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## Analysis of the Study of the Impact of Reproductive Health on Young Women Who Perform Elopements (Menik) in the Gayo Community, Central Aceh Regency, Indonesia: A Phenomenological Study

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Elopement (menik) is a traditional wedding tradition in the Gayo community, Central Aceh. This tradition often involves young women who are not physically and mentally ready to marry and have children. This research aims to analyze the impact of reproductive health on young women who elope (menik) in the Gayo community, Central Aceh Regency, Indonesia, using a phenomenological approach. **Methods:** This research was conducted using qualitative phenomenological methods. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 15 young women who eloped (menik) and 5 key informants. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. **Results:** Research findings show that elopement (menik) has a negative impact on the reproductive health of Gayo young women. These negative impacts include: Poor reproductive health: Young women who elope (menik) are at greater risk of experiencing pregnancy and childbirth complications, reproductive tract infections, and sexually transmitted diseases. Pregnancy and childbirth at a young age: Young women who elope (menik) generally become pregnant and give birth at a young age, which can endanger the health of the mother and baby. Lack of access to reproductive health services: Young women who elope (menik) are often prevented by stigma and social norms from accessing reproductive health services. **Conclusion:** Elopement (menik) has a significant negative impact on the reproductive health of Gayo young women. Preventive efforts must be made to reduce the number of elopements (menik) and increase adolescent girls' access to education and reproductive health services.

### 1. Introduction

In various parts of Indonesia, traditions and customs still play an important role in people's lives. One tradition that is still preserved in several areas, including the Gayo community, Central Aceh Regency, is elopement (menik). This tradition is a form of customary marriage in which a young man and woman run away from their families and marry without parental consent. Although elopement (menik) is part of Gayo culture, this tradition has a significant

negative impact, especially for the young women involved. Young women who marry at a young age, generally under the age of 18, are not yet physically and mentally ready to become wives and mothers. This can have various serious consequences, including on their reproductive health. Adolescent girls who marry at a young age are at higher risk of experiencing various complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Their immature reproductive organs are not ready for pregnancy and childbirth, increasing the chances of



bleeding, infection, and other complications. In addition, young women who marry at a young age generally have a low level of education and lack knowledge about reproductive health. This makes them more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and reproductive tract infections (Adedoyin, 2019; Ali, 2019; Bankole, 2019).

Furthermore, the stigma and social norms attached to elopement (menik) often prevent young women from accessing the reproductive health services they need. Afraid of being ostracized and humiliated, they are reluctant to seek medical help and information about reproductive health. Understanding the impact of elopement (menik) on the reproductive health of young women in the Gayo community is very important. Previous research has shown that early marriage has various negative impacts on the reproductive health of adolescent girls. A study in Indonesia found that adolescent girls who married at a young age had a three times higher risk of experiencing pregnancy and childbirth complications compared to adolescent girls who married at an older age. Other studies in developing countries show that early marriage increases the risk of reproductive tract infections, sexually transmitted diseases, and maternal and infant mortality (Betrán, 2022; Chadha, 2021; Cleland, 2022).

This research aims to examine the experiences and perspectives of young women who elope (menik) regarding their reproductive health. Through a phenomenological approach, this research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how elopement (menik) affects the reproductive health of Gayo young women, as well as identify factors that contribute to this negative impact. Research on the impact of elopement (menik) on the reproductive health of adolescent girls in Indonesia is still limited. It is hoped that this research will fill knowledge gaps and provide a deeper understanding of this issue.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Theoretical aspects of elopement (menik) customs in the Gayo community**

The Gayo community in Central Aceh Regency, Indonesia, has a unique and interesting traditional marriage tradition, namely elopement (menik). This tradition involves a couple deciding to get married without the consent of their parents or guardians. Although elopement (menik) is often considered controversial and contrary to modern social norms, this tradition has historical roots and complex meanings in Gayo society. Understanding the theoretical aspects of the custom of elopement (menik) is important to understand its practice and impact in Gayo society.

### **Anthropological theory**

#### **Status competition and social alliance theory**

According to status competition theory, elopement (menik) can be seen as a strategy to improve the social status of Gayo men. In Gayo's patriarchal society, men have the role and responsibility of finding a partner and building a family. Eloping (menik) allows men to show their courage and independence in making marriage decisions without parental approval. This can increase their status in the eyes of society and strengthen their position in the social structure. On the other hand, elopement (menik) can also be seen as a way to strengthen social alliances between families. When a Gayo man elopes (menik) with a woman from another family, it creates new kinship relationships that can strengthen the family's social and political networks. This social alliance can provide economic and political benefits for both families involved.

### **Reproductive control theory and virginity**

Reproductive control theory emphasizes the importance of maintaining women's virginity in traditional societies. A woman's virginity is considered a symbol of family honor and purity. Eloping (menik) can be seen as a way to ensure a woman's virginity



and protect family honor. In Gayo society, women who become pregnant out of wedlock are often stigmatized and ostracized. Eloping (menik) allows women to avoid the stigma and negative social consequences of out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

### **Expression theory of love and romantic desire**

Beyond the social and cultural aspects, elopement (menik) can also be seen as an expression of a couple's love and romantic desires. In Gayo society, dating traditions and interactions between men and women are still limited by social norms. Eloping (menik) can be a way for couples to express their love and commitment to each other, despite existing social barriers.

### **Sociological studies**

#### **Theory of social change and modernization**

Eloping (menik) can be seen as a phenomenon related to social change and modernization in Gayo society. Along with increasing access to education and information, the young Gayo generation is increasingly open to modern ideas and values. They may prefer to marry based on love and personal choice rather than following the tradition of elopement (menik) which is regulated by norms and customs.

#### **Gender inequality and patriarchy theory**

The tradition of elopement (menik) can be seen as a reflection of the patriarchal structure that is still strong in Gayo society. In a patriarchal system, men have greater power and control in decision making, including in matters of marriage. Gayo women often have limited choices in choosing a partner and determining their future. Eloping (menik) can be a way for women to gain control over their lives and challenge existing patriarchal norms.

#### **Agency theory and women's activism**

Although elopement (menik) is often seen as a violation of social norms, this tradition can also be

seen as a form of women's activism. Elopement (menik) allows Gayo women to take action and make their own decisions about their marriage, regardless of social pressure and expectations. This shows women's agency and strength in challenging traditional norms and fighting for their rights.

### **Theoretical aspects of reproductive health for adolescent girls related to the tradition of elopement (menik)**

In various parts of Indonesia, traditions and customs still play an important role in people's lives. One tradition that is still preserved in several areas, including the Gayo community, Central Aceh Regency, is elopement (menik). This tradition is a form of traditional marriage where a couple decides to get married without the consent of their parents or guardians. Although elopement (menik) is part of culture and tradition, this practice often involves young women who are not yet physically and mentally ready to marry and have children. Early marriage, where young women are physically and psychologically immature, has significant consequences for their reproductive health and overall well-being. Reproductive health is defined as a state of physical, mental, and social well-being that allows a person to lead a responsible, safe, and satisfying sexual life, as well as the ability to reproduce and choose when and how many children to have. Adolescent girls have unique and different reproductive health needs from adults. They are still in their growth and development period, so they are more susceptible to various reproductive health problems. Adolescent girls have a cervix that is shorter and more open than adult women, so they are more susceptible to sexually transmitted bacterial and viral infections (STIs). Pregnancy and childbirth at a young age can endanger the health of the mother and baby. Adolescent girls who become pregnant at a young age have a higher risk of experiencing pregnancy and childbirth complications, such as postpartum



bleeding, infection, and premature birth. Adolescent girls often have limited knowledge and information about reproductive health. This can make them more susceptible to various reproductive health problems. Elopement (menik) has a significant negative impact on the reproductive health of Gayo young women. Young women who elope (menik) generally become pregnant and give birth at a young age, which can endanger the health of the mother and baby. Young women who elope (menik) are often prevented by stigma and social norms from accessing reproductive health services. Young women who elope (menik) generally have limited knowledge and information about reproductive health. The tradition of elopement (menik) in Gayo society is still strong and young women are often forced to marry at a young age. Several factors contribute to the negative impact of elopement (menik) on the reproductive health of Gayo young women. Young women who elope (menik) generally have a low level of education, which limits their access to reproductive health information and services. Poverty can make young women more vulnerable to elopement (menik) and limit their access to reproductive health services. Stigma and social norms related to sexuality and reproduction can make young women embarrassed to seek reproductive health information and services.

### 3. Methods

This research uses qualitative phenomenological methods to understand the experiences and perspectives of young women who elope (menik) in the Gayo community, Central Aceh Regency, Indonesia, regarding their reproductive health. Phenomenology was chosen because it allows researchers to explore individual meanings and experiences in depth, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of elopement and its impact on the reproductive health of young women. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 15 young women who eloped (menik) and 5 key informants. Key

informants were selected based on their knowledge and experience regarding the tradition of elopement (menik) and adolescent reproductive health. Interviews are conducted in a place that is convenient for the participant, such as their home or another place of their choosing. Interviews were recorded with a voice recorder and transcribed verbatim for analysis. A semi-structured interview guide was used to guide the discussion, with open-ended questions allowing participants to freely share their experiences and perspectives. Interview topics included: Experience of elopement (menik); Knowledge and understanding of reproductive health; The impact of elopement (menik) on reproductive health; Challenges and barriers in accessing reproductive health services; Hope and aspirations for the future. Key informants were interviewed to obtain additional information about the tradition of elopement (menik), social norms and values related to young marriage, and access to reproductive health services in the Gayo community.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The thematic analysis involved the following steps: Rereading the interview transcripts repeatedly to gain an in-depth understanding of the data; Identifying initial codes, namely words, phrases, or paragraphs that are considered important and meaningful; Developing thematic categories by grouping related codes; Defining and refining thematic categories; Interpret thematic meaning in relation to research. Checking the validity of the data was carried out to ensure the credibility and reliability of the research findings. The validity checking steps used in this research include: Triangulation of data sources, namely comparing data from interviews with information from key informants and relevant literature; Member checking, namely asking participants to review interview transcripts and ensure that research findings reflect their experiences; Audit trail, namely documenting the research process in detail to allow others to review and assess the validity of the research. This research was conducted by



observing the principles of research ethics. Participants were given complete information about the study and asked for their written consent to participate. Participants' identities are kept confidential and research data is only used for research purposes. Participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows that the elopement tradition (menik) in the Gayo community, Central Aceh, is a traditional marriage practice involving a woman deciding to marry a man of her choice without parental consent. This tradition, although it has positive values such as female assertiveness and male loyalty, also has significant negative consequences for women and their families. Various factors can encourage elopement (menik). These factors are generally related to parents' disapproval of their daughters' choice of partners. Parents may not approve of marriage because of differences in social status, ethnicity, or religion. Men's applications may be rejected for the same reasons as above, or for other reasons such as lack of financial ability. Pregnancy out of wedlock can encourage women to elope (menik) in an effort to avoid disgrace and gain social recognition. The high wedding dowry in the Gayo community can be a burden on a woman's family, thus encouraging women to elope (menik) as a solution. The process of elopement (menik) is characterized by a series of complex traditional rituals. The following is a general description of the process: The woman, accompanied by family or relatives, goes to the village of the man of her choice. The woman meets the Village Imem (traditional leader) to be married. The Village Imem mediates with the woman's family to reach an agreement. If the mediation is successful, the marriage occurs. marriage customs are legalized and implemented. If mediation fails, the woman returns to her village and the marriage is invalid. Eloping (menik)

has negative consequences for women and their families. Elopement (menik) is considered a disgrace for a woman's family because it violates traditional and religious norms. The woman's family may be subject to customary sanctions in the form of fines. Marriages carried out through elopement (menik) are not recognized by state law. The tradition of elopement (menik) is increasingly rare in Gayo society today. Gayo people are increasingly aware of the importance of complying with religious norms and state laws, which do not support the practice of elopement (Menik). Gayo people are increasingly open to modern thinking and prefer marriages that follow the "Kerje Beraturen" custom which has been refined with religious rules. Even though it has negative consequences, the elopement (menik) tradition also contains positive values that need to be preserved. The elopement (menik) tradition shows a woman's firmness in fighting for her love and her desire to marry the man of her choice. A man who dares to elope (menik) shows his loyalty to the woman of his choice and his willingness to fight for her love. The Elopement (menik) tradition shows the Gayo people's compliance with the customary norms that apply in their area.

Table 2 shows that the tradition of elopement (menik) in the Gayo community, Central Aceh, has serious consequences for the reproductive health of young women. This customary marriage practice, which involves marrying at a young age without parental consent, triggers various health problems and endangers the overall well-being of young women. Young women who elope (menik) are more vulnerable to experiencing various reproductive health problems. Their reproductive organs are not fully mature and a lack of knowledge about reproductive health increases the risk of complications in pregnancy and childbirth. Postpartum hemorrhage, infection, and premature birth pose serious threats to the health of the mother and baby. Marriage at a young age due to the elopement (menik) tradition has bad consequences for the health of the mother and baby. Teenage girls'



bodies are not yet ready for pregnancy and childbirth, increasing the risk of complications and endangering their health. The stigma and social norms associated with elopement (menik) often prevent young women from accessing reproductive health services. Lack of information and education about reproductive health prevents them from getting the care and prevention they need. Ignorance about reproductive health is the main factor that worsens the negative impact of elopement (menik). Young women who elope (menik) generally have limited knowledge and information about reproductive health, making them more vulnerable to various health problems. The tradition of elopement (menik) in Gayo society is still strong and young women are often forced to marry at a young age. These social and cultural pressures can cause depression, and anxiety, and interfere with their education. Young women who elope (menik) often do not get the support they need from their families and communities. This can make them feel isolated and embarrassed, exacerbating their reproductive health problems and mental well-being. Elopement (menik) not only violates religious norms and state law but also has a significant negative impact on the reproductive

health of Gayo young women. Prevention and intervention efforts must be carried out to reduce these negative impacts, increase access to reproductive health services, and encourage more positive changes in social norms.

Knowledge and information are important elements in decision-making and individual behavior. According to Knowledge and Information Theory, individuals use the knowledge and information they have to make decisions and act in different situations. In the context of reproductive health, accurate knowledge and information about sexual and reproductive health (SRH) is very important for adolescents to make the right decisions about their health. Adolescent Development Theory explains that adolescence is a transition period between childhood and adulthood. During this period, teenagers experience various significant physical, emotional, and social changes. These changes can influence the way teenagers think and behave, including in terms of reproductive health. Several studies have shown that young women who commit Elopement (menik) generally have limited knowledge and information about reproductive health (Engebretsen, 2019; Garcia, 2019; Adedayo, 2019).

Table 1. Characteristics of elopement cultural customs (Menik) in the Gayo community.

Aspect	Information
Terminology	Called "Menik" in the Gayo language.
Definition	A woman's attempt to marry a man of her choice without parental consent.
Background	- Not getting parental approval. - The man's application was rejected. - Pregnancy out of wedlock. - High wedding dowry.
Implementation process	1. Women go to men's villages accompanied by family or relatives. 2. Meet the Village Imem (traditional leader) to get married. 3. Village Imem mediates with the woman's family. 4. If the mediation is successful, the marriage is legalized and marriage customs are implemented. 5. If mediation fails, the woman returns to her village and the marriage is invalid.
Consequence	- Viewed as a disgrace by the woman's family. - Customary sanctions in the form of fines. - Marriage is not recognized by state law.
Development	- Currently, it rarely happens because it is considered contrary to religious norms and the law of the country. - The Gayo community prefers marriage by following the custom of "Kerje Beraturen" which has been perfected with religious rules.
Contained values	- Women's assertiveness in fighting for their love. - A man's loyalty to the woman of his choice. - Compliance with customary norms.
Challenge	- Maintaining a balance between traditional values, religious norms, and state law. - Obtain approval from both sides of the family. - Prevent exploitation of women.
Preservation efforts	- Documentation and research on Munik customs. - Socialization of Munik customs to the younger generation. - Integration of positive Munik traditional values into modern life.



Table 2. The negative impact of elopement (menik) on the reproductive health of Gayo adolescent girls.

Impact	Description
Poor reproductive health:	-Young women who elope (menik) are at greater risk of experiencing pregnancy and childbirth complications, such as postpartum bleeding, infection, and premature birth. -This is caused by their reproductive organs not being fully mature and a lack of knowledge about reproductive health.
Pregnancy and childbirth at a young age:	-Young women who elope (menik) generally become pregnant and give birth at a young age. -This can endanger the health of the mother and baby because the teenage girl's body is not ready for pregnancy and childbirth.
Lack of access to reproductive health services:	-Young women who elope (menik) are often prevented by stigma and social norms from accessing reproductive health services. -This can cause them to experience undiagnosed and untreated reproductive health problems.
Lack of knowledge and information about reproductive health:	-Young women who commit elopement (menik) generally have limited knowledge and information about reproductive health. -This can make them more susceptible to various reproductive health problems.
Social and cultural pressure to marry and have children:	-The tradition of elopement (menik) in Gayo society is still strong and young women are often forced to marry at a young age. -This can cause them to experience depression and anxiety, and interfere with their education.
Lack of support from family and community:	-Young women who elope (menik) often do not receive support from their families and communities. -This can make them feel isolated and embarrassed and can worsen their reproductive health problems.

Research in Lombok, Indonesia, found that young women who married early generally had lower knowledge about SRH compared to young women who did not marry early. Another study in Ethiopia found that young women who married early were at greater risk of experiencing pregnancy and childbirth complications compared to young women who did not marry early. Several factors can influence the limited knowledge and information about reproductive health among young women who elope (menik). Young women who commit elopement (menik) often do not have access to adequate SRH education in their schools or communities. The stigma and taboo surrounding SRH in the Gayo community can make young women feel embarrassed about seeking information about reproductive health. Young women who elope (menik) often do not get the support they need from their families and communities to learn about reproductive health. Limited knowledge and information about reproductive health among young women who commit elopement (menik) can have a negative impact on their health. Adolescent girls who do not have accurate knowledge and information about SRH are more at risk of experiencing sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unwanted pregnancies,

and complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Adolescent girls who do not have accurate knowledge and information about SRH may make inappropriate decisions about their health, such as using ineffective contraception or not having prenatal health checks. Young women who elope (menik) in the Gayo community generally have limited knowledge and information about reproductive health. This is caused by various factors, such as lack of access to SRH education, stigma and taboo surrounding SRH, and lack of family and community support. This limited knowledge and information can have a negative impact on the health of adolescent girls, such as increasing sexual and reproductive health risks and making inappropriate decisions (Ali, 2019; Blum, 2019; Cheng, 2021).

The elopement (menik) tradition in the Gayo community, Central Aceh, is a traditional marriage practice where a woman decides to marry a man of her choice without parental consent. This tradition, although it has positive values such as female assertiveness and male loyalty, also has significant negative consequences for women and their families. One of the main negative consequences is that this tradition is still strong and young women are often



forced to marry at a young age. This violates the rights of women and girls and can have a negative impact on their health, education, and well-being. Early marriage is a marriage carried out before the age of 18 years. These marriages have many negative consequences for women and girls. Women who marry at an early age are at greater risk of complications from pregnancy and childbirth, sexually transmitted infections, and maternal death. Girls who marry at an early age often leave school to marry and take care of the household. This can limit their chances of getting a good job and improving their standard of living. Women who marry at an early age are more at risk of experiencing domestic violence from their partners. Women who marry at an early age are more at risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, and stress (Eswaramprakash, 2021; Farah, 2021; Gillespie, 2021).

Several studies have been carried out to study the elopement (menik) tradition in the Gayo community. This research shows that this tradition is still strong and many young women are forced to marry at a young age. One study found that 50% of young women in Gayo were married before the age of 18. Other research found that the main factors that encourage elopement (menik) are parental disapproval of the daughter's choice of partner, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and high wedding dowries. The tradition of elopement (menik) in Gayo society is still strong and many young women are forced to marry at a young age. This violates the rights of women and girls and can have a negative impact on their health, education, and well-being. Prevention and intervention efforts must be carried out to reduce the practice of elopement (menik) and increase access to education and reproductive health services for young women in Gayo (Mberu, 2023; Mmari, 2021). Several recommendations for overcoming the tradition of elopement (menik) and early marriage in the Gayo community. Socialization and education about the dangers of early marriage must be carried out on an ongoing basis to increase public awareness, especially among parents and

young women. Law enforcement against early marriage must be strengthened to prevent this practice and protect the rights of women and girls. Women and girls must be empowered with education and skills training so that they have better life choices and are not forced to marry at a young age. Access to education and reproductive health services for adolescent girls must be improved so that they can make informed decisions about their reproductive health. Social norms that support marriage at a young age must be changed to promote the values of gender equality and the rights of women and girls. With joint efforts from various parties, the tradition of elopement (menik) and early marriage in the Gayo community can be reduced and the rights of women and girls in Gayo can be protected (Blumstein, 2021; Engebretson, 2021; Eswar, 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

Research findings show that elopement (menik) has a negative impact on the reproductive health of Gayo young women. Young women who elope (menik) are at greater risk of experiencing pregnancy and childbirth complications, reproductive tract infections, and sexually transmitted diseases. Young women who elope (menik) generally become pregnant and give birth at a young age, which can endanger the health of the mother and baby. Young women who elope (menik) are often prevented by stigma and social norms from accessing reproductive health services.

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