rationale

This qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with women who were married when they were

younger than 18 years old in Kuching, Sarawak State, Malaysia. Critical realism was the ontological stance adopted in this study; critical realism suggests that reality can be known through the investigation of human minds and socially constructed meanings [12, 13]. This stance was adopted in this study so that the exploration could reveal the factors that affected the participants' views towards child marriage. The data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis [14, 15]. The thematic analysis approach by Braun and Clarke was chosen because it allows researchers to conduct analyses with flexibility and by following six distinctive phases: 1) becoming familiar with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. The application of thematic analysis with an ontology of critical realism, can assist in analysing the experiences, meanings and reality of the study participants. Through a focus on the aim of this study, insights regarding the factors leading to child marriage could be revealed. In addition, to describe the nuanced variations within the themes, an applied thematic analysis approach proposed by Guest was used to elaborate on the comparisons of quotes within the themes [15]. This study is in alignment with the items of the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) and includes the information required in this guideline [16].

### Setting

This study was conducted at a reproductive health clinic and in villages of suburban Kuching, Sarawak State, Malaysia. This state was chosen because it has one of the highest rates of child marriage in Malaysia [2]. In the urban and suburban settings of Kuching District, the issue of child marriage seems problematic, but there is very little scientific knowledge about the phenomenon of child marriage; only anecdotal cases of child marriage have been reported through personal communications with academic researchers and healthcare workers in the area.

### Sampling and recruitment

Purposive and convenient sampling strategies were used in this study. Recruitment of the women was initiated by contacting the clients of a private reproductive health clinic in Kuching. The first wave of participants included women who were recommended by the nurses of the reproductive health clinic, who used records to identify clients who met the following inclusion criteria: Malaysian females who were first married when were younger than 18 years old, who resided in the study area during the study period, and who were of reproductive age (current age between 18 and 49 years). The candidates were contacted by the clinic nurse, and only those who agreed to

participate were then contacted by the researcher. None of the women who were contacted refused to participate in this study, but we did not complete an interview with one of the candidates because we found she did not meet the inclusion criteria after we had started asking her questions at the beginning of the interview. For the second wave of recruitment, we visited households in the villages and identified women who met the inclusion criteria with the help of five local liaison officers. This process was undertaken to seek participants from diverse communities within Kuching District. The liaison officers asked the village members questions to determine their eligibility based on the inclusion criteria, and only those who met the criteria and were interested in participating in this study were approached by the researcher. We visited six different villages within the study area. This strategy of reaching out to the community was chosen so that we could effectively identify women who had married at younger than 18 years as we had discovered through an information exchange with the liaison officers that these women tended to live in several specific villages within Kuching District.

#### **Procedure and materials**

We conducted one-to-one semi-structured interviews to explore the women's experiences of child marriage, including their perceived reasons for child marriage and the reactions of their parents, friends and community members about their marriage at a young age. The interviews took place during July and August 2017 either in the clinic's office for the participants who were recruited from the clinic or at the participant's house for those who were recruited in the villages. One interview was conducted per participant, and the interviews lasted between 13 and 56 min, with an average interview time of approximately 30 min. In all cases, privacy was ensured by conducting the interviews in a private room where no other person was present except the local interviewer, the primary researcher (AK) and the participant. At the beginning of each interview, with the help of the interpreter, the primary researcher briefly explained her role of leading the study team and her background as a female Japanese researcher interested in the research topic of those who married at a young age in Sarawak and expressed her appreciation for the time the participants were taking to participate in this research. As the culture of Sarawak was foreign to the primary researcher, she tried to be respectful of the responses and behaviour of the participants and at the same time, to maintain an explorative approach to understand the unique culture of Sarawak. For that purpose, the primary researcher strategically used reflexivity, a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation, as the quality control method in this study [17]. The primary researcher took field

notes during and after the interviews to describe the living conditions of the women as well as other specifics observations during the interview, such as the characteristics of the participants and the surrounding environment in the community. As we visited the houses of the participants in the villages, the primary researcher was able to directly observe the living conditions of the participants and their interactions with family members and neighbours, and the primary researcher wrote her perceptions and reflexive thoughts in field notes. Interviews were conducted with women of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to ensure the validity of the study findings [18]. The interviews were conducted until the point of data saturation, i.e., "when no new categories or concepts can be derived from the data and any further data collected will fit within already developed categories" [19]. In this study, data saturation was reached after interviewing 20 women, and an additional two interviews were conducted to confirm that data saturation had been reached. A semi-structured interview guide had been previously prepared, and it was used during the interviews as a reference guide. The guides consisted of questions about what the women thought were the main reasons leading to their marriage at a young age as well as the reactions of their family, community, and friends. The participants were also asked about their current and past health statuses, childbearing experience and contraceptive use. Other probing questions that were not written on the guide were also asked when necessary to gain more insights on the issues discussed by the participants. As the interview guide had previously been developed for and used in a qualitative study conducted in another region in Malaysia [20], no pilot test was conducted. English version of the interview guide was published in abovementioned publication as the online supplementary documents. Interviews were conducted in the Malay language by a local research assistant who had sufficient knowledge of the local cultural and religious aspects. Prior to this study, the research assistant had experience as an interviewer in another qualitative study and received 10 h of training to gain skills in interviewing, before we commenced the interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded with the prior permission of the participants after the purpose and summary of the study were explained. The recorded data were transcribed into the Malay language and translated into English by a professional translator.

#### **Data analysis**

A thematic analysis was conducted wherein patterns or themes within the data were analysed and reported using the following six phases: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and

producing the report [14]. In addition, we compared the data among the following three groups according to the current age of the women to show the nuanced commonalities and differences within each theme by using the applied thematic analysis approach by Guest [15]: younger age group (current age: 18–25 years), middle-aged group (26–35 years), and older age group (more than 35 years old). First, the primary researcher familiarised herself with the data by reading the interview transcripts three times. In addition, field notes were studied to incorporate the primary researcher's observations during the analysis process. During the initial coding process, segments of the transcripts were assigned with a brief description of the meanings and phenomena using NVivo version 11 software (QSR International, Australia) for data management. After that, the codes were sorted into potential themes. Additionally, the relationships between the main themes and sub-themes were considered. Then, the quoted data were tabulated according to the three age groups. These themes were then refined through a review of the coded data extracts to determine whether the assigned themes articulately portrayed the meanings that were evident in the whole data set. Subsequently, the names of the themes were examined and finalised to fully reflect the stories behind each theme. Finally, the results of the analysis were reported in a written extract of the stories revealed by the analysis process. The primary researcher created the initial version of the coding table that contained the list of codes, sub-themes and themes that the three researchers (AK, MD and ND) identified. Divergences of opinions were discussed and reconciled, and the coding table was modified accordingly through a series of discussions. The participants' verbatim comments are presented as part of the findings. Each comment is marked with a specific identification number that was assigned to each participant to protect her anonymity (e.g., No 1, ethnicity, age at marriage, current age group at the time of interview). Current age group is categorized into the following three: Group 1 - women whose current age was between 18 and 25 years at the time of interviews; Group 2 - women aged 26 to 35 years; and Group 3 - women aged above 36 years.

## Results

### Participants

This study included 22 women who had experienced child marriage. The participating women had a mean age of 30.6 years and a mean marriage age of 16.3 years. The socio-demographic characteristics of the women are shown in Table 1.

Four overarching themes with respect to the factors leading to child marriage were identified: health risk behaviour, family poverty, early marriage as fate, and

family disharmony. For each theme, we compared the coded quotes for each subtheme among the three age groups to show the nuanced commonalities and differences within a given theme by age group. Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5 show exemplar quotes for each theme by age group.

### Health risk behaviour

This theme consisted of two subthemes: unprotected intercourse and pre-marital conception and alcohol and drug misuse.

#### *Unprotected intercourse and pre-marital conception*

For many of the participants, the turning point in making the decision to marry as children was when their parents suspected them of either having pre-marital sex or "khalwat" (close proximity) or discovered that they were pregnant before marriage, all of which are prohibited in their religion, Islam. Due to religious norms and to conceal the shame and disgrace of the family, the parents in these situations forced the girls to get married immediately, as the girls were thought to have committed sins.

"Well, when I was young, I had pre-marital sex, so we had to get married. Our parents told us to get married as well, so it was better to get married. So, we fell in love only after we got married to each other. Before marriage, we just liked each other. My husband's mother told us to get married because of pre-marital sex. I was still a student, but because of pre-marital sex and because he agreed as well, we just got married. I was in the middle of school. My father's side of the family told me that instead of letting a bad thing (pre-marital sex) continue, it's better to get married." (No. 17, Malay, married at 17 years old, current age range in Group 3.)

"There were many obstacles prior to our marriage. We had sexual relations (before marriage) then, even though it was wrong, and then I found out about my pregnancy at the time when I was working. My boss told me to quit because once I was pregnant, I could not work for long hours. I confronted my father. At first, he was furious. He thought that if he didn't marry us immediately, the child would be born outside of wedlock, and that is a sin." (No. 1, Malay, married at 15 years old, current age range in Group 3.)

"I was in the middle of Form 4 (at 16 years old) and then I quit school. Because, um, pregnant. Because I

**Table 1** Socio-demographic characteristics of women who experienced child marriage ( $n = 22$ )

Characteristics	Range in Years (Mean)	Data by Age Group		
		Group 1 <sup>a</sup> ( $n = 8$ )	Group 2 <sup>a</sup> ( $n = 8$ )	Group 3 <sup>a</sup> ( $n = 6$ )
		Frequency (Percentage)		
Current Age	18–46 (30.6)	8 (36.4%)	8 (36.4%)	6 (27.3%)
Age at Marriage	14–17 (16.3)	16–17 (16.6)	15–17 (16.4)	14–17 (16.0)
Current Marital Status	Frequency			
Continued First Marriage	19	7	7	5
Divorced and Remarried	2	1	1	0
Widowed	1	0	0	1
Final Education Attainment	Frequency			
Primary School	2	0	0	2
Lower Secondary (Forms 1–3)	8	4	4	0
Upper Secondary (Forms 4 and 5)	11	3	4	4
Diploma	1	1	0	0

<sup>a</sup> Group 1: Women whose current age was between 18 and 25 years

Group 2: Women aged 26 to 35 years

Group 3: Women aged above 36 years

was pregnant, I could not finish my studies. Ah, after I found out I was pregnant, I quit immediately. We married. If I hadn't been pregnant, I wouldn't have wanted to marry. I would have continued studying. Because while I was checking (for the pregnancy), both of our families discussed it; they said if I hadn't been pregnant, I would have been engaged first. After I finished Form 5 (at 17 years old), I would have gotten married because I had to finish my studies first. However, because I was pregnant, they... I was told to get married." (No. 4, Malay, married at 16 years old, current age range in Group 2.)

In Sarawak, where people of diverse ethnicities reside together, the Islamic teaching on the prohibition of premarital courtship may also be applicable to non-Muslims if their partners are Muslim. An Iban woman (belonging to one of the native ethnic groups of Borneo Island) who had married a Muslim man explained that she married at an early age because they were in situation of "khalwat" (close proximity).

"When we were young we did not plan to get married, but at that time, we were caught doing indecencies. So, according to Islam, we had to get married. It's like we were dating alone, just the two of us. We weren't supposed to go out after 12 o'clock." (No. 15, Iban, married at 17 years old, current age range in Group 3.)

Notably, most of the women in this study stated that they did not have proper knowledge of how women

could become pregnant prior to their early marriage. They simply did not know about the biological mechanism of becoming pregnant before they had intercourse at a young age.

"I think I had sex when I was in Form... still in school, Form 4 (at 16 years old). Two or three months before my marriage, that was my first time. After having sex, I immediately got pregnant. Never. I never wanted to. I asked what, like one of my friends, she said that her boyfriend touched her breast; I asked my friend 'If he touched your breast, can you get pregnant?' She said no, only if our genitals touched, she said. I was like, ha, okay and a month or two months after that I didn't get my period. So, my mom became suspicious because I didn't ask her to buy pads, so she was suspicious because I had not asked her to buy them for almost two months. So, she suspected it and brought me to the clinic. Ha like that." (No. 4, Malay, married at 16 years old, current age range in Group 2.)

#### **Alcohol and drug misuse**

Some of the women in this study related that they were involved in risky activities, such as consuming alcohol and drugs, with their peers when they were adolescents. Through the network of friends that they spent time with, they found partners with whom they had sexual relations and became pregnant. Although these women stated that the pregnancy was the triggering event for the decision to get married early, they also explained that they had actually wished to be married so that they could fill the void of loneliness, as they believed that by

**Table 2** Comparison of the age groups within each subtheme (theme: health risk behaviour)

Group 1 (18–25 years)	Group 2 (26–35 years)	Group 3 (> 35 years old)
Subtheme 1: Unprotected Intercourse and Pre-marital Conception		
<p>“Actually I...got pregnant before marriage. So, we got married. Actually, we were planning to get married even before the pregnancy anyway.” (No. 5, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>“Because I was 3 months pregnant (outside of marriage). I told her (grandmother) I didn’t want to (get married). My grandmother on my father’s side gave me two choices. First, she would send me to the city to study, and she told me to abort the baby. But then I didn’t want to. I had sinned once (by becoming pregnant outside of marriage); I didn’t want to commit another one.” (No. 6, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>“I was pregnant. I had sex outside of marriage.” (No. 12, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>“(I got married) because I was pregnant at that time. I didn’t want it (marriage) at first. But what could I do; I’ve gone overboard.” (No. 14, Malay, married at 16 years old.)</p> <p>“How do I say this... when I was pregnant with the first child, I wasn’t... when I was pregnant, I wasn’t married yet.” (No. 23, Malay, married at 16 years old.)</p>	<p>“I was in the middle of Form 4 (at 16 years old) and then I quit school. Because, um, pregnant. Because I was pregnant, I could not finish my studies.” (No. 4, Malay, married at 16 years old.)</p>	<p>We had sexual relations (before marriage) then, even though it was wrong. Then I found out about the pregnancy at the time when I was working.” (No. 1, Malay, married at 15 years old.)</p> <p>“When we were young we didn’t plan to get married, but at that time we were caught doing indecencies. So according to Islam, we had to get married.” (No. 15, Iban, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>“Well, when I was young, I had pre-marital sex. So, we had to get married. Our parents told us to get married as well, so it was better to get married.” (No. 17, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p>
Subtheme 2: Alcohol and Drug Misuse		
<p>After I quit school, I did nothing but just enjoyed myself... First, I was in jail because my mom was suspicious about my behaviour, and I always talked back. So, she wanted to check, and she told the police to take me. They checked my urine and took me to the drug rehabilitation centre.” (No. 5, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>I... always went out; I was naughty. Followed my friends, drank alcohol... I got into a fight with my grandmother, and I ran away.” (No. 6, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>“I had many friends who were tomboys, many of them. So, my father, when he found out that I was friends with them, because the majority of them drank alcohol and everything, so he was worried that I would drop out of school because of them. When we’re friends with someone, we tend to do what they do. So, my father found... a Nospin pill (a type of drug) in my pocket, but it was not mine.” (No. 22, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p>	(No relevant quotes.)	(No relevant quotes.)

getting married, they could change their lives and not be involved in alcohol and drug use anymore.

“After I quit school, I did nothing but just enjoyed myself. I was more into enjoying myself. First, I was in jail because my mom was suspicious about my behaviour, and I always talked back. So, she wanted to check, and she told the police to take me. They checked my urine and took me to the drug rehabilitation centre. So, I was thrown into the (drug rehabilitation) centre. But even after I was released, my behaviour didn’t change. I was stubborn. After a while, I was tired of being bad, so I thought I should

just get married. For me, I thought it would make my parents not worry anymore if I got married. If I didn’t have a husband, then they would be constantly worrying about me. I was very wild. I was like a crab, as they say; I always went out somewhere. Alhamdulillah (thank god), now that I have a husband, I am okay; I can change on my own.” (No. 5, Malay, married at 16 years old, current age range in Group 1.)

“I... always went out, I was naughty. Followed my friends, drank alcohol... I got into a fight with my



**Table 3** Comparison of the age groups within each subtheme (theme: family poverty)

Group 1 (18–25 years)	Group 2 (26–35 years)	Group 3 (> 35 years old)
Subtheme 1: School Dropout		
<p>"I wanted to quit (school). No one made me do it. I was wild at that time." (No. 5, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>My husband was one (of the reason to quit school), and I was pregnant also. (No. 6, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>"(I quit school) because I wanted to get married. No one asked me to quit." (No. 9, Malay, married at 16 years old.)</p> <p>"I quit school and worked in a canteen. I myself wanted to quit because my parents could not afford it anymore." (No. 12, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p>	<p>"I was in the middle of Form 4 (at 16 years old) and then I quit. Because um... pregnant." (No. 4, Malay, married at 16 years old.)</p> <p>"I quit school because I got married." (No. 11, Malay, married at 16 years old.)</p> <p>"Because we only lived a simple life; my parents were unemployed, my brothers worked but were not so rich, and then I decided to quit school when I was in Form 1 (at 13 years old)." (No. 13, Malay, married at 16 years old.)</p> <p>"I quit school because I had to work after my mom died." (No. 19, Malay, married at 15 years old.)</p> <p>"I was too lazy to go to school. At that time I was waiting... (I had) the PMR (Lower Secondary Assessment examinations) at that time, and I worked. I liked working, and I've lost interest in studying. Besides that, our lives were difficult back then. I had many siblings." (No. 20, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p>	<p>"(I quit school and) worked at a restaurant. I wanted to work. When I was little at the time, I was too lazy to study and it wasted my parents' money." (No. 1, Malay, married at 15 years old.)</p> <p>"[It was] my aunt's choice (for her to stay with her while going to school) because my parents wanted me to quit school. My siblings were still too little; we were villagers." (No. 2, Bidayu, married at 16 years old.)</p> <p>"I quit when I was in Standard 6 (at 12 years old). My parents could not afford it." (No. 7, Iban, married at 14 years old.)</p> <p>"I was still a student, but because of pre-marital sex, and because he agreed as well, we just got married. I was in the middle of school." (No. 17, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p>
Subtheme 2: Reducing the Burden on Parents		
<p>"I thought that my marriage would not burden my parents because my husband is able to take care of me, and we do not have to ask money from my parents anymore." (No. 12, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p>	<p>"After I quit (school) I wanted to continue, but then I pitied my parents, so I couldn't." (No. 13, Malay, married at 16 years old.)</p> <p>"I quit school when I was 15 years old because I worked after my mom died. She was sick. Because at that time, my mom was sick and my dad didn't have a stable job. I have brothers, but all of them were already married." (No. 19, Malay, married at 15 years old.)</p> <p>"Sometime after 10 years old, I went back to my mother's house. At that time someone was looking for a nanny to take care of their children. So, my mother said, 'You have no job, so it's better if you work now,' she said. So, my sister and I agreed to take the job. Both of us became a nanny to take care of the children." (No. 20, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p>	<p>"(I quit school and) worked at a restaurant. I wanted to work. When I was little at the time, I was too lazy to study, and it wasted my parents' money." (No. 1, Malay, married at 15 years old.)</p> <p>"Because we were in a difficult life, and when we get married, the husband will pay for everything. So, we have an open mind to, as they say, when, how to say this, we won't burden our parents too much (by getting married) because I have four siblings, I got married and then there are three, and my brother lived on his own. So, my parents had fewer burdens and could send my younger siblings to school. I, too, after I got married, I could help my siblings. I bought them clothes, trousers, and a little food. At the end of the month, I sent them money too. I got married, and my parents' lives got easier." (No. 7, Iban, married at 14 years old.)</p>

grandmother, and I ran away. I was contacted by the welfare people again and then they said, 'Because you keep running away, we will send you to the girls' home.' Because I kept on running away from home. Unless someone wanted to take me in. So, my grandmother said, 'Do you want to follow

me?' I didn't want to go to the girls' home; I didn't want to. If it wasn't for my grandparents' help, I don't think I could have completed my studies. They took care of me since I was small. I decided to get married because I was three months pregnant. First, I told my grandmother that I didn't want to.

**Table 4** Comparison of age groups within the theme (theme: early marriage as fate)

Group 1 (18–25 years)	Group 2 (26–35 years)	Group 3 (> 35 years old)
<p>"I don't know why (I got married). Maybe it's fate." (No. 9, Malay, married at 16 years old.)</p>	<p>"There were (people talking behind my back), but I ignored them. Because it's already fate." (No. 4, Malay, married at 15 years old.)</p> <p>"I don't know how it led to marriage. It's fate, as they say. We stayed married until now." (No. 8, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>"I guess it's fate. Nobody forced us (to get married)" (No. 11, Malay, married at 16 years old.)</p> <p>"Maybe it's fate (that I got married), and our families have given their blessing." (No. 16, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p>	<p>"At that point, I viewed young marriage as my fate, but it wasn't well-received by my family because I was still a child." (No. 2, Bidayu, married at 16 years old.)</p> <p>"It's normal. That's what they call fate." (No. 3, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>"(The ideal age of marriage is in your) 20s. But what to do? It's my fate." (No. 17, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p>

**Table 5** Comparison of age groups within the theme (theme: family disharmony)

Group 1 (18–25 years old)	Group 2 (26–35 years old)	Group 3 (> 35 years old)
<p>"My parents were divorced when I was in Primary 4 (at 10 years old)." (No. 5, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>"I lived with my grandmother since I was 4 years old until Form 5 (17 years old)." (No. 6, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p>	<p>"My father married my mother before he got divorced and married to another, and then divorced again, and now he has another wife." (No. 8, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>"My parents had their problems. They got divorced when I was in Standard 4 (at 10 years old); they separated." (No. 16, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p> <p>"I was under my grandmother's care since I was young. I only went back to my mother's house when I was older." (No. 20, Malay, married at 17 years old.)</p>	<p>"My father had proposed a potential husband for me, but I didn't want him. I didn't want a man who was already married and looking for another wife to convert to Islam. So, I ran away. I looked for a job so I wouldn't have to marry. I found my own money first. When I was old enough, I was pressured to marry. He (the father) told me to marry that old Chinese man. I didn't want to. So, I had to find a young man." (No. 1, Malay, married at 15 years old.)</p>

She gave me two choices. First, she would send me to the city to study, and she told me to abort the pregnancy. But then I didn't want to. I had sinned once (by becoming pregnant outside of marriage); I didn't want to commit another one. So..." (No. 6, Malay, married at 17 years old, current age range in Group 1.)

Table 2 shows the comparison of the age groups within the subthemes of health risk behaviour. The unprotected intercourse and pre-marital conception subtheme was especially evident among group 1 (18–25 years) and group 3 (above 35 years old). The alcohol and drug misuse subtheme was identified only among the youngest participant group.

#### Family poverty

Under the theme of family poverty, we identified two subthemes: school dropout and reducing the burden on parents.

#### School dropout

Many of the women in this study dropped out of school long before they engaged in child marriage, primarily due to family poverty. There was also another group of women who had dropped out of school at a young age due to pregnancy out of wedlock. Several of the participants in this study stated that they left school at an early age, such as when they were 12 or 13 years old, either voluntarily due to their families' financial situations or because they had been explicitly told by their parents to terminate schooling because of the family's poverty. After leaving school, some girls helped their families financially by working, while others stayed at home and helped with household chores and taking care of younger siblings. The other predominant reason for leaving school was pregnancy. The decision to leave was quickly enforced by the parents after they discovered the pregnancy. After dropping out of school, one of the participants was quickly married off to the man with whom she had had pre-marital sex.

"I didn't study at the time of my marriage. I attended school only until Primary 6 (at 12 years old). I stopped because my parents couldn't afford it. My parents didn't work; they only planted wheat in a long house." (No. 7, Iban, married at 14 years old, current age range in Group 2.)

"I did not finish studying because we only lived a simple life; my parents were unemployed, my brothers worked, but were not so rich, and then I decided to quit school when I was in Form 1 (at 13 years old). After I left, I wanted to continue, but then I pitied my parents, so I didn't. My parents were okay with me quitting school; they didn't really care. Then, my marriage was arranged by our parents when I was 16 years old." (No. 13, Malay, married at 16 years old, current age range in Group 2.)

"I studied until Form 2 (at 14 years old). I wanted to quit because my parents couldn't afford it. The reaction of my parents, they were just okay with it as long as I wanted to work after I quit school." (No. 12, Malay, married at 17 years old, current age range in Group 1.)

#### Reducing the burden on parents

Some of the participants stated that their main reason for getting married early was to help reduce the financial burden on their parents. Their logic was that by getting married early, there would be fewer members in the family for their parents to take care of. The girls thought getting married early would be beneficial for the family because it would reduce the burden on their parents.

"Because we were in a difficult life, and when we get married, the husband will pay for everything. So, we have an open mind, as they say, when, how to say this, we won't burden our parents too much (by getting married) because I have five

siblings. So, my parents had fewer burdens and could send my younger siblings to school. I, too, after I got married, could help my siblings. I bought them clothes, trousers and a little food. At the end of the month I sent them money too. I got married, and my parents' lives got easier." (No. 7, Iban, married at 14 years old, current age range in Group 3.)

"I wanted to quit school because my parents couldn't afford it anymore. Then, I met my husband at my workplace, at the canteen. Then, I was pregnant, so I decided to get married. First, I felt scared that I couldn't take care of my husband completely. Scared that I wouldn't be able to give him food and cook for him. But I thought that my marriage would not burden my parents because my husband is able to take care of me, and we do not have to ask money from my parents anymore." (No. 12, Malay, married at 17 years old, current age range in Group 1.)

Table 3 shows the comparison of the age groups within the subtheme of family poverty. The school dropout subtheme was identified across all age groups, while the reducing the burden on parents subtheme was identified more in the older age groups.

#### **Early marriage as fate**

Most of the women in this study described getting married early as their fate. They could not find any other justifiable reasons for their decision to marry early but believed that fate dictated that they would be married at an early age.

"I guess why I got married early is because it is my fate. We loved each other. Some of my friends asked me why I decided to get married too early. They said that I was young and my future's still long; that I needed to enjoy myself. But it's fate; that's all I can say." (No. 11, Malay, married at 16 years old, current age range in Group 2.)

"I don't know why I got married early. Maybe it's fate." (No. 9, Malay, married at 16 years old, current age range in Group 1.)

Table 4 shows the comparison of age groups within the fate of an early marriage theme. Fate was referred to by the participants in the older age groups, who had a longer time since their marriage to contemplate on what had happened.

#### **Family disharmony**

##### **Family disharmony**

Relationship problems with parents seemed to indirectly influence the women in their decisions to get married at a young age. Some of the women who participated in this study confessed that their relationships with their parents were strained during their childhood or adolescence, and that they sought affection and comfort in early marriage instead.

"My parents had their problems. They got divorced when I was in Standard 4 (at 10 years old); they separated. So, I stayed with my mom; my dad remarried. My step-mother never took care of us. She didn't really like us, so she never objected to my marriage. It's all up to my mom. I only took my dad as 'wali' (the bride's representative in a Muslim wedding)." (No. 16, Malay, married at 17 years old, current age range in Group 2.)

"I lived with my grandmother since I was 4 years old until Form 5 (at 17 years old). When I was in Form 3 (at 15 years old), I got into a trouble; I couldn't take it. I was under a lot of pressure. I really didn't receive enough love from my parents since I was little. I was always with my grandmother. So, I ran away from there... it was examination time. I took my identification card and left (my grandmother's house). I sought out my mother again because I really loved her." (No. 6, Malay, married at 17 years old, current age range in Group 1.)

"I was under my grandmother's care since I was young. I only went back to my mother's house when I was older. I don't remember when I returned to my mother's house, but I can only recall that when I was very young; my grandmother took care of me. Sometime after 10 years old, I went back to my mother's house." (No. 20, Malay, married at 17 years old, current age range in Group 2.)

Table 5 shows the comparison of the age groups within family disharmony theme. Participants in the older age group mentioned this theme more than those in the youngest group.

#### **Discussion**

In this study, we interviewed women who were married at younger than 18 years of age in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. They provided in-depth information about their lived experiences regarding what led them to get married at a young age. We identified four overarching

themes regarding the factors leading to child marriage in Sarawak. The themes were health risk behaviour, family poverty, early marriage as fate, and family disharmony. In this discussion section, we focus on the emotional aspects from the participants' perspectives and elaborate on what influenced the women in this study to decide to get married at an early age.

Regarding the first theme of health risk behaviour, which included the unprotected intercourse and pre-marital conception subtheme, an unmarried pregnant woman is seen as having committed a moral violation in Malaysia, and people perceive unmarried teenage mothers as having committed delinquency by having unmarried sexual relations or practising substance abuse or prostitution [21]. Therefore, parents or guardians will try to get them married immediately if they know about the pregnancy. Compared with parents' motives reported in previous studies of child marriage in developing countries in South Asia and Africa, the parents' motives in this study were slightly different. The parents believed they were left with no choice but to allow their daughters to get married *ex post facto* due to pre-marital conception. In contrast, the motives of the parents in the developing countries mentioned above were to protect their daughters from sexual assault or prostitution that may have occurred if their daughters remained unmarried; thus, the parents felt more secure once their daughters were married and under a husband's protection [7]. Another parental motive is that having a girl in a family is a financial burden, and thus, they need to find a suitor as early as possible [22]. In this study, we found that in most cases, the parents pressured their daughters to get married before they were 18 years old only after they had found out that they were pregnant. According to Islamic teaching, under some circumstances, when a man and a woman are together in private, they can be suspected of engaging in immoral activities that are considered "khalwat" (close proximity) and can be subject to criminal investigation under the Islamic religion [23]. For one of our participants, this was the stated reason for her child marriage; her parents had found out about her participating in an indecent act in private with her future husband and suspected that the couple was engaging in sexual behaviour. Therefore, we can conclude that child marriage in Sarawak is perceived as a mechanism for preventing young couples from committing further sins and ensuring that a girl who becomes pregnant does get married. Furthermore, one of the pertinent findings in this study is that many of the girls who became pregnant did not have adequate knowledge of how to prevent pregnancy. This finding is in line with a previous study of women who experienced early marriage in Iran [24]. Therefore, to prevent and reduce unwanted pregnancy among adolescents, sex education, including information about contraception methods, for female adolescents at

school and in the community must be promoted at an early age as they experience puberty. The previous review study identified a lack of knowledge about sexuality and reproductive health among Malaysian adolescents [25]. Therefore, education must emphasise what may happen when a couple has a sexual relationship as well as the various responsibilities attached to marriage and childbearing. The challenges faced by other Islamic states, such as Iran and Indonesia, concerning the introduction of sex education at school are based on the idea that teaching about sexuality is a taboo [26, 27]. A previous study reported that there is a reluctance to discuss sexual issues in public in Iran, as it is perceived as embarrassing to talk about sexuality, and people worry about the negative impacts of introducing sexual education at school [26]. Second, the findings showed that the concept of fate affected the emotions and minds of the women and influenced their decisions to marry early. This notion of fate as one of the determinants of child marriage has been briefly reported in previous studies [28, 29] but has not been analysed in depth. In this study, the women who married at younger than 18 years of age seemed to believe that external forces determined their early marriages and that there was nothing they could have done to alter the courses of their lives. By using locus of control as a conceptual framework of this study, we can explain the fate-believing characteristic of the women in this study. Previous studies have focused on the connections between religiosity and life satisfaction, with locus of control as the mediator [11, 30]. Based on the assumption that the women in this study made decisions about child marriage within the framework of an external locus of control, it can be hypothesised that their decisions to marry early were justified and affirmed by their beliefs that it was their fate to get married at a young age. In a previous study on child marriage, a belief in fate was described as a way for married girls to quickly secure their identities, statuses, and respect in a new environment after marriage [6]. Another report described the older generation's perception that the acceptance of early marriage as fate demonstrated girls' submissiveness [31].

Third, it is important to closely examine the factors related to family disharmony and elaborate on how the women's relationship problems with their parents influenced their decisions to marry as children. As yet, this issue of family disharmony has not been investigated in studies of child marriage. The salient underlying condition is the problematic relationship with parents, triggered by divorce or a broken family. One study described the typical parenting style in Malaysia as authoritarian [32]. This means that parents in Malaysia tend to be "highly controlling and demanding but affectively cold, requiring children to be responsive to parental demands" [32]. While we cannot make a generalised statement about the parenting styles of the parents of the participants in this study, it is

important to further investigate the possible influence of the parent-child relationship style when examining the issue of child marriage. From the daughters' perspectives, we can hypothesise that due to the divorce of their parents, the adolescent girls lacked affection and thus sought it elsewhere by developing relationships with men, or by marrying at a young age as a way to secure affection and emotional comfort. Furthermore, if their parents' parenting style were authoritative, then the girls' perceived lack of affection as a result of their parents' divorce may have been exacerbated and consequently have further motivated them to seek refuge in child marriage. Although one study focused on the risk of child marriage and early sexual behaviours among female orphans in 10 sub-Saharan African countries [33], no studies regarding the relationship between parenting style or the absence of parental affection and child marriage have been conducted, and further investigation is needed.

Finally, we need to pay close attention to the issue of alcohol and drug misuse, which contribute to child marriage. Some of the women in this study had already been involved in risky behaviours, such as alcohol and drug consumption, during early adolescence prior to their marriages. They indicated that their sexual experience before marriage with delinquent partners occurred under the influence of alcohol and drugs. Choon et al. reported on the situation of juvenile delinquency in Malaysia, stating that when adolescents are attached to their peers rather than their parents, they are more likely to be involved in delinquent behaviours [34]. We found that some of the women in this study who were involved in delinquent behaviours during adolescence did not receive enough affection from their parents and actively sought to establish bonding relationships with delinquent male peers; they thought that an early marriage would give them the opportunity to escape from the influence of other delinquent peers. They were tired of being continuously involved in delinquent activities and wanted to find a way out of such situations. Under such circumstances, child marriage was one of the most feasible options for them. This finding is in line with a previous report from a database study examining the adult outcomes of adolescent girls who engaged in antisocial behaviour, which reported a trend towards early marriage among girls with antisocial behaviour [35]. Furthermore, a study in the field of criminology showed an association between marriage and crime in early adulthood. This study demonstrated that some women with previous records of offences seemed to be influenced by marriage and that marriage could work to suppress offending behaviour by establishing informal social control [36]. It also revealed that women who were involved in alcohol and drug misuse in early adolescence had motive to get married at a young age, to stop their involvement in risky activities and exchange their existing lifestyle for

better conditions. Laub, Nagin and Sampson, using a dynamic statistical model analysis and longitudinal data, reported on the issue of desistance from crime and how early marriage prevented criminal activities among some male respondents with a history of criminal activities [37]. These researchers added that although marriage could be a turning point, desistance from crime is a gradual process that requires the accumulation of social bonds, such as attaining relationships of enduring attachment as a result of entering into a marriage or continued employment in the labour market [37]. We can apply this perspective to our study findings and argue that child marriage could provide a turning point that allows girls to leave behind habits of juvenile delinquency and that supports their desistance from criminal activities. However, this hypothesis requires careful examination through further studies.

#### **Future directions and implications**

The findings of this study have several implications for future research on the topic of child marriage prevention. First, our findings indicate that unwanted pregnancy is a triggering factor in the decision to marry early in Malaysia. To reduce unwanted pregnancy, the implementation of sex education in early adolescence is crucial. It is important to conduct research to evaluate the effectiveness of sex education as an intervention programme at school and in the community. An innovative approach that incorporates sex education in religious teachings is the key to success. A qualitative study conducted among young Muslim women in Australia revealed the importance of aligning their sexuality with both traditional expectations and mainstream norms in Australian society [38]. This alignment was necessary to reflect the norms and expectations of both spheres. This finding gives insight into the use of sex education to prevent child marriage. We need to disseminate information and provide space for dialogue between community members and young girls about sexuality in a way that is culturally and religiously sensitive so that young girls can feel safe and secure in learning about sexuality without facing the struggle of balancing two opposing values. Second, our findings suggest the need to solve the problem of family poverty and school dropout due to poverty. Therefore, the government should enhance efforts to empower people to improve their economic statuses and promote their health literacy. A study focusing on the challenges of poverty reduction policy in Malaysia addressed the inadequacy of the capacity building of economically vulnerable groups [39]. There is a gap in educational achievement among those who are economically advantaged and disadvantaged. The implementation of programmes to scale up practical, on-the-job training for economically vulnerable groups is necessary. To create a continuous improvement loop, the effects of such interventions must be measured systematically in

future studies. Third, the study shows that the parent-daughter relationship was problematic for some of the participants. The emotional impact of parents' divorce or a child's separation from the family due to family breakdown must be studied in connection with girls' decisions to marry as children. One study found an association between the daughter's satisfaction with her relationship with her mother, the mother's strong disapproval of her daughter having sex, and the frequency of the mother's communication with the parents of her daughter's friends with later sexual debut [40]. In future research focusing on parent-daughter relationships and child marriage, we need to further investigate the aspects mentioned above.

### Strengths and limitations

This research is the first community-based study to reveal the factors leading to child marriage in Sarawak. The study participants were recruited from urban and suburban areas of Sarawak State; therefore, the results cannot be generalised to rural settings in Sarawak, where different factors may have a predominant role in encouraging child marriage. In this study, the factors leading to child marriage were explored from the women's perspectives but not from the perspectives of men or the parents of those who married early. This approach might have limited the findings in terms of reflecting the viewpoints of those involved in child marriage. As one of our findings concerned family disharmony, the perspectives of parents regarding their daughter's early marriage should be investigated in future research. We also collected data from stakeholders who interact closely on regular basis with the girls who get marry at a young age. However, due to lack of resources, we were not able to obtain data from the stakeholders until the point of saturation. Therefore, the data was not included in this study. The authors plan to publish another paper separately as a future study to focus on the perspectives of the stakeholders in the community in perceiving why child marriage take place in Sarawak. In addition, because of the sensitivity of the issue, it was not possible to collect data about the reasons for child marriage from the girls before they enter into child marriage. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study can provide an evidence base to allow policy makers and practitioners to untangle the complex array of factors that affect child marriage in Sarawak.

### Conclusions

The findings of this study show that the factors leading to child marriage in Sarawak, Malaysia are related to individual personalities as well as relationships with parents and peers. These findings can be used by policy makers when creating intervention programmes targeting young female adolescents to strengthen sex education and empower female adolescents so that they will

not choose child marriage but will find hope in other meaningful life goals. Strengthening sex education for female adolescents at school and in the community as early as the onset of puberty is necessary to prevent and reduce unwanted pregnancy. Additionally, it is important to involve family members in sex education at school so that a close understanding between the family and the school can be achieved. Solely raising the legal minimum age of marriage will not solve the problems of child marriage as the factors leading to child marriage are diverse and intricately intertwined and affect the lives of girls, girls' families and the society in which girls live. It is also important to create support programmes for girls in poor families so that dropping out of school early is not an option. Future studies are required to examine the association of child marriage with personality and with interpersonal domains such as belief in fate, school dropout and relationships with parents and peers.

### Abbreviations

COREQ: COnsolidated criteria for REporting Qualitative research; HIV/AIDS: Human Immunodeficiency Virus/ Acquired ImmunoDeficiency Syndrome; WHO: World Health Organization

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### Authors' contributions

AK designed the study, developed the data collection tools, managed participant recruitment, conducted interviewer training, coded and analysed the data, and drafted and finalised the final manuscript. MD and ND provided technical and intellectual input in the study design, data analysis, and manuscript revision. RS and TN provided input in the data analysis and manuscript revision. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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### Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

### Ethics approval and consent to participate

At the beginning of the interview, the participants received a detailed explanation from the interviewer in the form of a written participation sheet regarding the purpose of the study and what they could expect when participating in the study. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, without being asked for the reason for withdrawal. All participants gave written consent to participate. This study was approved by the Kyoto University Graduate School and Faculty of Medicine Ethics Committee (R1026) as well as the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UM. TNC2/RC/H&E/UMREC - 163). Approval to conduct research in Sarawak State was received from the State Planning Unit of the Sarawak State Government ((43) JKM/SPU/608-8/2/2 Vol. 2).

### Consent for publication

Not applicable.

**Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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