

Which Indonesian Women Marry Youngest, and Why?

Gavin W. Jones

Although the Indonesian Marriage Law of 1974 set a minimum age of marriage for females of 16, among some groups – notably Sundanese in West Java and Madurese in East Java – early marriage remained common well after the Marriage Law was promulgated. Early marriage has since declined but certainly not disappeared among these groups. This paper analyses trends in early marriage and reports on a field study among the Madurese.

Introduction

In most parts of Indonesia, age at marriage for females has traditionally been very low, and although age at marriage has been rising universally throughout Southeast and East Asia, the rise in Indonesia has been less marked than in many other countries.¹ One of the key concerns of the 1974 Marriage Law was to prevent excessively young marriages by setting a minimum age at marriage of 16 for females.² However, this provision was strongly opposed by many Muslim groups on the grounds that the Koran does not set any such lower limit for age at marriage. As will be shown in this paper, the marriage law has not been conspicuously successful in preventing child marriage.

Child marriage has a number of adverse consequences that are serious enough to require efforts to accelerate its demise. These adverse consequences are well documented. They include psychological ill-effects, reproductive health consequences of early initiation of sexual activity and childbearing, and placement of the young bride in a position of multiple subordination: to her parents and to her husband, who is normally considerably older in the case of child marriages.³

The youngest-marrying groups in Indonesia

In a book published a few years ago, I tried to determine which regional or ethno-linguistic groups in Indonesia have had the youngest ages at marriage for females. The finding was that rural West Java had the lowest ages, and that possibly these were matched by the Madurese population of East Java, for whom the evidence was a little contradictory.

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1 Gavin W. Jones, 'The Demise of Universal Marriage in East and South-East Asia', in *The Continuing Demographic Transition*, ed. Gavin W. Jones, Robert M. Douglas, John C. Caldwell and Rennie d'Souza (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 51-79.

2 J.S. and R.S. Katz, 'Legislating Changes in a Developing Country: The New Indonesian Marriage Law Revisited', *American Journal of Comparative Law*, 26, 2 (1978): 309-20.

3 Sri Handayani Hanum, 'The Various Consequences of Child Marriages: A Case Study in North Bengkulu', paper presented at Fourth Asia Pacific Science and Medicine Conference, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 7-11 Dec. 1998.

In rural West Java, among cohorts born between the early part of the twentieth century and the end of the 1940s, one-quarter of girls were married by their fifteenth birthday, one-half by their sixteenth birthday, and three-quarters by their eighteenth birthday. These patterns were very stable over time. ... By the late 1960s and early 1970s, a slight rise in marriage ages was detectable, but it was a very modest rise, adding less than a year to the earlier prevailing age at marriage.⁴

Recent data from the 1995 Inter-Censal Survey show in a very general way that the regions with earliest age at marriage have remained the same, with West Java and East Java showing earliest ages at marriage, averaged over a large number of cohorts (Table 1). This contention is further supported by data from the 1991 and 1994 Demographic and Health Surveys, except that the 1994 survey shows that median age at marriage for women aged 25-49 in Lampung was slightly lower than in West Java.⁵

Table 1. Indonesia: Ever-married women aged 10-54 – Per cent married before certain ages, provinces with earliest age at marriage, 1995

	Before age 15	Before age 17
West Java	17.2	44.4
East Java	16.1	42.3
South Kalimantan	16.1	40.4
Lampung	14.4	38.2
Jambi	13.1	37.1
Central Java	10.7	34.1
South Sumatra	9.9	32.0
East Kalimantan	11.9	31.4
Bengkulu	8.7	30.7
South Sulawesi	8.4	27.0
INDONESIA	11.8	33.8

Source: Biro Pusat Statistik, *Population of Indonesia: Results of the 1995 Intercensal Population Survey*. Series: S2. Jakarta, 1996.

More detailed data from the 1990 Population Census allow us to follow this matter up, and also to update trends in age at marriage for early-marrying groups. An interesting question is whether the trend towards later marriage is slower or faster among groups that have previously been characterised by early marriage.

Data issues and sub-groups studied

In many parts of Indonesia, knowledge of age is very limited, and knowledge of age at marriage correspondingly limited. Knowledge of age tends to be worst among older respondents, and increasingly better as age decreases, particularly as a result of compulsory education programmes, which require children to enter primary school at age seven. Two questions were asked in the 1990 Population Census about age at first marriage. One was the month and year of first marriage,

⁴ Gavin W. Jones, *Marriage and Divorce in Islamic Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 84-8; concerning the Madurese, see fn. 11, pp. 110-11.

⁵ Government of Indonesia, Central Bureau of Statistics, *Indonesia Demographic and Health Survey 1994* (Calverton, MD: CBS and MI, 1995), Table 8.4.2.

and the other the age (in completed years) at first marriage. In the process of collecting and coding data, however, priority was given to the question on age at marriage; the month and year were only used to crosscheck stated age, and were frequently not filled in on the census form.

Clearly, deficiencies in reporting of both current age and age at marriage restrict the accuracy of analysis of age at marriage based on the census data. This accuracy varies considerably by region and social group. In the worst cases, accuracy is quite low. For example, in East Lombok, when asked their age at marriage, women frequently say how many menstruations they had experienced before they married – for example, ‘I had only just had my first menstruation when I married’, or ‘I had had 20 menstruations when I married.’ The problem with this sort of tallying is that women vary considerably in their age at menarche. This is not to say, however, that even in such groups analysis based on the census data is not useful, as long as the margins of error are appreciated.

In analysing the data from the 1990 Population Census, it has been possible to restrict the population groups covered to exclude particular sub-groups known to have a later age at marriage. For example, the non-Muslims in West and East Java (only two or three per cent of the population in each province) are known to have higher age at marriage, and therefore they have been excluded from the analysis. More importantly, the Muslim population of East Java has been divided into Madurese speakers and non-Madurese speakers, because other evidence has indicated that the Madurese ethnic group has the lowest age at marriage in the province.

Results

The data on female age at marriage for the groups that appear to have the lowest ages at marriage are presented in Table 2. They show the trends for cohorts born over a 50-year period – from the 1916–20 birth cohort to that of 1966–70.

The tentative answer to the question ‘which groups marry youngest in Indonesia’ is that the West Java Muslims had the youngest female age at marriage right up to the late 1960s (that is, up to the 1946–50 birth cohort), but that after that time, because age at marriage rose more among West Java Muslims, the Madurese speakers became the earliest-marrying group. The tendency for differentials in age at marriage to open up in more recent times among groups which in earlier years had almost identical age at marriage is a particularly interesting finding from Table 2. For example, for a number of the groups, half of the females born in the 1920s and 1930s had been married before their seventeenth birthday. This was the case for West Java Muslims, East Java Madurese speakers and non-Madurese Muslims from East Java. However, cohorts born in the 1950s were starting to marry later in the case of West Java Muslims and especially in the case of non-Madurese in East Java, but among the Madurese this rise was barely in evidence. For cohorts born in the 1960s, the rise in age at marriage accelerated in West Java and among non-Madurese in East Java. But the rise was much slower among the Madurese.

Thus the rise between the 1946–50 and 1966–70 birth cohorts in the age by which 50 per cent had married was 2.1 years for West Java Muslims, 3.0 years for East Java non-Madurese Muslims, and 2.4 years for South Kalimantan Muslims, but less than a year for the Madurese, whether in East Java as a whole or on the island of Madura. Over the same period, the equivalent rise for the population of Indonesia as a whole was 2.3 years, not very different from most of the populations in Table 2, with the exception of the Madurese.

Given that West Java Muslims are such a large group, and also because of the large differences among different parts of West Java, a further attempt has been made to sub-divide the West Java Muslim group into three distinct groups – those living in Banten in the west of the province, those

living in the highlands (Priangan) and those living on the north coast of Java (Pesisir region). In order to avoid the influence on the data of the large numbers of Muslims who are migrants from elsewhere in Indonesia in the extended metropolitan region of Jakarta, the Botabek region (the region immediately surrounding Jakarta) has been excluded from the figures. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 2. Age by which 50 per cent of female birth cohorts had married among various Indonesian groups

Birth cohort	West Java Muslims	East Java Madurese speakers	East Java Muslim non-Madurese	Madura Muslims	Lampung Muslims	South Kalimantan Muslims	Lombok Muslims
1966-70	18.7	17.6	20.2	17.8	19.6	19.9	19.5
1961-65	17.8	17.2	18.6	17.5	18.3	18.5	18.9
1956-60	17.1	16.9	18.0	17.3	18.0	17.9	18.7
1951-55	17.0	16.9	17.6	17.4	17.9	17.5	18.8
1946-50	16.6	16.7	17.2	17.1	17.9	17.5	19.5
1941-45	16.6	16.8	17.3	17.2	17.9	17.5	19.5
1936-40	16.4	16.6	17.0	17.2	17.9	17.5	19.9
1931-35	16.2	16.6	16.8	17.2	18.1	17.2	20.2
1926-30	16.0	16.6	16.8	17.5	18.0	17.5	20.4
1921-25	16.1	16.7	16.8	17.3	17.9	17.3	20.5
1916-20	16.0	16.7	16.6	17.5	18.0	17.3	20.6

Source: Calculated from tabulations prepared from data tapes, 1990 Population Census

Table 3. Age by which 50 per cent of female birth cohorts had married, regions of West Java

Birth cohort	Banten Muslims	Priangan Muslims	Pesisir Muslims	West Java Muslims (excluding Botabek)
1966-70	17.5	17.7	17.7	17.4
1961-65	16.8	17.1	17.2	17.0
1956-60	16.4	17.0	16.8	16.9
1951-55	16.4	16.6	16.8	16.5
1946-50	16.2	16.5	16.6	16.5
1941-45	16.1	16.3	16.6	16.3
1936-40	16.0	16.1	16.6	16.1
1931-35	15.8	15.9	16.4	16.0
1926-30	15.9	15.9	16.3	16.0
1921-25	15.8	15.8	16.4	15.9
1916-20	15.6		16.6	15.9

Source: Calculated from tabulations prepared from data tapes, 1990 Population Census. The following *kabupaten* were included in each region:

- a. Banten: Pandeglang, Lebak, Serang
- b. Pesisir: Cirebon, Indramayu, Subang, Karawang
- c. Priangan: all remaining *kabupaten* and *kotamadya* of West Java excluding the Botabek region.

Table 3 demonstrates that, although early marriage has long characterised all regions of West Java, there are some (though not dramatic) differences within the province. In earlier years, female age at marriage was somewhat lower in Banten and the Priangan than in the north coast areas from Jakarta to the Central Java border. However, among females born in the 1960s, there was little difference in age at marriage among the three sub-regions. Another interesting finding to emerge from Table 3 is that the rise in average age at marriage for West Java Muslims in the decade prior to 1990 was largely the result of a rise in age at marriage in the Botabek region surrounding Jakarta, presumably largely as the result of in-migration of Muslims from areas with a tradition of higher age at marriage. This is clear from a comparison of the "West Java Muslims" column in Table 2 with the "West Java Muslims (excluding Botabek)" column in Table 3. The latter rises much less in these years of massive migration to the Botabek region than the former.

Interestingly, a comparison of Tables 2 and 3 shows that for birth cohorts up to 1946-50, Banten and the Priangan had lower female age at marriage than the Madurese (by about half a year), but that because of the sharper rise in age at marriage in West Java, by the 1956-60 birth cohort and subsequent birth cohorts, there was little difference among these three groups in median age at marriage for females. It also shows the increasingly wide difference in age at marriage between the Madurese and the Muslim non-Madurese population of East Java (that is, the majority of East Java's population). The latter group have sharply increased their age at marriage among the younger birth cohorts, and consequently among the 1966-70 birth cohort, have a 'median' age at marriage for females that is two and a half years older than it is for the Madurese.

Table 2 shows that age at marriage in South Kalimantan was slightly later than in the various sub-groups in West and East Java, and has also risen more sharply there among the most recent birth cohorts. Lampung, which has a high proportion of Javanese in its population as a result of transmigration, had a slightly higher age at marriage than South Kalimantan, though the differential has been reversed in the two youngest birth cohorts. The strangest pattern is that for Lombok Muslims, where age at marriage for females was far higher (about four years higher, on average) than in West or East Java in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, but age at marriage actually declined over time. Consequently, by the most recent birth cohort, the difference between Lombok Muslims and the early-marrying groups in West and East Java had narrowed to about one or one and a half years.⁶

Marriages below the legal minimum age

Marriages below the legal minimum age remained common in some parts of Indonesia long after the minimum age at marriage for females was set at 16 in 1974.⁷ For the two major early-marrying groups, West Java Muslims and Madurese speakers in East Java, Table 4 presents evidence that gives a clearer picture of the proportion of young girls who marry below the legal minimum age. In the case of the Madurese speakers, 25 per cent had married before reaching age 16, even in the 1961-65 and 1966-70 birth cohorts. The young women in these birth cohorts would all have married after the 1974 Marriage Law had been promulgated. For West Java Muslims, too, 25 per cent of the 1961-65 birth cohort had married before age 16, and in the 1966-70 birth cohort, not much less than 25 per cent. Among other early-marrying groups, too, significant numbers of young

6 Sumbawa, the other island that is included in the province of Nusatenggara Barat, also displayed a similar pattern of decline in age at marriage over time (data for Sumbawa not shown in Table 2). There was little difference between Lombok and Sumbawa in the ages by which 50 per cent of female birth cohorts married.

7 Gavin W. Jones, Yahya Asari and Tuti Djuartika, 'Divorce in West Java', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 25, 3 (1994): 395-416; Sri Handayani Hanum, 'The Various Consequences of Child Marriages'.

women were still marrying before the age of 16. Recent fieldwork conducted by the author in Lombok Timur, the poorest region of Lombok, revealed that some girls are still dropping out of primary school in order to marry. Although the official age of completion of primary school is 12, there are many over-age pupils because of late enrolment or repetition of grades. Nevertheless, most of these girls dropping out of school to marry would be aged 12 to 14. In this region, girls are still considered 'old maids' if they reach the age of 17 without marrying.

Table 4. Age by which 25, 50 and 75 per cent of women had married, by birth cohort, West Java Muslims and East Java Madurese speakers.

Birth cohort	West Java Muslims			East Java Madurese speakers		
	25% had married	50% had married	75% had married	25% had married	50% had married	75% had married
1966-70	16.6	18.7	–	15.8	17.6	–
1961-65	15.9	17.8	20.8	15.5	17.2	19.5
1956-60	15.4	17.1	19.4	15.3	16.9	19.2
1951-55	15.4	17.0	19.0	15.3	16.9	19.0
1946-50	15.1	16.6	18.6	15.2	16.7	18.8
1941-45	15.2	16.6	18.6	15.3	16.8	19.0
1936-40	15.1	16.4	18.5	15.2	16.6	18.9
1931-35	15.0	16.2	18.1	15.2	16.6	18.9
1926-30	15.0	16.0	18.1	15.2	16.6	19.1
1921-25	15.0	16.1	18.1	15.2	16.7	18.9

Source: Calculated from tabulations prepared from data tapes, 1990 Population Census

Kawin gantung and non-consummation

If marriages at early ages were not consummated for some time, the adverse health and psychological consequences of early marriage would be ameliorated. There is indeed evidence that *kawin gantung* (marriage) was widely practised among the Javanese and to a lesser extent in other parts of Indonesia.⁸ Therefore the early ages of marriage reported did not necessarily reflect as early an initiation of sexual relations. On the other hand, the delay in initiation of sexual relations was normally not very long, in most cases not as long as one year, so the initiation of sexual relations was still occurring at very young ages.

Disaggregation of the rise in age at marriage

Given that age at marriage has typically been lower among the less educated than among the educated, and also in rural compared with urban areas, one way to investigate factors underlying the rise in age at marriage is to disaggregate the rise into that attributable to the changing educational or rural-urban composition of the population, and that due to other factors. It is possible to conduct an exercise that takes into account the first of these factors – namely, changing educational composition. In interpreting the results, what must be kept in mind is the very low proportions of

8 T.H. and V.J. Hull, 'Changing Marriage Behaviour in Java: The Role of Timing of Consummation', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, 15, 1 (1987): 104-19; Jones, *Marriage and Divorce in Islamic Southeast Asia*, pp. 59-61.

the female population who reached high school education in earlier times. For example, taking the female 1941-45 birth cohort, we find that the proportion of women who had junior secondary education and above was only seven percent in West Java and among the East Java Muslim non-Madurese population, five per cent among Lampung Muslims and a tiny one per cent among the Madurese speakers. By the 1961-65 birth cohort, these proportions had risen to 25 per cent among West Java Muslims, 24 per cent among the East Java Muslim non-Madurese speakers, 18 per cent among Lampung Muslims, but only five per cent among Madurese speakers of East Java.

Table 5 shows what happens when we disaggregate the rise in age at marriage into that explained by the rising proportion of the better educated in the population and that for which other explanations are necessary. For the earliest-marrying groups (West Java Muslims and East Java Madurese speakers), roughly half of the modest rise in age at marriage can be explained by the increased proportion of women in the educational groups where age at marriage is higher, and the other half by a general tendency for age at marriage to rise, even among the predominant uneducated and primary school educated groups. However, there is considerable variation in these proportions among the other three groups in Table 5. Lombok Muslims provide the real exception. Here age at marriage fell. Holding age at marriage within educational categories constant, changing educational composition should have led to an increase in age at marriage, not a decrease, so more than 100 per cent of the decline in age at marriage must be attributed to changing marriage age within educational groups.

Table 5. Disaggregation of causes of change in median age at marriage between 1941-45 and 1961-65 birth cohorts

	West Java Muslims	East Java Madurese speakers	East Java Muslim non-Madurese speakers	South Kalimantan Muslims	Lombok Muslims
Age by which 50 per cent had married:					
1941-45 birth cohort	16.6	16.7	17.3	17.5	19.5
1961-65 birth cohort	17.8	17.2	18.6	18.5	18.9
Rise in age at marriage (years)	1.2	0.5	1.3	1.0	-0.6
Percentage due to changing educational composition	48	50	39	68	45
Percentage due to changing marriage age within education groups	52	50	61	32	-145

From Table 2, it is clear that the rise in age at marriage was picking up pace in the youngest cohorts. For this reason, it is important to use the youngest possible cohort to study the disaggregations between changing educational composition and other factors. In Table 6, therefore, a similar exercise to that conducted in Table 5 has been carried out, the only difference being that the 1966-70 birth cohort is used instead of the 1961-65 birth cohort. This gives the considerable advantage of disaggregating a substantially larger rise in age at marriage; however, an element of uncertainty is introduced by the truncation effect for those with secondary education, whose age at marriage in most cases was over 20, and therefore not all had had the chance to marry by this age at the time the census was conducted. This problem was dealt with by assuming that the rise in age at marriage for these educational groups observed between the 1941-45 cohorts and the 1961-65

cohorts continued at an accelerated pace for the 1966-70 cohort. Table 6 somewhat modifies the picture presented in Table 5. But the changes are not all in the same direction. Using the most recent possible birth cohort, as in Table 6, results in a larger effect of changing educational composition in the case of the non-Madurese East Javanese and the South Kalimantan Muslims, but a smaller effect in the case of the Madurese. For West Java Muslims, there is little change.

Probably the most important conclusion from the disaggregations presented in Tables 5 and 6 is that although the rapid expansion of education in recent decades has been an important factor in raising female age at marriage among groups where this age was previously very young, there are other forces operating as well which are raising age at marriage even among those with little or no education.

Table 6. Disaggregation of causes of change in median age at marriage between 1941-45 and 1966-70 birth cohorts

	West Java Muslims	East Java Madurese speakers	East Java Muslim non- Madurese speakers	South Kalimantan Muslims
Age by which 50 per cent had married:				
1941-45 birth cohort	16.6	16.7	17.3	17.5
1966-70 birth cohort	18.7	17.6	20.2	19.9
Rise in age at marriage (years)	2.1	0.9	2.9	2.4
Percentage due to changing educational composition	50	38	56	59
Percentage due to changing marriage age within education groups	50	62	44	41

The Sundanese of Banten and Priangan (West Java) and the Madurese of East Java

We have now pinned down the earliest-marrying groups in Indonesia. They are two sub-groups of the Sundanese ethno-linguistic group – those living in Banten and the Priangan in West Java, and the Madurese of East Java, who are concentrated on the island of Madura but also are numerous in other parts of East Java, particularly in the areas of the ‘East Hook’ (the peninsula extending from south of Surabaya eastwards to Banyuwangi). These groups are major ethno-linguistic groups. It is just possible that younger ages at marriages can be found among some other small and geographically restricted groups for whom data are not readily available, but it can be confidently claimed that the groups identified here have the lowest ages at marriage among the major ethno-linguistic groups.

What is it about these groups that has not only led them to maintain their status as the earliest-marrying Indonesians over many decades, if not for more than a century, but also has caused their younger cohorts to show less inclination to raise their age at marriage in recent times? Some key elements may be the strong adherence to Islamic beliefs of the ‘little tradition’ and the low levels of education. The very low educational level of Madurese women was already documented above. Among West Java Muslims, educational levels are higher than this, particularly in the Priangan, but not especially high by Indonesian standards.⁹ In both these populations, very young age at marriage for girls was considered normal, and there was no sense that a young girl had the right to choose whether to

9 Gavin W. Jones, ‘Religion and Education in Indonesia’, *Indonesia* no. 22 (Oct. 1976): 19-56.

marry, when to marry or whom to marry.

The context of early marriage amongst the Madurese has been described by Anke Niehof.¹⁰ In the two villages where she worked in Madura, the median age at marriage for women currently aged in their 40s was between 12 and 13, and between 13 and 14 for younger women. Husbands were typically about five years older. In one of the villages, about half of marriages were to kin, and in the other about a quarter. The actual consummation of the marriage could take between a few days and a few months. In many cases, the young bride would resist sexual advances by her husband by kicking and lashing out (*jharan ghujang*) or by a fit of hysterical crying (*samar tanges*). A *dukun* (traditional healer) or *kiyai* (religious teacher) was frequently consulted in order to counter the black magic by a jealous rival, the normal explanation for such behaviour. If the girl finally overcame her fears and resistance, the marriage proceeded. If not, a divorce was the only way out. The difficulty of establishing satisfactory relations between the bridal couple was a frequent cause of divorce.

Indraswari vividly describes the terror experienced by women she interviewed who had been married off at very young ages.¹¹ Some of them received very rough treatment from their husbands at the time of their first sexual intercourse, causing great physical and mental distress. Not surprisingly, in such cases sexual relations came to be seen as part of a wife's duty rather than something pleasurable. She tells of a 12-year-old girl, in fifth grade primary school, who was married to a 23-year-old son of Muslim religious teacher. Although this was supposed to be a *kawin gantung*, the husband frequently forced himself on the young girl without her parents' knowledge, and she could not refuse.

The author was able to conduct fieldwork in one village in the *kabupaten* of Lumajang, East Java, in September 1999. Although Lumajang is quite far from Madura, probably 15 per cent of its population are Madurese. In the *kecamatan* (district) of Rawakangkung, where the study village was located, about 60 per cent are Madurese, and in the village itself, about 85 per cent are Madurese. Many of the older women interviewed spoke only Madurese and could not understand Indonesian. The vast majority of this Madurese population has lived in this area for generations, with only very limited supplementation from more recent migrants from Madura.¹²

This is an agricultural area, but rice is not its major crop. The main crops are corn, sugar cane and tobacco. Tobacco is the newer and increasingly grown crop in the area. Many of the people work as agricultural labourers on the sugar estates. In the early morning, the roads are full of trucks carrying labourers to the sugar and tobacco estates.

The picture of traditional Madurese marriage painted by Niehof is confirmed from the discussions among this rural Madurese population. Older respondents typically referred to themselves as '*bodoh*' (ignorant). Schooling for girls was very rare in this village when they were of school age, and if they went to school at all, it was only for a few years. Some daughters of well-off villagers would perhaps continue in school for six years. These older respondents, as well as bringing up their children, frequently worked in the rice fields or as farm labourers. In those days, people had to work hard to get any money. Nowadays, one respondent told me, they can get money just by using their brains.

Among women in their 50s (that is, those marrying around the late 1950s), marriage at ages below 16 was usual, and at ages 12 or 13 not uncommon. Marriage was entirely at the behest of

10 Anke Niehof, 'Women and Fertility in Madura (Indonesia)' (PhD diss., Leiden University, 1985).

11 Indraswari, 'Fenomena kawin muda dan aborsi: gambaran kasus', in *Menakar 'Harga' Perempuan*, ed. Syafiq Hasyim (Bandung: Penerbit Mizan, 1999).

12 For more details about the long-standing Madurese population of East Java, and migration from Madura over that period, see Laurence Husson, 'Eight Centuries of Madurese Migration to East Java', *Asia Pacific Migration Journal*, 6, 1 (1997): 77-102.

parents, and the possibility of refusing the parents' choice was not entertained. Frequently the girl knew the man chosen for her, indeed sometimes he was a relative, but this did not necessarily mean that she knew him well or that he was someone she wanted to marry. Marriage for many of these young girls was a traumatic event. A simple village girl of this age knew little of life, or of sex, but she was supposed to initiate sexual relations with a man who was – to all intents and purposes – a stranger, and who in many cases would force himself on his young bride as a matter of right.

Not surprisingly, divorce was common, though most people did not divorce. Divorce frequently occurred at quite short intervals after the marriage took place (sometimes just a week, or a few weeks). People were embarrassed about such a divorce, but (as they expressed it to the author) not as embarrassed as they would have been about the ultimate disgrace, a daughter who fell pregnant before marriage. After all, a divorce could be rationalised as indicating that the couple was not well matched by fate – not '*jodoh*'. This did not reflect particular fault on those arranging the marriage.¹³ Marriages among the poor were simple affairs, although certainly the event of the marriage did not go unremarked in the village, and the embarrassment of a subsequent divorce could therefore not be avoided. Divorce, too, was cheap and straightforward at that time. Often it was not officially recorded. If three months passed after the husband pronounced the *talak* (the divorce declaration), and *rujuk* (reconciliation) did not occur, it was accepted that the divorce had taken place, even if it was not registered.

The following discussion with a woman aged in her 50s is revealing. She works in the rice fields and had no education. She was married off by her parents before her first menstruation – she 'didn't have any breasts yet'. She does not know exactly how old she was at that time – probably about 12 or 13. She did not know the young man she was married to, who was only slightly older than she was, but she had no choice but to agree. Her parents were worried that the *penghulu* (village headman) would not agree to the marriage because she was too young, so on the occasion of getting his agreement to the marriage, she was dressed in *pakaian adat* (traditional clothes) that were somewhat too large for her. This worked, and the *penghulu* agreed to the marriage.

At first she was frightened of her husband because she did not know him, and they did not start to have sexual relations for some time. She wanted to fall in love with her husband, but could not. However, three months after she was married, her mother died. Because she felt that a failure to have a cordial relationship with her husband would dishonour her mother's commission to her as her daughter, she determined to try harder and succeeded in falling in love with her husband and started having sexual relations. They then managed to have seven children, of whom three died when still very young. At that time, there was no health facility nearby, so if a child fell sick with fever (*panas demam*) they used herbal remedies; if the child lived, it lived – if it died, it died.

The effort of coming to terms with sharing a life and a bed with a man who was a stranger was a much-mentioned problem among older respondents in this area. Young women frequently went to those *dukun* who were known to be able to cast spells to enable the couple to fall in love.

This woman has two daughters, currently aged in the mid-30s and 29. The first daughter therefore reached marriageable age about 20 years ago. Both she and her younger sister were married off at the early age of about 14 or 15 according to the traditional pattern. In the first case the marriage was followed by divorce, another marriage and another divorce; in the other case the husband died from poisoning, and the wife married his brother, a marriage that subsequently ended in divorce. It was at this point that non-traditional elements entered the picture.

13 Niehof, 'Women and Fertility', p. 179.

The eldest daughter, after experiencing two divorces, went to Kalimantan to work, and ended up marrying a Buginese man she met there. They have settled down in Kalimantan. The younger daughter followed her elder sister to work in Kalimantan and had a '*pacaran*' (boy friend – girl friend) relationship with a young Madurese man she met there. After marrying, she brought him back to the village in Java. This daughter says that most Madurese girls here marry around 17 or 18 nowadays. That is apparently the age at which they want to marry, because these days it is generally their own choice.

The mother says that she wants her grandchildren to get plenty of schooling, and not to be '*bodoh*' like her. And indeed children are getting more schooling these days. In this area, perhaps 60 per cent of them continue to SMP (lower secondary) level. Most of these young people these days are choosing their own spouse. Perhaps only about 30 or 40 per cent are still married off by their parents. On the other hand, there are some more isolated Madurese villages in a different *kecamatan* of this *kabupaten* which are more isolated, where almost nobody goes to junior high school, where knowledge of the Indonesian language is more limited and where marriage patterns remain more old-fashioned than they are here.

The village headman (who had formerly been the muezzin) told me that in registering marriages, the first thing to find out is the current marital status of the applicants – whether they are single, divorced or widowed. If the girl is below 16 years of age, application for permission to marry has to be made to the religious court. In this case, the parents have to take responsibility by signing a letter of agreement. If the girl is below 17, the Religious Affairs Office (KUA) asks for a copy of her elementary school certificate. He himself gives a lot of advice to the Madurese in his *desa* (village) not to marry their daughters below 16 years of age. He and the officials of the KUA are trying to make marriage cheaper for poor people. The '*nikah tidak mampu*' and the '*nikah kantor*' are the two cheaper forms of marriage, whereas the '*nikah bedol*' in which the head of the KUA is invited to the home is the more expensive kind of marriage.

The headman kindly allowed me to photocopy one year's records of marriage registration (1997-98). Of the 36 cases of first marriage, five cases did not record the wife's age at marriage, though the husband's age was recorded in every case. Of those marriages where the age was recorded, the mean age for women was 20 and the median 19. If we assume that those females whose age at marriage was not recorded were in fact below the legal age (say, aged 15), then the mean age comes down to 19 and the median age to 18-19. These ages are clearly well above the ages prevailing 30 or 40 years previously, according to our respondents, but still low compared with non-Madurese in East Java. The median age difference between spouses was four years (4-5 years if we assume all women with unstated ages at first marriage were aged 15).

Discussion

Although very young age at marriage for females still characterises certain ethnic groups and geographic regions of Indonesia, in all cases the median age is rising. The rise has much to do with education, since studies typically show a strong positive association between education and age at marriage for females.¹⁴ The slowest rise among the major early-marrying groups appears to be among the Madurese, yet even among this group the average age has risen and arranged marriage has become the exception rather than the rule. Data from the year 2000 Population Census – 10 years more recent than that used in this paper – when analysed will almost certainly show a

14 Budi Soeradji and Sri Harijati Hatmadji, *Perbedaan Umur Perkawinan Antar Daerah* (Jakarta: Lembaga Demografi, Fakultas Ekonomi, Universitas Indonesia, 1982); Agus Dwiyanto et al., *Studi Evaluasi: Tingkat, Pola dan Determinan Usia Kawin Wanita dan Pria* (Yogyakarta: Pusat Penelitian Kependudukan, Universitas Gadjah Mada, n.d.).

continuing rise in average age at marriage for Madurese.

Similarly, in West Java the economic and cultural changes among this early-marrying population have led to a quite rapid rise in female age at marriage and in the arrangement of marriage. Young village women are nowadays frequently employed in factories well away from their homes, travelling daily to this work. Such a situation would have been unthinkable for their mothers' generation, because of the perceived need to marry them off early and restrict their movement before this had happened. In one recent study, 90 per cent of such factory women stated that they had the right to marry the man they loved as long as their parents agreed, and all said that marrying under the age of 20 was bad for women.

One of the key aims of the 1974 Marriage Law was to prevent excessively young marriages by setting the legal minimum age at marriage for females at 16. It is clear that to a quite significant extent this has not succeeded, because there are still many marriages taking place at younger ages. In fieldwork in West Java, the author was told by officials of the KUA that they sometimes have no alternative to allowing such marriages because the girl is already pregnant, and marriage the only way to avoid a scandal. By contrast, in parts of Lombok, where *kawin lari* (elopement) is part of local tradition, the hands of officials are frequently tied, because in addition to cases of below-age marriages arranged by the parents, many under-age marriages are *kawin lari* kept secret from the girl's parents in advance. If not acknowledged by legalizing a marriage, such events would bring disgrace on the family. However, suspicions remain that in some areas with early marriage norms, there is sometimes collusion between parents and officials in falsifying the stated ages. This was certainly found to be the case in one village studied in Bengkulu, as well as in many other areas.¹⁵ As mentioned earlier, the age of the bride is sometimes left blank in official marriage registration records, whether accidentally or to cover up cases of marriages below the legal age. In other cases noted in Madura in 1976, village headmen forced the hand of the KUA by sending them a letter stating that the couple had been caught in fornication, an act which according to the local custom requires them to marry immediately.¹⁶

Should we be particularly concerned about child marriage, given that its incidence is decreasing? I believe we should be, for two main reasons. The first reason is that the decrease in prevalence of child marriage may be slowed by the delays in expanding education, as a result of the economic crisis (though it could also be argued that a lack of job opportunities resulting from the crisis could well lead to delayed marriage as people become more cautious about committing themselves to marriage before they are economically established). The second reason is that, even if its incidence is decreasing, child marriage has all the drawbacks already alluded to in the introduction. The elimination of child marriage and the attitudes that accompany it should be an important goal of Indonesian policy, in the interests of the welfare of those who are married off without any choice in the matter and of increased gender equity.

15 Sri Handayani Hanum, 'The Various Consequences of Child Marriages', p. 3; Indraswari, 'Fenomena kawin muda dan aborsi'.

16 Afdol, *Effectiveness of the Minimum Marriage Age Law in Bangkalan*, SEAPRAP Research Report No. 76 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1979), pp. 30-1.