Early Marriage in West Java: Understanding girls’ agency in the context of ‘traditional’ and changing norms regarding gender and sexuality

Yvonne van der Kooij
University of Amsterdam
MSc International Development Studies
July 2016
COLOPHON

Master’s Program International Development Studies
Graduate School of Social Sciences
University of Amsterdam

Master’s Thesis

Title: Early marriage in West Java: Understanding girls’ agency in the context of ‘traditional’ and changing norms regarding gender and sexuality

Name of supervisor: Esther Miedema

Name of second reader: Winny Koster

Cover photo: Yvonne van der Kooij

Date of submission: 8 July, 2016

Yvonne van der Kooij
11120150
yl.vanderkooij@gmail.com
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank everyone that has supported me and my research the past few months. First of all, I am very grateful to all the girls that participated in this research and were willing to talk to me and share their stories about sometimes very personal struggles in their lives. Furthermore, I would like to thank the other women and community members that included me in their daily life activities and made me feel so welcome in the village Cibacang in Sukabumi. In particular Bu Emun and Bu Herna who both welcomed me into their homes, made me feel as if I was part of their family and introduced me to many people who participated in this study.

Also, I would like to express my gratitude to the directors and teachers of two Junior High Schools in the Sukaraja District of Sukabumi, SMPN2 Sukaraja and MTS Darmut, who opened their schools to me. They gave me a great opportunity to spend time with their students and learn more about the lives of teenagers in this area.

Special thanks goes out to my Indonesian research partner, friend and fellow anthropologist Navita Hani R. without whom I would not have been able to conduct this research and gave me so many insights into the lives of young women in Indonesia. You made this research project extremely interesting and fun and I feel very honored that I met you and that we became good friends. Also, I would like to thank Aminah Agustinah and Izmy for their support during the fieldwork and for making my stay in Indonesia so enjoyable.

Further, I would like to express my appreciation for Mies Grijns, head of Java Village Foundation and researcher at Van Vollenhoven Institute of Leiden Law School for her time and help and for giving me the opportunity to conduct my research in Cibacang in cooperation with her running research project and team. In addition, I would like to thank Bu Selly, professor at the Anthropology Department of Universitas Padjadjaran in Bandung, for taking up the role as my personal sponsor, making it possible for me to come to Indonesia to conduct my fieldwork.

I would also like to thank my supervisor Esther Miedema at the University of Amsterdam who always provided me with critical and constructive feedback during the research and writing process. Finally, I would like to thank Winny Koster for taking up the role of being my second reader.

Terima kasih!
ABSTRACT

Early marriage still persists around the world and is internationally viewed as a violation of human rights, undermining opportunities for girls and women regarding education and sexual reproductive health. Existing research has focused heavily on causes and consequences of early marriage, often portraying girls as victims of what is perceived to be a harmful cultural practice. In addition, early (or child) marriage tends to be equated with force, and girls thus forced to marry. However, there seems to be a lack of knowledge of girls’ perspectives on early marriage and the agency they have with regard to decision-making processes prior to a marriage. This study aims to address this gap by asking: what are the views of both young married and unmarried girls in rural West Java, Indonesia, regarding their perceived agency towards (early) marriage.

Based on a mixed qualitative methods design, including in-depth interviews with girls, supporting interviews with community members, teachers of junior high schools and healthcare personnel, and focus group discussions, the results show that girls in this study are by no means passive victims of early marriage and that they all have shown different ways in which they exercised their agency within the decision-making process to get married at an early age. Girls’ accounts reveal that although they had their own reasons to get married at an early age, their agentic space was influenced - and sometimes limited - by social and religious norms regarding gender structures and sexual morality (how to behave like a good woman). This study makes recommendations on how to expand the space for girls’ agency by promoting sexuality education for unmarried girls and improving the role of formal schools in strengthening girls’ agency to make informed decisions about their future, while considering the conservative, but also changing, context in which early marriage in Sukabumi seems to be situated.

Keywords: girls, early marriage, agency, gender, sexuality, education & sexual reproductive health, Indonesia
LIST OF FIGURES AND ACRONYMS

Photos
Photo 1  FGD school girls (by author)
Photo 2  FGD married girls (by author)
Photo 3  Participatory day (by author)
Photo 4  Participatory day (by author)
Photo 5  Junior High School SMPN2 Sukajara (by Izmy Khumairoh)
Photo 6  Midwife’s office Cibacang Rw 8 (by author)
Photo 7  Out of school girl in house (by author)
Photo 8  Married girl, 16 years old (by Izmy Khumairoh)
Photo 9  Two married girls taking care of their babies (by Izmy Khumairoh)
Photo 10  School girls in break time

*Photos of girls that are shown in this thesis are taken and used with consent of the participating girls in this study

Maps
Map 1  Research location Sukabumi, West Java (Google Maps)

Tables
Table 1  Childhood differences
Table 2  Girls’ future goals
Table 3  Married girls’ educational attainment

Figures
Figure 1  Conceptual scheme

Acronyms
CRC  Convention of the Rights of the Child
NGO  Non-governmental Organization
SDG  Sustainable Development Goal
SRH  Sexual Reproductive Health
UN  United Nations
UNFPA  United Nations Population Fund
Bapak  Sir
Ibu  Madame
MG  Married Girl
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .............................................................................................................. 3
ABSTRACT ..................................................................................................................................... 4
LIST OF FIGURES AND ACRONYMS .......................................................................................... 5

1 INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................................... 9
  1.1 Problem statement .................................................................................................................. 9
  1.2 Research rationale .................................................................................................................. 10
  1.3 Outline of thesis ..................................................................................................................... 11

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .................................................................................................. 12
  2.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 12
  2.2 Recent debates on (early) marriage ...................................................................................... 12
  2.3 Girls’ agency .......................................................................................................................... 14
  2.4 Constructions of gender and young people’s sexuality ......................................................... 16
  2.5 Girls’ education and sexual reproductive health ............................................................... 17
  2.6 Concluding remarks ............................................................................................................. 19

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ................................................................................................. 20
  3.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 20
  3.2 Research questions ............................................................................................................... 20
  3.3 Conceptual scheme ............................................................................................................... 20
  3.4 Epistemological position ....................................................................................................... 21
  3.5 Research methods .................................................................................................................. 21
  3.6 Data analysis .......................................................................................................................... 25
  3.7 Research quality, limitations and ethical choices ............................................................... 26
  3.8 Concluding remarks ............................................................................................................. 28

4 RESEARCH CONTEXT .............................................................................................................. 29
  4.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 29
  4.2 Background information on Indonesia and West Java ....................................................... 29
  4.3 Legal context of marriage in Indonesia ............................................................................. 29
  4.4 Education in Indonesia ......................................................................................................... 30
  4.5 Research site ......................................................................................................................... 31
  4.6 Access to the field ................................................................................................................. 31
  4.7 Concluding remarks ............................................................................................................. 32

5 GIRLS’ PERCEPTIONS ON GROWING UP AND GETTING MARRIED ........................................... 33
  5.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 33
  5.2 The meaning of marriage and the importance in Islam ...................................................... 33
  5.3 The ideal age for marriage ..................................................................................................... 34
  5.4 Growing up as a woman ....................................................................................................... 35
  5.5 Talking about sex, relationships and marriage .................................................................... 37
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem statement

Today, more than 700 million women are married before they turn 18 years (Unicef 2014). Early or child marriage is defined as a marriage that is carried out before the age of 18 years, according to the definition stated in the Convention of the Right of the Child (CRC) (Greene 2014). Although this definition does not exclude boys, in practice the majority of children that get married before they turn 18 years are girls. Academic and public discourses of child marriage represent child marriage as a violation of human rights, with negative consequences that stand in the way of achieving international development goals related to gender, education and health (Svanemyr et al. 2015; Callaghan et al. 2015). Over the past years more attention has been given to the issue of child marriage within development policies and programs. In the international development literature, early marriage is often portrayed as a problematic practice (Callaghan et al. 2015; Chantler 2012).

“Child marriage is a violation of children’s human rights, robbing millions of girls under 18 around the world of their childhood and forces them out of education and into a life of poor prospects” (Because I am a Girl Campaign; Plan International 2016)

Child marriage is usually seen within the international community as a harmful cultural practice that ‘robs’ girls from their childhood. The portrayal of girls as victims of this practice leads to the assumption that most child marriages are forced, suggesting that there is no space for agency of the girls involved (Chantler 2012). NGOs, governments and scholars further suggest that marrying at an early age undermines girl’s opportunities when it comes to sexual reproductive health (SRH), education, livelihood skills, employment, decision-making power in the household and the ability to gain agency over their lives (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015).

Girls’ empowerment initiatives in general have gained an important focus in the international development community lately. Not only are girls portrayed as possible agents for development but their bodies sometimes even become sites of contestation when it comes to measuring the development of nations (MacDonald 2015). The centrality of the female body and the girl child become very visible when looking at cultural practices such as child marriage.

In Indonesia an estimated one in every five girls is married before the age of 18 years according to the Girls not Brides movement (2015). Child marriages occur in many regions of Indonesia and often lead to early pregnancies and childbirth (Svanemyr et al. 2012). Indonesia’s effort to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SGD) on declining global maternal mortality rates and achieving universal access to SRH are seen to be countered by early marriages and early pregnancies (UNFPA 2015).

As argued by Desriani (2011), local marriage customs and reproduction often go hand in hand in Indonesia, however, there is not much knowledge of the perspectives of girls with regard to the decision-making process leading to an early marriage and the expectations for girls of entering a marriage. There are few studies on Indonesian youth, the frequency of early marriage and its consequences but even less
attention has been paid to the perspectives of young girls that are married and already occupy adult roles and status despite their young age (Bennett 2014). Also the views of girls that are not married, but may be at ‘risk’ of becoming married are rarely included in research on early marriage patterns.

Kesby et al. (2006) propose that if the needs of children worldwide are to be met, the focus in research should also be on ‘other childhoods’. ‘Other childhoods’ are characterized by un-childlike behavior such as sexual behavior and adult roles among what are deemed to be non-adults. In the past few years a growing body of work has started to call for more attention to girls’ sexuality since this topic is often overlooked within the dominant discourse on child marriage (Miller & Vance 2004). Also according to Murphy Graham (2015) there is an urgently need for a deeper understanding of the way in which gendered norms and girls’ sexuality, relate to child marriage.

Research on child marriage is thus often about the lives of girls but does not always include the voices and desires of young girls themselves. Many studies on child marriage tend to focus on causes and consequences for girls but give less focus to the rationale behind the dominant discourse, the experiences of young girls, girls’ agency and the decision-making processes that inform their actions (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015). Therefore, this research will look at the everyday lives of girls in Indonesia and their perspectives and agency when it comes to early marriage. The research question that this study tries to answer is the following:

How can we understand girls’ agency in decision-making processes with regard to early marriage against the background of local understandings of gender and sexuality, and religious norms in rural West Java?

1.2 Research rationale

The academic relevance of this study lies in the lack of research with a focus on the voices and agency of girls with regard to early marriage. Women (and in particular girls) within development discourse are still often portrayed as being poor, victimized and ignorant instead of capable and powerful in the process of change (MacDonald 2015). Many (western) studies focus on the marginalized position of the girl child and with that female vulnerability that is multiplied by her childhood (MacDonald 2015, Manzo 2008). Although the reproductive status of girls and women and their body often has an important role within development processes, we know little about their own perceptions and agency with regard to decision-making processes. According to Cornwall (2003), research should engage more with those that are most affected by the process of early marriage in order to gain better insight in the issue of early marriage. This research will attempt to fill the knowledge gap by providing a better understanding of the decision-making processes of young girls in regard to early marriage. Furthermore, this study can contribute to the existing literature on broader topics of hearing women’s voices and agency. Women’s voices and agency have been systematically silenced and devalued for a long time but critical researchers have sought to create a platform in which the perspectives and experiences of women are more included (Harding 1987).

The social relevance relates to addressing the issue of child marriage in Indonesia. According to the UNFPA (2012) early marriage in Indonesia often leads to initiation of sexual activity during a period when girls know little about their bodies, their SRH and their rights to family planning. SRH education is not
widespread in Indonesia which leaves some girls ill-prepared for adulthood, marriage and childbearing and rearing. A better understanding of the perspectives of girls, their agency and the processes that inform their decisions or limit these is expected to contribute to government and NGO efforts to reduce child marriages and improve social services that may further strengthen girls’ agency.

1.3 Outline of thesis
This thesis is organized into seven chapters. This first chapter introduced the problem statement and relevance of this study. In the second chapter, I will present an overview of literature related to the early marriage discourse and other concepts that this research will draw upon. The third chapter describes the research questions, methodology and limitations of this study. An overview of the context of early marriage in Indonesia and an introduction to the research location, are presented in the fourth chapter. The following two chapters reveal the main research findings of this study by looking at the local meanings attached to marriage and gender and sexuality constructions (chapter five) and the perceived agency regarding early marriage of girls and role of (sex) education in strengthening girls’ agency (chapter six). The final (seventh) chapter discusses the findings of this study more in-depth in relation to the theoretical framework, presents a conclusion and gives recommendations both for further research as for policy and practice purposes.
2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction
In this chapter an overview of the most important concepts and theories that this research draws on is presented. In the first section recent literature debates of early marriage [including the universal human rights-based discourse and the more localized interpretations] are discussed (2.2). In section 2.3, debates about girls’ agency and hearing girls’ voices, in research centralized around girls and development, are further elaborated. This is followed by a theoretical discussion on constructions of gender and sexuality, that are deemed relevant in the context of early marriage debates in Indonesia (section 2.4). Finally, section 2.5 discusses the perceived role of sexuality education and formal schooling for girls in (international) efforts of enhancing girls’ agency and combating early marriage.

2.2 Recent debates on (early) marriage

*International attention for child marriage and the human rights-based discourse*

Child or early marriage is defined as any marriage, a formal or informal union before the age of 18 years. The International Day of the Girl Child in 2012, held by the United Nations (UN), put a primary focus on the initiative to abolish child marriage worldwide (Svanemyr et al. 2012). This discourse on child marriage is based on the ‘childhood’ concept that has been proposed in the Convention of the Rights of a Child (CRC 1990), in which ‘childhood’ is universally recognized to be a carefree period in life and the time that is spent in school for children until the age of 18 years. As Archambault (2011: 634) poses, “the term early marriage (or child marriage) is powerfully constituted as it simultaneously signifies an inappropriate age to marry as well as an inappropriate time to marry, implying that one ought to do something else during this period of childhood (pursuing an education).”

The dominant discourse around early marriage is usually framed by large development organizations and grounded in notions of human rights (Callaghan et al. 2015; Le Strat et al. 2011). Chantler (2012) argues that the rights-based discourse on child marriage represents most child marriages as forced marriages, suggesting that there is a lack of agency for children involved. The right to a full and free consent to a marriage thus has a central place in this discourse and consent is not deemed to be free and full when a girl or boy has not yet reached the age of 18 years yet (Unicef 2001). Furthermore, (international) organizations represent child marriage as a human rights violation with many negative social and health consequences for girls (Callaghan et al. 2015). Additionally, international conventions around ending child marriage are often aimed at protecting girls from the consequences of early marriage that are deemed to be harmful. Recent literature shows the association of child marriage with high risks of early pregnancy, maternal problems, HIV infections, poverty, reduced access to education and reinforced gender inequalities (Unicef 2012; Svanemyr et al. 2012).

Child marriage in this light is also considered to pose a further threat to the subordination of women in society and is believed to constitute a form of gender-based violence (Rembe et al. 2011). According to Jensen and Thornton (2003), girls who marry early have an increased risk of experiencing violence from their husband or family, are seen to have less autonomy and negotiating power in the household and risk a
higher chance of having an early divorce. Although there is a general consensus about the negative consequences in terms of social and health constraints, the interventions of development agencies are not always taking into account the many different cultural and socioeconomic realities of young women (Callaghan et al. 2015).

Critique on the human rights discourse and the sociocultural context
With the rise of human rights-based approaches in the international development field, there is growing criticism on the presumed universality of these approaches, which are not always deemed applicable in every context (Miedema et al. 2014; Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi 2004). The mainstream discourse and international regulations on early marriage often prevent a holistic analysis of early marriage and tend to obscure complex structural and socioeconomic factors that perpetuate these practices (Bunting 2005; Archambault 2011).

Recent debates, highlight that the conceptualization of an ‘universal’ childhood is not always compatible with more culturally specific conceptualizations of childhood and the changing roles of children within different social, economic and political settings worldwide (Ensor 2010; Kesby et al. 2006). The critique further focuses on the presumption that ‘childhood’ is an idealized western idea used by international organization, which does not pay attention to actual experiences of many young people under the age of 18 years around the world (Willis 2011; Kesby et al. 2006; Bunting 1999). In many places children take on different adult roles, such as responsibilities in the household and caring for family members (Ensor 2010). Early marriage represents this sort of un-childlike behavior since it violates the ideals of a ‘normal childhood’ (Burman 2008).

Children within the human rights discourse are often represented as victims and in need of rescue from the oppressive cultural and patriarchal practices in order to restore a ‘normal childhood’ and ‘liberated womanhood’ (Callaghan et al. 2015). Archambault (2011) further shows how a dichotomy is presented between traditional patriarchs on the one hand, and young women as victims who have no say in decisions regarding early marriage on the other hand. In addition, early marriage and with that the violation of girls’ rights are often seen to be attributed to parents and ‘bad’ and cultural ‘traditions’ in society. (ibid.). However, in an agrarian culture with high levels of poverty early marriage for a girl herself can be seen as a way of securing the life and future of a girl, to construct reciprocal networks and to extend access to resources (Walker 2012).

Besides, recent studies show that decisions to marry early for a girl can also be linked to adolescent sexual behavior (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015; Muhanguzi & Ninsiima 2011). In many local contexts girls are not allowed to have sex before marriage and marrying early could then be seen as the only possible space for sexual intimacy (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015; Platt 2012). James (2010) further shows, in his study about the perspectives of young girls on early marriage in Nigeria, that girls often see early marriage as culturally normal and are supportive of the idea because it emphasizes the importance of family and the role of the woman within a family.
Consent, coercion and voices of girls

According to authors such as James (2010), constructions of international agencies that position girls as victims, often obscure the agency and voices of girls themselves in their responses to early marriage. The construction of child marriage tends to focus on forced and arranged marriages and leaves no room for possible consent of part of the child. As Anitha and Gill (2009) argue, there is often a binary understanding of consent and coercion in relation to marriage, which deems that girls who marry early, by definition, have no consent. However, young women also practice agency, make choices in a context of cultural expectations and/or have the ability to resist certain cultural practices (Callaghan et al. 2015). Willis (2011) emphasized that research on children should not neglect girls’ agency and the fact that they have their own opinions about their lives and futures.

Chantler (2012) further argued that research on marriage issues should be conducted without an overly bias for Euro-American norms around individual choices regarding love and marriage that sometimes tend to determine research agenda’s. The purpose and the meaning of marriage differ in societies and often vary from an individual to communal level (Holland & Mohan 2001). In this thesis, I therefore look at marriage as a social construct and let the perceptions and experiences of girls determine what marriage means to them.

International organizations and governments use the term ‘child marriage’ for development programs that are focused on this issue. However, the term ‘early marriage’ is more common within the scholarly debates on this topic. Therefore, I will use the term ‘early marriage’ in this thesis as this term does not have the presumed connotations of the discourse around the ‘girl child’ and what this concept should or should not entail.

2.3 Girls’ agency

Until the beginning of the twenty first century children have often been portrayed as being passive recipients of information and guidance by many international organizations which resulted in attempts to secure and protect children’s right worldwide (Kesby et al. 2006). The traditional perception of childhood has for a long time been a stage before adulthood in which characteristics such as dependency, purity, innocence, vulnerability and asexuality were central (Ensor 2010; Gillian 2009). This western model has been exported through colonialism and migration to many other places in the world. Since the mid twentieth century international organizations have been advocating for the universalization of the ‘child’ in order to ensure equal treatment for all children (Ensor 2010). Nowadays young people’s agency is a widely discussed concept among scholars who increasingly recognize that children and young people have a voice too and that they can participate actively in shaping their environment and have the capacity to act (Robson et al. 2007; Ensor 2010; Naafs & White 2012).

Although there is debate about the exact definition of agency, different scholars have engaged with the notion of agency with a particular emphasis on examining how actions of individuals reproduce or transform the social structures that are shaped in society (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979). In many studies agency is used as a concept that indicates the ability of an individual to make effective choices or have a degree of free choice (Bourdillion et al. 2010; Mahmood 2012). Structures in society are often portrayed as constraining the ability of individuals to exercise their agency and these constraints are seen to be worse for
young people since adults often have a more powerful position in society (Coumans 2013). Mahmood (2012) further argued that the desire for freedom which is often underpinned by western liberal feminist discourses around agency, should not be used as an universal standard in research on girls’ agency. He rather proposes that we should look at different ways in which people live their moral codes, without the assumption that individual autonomy is a precondition to agency (Mahmood 2012).

Ahearn (2001) presented a definition of agency that captures the idea that the capacity to act will differ in different places and at different times. According to the author ‘agency is the sociocultural mediated capacity to act’ (Ahearn 2001: 112). With this definition there still remain many details unspecified such as ‘should agency be something that is individual, conscious, intentional or even effective’ (Ortner 1996). However, what Ahearn (2001) deems as important is especially the notion of how agency is defined within a certain place and time given the definition of agency itself may differ from society to society. She then proposes that scholars should ask people themselves how they conceive their own actions and what having agency means to them. Desjarlais (1997) also showed that agency cannot always be seen as ontologically prior to a certain context but often arises from social, political, and cultural dynamics of a specific place and time. Ahearn (2001) thus points out that there is a need for research in which the understanding of the complex and ambiguous nature of agency is explored. Ahearn notes that it is irrelevant to talk about having more or less agency, since agency is not a quantity that can be measured (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015).

**Forms of agency**

Ahearn (2001) provides an overview of different types of agency. In this section, I will draw a distinction between different types of agency that are deemed most relevant for examining girls’ agency in the context of child marriage in Indonesia.

Young women are often considered to exercise agency ‘within constraints’, referring to the idea that they operate within a particular constellation of power relations (Bell 2010). The context of young women’s constraints will vary within and across different spheres such as parental, social, cultural or economic spheres. Klocker (2007) distinguishes between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ agency, where thick agency refers to those within a broad range of options and thin agency to the decisions and actions that are made in highly restrictive contexts (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015). The agency of girls is often impacted by the ability to act, the confidence to do this and the space they have set within social cultural norms and expectations around for example gender roles. In addition, three other types of agency are often mentioned in literature.

First is the conception of agency as subtle or oppositional agency, whereby greater emphasis is placed on the ability of a person to exert influence over her/his own life by showing resistance to other controls (Bell 2010). Second is ‘little’ agency or agency as accommodating where girls act in a way that is expected of them, often out of necessity or for survival. Third is the notion of opportunistic agency. This idea is based on the concept of ‘judicious opportunism’ introduced by Johnson-Hanks (2005). Opportunistic agency is defined as a response to the limited choices girls may have and seizing any chance they get. Johnson-Hanks found out that young women who plan for their future, in particular with regards to marriage and fertility, often take advantage of whatever opportunity arises (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015). This
concept can help to understand why young girls sometimes decide to marry in a context of uncertainty about other options that may be available in the future to them. According to Robinson (2009), diverse forms of female agency are manifested in the gender orders that are common in a society.

2.4 Constructions of gender and young people’s sexuality
Connell (2009) defines gender as a social construction that centers around the reproductive arena and as a practice that brings reproductive distinctions between bodies into a broader social process. Gender roles and expectations vary between different societies but many gender orders privilege men and disadvantage women. Theories on gender, gender relations and gender roles highlight the relations between men and women that produce and reproduce sexual differences as well as sexual inequities (Connell 2002, 1987). Gender is reproduced by individuals through different social relations and is under construction through practice and action, which gives space for agency and making choices (Connell 1987). According to Connell (2002), choices that people make or the options that they may have are always highly influenced by gender structures of a certain time and place in which they live. These gender structures may operate through different institutions such as the state, families, schools and their gender regimes at an intermediate level. At a broader level these structures operate often through gender orders that are common in a society or community (Goicolea et al. 2010). Although many theories on gender focus on the gender binary that is constructed from an early age onwards, the fluidity of gender identities and intersectionality with other identities such as age, ethnicity or class should also be acknowledged (Shields 2008).

Connell (1987, 2002) recognized different structures of gender relations: power, labor and cathexis. The sexual division of labor includes the organization of domestic work and child rearing. This is often the basis on which family and marriage are organized and how particular types of work are allocated to women and men and girls and boys. The gendered division of labor follows in many contexts the idea that women should be in charge of domestic chores and child care and men should provide for the welfare of the family (Webley 2012). Women are also more associated with the body than men because of their reproductive role (Chilisa & Ntseane 2010). Power relations refer to control and authority and any sexual regulations. This structure derives from structural advantages of one individual or group over another and can control or influence others. Women are often associated with lower power since they are assigned different social roles than men as mentioned above. Power influences within a marriage can affect the decision-making of girls with regard to initiating sexual practices and the ability to decide over their own lives (Andersen 2005).

The cathexis is determined by emotional and sexual relationships between men and women. According to Foucault (1978), sexuality is socially constructed and entails a process by which sexual thoughts, behaviors and conditions like virginity are interpreted and given cultural meaning. A girl’s virginity is often linked to local sexual norms that consider marriage as the appropriate sphere for sexual intimacy (Platt 2012). According to Muslim (2007), sexual norms in an Islamic society are typically based on local interpretations of Islam that often consider marriage the (only) appropriate sphere for sexual intimacy. There is a certain imbalance exuded in the sexual double standard, which often permits men greater sexual freedom as well as rights of sexual self-determination than women (Connell 1987).
Acceptance of young people’s sexuality has a varying degree in different communities. Standards of sexual legitimacy can vary greatly and often include procreation, intimacy, consent, personal fulfillment, heteronormativity and/ or religious duty (Miller & Vance 2004). In societies where sexual legitimacy is mostly based on procreation, young people’s sexuality (in particular for girls) can sometimes be more easily accepted or normalized at a young age (Coumans 2013). However, young people’s sexuality usually raises concerns and especially among the older generations because it is seen as constituting a threat to young people (Harding 2008, Naafs & White 2012). Age is then often becoming the determining category of maturity. Kesby et al. (2006) argued that in many societies sexual activity (and even knowledge) is usually portrayed as un-childlike behavior since its association with the realm of adulthood. Despite the fact that non-adult sexuality has not been widely accepted, the age at which young people become sexually active is dropping worldwide (Kesby et al. 2006). Kesby et al. (2006: 194) further argue that in any society, “the real life contexts in which sex actually takes place are highly complex, often marked by inequalities of power, and always emotionally charged”. Coumans (2013) shows that legal minimum age settings in policies can have double standards regarding moral judgments towards gender and sexuality. Religion and secular frameworks are also seen to play a role in shaping laws when it comes to regulating sexuality (Miller & Vance 2004). Marriage is often seen to be linked to the expected gender roles for women in a society. According to Hinshelwood (2001), a woman’s status is usually determined by her role as either a daughter, mother or wife in her family. The time that a girl is ready for marriage is sometimes measured by symbols that are seen as typical gender roles for a woman (Aisyah & Parker 2014). Symbols that indicate this are the onset of menstruation and with that the capability to reproduce and the ability to perform domestic tasks. In Indonesia, motherhood and the rearing of children are often seen as an integral part of the feminine social identity (Bennett 2005). Marriage for some women is also associated with adult status and greater autonomy and mobility (ibid.).

If we acknowledge that early marriage is influenced by social processes that take place in young girls’ lives, then we cannot ignore local understandings of gender relations and sexuality. How young girls perceive early marriage may parallel values and norms around gender and sexuality in their society, gender based ideal behavior and responsibilities that are expected by their parents, family or community.

2.5 Girls’ education and sexual reproductive health
The link between formal education and early marriage is often made in literature on early marriage patterns. Formal schooling is seen as one of the most effective ways of delaying the age of girls getting married (Svanemyr et al. 2012; Rembe et al. 2011). Recent studies also show that changing marriage patterns are related to levels of educational attainment for women (Naafs & White 2012; Jensen & Thornton 2003). When a girl reaches a higher level of education, it is more likely that she will marry later. This is especially the case for completing secondary school and even more likely in case of completing tertiary education (Brown 2014).

Lack of education for girls is argued to increase vulnerability due to lack of economic independence and necessary skills that are required to negotiate in decision-making processes around marriage (Erulkar 2013; Murphy Graham & Leal 2015). These ‘skills’ are often explained to be useful for girls in the light of
participating in economic activities and in order to make their own decisions about their lives (MacDonald 2015). Lloyd and Mensch (1999) further argued that girls can acquire more autonomy and negotiation skills by going to school, affecting their decisions on if, whom and when to marry. According to ‘Girls Not Brides’ (2016), early marriage often means that girls’ access to education is limited and as a result that their right to an education, to work, to live a healthy and fulfilling life and their ability to contribute to her family and community are is denied.

Although most studies reveal that girls’ education is a key strategy to address early marriage, the representation of girls as in need of saving and as a site of investment has been critiqued as well (MacDonald 2015). In her recent study on the calls for educating girls in the ‘Third World’, MacDonald (2015), for example, argues that through western and gendered discourses of development, girls are portrayed as sites of investments with a call for support from other Western donors. These calls for educating a ‘Third World’ girl point out the need for an intervention to “save these girls from a future in which they are perpetually oppressed” (MacDonald 2015: 14). The rationale behind the “calls for girls’ education” is often questioned as they often seem to focus on giving girls access to education, but seem rather sparse on details of what education should look like for girls (Kabeer 1999).

Despite the debatable rationale behind girls’ education, recent literature shows how early marriage patterns and strengthening girls’ agency are often linked to education for girls (see Murphy Graham & Leal 2015; Dahl 2010). This thesis will therefore look at how the girls and the rest of the community, represented in this study, perceive (the importance of) girls’ education.

**Sexual reproductive health and education**

In the light of recent early marriage debates, the focus on educating girls specifically on sexual and reproductive health matters has also gained more importance (Girls not Brides 2016, Green 2014). Especially in Indonesia promoting sex education for young people has been argued lately as an important strategy in reducing the number of early marriages and early pregnancies (Nasril & Samosir 2011, Holzner & Octomo 2004). Sex education and access to SRH services are seen to provide girls with the necessary skills and knowledge to make better and informed decisions regarding their life, sexual activities and marriage (Girls Not Brides 2015). Giving young people access to SRH services and education remains a problem in many countries and is often especially the case for the poorest girls in a society (Obaid 2009). Political will and support from religious leaders often lack in expanding and improving sexuality education (Altinyelken & Olthoff 2014, Bennett 2014).

Aggleton and Campbell (2000) have argued that sexuality education is a tool to (1) receive knowledge about sexual reproductive health, (2) to be able to make informed decisions about parenthood and sexuality, and (3) to be (more) comfortable with one’s own sexuality. One strategy to provide sex education to young people is through formal education. Although there are different opinions on the exact impact of the role of formal education in efforts to contribute to young people’s knowledge on SRH, schools are argued to be an important setting for receiving sexuality education since large numbers of young people can be reached at ones and they can give access to counseling services for young people as well (Altinyelken & Olthoff
Schools are seen to have an important role in socializing children and young people on issues such as sexuality and gender relations (ibid.). A recent study showed how young people often develop gendered identities and opinions about sex through friendship and interactions with their peers at school (Bhana & Pattman, 2011).

However, other scholars point out the complexity of sexuality and argue that offering access to SRH knowledge and services through schools alone is not enough to empower girls. Promoting SRH through the formal education system misses out on (marginalized) young people who are out of school, thus showing the need for alternative ways of promoting sex education and SRH services (Aggleton & Campbell 2000).

This thesis will examine what the perceived role and importance of sexuality education for both married and unmarried girls and for in and out of school-girls is in relation to girls’ agency and early marriage practices.

2.6 Concluding remarks
This chapter described the theoretical background upon which this research is built. The main debates in the literature on early marriage have been presented, which highlight that early marriage practices are often looked at from a human-rights perspective that obscure complex social processes and dynamic subjectivities of girls involved. The dominant binary accounts of violator - victim, individual - collective rights and consent - coercion are argued to be countered by looking at local constructions and perceptions of gender and sexuality and acknowledging girls’ agency. Furthermore, the relation between (sexuality) education for girls and early marriage practices has been discussed. In the next chapter the methodological framework of this study is presented.
3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction
This chapter first presents an overview of the research questions (3.2), epistemological position (3.3) and the conceptual scheme on which this research is built (3.4). Followed by this, the methods that I used in conducting this research (3.5) and the process of data analysis (3.6) are explained. Finally, the different quality requirements for qualitative research, that were taken into consideration and the limitations and ethics of this research, are discussed (3.7).

3.2 Research questions
Based on the previous explained theoretical framework this research aimed to explain a deeper understanding of the context of early marriage in Indonesia. The main research objective was to examine the process of early marriage and explain the agency of girls with regard to decisions around early marriage. This research is based upon the following questions, which will be answered in the following chapters (6,7 and 8):

*How can we understand girls’ agency in decision-making processes with regard to early marriage against the background of local understandings of gender and sexuality, and religious norms in rural West Java?*

- What does marriage mean to girls in Sukabumi?
- To what extent do girls exercise agency in the decision-making processes leading up to an early marriage?
- How do local understandings of gender structures, and sexual and religious norms influence girls’ agentic space?
- What is the perceived role of (sex) education in efforts to expand the (space for) girls’ agency?

3.3 Conceptual scheme
The following conceptual scheme highlights the main concepts that my research is centered around. The local context consists of the sociocultural norms and cultural specific constructions of gender roles and sexual morality norms, these provide the main context in which early marriage and girls’ agency in this study is situated in. The context of early marriage shows how dominant and/ or changing sociocultural norms presumably will influence the way in which girls exercise their agency in regard to the decision-making process leading up to early marriage and at the same time how their agency can also be constrained by this context. Early marriage and girls’ agency are bi-directional linked, which means that girls’ agency is perceived to influence the way girls make decisions to get married. At the same time an early marriage for a girl can also influence the way she exercises her agency, strengthen or limit her agency in her married life.

The conceptual scheme further shows the level of efforts and programs to reduce child marriage. Based on the assumption that (international) NGOs implement programs focusing on empowering girls in order to strengthen their agency (Unite Against Child Marriage 2015). In the context of Indonesia improving
girls’ schooling and SRH are presumed to be main factors that can increase the space for girls’ agency to make decisions about their lives. Strengthening girls’ agency is then again seen as an important force to target and reduce early marriage practices.

![Figure 1 conceptual scheme](image)

**3.4 Epistemological position**

This research departs from the social constructivism theory, which centers around the meaning making practices of actors (Mc Mahon 1997). From a social constructivist point of view people are shaped by their experiences and interactions with others. These interactions within their social context are reflected in the perceptions and behavior of people, meaning that knowledge of social reality is thus a human product. Although the idea of a single reality is not rejected by constructivist authors, they rather argue that more or multiple realities can exist next to each other (Mc Mahon 1997). These ideas deriving from the social constructivist theory are relevant for this thesis because my research is qualitative and focuses on capturing people’s perceptions, meanings and lived realities within their own local and social context.

Since this research deals with decision-making processes around early marriage, the qualitative way of this study can further facilitate an in-depth understanding of the behavior of girls and their reasons for acting in a certain way (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, Creswell 2003). This research therefore aims to understand girls’ perceptions of early marriage and tries to capture their experiences that are shaped in their local context. Thus, their perceptions and stories form the center of this study. Through engaging as much as possible with my participants and living in the village where most of this research was conducted, I tried to gain in-depth knowledge of the girls’ lives and the cultural setting of their stories.

**3.5 Research methods**

This research is, as the above has clarified, mainly focused on qualitative research methods in order to collect in-depth data to understand the different perceptions of young girls within one community. In-depth
interviews, focus group discussions and participatory methods are the main methods that I used. This research still follows a mixed-method approach since different qualitative methods were used in order to support and complement each other.

**Sampling**

In order to find girls that could participate in this research I used the following two sampling techniques, purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Since most of my participants were young girls and the topic was rather sensitive, I started by using purposive sampling technique. According to Bryman (2008), this kind of sampling focuses on interviewing those people who are most relevant to the research question. In addition, Murphy Graham and Leal (2015) explain how purposive sampling focuses on selecting participants or groups of participants that you can establish the most productive relationship with. Establishing a productive relationship with participants in this study meant that the selection for the interviews with married girls had to be based on the following characteristics, marital status and age. I selected girls that were married before they turned 18 years old. Since the Desa (village) consisted of many neighborhoods and these neighborhoods sometimes had their own characteristics (i.e. poverty rate or religious background), I tried to include girls from all the different neighborhoods.

For the sample of unmarried girls I selected 2 different Junior High Schools to find girls that could participate in this study. The schools were good and neutral places to get in contact with girls because they felt comfortable amongst their peers and girls and boys could easily be separated by different classrooms. Since religious beliefs and values are so important in the village I chose one public Junior High School and one Islamic Junior High School. I selected girls (that were willing to participate) from the last class of the different schools that were in the same age category (between 14-16 years). Later on I learned that I was missing out on an important category of girls not attending the formal Junior High Schools but Pesantren schools (Islamic boarding schools), so I also included girls from these schools in my sample.

To complement the purposive sampling technique I also used the ‘snowball sampling’ strategy which relies on social contacts between individuals in order to trace additional participants in a certain area (Bryman 2008: 459). Working together with a local female research partner who already had conducted research in the village before and the contacts established by the research team of Mies Grijns, made it easier to get access to people in the village. During the first weeks I built a good relationship with the head of the village, a few community representatives and a healthcare worker who helped me get in touch with girls that could participate in this study. One of the shortcomings of these sampling techniques is that it does not allow me to make many claims about the representativeness of my data. However, Murphy Graham and Leal (2015) argued in their study that making claims on how ‘typical’ or ‘representative’ in-depth case studies on early marriage are, is unlikely to happen in most qualitative studies. The goal of this research therefore is not to generalize findings to other girls around the world or even other girls in Indonesia, but rather to theorize how girls exercise agency in an early marriage.
In-depth interviews

The most important part of this research was focused on getting insight in the process of early marriage, the position of a girl in the community and her agency in regard to the decisions that she could or could not make during this process. The most suitable method to collect this data was by using in-depth or semi-structured interviews. Bernard (2011: 70) describes a semi-structured interview as an interview that is open ended but at the same time follows a general script and can cover a list of topics. I chose this method to be my main source of data collection because it gave space to my participants to raise (other) issues that they felt were important while at the same time ensuring that the topics of their stories were still in line with my research focus (Bryman 2008).

In total I conducted 40 interviews which all lasted between 30 minutes to one and a half hours. Giving capturing the stories of married girls was one of my main objectives, I did multiple in-depth interviews with 16 married girls, which were often spread over different days. Besides this, I conducted 10 interviews with unmarried girls between the ages of 12 to 18 years. The other 14 interviews were with healthcare workers, school staff and other community members (i.e. parents, religious leaders, elders) to support the data gathered from the interviews with the girls and to develop a better understanding of the broader context of their stories.

Most of the interviews with the married girls took place in their own houses. Sometimes we would move somewhere else if the situation was too crowded with other family members. For most of the other interviews I visited the participants in their own house as well unless they requested otherwise. The healthcare workers and school staff were all interviewed in their own work place (i.e. health clinics or schools).

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

In order to support the data gathered by the individual interviews I also made extensive use of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The focus groups allowed me to collect more insight information from my participants. According to Bryman (2008), a focus group can create a space for participants to jointly define a concept that is central to the research, and where they can learn from and challenge each other’s ideas. The FGDs were mainly used to engage with junior high school students. The FGDs proved to be very valuable for my research as they gave the girls a comfortable space in which they could express themselves among their peers and were not alone at the center of attention.

In total I conducted nine FGDs, which all took place in classrooms of the different schools. Eight of the FGDs were held with groups of 10 to 12 junior high school students (between the ages of 14-16 years old) from one public and one Islamic school (four with girls and four with boys). Although my main focus was on girls’ views, I also conducted FGDs with boys, in which I covered similar topics. The idea to also conduct FGDs with boys was one that was proposed by the schools (director and one of the English teachers), that is they believed it was important that I spoke to boys as well. Carrying out FGDs with boys did indeed prove to be invaluable as it provided me with richer data with regard to community norms and
values concerning gender and sexuality. The last FGD was with a group girls from Pesantren, which is a more traditional Islamic school.

The aim of the FGDs was to a) understand gender structures and norms as well as girls’ ideas for the future, and b) understand how marriage is perceived in the village, when girls (and boys) should get married, who the most power has in making decisions and for what reason girls marry early in this region according to the students.

Participatory methods

I used a range of participatory methods during the first FGDs that I conducted with girls and boys in both the public and Islamic junior high schools. Participatory methods are increasingly used in research with young people because these are seen as a useful way in which to reduce unequal distributions of power between the researcher and research participants, and to allow for co-construction of knowledge, that is constructing knowledge with young people rather than for them (Fox 2013: 986). An additional important reason for using participatory activities, and especially during the first FGDs, was to make the girls and boys feel more comfortable and freer to express themselves. In addition, I used storytelling methods in FGDs with girls during which they could write a small story about their idealized future and hopes for their further lives, and also let them write a story about why they thought it was a good or bad thing for a girl to marry at a young age and why. Sharing their stories in this way was a useful method because they could write say something in a creative way without it having to be too personal. For me it was useful to read all their stories later on, also from the ones that were more quiet in the discussions.

Another participatory method that I used was similar to designing a concept map. During a group meeting I would divide the girls in smaller groups and give them a large piece of paper to let them brainstorm about ‘marriage’, I would ask them to write down anything and pay attention to questions as ‘why people get married’, ‘when they should get married’ and ‘who makes the decision to get married’. Because the girls had some time to think about it and chat with each other they would write down a lot of thoughts on the paper. Afterwards I put the groups back together again and we discussed among all of them the differences in their maps.
Participants observation and field notes

Participant observation was not used as a main method, but more as a method that supported the data I gathered during the interviews, FGDs and participatory exercises. This method is described as the participation of a researcher within the research setting for a certain period of time to actively learn about the local context and lives of the participants (Bernard 2011). Together with the informal conversations I had with girls in the village and my field notes, this method gave me better insight in the daily lives of the girls in the village. Since I lived in the village where the research took place and because of my status as a woman, I was included by the girls and women in the village to join in their daily activities, for example: helping with the household chores, cooking, going to the farm fields, taking care of children or brothers and or sisters, attending village meetings and visiting healthcare clinics. Through these activities and many informal conservation I was able to observe the gender relations in the community and learn about the position of girls and women. It was also a good way of cross-checking the information that girls gave me during an interview and to see if their actual behavior in their daily life matched. Bryman (2012: 271) also argues that participant observation can further address the gap between stated and actual behavior.

3.6 Data analysis

The majority of data analysis took place in the Netherlands when I returned from fieldwork. Qualitative data obtained in Bahasa Indonesia was translated to English by my local research partner. To prevent any data gaps or inconsistencies, I transcribed the collected data within a few days after the interview or FGD took place. All the interviews and FGDs were recorded and digitally stored on an external flash-disk. During the fieldwork I already started with small parts of the analysis, describing different themes and categories in my notes and linking these with parts of the interviews of my participants. Upon return, the deeper analysis was done by using different coding strategies. Since all of my data was qualitative, coding seemed like a useful technique for data analysis.

Firstly, I started with open coding, which means that no pre-defined categories were used in order to categorize the general patterns and concepts that were revealed during the interviews or FGDs. Secondly, I made use of thematic coding of the topics that were earlier defined in my theoretical framework and research.
questions such as, ‘(early) marriage’, ‘gender perceptions’, ‘sexuality perceptions’ and ‘agency regarding marriage’. I printed out all the interviews and organized them by the different themes and quotes of participants. By doing so, it was easier for me to cluster themes and define the outline for the different empirical chapters (5 and 6). Field notes and the visual data I had gathered through the participatory methods was further used to triangulate the data from the interviews and FGDs.

3.7 Research quality, limitations and ethical choices

Research quality

Bryman (2008: 377) described different quality criteria that would help further ensure the quality of research in the social sciences. I used the following five criteria for qualitative research to evaluate the process of data collection of this study: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity.

Credibility

Credibility is the extent to which findings are presented in a realistic and believable way (Bryman 2008). As described above, during the eight weeks that I stayed in my research site I made use of different qualitative methods that could complement each other. By using these different methods I further helped to ensure triangulation of data and in the end the validity of the collected data. As there is a lack of qualitative research on the perspectives of girls with regards to early marriage (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015, Callaghan et al. 2015), I focused on the above mentioned qualitative methods and did not include (other) quantitative methods to collect data.

Because talking about marriage and relationships was sometimes quite sensitive and personal for the girls, I went at least two or three times to most of the girls that I interviewed. Most of the times I started to get to know them and their families on the first meeting, the second meeting we would do an interview, and then I would come back to finish the interview and spend some time with them (often helping with some household chores and just informal chatting). This helped me to create a better relationship with the research participants, to gain more trust and to get a deeper understanding of their situation and their stories.

Transferability, dependability and confirmability

Transferability is the extent to which findings hold in another context or setting (Bryman 2008). The findings of this study are probably not directly representative for a larger area since I only had eight weeks for data collection and decided to focus on one village because I wanted to create space for my participants to really tell their stories. However, it does give a clear account of the struggles and lives of these girls in a specific local context which in some sense will be representative and relevant for other girls in a similar situation who deal with similar problems in their lives. Dependability further includes a presentation of the reliability and transparency of a research (Bryman 2008). The interviews and data collection through FGDs were all recorded and transcribed on the same day or within a few days after the data were collected. I always used a list of topics that I would cover in the interviews so that data from the different participants could more easily be used for analysis. However, I also acknowledge that my research was time- and context-specific and especially would be influenced by my role as a researcher.
Confirmability means striving for objectivity and being open about the subjectivity of the position you have as a researcher (Bryman 2008). As a young female researcher from a ‘western’ country you always have your own background and values that may create some power differentials or keeps some distance between you and the participants. I tried to be aware of these limitations and to make sure my background did not influence my research too much in order to strive for confirmability in my research. For example, I worked together with a local female research partner who is also a researcher herself on the same topic and in the same village as she is part of the running research team of Mies Grijns and Van Vollenhoven Institute. This helped to create trust between us and our participants (especially because we are young women which was an advantage for talking to these girls). We always had a discussion about the interview or FGD afterwards to make sure I understood everything correctly. We would pose new questions or un-clarities and went back to talk again to our participants to cross-check statements and findings from before. We also tried to change the location of our interviews because some girls were not really able to talk openly in their own house because parents, their husbands or other family members were always present. In some cases we could go out for a walk or invited them over somewhere else to chat with us. These things contributed to the overall quality of the data and also to create a good relationship with our participants.

Authenticity

Authenticity is about contributing to the fairness and interest of those people who participate in a study (Bryman 2008). In terms of fairness and contributing to the interests of the community and group of participants I did not try to gain a relationship with my participants that was solely based on them sharing their stories with me. Because I lived in the same village as my participants I saw them many times and joined them in different activities that were not directly related to my research. Many of the girls were excited that I was staying in their village and that I was interested in their lives and wanted me to join them in social events that were going on in the village (for example attending a wedding or visiting new born babies).

Because the two different Junior High Schools gave me access to the students and offered me their classrooms to use for my FGDs, I also helped English teachers with their classes which gave the students the chance to improve their English speaking skills by practicing with me. The girls from the Junior High Schools that participated in the FGDs were also invited over to my house in the village for ‘informal girl gatherings’ after school time. Since the two schools that I visited many times were interested in my research and especially the role of education and teachers when it comes to discussions about early marriage and early pregnancies, I promised to share the research results with them later on.

Limitations and ethical considerations

One of the limitations of this research remains the language barrier that I dealt with as I did not speak sufficient Bahasa Indonesia and the level of English of most of my participants was not that high. Although I worked together really well with my local research partner who translated everything from Bahasa Indonesia
(and sometimes from Bahasa Sunda) to English, it is likely that certain words did get lost in the process of translation and a second layer of interpretation can never completely be avoided. Besides this, some girls may have given socially acceptable answers to my questions. Especially when I did an interview with a married girl in the neighborhood of her family (in law) or her husband, I could see she had trouble to speak openly. To overcome this limitation I tried to create a neutral and safe location for the girls to talk. However, a few of the girls did not get permission from their husbands to speak to me and my research partner about their married life anymore after our first meeting. In these cases we decided that it was better not to meet alone with the girl anymore or even not to contact the girl again because we did not want to cause any trouble in their marriage and personal life. Unterhalter (2012) argued that research focusing on hearing girls’ voices must always pay attention to the limits of what is possible to say within a particular social context. Some of these situations also showed the gender structures and cultural constraints for girls which was a big part of the context of early marriage in this area.

Furthermore, the content of most of my interviews and to some extent the FGDs was centered around the sensitive and personal topics of marriage, relationships and sexuality. Especially the latter subject is a taboo subject to talk openly about in Indonesia and especially in this rural area. Therefore, I always ensured the girls that the things we would discuss would only be used for the purpose of this research and that their names and other personal information would be treated anonymously. Names of girls and of the village have therefore all been changed in this thesis. In addition, prior informed consent was obtained from the participants before the interviews and FGDs took place.

Other ethical choices that I had to make were around negotiating my own position and the role that I had as a researcher in the village. Firstly, the village that I stayed in was quite conservative Islamic and as a woman I had to make sure to dress properly and follow the rules not to go out alone in the nighttime. When in the village, I always made sure that I planned interviews or FGDs during the day and would be back home before it turned dark. Secondly, I had to decide to what degree I could interfere in the personal lives of my participants. One of the girls asked for help because she felt that her husband was not taking good care of her and her baby. Although me and my research partner gave some emotional support and advice we felt that we were not in the position to further help her because we wanted to avoid causing any social disruption in the community.

3.8 Concluding remarks
In this chapter I explained my methodological positioning and the different qualitative research methods I used following from that, in-depth interviews, FGDs, participatory methods and observations and field notes. Furthermore, I tried to clarify the way in which my data has been analyzed. The chapter concludes with an overview of the reflections on the quality of the research process, the limitations and ethical concerns that should be kept in mind while reading the next chapters of this thesis.
4 RESEARCH CONTEXT

4.1 Introduction
This chapter follows up on the methodological context by giving more insight into the context of this fieldwork and research place. Section 4.2 provides general background information on Indonesia and the broader research area. The next section (4.3) shows the legal context of marriage in Indonesia, followed by an introduction to the education system in Indonesia (4.4). The next sections (4.5 and 4.6) reveal more information about the actual research site and accessibility.

4.2 Background information on Indonesia and West Java
This research was conducted in the rural area of West Java in Indonesia. Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world with an estimated population of around 240 million people (Unicef 2014). The country consists of more than 300 ethnic groups that are scattered around the different islands. Indonesia is also the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. Officially Indonesia has been ranked as an lower middle income country by the World Bank (2005). However, nearly 40% of the Indonesians still live just above the national poverty line (IFAD 2014). Although there have been many improvements in the healthcare and education sectors, high rates of maternal mortality, child malnutrition, inadequate access to water and education are persistent among many poor communities. Almost 60% of the total population lives in rural areas where farming still is the main occupation (IFAD 2014). Most of Indonesia’s rural poor live on the densely populated island of Java.

The region of West Java is inhabited by mostly Sundanese people and fewer other ethnic groups such as the Javanese. The majority of people in the region of West Java are Muslim (Suryadinata et al. 2003). Early marriages are still common in West Java. According to Unicef (2011), approximately 35% of young women in rural areas of West Java are married before they turn 18 years. Because West Java is a densely populated area with high rates of young people this is also one of the provinces in Indonesia with the highest absolute number of early marriages. Early marriages in Indonesia have been and are still more prevalent in rural rather than urban areas which is often explained by the greater availability of choices and education facilities for girls in urban areas (Unicef 2011).

4.3 Legal context of marriage in Indonesia
The 1974 Marriage Law of Indonesia holds the minimum age for girls to marry at 16 years and for boys at 19 years, thus contradicting the set minimum age of 18 years by the UN in the Human Rights Declaration (Wright Webster 2015). The Marriage Law also contradicts another Indonesian law on child protection, which states that it is not allowed for anyone to marry below the age of 18 years. There are recent debates in Indonesia on increasing the minimum age for girls and national human rights activists have called for the minimum age of marriage to be set at the same age for both sexes. The younger legal age to marry for a girl is understood by many activists as a form of institutionalized gender discrimination, especially since the harmful consequences are seen to be worse for girls (Bennet & Andajani-Sutjahjo 2007). Recent studies also indicate that the different minimum age for boys and girls reflects the (discriminatory) expected gendered roles and behavior in society and within a family (Aisyah & Parker 2014; Blackbum & Bessell 2007). The
Marriage Law of 1974 namely describes what kind of role a husband and wife should pursue within their marriage and family life. A husband should be the head of the family and is responsible for protecting his wife and the wife is supposed to be a housewife (Aisyah & Parker 2014).

In Indonesia it is even possible to marry at an earlier age when people receive permission from religious courts. The dispensation for underage marriage is often granted to ameliorate social stigma due to premarital pregnancy and to reduce the number of babies born illegitimately (Wright Webster 2015). Local authorities sometimes also falsify documents that raise the age of a child (ibid.). At the research site of this study, many girls did not have a birth certificate either, which makes it hard to see the actual amount of early marriages happening. Marshan et al. (2010) state that for the minimum legal age for marriage in Indonesia to have real meaning, it needs to be accepted and adopted by religious authorities and community leaders since marriage in many rural areas and villages remains a religious affair instead of a state-based affair.

4.4 Education in Indonesia

All children in Indonesia are required to complete nine years of basic schooling (Behrman et al. 2002). This means six years of SD (elementary school) and three years of SMP (junior high school) for children from approximately 6-15 years. The other three years of SMA (senior high school) are not made compulsory by the government yet. The commitment of the government to promote the importance of education has resulted mainly in an increase in primary school enrolments and illiteracy eradication (Naafs & White 2012). Secondary and tertiary school enrolment rates remain low, especially for those in rural areas. Although elementary school and junior high school are thus compulsory this does not mean that girls actually stay in school until they finish their junior high school.

Indonesia has, besides the public schools, a large system of private and religious schools. In the rural area of West Java the importance of religious schooling is big. Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) are still very common in the area. These schools provide a more ‘traditional’ model of schooling, which is based upon transferring Islamic knowledge often in a non-grading style (Srimulyani 2013). Some Pesantren nowadays have integrated the national curriculum into their religious teaching system, but there are still many solely based on the religious teaching and learning practice (Lukens-Bull 2001). The morals of these schools derive from religious and socio-cultural aspects of the society. An education in a traditional Pesantren often means for girls preparation for maternal duties and learning about the concept of becoming a good wife and mother for future generations (Srimulyani 2007). The role of ‘traditional’ Pesantren schools is often not only to provide a religious education but also to protect students from unwanted external influences. These ‘unwanted external influences’ are often explained as negative effects of globalization and modern technology, which are associated with the formal education system (Asrohah 2011). Wright Webster (2010) explains that the intrusion of ‘western’ values can be seen as a tangible threat to more conservative people in Indonesia that associate these with the moral decay of Indonesian society (often referred to the rise of free courtship and free sex).
4.5 Research site

My fieldwork took place in the Sub-District Sukaraja of Sukabumi, which is located in the rural part of the Province West Java, Indonesia. Most of my data was gathered in the village Cibacang, where I also lived during the eight weeks of research. This village is located on the slope of a mountain and has an estimated population of 7400 (Kabupaten Sukabumi 2014). Agriculture still makes up for the most important income source (peasants and laborers in the fields), followed by factory laborers, informal sellers and angkot (minibus) drivers. About 40% of the people living in Cibacang are considered to be (very) poor (Grijns et al. 2016).

An estimated of around 32%\(^1\) of the women is married before the age of 18 years (ibid.). This is comparable to the average percentage in West Java but significantly higher than the estimated average amount of early marriages in Indonesia, which is around 25% (Unicef 2014). This number of early marriages in the village is however only an estimate since many early marriages are not officially registered, especially when a girl has not reached the age of 16 years. Although early marriage numbers in this region are high, there are no NGOs active in the nearby region working on issues related to early marriage.

4.6 Access to the field

Since there were no organizations directly working in this area, my initial contact was with a running research team coordinated by Mies Grijns from the Van Vollenhoven Institute, Leiden Law School working on the topic of early marriage in the area. They offered me the possibility to conduct my research within their research site and helped me to get started, providing me with guidance on the content of my research and finding a research partner to conduct my fieldwork with.

In the village I worked together with 2 junior high schools (one public and one Islamic) through which I was able to get in contact with many girls. The Puskesmas (health clinic) in the Sukaraja District and a few small healthcare clinics supported my research too by offering me to use their clinics to get in contact with young married pregnant girls. Both the schools and the healthcare clinics were useful places to start the research and get familiar in the village area because they seemed safe areas in which I could easily speak to women and make further contact.

\(^{1}\) 32% of the ever married women before 18 years old, in the age group of 20-24 years (child marriage prevalence standard).
4.7 Concluding remarks

This chapter gave an overview of the main context upon which this research is based. In the chapter the legal context of early marriage in Indonesia was discussed, which shows a contradictory message on the minimum legal age for marriage. Further, this chapter has shown how the educational system has been changing mostly due to governments’ efforts to increase access for both girls and boys to formal education. The next two chapters (5 and 6) present the most important empirical findings of this study and will look at perceptions of both married and unmarried girls regarding (early) marriage, agency and education.
5 GIRLS’ PERCEPTIONS ON GROWING UP AND GETTING MARRIED

5.1 Introduction
The previous chapters discussed the theoretical background and the methodology of this research. In this chapter, girls’ perceptions on the meaning of marriage and their views on the broader process of growing up as a woman in the rural area of Sukabumi in West Java will be further explored. The data discussed in this chapter was generated during individual interviews and different FGDs in which around 40 girls in total from the Sub-District Sukaraja in Sukabumi took part. To find out about the lives and experiences of girls in Sukabumi, I talked with girls between the ages of 14 to 18 years as well as a number of older women from the same district. This chapter shows a selection of their accounts, in which I present the views of both in and out-of-school girls from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds. In addition to this, the perspectives of mostly (still) unmarried girls with regard to ideas about marriage are presented in this chapter.

The first section discusses how girls perceive marriage in general and its relation to Islam (5.2). The second section shows the discussions around the idealized age for marriage (5.3), followed by the third section which focuses on the perceived gender structures and its consequences for the lives of girls in the area (5.4). The fourth section pays attention to the views of girls on relationships and sexuality and how this related to views on when to get married (5.5). The fifth section examines the obstacles for girls in making further decisions about their future (5.6). The last section concludes with a summary of the main points of this chapter (5.7).

5.2 The meaning of marriage and the importance in Islam
Marriage for girls in Sukabumi was mainly perceived and described as establishing a legitimate relationship with a boy within Islam. The girls saw getting married in life as a responsibility and obligation for every Muslim girl or boy. All the girls from different backgrounds that I spoke to immediately referred to the social importance of getting married in their life as a Muslim. One of the school-going girls explained the importance of marriage for a Muslim girl during one of the FGDs as follows:

“Marriage is a gift from god. It means a man being responsible for a woman. It is about two hearts and families becoming one and you can only do it one time. Basically… it is the rule in Islam about making a new and good family. Marriage makes your life complete” (Nesti, 15, school girl MTS Darmut)

This quote shows how marriage is perceived as something every Muslim has to do in its life. Marriage was explained by the girls as the space for a man and woman in which a new family is created, with the emphasis on procreation. The girls all referred to the expectation of a woman to have a baby soon after she is married. Procreation is often named as the main function of marriage in Islamic context for men and women (Idrus 2004). For the girls participating in this study, the idea of getting married seemed also directly linked to motherhood and pregnancy. However, marriage was not just seen as the making of a new family for a husband and wife since many of the participants also mentioned the wider social importance of getting
married. According to the girls, marriage also portrays the making of a new deep relationship between two families in the community which is not only good for the status of the girl but also for her family. As Aisyah and Parker (2014) have also shown, in a region that is strongly Islamic as this rural area of West Java, the strengthening of family ties is often seen as an important part of getting married.

Some girls attending the non-Islamic Junior High School mentioned the concept of (romantic) love, cinta, but they would explain afterwards that this is not the most important part of a marriage to them. As Wright Webster (2015) has suggested, it is common that the notion of marriage based on desires of romantic love for girls in Indonesia is reduced to the idea of complying to community and family’s expectations. The girls in this study further explained that making a legitimate relationship by getting married would create a good status for themselves as women in Islam and society, which is portrayed by the following quote:

“If you have found a nice boy or have a boyfriend you should get married soon to avoid gossip… Fitnah… Everything we do and how we behave is visible in society that is why you have to make a settled and halal relationship” (Irma 15, school girl MTS Darmut)

This quote explains the social importance of maintaining a good status as a woman. Many of the girls that I spoke with during the FGDs were talking about the concept fitnah which was explained by them as something like shame or bad gossip which can be portrayed by any wrong behavior or socially undesirable behavior of girls in an Islamic society. Fitnah mainly occurs when a girl has engages in a relationship with a boy before marriage, which was therefore something that should be avoided to maintain a good status.

5.3 The ideal age for marriage

The perceptions among the participating girls in this study on the ideal time for a girl to enter a marriage differed slightly. According to most school-going girls from the public junior high school (SMPN2 Sukaraja), the age range of 20 to 25 years was seen as the most ideal one for a woman to get married. During this time girls would have had enough time to finish their education and would be ready for the responsibilities of a marriage. This view resonates with the idea of an universal childhood, which is characterized by a period in life in which children should go to school and not have the burden of adult responsibilities yet (Kesby et al. 2006). Mostly the girls that were in school thought that early marriage was a bad thing to happen. They said that early marriage happens when a girl is still under 17 or 18 years. One of the girls shared her feelings about early marriage:

“Early marriage is bad because the girl is too young to marry and to have a baby… She should study and play first”

(Vena, 14, school girl SMPN Sukaraja)

This quote is also consistent with the human rights perspective on early marriage which focuses on the violation of the rights of a girl and the negative health consequences (Callaghan et al. 2015; Le Strat et al. 2011). Many of the girls showed their concern that if a girl would marry at an early age, her body would not be ready to have a baby yet. This view appears to have been shaped largely by the ideas they get from the
teachers in formal schools. Girls from SMPN2 explained that some teachers sometimes briefly mention the dangers of early marriage and pregnancy in biology classes. One girl elaborated that “early marriage is not healthy especially for the body because it means having a baby… and this is not good for the uterus” (Salma, 15 years, school girl SMPN2).

Besides this, school-going girls from an Islamic Junior High School (MTS) and Pesantren schools put more emphasis on the idea that getting married is linked to the transition from childhood to adulthood within Islam. The transition to adulthood in their eyes was not directly marked by a certain age but rather by a change of the body and mind. During a FGD with school-going girls from MTS, ‘adulthood’ was mostly described by the Islamic concept baligh, which means that the female body should be fully grown and is measured by girls having their menstruation and thus the readiness to have a baby. Another concept that was used during this FGD is akhil, which means that the mindset of a girl should also be sufficiently adult-like. The girls explained that: “a girl should have been able to develop wise thinking skills, for example through gaining knowledge first by reading books and learning from (religious) teachers about life” (school-going girl MTS, 15 years).

The ideal time for marriage for girls from the Islamic junior high school was then linked to the maturity and ‘adult’ status of a girl which was indicated by her capability to have children but also the capability of performing domestic roles. One of the girls explained the following during a FGD:

“Marriage it’s also about being adult… like having more responsibilities and having children and to keep a family”

(Ani, 16, school girl MTS Darmut)

This quote shows that for many school-going girls, marriage was seen as a marker for adulthood since they would receive new responsibilities once they would be married.

5.4 Growing up as a woman

The girls in this study all acknowledged that there is a difference between being (and growing up as) a girl or a boy. This was explained by the girls through a list of tasks and factors that differentiated girls from boys that they came up with during one of the FGDs. The following table shows the main points that the school-going girls presented:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics and tasks</th>
<th>Anak perempuan (girl)</th>
<th>Anak laki-laki (boy)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helping her mother in the house</td>
<td>Playing and gaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More diligent (because she will be a housewife)</td>
<td>Lazy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things that you are not allowed to do</td>
<td>Stay inside</td>
<td>Going outside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Going outside alone</td>
<td>Doing bad things to girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have a relationship with a boy</td>
<td>Have a relationship with a girl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the different group sessions the girls mentioned that childhood is a different time for boys and girls since girls have to be more responsible and help their mothers with household tasks and taking care of siblings. They explained that boys have more freedom to play. Girls on the other hand have to prepare for their future already at an early age to learn about how to become a housewife and mother. This view is linked to the local perceptions of gendered roles within the family and household that are prevalent in the area. Symbols of womanhood and perceived gender roles of women are often used to indicate the readiness of Indonesian women to marry (Bennett 2005).

Other differences were seen in the place where social activities took place, girls mentioned that they were mostly encouraged to stay inside the house and not spend too much time on the streets. For boys however it was more common and accepted to go outside. The different tasks and characteristics assigned to boys and girls by the girls participating in this study resonates with the dominant discourse on traditional gender roles and structures in society that are often reproduced (see for example: Van Santen 2013; Wright Webster 2010; Connell 2009). Girls explained during a FGD that both boys and girls were not allowed to have a sexual relationship but that there were more negative consequences for girls attached to this. Girls’ perceptions on having a relationship with a boy and the notion of free sex will be further explained in section 5.5.

**Gender structure and roles**

In order to gain more insight into the perceived gender roles and structures in the area of Sukabumi where the girls live, I asked them more question on the different roles and tasks women are assigned during their lives. When I spoke to the girls about this topic many of them mentioned the concept of being a ‘good woman’ which was explained as maintaining a good status in society and within Islam. In order to be considered a ‘good woman,’ a girl has to be responsible and obedient which could be attained by staying at home, covering yourself (the use of a hijab), and becoming a wife and mother. Maintaining a good status as a woman also means that girls have to be aware of their behavior all the time.

“Everybody watches the behavior of girls... It is different than for a boy, there are just more dangers for a girl in society. You cannot go outside by yourself, especially at nighttime... You have to be careful because every kind of relationship with a boy is forbidden” (Desy, 15, school girl SMPN Sukaraja)

This quote shows that the idea of girls as being unable to protect themselves is common. According to many of the girls, as a woman you mostly need a man who can accompany you to go to places outside (either a brother, father or husband). As Connell (2002) has also shown gender structures often result in a lower power position for women and sexual regulations tend to be more stringent for women than for men. The girls involved in this study expressed their concerns as to what could happen to them if they were to go outside by themselves, concerns that were often related to ‘men doing bad things to them’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>perception</th>
<th>Become a prostitute/ free sex</th>
<th>Free sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Table 1: list of perceived differences between girls and boys during childhood*
In general, the girls thought that women are still very much dependent on men because as a woman you mostly need the permission of a man to go out. This was also related to the views of the girls on the specific division of tasks for men and women, which again were related to those of a husband and wife. All the girls agreed that a man should become a leader of the family and the main bread winner and that a woman is the one who should be in charge of raising the children. This resonates with what Connell (2009) described in her study on gender orders in which the sexual division of labor is explained to privilege men and disadvantage women by giving a higher social value to the economic activities of a man.

At the same time, all school going girls were of the opinion that education was equally important for men and women. The view of equal access to education for both boys and girls and the ability for girls to pursue a career is becoming more prevalent since more girls in Indonesia have entered the formal education system (IFAD 2014). However, the girls also established that having a job was still more important for men than for women since traditionally men are designated with the role of breadwinner. Although the girls agreed that women are also able to get a job nowadays, they explained that the status of a woman still depends on her tasks to take care of children and the household and that these tasks should thus always prevail over having a job.

5.5 Talking about sex, relationships and marriage

Talking about female sexuality to the girls in Sukabumi made clear that their ideas on sex or a relationship with a boy were centered around the norms of sexual purity and chastity before marriage. Both interviews and FGDs with unmarried girls showed the fears of girls and dangers for girls of having sex before marriage, as this would destroy her status as a good woman and her family’s honor. If a girl is seen spending too much time with a boy on her own, people start to gossip and the assumption is soon made that she might have lost her virginity. Girls explained that being a virgin means everything to a girl. According to some of the girls, a girl who is no longer a virgin is labeled as a ‘naughty girl’ who is lacking morals. Some girls associated this with stories they heard of girls who became prostitutes once they started to have premarital sex. According to the girls, having premarital sex would mean the risk of losing one’s reputation but also of not being able to find a boy later to get married to.

“Once you lose your virginity to a boy you just have to get married to that boy otherwise you cannot find anyone again. That will be very difficult… The status of a girl depends heavily on her virginity” (Ilva, unmarried girl, 18 years)

This quote shows that guarding your own status as a ‘good woman’ meant keeping your virginity and modesty when you are growing up. However, keeping your virginity was not only explained as the duty of a girl herself but
also of her parents and her family as they needed to safeguard the position of their family in the community. As also explained by Manderson and Liampurtong (2002) unacceptable behavior of a girl that leads to the loss of a girl’s reputation often jeopardizes her marriage prospects but is equally regarded as placing the family and community’s honor at risk.

The girls that took part in this study talked about the dangers of free sex on many occasions. Free sex was explained as having sex outside the boundaries of a ‘normal marriage’, and was also described as ‘the dark relationship’. The FGDs showed further that free sex was consequently linked to immoral and socially deviant behavior by the girls, also explained by the term ‘zina’. The girls told me that even the teachers in school watch girls in an effort to identify behavior that might suggest they were having a relationship with a (young) man. Recent studies on teenage sexuality in Indonesia discuss the apparent ‘moral panic’ regarding young people who have sex, whereby free sex is seen as a threat to the lives of young people (Wright Webster 2010; Harding 2008). The following quote shows that girls are also very worried about the consequences of having a sexual relationship:

“Once you start spending too much time alone with a boy, there is the risk of getting pregnant as well… this is just really bad for a girl and her life will be over, that why we have to keep away from the boys” (Ani, 16, school going girl SMPN2 Sukaraja)

This quote shows how school-going girls thought that free sex would not only lead to unwanted pregnancies but also shows the fear of girls about damaging their reputation and at the same time of ruining their future prospects such as the possibility of continuing their education.

Mostly the girls indicated that their knowledge of sex was very limited. However, some of them spoke about the role of sex for women, which was mainly described as “pleasing your husband and in order to have a baby” (Eli, 15 years, Pesantren). The value of marriage and motherhood seem to be related to the sexual ideology about the role of sex for women in this area.

Something that seemed contradictory in itself was that all the unmarried girls that I spoke to showed their concerns about having a relationship with a boy during many of our meetings (since this could lead to engaging in free sex) but once I got to know them better almost all of the girls appeared to have boyfriends. The girls thought that in Junior High School most of the girls had boyfriends, it was explained as “a habit and something that gives you status as a girl in school” (school-going girl SMPN2, 14 years). According to most of the girls, it was allowed to have a boyfriend as long as you did not spend time alone with him unsupervised.

5.6 Modernity and the realities of everyday life

Modern life and the importance of having a boyfriend

As shown in the previous section the norms around sexual morality in Sukabumi are influencing the ideas that girls have of their own sexuality and the way they can interact with boys. Although the girls mentioned that traditional norms around sexuality in the area do not allow them to have a (sexual) relationship with a boy before marriage, they still try to find ways to negotiate a legitimate space in which they can have a
boyfriend. Some of the school-going girls indicated that modern social media has been a big influence in creating this space. One of the girls mentioned the following:

“Nowadays most of the girls in my school have boyfriends and they find them in social media, you know like on Facebook… In Facebook you can make a legitimate relationship to show to your friends. Also Facebook is a place with more freedom because parents are not there and we can easily talk to the boys. It is different than real life because there we can still be good girls…” (Vasha, 14 years, school going girl SMPN2 Sukaraja)

The above quote shows that girls use modern technology as a way of dealing with the more strict conservative ideas in the region around sexuality norms. All the school-going girls in this study had access to smartphones and they explained that they liked to be on Facebook (and other social media) as this was a place where parental control could be bypassed since parents usually did not understand about this. Naafs and White (2012) have shown, in their research on contemporary youth culture in Indonesia, that rapid growth of social media contributed to new spaces for young people’s agency. Girls from different schools also mentioned that the idea of cinta, romantic love, is an important notion in the lives of young girls. A school-going girl further explained that relationships, as seen by girls in romantic and dramatic movies, have become the standard of finding a boyfriend for themselves. As Nilan (2004) has argued, the portrayal of romance in popular media in Indonesia often has a significant influence on the behavior and lifestyle choices of girls.

*Dreams and desires for the future*

During the FGDs with girls from the different Junior High Schools we spoke about the plans and dreams for the future of the girls. The following table shows an overview of the answers of the girls:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal goals for the future</th>
<th>no of total participants: (n = 48)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make parents happy/ be a good woman</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue studies to SMA and/ or University</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become a successful person/ find a good job</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know everything about Al Quran</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: overview of future goals from girls’ stories from two Junior High Schools*

In the answers of the girls we can see the struggles the girls have in their daily lives. Most of the girls gave equal importance to the idea of ‘making their parents happy in life’ and ‘continuing education’. The goals for the future around finishing education and being successful seemed mostly related to the views they get from the teachers in the formal schools on the importance of education for women. However, some girls acknowledge that their parents maybe have other hopes for them or that there is not enough money for them to actually achieve these educational goals. The girls further mentioned that they did not know how to
combine ‘being successful and having a good job’ with ‘being a good woman who stays at home to take care of her family’. As Miles (2000) has shown, girls who are constrained by the local context of poverty and socio-cultural norms are often torn between on the one hand, pursuing a more modern lifestyle as presented by formal schools and media, and on the other hand, the reality and poverty of their everyday lives combined with social norms as to ‘good’ behavior.

5.7 Concluding remarks

This chapter described the meaning of marriage for girls in Sukabumi based on the accounts provided by unmarried and mostly school going girls (12 to 18 years) on their daily lives. Additionally, the chapter gives an overview of how girls talk about marriage, gender roles and constructions around female sexuality which are often related to the Islamic norms in this region. Finally, this chapter captures the struggles that girls face in their lives in dealing with expectations of parents and society and the socio-economic reality on the one hand, and their own desires for the future (often influenced by ideas derived from modern technology and formal schools) on the other hand. The next chapter engages with the accounts of married girls regarding the process of getting married early and how they perceived their agency in regard to this.
6 EARLY MARRIAGE, GIRLS’ AGENCY AND THE ROLE OF (SEX) EDUCATION

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter the context of early marriage in Sukabumi was described by looking at the experiences of unmarried girls during the time they are growing up and socio-cultural norms that shape their everyday lives. This chapter engages with the stories of married girls on the decision-making process in the lead up to marriage and how these girls perceived their own agency and role in taking decisions regarding marriage (6.2-6.5). In addition, this chapter shows the perceived role of both formal schooling (6.6) and sex education (6.7) in expanding the space for agency of girls and for decreasing the number of early marriage cases in the area. The findings that are presented here are based upon the stories of 16 married girls between the age range of 13 to 18 years which were collected through the use of in-depth interviews and participant observation in their homes and surroundings. Besides this, some of the data gathered from interviews with school staff, healthcare personnel and other community members is also included. In the last section of this chapter (6.8), a short summary is given of the main points of this chapter.

6.2 Early marriage and exercised agency of girls

This section provides further insight into the agentic space of girls in relation to their marriage. During the interviews and observations with the married girls I paid attention to the question if the girls perceived to have had any agency during the process of getting married and important decisions that were made. In addition, I looked at how agency (if they felt like they had any) was expressed by them. In general, the majority of the girls felt that if they would have had a broader range of options they would probably not have chosen to get married early. Many of these married girls had different plans for the future before getting married, such as becoming a police officer, a teacher or to work in a factory in Sukabumi.

Mostly, the girls perceived they had some sort of agency in making the decision to get married. Forced marriages were not that common in the village, as some girls explained, “only in case of a girl that gets pregnant before she is married she is forced to marry as a result of her actions” (Irma, school-going girl, 15 years). Forced marriage for the participating girls in this study meant mainly forced by the expectations of parents, family or community. I addressed this topic by asking girls who usually makes decisions for girls to get married and if they were allowed to choose when and who to marry. All of the participating married girls expressed that they had their own reasons to get married. While they explained that parents in general do not force their children to get married in this area, the permission and support of parents for this is still of great importance.

Although many of the girls felt that they had agency in deciding to marry, this did not mean that they knew about the expectations of them in a marriage or that they were still happy once they married. The following sections engage with the different forms of agency that the analysis of data suggests girls had.
6.3 Poverty and limited educational and employment options for girls

Although overall most of the married girls participating in this study came from relatively ‘poor’ families, not all of them thought their socioeconomic background was the biggest influence in deciding to marry at an early age. However, some girls said that coming from a poor family and the fact that their family did not have enough money to let them continue their education after elementary school was an important reason to think about getting married. In these cases the girls just stayed at home to help with household tasks. For most of these girls it was impossible to find work, especially without a SMP certificate (Junior High School diploma). It then also seemed unrealistic to pursue further education goals since there was no money and the girls explained that they did not want to place that much pressure on their family. During the interviews with these girls it became clear that they did not see any other options for the future other than getting married at a relatively early age. Some girls even explained that they became a burden to their own family because they could not contribute to the welfare of the family. One of my participants explained her decision to get married at the age of 16 years as follows:

“My dad passed away nine years ago and we did not have a lot of money… I had to quit school after SD (elementary school) and then just stayed at home to help my mom. I actually wanted to marry my boyfriend because he can help my family now too, you know to give my mom money…” (Ani, married at 16 years)

This quote represents the idea that getting married for some girls was almost as a sacrifice in order to release their parents from the economic burden but crucially also to improve their own wellbeing and ultimately that of her family.

For other girls that came from very poor families the prospect of a better future was even more important. One of the girls stated the following, “it felt like I had found new hope for a better future if I would get married” (Married girl, 15 years). This idea of a better future was mainly explained as having more economic safety and the prospect of a more comfortable life. Another girl explained how her decision to marry was made:

“I was from a poor family and it was difficult for my parents to keep me because I also have three other sisters and brothers. It was not really comfortable at home and I wanted to leave… I already had a boyfriend for three years so I thought it was smart to get married, you know it is a good thing in Islam too. My parents actually did not give permission at first… they thought I was too young but because of our financial situation they finally agreed” (Rami, married at 16 years)
This quote shows that Rami saw her decision to marry as her own without any force of her parents. While approval of her parents to actually get married was still very important, she explained that she was happy to make a deliberate choice for herself and her future to get married. Bennett (2014) has shown in her research on early marriage in Lombok that girls from a poor background often make a deliberate choice to marry early. She argued that poor girls who are aware of their constrained options, tend to adopt a pragmatic attitude and get married as marriage is seen as a very achievable and realistic goal to girls.

These accounts provided by married girls, and as illustrated by the quotes given above, suggest that these girls actively chose to marry relatively early themselves. Marriage hereby presented an alternative to the limited choices that were available to them. Marriage to them was perceived as a new option for life. This decision to marry can be seen as a form of ‘opportunistic agency’, which Johnson-Hanks (2005) defines as acting in a deliberate manner and seizing an opportunity that presents itself to you in a situation where there are limited choices available.

6.4 Pesantren, Islamic morality, and becoming a ‘good woman’

A few of the married girls that participated in this research were from Pesantren schools (Islamic Boarding School) and often came from quite conservative families. None of these girls from Pesantren continued their formal schooling after elementary school but rather focused on deepening their knowledge of moral codes in Islam. During the interviews that I had with these girls, they expressed that formal education was not seen by them as something valuable for a woman according to the Islamic knowledge they had learnt. During their time in the Pesantren they learn about the concept of a good woman according to Islam and the importance of marriage in life. One girl from Pesantren explained the following about her decision to get married:

“I met my husband at a gathering in Pesantren and after a little while he came to my parents’ house to ask for permission to marry me. I thought I was not really ready to get married yet but at the same time I wanted to do it because it is just a good thing in Islam to be married soon… I knew I would become a mother and wife anyway so it just made sense to get married. You can’t wait too long as a woman because there is a bad image for unmarried women…” (Alma, married at 15 years)

This quote shows the importance of marriage for girls despite their early age and in important ways, their decision to marry seems driven by social definitions of being a good Islamic woman. Murphy Graham and Leal (2015) describe that girls who marry early may do so in a way to follow behavior that is expected of them, which could be understood as a form of agency that is ‘accommodating’, in that the young women concerned abide by ‘traditional’ expectations. The girls seem to accept early marriage as a normal part of their lives. Since formal education or having a job was not regarded as important in the Pesantren that the girls attended, they seemed to think that getting married at an early age was a normal choice because then they could start with living the life they are supposed to live according the principles of being a good woman (which included the prospect of being a good wife and mother).
6.5 Girls from ‘broken’ or restrictive families

The number of divorces and conflicts within families in this area of West Java is still relatively high (Parker et al. 2016). The narratives of the girls involved in the study appeared to confirm this lack of a stable home situation. Some of the participating girls explained that their family was restrictive in a sense that they were not allowed to go outside or have a boyfriend or that they had many conflicts in their childhood home. One of my participants expressed her feelings about getting married as follows:

“I married because I had to get away from my own home, my father and I had big conflicts all the time. He did polygamy and I did not like this… He is the leader of a Pesantren and always forced me to stay there too but I didn’t feel comfortable there so I ran away. I was depressed before and when I met my husband on Facebook and he later showed interest in marrying me I thought this was a good opportunity for me to get away from my own situation… and find happiness” (Ismah, married at 17 years)

This girl showed that she made a very radical choice to get married soon and with that resisted parental control in search for happiness. Another married girl further explained:

“I had a troubled childhood, my dad passed away when I was little and my mom was busy working all the time. She was very protective of me as well and I was not allowed to go to many places or have a boyfriend. When I met my husband at an event we started texting and he asked me to marry him… I said yes. I thought getting married would give me more freedom and I was relieved that I could finally leave my house” (Zura, married at 16 years)

This case also shows that girls can act in a certain way to get away from a controlling situation in which they feel that they have no freedom. These girls were presented with an option to live a life outside of their childhood homes and away from the tension of parental control. Bell (2007) argued that tense and conflictive adult relationships can fuel a girls’ oppositional agency which helps to explain why the seemingly quick decisions many of the married girls taking part in this study made to get married and move away from conflict in their parental home. Aisyah and Parker (2014) also showed in their study on the position of girls in marriage in Makassar, that girls sometimes use agency in an oppositional way by challenging dominant power structures. In the above account Zura showed that she challenged adult power as represented by her mother by seeking a boyfriend (and husband). As Aisyah and Parker (2014) further explained, girls who express sexual desires may exercise opposing agency. The following section and the next chapter show however that the expression of and acting on sexual desires for girls in itself, can lead to constraint.

6.6 Married by accident

A recurring theme was MBA (or Married By Accident), which was often spoken about during the research by many of the participants. MBA was used as an English term and referred to an (unwanted) pregnancy of a girl before marriage. In case of an unwanted pregnancy, the consequence for a girl was to get married soon. Although the fear of premarital sex and an unwanted pregnancy for girls was severe, this did not mean that these did not happen. During the interview sessions with the married girls I came to realize that almost half
of them had been MBA. In most cases the girls did not tell me about their condition during the first meeting since telling people you have been MBA was shameful because this indicated that you had engaged in premarital sex. However, most of the girls would tell me about their situation during our second meeting or when I spoke to them alone, without the presence of other family members.

According to all the girls involved in this study who had become pregnant before marriage, there had only been one solution to their situation and that was to get married to the boy that they had sex with to avoid further gossip and damage to the status of the girl and her family. One of my participants said the following about this:

“My boyfriend and I were dating for one year before. He convinced me to have sex with him… We only did it three times but then I turned out to be pregnant. I did not want to get married or have a baby but I had no other choice. At first I tried to take a pill… for abortion, but this did not work because I was already pregnant. I had to consult with my mother who advised me to get married soon… I couldn’t do anything because I did not want to bring shame upon my family and you can’t be an unmarried mother either so the only choice was to get married” (Erin, MBA at 16 years)

The quote above shows the difficult position that girls are put in once they become pregnant before marriage, resonating with earlier studies on early marriage and early pregnancy in Indonesia showing the social importance of female chastity prior to marriage (Wright Webster 2015; Platt 2012). Another girl stated:

“When I found out I was pregnant by my boyfriend I knew there was not really another option than to get married. I was still in my last year of SMP but had to drop out…My parents told me I had to do this [get married] but I also wanted it myself because I was concerned about the future for myself and my baby… I felt really bad about my situation but I chose the best option available at that time” (Varda, MBA at 14 years)

Although this story shows that parents have a lot of power in deciding about the marriage in case of a premarital pregnancy, this girl showed that she agreed with the decision of her parents to get married because she felt that in these circumstances it was her best option. Since the girls that were MBA could only exercise agency by choosing to get married, their agency can be described as ‘thin’ since other options were not available in such a constraining context (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015).

6.7 Early marriage and the role of formal schooling

None of the married girls participating in this study were still in school. Most of the girls indicated that if it would have been possible they would have preferred to continue their education. The one exception to this narrative was the few married girls that went to Pesantren who considered formal schooling to be unnecessary. The following table presents the educational attainment of the 16 married girls who took part in this study:
The table shows that almost all of the girls finished SD and only three of them actually graduated in SMP. Many girls initially continued to SMP after SD, but eventually they had to quit because of financial problems or because of an unplanned pregnancy. Although national policies in Indonesia indicate that pregnant women should be able to attend school (Desriani 2011), both schools in Sukaraja District of Sukabumi that participated in this research had their own policy on this and would force girls to drop out once they appeared pregnant.

**Perceived importance of education**

Most of the married girls thus said that they rather would have continued their studies instead of getting married early and they saw education as something that is very important for women. As one of the girls explained:

“Education for women is very important in this area I think because many girls want to work in the factories nearby but you can only do that if you have a SMP certificate. My plan before was to be a successful person and have a job… I hope that my children do not follow my path [of getting pregnant and married so early]” (Varda 20, married at 14 years because of MBA)

This quote shows that education was often perceived as something that can help women to find a job in the future. An unmarried girl who was able to continue her education argued that, “A girl has more knowledge and skills to negotiate and make informed decisions about her future by continuing her education” (Uma, University student, 22 years). She further explained that if girls would stay longer in school they would be more prepared to enter a marriage and more able to discuss their own position in a marriage. Community leaders interviewed during this study also indicated that they saw education for women as something positive, they thought that educating women was important because they would be able to find a job as well as men, in order to move out of poverty. They explained that ‘traditional’ gender structures around labor division are changing nowadays and women more often work outside of the house too to support the husband in earning money for their family.

Although many (young) people recognized that education was becoming more important for women nowadays, still many parents did not appear to acknowledge this fact. Especially in more conservative families the general opinion among parents (and sometimes the girls themselves) seemed to be that the role of women was to stay at home and take care of her children. Even parents that did think education was important for their children told me that they could not always deal with the costs of this. In the rural area of Sukabumi access to both Junior and Senior high school was sometimes limited. Although SMP schools were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary education (SD)</th>
<th>Junior high school (SMP)</th>
<th>Senior high school (SMA/SMK)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 out of 16 girls</td>
<td>3 out of 16 girls</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Married girls’ educational attainment*
fee-free, girls still needed money for transportation since there was not a broad range of schools in the neighborhood. For girls wanting to continue to SMA schools this was even more difficult due to registration costs and the longer travel distance, since there were even fewer SMA schools in the region.

_Education as a tool to prevent early marriage_

The interviews with directors and teachers of the two participating schools revealed that the schools were seen to have an active role in promoting the importance of education and with that trying to keep girls in school instead of getting married too early. One teacher in one of the junior high schools indicated the following:

“Girls that can continue their studies are often more aware of dangers of early marriage and early pregnancy” (Teacher SMPN 2 Sukaraja)

Most of the teachers that I spoke to expressed their concerns of girls marrying too young, which was almost always linked with immediate pregnancy. Some teachers in the junior high schools saw talking to both students and parents to convince girls to stay in school and finish their education (at least until senior high school) as an important role. Teachers seemed to be in a unique position because they spend a lot of time with the girls in school and were able to help them to think carefully about their decisions. Most teachers mentioned that they encouraged girls not to be too ‘opportunistic’ but rather to think about the consequences of their decisions and make a deliberate choice instead, especially in relation to decisions on who and when to marry. Recent literature on the role of teachers in enhancing girls’ agency also suggests that teachers can be respected adults in the lives of girls (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015). This role seems to be particularly strong when teachers understand the constraints of the environment the girls are in and the ‘lure’ of adolescent romance.

_The school environment_

The teachers participating in this study tended to perceive the school environment as a ‘neutral’ place in which girls are encouraged to continue their schooling to broaden their options for life and avoid getting married too early. However, many parents regarded the school as a site of danger, where immoral behavior started. Some of the parents that I spoke too were concerned about their girls going to school because they regarded it as a place where girls could easily meet boys. There was a lot of gossip in the village regarding girls getting pregnant because they met a boy in school with who they started to hang out without parental supervision or knowledge.

Some of the school-going girls mentioned during the FGDs that this fear of girls getting pregnant was sometimes a reason for their parents to keep them home or send them to a Pesantren school, which were single-sex instead of a (mixed-sex) senior high school. This view is also presented in previous research on the threat of adolescent girls’ sexuality. Grant (2012) argued that parental perceptions of risk for girls to engage in sexual relations weakens their motivation to keep daughters in school. A few girls from the Islamic
junior high school also mentioned themselves that they did not want to continue to senior high school, “because they were afraid of being persuaded into wrong behavior and of the stories of free sex happening which would damage their reputation as a woman” (FGD, school-going girl MTS Darmut, 14 years).

6.8 The importance and absence of sex education

Early marriage in the rural area of Sukabumi was, as mentioned earlier, highly related to early pregnancy. In case of MBA, girls were already pregnant before their marriage and in the other cases it usually did not take longer than a few months before the first child was born after the wedding of the girls that participated in this study.

**Girls’ knowledge of sex and having a child**

Most married girls mentioned that they did not receive any information before marriage about expected behavior of them once married, sex or having a child. One of the married girls expressed her fears as “I was really scared when I got married because I did not know anything about sex and thought it was really going to hurt” (Akinah, married girl, 17 years). None of the married girls were aware of any possible health risks related to early pregnancy or childbearing for young mothers. Since the girls expressed that motherhood was highly valued within a marriage, there did not seem a lot of space for delaying motherhood after a girl was married. Most of the married girls in this study were looking forward to having a baby soon. However, some of them expressed that they rather would have waited and that they tried to use contraception but that this often did not work. The girls said that they did not fully understand how contraceptives worked or they did not have any information beforehand on the use of contraceptives.

The girls that married because of MBA were often the ones that initially continued their education in junior high school. As mentioned in Chapter 5, girls in junior high school learn a little about the dangers of early pregnancy and that the body of a girl at an early age is not yet ready for having a baby during biology lessons. Any other information about reproduction or how to prevent early pregnancies does not appear to be given, however. According to staff interviewed at the local health clinic in Sukaraja, there is a workshop given in senior high schools that addresses sex education but mainly focuses on promoting a healthy lifestyle for teenagers. Therefore, almost no attention is given to sex education in formal schools, with the little information that is given mainly being provided in the higher classes of SMP or SMA. However, most of the married girls only finish SD and are thus excluded from receiving this information.

**Availability of and access to SRH knowledge and services**

In the village of the girls there were no specific sexual reproductive healthcare services. However, in the small health clinics, local midwives could provide information about contraception and a healthy pregnancy, but were officially only able to provide this information to married women. According to one of the
midwives that I interviewed during the study, “girls that marry early and have a baby early are often out of school and have no access to information about sex and contraception before their marriage” (Midwife Mirna, Posyandu Rw 8 Cibacang). This quote shows that women have little control over their contraceptive use or even have autonomy to decide on their fertility in general, a finding confirmed by Harding (2007) in her study of SRH for women in Indonesia. Furthermore, (young) women in Sukabumi who wanted to access any kind of SRH service had to present their marriage certificate or had to show a signed form by their husbands in which he gave permission for his wife to receive and use contraceptives. Girls that do not provide proof of their married status are usually denied access to these services.

Receiving sex education in formal school setting
Since girls that are not yet married have no access to information about their SRH they have to gain this information from their personal contacts. None of the girls in this study said that their mothers or other family members spoke about these issues with them. My findings further showed that teachers in schools did have a significant role too in talking about SRH issues. They were in the position of being a counselor to girls and played a key role in noticing any ‘immoral’ behavior. One of the teachers told me that she closely followed the social lives of her students and if she knew about a relationship between a boy and girl, she would talk to them about the dangers of early pregnancy. In class some teachers also gave speeches on “being aware of the dangers of early pregnancy and early marriage because this could ruin their future goals” (Female English teacher, SMPN2 Sukaraja). In earlier research on young Indonesians’ preferred sources of information about SRH, girls below the age of 19 years old mentioned that teachers are preferred sources to talk to about these issues (Demographic and Health Survey Indonesia 2012).

6.9 Concluding remarks
This chapter showed the different accounts of married girls and how they perceived their agency regarding the decisions that they could or could not make in the process of getting married. Overall the findings in this chapter reveal that early marriage in Sukabumi is usually not regarded as forced marriage by the girls. The girls participating in this study all showed they had exercised their agency in different ways (as accommodating, as oppositional, as thin or as opportunistic). The agency of these girls however, seemed dependent on dominant structures around socio-cultural norms regarding gender and sexuality (amongst other factors). This chapter furthermore discussed how girls’ schooling and SRH education was perceived in general by girls, parents, community leaders, school staff and healthcare personnel in Sukabumi. Although overall girls’ schooling was perceived as important by most people in the community and as a tool to enhance girls’ agency, parents and girls associated the school setting sometimes with a place where ‘immoral behavior’ could be developed. Finally, the chapter shows that lack of basic SRH knowledge and services limit the agentic space for girls with regard to early pregnancy and early marriage.

The following chapter will discuss in more detail the findings of this research in relation to the proposed questions and theories that this research is built on.
7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

Based on the previous chapters that presented the main findings of this study, this chapter aims to look more closely at the empirical findings in relationship to the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2. The first section (7.2) focuses on the debates around (early) marriage and constructions of gender and sexuality, and how these relate to the local values attributed to marriage in the context of Sukabumi. Section 7.3 discusses girls’ agency in decision-making processes leading up to early marriage. This is followed by a discussion on the perceived role of (sex) education in efforts to strengthen the agency of girls (7.4). In the following section (7.5) the conclusion of this thesis is presented by answering the research question and summing up some of the key points of this study. Finally, suggestions for future research (7.6) and implications for policy and practice (7.7) are discussed.

7.2 Marriage, norms and expectations around gender, sexuality and religion

The accounts gathered during this study suggest that girls between 12 and 18 years mostly regarded marriage as a religious obligation. That is, when the girls spoke about marriage they referred to the rule of Islam. Following this rule meant making a legitimate relationship so that a husband and wife can create their own family and at the same time establish a relationship between the families of the husband and wife. The latter corresponds with research done by Aisyah and Parker (2014) in Indonesia that showed the wide social importance of marriage by strengthening family ties that improve both the status of a girl and that of her family. Central to girls’ understanding of marriage was the status that they would receive once they would be married, which related to the idea of being a ‘good Muslim woman’. According to Wright Webster (2010), the definition of a ‘good Muslim woman’ in Indonesia is a woman who closely guards her modesty and virginity and only has sex within the space of marriage with the primary intention of child bearing. The accounts of girls reflect how deeply they seemed to have internalized these principles of the ‘good Muslim woman’ because maintaining a good reputation for themselves and their family was a crucial aspect in their lives.

Girls in this study did not associate ‘readiness’ for marriage directly to a certain age but rather used concepts related to ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’ to indicate when a girl should marry or not. On the one hand, most school girls thought that marriage was something that is only suitable for adults and not for children. They associated ‘childhood’ with a period in life in which children had to learn and go to school rather than taking care of adult responsibilities (e.g. being a wife, having sexual relations and having children). This view reflects the ‘western’ notion of a ‘universal’ childhood as a carefree period in life for children before 18 years in which they should be able to play and go to school (CRC 1990). The girls that made the distinction between childhood and adulthood so clearly were from the public junior high school and seemed to have derived these ideas from teachers who emphasized that childhood should be a period solely for education. On the other hand, many girls from the Islamic junior high school did not refer to the distinction between child and adult when talking about the time to get married, but rather referred to Islamic notions of being mentally (akhil) and physically (baligh) ready for the responsibilities of marriage. This view is consistent
with earlier research on marriage patterns in Indonesia in which readiness for marriage was measured by the physical ability of girls to have children and to take care of household duties regardless of their age (Aisyah & Parker 2014). In addition, girls stressed that they are already learning about the future responsibilities of a (house)wife and mother at a young age. This view contradicts the idea that Western conceptions of ‘childhood’ are universal and instead shows that children perform different roles in different cultural settings (see also Kesby et al. 2006).

The findings further show that the way girls perceive marriage is highly influenced by local constructions of gendered roles and sexual moralities. The importance of marriage for girls in Sukabumi was reflected by the fact that both being a wife and a mother were named as key signifiers of a woman’s social identity and her position in the community. Girls showed that marriage was often associated with expected ‘traditional’ gender roles of men and women since they thought men should be breadwinners and leaders of the family, and that women should take care of children and the household, which resonates with what Connell (2002) proposed in her study about gender roles. All participating girls expressed that marriage was further seen as the only space to have a legitimate (sexual) relationship. Since marriage is something that you should only do once, the girls indicated, keeping your virginity as a woman was of great importance. This view is reflective of the prevalent sexual morality in Indonesia that supports the ideal of premarital chastity and emphasizes the value that is given to girls’ virginity (Bennett 2005).

However, different studies have emphasized that gender and sexual arrangements can also be dynamic in the sense that dominant norms can also change (Deutsch 2007). My findings showed that certain gender and sexuality constructions are subject to change. More girls pursue careers as a result of increased access to formal schooling and with that are Contesting the ‘traditional’ gender structures. In addition, girls showed that despite the strict norms around sexual morality, they find ways to explore their sexuality at an early age (often attributed to the increased exposure to social media and modern technologies).

International organizations regard every marriage carried out under 18 years to be an early or child marriage (Unicef 2014). This definition is largely based on western assumptions with regard to the notion of an ideal childhood and individual ideals of freedom that emphasize love based choices and a free will (Callaghan et al. 2014). The findings in this study show that the meaning attributed to marriage is not always defined in individual terms but instead in relation to familial or even communal concerns and values. Locating early marriage as a problem that violates human rights is mainly based on the idea of restoring the individual ideal of childhood and liberated womanhood (Burman 2008; Callaghan et al. 2014). Callaghan et al. (2014) further show that in this light a representation of the ‘Muslim Girl’ is often made in the context of the gendered other, as a victim that is silenced and that needs saving from this harmful practice. Questions that seem relevant in this context are: who is allowed to decide for these girls if they need saving from early marriage and should ‘we’ even presume that girls per definition have no agency in regard to early marriage?

7.3 Agency of girls and early marriage

Ahearn (2001: 112) described agency as the “sociocultural mediated capacity to act”. This research, which sought to document and understand the different stories of girls who married before the age of 18 years, shows how girls’ agency needs to be understood in its own specific context and as bounded by what is
deemed socioculturally acceptable. There are increasing calls for more nuanced understandings of the context in which girls make decisions, including in relation to the issue of early marriage (Callaghan et al. 2015; Archambault 2011). The in this study participating girls’ accounts of their marriage, and their motives to marry early, are illustrative of a range of different forms of agency, which could be understood as opportunistic, thin, oppositional, and/or accommodating agency (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015; Bell 2010; Klocker 2007; Johnson-Hanks 2005).

Opportunistic agency was shown by girls who chose marriage as a way out of their ‘poor’ lives. Girls in this case had often made a sudden decision to marry because they wanted to take a chance in order to find happiness and/or a better life and future in general. This motive of girls resonates with the notion of ‘judicious opportunism’ proposed by Johnson-Hanks (2005), which he explained as the opportunism of girls, who plan for their future, to act upon every opportunity they get to move away from their own (poor) situation.

The findings further showed that married girls also exercised agency in a way that was seen as accommodating, either out of necessity or for survival (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015). These girls, who were often from a more conservative Islamic background, took up the expected role of women in society to be a (house)wife and mother and emphasized the importance of being a good woman in Islam.

In addition, the findings revealed that girls who became pregnant before marriage, did not have much space to make another decision than to get married since this was the only way for them to safeguard their status as a respectable woman and their future prospects. Existing literature also suggests that sexual moral codes, and specifically the insistence on female chastity before marriage combined with a fear of female sexuality can propel women into marriage since there seems to be a strong moral aversion to premarital sex for women in Indonesia (Bennett 2014). The limited space of ‘MBA girls’ corresponds with the idea of thin agency, which as Klocker (2007) explains, can be understood as any decision made in a highly restricted position.

Other girls in this study showed that their decision to get married was one that could be seen as a form of oppositional agency (Bell 2010). These girls used marriage as a way of resisting parental control (e.g. parents who forced their children to go to Pesantren or did not allow them to go outside), which gave them a chance of a life outside of their restrictive home situation. Murphy Graham and Leal (2015) stressed that tense and conflictive adult-child relationships fuel girls’ oppositional agency and can help to explain why girls choose marriage over their current ‘childhood’ situation.

Forced into marriage?: examining the interaction between girls’ agency and early marriage

These different forms of agency help explain the situation of married girls and to understand more clearly the context in which these girls took the decision to get married. However, these categories of agency as suggested in the literature do not fully clarify girls’ agency in decision-making processes towards early marriage. This study shows that the agency as exercised by girls can be seen as a continuum on which girls value their options and make a choice based on what they think is the most appropriate, valuable or beneficial to their lives at that moment. As Gill and Anitha (2009) also note, girls who get married early
often exercise agency in complex and often contradictory ways as they assess the different options that are available to them and weigh the costs and benefits of their actions.

Although most studies acknowledge that young people’s agency should be recognized, and that children can no longer be understood as passive victims of oppressive or parochial practices (Robson et al. 2007; Callaghan et al. 2015), the dominant international discourse around early marriage often suggests that an early marriage is, by definition, a forced marriage. Emphasis is hereby placed on the perceived coercive and exploitative nature of marriage of young women below the age of 18 years (Chantler 2012; James 2010). This conception of early marriage leaves no room for addressing the question of agency of girls in regard to making decisions to get married. In many cases the concept of ‘agency’ has also been underpinned by the liberal and ‘western’ notion of individual autonomy (see Mahmood 2012).

This study concurs with Mahmood (2012) who argues that autonomy should not be regarded as a precondition to agency, but instead calls for a better recognition of different ways in which people live their moral codes. This study shows that girls in Sukabumi do exercise their agency by making their own decision to get married. The decision to get married was motivated by a variety of expectations, pressures and constraints but, crucially, was not necessarily or primarily linked with age. Most girls explained that they were not forced to get married. However, they all still acknowledged the importance of permission to get married and the role that parents played in arranging the wedding. Understanding the relationship between consent and coercion is thus crucial in studies and programs that focus on early marriage (see also Gill & Anitha 2009). A binary distinction is often made between ‘normal’ marriages, associated with mutual consent, and early or forced marriages, which are associated with coercion and exploitation (ibid.). The findings of this study show however that it is not easy to draw a clear line between marriages that are either voluntary or forced.

The findings in this study further show that assuming that girls have no agency in decisions to get married portrays young women as ‘needed to be saved’ from early marriage. As MacDonald (2015) has argued, NGOs often portray ‘Third World Women’ as oppressed and in need of support for survival. Presuming that girls have no agency in regard to early marriage thus seems to offer a wrong approach for development organizations working on programs that tackle the practice of early marriage because it does not capture the complex nature of the practice and decontextualizes the experiences of girls.

7.4 Early marriage and the role of (formal) schooling and SRH education

Regardless of the discussion on whether international development organizations take a ‘right’ approach in their programs around early marriage, a growing body of research highlights the negative outcomes of an early marriage for the girls concerned (see e.g. Callaghan et al. 2014; Le Strat et al. 2011; Dahl 2010). As clarified in the previous section, this research shows that girls who marry early should not be portrayed as passive victims but rather as agents that sometimes make a deliberate choice to get married but always within a limited set of choices available to them. However, most of the married girls in this research stressed that if they would have had other options they would have preferred to get married at a later age and stay in school for a longer period of time. The following two sections will discuss the perceived impact of formal schooling and sex education in attempts to enhance girls’ agentic space.
The role of formal schooling in expanding the agentic space for girls

Earlier studies imply that formal education plays a significant role in strengthening girls’ agency and delays girls’ age of marriage (Brown 2014; Murphy Graham & Leal 2015). Unmarried girls in this study confirmed the idea that access to education would offer them more knowledge and negotiating skills in order to make more informed decisions in life, which is a finding that has been supported in earlier research (see also Lloyd & Mensch 1999). In addition, married girls stressed that they were of the opinion that going to or staying in school would have given them more opportunities to find a job in the future. This is in line with the idea that schools can provide girls with necessary skills that will let them take part in economic activities (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015; MacDonald 2015).

Although education for women was perceived as important by most people in the community, girls’ access to schools (after elementary school) remained limited. This limited access was seemingly due to relatively long travel distances and transportation costs, but also because parents did not always regard the school setting to be a ‘good’ one for the girls. Parents perceived school to be a place where girls could easily meet boys, which they associated with the onset of sexual behavior and fear of girls getting pregnant. Grant (2012) argued in her study on girls’ sexuality in Malawi that a ‘persistent’ negative view of the school setting often contributes to the decision of parents to keep their children at home.

Recent literature further shows that increasing girls’ access to education alone is not enough to enhance girls’ agency (Murphy Graham & Leal 2015; Archambault 2011). In order for education to strengthen girls’ agency and to delay the age of marriage, education needs to be relevant and address gendered norms and issues related to sexual moralities that may constrain girls’ agency, and offer them alternatives. To enhance the agency of girls who act in an accommodating way by complying to expected ‘traditional’ gender roles of becoming a housewife and mother, these gendered norms should be challenged first and alternative pathways for girls should become more accepted. For schooling to expand the range of choices that girls have, there then needs to be a closer link between schooling and what girls are able to do afterwards.

The role of sex education in expanding the agentic space of girls

High numbers of early pregnancies in Indonesia, which are often directly linked to the prevalence of early marriage, are, in most cases, compounded by poor access to contraception and SRH services (Prasetya & Dasvarma 2011). Aggleton and Campbell (2002) have argued that comprehensive sexuality education can be a powerful tool to provide knowledge on reproductive health and to enhance the ability to make informed choices regarding parenthood and sexuality. The findings in this study show that girls rarely receive any formal sex education and that married girls did not have any knowledge about sexual relations and reproduction prior to marriage. This lack of knowledge supports the idea that not granting girls their right to reproductive health information undermines their ability to make informed choices about their future, including choices around getting married.
Altinyelken and Olthoff (2014) argued that a school can serve as an important setting to provide sex education due to its scope to reach many young people and girls at the same time. Although the findings in this study show that no official sex education was given at the formal schools that participated in this research, girls who were in school did learn about a healthy life style and the dangers of early pregnancy for a girls’ body. However, girls who married early and were not in school prior to their marriage did not understand the risks associated with early pregnancy. In order to reach girls that are most vulnerable to getting married and/or pregnant early, non-formal sexuality education should also be provided since these girls are often out of school.

This research further shows that expanding access to SRH services and contraceptives to unmarried individuals is important in order to reach those girls that get pregnant before marriage and as a result marry at an early age. The notion of ‘Married by Accident’ (MBA) was widespread in the village in which I did my research and girls explained that since more girls start dating at an early age, the risk of getting pregnant before marriage also increased. This is a problematic notion since young girls have no guidance in the area of sexuality matters. Wright Webster (2015) has shown how young people’s attitudes towards sexuality in Indonesia are changing due to increased access to modern technologies and media, which places girls in a vulnerable position since they are usually deprived access to sexuality education. Improving the agentic space of ‘MBA girls’ can thus be supported by giving them access to adequate sex education and contraceptives. Providing adequate access to safe contraception has been seen as central to the prevention of early pregnancy (Desriani 2011; Grant 2008). However, in Indonesia there is still cultural shame and stigma attached to premarital sex and accessing contraceptives, particularly for girls, which may withhold them from accessing SRH services (Bennett 2005).

Therefore the set-up of sex education programs should be made relevant in a more conservative context of Islamic norms around gender and sexuality. However, many sexuality education programs are based on a human rights-based perspective that promotes the idea of enabling girls’ right to sexuality (Tabatabaie 2015). In order to promote a more suitable set-up for sex education in a conservative setting, programs could focus more on morally distanced approaches that correspond to moral values regarding sexuality such as decreasing teenage pregnancies (see also Miedema et al. 2011). Other recent studies have also emphasized that programs to improve SRH should not only focus on access and quality of services but also incorporate how to deal with social and cultural norms around sensitive topics such as premarital sex and early pregnancy (Svanemyr et al. 2014; Turmen 2000).

7.5 Conclusion

Answering the main research question

How can we understand girls’ agency in decision-making processes with regard to early marriage against the background of local understandings of gender and sexuality, and religious norms in rural West Java?

The agency of girls in decision-making processes leading up to early marriage can be seen as very complex and dependent on many factors. The space for agency, and the range of choices available to girls, are limited
by conservative views around ‘traditional’ gender roles, sexual morality and Islamic notions as to what girls are supposed to do in life. ‘Traditional’ gender norms were marked by the idea that girls are supposed to be good women, wives, and caretakers of their families and the household. Sexual moral codes play an important role in shaping the agentic space for girls in that girls are supposed to remain virgins until marriage, and the fear of girls getting pregnant or having ‘free sex’ when they are not married is big. By complying with these norms, girls sometimes choose to get married to secure their future and status within these structures, and thereby attempting to increase their agentic space.

However, at the same time, girls are seen to create new spaces in which they exercise their agency based on the more ‘universal’ ideas they get from formal schools often influenced by the human rights discourse that promote gender equality, the importance of education and rights for girls to be able to continue studying and find a job in the future. In addition, girls seem to start dating at earlier ages even though ‘traditional’ norms oppose premarital relationships. Social media and modern technology seemed to be of big influence in attempts of girls to find a space in which they can have a relationship without parental interference. However, given their lack of knowledge regarding sexual relations and lack of access to contraceptives, this trend – of girls starting to date at early ages – also means that more girls become at risk of getting pregnant before marriage.

Both formal education and sex education were seen by most girls in this study as well as by teachers from the different junior high schools in Sukaraja and local healthcare personnel as important features for girls in Sukabumi to broaden their agentic space. Girls thought in general that formal schooling would provide them with more knowledge and skills to negotiate and to make better and more informed choices about their future, marriage, and sexual activity. Sexual reproductive health education was seen as relevant in order to address the growing number of girls who become pregnant at an early age and before they are married.

7. 6 Recommendations for future research
A first recommendation for future research is conducting a more in-depth study on how girls’ sexuality and their consensual courtship play a role in the context of early marriage in Indonesia. Findings in this research show that girls start to date at an early age and they are often exposed to the possibilities of engaging in premarital sex. It would be highly relevant to examine how girls explore their sexuality at a young age and how this relates to decisions to get married early. Murphy Graham and Leal (2015) have shown in their research on early marriage that lack of opportunity for physical interaction for unmarried couples may contribute to early marriage, thus calling for a need for research on girls’ sexuality.

A second recommendation for future research is to investigate different forms of sexuality education that are acceptable within a highly conservative setting in order to provide a more comprehensive and suitable sexuality education within its more reserved context. As Tabatabaie (2015: 283) has shown, the promotion of sexuality education worldwide often emphasizes young people’s rights to “enjoy their sexuality, which threatens the image of a responsible, pure and non-sexual young Muslim.” It would therefore be important to investigate how we can promote a sexuality educational program that is supportive of cultural and religious norms around sexuality.
A third recommendation for future research is to further explore the views of boys on early marriage in relation to the perceived gender and sexuality norms. Many of the girls who participated in this study thought that girls are still very much dependent on boys. Girls and boys stressed during different FGDs that boys had more freedom in their childhood, that the rules around sexual morality were often less strict for boys than for girls, and that boys face fewer limitations in deciding who and when to marry than a girl. Understanding how boys view their own role in decisions to marry and how they perceive (changing) norms regarding gender and sexuality would thus be very useful to get a more comprehensive understanding of (early) marriage patterns in Indonesia.

7.7 Implications for policy and practice
Based on the findings in this study some recommendations for policy and practice can be made. In general NGOs or organizations that have programs on targeting early marriage should pay more attention to the local values attributed to marriage in a certain context and the different meanings and purposes that a marriage serves for girls in a certain community. Furthermore, it is critical that agencies do not base their programs on the assumption that all early marriages are necessarily forced.

In the context of Sukabumi schools and teachers seem to have an important role in strengthening girls’ agency and might be able to reduce early marriages but in order to do this in a valuable way they should make sure that school policies are supportive of pregnant and married girls to re-enter or continue their education and thus establishing re-enrollment possibilities for girls after pregnancy or marriage. In addition, schools should offer a curriculum in school that also addresses discussions around gender and sexuality norms in society. However, we should also acknowledge that incorporating curriculum on adolescent sexuality and that challenge dominant gender roles, remains highly controversial in this conservative Islamic context.

Programs from the government or NGOs could further focus on offering incentives to young people and make sure that any effort to reduce early marriages must incorporate strategies to identify and promote viable livelihood strategies for young women so that being a housewife is not the only future.

Finally, the set-up of a comprehensive SRH education for girls and boys would be highly useful. This means both providing, in schools and outside the school setting, knowledge on SRH and at the same time giving girls access to facilities that can provide them with contraceptives. A challenge would be how to promote sex education in a way that is tolerated within a highly conservative Islamic setting. Policy makers, NGOs and healthcare facilities should think about stigmas around pregnancies before marriage, contraception use for unmarried girls and safe abortions. One way of meeting the needs of young girls while at the same time thinking about the values of shame and stigma is by making use of modern technologies and social media.

Based on the findings in this study, especially the smartphone seems to be a very powerful educational tool since the use of the smartphone is already widespread among girls in Sukabumi and girls are seen to use it in establishing new romantic relationships. Public health campaigns and prevention strategies for early marriage and early pregnancy can be delivered through mobile devices. The positive role of mobile phones in delivering sexuality education has been acknowledged in earlier research on HIV/AIDS.
prevention (Jamison et al. 2013). In a broader sense, Murphy Graham and Leal (2015) have also argued that media campaigns have potential to challenge community norms on courtship and early marriage.

Photo 10: School girls in their break time
REFERENCES


Bennett & Andajani-Sutjahjo (2007) *Mapping human rights in maternal and neonatal health; A report on provincial laws, policies and plans, and primary data from 4 districts in NTB/NTT* Jakarta, MOH and GTZ.


Demographic and Health Survey (2014) *Adolescent reproductive health in Indonesia 2012* Jakarta, Statistics Indonesia & BKKBN.


Foucault, M. (1978) “What is critique” In S. Lotringer (Eds.) The politics of truth Los Angelos, CA Semiotexte.


Wright Webster, T. (2010) *Pergaulan Bebas and Gendered Youth Culture in Yogyakarta, Indonesia* Crawly, University of Western Australia.