


The intersection of Christian education and philosopher-feminist thought: Addressing child marriage in Indonesia

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One of the global challenges addressed in this article, particularly in the Global South, is the high prevalence of child marriage. The author is situated in an area with one of the highest rates of child marriage in Indonesia. The rationale for selecting this case study is to examine the concept of spiritual freedom and its potential to empower women to challenge the oppression they face with regard to their bodies, rights, and futures. Child marriage should be regarded as a criminal act in the context of Christianity. However, this issue does not appear to be a prominent topic in educational institutions, places of worship, or global discourse. This research employs a qualitative methodology, utilising interview techniques with women who have experienced child marriage. The author then engaged in a process of reflection with feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young, concurrently addressing theological concerns and the role of Christian education. The findings indicate that Christianity and government policy on health are inextricably linked, as health is a divine mandate for humanity to fulfil its responsibilities.

Contribution: This article makes a contribution to the field of research in Central Kalimantan and serves to proclaim to the global community that Christian education must address the issue of child marriage as a matter of urgency.

Keywords: Christian education activist; Iris Marion Young; marriage continuum paradox; shame culture; victim humanity; welfare and women.

Introduction

Child marriage is a global crime and a crime in education. Child marriage is an issue in developing countries or in Asia Pacific. Child marriage is a gender issue. Children have various definitions, namely, when they are called children, and when they are not called children. The definition of a child from a religious perspective is different from the definition of a child from a health perspective. In addition, the definition of a child can also differ based on custom. I quote the definition of a child according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 which entered into force on 02 September 1990. Article 49 defines a child as follows: 'a child means every human being below the age of 18 years' (Fan & Koski 2022). To what extent can educational initiatives and the empowerment of women contribute to the reduction of child marriage prevalence in Indonesia? The definition of a child, according to Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), is a child under the age of 18 (Bapennas 2017; Roberto et al. 2020). Are child marriages and/or weddings allowed? Before going there, I try to contain the definition of marriage itself.

In general, marriage can be interpreted as an agreement between two parties who bind themselves to build a family (Anwar 2015; UI Gender Studies Programme 2016). The definition of marriage is also affirmed through Law No. 1 of 1974 that, 'marriage is defined as a physical and mental bond between a man and a woman with the aim of forming a happy and eternal family based on the Almighty God' (Ministry of Religious Affairs, Law No. 1 of 1974 article 1). At the global level, the institution of family has become important and is recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or UDHR article 16 paragraph (1) related to child marriage, which declares that men and women of legal age, regardless of nationality, citizenship or religion, have the right to marry and to form families (Anwar 2015; Childhood & Law 2022; Munte & Korsina 2022). They have equal rights in the matter of marriage, during marriage, and at the time of divorce (Smeru et al. 2021; UNICEF 2018, 2020).

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The Covenant affirms the right of men and women of marriageable age to form new families. How, then, does the affirmation of marriage mean that children are allowed to marry? Child marriage has many negative sides, ranging, in terms of reproductive health (increasing maternal mortality rate [MMR] and child mortality rate [CMR]), power relations, customs, and even religious practices that support child marriage.

Child marriage has received special attention in the fifth target of the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), which boils down to achieving gender equality and empowering girls and all women (Genilo & Intaratat 2023; Thamrin 2020; Zain & Yanti 2022). One of the targets is to eliminate all forms of prejudicial activities such as child marriage, female circumcision and forced marriage.

In addition, the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights affirms that marriage is (Lauterpacht 1948:354):

... a natural and fundamental unit of society and has the right to be protected by society and the state. Then, the right to marry as a human right is further strengthened by Article 28B of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia Amendment (second amendment in 2000) which states that everyone has the right to form a family and continue offspring through legal marriage. The guarantee of this right has previously been emphasised by the legislation under it, namely Article 10 paragraph (1) of Law No. 39 of 1999 concerning human rights (Human Rights Law).

The preceding research was conducted as part of a seminar and subsequently published in book form (although my own writing was not included therein) under the title *Menikah Muda di Indonesia: Suara, Hukum, dan Praktik*, which presents a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted dimensions of child marriage, including the question of how child marriage is defined, the impact of child marriage on children and women from an intersectional perspective, and the legal and social context of children and women in Indonesia (Grijns et al. 2018). However, this article differs in the sense that it focuses on the work of feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young, particularly in relation to the issues of Christian theology (the relationship between contraceptives, shame culture, and God's love is complex and/or multifaceted) and education in Central Kalimantan. It does so by paying close attention to the needs of children.

Conceptual clarification

Child marriage is not only a violation of human rights but also the face of evil. The definition of evil to me is dealing with discrimination/alienation, coercion, elimination of bodily autonomy in private and public spaces, deprivation of educational rights and narrowing the space for participation across sectors. I have observed that the UN urgency response has moved a long way in setting the legal age of marriage above 18 years for all countries of the world. The limit is the lowest age of marriage for any

given country. Indonesia, with its latest law (UU) No. 16 of 2019 in article 7 passed on 15 October 2019 (previously: UU No. 1 of 1974) conceptually confirms that marriage, both by men and women, is at the age of 19 years and above. Marriage under the age of 19 means that the marriage is now categorised as a child marriage.

Facts show that, globally, lawlessness through the age limit of marriage practice has occurred, especially in developing countries, including Indonesia. The United Nations (UN) specialising in health in the international field informs through the CEDAW (commission or committee urging the elimination of the differentiation of women [objectification of women]) and CRC (commission or committee dealing with the rights of the child) committees that marriage itself is officially recognised (registered) by the state, custom and religion. The UN agency World Health Organization even claims that 650 million women were married as children. In other words, 12 million girls are married before 18 every minute (Siscawati 2017; Smeru et al. 2021; UNICEF 2020).

Data from United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), an organisation that works on child development globally, shows that the logical consequences of child marriage greatly affect and disadvantage girls (UNICEF 2018, 2020). These disadvantages include the loss of career opportunities in the world of work (outside the home and inside the home), isolation in the social structure (no voice, no legalisation in terms of deciding to give opinions), and segregation in the family circle (stigmatisation, violence). In my opinion, the disadvantages of women victims of child marriage as survivors have actually received a response from the government, but in reality, there is stagnation of change. Even in the context of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), there has been a drastic increase in the number of child marriages in Indonesia.

The family is an important part of the history of the development of Christian religious education. The family itself is the heart of Christian religious education. A family, in my opinion, is a family that does not only have a wife, husband and children, but the epistemology of family is much broader than that. However, the history of the term and the journey of the family itself is never separated from something called children. Children are part of the family and play an important role in family life.

The history of the family, as the oldest institution in the world, underwent changes in two important ways: firstly, the shift of the subject of gathering (8000 BC) to agrarian activities (7000 BC in South China and 5000 BC in Central America), and secondly, agriculture to industry that gave birth to urban society (Gilbert 2023). Thus, dynamising conversations about whiteness, how and why families (nuclear families), have their grassroots roots in these transitional vignettes of activity. During the community

and agricultural eras, egalitarian relationships were dominant within the nuclear family. However, after transitioning to the industrial era, the gap between male and female alienation deepened (Gilbert 2023; Munte & Monica 2023). I suppose it was during this period that the space of the political system in the image of patriarchy became clearer, and it remains in the nuclear family to this day, including in Christian families, especially in the developing countries.

Iris Marion Young: Philosopher-feminist

The context in which Young's work is situated within my research is the strengthening of the relevance of his theory, which addresses the issue of exploitation. This is defined as coercion resulting in a loss of access to various forms of capital, including social, educational, economic, religious and cultural capital. In addition to exploitation, women in child marriage are subjected to marginalisation or exclusion of access. Moreover, those subjected to child marriage often find themselves in a position of powerlessness with regard to expressing their opinions. The expression of thoughts is solely at the discretion of parents or elders. The relationship between Young's thinking and my writing is the presence of multiple forms of violence that are consistently present in the lives of victims (in this case, women). Consequently, Young endeavours to present a potential solution through the avenue of awareness, particularly with regard to state policy (as a newly introduced concept in this context). Furthermore, she suggests ways in which individuals can adopt a proactive stance in resisting the prevailing circumstances, particularly through the implementation of government policies, notably those pertaining to Christian education and broader initiatives aimed at fostering empowerment.

Although surviving women directly affected during child marriage have found appropriate employment outside their homes, they are rarely holistically free. Instead, they experience new oppressions (Young 1997). Iris Marion Young's perspective will be my analytical lens to analyse how far the category of oppression operates in the experiences of such women survivors (Scholz 2017; Young 2005, 2014). I have found that although women victims of child marriage work, they are still victimised and exploited in their workplace, such as, salaries that are less than Indonesia's regional and/or provincial minimum wage levels. In terms of marginalisation, Young has identified issues where women are intentionally and consciously excluded from access, autonomy, and rights whether in public, political, church, or community spaces (Scholz 2017). I will draw on Young's research findings to investigate and classify the marginalisation seen among female victims of child marriage. Young adds the category of powerlessness in terms of decision-making, whether in the household, family association, church, political space and their own bodies (Scholz 2017).

However, beyond men in child marriage, getting an education is important for women who have survived forced marriage. However, despite being educated, these women remain silenced. Freire as a philosopher in education, whose views are used in the context of Christian education regarding spatialisation is critical consciousness as a form of resistance to silencing/internalisation (imperialist indoctrination through negative image narratives and patience without resistance), including the oppression of women (Freire 2020; 'Paulo Freire's Intellectual Roots : Toward Historicity in Praxis', 2013; Pouwels 2019). Finally, Young looks at oppression in terms of violence. I will analyse violence in relation to economic, verbal, physical, psychological dimensions, and specifically Christian religion (church and school).

Scholars who have tracked Iris Marion Young's feminist and philosophical approach have conducted similar research, such as Sara Willner. Willner discovered the womb, which is closely linked to reproductive organs, through social networking sites such as Facebook (Willner 2021). Exploratory qualitative research has shown the similarities between motherhood – which experiences physical, mental and emotional stress – and women, namely the finality of procreation. The right to agency in women's bodies (autonomy) is a serious issue (gender dysphoria) that is not only perpetuated by pronatalist civil society but also legitimised access to medicalisation.

I found insights and confrontations about and on behalf of justice developed under Francisco Blanco Brotons. Brotons compares the thought of John Rawls with that of Iris Marion Young. Young, in Brontons' understanding, criticises Rawls' justice perspective's rules of collaboration between society and the people who establish institutions (e.g. states) (Aßländer 2020). Iris Marion Young, through Brotons, argues that although the institution operates in alliance with justice, there are still politically vulnerable subjects, who – in my opinion – are among the survivors involved in child marriage. Although survivors accept the invitation to work together towards the globalisation of justice, Rawls' offer of justice is not one that accommodates women first in order to be equal to men in the acquisition of justice in terms of social ontology.

I want to emphasise that women should have access, connection and autonomy in both private and public spaces. Based on Kayla R Mehl's research, which cites Young, my view is supported by the fact that women have been unfairly intertwined with social structures (Mehl 2018). Second support is provided by Jennifer Lynn Kiefer Fenton. Fenton refers to the suppression of voiced communication (marginalisation of vulnerable women's voices) (Fenton 2019). Another term of oppression, according to Catherine Lu et al. and Paige E Digeres, is alienation in the social fabric of indigenous communities (Digeres 2018). Among these social structures is

objectivation and symbolisation as a space for women's loyalty, in my case, women survivors who were victims of child marriage. Once these women have secured their rights, persuasive calls for justice are equally championed. Iringó Cora proposes and calls it a corporatisation of the feminine that grounds depatriarchalisation (Cora 2022).

Previous research was conducted as part of a seminar and later published in book form under the title *Menikah Muda in Indonesia: Voices, Laws and Practices*. This book presents an exhaustive study of the different aspects of child marriage, including how it's defined, its impact on children and women from various perspectives, and the legal and social context of children and women in Indonesia (Grijns et al. 2018). However, this article differs in that it focuses on the work of feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young, particularly in relation to the issues of Christian theology (The relationship between contraceptives, shame culture, and God's love is complex or multifaceted) and education in Central Kalimantan. It does so by paying close attention to the needs of children.

Mary Elizabeth Moore: Christian education activist

Upon review of Moore's writings, it is evident that she does not directly address the issue of child marriage. However, I utilise Moore's framework when discussing hope as a foundation for theology and education, an imaginary community (how Christianity coexists with the world in the midst of injustice), and Christian education as a site for theology when addressing God's love and knowledge of child marriage (rights, collective consciousness, and parenting) as a prophetic calling (children and church leaders/teachers are part of empowerment through advocacy to eliminate cases of child marriage).

I have seen the connection between women survivors of marriage in Indonesia is more about disconnection from school (expulsion because of pregnancy) and the lack of teaching by teachers about the reproductive system. Furthermore, the responsibilities of men and women before entering adulthood in marriage. Teachers have an inadequate understanding of their sacred calling as educators. Teachers are mediators of God's presence, responsible for the well-being of students and all beings. In addition, the lack of awareness and action on the work of nursing, empowerment and nurturing from teachers, and the cultivation of knowledge regarding preparation before marriage at an age beyond the age of the child (Adler 1942, 1983; Sanasintani & Munte 2024). Therefore, I will also use the thoughts of Christian education thinker Mary Elizabeth Moore as a basis for analysing the space/existence of Christian education itself how and what exactly the pearl of great price is in teaching as a sacrament (Nouwen 2004). Moreover, I will apply Moore and Almeda M Wright's conversational model during a discussion on spirituality among youth (Collins-Pisano et al. 2021; Nijhum 2023).

Based on Myungjin Lee's reflections, the historical situation becomes the locus of Christianity in Christian theology and educational praxis that emphasises hope in God's masterpiece for human beings, including women survivors who have been victims of child marriage on earth. God in and through Christ participates, joins, befriends and is touched by the restoration of God's people in the suffering, crisis and autonomous integrity of vulnerable groups. I find the view that God is present and gracious – and participates in the process of recovery with all beings, including humans, including survivors – by Mary Elizabeth Moore throughout Lee's writings valuable. As a result, survivors engage in life vocations, including prophetic vocations. It seems that the prophetic vocation is not only to proclaim justice but also to participate and empower fellow vulnerable groups, such as women survivors victimised by child marriage.

Lynn Cooper's dissertation work alludes to Mary Elizabeth Moore on the extent of man's relationship to power with sin (Adams et al. 2024). Power, according to Moore through Cooper, is not only something to be done away with but also a gift of God. Through this understanding, Moore has understood social sin as a rejection of the gifts of sexuality and self-autonomy. Through Moore, Cooper has stimulated Moore to invite people, including survivors, to critique (probe and investigate) themselves on how far they are affected with sin (reality check). I also noticed that Moore's awareness is important, namely that survivors realise the 'sin' of child marriage, not only by remaining silent while experiencing oppression but also by resisting – non-violently – as God's work on vulnerable groups (subject-object of God's love).

Mary Elizabeth Moore, through David Scott Penn's findings, envisions the church as an imaginary community in the midst of a troubling world (Adams et al. 2024), with issues such as hunger, violence, discrimination, civil war, and perhaps including child marriage in the Indonesian context. There are different types of Christian identity and education. Identity here is not merely identity in the egalitarian sense, but –according to Lydia Winsor Brindamour, quoting Iris Marion Young – is identity that is given, but identity that has been socially constructed consciously and intentionally (Hiraide 2023). I argue that Christian education is not only within the locus of schooling in early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary education, but also within the church itself. Imaginative community within a Christian education framework focuses on the development of adolescents (both survivors and non-survivors of child marriage) and the congregation as a whole (King, Hardy & Noe 2021).

Marriage continuum paradox: Subject-victim humanity

Febri (pseudonym), a 29-year-old woman, is a woman who is married underage or referred to as married in the child category. The woman, who works in a private company with an uncertain salary, said:

'Many of them here marry young because they get pregnant first, and also because they don't want to go to school. Most of them are like that, especially the boys in the village. I'm sorry, I'm not patronising, but usually those who don't go to school participate in sucking up gold, mining for gold.' (Febri, 29 years old, female).

The narrative of this woman with two children, in my opinion, illustrates the normalisation of child marriage on the basis of men's day jobs in the mining world. However, even though it seems to normalise child marriage and there are no complaints that child marriage is wrong, I see economic and physical pressure from both parties. Although women are often stigmatised as oppressed subjects, in this case, Febri describes and realises as consciously as possible that she is a woman who does not describe herself as a victim. In fact, Febri is a victim herself in my opinion. Febri should not be in the confines of work. Febri should still be in school. She still has the right to get lessons, play, gain knowledge, experience interacting with peers, and continue her future goals.

On the theological side, I see that Febri has a spirit of service for herself and her family as subjects of God's love who participate in accompanying her husband to look for daily needs or to alleviate the economy. However, there is a paradoxical action that, as it were, God participates in a forced marriage or marriage in the condition of a child. God does not describe in detail at what age women and men should get married. In fact, in my opinion, Allah does not say if a woman should get married or not. At least, in my opinion, Febri and her husband are joyfully carrying out God's love in their daily work even though it seems as if the vulnerability experienced by Febri is something wrong for the gender context or Febri as a marginalised subject. Either because she is a woman or because her rights, body and self are taken away by subjects outside herself.

Contraception, shame culture and god's love

Febri (not her actual name; pseudonym) is one of the victims of child marriage. Febri grew up and immersed for a long time in the social, cultural, religious and familial milieu in Central Kalimantan. Febri's identity as one of the concrete evidences indicates that she is indeed a subject or victim of child marriage. From my observations, it appears that contraception is a controversial or even taboo issue when discussed in the public sphere. The reluctance is characterised by the emergence of self-shame as Febri narrated (but I did not explore the extent of the shame she wished to convey or in other words that Febri was embarrassed). This phenomenon does not occur only in one region, it also occurs in other regions or even Asia Pacific countries where the level of child marriage is a significant concern. Therefore, the narrative that Febri conveyed is a narrative that represents one of the victims of child marriage, which is not only in Central Kalimantan, but has become a problem in the Asia Pacific.

Febri, when it comes to other topics, still goes hand in hand with marginalised subjects and how God works:

'... yes because sometimes the first one, buying contraceptives, is definitely embarrassed, embarrassed by the officer. But if he feels that he is married, there must be no shame. But sometimes even those who are married feel embarrassed. Yes, my husband is like that. Yes, and sometimes for young people it must be uncomfortable if they use contraceptives. So the thought is that if it comes out outside it must not get pregnant, but the education that is now running is that even though it comes out outside, sometimes a little goes inside. And that can make you pregnant.' (Febri, 29 years old, female).

Based on Febri's narrative, I tried to divert the question of how the phenomenon of child marriage produces children or children breastfeeding children and children taking care of children. This means that there is an increase in population when entering the institution of marriage. I asked with a solution question that how Febri responded as a woman when dealing with contraceptives. Febri pointed out that there is a culture of shame to buy from stalls or shops. I suspected that the lack of education about sexuality could lead to a sense of excessive shame. Shame should be a part of life in Christianity. Shame for doing wrong, shame for ruining other people's lives or the ideals of a group of people. However, this indicates that contraceptives are important to inhibit the acceleration of human growth as a global problem, especially when it comes to the issue of child marriage. The shame that should belong to Christianity to perpetuate responsibility and obligation then takes over for something that I think is less important.

On the other hand, in addition to discussing shame, God does not basically prohibit procreation, but I see and reflect that humans are given the wisdom not to see children as an asset to be controlled, seeing children as a sacrifice for economic weakness, such as some cases of child marriage in parts of developing countries, including Indonesia. The issue of child marriage is a global issue as well as a theological issue that overlaps with other disciplines, especially humanities. Christianity becomes important to me when I see Febri's narrative that education is not only the property of the powerful but also the right of the lower class. God does not favour one-sided education, but requires communal welfare or overall welfare.

Health, welfare and women

Eka (pseudonym), a midwife from one of the districts in Central Kalimantan, shared her experience as a midwife dealing with women and pregnancy in the village. Eka, a woman who has moved to work in a new place in one of the Kalimantan districts said:

'... yes, it is to pass some tetanus, what kind of immunisation, right before the marriage must be [*Tetanus Toksoid*] TT first laboratory examination ... for example, blood test for [*Hemoglobin*] HB group, Spilis, which interferes with the reproductive health of the mother or father ... There is no such thing as a paid examination covered by BPJS, I don't know if it's because of what yesterday there was one month it feels like for patients it is paid again ...' (Eka, 35 years old, female)

On the basis of the information I received during the interview with Eka, I see that the immunisation process is important to diagnose women in order to ensure their health condition, immunity, detection of disease or not, reproductive system and psychology. In addition, I found that women as subjects should receive attention not only from the institution of marriage or family but also from other institutions, such as the hospital. I think this kind of cooperation is important to show that cooperation is part of God's work.

The concept of God as a benevolent entity is often associated with the marginalised, providing solace and comfort to those who are suffering or facing exclusion. Furthermore, it is evident that God is Christ, who is present within the entirety of the subject (encompassing women and men), regardless of the pain they endure, economic vulnerability, or cultural contribution as a manifestation of the marginalisation of women as second-class subjects in the pursuit of rights within the health sector, encompassing all its aspects. Furthermore, it is important to consider the continuity of regulations at *puskesmas*, the fulfilment of facilities, the delivery of information on a regular basis, the distance pregnant women travel from home to *puskesmas*, and the process of birth. This process is an act of empathy that God has transmitted and that Christians must embrace. It is a responsibility and a necessity for Christians to voice and ground heaven in the forms of empathy and welfare.

The relationship between child marriage and disease can be understood by examining the impact of child marriage on reproductive health. This is a logical consequence of child marriage that gives rise to the need for midwifery care for both childbirth and childrearing. This perspective is exemplified by Eka, a midwife who frequently treats child patients. Eka's portrayal of the situation illustrates the crucial role of health services in guaranteeing children's rights as citizens. However, in practice, the existing system still falls short of expectations, particularly in the context of Eka's work location. The relationship between Christian education and the issue of child marriage is one of responsibility, empathy, and the fulfilment of health education as a form of divine love. It is the duty of churches and religious institutions to demonstrate these values.

In order to respond to the research question, an investigation has been conducted into the narratives of women who have been victims of child marriage in Central Kalimantan. These narratives encompass a range of topics, including education (with a particular focus on Christian education), the concept of women's autonomy, and narratives related to reproductive health. Young attempts to address the narrative of the problem by referencing women as agents within their own bodies, thereby emphasising their autonomy. Young posits that this autonomy represents a form of gender dysphoria, which is a significant issue. In the context of bodily autonomy, access to medicalisation is of significant importance as a means of avoiding medicalisation or, as Cora terms it, depatriarchalisation

(corporatisation of the feminine). The rationale is that women in general, as posited by Young, encounter feelings of estrangement in social and medical contexts.

Furthermore, I attempted to reflect on and record Mary Elizabeth Moore's perspectives on education, particularly her ideas about the teacher as a mediator or symbol of God's presence. In addition to providing material resources, care, and nurturing for children in the classroom or school environment, teachers should also present knowledge about the concept of marriage, its positive and negative effects, the concept of bodily autonomy, the nature of God's love, the cultural phenomenon of shame, and the characteristics of a prosperous human being with multiple relationships.

Conclusion

The results showed that although women get oppression over their bodies through the institution of marriage, family, or health institutions for a lack of access, female subjects are able to be empowered over their bodies, rights and futures. Freedom, although not fully freedom, the research subjects were able to be empowered by the existence of health access, a family that still supports although not fully. In addition, God, although he is a God of love, also remains on the side of the victim, namely women as marginalised subjects. God becomes paradoxical when placed in the midst of male segregation over women in the institution of marriage. In addition, the culture of shame that should be part of Christianity to show that sin is something truly real only lies when it becomes a crime. The government's support of contraceptives to the public is not a logical consequence of shame, but an active participation of God through the government.

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Author's contributions

A.M. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

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