

Bounded Agency and Survival Strategies: Early Marriage Practices among Rohingya Muslim Refugees in Aceh

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Abstract

This study is motivated by the emergence of early marriage practices among Rohingya Muslim refugees in Aceh, which are often normatively framed either as cultural traditions or legal violations, without sufficient attention to the structural conditions that shape them. Accordingly, this article aims to analyse the factors driving this practice and to examine how early marriage is rationalised within conditions of prolonged displacement. Employing a qualitative, fieldwork-based approach, the study was conducted at the Mina Raya refugee camp in September and December 2024 through direct observation and in-depth interviews with seven informants in order to capture the everyday dynamics of life under conditions of uncertainty. Drawing on Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, the analysis focuses on the relationship between structural constraints and refugee agency. The findings indicate that early marriage is shaped by three interrelated conditions: insecurity within the camp environment, the perceived need to protect girls from harassment or violence, and the absence of viable alternatives such as formal protection mechanisms and access to education. Within this context, marriage is understood by families as the most immediate and rational means of securing safety and stability. The article argues that early marriage constitutes a form of bounded agency—a survival strategy enacted within a severely constrained field of choice shaped by legal invisibility, prolonged displacement, patriarchal norms, and unresolved trauma. These findings contribute to scholarship on Islamic law and socio-legal studies, while underscoring the need for clearer legal frameworks, stronger protection mechanisms, and expanded access to education for refugee women and girls.

[Studi ini berangkat dari munculnya praktik perkawinan dini di kalangan pengungsi Muslim Rohingya di Aceh, yang sering kali dipahami secara normatif sebagai tradisi budaya atau pelanggaran hukum tanpa mempertimbangkan kondisi struktural yang melatarbelakanginya. Oleh karena itu, artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis faktor-faktor yang mendorong praktik tersebut serta memahami bagaimana perkawinan dini dirasionalisasi dalam kondisi pengungsian yang berkepanjangan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis kerja lapangan yang dilakukan di kamp pengungsian Mina

Raya pada September dan Desember 2024 melalui observasi langsung dan wawancara mendalam terhadap tujuh informan, guna menangkap dinamika kehidupan sehari-hari dalam situasi ketidakpastian. Dengan menggunakan teori strukturasi Anthony Giddens, analisis difokuskan pada hubungan antara keterbatasan struktural dan agensi pengungsi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perkawinan dini dibentuk oleh tiga kondisi yang saling berkaitan, yaitu ketidakamanan di dalam kamp, kebutuhan untuk melindungi anak perempuan dari pelecehan atau kekerasan, serta ketiadaan alternatif yang memadai seperti perlindungan formal dan akses terhadap pendidikan. Dalam konteks ini, perkawinan dipahami oleh keluarga sebagai cara paling cepat dan rasional untuk memperoleh keamanan dan stabilitas. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa perkawinan dini merupakan bentuk bounded agency, yaitu strategi bertahan hidup yang dijalankan dalam ruang pilihan yang sangat terbatas akibat invisibilitas hukum, pengungsian berkepanjangan, norma patriarkal, dan trauma yang belum terselesaikan. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada kajian hukum Islam dan studi sosio-legal, serta menegaskan pentingnya penguatan kerangka hukum, mekanisme perlindungan, dan perluasan akses pendidikan bagi perempuan dan anak pengungsi.]

Keywords: Bounded Agency, Early Marriage, Rational Choice, Rohingya Refugees, Survival Strategies.

Introduction

Reports from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) indicate that approximately 640 million women worldwide were married before the age of 18,¹ with an estimated 12 million girls becoming child brides each year.² The regions with the highest prevalence of early marriage include South Asia, which accounts for around 45 per cent of the global total, with India alone contributing approximately one-third of this figure.³ Countries such as Niger also exhibit extremely high rates, with 76 per cent of women married before the age of 18.⁴ In Indonesia, UNICEF data from 2023 show that 25.53 million women were married before reaching adulthood, placing the country fourth globally in terms of child marriage prevalence.⁵ This persistence is commonly attributed to intersecting structural and socio-cultural

¹ Judith Aura, "Laporan UNICEF: 640 Juta Perempuan di Dunia Menikah Saat Masih Anak-Anak," *kumparan.com* (Jakarta), October 2024, <https://kumparan.com/kumparanwoman/laporan-unicef-640-juta-perempuan-di-dunia-menikah-saat-masih-anak-anak-23haxLndvs8>.

² Ardi Priyatno Utomo, "1 Dekade Terakhir, UNICEF Sebut Angka Perkawinan Anak di Dunia Menurun," *kompas.com* (Indonesia), March 6, 2018, <https://internasional.kompas.com/read/2018/03/06/12564681/1-dekade-terakhir-unicef-sebut-angka-perkawinan-anak-di-dunia-menurun>.

³ Fatimah, "UNICEF: 640 Juta Anak Perempuan Dinikahkan Sebelum 18 Tahun," *IDN TIMES*, May 2023, <https://www.idntimes.com/news/world/fatimah-8/unicef-640-juta-anak-perempuan-dinikahkan-sebelum-18-tahun-c1c2>.

⁴ Monavia Ayu Rizaty, "8 Negara dengan Perkawinan Anak Perempuan di Bawah Umur Tertinggi," *Databoks*, June 1, 2022, <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/demografi/statistik/18f8929e98f746b/8-negara-dengan-perkawinan-anak-perempuan-di-bawah-umur-tertinggi>.

⁵ Icen Ectefania Mufrida, "RI Peringkat 4 Jumlah Perempuan yang Menikah di Bawah Usia 18 Tahun," *GoodStats Data*, February 19, 2024, <https://data.goodstats.id/statistik/ri-peringkat-4-jumlah-perempuan-yang-menikah-di-bawah-usia-18-tahun-JkHnB>.

factors, including poverty, limited access to education and economic opportunities for girls, entrenched patriarchal norms, and family strategies aimed at reducing economic burden or safeguarding girls' social honour and physical security. In many high-prevalence contexts, these pressures are further reinforced by rural marginalisation, weak female bargaining power, and the social normalisation of early marriage as a legitimate and even necessary practice.⁶ Although there has been a gradual global decline in early marriage, UNICEF estimates that, at the current pace, it may take up to 300 years to eliminate the practice entirely.⁷

In Indonesia, early marriage is influenced not only by poverty, limited access to education, and patriarchal gender norms,⁸ but also by the absence of a comprehensive legal framework addressing child marriage within vulnerable populations such as refugees. This gap is particularly significant in the case of Rohingya Muslim refugees, as Indonesia's refugee governance remains largely administrative and fails to adequately address domestic and family-related vulnerabilities, especially those affecting women and children. This situation is evident in Aceh, particularly in Mina Raya Camp, where initial findings indicate that early marriage has occurred among Rohingya Muslim refugees,⁹ including girls married at the ages of 13 and 15.¹⁰ In contexts of prolonged displacement, insecurity, trauma, and legal uncertainty, marriage is often perceived by refugee families not merely as a social institution but as a pragmatic mechanism of protection, social security, and survival. Early marriage among Rohingya Muslim refugees should therefore be understood not simply as a cultural practice or a normative legal violation but as a socio-legal outcome arising from the intersection of forced displacement, legal invisibility, gendered vulnerability, and the strategic rationalities of survival embedded in everyday life.

Previous studies on early marriage in refugee settings can generally be categorised into three interconnected strands. The first strand focuses on the structural and situational drivers of early marriage in contexts of displacement. Research on Rohingya Muslim refugees in Bangladesh demonstrates that early marriage is deeply embedded in socio-cultural and religious norms, yet becomes more prevalent following displacement, as regulatory and communal constraints are weakened within camp settings.¹¹ A similar pattern is observed among Syrian

⁶ Asma Pourtaheri et al., "Socio-Ecological Factors of Girl Child Marriage: A Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Research," *BMC Public Health* 24, no. 1 (February 2024): 428.

⁷ Fatimah, "UNICEF: 640 Juta Anak Perempuan Dinikahkan Sebelum 18 Tahun."

⁸ Sainun, Hery Zarkasih, and Arif Sugitanata, "Tuan Guru and the Efforts to Prevent Early Marriage Among Sasak Tribe," *De Jure: Jurnal Hukum dan Syar'iah* 16, no. 1 (2024): 37–57.

⁹ The observations conducted at the Mina Raya Camp shelter indicate that the majority of Rohingya refugees in Aceh adhere to Islam, specifically following the Hanafi school of law. Although the researcher has not yet determined the exact number of adherents to this school, this information consistently emerged in the narratives collected during interviews with the refugees. Based on these findings, the researcher has chosen to use the term "Rohingya Muslims" in this article to represent their religious identity.

¹⁰ "Field Notes from Observations at Mina Raya Camp, Aceh," September 2024.

¹¹ Andrea J. Melnikas et al., "Child Marriage Practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh," *Conflict and Health* 14, no. 1 (May 2020): 28.

refugees in Lebanon, where heightened insecurity, deteriorating economic conditions, and disrupted access to education significantly increase the likelihood of early marriage.¹² Other studies further show that poverty, limited educational opportunities, fear of sexual and gender-based violence, and concerns over family honour interact in complex ways to push families towards early marriage.¹³ In the context of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, these dynamics take on a distinct form, with extreme poverty, restricted access to education, and the risk of bride trafficking identified as key factors sustaining early marriage within a legally precarious environment.¹⁴

The second strand of scholarship moves beyond viewing early marriage solely as a harmful social practice and instead interprets it as a strategy for survival and adaptation under conditions of forced displacement. From this perspective, refugee families reconfigure marriage as a means of securing protection, social stability, and a semblance of future certainty, despite such unions potentially involving legal ambiguity, abandonment, polygamy, or underage marriage.¹⁵ At the same time, empirical studies reveal that marriage does not eliminate vulnerability but rather transforms it. Research on married Rohingya girls in Cox's Bazar highlights post-marital vulnerabilities, including restricted mobility, social isolation, gender-based violence, and psychological distress, suggesting that marriage often shifts girls from one form of insecurity to another. Similar findings emerge in other refugee contexts.¹⁶ Studies of Somali refugees in Ethiopia demonstrate that displacement reshapes marital practices through changing legal, economic, and educational conditions,¹⁷ while research on Syrian refugee girls in Domiz Camp shows that early marriage is closely associated with domestic violence, intra-household conflict, divorce, and prolonged social marginalisation.¹⁸ Collectively, these studies indicate that early marriage in humanitarian settings is embedded in broader negotiations over safety, livelihood, and social continuity, while simultaneously reproducing new forms of inequality and harm.

¹² Rima Mourtada, Jennifer Schlecht, and Jocelyn DeJong, "A Qualitative Study Exploring Child Marriage Practices among Syrian Conflict-Affected Populations in Lebanon," *Conflict and Health* 11, no. 1 (November 2017): 27.

¹³ Susan Andrea Bartels et al., "Making Sense of Child, Early and Forced Marriage among Syrian Refugee Girls: A Mixed Methods Study in Lebanon," *BMJ Global Health* 3, no. 1 (January 2018): e000509.

¹⁴ Mohd Al Adib Samuri and Noor Aziah Mohd Awal, "Drivers of Child Marriage among Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam* 9, no. 2 (2025): 803–24.

¹⁵ M. Ala Uddin, "The Meaning of Marriage to the Rohingya Refugees, and Their Survival in Bangladesh," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 2 (June 2021): 2036–51.

¹⁶ Silvia Guglielmi, Khadija Mitu, and Jennifer Seager, "'I Just Keep Quiet': Addressing the Challenges of Married Rohingya Girls and Creating Opportunities for Change," *The European Journal of Development Research* 33, no. 5 (October 2021): 1232–51.

¹⁷ Vandana Sharma et al., "Displacement-Related Factors Influencing Marital Practices and Associated Intimate Partner Violence Risk among Somali Refugees in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia: A Qualitative Study," *Conflict and Health* 14, no. 1 (April 2020): 17.

¹⁸ Jabbar Abdulrahman Qahar, Azlin Hilma Hillaluddin, and Fatimah Zailly Ahmad Ramli, "Child Marriage and Domestic Violence Among Syrian Refugee Girls in Domiz Camp Kurdistan-Iraq," *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* 10, no. 1 (March 2025): 68–78.

The third strand highlights both the consequences of early marriage and the limitations of existing interventions. Studies within the Somali refugee context in Ethiopia reveal that early marriage is associated not only with household vulnerability and limited access to education but also with low contraceptive use and early childbearing.¹⁹ More broadly, existing scholarship has generated important recommendations concerning education, protection programming, awareness campaigns, and context-sensitive interventions. However, much of this literature remains focused on identifying causal factors, documenting consequences, or proposing humanitarian responses in refugee camps located in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Lebanon, Ethiopia, or Iraq. Far less attention has been given to how early marriage operates within refugee communities in Indonesia, particularly in Aceh, where the issue intersects with a legal vacuum, the absence of explicit state prohibition, and the internal survival strategies of a Muslim refugee community living under prolonged uncertainty. It is precisely within this underexplored socio-legal context that the present article is situated. Rather than treating early marriage as a residual cultural practice or a by-product of humanitarian crisis, this article examines how the practice is actively produced and reproduced at the intersection of displacement, legal invisibility, gendered vulnerability, and the everyday rationalities of survival.

Previous studies, as outlined above, have significantly advanced the understanding of early marriage in refugee settings by examining its structural drivers, its function as a survival strategy, and its consequences for girls' wellbeing, education, and reproductive health. However, these studies have largely focused on identifying causal relationships, documenting impacts, or proposing interventions in refugee contexts outside Indonesia. Considerably less attention has been paid to how early marriage is socially produced within the internal dynamics of refugee communities living under conditions of legal ambiguity and prolonged uncertainty, such as those in Aceh. In this context, the perception of early marriage among Rohingya Muslim refugees cannot be reduced to a cultural preference or a private family decision but must be situated at the intersection of displacement, legal vacuum, gendered vulnerability, and everyday survival strategies. Drawing on Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, this article examines how early marriage is reproduced through the dynamic interaction between structural constraints and refugee agency. It argues that early marriage should be understood as a form of bounded agency—a rational survival strategy enacted within conditions of severe structural limitation—rather than as a purely cultural practice or a simple legal violation.

Research Methodology

This study employed qualitative field research to examine the underlying reasons behind early marriage practices among the Rohingya Muslim refugee community in

¹⁹ Shatha Elnakib et al., "Child Marriage among Somali Refugees in Ethiopia: A Cross Sectional Survey of Adolescent Girls and Adult Women," *BMC Public Health* 21, no. 1 (June 2021): 1051.

Aceh, Indonesia. Conducted over two months of fieldwork in September and December 2024, the research aimed to capture the contextual and lived experiences of early marriage under conditions of displacement. A qualitative approach was chosen because it facilitates an in-depth exploration of meanings, perceptions, and motivations that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative or statistical methods alone. More importantly, this approach is particularly suited to uncovering the interplay between individual agency and structural constraints, which lies at the core of this study's analytical framework. The fieldwork took place at the temporary Rohingya refugee camp in Mina Raya, Padang Tije District, Pidie Regency, Aceh. This site was selected based on considerations of accessibility and research feasibility, as it was one of the camps to which the researcher was granted access.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and direct observation at Camp Mina Raya, Aceh, which served as the principal research site. A total of seven participants were selected via purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research focus. These included two adolescent girls who had married at a young age, one Rohingya mother with prior experience of early marriage, the father of one of the young brides, a representative of UNHCR in Aceh, an activist from Komisi untuk Orang Hilang dan Korban Tindak Kekerasan (KontraS) in Aceh, and a representative from Yayasan Kemanusiaan Madani Indonesia (YKMI). The inclusion of both community members and institutional actors aimed to capture the multi-layered dimensions of early marriage, encompassing lived experiences, family decision-making processes, and broader socio-legal perspectives. In line with research ethics, the identities of all informants were anonymised to ensure confidentiality and protect them from potential harm, particularly given the sensitivity of the topic and the vulnerability of the population involved.

Table 1
Profile of Informants

Code	Gender	Age	Position of Informant	Interview Date
A	Female	14-years-old at the time of marriage	Rohingya woman who married at a young age	December 2024
M	Female	13-years-old at the time of marriage	Rohingya woman who married at a young age	December 2024
L	Female	15-years-old at the time of marriage	Rohingya woman who married at a young age	December 2024
T	Male	Not specified	Father of a Rohingya girl who married at a young age	December 2024
FSL	Male	Not specified	UNHCR representative in Aceh	December 2024
HDR	Male	Not specified	Activist from KontraS Aceh	December 2024
I.IY	Female	Not specified	YKMI representative	December 2024

The data obtained from interviews and observations were analysed thematically using Giddens' structuration theory as the primary analytical framework. This theoretical approach was employed to examine the dialectical

relationship between structural conditions and individual agency²⁰ in shaping the practice of early marriage. Within this framework, early marriage is conceptualised not merely as a consequence of structural pressures—such as poverty, refugee status, and limited access to education—but as a form of socially situated action produced through the interaction between constraints and reflexive decision-making. In this context, the analysis interprets early marriage as an expression of bounded agency, whereby individuals and families actively negotiate limited choices to secure protection, stability, and survival under conditions of prolonged uncertainty and structural vulnerability.

Structural Constraints, Legal Uncertainty, and Everyday Life among Rohingya Muslim Refugees in Aceh

The displacement of Rohingya Muslim refugees constitutes one of the most severe humanitarian crises in contemporary Southeast Asia. Following the large-scale military operations conducted by the Myanmar government against the Rohingya population in 2017, more than 700,000 individuals were forced to flee across national borders, undertaking perilous sea journeys in search of asylum.²¹ Among the countries receiving these displaced populations, Indonesia—particularly the province of Aceh—has emerged as a significant destination,²² despite the fact that the state is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol.²³ This legal status places Rohingya refugees in a state of institutional ambiguity, where humanitarian reception coexists with limited formal protection.²⁴

Aceh, renowned for its strong Islamic heritage and the implementation of Islamic law through regional regulation (*qanun*),²⁵ occupies a distinctive position in responding to the arrival of Rohingya Muslim refugees.²⁶ At the end of 2023, the influx of refugees increased sharply, with nine boats arriving in Aceh's waters within a single month, from mid-November to mid-December. According to data reported

²⁰ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 25–9.

²¹ “Over 110 Million People are Forcibly Displaced Globally,” *UNHCR*, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/mid-year-trends>; “Global Report 2023,” <https://reporting.unhcr.org/global-report-2023>.

²² Rizki Yunanda et al., “The Social Impact of the Existence of Rohingya Refugees in Aceh,” *Community: Pengawas Dinamika Sosial* 10, no. 1 (2024): 129–41.

²³ Cipta Primadasa Primadasa, Mahendra Putra Kurnia, and Rika Erawaty, “Problematisasi Penanganan Pengungsi di Indonesia dari Perspektif Hukum Pengungsi Internasional,” *Risalah Hukum* 17, no. 1 (2021): 44–51.

²⁴ See: Rodziana Mohamed Razali, Aizat Khairi, and Tasneem Rahmatullah, “Transnational Marriages of Rohingya Refugees: Legal Challenges of Islamic Family Law in Malaysia,” *Manchester Journal of Transnational Islamic Law and Practice* 20, no. 3 (2024): 412–19; Harsh Mahaseth and Samyuktha Banusekar, “Living in the Shadows: Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia,” *Asian Journal of International Law* 12, no. 2 (July 2022): 259–66.

²⁵ *Qanun* is a form of regional regulation implemented in Aceh to govern various aspects of community life based on the principles of Islamic law, as a consequence of the province's special autonomous status. See: Arief Budiono et al., “Aceh Autonomy Policy and Qanun Post-Helsinki Agreement,” *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding* 9, no. 2 (2022): 771–6.

²⁶ Lindra Darnela, Faisal Syafri Azmi, and Arif Sugitanata, “The Dominant Influence of Islamic Law in Addressing the Challenges of Upholding the Rights of Rohingya Refugees,” *De Jure: Jurnal Hukum dan Syar'iah* 17, no. 1 (2025): 1–32.

by CNN Indonesia, these nine boats carried a total of 1,543 refugees, comprising 357 men, 447 women, and 739 children. The arrivals were distributed across several locations, including Lhokseumawe, Pidie, Banda Aceh, and Sabang. The refugees were subsequently accommodated in a number of temporary shelters, including the former Immigration Office building in Ulee Blang Mane Village, Blang Mangat District, Lhokseumawe (514 individuals); the Mina Raya Foundation camp in Leun Tanjong Village, Padang Tiji District, Pidie (755 individuals); the Balee Meuseuraya Aceh (BMA) building in Banda Aceh (135 individuals); and the CT-1 BPKS Pier in Sabang (139 individuals). Meanwhile, a number of earlier arrivals from previous migration waves remained in Pidie.²⁷ This pattern indicates that Aceh has not only functioned as an emergency landing site but has also evolved into a recurring transit point within the broader migration network of Rohingya Muslim refugees.

The initial reception by the Acehnese community was largely characterised by solidarity rooted in religious and cultural values. The principle of *ukhuwwah islāmiyyah* (Islamic brotherhood)²⁸ and the local tradition of *peumulia jamee* (honouring guests) played a significant role in fostering positive attitudes towards refugees.²⁹ This was demonstrated through the provision of food, clothing, and other essential needs even before the arrival of international humanitarian organisations such as UNHCR, IOM (International Organization for Migration), and YKMI.³⁰ However, over time, this initial solidarity has been increasingly challenged by shifting socio-economic dynamics. The growing number of refugees, coupled with the prolonged nature of their stay, has generated tensions in certain localities. Perceptions of unequal resource distribution have emerged, with some local residents expressing concerns that refugees receive disproportionate access to humanitarian aid, while local communities continue to endure economic hardship.³¹

These tensions have been further exacerbated by the spread of negative narratives and misinformation on social media, which portray refugees as a social burden and, in some instances, as sources of insecurity or criminality.³² In certain cases, such as in Bireuen District, refugees were denied permission to disembark, while in North Aceh local communities resisted their settlement, citing concerns

²⁷ CNN Indonesia, "Update Jumlah Total Pengungsi Rohingya dan Sebaran Penampungan di Aceh," *CNN Indonesia* (Jakarta), December 2023, Peristiwa Edition, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20231213141254-20-1036757/update-jumlah-total-pengungsi-rohingya-dan-sebaran-penampungan-di-aceh>.

²⁸ Lindra Darnela, "Islam and Humanity: Commodification of Aid for Rohingya in Aceh," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 59, no. 1 (2021): 57–96.

²⁹ Zahra Nelissa, Sunaryo Kartadinata, and Mamat Supriatna, "A Study 'Peumulia Jamee' of Aceh Society in Counseling Relationship," paper presented at International Seminar on Innovative and Creative Guidance and Counseling Service (ICGCS 2021), 2022, 210–14.

³⁰ Mumtazinur Mumtazinur, "Pengaruh Bantuan Kemanusiaan Aceh bagi Pengungsi Rohingnya terhadap Upaya Diplomasi Kemanusiaan," *Media Syari'ah: Wahana Kajian Hukum Islam dan Pranata Sosial* 22, no. 1 (2020): 16–29.

³¹ Chairussani Abbas Sopamena, "Pengungsi Rohingya dan Potensi Konflik & Kemajemukan Horizontal di Aceh," *Caraka Prabhu: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan* 7, no. 2 (2023): 85–115.

³² Teddy Farhan and Alifia N. Sumayya, "Demonization of Rohingya in Indonesia: An Analysis on Social Media Narratives," *The Lemkin Institute* (USA), December 2023, <https://www.lemkininstitute.com/single-post/demonization-of-rohingya-in-indonesia-an-analysis-on-social-media-narratives>.

over security and cultural disruption.³³ These developments indicate a shift in public sentiment from initial empathy towards ambivalence and, in some cases, open resistance. This evolving dynamic must be understood within the broader context of Indonesia's limited regulatory framework on refugee protection. Although the Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016 on the Handling of Refugees from Abroad provides a basic administrative framework for managing refugees,³⁴ its implementation remains fragmented and insufficient. The absence of a comprehensive system for determining refugee status, ensuring access to education, and providing legal avenues for employment reflects a broader condition of structural inadequacy. Furthermore, coordination among state institutions and humanitarian actors continues to be sectoral rather than integrated.³⁵ At the regional level, despite Aceh's special autonomy and Islamic legal framework, no specific *qanun* has been enacted to regulate refugee governance. As a result, refugee management remains largely reactive, relying heavily on humanitarian initiatives rather than sustained, rights-based policy frameworks.

Within this context, the everyday lives of Rohingya refugees unfold under conditions of legal precarity and social uncertainty. Refugees lack formal citizenship status, are excluded from formal labour markets, and face significant barriers to accessing education for their children. Many have resided in Aceh for extended periods, yet their futures remain contingent upon resettlement processes facilitated by UNHCR, which are often lengthy and uncertain.³⁶ These structural constraints generate not only material hardship but also profound psychological pressures. It is within this context of prolonged insecurity that internal social dynamics, including early marriage, emerge as significant coping mechanisms.³⁷ From a structuration perspective, these practices can be understood as socially embedded responses arising from the interaction between structural constraints and limited agency. The emergence of early marriage within the Rohingya refugee community thus reflects not merely a cultural or individual choice, but a patterned response shaped by legal invisibility, gendered vulnerability, and the absence of reliable protection mechanisms.³⁸ This highlights the need to analyse refugee life beyond material

³³ Agus Setyadi, "Pengungsi Rohingya Silih Berganti ke Aceh Sepanjang 2023, Penolakan Kian Masif," *detiksumut*, December 18, 2023, <https://www.detik.com/sumut/berita/d-7095376/pengungsi-rohingya-silih-berganti-ke-aceh-sepanjang-2023-penolakan-kian-masif>.

³⁴ "Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016 on the Handling of Refugees from Abroad," December 31, 2016, <http://peraturan.bpk.go.id/Details/41029/perpres-no-125-tahun-2016>.

³⁵ Darnela, Azmi, and Sugitanata, "The Dominant Influence of Islamic Law in Addressing the Challenges of Upholding the Rights of Rohingya Refugees," 1–32.

³⁶ Resettlement is the process of relocating refugees from the country where they initially sought protection to a third country that is willing to receive them for permanent settlement. See: Aprianti Ranty, Maria Maya Lestari, and Evi Deliana, "Durable Solutions bagi Pengungsi Etnis Rohingya Tanpa Kewarganegaraan Menurut Hukum Internasional," *Balobe Law Journal* 4, no. 1 (2024): 26–34.

³⁷ "Field Notes from Observations at Mina Raya Camp, Aceh."

³⁸ Samuri and Awal, "Drivers of Child Marriage among Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia," 803–24; Guglielmi, Mitu, and Seager, "I Just Keep Quiet," 1232–51; Kate Mieth et al., "What Other Option Did I Have?—The Effect of Conflict and Displacement on Child Marriage and Early Childbearing among Displaced Rohingya Adolescents," *Conflict and Health* 19, no. 1 (March 2025): 16.

deprivation and legal status, focusing also on lived experience and adaptive social practices, especially those impacting women and children.

Early Marriage as a Survival Strategy under Structural Constraints

The three narratives presented in this study indicate that early marriage among Rohingya Muslim refugees in Aceh is shaped by a constellation of interrelated structural conditions: pervasive insecurity within the camp environment, the perceived necessity of protecting girls from harassment or violence, and the absence of viable alternatives such as formal protection mechanisms and access to education.³⁹ These conditions are deeply rooted in experiences of conflict and forced displacement, which continue to influence how refugee families interpret safety, dignity, and survival. In this context, early marriage cannot be adequately explained as a cultural practice or a private family decision. Rather, it is more appropriately understood as a form of bounded rationality operating under conditions of severe constraint. Under such circumstances, marriage functions simultaneously as a protective mechanism, a strategy of social survival, and an attempt to produce stability in an environment characterised by prolonged uncertainty.

This pattern is evident in the experience of A, who married at the age of 14. In the absence of formal protection, her decision to marry was not motivated by personal desire but by the normalisation of fear in everyday camp life. After arriving in Aceh, she married a fellow Rohingya refugee, a decision confined within the refugee community rather than involving members of the local Acehnese population. As she explained, “*When night falls, I feel afraid of the situation.*”⁴⁰ Her statement reflects the structural insecurity experienced by young Rohingya girls living in overcrowded shelters, where supervision is limited and institutional protection is largely absent. Under such conditions, marriage is interpreted by the family as a pragmatic mechanism to reduce exposure to risk, particularly the threat of harassment or violence.⁴¹ For A, early marriage was therefore not a matter of emotional readiness or future planning, but a situated response aimed at securing immediate safety in the absence of reliable protection.

A similar pattern emerges in the account of M, a 15-year-old girl who married at the age of 13. When asked about her reasons for marrying, she paused before responding quietly, “*I was afraid to sleep alone in the camp. My father said that if I had a husband, I would be safer.*”⁴² Like A, she married within the Rohingya refugee community after displacement in Aceh. Her testimony emphasises that, in this context, marriage is not primarily associated with affection, maturity, or individual

³⁹ FSL, “Interview with a UNHCR Representative,” December 2024; HDR, “Interview with a KontraS Aceh Activist,” December 2024.

⁴⁰ A, “Interview with a Rohingya Woman Who Married at a Young Age,” December 2024.

⁴¹ Additional findings show that the camp’s cramped conditions, limited supervision, and intense social pressures compel Rohingya refugee parents to marry off their daughters at an early age. See: Melnikas et al., “Child Marriage Practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh,” 28.

⁴² M, “Interview with a Rohingya Woman Who Married at a Young Age,” December 2024.

choice, but with the search for protection in an environment perceived as unsafe for young girls.⁴³ From a structuration perspective, this decision reflects the exercise of agency within constrained conditions, where available options are limited and shaped by structural vulnerability. Early marriage thus emerges as an immediate, though imperfect, response to insecurity, even as it potentially relocates girls from one form of vulnerability to another.

This logic becomes more complex in the testimony of L, now an 18-year-old mother who married at the age of 15. She vividly recalled the night her village was attacked by the military: *"We fled in the middle of the night. Many women were captured. Since then, my parents have always said it was better for me to have a husband so I would be protected."*⁴⁴ Following displacement, she also married within the Rohingya refugee community and now lives with her husband and child in a camp in Aceh. She recognises that her life trajectory has diverged from what is typically expected of girls her age. *"I want to go to school, but I do not know how. Here, we are just trying to survive."*⁴⁵ L's account introduces a temporal dimension to the analysis, demonstrating that early marriage is shaped not only by present conditions of insecurity in the camp but also by embodied memories of violence prior to displacement. From this perspective, marriage represents the continuation of a protective logic formed under conditions of structural violence before arrival in Aceh. Early marriage, therefore, emerges as a cumulative response, shaped by past trauma, forced migration, and the enduring belief that a husband constitutes the most accessible form of protection for a young girl.

These findings broadly align with existing scholarship on child marriage in refugee settings, although the specific configurations of drivers vary across contexts. Among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, early marriage has been linked to economic precarity and displacement, as well as the weakening of pre-existing social restrictions on underage marriage within camp environments.⁴⁶ In Malaysia, studies identify poverty, limited access to education, and the risk of bride trafficking as central factors sustaining early marriage among Rohingya refugees.⁴⁷ Similarly, research on Syrian conflict-affected populations in Lebanon highlights the roles of insecurity, economic pressure, and disrupted education in shaping marital decisions.⁴⁸ In comparison, the case of Aceh places greater emphasis on insecurity within the camp, fear of harassment or violence, and the absence of formal protection and educational opportunities as primary drivers. While these findings do not diverge from the broader refugee literature, they suggest that the logic of protection is articulated more explicitly in the narratives of girls and their families, compared with explanations that focus predominantly on economic deprivation or

⁴³ M, "Interview with a Rohingya Woman Who Married at a Young Age."

⁴⁴ L, "Interview with a Rohingya Woman Who Married at a Young Age," December 2024.

⁴⁵ L, "Interview with a Rohingya Woman Who Married at a Young Age."

⁴⁶ Melnikas et al., "Child Marriage Practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh," 28.

⁴⁷ Samuri and Awal, "Drivers of Child Marriage among Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia," 803–24.

⁴⁸ Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong, "A Qualitative Study Exploring Child Marriage Practices among Syrian Conflict-Affected Populations in Lebanon," 27.

regulatory shifts. In this sense, early marriage in the Aceh context can be more clearly understood as a socially embedded survival strategy enacted through bounded agency under conditions of structural constraint.⁴⁹

Early Marriage as a Response to Legal and Protective Vacuums

The Rohingya Muslim community in Aceh did not arrive as a population entering a fully secure new beginning, but rather as refugees bearing the enduring consequences of persecution, forced displacement, and prolonged fear. Many had fled a homeland devastated by the destruction of homes, the loss of family members, and the systematic erosion of dignity under military violence.⁵⁰ Although arrival in Aceh provided a degree of immediate safety and humanitarian refuge, it did not eliminate the structural vulnerabilities that continued to shape their daily lives. For many families, particularly those with adolescent daughters, insecurity remained a persistent concern within a broader context of legal uncertainty, limited institutional protection, and fragile access to education. In this setting, the experience of danger was no longer confined to past events in Myanmar but extended into the present through unresolved structural conditions: the absence of enforceable legal safeguards, the fragility of everyday protection, and the lack of viable alternatives through which girls could be protected without recourse to marriage. It is within this sustained condition of uncertainty that early marriage emerges as a socially meaningful response.⁵¹

FSL, a UNHCR representative in Aceh, confirmed that early marriage is not a new phenomenon but remains difficult to prevent due to the lack of binding regulatory frameworks. *“At UNHCR, we try to promote child protection, but in Indonesia there is no legal framework that explicitly prohibits this practice in the refugee context. Moreover, Indonesia has not ratified the 1951 Convention. Our approach is therefore more focused on advocacy and education rather than direct legal intervention,”* he explained.⁵² Meanwhile, HDR, an activist from KontraS, described early marriage among refugees as a form of “emergency protection” adopted in the absence of an effective protection system. *“Amid uncertainty, marriage becomes a logical decision for them. But this is not about culture; it is the result of a protection vacuum. The state is absent in providing supportive regulations,”* he argued.⁵³ His perspective highlights the need to reframe early marriage not as a culturally tolerated practice, but as a structural outcome of regulatory absence and institutional failure.

⁴⁹ See: Melnikas et al., “Child Marriage Practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh,” 28; Samuri and Awal, “Drivers of Child Marriage among Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia,” 803–24.

⁵⁰ Adwani Adwani, Rosmawati Rosmawati, and M. Kadir, “The Responsibility in Protecting the Rohingya Refugees in Aceh Province, Indonesia: An International Refugees Law Perspective,” *IJUMIJ* 29, no. S2 (2021): 1–21.

⁵¹ Other sources indicate that the preference for early marriage among the Rohingya has become easier to realise after they began living in refugee camps such as those in Bangladesh. See: Melnikas et al., “Child Marriage Practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh,” 28.

⁵² FSL, “Interview with a UNHCR Representative.”

⁵³ HDR, “Interview with a KontraS Aceh Activist.”

I.IY, a representative from YKMI, offered a similar assessment. She explained that her organisation engages the community primarily through counselling and dialogue but lacks the authority to impose prohibitions. *“We approach them through dialogue. We emphasise health risks as well as emotional immaturity. However, if larger systems such as the state are absent, our efforts are only like a topical remedy for a deep wound,”* she stated.⁵⁴ T., the father of M, a girl who married at the age of 13, expressed a comparable sense of constraint. *“If I let my daughter grow into adolescence without protection, I fear she would be attacked or separated. Here, her husband can protect her.”* He also noted the absence of legal guidance: *“There is no law protecting us. So, we created our own protection.”*⁵⁵ These accounts illustrate how decision-making at the family level is shaped by structural limitations, where the absence of institutional protection compels individuals to construct alternative forms of security within their immediate social environment.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that early marriage among Rohingya Muslim refugees in Aceh cannot be reduced to a cultural preference or a private family choice; rather, it must be understood as a response to a specific configuration of structural vulnerability. It arises from the convergence of at least three interrelated conditions: persistent insecurity within the camp, the perceived need to protect girls from harassment or violence, and the absence of meaningful alternatives such as effective legal protection and sustained access to education. In this regard, the Aceh case resonates with a broader body of scholarship on marriage practices in refugee settings while also offering a distinct emphasis. Melnikas et al. show that among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, displacement weakened prior social constraints on underage marriage, making early marriage easier to practise in camp environments.⁵⁶ Similarly, studies on Syrian refugees in Lebanon demonstrate how insecurity, economic deterioration, disrupted education, and concerns over sexual and gender-based violence converge to increase the perceived utility of early marriage as a coping strategy.⁵⁷ Research across other displacement contexts likewise suggests that where legal frameworks are weak and educational pathways remain unstable, early marriage persists as a socially rationalised response to uncertainty. The findings from Aceh align with this broader pattern, yet they highlight a particularly salient dynamic: marriage is articulated by families and community actors less as a cultural norm than as a substitute for absent protection. From a structuration perspective, this reflects the operation of bounded agency, in which actors, constrained by structural limitations, engage in reflexive decision-making to secure safety. Early marriage in this context should therefore be understood not merely as a harmful practice but as a socio-legal outcome of displacement, legal invisibility, structural exclusion, and unresolved collective

⁵⁴ I.IY, “Interview with a YKMI Representative,” December 2024.

⁵⁵ T, “Interview with the Father of a Rohingya Girl Who Married at a Young Age,” December 2024.

⁵⁶ Melnikas et al., “Child Marriage Practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh,” 28.

⁵⁷ See: Bartels et al., “Making Sense of Child, Early and Forced Marriage among Syrian Refugee Girls,” e000509; Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong, “A Qualitative Study Exploring Child Marriage Practices among Syrian Conflict-Affected Populations in Lebanon,” 27.

trauma, through which families attempt to construct forms of protection in the absence of reliable institutional support.

Early Marriage as a Survival Strategy: Bounded Agency within Structural Constraints

The practice of early marriage among Rohingya Muslim refugees in Aceh presents a complex analytical landscape concerning the relationship between social structure and individual agency. When examined not as an isolated social phenomenon but as part of the ongoing dialectic between structure and action, Giddens' structuration theory offers a particularly valuable analytical framework. Rather than positioning agency and structure as opposing forces, this perspective conceptualises them as mutually constitutive elements of social life. Structure does not merely constrain action through rules, unequal access to resources, and institutional limitations; it simultaneously enables action by providing the conditions under which it becomes possible. Conversely, actors are not fully autonomous individuals operating in a social vacuum but socially embedded agents whose choices are shaped by historical trajectories, power relations, and institutional arrangements, while still retaining a degree of reflexivity in navigating these constraints.⁵⁸

In the context of Rohingya Muslim refugees, early marriage among girls such as M, A, and L, who married between the ages of 13 and 15, should not be understood as a fixed cultural practice or an expression of autonomous personal choice. Rather, it emerges as a strategic response to persistent insecurity, fear, and the absence of effective protection. Their testimonies consistently reveal three interrelated drivers: insecurity within the camp, the perceived need to shield girls from harassment or violence, and the lack of meaningful alternatives, such as formal protection mechanisms and access to education. These conditions are not produced in isolation; they are rooted in a longer trajectory of structural violence experienced by the Rohingya, beginning with exclusion and persecution in Myanmar and extending into conditions of legal uncertainty and prolonged displacement in host countries.⁵⁹ Under such circumstances, early marriage within the refugee community is often perceived by families as the most immediate and rational form of protection available.⁶⁰

From the perspective of structuration theory, these actions can be understood as expressions of bounded agency: families and girls do not act under conditions of complete freedom, nor are they passive subjects of structural forces.⁶¹ Instead, they make decisions within a constrained field of possibilities shaped by legal invisibility, the absence of enforceable regulations, traumatic memories of violence, prolonged displacement, fragile access to education, and patriarchal norms that associate male

⁵⁸ Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 25–9.

⁵⁹ Darnela, Azmi, and Sugitanata, "The Dominant Influence of Islamic Law in Addressing the Challenges of Upholding the Rights of Rohingya Refugees," 1–32.

⁶⁰ See: Guglielmi, Mitu, and Seager, "I Just Keep Quiet," 1232–51; Mieth et al., "What Other Option Did I Have?," 16; Melnikas et al., "Child Marriage Practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh," 28.

⁶¹ Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 3–5, 25–9.

guardianship with female security.⁶² In this sense, early marriage represents an exercise of agency under severe constraint—a reflexive attempt to secure safety and stability within circumstances not of the actors’ choosing. At the same time, this practice exemplifies what Giddens describes as the duality of structure:⁶³ actions taken in response to structural constraints may simultaneously reproduce those very constraints. By treating marriage as a mechanism of protection,⁶⁴ families may inadvertently reinforce patriarchal assumptions, sustain informal systems of security in the absence of state intervention, and normalise a practice that exposes girls to new risks.⁶⁵ Early marriage, therefore, does not simply mitigate insecurity; it also generates unintended consequences, including educational exclusion, reproductive health risks, domestic violence, and the perpetuation of gender inequality.⁶⁶ A strategy intended to reduce immediate danger may thus reproduce longer-term forms of vulnerability.

This interpretation becomes even more compelling when situated within the broader socio-legal context of refugee governance in Indonesia. The existing legal framework remains limited and does not adequately regulate the domestic and protective aspects of refugee life, including the prevention of early marriage and the safeguarding of girls’ rights.⁶⁷ Although Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016 provides an administrative basis for refugee management, it does not guarantee comprehensive legal status, sustained access to formal education, or long-term social protection.⁶⁸ In this context, the absence of substantive state intervention compels refugee communities to develop their own survival mechanisms. Consequently, practices that may appear problematic from a formal legal perspective are often perceived by refugee families as rational within a framework of protection and endurance. Testimonies from institutional actors reinforce this interpretation. FSL from UNHCR acknowledged that early marriage is difficult to prevent due to the absence of binding legal frameworks specific to refugee contexts.⁶⁹ HDR from KontraS emphasised that early marriage should be understood not as a culturally acceptable norm, but as a consequence of a protection vacuum,⁷⁰ while I.IY from YKMI highlighted the limited effectiveness of counselling and dialogue in the absence of broader structural support.⁷¹ Collectively, these perspectives indicate that early marriage is sustained not only by internal

⁶² T, “Interview with the Father of a Rohingya Girl Who Married at a Young Age.”

⁶³ Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 25.

⁶⁴ T, “Interview with the Father of a Rohingya Girl Who Married at a Young Age.”

⁶⁵ See: Guglielmi, Mitu, and Seager, “I Just Keep Quiet,” 1232–51; Mieth et al., “What Other Option Did I Have?,” 16.

⁶⁶ I.IY, “Interview with a YKMI Representative.”

⁶⁷ Amy Nethery, “Troubled Transit: Asylum Seekers Stuck in Indonesia,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 38, no. 2 (March 2017): 245–47.

⁶⁸ Darnela, Azmi, and Sugitanata, “The Dominant Influence of Islamic Law in Addressing the Challenges of Upholding the Rights of Rohingya Refugees,” 1–32.

⁶⁹ FSL, “Interview with a UNHCR Representative.”

⁷⁰ HDR, “Interview with a KontraS Aceh Activist.”

⁷¹ I.IY, “Interview with a YKMI Representative.”

community dynamics but also by systemic gaps in law, policy, and institutional response.

Seen in this light, the findings substantiate the central argument of this article: early marriage among Rohingya Muslim refugees in Aceh cannot be adequately understood as a cultural residue, a private family decision, or a simple moral issue. Rather, the evidence demonstrates that the practice functions as a socio-legal response to displacement, structural exclusion, unresolved trauma, and the severely constrained scope of agency available to refugee families. The contribution of this study lies in showing, at the micro-social level, how marriage is rationalised not primarily as a cultural ideal but as a substitute for absent protection. This perspective extends existing scholarship by demonstrating how the logic of protection is internalised in everyday decision-making within refugee communities living under prolonged uncertainty.⁷²

This interpretation broadly aligns with existing scholarship while refining it in one significant respect. Previous studies have demonstrated that displacement alters the social and regulatory environment of marriage, making child marriage more readily renegotiable within camp settings. Additionally, poverty, limited access to education, and trafficking-related pressures further exacerbate the practice.⁷³ Other research similarly shows that insecurity, economic decline, and disrupted education increase the appeal of early marriage in displacement contexts, whereas access to safe education can serve as a crucial protective factor.⁷⁴ The findings from Aceh resonate with this broader body of work, yet they reveal a more explicitly articulated protective rationale: here, early marriage is consistently framed by girls, parents, and advocates as an immediate response to the absence of dependable protection. For this reason, policy responses cannot remain limited to counselling, advocacy, or normative condemnation alone. While such measures are important, they will remain insufficient without the development of a clearer legal framework, stronger protection mechanisms for refugee women and girls, and expanded access to education capable of reducing reliance on harmful informal strategies of security.⁷⁵ Only through broader structural transformation can the conditions that currently reproduce fear, vulnerability, and early marriage be changed into conditions that support dignity, safety, and a more secure future.

⁷² See: Melnikas et al., "Child Marriage Practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh," 28; Samuri and Awal, "Drivers of Child Marriage among Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia," 803–24; Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong, "A Qualitative Study Exploring Child Marriage Practices among Syrian Conflict-Affected Populations in Lebanon," 27.

⁷³ See: Melnikas et al., "Child Marriage Practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh," 28; Samuri and Awal, "Drivers of Child Marriage among Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia," 803–24.

⁷⁴ See: Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong, "A Qualitative Study Exploring Child Marriage Practices among Syrian Conflict-Affected Populations in Lebanon," 27; Sharma et al., "Displacement-Related Factors Influencing Marital Practices and Associated Intimate Partner Violence Risk among Somali Refugees in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia," 17.

⁷⁵ See: Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong, "A Qualitative Study Exploring Child Marriage Practices among Syrian Conflict-Affected Populations in Lebanon," 27; Sharma et al., "Displacement-Related Factors Influencing Marital Practices and Associated Intimate Partner Violence Risk among Somali Refugees in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia," 17.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that early marriage among Rohingya Muslim refugees in Aceh cannot be adequately understood merely as a cultural expression or a private family matter. Instead, it emerges as a socio-legal response to prolonged displacement, insecurity within the camps, legal invisibility, and the absence of effective protection mechanisms. The findings indicate that this practice is shaped by at least three interrelated factors: persistent insecurity in the camp environment, the perceived need to protect girls from harassment or violence, and the lack of viable alternatives such as formal protection and access to education. Within this context, marriage to fellow Rohingya refugees is often regarded by families as the most immediate and rational means of mitigating vulnerability, securing protection, and fostering a sense of stability amid prolonged uncertainty. Accordingly, early marriage must be interpreted through the lived experiences and survival rationalities of the refugee community itself, rather than being evaluated solely through external normative frameworks.

Drawing on Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, this study demonstrates that early marriage arises from the dynamic interplay between structural constraints and refugee agency. At the structural level, the practice is shaped by a constellation of factors, including legal vacuums, prolonged displacement, traumatic memories of violence, limited access to education, and patriarchal norms that equate marriage with female protection. At the agential level, families and girls do not act with full autonomy, yet neither are they passive subjects of structural forces. Instead, they make decisions within a severely constrained field of possibilities. In this sense, early marriage reflects a form of bounded agency—a reflexive and strategic attempt to secure safety and continuity under conditions not of the actors' choosing. Simultaneously, this strategy contributes to the reproduction of new vulnerabilities, including educational exclusion, the persistence of gender inequality, and exposure to further forms of harm. Early marriage, therefore, does not simply respond to insecurity; it also exemplifies the duality of structure, whereby actions intended to mitigate risk may simultaneously sustain the very conditions of vulnerability they seek to escape.

The principal contribution of this study lies in revealing the internal socio-legal logic through which early marriage is rationalised within a refugee community living under prolonged uncertainty. By foregrounding the micro-social dynamics of protection, fear, and survival, this study extends existing scholarship, which has predominantly focused on causal drivers, consequences, and humanitarian interventions. More significantly, it demonstrates that, in the Aceh context, early marriage is articulated less as a cultural ideal than as a substitute for absent protection. This finding carries important implications: responses to early marriage among refugee populations cannot rely solely on counselling, advocacy, or normative condemnation but must be accompanied by clearer legal frameworks, more robust protection mechanisms for refugee women and girls, and expanded access to education capable of reducing reliance on harmful informal strategies of

security. Although this study is limited to a single refugee setting in Aceh, its findings provide a valuable foundation for further research on marriage practices, gendered vulnerability, and protection regimes across diverse refugee contexts.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical considerations. However, anonymized data can be obtained from the author upon reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement

The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with established research ethics principles. Informed consent was obtained from all informants and, where applicable, from the parents or guardians of minor participants. The identities of all informants were anonymized to protect confidentiality.

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