



## Research Frontiers: International Journal of Social Science and Technology

Journal Homepage:

<https://researchfrontiersjournal.com/index.php/pub/index>



### Research Article

# INTO THE WORLD OF CHILD MARRIAGE: A PHENOMENOLOGY

Asnaira M. Pagayao-Laba<sup>1</sup> | Minda B. Brigoli<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1-2</sup> University of Mindanao, Professional Schools, Davao City, Philippines

<sup>\*1</sup> a.pagayao-laba.529458@umindanao.edu.ph

<sup>2</sup> minda\_brigoli@umindanao.edu.ph

### Article Info

### ABSTRACT

#### Article History:

Received: 8th May 2025

Accepted: 5th June 2025

Published: 10th June 2025

#### Keywords:

child marriage, adolescent girls, lived experience, Muslim communities, BARMM

This study aimed to examine the lives of adolescent girls engaged in child marriage, particularly in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), particularly in the City of Cotabato. Child marriage is a global problem that has long been practiced in the country, especially among Muslim and IP communities due to Presidential Decree 1083 which excludes them from the prohibition of marriage below eighteen. However, this exclusion was removed in 2021 through the passage of the Republic Act 11596, also known as "Anti-Child Marriage Law". Phenomenological Qualitative Research Design and Thematic Analysis were used in this study, where seventeen (17) adolescents aging 15-19 years old in Cotabato City participated the In-depth Interview (IDI) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The results revealed that despite the newly passed legislation, child marriage is still being practiced, but may not be reported due to RA 11596. It further reveals that the primary drivers of child marriage are abiding to cultural tradition and practice, which is rooted on religious belief such as the importance of having a "halal" relationship. The findings also highlight the challenges the child brides are facing every day, such as socioeconomic pressure, societal and cultural pressures, and the responsibility and motherhood challenges, their coping strategy as well as their personal reflections as child brides.

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

<sup>\*</sup>Corresponding Email

## INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is a global problem that primarily affects girls and women. Although this is not limited to girls alone, research shows that child marriage among boys is just one-sixth of the cases that are among girls (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2023). Globally, there has been a notable decline in this practice over the past few years, but it remains widespread worldwide, accounting for one in every five girls getting married in childhood (UNICEF, 2023).

Child marriage is one of the social issues being addressed under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically under Goal No. 5, also known as Gender and Equality, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all girls and women. Under SDG 5 target 5.3, it explicitly seeks to eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early, and forced marriage and female genital mutilation in 2030 (Our World in Data team, 2023).

According to UNICEF (2023), there are an estimated 640 million girls and women alive today who were married in childhood, and almost half of child brides live in South Asia (45%), with the next largest share in sub-Saharan Africa (20%), followed by East Asia and Pacific (15%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (9%).

In the Philippines, child marriage remains a concern. The country profile of UNICEF (2022) shows that 865,800 girls in the country were married before the age of 15, and 5.5 million girls were married before the

age of 18, equating to approximately one child bride for every six young women.

In the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, or BARMM, in 2021, an estimated of 88,600 girls marrying before the age of 18 were reported by the Bangsamoro Women Commission (2023). Since there is no systematic documentation of this practice in the region, its true prevalence remains uncertain, but we can expect a higher case in actuality because of the acceptability of this practice among Muslims, and the majority of inhabitants in BARMM are Muslims. (Statista, 2024). As we all know, Muslims follow unique standards and rules on marriage and even have a unique definition of children, which are mostly influenced by Islamic beliefs, while some are from the cultures and traditions of Bangsamoro.

In the Presidential Decree 1083, also known as the Code of Muslim Personal Laws, it is stipulated particularly in Article 16 that, "Any Muslim male at least 15 years of age and any Muslim female of the age of puberty or upwards and not suffering from any impediment under the provisions of the code may contract marriage...". This means that it is allowed for Muslim girls, including the Indigenous People (IP), to enter marriage as young as twelve (12) years of age if she has attained puberty and it is petitioned by her guardian or wali through the Shariah Court. (Presidential Decree No. 1083, 1977).

Although there is no certain age to contract marriage in Islam, there are conditions that

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

need to be met before an individual is allowed to get married. According to Islamic Relief Worldwide (2018), the Qur'an emphasizes that marriage must be a voluntary agreement between two legally capable parties, be it the spouse themselves or their guardians. Additionally, the marriage should have mutual attraction, compatibility, shared beliefs, agreement on the dower or mahr, which is provided by the groom to the bride, and other terms of marriage agreed upon. Another basic condition is the understanding of both husband and wife on the marriage contract, including the responsibilities and rights of spouses and the capacity of the husband to provide for the family, which is very vital since he has the primary obligation to financially support his wife and children. However, the wife may be allowed to work if she opts too. Lastly, both spouses must have reached physical maturity post-puberty, and possess sound judgement especially when it comes to financial transactions. This was supported by the Bangsamoro Darul Ifta or the Bangsamoro Jurisconsult with the issuance of fatwa or Islamic ruling on issues like the early and forced marriage, wherein it emphasized that Islam recognize the importance of mental maturity and intellectual integrity of both man and a woman before entering marriage. They further suggest that twenty (20) years old for males and eighteen (18) for females are the recommended ages for marriage based on the advice of reliable Medical Doctors of Bangsamoro (The United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) Philippines, 2015).

Child marriage is not limited to the Philippines or in BARMM. Around the world, millions of children are affected by this practice, which is why there are various studies conducted at an international level to widen the understanding of the factors that contribute to its existence and the extent of its effects on the lives of children, especially those who are advocating for child rights. Identification of these factors are very essential because it will provide a guidance in addressing the problem of child marriage. According to UNICEF (2023), some of the factors contributing on its practice are poverty, the misunderstanding that it provides protection to the children, protecting honor, social norms, customary or religious laws, inadequate legislative framework, and the state of the country's registration system.

Meanwhile, Plan International (2020) believes that this practice is brought by harmful social and gender norms, which include the control of female sexuality, thus making it challenging to address. They also believe that crises are often contributory on the increase of this practice due to unintended and unwanted pregnancy, caused by range of factors which include lack of access to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) services, disruption to education and Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE), and economic stress resulting in increased sexual exploitation in exchange for food or money.

In a study conducted to understand the drivers of child marriage by examining the qualitative data from Muslim dominated

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

countries such as Bangladesh, Malawi, and Niger, the result shows that the five core drivers of child marriage for girls are social norms, poverty, lack of agency, lack of opportunity, and pregnancy or fear of pregnancy. The study further highlights the connections between the drivers, like the contribution of poverty as well as the social norms, on the opportunity that the girls get, which makes child marriage appear to be a better option for their families and themselves. The study also indicates the connection of social norms or societal expectations on the sexual behavior of girls, which are tied up around marriage, pregnancy, and fear of pregnancy, on the facilitation of child marriage either in response to pregnancy or the urge of parents to marry their daughter for fear of being pregnant (Psaki et al., 2021).

Another study conducted in Indonesia, where it examined the lives of forty thousand seven hundred (40,700) women and men who got married at an early age to understand their experiences using the Indonesian Family Life Survey, reveals that child marriage is associated with lesser educational attainment, lower earnings or income, and minimal influence when it comes to decision making in the household (Cameron et al., 2022).

The realities of child marriage can be very complex and challenging. The health and other aspects of the life of the involved child, particularly the girls, are highly affected. In a general perspective, CAMFED (2017) has identified five reasons why this practice affects almost everyone. The first one is that

it traps girls and their families in a cycle of poverty; second is due to high global rates of maternal mortality; third is the likelihood to contract HIV/AIDS; fourth is hinders gender equality; and lastly, it locks away women's potential in helping to solve the global problems.

In a study conducted in Iran, a Muslim dominated country, reveals that child marriage is often associated with physical and psychological problems brought by high-risk pregnancy/childbirth, emotional distress, and depression; second is the family problems due dissatisfaction and being overwhelmed with married life; third is the social problems brought by lack of access to social and health services, job, and educational opportunities (Lebni et al., 2023).

In the Philippines, based on the National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) survey in 2022, the probability of dying in infancy is much greater among children born to mothers who are too young or under age 18 (PSA & ICF, 2023). Child brides also have a lower likelihood of receiving post-natal care after delivery, and their likelihood of developing cervical cancer, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy complications is high (Fan & Koski, 2022). These negative consequences, both for the mother and her children, are often exacerbated when the young girls marry underage men (Cameron et al., 2022).

Other than the health consequences, child marriage is also associated with violence. According to Girls Not Brides (2018), 50% of girls who marry before 15 years old are more

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

likely to suffer from intimate partner violence than those who marry later. This is supported in a study conducted in Indonesia, which shows that children are more likely to experience mood disorders, anxiety, and psychiatric disorders when they reach adulthood, and some with depressive symptoms (Fan & Koski, 2022).

Collective efforts to eliminate child marriage both at the international and national levels are present. The most widely known agreements around the world that address child marriage are the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). (UNFPA, 2022). Both treaties were signed and ratified by the Philippines.

In the Philippines, the national government has demonstrated its commitment to eliminating child marriage in the country by passing the Republic Act 11596, also known as the Act Prohibiting the Practices of Child Marriage and Imposing Penalties Thereof, which was signed into law last December 10, 2021. This law considers child marriage as a public crime which is applicable to all Filipinos, including the Muslims and Indigenous People (IPs), and abolishes all traditional and cultural practices and structures that perpetuate discrimination, abuse, and exploitation of children, such as the practice of child marriage (Republic Act No. 11596, 2021). This is the reason why the passage of this law generates different opinions in BARMM, especially among the Members of the Parliament of the

Bangsamoro Transition Authority, also known as the region's interim parliament.

Prior to the approval of the said policy, the BARMM Government submitted its position paper to the Senate and House Representatives on the proposed legislation of Senate Bill No. 1373, also known as the Girls not Brides Act, which asserts child marriage as illegal. In the position paper, BARMM Government expressed their aspiration that the proposed policy will not be applicable to the Muslim Filipinos and Indigenous peoples because of its unique context that is based on Islamic principles and cultural practices, and has long been recognized as part of the law of the land through the Presidential Decree No. 1083. (Bangsamoro Information Office (BIO), 2021).

This research study is anchored in Systems Theory, which recognizes individuals as interconnected parts of larger systems, such as families, communities, and societies. (Bouchrika, 2025). In particular, Family Systems Theory is applied in the study since it focuses on examining how the relationship, beliefs, and dynamics in the family influence the practice of child marriage. The family is an emotional unit, and any change in one individual within a family is likely to influence the entire system and may even lead to changes in other members (Drew, 2023). Another theory on which this study is anchored is the Socio-Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner, which emphasizes the importance of studying the environment. While the Family Systems Theory focuses on the interaction within the

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\* Corresponding Email:

family, socio-ecological theory, on the other hand focuses, focuses on a broader structure that may contribute to the practice of child marriage. This theory suggests that the child's environment and societal structure has a great impact on the development and behavior of a child, which can be multiplied into different layers (MSc, 2023).

Another theory where the study is anchored is in the Cultural theory, since this study talks about child marriage, which has long been practiced by the Muslims and IPs. Culture theory aims to examine how culture influences and shapes individuals and societies as it tries to explore how cultural practices, beliefs, and values are transmitted and maintained within a society, and how it shapes human behavior and social structures (Sociology, 2024). Another theory that can be related to Cultural theory is the Social Norm Theory by Perkins and Berkowitz, which suggests that the behavior of an individual can be influenced by the people around them. The theory further states that for a certain behavior to be understood, the environment and the interpersonal influence should be examined, and should not focus on the individual alone. (LaMorte, 2022). That is why this theory is also a good fit in this study, since it will help in understanding the situation of adolescent girls in child marriage, which is an acceptable practice in the community.

Given the current situation of child marriage both at the national and local level, the full implementation of the RA 11596, the different stand and opinion of the Bangsamoro people on the implementation

of this new policy especially among the Muslim Filipinos and IPs, the researcher find it imperative to conduct a study that will give a deep understanding on the lived experience of the children who are engaged on child marriage. After reviewing the studies conducted in relation to child marriage at the international and local levels, it appears that there was no study conducted in areas of BARMM, particularly in the city of Cotabato, where it serves as the capital of the newly established autonomous region and a home for diverse tribes and religions, including the IPs. It is the gap that this study asserts and would like to address.

The result of this study will enlighten and give awareness among children, youth, parents or guardians, and different stakeholders such as community leaders, religious leaders, and the local government unit of Cotabato City about the lived experience of the children engaged in child marriage.

The result of the study may serve as a basis for the Bangsamoro Government in either supporting the existing anti-child marriage law or developing a relevant law that would fit the special context in the region without compromising the rights and well-being of Bangsamoro children. Additionally, it will benefit the Ministries, Offices and Agencies (MOAs) in BARMM such as the Ministry of Social Services and Development (MSSD) as the primary agency to implement social protection services in the region by promoting quality and sustainable programs intended for adolescent girls especially those who are into child or early marriage. Lastly, this study may serve as the basis for future

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\* Corresponding Email:

researchers who want to conduct an in-depth study about child marriage in BARMM and the acceptability of the Bangsamoro people on the anti-child marriage law.

This study aims to understand the lived experienced of Muslims adolescent girls who are engaged in child marriage by specifically identifying the factors that influenced the

participants to engage in child marriage, determine the challenges that they are experiencing as child brides, understand how they cope with these challenges, and get their insights and personal reflection as a child bride which they wanted to share to the community.

## METHODS

### Study Participants/Research Subject

The participants in this study were seventeen (17) Muslim adolescent girls from selected barangays in Cotabato City, BARMM, who were engaged in child marriage. Out of 17 participants, 7 were subject to Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and the other 10 were subject to individual In-depth Interviews. The number of participants was good enough to represent the phenomena that the researcher was trying to explore, since it is said that in phenomenological studies, sample sizes typically range from 3 to 25 participants, a range suggested by Creswell and further supported by Morse, who recommends at least six participants. (Bierut, 2025).

They were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a technique used in qualitative research to select a specific group for analysis, which means that the sample was selected for a specific purpose and based on certain characteristics the researcher is interested in studying (Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023).

The seventeen (17) participants selected were adolescent Muslim girls aged 15-19 years old, who are resident of Cotabato City, BARMM, particularly in the topmost populated Barangays, namely Barangay Poblacion I and Poblacion VII. The following were the inclusion criteria that served as the guide to the researcher in the selection of participants which include that the adolescent girls may be with or without formal school, who had been married either to a man of similar age or to an adult for a minimum of one (1) year and still living together, who had at least one child, and their families are among the indigent households. Among the seventeen (17) participants, 10 were subject to IDI, and the remaining 7 participants were subject to FGD. Excluded from the study are adolescent girls who are below 15 years old and beyond 19 years old, or those belong to 15-19 years old age group but does not have at least one child and been married for less than a year or no longer living together or separated already, those who are not belong to indigent families, and those who are not residing in Cotabato City.

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:



## Materials/Instruments

This study employed the interview as the primary method of data collection. The individual IDI and FGD were conducted face to face using a semi-structured and open-ended questions that were developed by the researcher, which provided direction to the interview. In this study, the adolescent girls gave their feedback, experiences, and perceptions on child marriage; thus, the researcher narrated important and relevant events as experienced by them. An interview is a verbal conversation between two people with the objective of collecting relevant information for the purpose of research, and it is particularly useful in getting the story

behind a participant's experience (Monday, 2020). Before the actual interview and focus group discussion, the researcher prepared an interview guide question. This interview guide is a list of questions, topics, and issues that the researcher wanted to cover during the interview (Monday, 2020). These research questions were validated by 4 internal validators and 1 external validator to ensure their reliability and validity, with an average score of 9.6 which is labeled as a good questionnaire for data gathering and administration. The criteria for the said validations are based on ethics, artistry, and rigor.

## Design and Procedure

This study utilized the qualitative phenomenological approach. A Qualitative study seeks to understand the experiences and perspectives of people by studying human behavior. Its data focuses on people's beliefs and emotional responses rather than on numbers (Girardin, 2024). Qualitative research is used to understand how an individual subjectively perceives and gives meaning to their social reality, often through observation and interview (Mcleod, 2023).

Phenomenological research is a qualitative approach that focuses on studying the phenomena that impact an individual. This approach highlights the specifics and identifies a phenomenon as perceived by an individual in a situation (Prakash Srivastava, 2023). It investigates the lived experiences of

the participants to examine how and why participants behaved a certain way, from their perspective. It focuses on describing and explaining a phenomenon from the perspective of those who experience it (Tenny, 2022). The researcher used a phenomenological approach in the study since it seeks to understand the essence and the underlying structure of child marriage among adolescent girls.

A Qualitative Phenomenological study focuses on understanding a few cases rather than a general understanding of many cases of people. (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Thus, in this study, only 17 participants participated, wherein ten (10) adolescent girls joined the one-on-one in-depth interview and seven (7) participated in the

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:



focus group discussion. The participants were selected based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria set to ensure the appropriateness of the subject in the study. The researcher purposefully selected the participants and site that would best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question (Cresswell & Cresswell, 20218). The researcher personally secures a certificate or permits from the Local Government Unit of Cotabato City through the Office of the City Social Welfare and Development (OCSWD) and pays courtesy call and formally ask permission to conduct the study, and to the Barangay Local Government Unit where the research study was conducted to demonstrate respect, transparency, and fostering positive relationship. The schedule of the IDI and FGD was set based on the availability of the participants, and during the interview process, the researcher used a recorder while jotting down notes to capture all the essential information that may be essential in the study. Transcription of all the relevant information was done after, and the interpretations of the recorded narrations (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018).

For data analysis, the researcher uses thematic analysis, where the researcher identifies and examines the similar experiences of the participants, including the differences, and categorizes them according to their similarities and differences (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Then the researcher reviewed the transcripts to ensure that the categories were sufficiently described. The process of modification and data review continued until the modified categories

appeared to be consistent with the interview data. The researcher's role in this study is essential from the gathering of primary information and interpreting the data, which can contribute to the knowledge pertaining to the study. Thus, the researcher was guided by her knowledge, values, and skills in conducting the research to ensure that the study is reliable and evidence-based.

The researcher also ensures the trustworthiness of the study by ensuring the credibility of the data by comparing the data taken from IDI and FGD to validate findings. Traces of intentional misrepresentation of research processes, data, or results and presentation of inaccurate conclusions in the study are prevented by carefully reviewing the data presented in the study to ensure consistency with the established research findings and the existing literature. Additionally, traces of intentional alteration or falsification of data are nowhere to be found in this study by accurately presenting the limitations of the study and refraining from overclaiming or exaggerating the results (Simply Psychology, 2024).

The study also maintains the principle of credibility and reliability by presenting the information with integrity, accuracy, honesty, and transparency, including any limitations or biases (Simply Psychology, 2024). The researcher also ensures the acknowledgement of all the authors who made substantial contributions on the acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data by setting up a clear criterion for authorship credit to promote fairness, accountability, integrity, and fostering a

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

culture of responsible publication, including the researcher's adviser as one of the co-authors of the study. The researcher also ensures proper citing of all sources to the original authors for maintaining academic integrity and giving credit to the authors. (Paperpal & Paperpal, 2025). Tools such as Grammarly, Turnitin` software, or Plagiarism Detector were also utilized to uphold integrity and precision (Perry, 2025).

This study was executed under the key principles of ethical standards, having been granted approval by the University of

Mindanao Ethics Review Committee (UMERC) with UMERC Protocol No. UMERC-2024-168. The research ensures the rights of the participants are uphold by having informed voluntary consent which was translated in local dialect, observance of privacy and confidentiality by concealing their names and using of code name, consideration of potential harm or risk by carefully assessing the possible risk at all stages of research process and ensuring appropriate support, and informing them of the compensation for their expenses during the study and benefits for their participation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the data and analysis based on the shared experiences during the In-Depth Interviews (IDI) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) of selected participants. The tables are arranged in the following subheadings: First and second tables are the profile of the participants for IDI and FGD, third is the factors or reasons that influence the participants to engage in child marriage, fourth is the challenges they have experienced when they get into child marriage, fifth is their coping on the identified challenges, and six is their insights and personal reflection on child marriage that they can share to the community.

In total, there are thirteen themes that emerged in this study. The themes are as

follows for the factors or reasons that influence the participants to engage in child marriage: Abiding by cultural traditions, getting into a relationship and engaging in premarital sex, and perceived lack of alternatives. The challenges that they have experienced are socioeconomic pressures, cultural and societal pressures, and responsibility and motherhood challenges. For their coping, the Support Network, Stronger Faith, and Crying served as an outlet. Their insights and personal reflections on child marriage, which they can share with the community, are: Finding inspiration from family, learning life lessons the hard way, listening and following parents' advice, and prioritizing education.

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

**Table 3*****Themes on the factors or reasons that influence the participants to engage in child marriage***

Major Themes	Core Ideas
<b>Abiding by cultural traditions</b>	My husband only wanted our relationship to be “halal” because in Islam it is prohibited to be in a relationship without marriage... (IDI R1a)
	My mother was planning to arrange for me with another guy, and upon learning that we reported that something happened to us sexually, so that we could get married... (FGD R6)
	Having a relationship. Because if the people find out that you have a girlfriend/boyfriend, they immediately call for marriage. (IDI R10a)
	Someone informed my mother that I have a boyfriend...After a month, we got married. (FGD R2)
	My mother told me that I need to stop going to school because someone told her that something happened to us with my boyfriend...then they put us in a marriage. (FGD R7)
<b>Getting into a relationship and engaging in premarital Sex</b>	I got married because I was impregnated by my boyfriend. (IDI R3a)
	I got pregnant in 2020 and then delivered my baby...he informed his parents, and they went to us after. (IDI, R8a)
	I got pregnant, as a Muslim, and if the people find out that you are pregnant, they will arrange your marriage immediately to make it “halal”. (IDI R7a)
	We are in a relationship with my husband. We are dating, and then something happened to us, and then we decided to get married. (FGD R4)
	I have been in a relationship with my husband for 1 year, but then something happened to us. I don't want him to get out of it. (IDI R6a)
<b>Perceived Lack of Alternatives</b>	It's really our choice to get married. There's no other reason that I can think of except that we love each other. (IDI R2a P1-2)
	Someone reported to my parents that I have a boyfriend...upon learning that I take revenge by doing the things that they accused me of... (FGD R1)
	I used to skip and go outside with my friends. After 5 months, something happened to us, and I got pregnant. (IDI R4a)
	I was scared that the person who touched me would not take the responsibility...that's why I made the first move, I got scared that he would not take responsibility for what he did. (IDI R6a P1-3)
	Maybe it's because of the death of my mother, the marriage of my father to another woman, and having his own family right after her death. (FGD R4)

The responses of the 7 participants in the FGD and 10 participants in IDI were analyzed, and themes were generated out of the clustered core ideas. The themes that flourished include abiding by cultural traditions, getting into a relationship, engaging in premarital sex, and perceived lack of alternatives. As the FGD commenced, some participants looked excited, others were relaxed, while some looked so nervous

and anxious. The same mixed emotions are also observed in the IDI. At first, they were hesitant to answer as observed in their low voice, but later, when the researcher reminded them about the confidentiality of the study, they became more relaxed, calm, and open in answering the research questions.

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\* Corresponding Email:

## Abiding by Cultural Traditions

The Cambridge Dictionary (2025) defined culture as the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time while tradition is defined a belief, principle, or way of acting that people in a particular society or group have continued to follow for a long time. The cultural tradition that is being emphasized here is the encouragement of getting married even at an early age, particularly to those who feel that they are unable to control themselves or are ready to get into marriage to make the relationship “halal” (Naeem, 2023).

Marriage is seen as the best option, especially for couples who are in love, even at a young age, to prevent them from engaging in sexual intercourse outside of marriage, which is a major sin in Islam. Other than the core benefit of companionship in a Halal manner, early marriage creates a stronger connection between the spouses because of the opportunity to grow up together, learning from each other, and develop together intellectually and emotionally (Naeem, 2023)

One participant shared:

*“Gusto kasi ng asawa ko na maging “halal” ang relasyon namin, sa islam po kasi ay bawal ang pagkakasintahan...”* (IDI R1a)

My husband only wanted our relationship to be “halal” because in Islam it is prohibited to be in a relationship without marriage...

This statement shows that the cultural tradition, which is commonly influenced by the religious belief where the person belongs, greatly affects the approval of a certain practice, like the case of child marriage. It also reflects that the decision of getting married at a young age was a personal choice of the involved child together with her boyfriend, who is also a minor, which contradicts the

common findings of some research studies that child marriage is usually forced. Another participant also shared in the FGD that she took her relationship with her boyfriend as an opportunity to avoid arranged marriage:

*“Ipinaarrange po ako ni ina sa ibang lalaki bale ang ginawa naming ng kasintahan ko na nagsumbong kami na may nangyari na sa amin para makasal po kami...”* (FGD R6)

My mother was planning to arrange for me with another guy, and upon learning that we reported that something happened to us sexually, so that we could get married.

This statement from the participant clearly shows that arranged marriages are still practiced in the community, and this is often attributed to Islam, but accordingly to this practice, it is not based on the teachings of Islam. In Islam arrange marriage means the parent or guardian take the responsibility of finding a suitable match to their children, but despite that it is emphasized that there shall be a mutual agreement between the prospective bride and groom before the marriage take place, meaning if either of them disagrees then the arrange marriage will not happen (Hakam, 2023). This is contrary to what is being practiced by some communities, where often the girl and the boy have no voice and are usually forced. Another participant shared:

*“Iyong pagkakaroon ko po ng kasintahan. Kasi po sa amin pag nalaman nila na may kasinyahan ka na agad-agad po pinapakasal na...”*(IDI R10a)

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\* Corresponding Email:

Having a relationship. Because if the people find out that you have a girlfriend/boyfriend, they immediately call for marriage.

This statement clearly supports the unacceptability of having an intimate relationship in Islam without marriage. In Islam, it is forbidden to mingle and mix with the opposite sex, much less if it is a girlfriend and boyfriend relationship, as it may lead to staring, lustful thoughts, flirtations, and seductions (About Islam, 2022). The parents usually marry off their children once they find out that their children are in a relationship, specially among girls, regardless of their age. Although having a girlfriend and boyfriend may be common and acceptable to other communities, here in BARMM, these are still unacceptable. This tradition is based on Islamic teachings where it is forbidden for a male Muslim to have a girlfriend and for a female Muslim to have a boyfriend. (En-Asks, 2023).

This was supported by the other participants who shared during the IDI that her parents put her into marriage when they learned that she had a boyfriend. As Muslims, the only person with whom one can have intimate relations is one's spouse, and engaging in lawful intercourse with one's spouse is not only encouraged but also a sacred act (Muhammad & Muhammad, 2025).

### **Getting in a relationship and involving in premarital Sex**

Being in a relationship, especially if it involves premarital sex, is the other theme that appeared to be the reason adolescent girls

engage in child marriage. This is linked to the first theme mentioned above, where it emphasized the influence of cultural tradition on the acceptability of child marriage since it discouraged having an intimate relationship without marriage to avoid the commitment of sexual intercourse and, in worst case, getting pregnant. The participants shared that the reason why they got married at young age is due to pregnancy.

*"Nakasal ako dahil nabuntis ako ng kasintahan ko."* (IDI R3a)

I got married because I was impregnated by my boyfriend.

This line from the participant has emphasized that pregnancy was the reason for her engagement in child marriage, which was supported by another participant who said:

*"Nabuntis, as a Muslim pag nalaman na buntis agad-agad ipapakasal na para maging halal."* (IDI R7a)

I got pregnant, as a Muslim if the people find out that you are pregnant they will arrange your marriage immediately to make it "halal". (IDI R7a)

This statement clearly shows that marriage is considered as the best option once a girl or a woman gets pregnant to make her pregnancy "halal" or permissible, making the practice of child marriage totally acceptable regardless of their age. Although this has been practiced in Muslim communities, there are different viewpoints in Islam on the permissibility of the marriage of an unmarried pregnant woman as the result of an illegal relationship. Most jurists prefer not to permit that adulteress to marry during her pregnancy (Aliabadi, 2022). Although there are some

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

scholars who allow it, and that includes the religious leaders in BARMM, who support the permissibility of this practice, provided that the pregnant woman will be married to the man who impregnated her. Meanwhile, there was a fatwa issued by the Egyptian Darul Ifta' which states that an adulterer or fornicator is allowed to marry the woman he impregnated, and the wisdom behind that is to secure a Muslim's best interest and attempt to preserve the woman's honor. (RAkanbi, 2023).

Other than getting pregnant, the act of having sexual intercourse, even without getting pregnant, is considered a valid reason for entering marriage since virginity is viewed as very important, especially among girls. The participant shared.

*"Magboyfriend po kami ng asawa ko ng isang taon. Tapos may nangyari po sa amin. Ayoko po na hindi nya ako panagutan..."* (IDI R6a)

I have been in a relationship with my husband for 1 year, then something happened to us. I don't want him to get out of it.

This statement clearly emphasized that commitment of premarital sex is totally unacceptable and a grave sin with serious consequences among Muslims, and its commitment, especially if the girl gets pregnant, shall automatically be subject to marriage as practiced in Muslim communities. In most cases, the Muslim women will be compelled to initiate the marriage, and for some, this would force them to run after the guy who broke their virginity. Virginity is a very strong sign of chastity in Islam, which is why Muslim women should strive to keep their virginity

till their first night in marriage for their legal husband, since it sends a strong message of morality, fidelity, chastity, loyalty and a good home upbringing (Kekere-Ekun, 2024).

### Perceived Lack of Alternatives

The third theme in the first research question is the perception of a lack of alternatives as the reason for their engagement in child marriage. Some participants shared their thoughts that getting into child marriage is something that they perceived as the best option because of their unique circumstances. One of which is the feeling of being in love at an early age and seeing no alternative but to enter marriage to be with the person that shares mutual feelings with them, which may be linked with the cultural tradition and religious beliefs that were mentioned above. A participant shared in the in-depth interview:

*"Ginusto po talaga namin na magpakasal na po kami. Wa la na po akong maisip na dahilan maliban sa mahal namin ang isat-isa kaya kami nagpakasal..."* (IDI R2a)

It's really our choice to get married. There's no other thing that I can think of as the reason except that we love each other.

This clearly shows that some people, especially among the young ones, see marriage as the best option. This is often due to a lack of feasible alternative opportunities, especially when continued education was no longer possible due to a lack of resources to continue schooling or because they had lost interest in school (Baraka et al, 2022). In addition, the adolescent stage is an identity

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

formation period, which explains their utmost desire for autonomy, resulting in more independence in decision making and self-expression, which sometimes can create problems. (Staff, 2024). It also means that the decision of getting into child marriage or not may be in the hands of the children involved, which may be influenced by the environment they are in, like their family, friends, and the community, since they are especially susceptible to peer pressure (Muneer, 2023). This was supported by another participant who shared in the FGD, where she emphasized that it was her friends who influenced her to get in child marriage.

Another sharing from a participant in an in-depth interview:

*“Natakot po ako na hindi ako panagutan ng taong nakagalaw sa akin...kaya inunahan ko na, baka hindi pa nya ako panagutan.”* (IDI R6a)

I was scared that the person who touched me would not take the responsibility...that's why I made the first move, I got scared that he would not take responsibility for what he did.

This statement shows the desperate move of a girl to save his dignity by ensuring that the man who broke her “virginity” will marry her. This is also linked with the tradition and belief mentioned above. Protecting one's virginity is a practice treasured by Muslim as prescribed in Islam, which is why women are instructed to strive to keep their virginity till their first night with their husband. (Kekere-

Ekun, 2024). The participant was hesitant and appeared to be shy upon saying those words, but got relaxed after she was done sharing the whole story. Another sharing of the participant,

*“Siguro po iyong maagang pagkamatay ni mama tapos si papa ay nag-asawa at may mga anak ng iba.”* (FGD R4)

Maybe it's because of the death of my mother and the marriage of my father to other woman and having his own family right after her death.

This line stresses the key role of the parents when it comes to providing guidance to their children and having open and effective communication with them. In the case of the participant, her father was not there to guide her. The lack of parental involvement in their children's lives may force them to seek validation and emotional connection elsewhere, often leading to risky behaviors, including early sexual activity. (Muneer, 2023). These risky behaviors are prevalent during adolescence due to ongoing brain development and at the same time due to peer pressure. Thus, the role of the parents and the quality of the relationship that they have with their children are very crucial in this stage because parents and mentors play a crucial role in guiding them toward healthier choices and constructive coping strategies (Staff, 2024).

**Table 4 Themes on the challenges the participants have experienced in getting into child marriage**

Major Themes	Core Ideas
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<b>Socioeconomic Pressures</b>	Maybe it's the poverty because my husband only earned Php 200 through his part time job. It's not enough for our daily expenses. (IDI R2a)
	In budgeting especially when my children are sick. (IDI R5a)
	In our daily living, for example, the late salary of my husband and the bills the need to be settles, and our food. (IDI R7a)
	Our daily expenses especially I have twins, and I am pregnant again. (IDI R9a)
	Our daily expenses. (FGD R1)
<b>Cultural and Societal Pressures</b>	The most difficult is the avoidance of my siblings to express their disappointments. (IDI R10a)
	Before I can do everything...but now I can no longer do it because I have my kids and husband now. (FGD R1)
	No time with friends I was not able to continue my schooling when I got married and when we already have our baby. (FGD R6)
	When I got pregnant, I also stopped my studies including my husband because he needs to work... (IDI R9a)
<b>Responsibility and Motherhood challenges</b>	The first one is being pregnant and the delivery of the baby.(IDI (R1a)
	Waking up early to bath my child, and I am doing it every day. (IDI R3a)

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

	When I stopped my studies so that I can take care of my child. (IDI R4a)
	For me its being a mother. It's so tiring to take care of child, I can't sleep well. (FGD R7)
	Same (difficulty in attending to my child) because I am breastfeeding, and I am not used to taking care of kids including my husband. (FGD R3)

Moving forward to the second research question, the majority of the participants seem overwhelmed and exhausted with the challenges they experienced and continuously facing as an adolescent girl in a child marriage as shown in Table 4.

### Socio-economic Pressures

As the IDI and FGD continued, most of the participants shared their sentiments as to the challenges they are experiencing when it comes to financial constraint or limited resources. A participant said in an in-depth interview:

*"Siguro po ay iyong sa kahirapan dahil sa part time ng asawa ko 200 lang po ang kita nya. Hindi po iyon sapat sa gastos namin."* (IDI R2a) Maybe it's the poverty because my husband only earned Php 200 through his part time job. It's not enough for our daily expenses.

This statement expresses the concern of the participant about the daily earnings of her husband, which are not sufficient for their daily needs. BARMM is the second poorest region in the country (BIO, 2024). Although this was not elicited on the themes as the

reason for engaging in child marriage, it is important to note that most of the participants belong to a low-income family. Based on studies, most of the girls who got married early were from humble families (Lebni et Al, 2023). Another participant also expressed the same sentiment, where she shared that having a very limited budget is the challenge that they are also experiencing especially when their children are not feeling well.

*"Sa budget po lalo na pag may sakit ang mga anak ko."*(IDI R5a)

In budgeting especially when my children are sick.

This statement emphasizes the hardship that the participant is going through since her husband is the only one who provides for their family, because she needs to stay at home to take care of her children and cannot help their family financially. Lack of education and social opportunities in a child's life due to child marriage limits their prospects for employment and ability to gain skills, thus impacting their lifelong economic prospects (Johnson, 2021). Many high-paying and stable jobs require more than a

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

high school education or vocational training, which children trapped in child marriages may not possess, therefore impacting their lifelong earning and employment potential (Martincic, 2020). Additionally, based on research, young brides are less likely to receive proper medical assistance during their pregnancy and delivery than those who give birth later, and the combination of them being physically immature and their lack of proper medical care during their pregnancies puts them at a higher risk for complications during their deliveries (Johnson, 2021).

Another participant shared the challenge her family is facing when it comes to the payment of their bills, which is further exacerbated by the late payment of her husband's salary. Child marriage means missing out on potential higher earnings, leading to less income for their household that perpetuates the cycle of poverty with the next generation (MacKinnon, 2024).

*"Sa part na buhay-buhay, halimbawa pag late ang sahod ng asawa ko tapos sabay-sabay ang bills, tapos walang pagkain."* (IDI R7a)

In our daily living, for example, the late salary of my husband and the bills the need to be settles, and our food.

Girls who marry young typically have more children and larger families can mean higher expenses and reduced standards of living, with less money to pay for essentials like food, education, and healthcare (MacKinnon, 2024). Child marriage is not only a human rights violation, but also a major barrier to gender equality and economic development. It can lead to missing out on potential higher

earnings, leading to less income for their household, which perpetuates the cycle of poverty with the next generation (MacKinnon, 2024)

### Cultural and Societal Pressures

Another theme that emerged from the IDI and FGD in the second research question is cultural and societal pressures. Cultural pressure refers to the expectations and norms dictated by one's culture, which can shape the behavior, belief, and values, while social pressure refers to the social environment exerted on people, which influences their thoughts, behavior, and decisions. (Jones, 2024). A participant shared:

*"Dati nakukuha ko ang gusto ko... ngayon po hindi na kasi may anak at asawa na po ako."* (FGD R1)

Before I can do everything...but now I can no longer do it because I have my kids and husband now.

This statement emphasizes that being a child bride does not excuse her from the expectations of assuming different roles after marriage, such as the role of being a mother and a wife to her husband. According to UNICEF (2023), usually when girls are married, they are often at the mercy of their husbands' control. Many are kept under constant supervision and are not allowed to socialize or interact with others, including their own family members. They are confined to the home to care for their children, completing household chores and catering to the needs of their husband's family. Based on research, child marriage is associated with

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

higher rates of lifetime and current psychiatric disorders, including depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorders. (Martincic, 2020a). Another participant opens up about her struggle as she felt that she was left out because of not being able to continue her schooling.

*“Hindi na rin po ako nakapag-aral simula nung nakasal ako tapos nung nagkaanak.”*(FGD R6)  
I was not able to continue my schooling when I got married and when we already have our baby.

When children are removed from school, they not only suffer from a lack of formal education but also a lack of socialization, since schools provide a space for children to cultivate social skills and support systems that allow mobility and engagement in their communities (Martincic, 2020). The same sentiment was shared by another participant who shared:

*“Simula din nung nabuntis ako hindi na ako naka-aral pati na rin ang asawa ko kasi kailangan nya ring magtrabaho...”* (IDI R9a)  
When I got pregnant, I also stopped my studies including my husband because he needs to work...

The majority of child brides in Muslim communities are expected to stay at home, and their primary role is to take care of their children and family, forcing them to stop their education and pursue their own dreams. According to Child Help Foundation (2024), the termination of formal education often leaves these girls feeling unfulfilled and stifled as they are denied the opportunity to

pursue their dreams and aspirations, which results in feelings of inadequacy and regret that can have lasting effects on their self-esteem and overall well-being. Additionally, child marriage prevents a child from experiencing childhood and adolescence like their peers which could lead them to face a lot of yearnings and regrets especially when they see their successful peers who had been educated and had a job, they inevitably compared it with their lives and circumstances and have more regret (Lebni et. Al, 2023).

### Responsibility and Motherhood Challenges

The third theme emphasized that the responsibility and motherhood challenges are among the identified challenges of the participants who got into child marriage. Being a mother is a huge responsibility, especially among child brides with so much innocence and with an undeveloped body. A participant shared:

*“Una po iyong pagbubuntis tapos iyong panganganak.”* (IDI R1a)  
The first one is being pregnant and the delivery of the baby.

This line shows that pregnancy and the delivery of the child, whether it's a normal or caesarian section delivery, is a big challenge among child brides since, physically and psychologically, they are not yet ready for it. Pregnancies in adolescents are considered high-risk pregnancies that require comprehensive prenatal care for pregnant adolescent children because insufficient prenatal care can be harmful to both the mother and her fetus (Diabelková et al., 2023). It is often linked to higher rates of

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

maternal and infant mortality (NexNews Network, 2024). This was supported by the sharing of other participants who emphasized the challenge after their baby arrives.

*“Iyong magising ka ng madaling araw magpaligo ng bata, araw-araw yun ay ginagawa ko.” (ID1 R3a)*

Waking up early to bath my child, and I am doing it every day.

After giving birth, another challenge that being experienced by the child bride is the role of a mother and a wife, where she is expected to take care of her child and her husband. According to Child Help Foundation (2024), the premature transition of child brides to motherhood intensifies the psychological strain on their part because coping with the demands of parenthood while still navigating their adolescence places an immense burden on these young girls. This

has been supported by other participants who shared:

*“Sa akin po ay ang pagiging ina. Nakakapagod mag-alaga ng bata, hindi po ako makatulog ng maganda.” (FGD R7)*

For me its being a mother. It’s so tiring to take care of child, I can’t sleep well.

Taking care of your own children is fulfilling but sometimes overwhelming and exhausting, particularly to child brides who are not physically and psychologically prepared from sleepless nights and the challenge of breastfeeding, even more so if the husband is not supportive. According to Child Help Foundation (2024), one of the primary psychological repercussions of child marriage is the abrupt loss of agency and autonomy of the children involved since they are pushed into marital roles, often lacking the emotional and mental preparedness necessary for such commitments.

**Table 5 Themes on How the participants cope with these challenges**

Major Themes	Core Ideas
<b>Support Network</b>	I talked to my mother especially when we are in financial difficulties... (FGD R3)
	Me and my husband are helping one another...(FGD R2)
	I discuss things with my husband. (FGD R4)
	I always talk and share things with my husband especially when I am so tired. (FGD R7)
	Whenever we have a problem, we discuss it (my husband). (FGD R6)

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

<b>Stronger Faith</b>	I always pray. (IDI R9a)
	I just pray. (FGD R1)
	I keep on praying that we will surpass everything. (IDI R1a)
	I always call Allah to strengthen me. (IDI R3a)
	I pray and I just think of my child and my husband. (IDI R5a)
<b>Crying served as an outlet</b>	I just cry then I talked to my husband if I couldn't handle it anymore. (IDI R1a)
	I cry it to my husband. (FGD R5)
	I just cried. I worry that if I think of it too much, it might lead to depression especially post-partum depression. (IDI R7a)
	I cry especially when I feel so tired. (IDI R7a)
	I cried to my husband to release all the bad feelings within me. (IDI R4a)

### Support Network

The first theme that emerge from the third research question as to the coping strategy of the participant in facing the daily challenges in their lives as a child bride is the support network. According to Cambridge Dictionary (2025), a support network refers to a group of people who provide emotional and practical help to someone in serious difficulty. It is a group of people who you can run to and provide you with support when you need it most. Having someone to rely on

and support you in times of difficulty is a big help for you to cope with any challenges, especially if you are in a totally new and difficult situation. This is true in the case of adolescents who are engaged in child marriage.

A participant shared:

*“Kinakausap ko ang nanay ko mas lalo na pag sobrang gipit na kami...”* (FGD R3)

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

I talked to my mother especially when we are in financial difficulties...

This statement emphasizes the important role of the mother or parents of the child who are into child marriage in coping their everyday challenges and difficulties. To get married at an early age and be a mother at the same time is very overwhelming, and the mere presence of the child's mother or parents to show her support is a big help already. Support network is shown to reduce stress, physical health problems, and improve emotional well-being, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and resiliency, and low levels of support have been linked to increased death from cardiovascular disease, infectious diseases, and cancer. (Harper, 2023).

Another support system that the participant mentioned is the support of their spouse or husband, where they openly discuss their worries and concern, share things, and ask for help in doing household chores and taking care of their children. The participants shared:

*"Nagtutulungan kami ng asawa ko..."* (FGD R2)  
Me and my husband are helping one another...

*"Pag may problema na pinag-uusapan po namin (mag-asawa)." (FGD R6)*  
Whenever we have a problem, we discuss it (my husband).

These statements clearly show the key role of the husband and the kind of relationship they shared to cope with the everyday challenges they are experiencing, brought

about by child marriage. They serve as the primary support network for their wives. The good relationship that they shared plays an important role for them to cope with the day-to-day life experience with confidence because they know that they have someone to cry and depend on. Research shows that people with high levels of social support seem to be more resilient in the face of stressful situations. They also have a lower perception of stress in general and have less of a physiological response to life's stressors (Reid, 2024). By nature, humans are social creatures, and having people to care for them, support them, and share their lives is a source of joy and connection. (Scott, 2023).

In Islam, the importance of supporting each other in promoting resilience is also emphasized. Muslims are encouraged to support one another during times of difficulty and to seek help from others when needed. The Quran states, "And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided...(Surah Ali 'Imran Ayah 103 - Quran.com, 2025). This verse highlights the importance of unity and solidarity in Islam and how it can promote resilience during times of difficulty. (Consultant, 2023).

### Stronger Faith

The second theme emphasized under the third research question is having stronger faith as the coping of the participants in the challenges they are experiencing as child bride. Cambridge dictionary (2025) defines faith as having a great trust or confidence in something or someone. Based on the sharing of the participants, the faith that they are

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:



referring to is the trust and confidence that they have in Allah or the Lord, particularly in the spiritual aspect. Spirituality plays a very important role in building resilience, providing hope, strength, and guidance, especially in times of adversity or difficulties. Research has shown that engaging in practices such as prayer, meditation, and mindfulness can have tangible benefits for mental and emotional well-being, particularly in times of stress and adversity (Cava, 2024).

The participants shared:

*"Nagpapray po ako..."* (IDI R9a)  
I always pray.

*"Nagpapray lang po ako na malampasan naming lahat."* (IDI R1a)  
I keep on praying that we will surpass everything.

*"Nagpaparay na lang ako tapos iniisip ko ang mga anak ko tapos ang asawa ko."* (IDI R5a)  
I pray and I just think of my child and my husband.

These statements clearly emphasized that their faith, which is expressed through praying, is their way of coping on the everyday struggles or challenges of their life. Their strong faith helps them to endure everything and strengthens them to continue and enjoy life despite all the challenges and difficulties. Muslims have five obligatory prayers every day, and other than that, they can still perform extra or voluntary prayers if they feel they need more time to talk to their creator. It was mentioned in the Qur'an, "And your Lord says, call upon Me, I will respond

to you..." (Surah Ghafir Ayah 60 – Quran.com, 2025). This verse encourages the believers to seek guidance, strength, and answers from Allah. It assures them that sincere prayers directed towards Him will be met with responsive divine intervention. Additionally, this verse functions as a strong reminder of the accessible divine aid, particularly in moments of hardship (Admin, 2024).

Muslims facing hardship are encouraged to anchor their hope in Allah's promises. It is a steadfast belief that, despite the trials, Allah's mercy prevails, and the believers will ultimately triumph. This hope becomes a source of strength and resilience. (Alex, 2023). In Islam, faith or 'yaqeen', which in Arabic seems to have that special strength, is translated as certainty in God and His power, attributes and promises (Nassar, 2024). Through this belief, the Muslims are reminded that everything happens by the will of God, and through this, it helps them to be thankful for all the blessings that they have, even for the small ones, and remain patient in times of adversity. It was mentioned in the Qur'an, "And seek help through patience and prayer, and indeed, it is difficult except for the humbly submissive to Allah" (Surah Al-Baqara, Ayah 45 – Quran.com, 2025). This verse emphasizes the importance of being patient and the performance of prayer in seeking help during times of difficulty, and Muslims are encouraged to turn to Allah and seek His guidance and support in facing life's challenges. (Consultant, 2023).

**Crying served as an outlet**

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

The last theme that emerges in the third research question is crying as a means of getting away from their sadness, disappointment, and worries. Crying serves as their outlet to express how they feel, whether alone or in front of other people, but often do it in front of someone close to them, like their husband, whom they feel comfortable, secure, and whom they trust. Crying is a natural response to a range of emotions, from deep sadness and grief to extreme happiness and joy (Licsw, 2021). The participants shared:

*“Iniyyak ko lng po tlaa sa asawa ko”* (FGD R5)  
I cry it to my husband.

*“Iniyyak ko lang lalo na pag pagod na po tlaa ako.”* (IDI R7a)  
I cry especially when I feel so tired.

*“Umiiyak na lang ako sa asawa ko para malabas ang sama ng loob ko.”* (IDI R4a)  
I cried to my husband to release all the bad feelings within me.

These statements emphasize how helpful crying is to the participants in coping with their problems by releasing their emotions, mostly to their husband. The possible benefits of crying include self-soothing, relieving pain and stress, enhancing mood, and more. (Burgess, 2023). Crying has been

reported to have many benefits, which are based on different research and scientific studies. It can help relieve pain by the release of oxytocin and endorphins, thereby enhancing mood. It can release toxins and relieve stress, it can help sleep better, it keeps the person's eyes clean by fighting bacteria, and it can improve vision (Burgess, 2023).

The participants were not hesitant to share that they are crying when they feel exhausted physically and psychologically, and this has been supported by a lot of studies. According to research, people who cry in response to stress are less likely to experience physical or mental health problems later (SonderMind, 2023). Crying also provides not only a temporary stress relief but can release old pain and trauma that a person has been holding, especially if they are open to looking at the prior pain (Goldsby, 2021). Studies have linked suppressing crying with a less resilient immune system, cardiovascular disease, and hypertension, as well as with mental health conditions, including stress, anxiety, and depression. (Licsw, 2021). It means that crying is healthy because it allows your negative feelings inside you to let go, which may cause harm to your health if you contain it inside. It can be a sign or step towards healing.

**Table 6 Themes on the insights and personal reflection do participants have on child marriage which they can share to the community.**

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Finding inspiration from family	We build our family, and I do not want to break it. (IDI R1a)

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

	The source of my strength is my child...I am still holding on our marriage because I want to give him a complete family. (IDI R4a)
	I just think of all the hardship that we went through with my husband and our child, that's what motivates me. (FGD R2)
	My child and the family that we are trying to build. (FGD R3)
	My child and my husband. I keep on telling myself that we will not end here. (FGD R5)
Learning life lessons the hard way	I learned that having a family is not easy, but I don't regret it at all.(IDI R1a)
	It is so difficult to be a mother. I always left here at house to take care of my child. (IDI R2a)
	It's so difficult to have your own family especially if you are not yet ready. (IDI R5a)
	It is so difficult to earn money. (FGD R4)
	I regret that I did not listen to my mother when she told me not to have a boyfriend because being married is very difficult. (FGD R2)
Listen and follow parents' advice	I realized the importance of children listening to their parents. (IDI R4a)
	Don't rush in getting married just like what our parents are telling us. (IDI R5a)
	Believe your parents, if they say this is not allowed then do not do it because it is for your own good. (FGD R2)

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

	Follow your parents. (FGD R3)
	I realized that all the advice from my mother before are correct. (IDI R10a)
It is better to prioritize education first	To the children don't rush, finish your studies first. (IDI R1a)
	Study first. (FGD R6)
	Study and if possible don't engage in a relationship because if something happens between them then that's it. (IDI R6a)
	Enjoy the single life. Don't rush and study first. (FGD R4)
	Don't have a boyfriend, study first. (FGD R6)

The insights or personal reflection of the participants in the in-depth interview and focus group discussion as their response on the last research question of the study is shown in Table 6 which came up with four themes: Finding inspiration from family, learning the life lessons the hard way, listen and follow parents' advice, and it is better to prioritize education first.

### Finding inspiration from family

The first theme that emerges from the last question on the insights or personal reflection of the participants based on their experience in child marriage is finding inspiration from the family. Most of the participants considered their family as their main source of strength and inspiration that allows them to face all the challenges and difficulties in their lives and look forward to

the future with hopes and high dreams, especially for their children. Cambridge Dictionary (2025) defined inspiration as the feeling of enthusiasm that you get from someone or something, which gives you creative ideas or that pushes you to do or achieve something.

The participants shared the following statements.

*"Ang nagpapalakas sa akin ay ang anak ko... kumakait pa rin ako dahil gusto ko syang bigyan ng buong pamilya."*(IDI R4a)

The source of my strength is my child...I am still holding on our marriage because I want to give him a complete family.

*"Iniisip ko po ang mga pinagdaanan naming ng asawa ko tapos ang anak ko, iyon ang nagmomotivate sa akin."* (FGD R2)

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

I just think of all the hardship that we went through with my husband and our child, that's what motivates me.

*"Ang anak ko po talaga at asawa ko. Sinasabi ko parati na hindi lang po kami hanggang ganito lang."* (FGD R5)

My child and my husband. I keep on telling myself that we will not end here.

These statements clearly show the love and care of the participants for their family, that they are willing to do everything for them to ensure that they are whole and complete. The children are the source of strength for most of them, for pushing and keep on going in life, it serves as their purpose and motivation. Many people are motivated to get up every morning and go about their work because they care about supporting their family. (Howe, 2024). Throughout the course of the interview and FGD, the participants kept on saying that their children are the best thing that happened to them when they got married. They never mentioned, not even once, that they regret having their babies. It clearly shows how they value and care for their family.

### Learning life lessons the hard way

The second theme that appears from the last question is learning life lessons the hard way. Cambridge dictionary (2025) defines it as to discover what you need to know through experience or by making mistakes. It means that when the participants got into child marriage, they have learned and realized so many things in life that they are not aware of, or they might have heard but did not mind

or bother. But their own experiences of being a child bride helped them realize the reality of life. A participant shared:

*"Nalaman ko na hindi pala ganun kadali ang buhay pamilya pero wala naman po akong pinag-sisisihan."* (IDI R1a)

I learned that having a family is not easy, but I don't regret it at all.

*"Ang hirap pala magkaroon ng pamilya mas lalo po kung hindo kayo ready."* (IDI R5a)

It's so difficult to have your own family especially if you are not yet ready.

*"Nagsisi po ako na hindi ako nakinig kila ina na wag magkasintahan kasi mahirap pala talaga ang pag-aasawa."* (FGD R2)

I regret that I did not listen to my mother when she told me not to have a boyfriend because being married is very difficult.

These statements emphasize the learning of a participant that life is tough. Although this has been constantly reminded to them by their parents when they were still single, they agree on its truthfulness when they experienced it on their own. Usually, newlywed young girls feel happy and excited about marriage. Some of them envision that married life would be akin to a fairy tale. However, this vision of married bliss changes as soon as they get married and struggle with all the different aspects of married life (Mrayan & Obeisat, 2021). They thought that marriage is a happy ending as what always shown and portrayed in movies but as they lived the life of child brides and experience the hardship, especially the participants who

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

decided to get married on their own and those who still continue having a boyfriend and got pregnant despite of all the advices from their parents, they realized that marriage is something that should be thought wisely.

This also proves the old Filipino proverb, *“Nasa huli ang pagsisisi”* translated as *“Regret is always at the end”* which means regrets usually comes last because they learned the lesson after experiencing it on their own or learned the lesson the hard way (FilipinoPod101.com, 2024).

#### **Listen and follow parents’ advice**

The fourth theme that emerges from the last research question is the realization of the participants on the importance of listening and following their parents’ advice. This is also related to the last theme, where learning the difficulty of a married life helps them realize that all the advice of their parents to them is for their own good. Cambridge Dictionary (2025) define advice as an opinion that someone offers you about what you should do or how you should act in a particular situation. In this case, the advice is coming from the parents of the participants when they are still single and studying. Based on their statements, the advice that their parents are constantly giving them pertains to not having a boyfriend, studying first, choosing their friends, not staying late with friends, and so on. A participant shared,

*“Narealize ko na dapat ang mga anak ay nakikinig sa magulang.”* (IDI R4a)

I realized the importance of children listening to their parents.

*“Maniwala sila sa parents nila, pag sinabing bawal na wag nilang gawin kasi para din un sa ikabubuti nila.”* (FGD R2)

Believe your parents, if they say this is not

allowed then do not do it because that is for your own good.

*“Narealized ko po na iyong mga advise po sa akin noon ni ina ay tama.”* (IDI R10a)

I realized that all the advices from my mother before are correct.

These lines emphasize the realization of the participant on the virtue of listening to one’s parents and taking their advice positively, especially on the matters that concern them. In Islam, obeying and honoring one’s parents is a means of entering paradise, and just a simple act of listening to their advice is already a sign of respect and is a way of showing gratitude to them for bringing one into this world (Team, 2024).

The regrets of not following their parents’ advice are clearly expressed on their statements and on their actions. This insight by the participants may be influenced by their own experiences as parents. They may now understand the sacrifices of their parents and the reason why that advice was given by their parents, and that is to protect them. Parents’ love to their children is unconditional, while that love is overbearing at times, they still want the best for their children, and their advice will reflect that they truly love them (Team, 2024).

#### **It is better to prioritize education first**

The last theme that emerges from the last research question is the personal reflection or insight of participants on the importance of prioritizing education. This is related to the previous theme of the importance of following one’s parents because prioritizing

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

education is the common advice the participants receive from their parents. Child marriage can be both the cause and result of terminating schooling, and it reduces the chances for a girl who is married before reaching the age of 18 to complete secondary education, which in turn raises the likelihood of forcing them into lower-paying or unstable jobs due to childcare responsibilities (MacKinnon, 2024).

Participants shared:

*“Tapos sa mga bata wag silang magmadali, magtapos muna sila.”* (IDI R1a)

To the children don't rush, finish your studies first.

*“Enjoy lang muna nila ang buhay na single sila. Huwag magmadali mag-aral muna.”* (FGD R4)

Enjoy the single life. Don't rush and study first.

*“Wag muna sila magjowa, mag-aral na muna sila.”* (FGD R6)

Don't have a boyfriend, study first.

These lines clearly show the importance of prioritizing education over other things like having a boyfriend or girlfriend, which might destroy them, and worst, might lead them child marriage especially among Muslims, where an intimate relationship prior to marriage is not accepted. Among the 17 participants, only 2 are continuing their education. Some were forced to stop when they got pregnant and delivered their baby, while some had already stopped when they got married. According to study, child brides are usually forced to drop out due to early pregnancy, while others are denied entry to an educational space because of their marital status, and they are more likely to drop out of high school and four times less likely to graduate from college (Martincic, 2020).

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARK

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Social Workers are among the front liners that provide social protection programs and services to the people, especially the vulnerable, marginalized, and disadvantaged. Some are working directly with individuals, groups, and at the community level to help them overcome their struggles and adversity to achieve a better quality of life. Among the vulnerable sectors that they serve are the children who are susceptible to different

forms of abuse, neglect, maltreatment, and violence that may hinder their full development and put their lives at stake. One of the social problems that negatively affects the lives of children is the practice of child marriage.

There are so many studies done globally proving the harm and risk it causes to many children, but despite that, this practice is still being accepted in many communities, including BARMM. The role of social workers

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:



in addressing this problem is very crucial and may require them to work directly at all levels, such as with children, their families, and the community in which they are. Since it is a multi-faceted problem that involves various factors, it may require intervention in different areas where the social workers can contribute by assuming different roles and functions, such as being a case manager, advocate, enabler, counselor, mediator, and resource provider.

The findings emphasized the need for the social workers as case manager to assess and address the needs of the children and their families by developing individualized intervention plan that will prevent child marriage and provide support to the children and their families, especially those who are already engaged in child marriage, such as the provision of livelihood opportunities, health services, legal services, psychosocial services, counseling, education, and other intervention needed to protect the children and their families.

As a child advocate, the social workers need to conduct more awareness campaign to promote the rights and protection of the children as specified in the approved policies of the state which include the Presidential Decree No. 603 also known as the "*Child and Youth Welfare Code*", Republic Act 7610 also known as the "*Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination*", and Republic Act 11596 also known as "*An Act Prohibiting the Practice of Child Marriage and Imposing Penalties for Violations Thereof*." Some of these policies are not known by the participants, particularly

RA 11596, which needs further dissemination across all levels. In relation to this, the social workers need also to work closely with the Local Government Unit to ensure the implementation and enforcement of these laws by making sure that local mechanisms such as the Local Council for the Protection of Children (LCPC) at Provincial, Municipal/City, and Barangay level are in place and integrated to their local development plans to ensure the implementation of the said laws and policies. This will ensure the protection of children and the provision of services to the affected children, families, and communities.

Since the development and welfare of children are a shared responsibility, there's a need also for the social worker to strengthen their collaboration with community and religious leaders who have great influence on the acceptance of this practice to promote children's rights on top of cultural norms and tradition that promote child marriage. Ensuring their engagement will help in changing the perception and the behavior of the people in the community by reexamining the cultural and religious norms that promote child marriage.

The study also suggests that social workers need to be equipped with knowledge and skills to contribute to the prevention of child marriage. Their knowledge on this issue, such as the understanding of the factors contributing to child marriage, is needed for them to provide effective intervention. It is fundamental for social workers to be provided with guidance on how to effectively handle cases of child marriage, especially circumstantial ones, such as when the child committed premarital sex or if she

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

got pregnant, through the development of manual or standard protocols for providing clarity of their roles. In special cases like this, social workers may be confronted with either reporting the incidence of child marriage and just focusing on providing intervention based on the problems presented which may have legal consequences on their part as social worker, or they will report it to the law enforcer as provided in RA 11596 and will urge for the rescue of the children involved and separation of the child to her husband. This is a very complicated situation that the social workers will go through in circumstantial marriage, as described above, and must be clarified to provide them guidance because it is imperative for the social worker to put priority on the best interest of the child.

### IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study has examined the lived experiences of adolescent girls engaged in child marriage in Cotabato City, which provides additional insights into the existing and limited knowledge about child marriage in BARMM. The findings in the study provide an overview of the factors that influence the prevalence of child marriage in the region, particularly in Muslim communities, which may serve as an outline for the development of social protections that would help prevent child marriage and appropriate social interventions to support the child brides and their families.

Further research is then suggested to conduct a quantitative study on the drivers of child marriage that focuses on cultural and religious beliefs of the family and community on marriage particularly the rate of pregnancy before marriage, the commitment of premarital sex, and getting into intimate relationship

(boyfriend/girlfriend), lack of parental guidance, and peer pressure as contributing factors to child marriage. Future research on the lived experiences of adolescent girls from Indigenous Peoples and other Muslim communities where child marriage is prevalent, both in mainland and island provinces, and even outside BARMM, is recommended to understand their context and as a basis for developing social interventions.

The study also found the different coping strategies utilized by the children engaged in child marriage, which may serve as a basis for strengthening the matrimonial relationship by conducting family sessions. Further research on this is suggested to be conducted on the same participants after a certain period of time to determine if these coping strategies will evolve over time and if this can be linked to the quality of life the participants and their families have. The study also provides the personal insights of the participants on child marriage, which may serve as the basis on the development of advocacy materials for the children, families, and communities.

Finally, the study also provides an overview of the extent of awareness of the participants on the existing policy that prevents child marriage, particularly RA 11596, which shows that the majority of them are still unaware. Further research is then suggested to examine the awareness and acceptability of Bangsamoro on RA 11596, also known as Anti-Child Marriage Law, which may include the determination of the status of its implementation in the region, particularly in Muslim and IP communities, which may include the advantages and possible consequences of its implementation. The result on the suggested research study will serve as the basis whether there is a

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\*Corresponding Email:

need for the existing policy to be reviewed and provide amendments on it to make it more inclusive, responsive, and appropriate on the needs of the Bangsamoro people and to the reality on the ground, which the current study failed to provide.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Child marriage is a global phenomenon that has long been practiced in certain areas in the country, especially among Muslim and IP communities due to Presidential Decree 1083, or the Code of Muslim Personal Laws excludes Muslims and IPs from the prohibition of marriage below eighteen in consideration of their unique customs, traditions, and beliefs. This exclusion was removed in 2021 through the passage of the Republic Act 11596, also known as the “Anti-Child Marriage Law,” which prohibits child marriage and penalizes those who facilitate and solemnize it. This is the reason why the passage of this law generates different opinions among the constituents of BARMM, especially among the Members of the Parliament of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, also known as the region’s interim parliament. In fact, there was an effort by the Muslim leaders a month after the effectiveness of this law urging former president Rodrigo Duterte to repeal it, emphasizing that BARMM does not support the law since the practice in Islam, there is no fixed age to get married, and it’s a culture that hard to change (Maitem, 2022).

Based on the findings of the study, child marriage in Cotabato City is primarily driven by cultural tradition and practice, which is rooted on Islamic religious belief, making it difficult and almost impossible to stop despite the newly passed legislation. There are still some who still hold on to the Presidential Decree 1083 (1977) when it comes to the issue of child marriage, arguing

that under Article 3 under Conflict of provisions, it states that in case of conflict between any provision of this Code and laws of general application, the former shall prevail, which means that if there is a conflict between a provision of this code and a general policy like the RA 11596 which declares child marriage as invalid, the PD 1083 will take precedence.

The cultural practice that was highlighted in the study is the firm belief of having a “halal” relationship through marriage regardless of the age which influences the parents including the children towards the acceptability of child marriage and especially on cases of circumstantial child marriage where the child got pregnant or found to commit sexual intercourse which is found as the second cause of child marriage in the study. Islam prohibits the fornication or premarital sex and emphasizes the importance of maintaining “virginity”, which influences the actions of parents or guardian to put their children in marriage once they know that they are in a relationship to avoid the commitment of premarital sex and to secure the honor of their family. This explains why Muslim parents are still not open on their children having a girlfriend and a boyfriend, even without sexual contact, which is being promoted in the social media. Marriage is considered as the best option for children caught in this situation, especially those who were guilty of committing sexual activity and got pregnant to make the pregnancy permissible, although there was an opposing opinion about this by Islamic scholars.

The same applies to the children who, by their own will, decided to get married to their boyfriend or girlfriend to make their relationship halal and to avoid the commitment of “zina” or fornication, especially if the involved parties can no

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\* Corresponding Email:

longer control their sexual desire. This is an important finding also of the study that some children who are engaged in child marriage are the ones who made the decision to get married without coercion, which is contrary to most of the findings of the previous study, emphasizing that child marriage is usually forced and without the consent of the involved children. These are the realities on the ground, which make the implementation of RA 11596 a particularly challenging one, especially among the social workers, since the intention of contracting marriage is for the best interest of the involved children. This is the reason why this law may actually hide the reality of child marriage in the communities because of the penalties of the said law, the people opted to be silent and not to discuss the problem anymore concerning on child marriage to avoid the repercussions such as the possibility of separation of the involved children to their husband or wife, the removal of parental authority and the possible criminal liability of those involved in the facilitation and solemnization of the child marriage. The people tend to be silent about it instead of bringing up the concern of child marriage to avoid the consequences of possible “rido” or grudges, which hides the real deal of this problem.

But despite on this, the Bangsamoro Government showed their commitment in the implementation of the law through the Ministry of Social Service and Development (MSSD) by conducting series of advocacy campaign on RA 11596 and other relevant laws on children to different schools and communities across the region to create awareness emphasizing the negative consequences of child marriage. A series of rescue operations was also done for children who were reported to be involved in child marriage. But since cultural tradition is identified as the primary driver of child

marriage, which is influenced by Islamic beliefs, the engagement of community and religious leaders in the current efforts is recommended by reexamining the cultural and religious norms that perpetuate the practice and hopefully develop an intervention that may contribute to curbing its prevalence. More community-based programs are also recommended, targeting the parents, children, and the community as a whole with the involvement and participation of other stakeholders, such as health, education, community and religious leaders, to raise awareness of the harmful effects of child marriage.

The study also highlights the challenges that the child brides are facing everyday such as socioeconomic pressure due to limited budget or not enough resources, societal and cultural pressures like the expectation of being a full-time and sole caretaker of their children and their family, which forces them to stop schooling, and the responsibility and motherhood challenges which they are not prepared for like giving birth, being a full-time mom where you oversee everything from taking care of the children, doing household chores and many more. This confirms the harmful effects of child marriage that were mentioned in the literature review and thus recommends the need to equip the children, parents, and families in general, and the communities about the consequences of child marriage as mentioned above to change their perception about child marriage and hopefully contribute on its reduction and elimination.

The study further shows that children engaged in child marriage are often unprepared and lack the skills that make their transition from being single to a wife and a mother a difficult journey which recommends the need for providing them

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author

\* Corresponding Email:

the training or to continue their education to be equipped with necessary skills that would help them perform their roles and functions. Additionally, it shows that despite the available social interventions and policies protecting children, there is still more that needs to be done, like the development of programs and services solely intended for the child brides and their families, like the provision of education and economic opportunity for them to continue their education and break the cycle of illiteracy and poverty that may contribute to its practice, the provision of health services, legal services, psychosocial services, counseling, education, and other intervention needed to protect the children and their families.

The study also shows the coping strategy of the child brides on the challenges they are facing every single day such as having a support network primarily from their husband, having strong faith through praying or performing “sambayang”, and crying alone or with someone they trust to express their worries, fears, disappointments, and uncertainties. This highlights the need to strengthen the support provided to the children involved in Since the issue of child marriage in BARMM has been practiced and even encouraged for a long time, we cannot expect that it will automatically end with the passage of a certain policy. As mentioned above, the law may even hide the real situations of the prevalence of child marriage in the communities, especially among children. It is then recommended that aside from the development of culturally sensitive programs and services for the prevention of child marriage and the support to involved children, a review of the implementation as well as the provisions of RA11596 at the national, regional, and local level, through

child marriage and their families by providing counseling and psychosocial support and life skills that would help them cope with life challenges. Moreover, the need to organize community-based support groups for child brides is also recommended.

The study also shows the personal reflections of the participants based on their experienced as child brides that they wanted to share to the people such as the realization on the importance of family as a source of inspiration especially in times of difficulties, second is learning life lessons the hard way by recognizing the reality of life after experiencing the hardship on their own, third is realizing the importance of listening and following the parents’ advice as they only wish good for their children, and lastly the importance of prioritizing education. This may be used in the creation of Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) Materials in addition to the challenges that a child bride may experience for an awareness campaign to present the reality of child marriage, especially among the children and their parents or guardians.

the Members of Parliament in BARMM, is highly recommended, in addition to the conduct of a study that will evaluate the acceptability of the said law and the status of its implementation, and make amendments if necessary to ensure that it is inclusive, culturally sensitive, and effective in responding to the issue of child marriage. Finally, the study highlights the importance of collective effort in addressing child marriage by ensuring a healthy and safe environment for all children to help them grow and reach their own potential to become a productive member of soc

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