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Qualitative Article

Determinants of Child Marriage in Thailand: A Study among the Hmong Communities and Southernmost Provinces

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Abstract

Background/ problem: Child marriage in Thailand has never received adequate academic recognition. Without knowledge of the fundamental determinants of child marriage in the country, it is difficult for Thailand to effectively deal with child marriage.

Objective/ purpose: This study aimed to explore the determinants that facilitate the ongoing practice of child marriage in two areas of Thailand: the Hmong communities in the northern provinces and the Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces.

Design and Methodology: A constructivist grounded theory research methodology was applied in this study, with the use of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions as tools for data collection. A total of 113 participants voluntarily took part in this study.

Findings: Three similar themes were found in both study areas: patriarchy and culture, a taboo of pre-marital sex and pregnancy outside of wedlock, and intergenerational oppression. The main differences among the Hmong communities and the Muslim communities in the south were the doctrines, which laid the cultural foundation for the two areas.

Conclusion and Implications: The findings highlight the significant determinants that influence child marriage in the two study areas of Thailand. Any future programs aiming to eradicate child marriage in the country could apply the results from this study as foundations of their works.

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Originality/Value for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Preventing child marriage is listed under SDGs-5, which aims to combat gender inequality. With regards to the SDG-5, the UN urges member states to take action against child marriage and conduct academic research on this issue. However, the current studies on child marriage suggest that research on child marriage tend to be conducted in the regions where the rate of the practice is critically high, which Thailand is not included. This presents the gaps in child marriage research. This study addresses this gap by aiming to systematically study child marriage in rural Thailand. By focusing on the first-hand information from children, families, and communities, this study seeks to develop a model that explains determinants that support the existence of child marriage in rural Thailand.

Child marriage is globally recognized by the international human rights regime as a human rights violation towards children (UN General Assembly, 2015a). Documented evidence shows that the practice often results in a deterioration of physical and psychological health, early childbirth, lower opportunities in education and occupation, domestic violence, and divorce (DiGiovanni, 2024). The international human rights communities, such as United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2023) has actively expressed concerns over the negative impact of child marriage on girls. In 2015, the UN's state parties adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in which the aim of ending child marriage is listed under Goal 5 (UN General Assembly, 2015b). Despite the global effort trying to eradicate child

marriage, ending this practice has never been an easy task as it can run contrary to some cultural, social, economic, and religious arguments.

In 2021, the rate of child marriage declined only in some regions, remained stable in some, and even increased in other parts (Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021). At the international level, this has raised concerns that the elimination of child marriage may not be achieved as per the SDGs by 2030 (UNICEF, 2023). One of the main problems in responding to child marriage is the fact that there are missing gaps in research on child marriage. While the SDGs have led to an increase in the number of academic research projects on child marriage, many of these studies were focused on regions where child marriage is highly prevalent (Efevbera & Bhabha, 2020). Therefore, the Sub-Saharan and South Asia were the most popular studied areas due to their highest rates of child marriage (Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021). The East Asia and Pacific regions, where Thailand is grouped under however, has been shown to have significantly lower numbers of scholarly studies on this issue.

The low publication rates do not mean that the region does not experience child marriage. A recent UNICEF report (2023) found that the East Asia and Pacific region is a home to nearly 95 million child brides. In Thailand, alone, there are approximately 1.2 million girls who are married off before the age of 15, and approximately 5.7 million girls who marry before the age of 18 years (UNICEF, 2024). Despite this, studies on the topic of child marriage in Thailand are quite limited, and there is none that attempt to explore the determinants that lead children in Thailand into marriage. To end child marriage effectively and sustainably, it is important to understand why the practice is allowed to exist and what causes children to marry. Therefore, this study aimed to discover the fundamental determinants and linkages of drivers that contribute to the existence of child marriage in Thailand.

Literature Review

Unlike traditional research methodology, researchers using the grounded theory approach are recommended to avoid conducting the full literature review prior to the data collection in order to protect the researchers from being preoccupied with the existing knowledge of the studied topic (Thornberg & Dunne, 2019). However, a preliminary literature review is advised to be conducted prior to the study. This is a short but more directed literature review, focusing on the topics and issues that the researchers plan to study (Charmaz, 2006). This study followed Charmaz (2006)'s constructivist grounded theory research methodology, and the preliminary literature review of this study focused on the scopes of the situation of child marriage in Thailand and the literature gap to ascribe the importance of this study.

Child Marriage in Thailand

A 2024 UNICEF report about child marriage in Thailand shows that there are approximately 17 percent of women aged between 20 to 24, who were married off before 18 years, of which, around 5 percent were married before 15 years of age. Among these numbers, it was found that most child brides in Thailand resided in the northern, northeastern, and the southern parts of the country. These child brides mostly came from impoverished families who resided in rural areas, where the access to education was quite limited, and a high proportion of these child brides were pregnant prior to their marriage (UNICEF, 2024).

Thailand has consistently shown their willingness to promote and protect children's and women's rights and the country's official policy and legal positions on child marriage are both clear and evolving. The country is a state party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies, n.d.). Within the domestic level, Thailand has adopted the 1989 CRC's definition of a child, that uses the cutting age point of 18 years, into the state's child protection act, 2003. Although the Thai state's law on the minimum marriageable age has been set at 17 years of age (Thailand Lawyer, n.d.), Thailand has recently been working on increasing the minimum age for marriage in the civil and commercial code to 18

years (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). In 2024, the proposal of the law amendments has been accepted by the cabinet, but the new legislation has not yet been finalized (Bangkok Post, 2024).

Whilst the country has shown effort in preventing child marriage, most of the country's actions have been founded only on the aspects of legislation and regulation. Thailand has never been a focal research area for child marriage. Rather, most of the scholarly research on child marriage in Thailand has been focused more on the topics of adolescent sexual reproductive health, with limited attention to child marriage. Furthermore, a general protectionist lens is used in discussing child marriage in Thailand, which rarely considers the views and experiences of the communities where child marriage still occurs.

Determinants that Support Child Marriage in Thailand

A few studies on child marriage in multiples global settings, with Thailand being one of several studied states, have delivered interesting findings. Among three countries: Niger, Yemen, and Thailand, Rivera (2011) found that, unlike the other two countries, child marriage in Thailand is not commonly found throughout the country, but more prevalent within some certain ethnic groups. This implies that local cultures and norms are the primary causes that prompt ethnic children to marry early. Additionally, a study by Asnong et al. (2018) suggested that extramarital sex and pregnancy, and adolescent dating are viewed as taboo among the refugee and migrant communities living at the border between Thailand and Myanmar, and that these factors drive children into marriage. In another study by Harvey et al. (2022), pre-marital sex was also found to be a strong determinant for child marriage in Thailand as well as some other SEA countries, such as the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and Vietnam.

The findings from the study by Harvey et al. (2022) imply that the causes of child marriage in every country in SEA cannot be concluded as being similar even though all countries are in the same region. Additionally, even if a study on child marriage has focused on only one country, one cannot generalize the drivers that influence child marriage from one part of that country to other parts. Taken together, all findings from these studies indicate that the determinants of child marriage in Thailand can be varied and due to the variations in ethnic culture in each region of the country.

Behavioral Science and Child Marriage

Behavioral science has gained UNICEF's attention due to its nature of being the knowledge that focuses on human's behavior (UNICEF, 2021). Wendel (2020) suggested that behavioral science is an "interdisciplinary field" (p.5), which sheds light on how individual and environmental factors impact the way humans think and behave. Within the psychological field, social cognitive theory is a theory that explains how society influence human's motivation in decision making process (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Thus, behavioral science can be beneficial in studying child marriage, because it allows researchers to understand the determinants that drive children into marriage.

Whilst child marriage is globally accepted as a harmful practice by the international human rights lenses (UNICEF, 2023), the perspective of child agency argues that children are capable to make decisions for themselves, including marriage (Horii, 2020b). This has raised the issue of the importance of children's voices when responding to child marriage. Children's ability in decision making is prioritized by UNICEF (2021) as being the first step for applying any behavioral science projects with children. Thus, working people aiming to respond to child marriage should first start by listening to children who are involved in the practice. This is taken as a foundation of this study, which prioritized first-hand information from the children, their families, and their communities.

Research Gaps

The preliminary literature review showed that despite the legal effort, the statistics of child marriage cases in Thailand, as was reported by UNICEF (2024) has not been declining. This suggests that legal action alone may not be sufficient to stop child marriage within the country and that there are other

underlying issues at play. An inadequacy of academic studies aiming to research child marriage in Thailand is a major concern that may explain why child marriage in the country is difficult to understand. Although child marriage has been recognized by human rights advocates as a global problem (UNICEF, 2023), the determinants that drive children into the practice are varied and differ in each region. More critically, there is very little research engaging directly with children and local communities, so that outsiders can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which child marriage is practiced.

Thus, it is important to understand the unique fundamental causes and linkages among them in each target region. A deep analysis of child marriage in specific areas of studies can bring the structure of this practice to light, and possibly lead to effective policies and programs to tackle the issue of child marriage (Horii, 2020a). Understanding why communities support child marriage—whether for economic reasons, social security, religious beliefs or other reasons—helps identify the driving forces behind the practice. Therefore, if Thailand plans to safeguard its children from child marriage, the country should begin by systematically studying the reasons why the practice continues to exist today.

The Research Context

In Thailand, the *Hmong* are the second largest hill tribe (Ueda, 2018). The tradition called *bride kidnapping* is culturally accepted within the Hmong. It is a traditional practice that allows Hmong men to freely choose their wives with or without the female's consent (McKendry-Smith & Jenkins, 2016). The CRC Coalition Thailand (2018) expressed concerns over this tradition as being a harmful cultural practice of child marriage. The southernmost provinces are home to the largest Muslim population in Thailand (Yusuf, 2022). The uniqueness of these southernmost provinces is that the Islamic family and inheritance law is specifically applied in this region (Puteh & Jehwae, 2022), in which marriage is one topic under this law. Although the Islamic Family and Inheritance Law has recently set a regulation for the minimum marriageable age at 17 (The Central Islamic Council of Thailand, 2018), the lack of law enforcement has stirred the debate as to whether this regulation could in fact prevent local children from early marriage.

Whilst there are no official statistics of child marriage among the Hmong ethnic communities in Thailand, the rates of child marriage among the Hmong communities that reside in Vietnam are reported to be around 50 percent of all the Hmong people (Pham, 2024), and almost 60 percent for those in Lao PDR (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2018). Likewise, the official statistics for child marriage in the southernmost provinces have also not been reported. Nonetheless, girls not brides has raised concerns over these two locations: the Hmong in the northern provinces and the Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces, due to the critically high rates of child marriage suspected within these two areas. To gain insight of how the practice of child marriage existed and has been supported in the Hmong communities in the northern part and the Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. This study focused only on these two regions.

Research Objectives

This study aimed to study the determinants and linkages of drivers that facilitate the practice of child marriage in Thailand. The researcher aimed to develop a model from the results of this grounded theory research. It was anticipated that the results from this study could lay a foundation for future programs aiming to eradicate child marriage in the country.

Method

Design

A constructivist grounded theory research methodology was applied for this study, with the use of semi-structured interview and focus group discussions (FGDs) for data collection. Although the civil and commercial code of Thailand, at the time this study was conducted, set the legal minimum marriageable age at 17 years (Thailand Lawyer, n.d.), the cut-off point for child marriage in this study was set to 18 years,

following the international recommendations (UNICEF, 2024). Constructivist grounded theory requires the researcher to collect the data until they reach the saturation point. This refers to the state of data collection whereby the acquired data repeat themselves and no further emerging themes or coding can be found (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, the number of research participants was not set prior to the data collection but was allowed to flow along with the data collection process.

The study was designed by strictly following ethical practices of confidentiality, voluntary participation, informed consent, assent form and parental consent (where appropriate), and minimal risk and do no harm. This study's topic dealt with a sensitive and personal issue of child marriage. Therefore, information for resources for mental health support were prepared and handed out if the participants needed or requested. Due to children being included in the sampled participants, the protocol of this study strictly followed the Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC, 2013)'s guideline.

Participants

The participants of this study were categorized into six groups: firstly, the group of key specialist informants, government sectors, and civil society organizations (CSOs); secondly, the community leaders, including religious leaders, spiritual leaders, and teachers; thirdly, the family members of child brides and grooms; fourthly, the previous child brides and grooms, which were the women and men who were married before the age of 18; fifthly, the current child brides and grooms, which were the married boys and girls who were still under 18 years old at the time of the data collection, and lastly; sixthly, the unmarried adolescents. This study places great emphasis on the views of children, youth and local communities, since they may have different perspectives on child marriage from other key specialist informants who have been working to stop this practice. At the completion of data collection, the total numbers of participant were 113.

Sampling Procedures

This study used the snowball sampling technique to recruit the participants. First, the researcher began the sampling procedure by reaching out to those in the policy makers level, such as key specialist informants and government sectors, who then connected the researcher with CSOs, the non-profit organizations that work on child marriage issues in the local communities. Later, the CSOs introduced the researcher to the community level of potential participants, which included the community, religious, and spiritual leaders, and teachers. These key persons at the community level, then, provided the researcher with access to meet and interview the family members of previous child brides and grooms, previous child brides and grooms themselves, current child brides and groom, and regular unmarried adolescents.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

All participants in this study participated voluntarily and there was no monetary compensation provided to any participant. Moreover, the purpose of this study was to explore the determinants of child marriage in the two areas of study. Thus, apart from the key specialist informants, government sectors, CSOs, and teachers, the Hmong and Muslim participants who were included in this study were only those who resided in these two said locations were recruited. The Hmong and Muslim people who lived outside of the target communities of study were excluded from this study.

Interview Tools

This study used semi-structured interviews and FGDs as tools for data collection. The guidelines for both semi-structured interviews and FGDs were developed by the researcher and received a quality check with the thesis advisors' team prior to the data collection. The semi-structured interview was applied for all participants, except the participant group of unmarried adolescents, for whom the FGS were employed. For the semi-structured interview, the participants were asked to choose how they preferred to have their interview: online or on site. The FGDs were only conducted on site. The guidelines for both tools were designed to discover the participants' opinions on marriage, child marriage, drivers for child marriage, and

their direct and non-direct child marriage experiences. For those who experienced being child brides or grooms, the questions went deeper to aid in understanding their child marriage experiences, and their lives before and after their marriage. All of the data were combined together and used for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Following the instruction for data analysis proposed by Charmaz (2006), the data gained from each participant group was initially coded separately. Then, the focused codes were identified through all combined initial codes from every group. This study applied Microsoft Excel as the tool for accommodating the codes combination. Later, a comparative method was applied, which allowed the researcher to see the various patterns that emerged from the focused codes found in the two study areas. Lastly, the theoretical coding was developed, which resulted in the proposed model that explains the determinants of child marriage in the northern Hmong and southern Muslim communities.

Data Rigor

The researcher applied Stahl and King's (2020) suggestion, which discussed the rigors of research through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The data from this study was obtained by multiple contact, communication, and community visits in both communities. The researcher applied the comparative method during the data analysis process to obtain credibility and transferability of the research. Furthermore, the researcher was consistently supported by her PhD supervisor during each step in the research procedure. Therefore, the dependability and confirmability of this research was ensured.

Results

Demographic Data

The total 113 participants in each study area varied depending on the point of the data saturation for each participant group. Thus, this study collected data from 23 participants for the first group, which comprised of 8 key specialist informants, 10 CSOs, and 5 government sectors; 16 participants for the second group, which included 6 community leaders, 5 religious leaders, 1 spiritual leader, and 4 teachers; 10 participants for the third group, which consisted of 7 mothers, 2 fathers, and 1 relative; 18 participants for the fourth group, which contained 16 previous child brides and 2 previous child grooms; 7 participants for the fifth group, which were 7 current child brides; and lastly, 39 participants for the sixth group; which comprised of 23 unmarried adolescents from the Hmong communities and 16 unmarried adolescents from the Muslim communities in the southern provinces.

Research Findings

The analysis of theoretical coding from the semi-structured interviews and FGDs regarding the participants' opinions on marriage, child marriage, drivers for child marriage, and their direct and non-direct child marriage experiences, resulted in three themes: Firstly, patriarchy and cultural background; secondly, a taboo of pre-marital sex and pregnancy outside wedlock; and thirdly, integrational oppression. These themes were found in both study areas. Despite the diversity of culture between these two locations, it was found that these three emerging themes were strongly related to the existence of child marriage within the communities. Whilst patriarchy and the communities' cultural background seemed to lay the foundation that would normalize the practice of child marriage, the negative perception towards sex and pregnancy outside of marriage, along with the oppression across generations, were found to be drivers of the practice. Additionally, the focused codes reflected sub-themes for each theme. These are described further.

Theme 1: Patriarchy and Culture as a Foundation of Child Marriage

Patriarchy has been embedded in the cultures of each study area. This leads to gender inequality, which then leads to an acceptance of child marriage in the communities. The cultural backgrounds of both studied locations were socially constructed by men who also acted as the gatekeepers. Consequently, the customary practice of child marriage followed male standards.

Sub-theme 1.1: Religious Doctrine. The Islamic religious doctrine was found to be strongly related to the occurrence of child marriage among the Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces. Although child marriage in the southernmost provinces was driven by religious doctrine, children seemed to have different perceptions towards their marriage. Some accepted their marriage as being a positive life event, while others complied reluctantly.

> "My parents forced me to marry. They wanted me to do the right thing by the following religious doctrine because my girlfriend got pregnant." (A previous Muslim child groom)
> "I feel that my living condition after marriage is better, compared to my life before marriage. My family was poor. So, being with my husband's family provides me a better living." (A Muslim child bride)

Some argued that religion is not the primary cause of child marriage, but it was the misinterpretation of the religious doctrine that drove child marriage.

> "It is not directly about religion, but it is more of the interpretation … all done by male religious leaders. For the south, once the girl has undergone menstruation, she is perceived as being mature enough for marriage." (A female Muslim key specialist informant)

Sub-theme 1.2: Gatekeepers. While Thailand legitimizes 17 years of age as the minimum marriageable age (Thailand Lawyer, n.d.), the state law has been disregarded in the local communities. In both study areas, all leadership positions are basically men. It was found that men hold superior positions and oversaw decision making in the societies, including the decision for children to marry. In the southernmost provinces, although the Islamic family and inheritance law set 17 years as the minimum marriageable age, the religious leaders in the southernmost provinces have set their own standard when it comes to this practice.

> "According to the religion, marriage is allowed once the child reaches maturity… Here… at the Islamic committee, we allow children as young as 16 to marry." (A male Muslim religious leaders)

For the Hmong communities in northern Thailand, religious doctrine did not influence child marriage, unlike in the southernmost provinces. However, the male elderly Hmong community committee were the gatekeepers who acted as judges for community complaints, including decisions to marry off a child.

> "When the locals have complaints, they will inform the community leaders and we would hold, almost weekly, meetings to help solve the locals' complaints. There could be variety of complaints including when to tell if the child is ready for marriage." (A male Hmong community leader)

Sub-theme 1.3: Customary Practice. Customary practice and community rules were found to be produced by male authorities. The locals in both study areas expressed that they needed to follow these rules even though some might question the practice. In the Hmong culture, divorcees and widows are not allowed to return to their family homes due to the belief of bringing bad luck into the family. Since child marriage often results to divorce, when the child divorcees could not return home, they have no choice but to re-marry.

> "Here, we use the Hmong law, so children usually get married around the age 15 – 16 years old… My daughter got married at 14. Now, she is a divorcee, but I cannot bring her back into our house." (A father of a divorced Hmong child bride)

In the Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces, "Hukoompakutt" is a community law that is strictly followed by the locals and accepted by the state. Hukoompakutt enforces the communities to maintain order. It covers a wide range of rules including child marriage.

> "It is the community leaders and religious leaders that legislate Hukoompakutt. They use forced marriage as a punishment for children dating and hanging out … The adults … agree that those children deserve the punishment if they break the law." (A male Muslim key specialist informant)

Sub-theme 1.4: Community Pressure. Apart from the need to follow the customary practice, participants also reported that they felt the need to marry off their children due to the pressure from other locals in their communities.

> "I did not want my daughter to marry at a young age, but she wanted to travel to Malaysia for work, with her boyfriend. So, I had no choice but to let them marry before their move… because the community would view it as we violated the custom [if they were not married]." (A Muslim mother of a child bride)

Some girl participants expressed that they were pressured by the community to marry at young ages due to the social virtue of being a grateful daughter that should not ruin the family's reputation by dating.

> "I had to marry because I was staying overnight at my boyfriend's house. When my parents found out, they did not want me to marry but there was nothing we could do. If I returned home without marrying my boyfriend, it would make it look bad for my family, so I had to marry him." (A Hmong child bride)

Theme 2: A Taboo of Pre-marital Sex and Pregnancy Outside Wedlock as Drivers for Child Marriage

In both study locations, sexual conduct and pregnancy outside marriage were frowned upon by the communities and many participants reported that the communities often use marriage as a solution to block such behaviors. There are several factors that lead children towards having sexual relationships and/or pregnancy, including a child's own decision-making and maturity. Moreover, social media and technology were viewed negatively by the adults in the community as a channel that encourages children's sexual misconduct. Lastly, with the perception of pre-marital sex as sinful and prohibited, sex education, the use of contraception, and knowledge about family planning were not promoted to young teens in these two study areas for fear of encouraging early sexual behaviors.

Sub-theme 2.1: Teenage Romance. The communities' perception towards children dating were different in each community. Whilst the Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces do not allow children dating due to religious doctrine, the Hmong communities seem to more readily accept children dating. However, pre-marital sex is viewed as wrong in both communities. Marriage is used as a tool for curbing children from having sex, punishing them if their sexual conducts were found, and solving the problem of pregnancy outside wedlock.

> "Marrying children who are dating benefits our community in the way that we make an example of children dating, which is unallowed in our religion." (A male Muslim religious leader)
> "Teenage pregnancy is prevalent to this day… If it happens in this community, the locals will force the pregnant teen to marry." (A male Hmong spiritual leader)

Some participants from both study areas pointed out that there are no exceptions for extramarital pregnancy cases. Even if the pregnancy was a result of rape, the communities tend to marry the pregnant teens to their rapists.

> "For the case of rape, the community would deal with such cases by marrying the child victim to her rapist. Religiously, the rape cases would be dealt this way because if there is no marriage, how can we deal with the newborn without father?" (A male Muslim key specialist informant)

Sub-theme 2.2: Children's Agency. Children's agency refers to the children's abilities to make their own decisions for their own good. For this study, it includes children's consent to marry. The data from the interview showed that the idea of children's agency in child marriage is nuanced between each study area. Child marriage in the Hmong communities often occurs due to the children's decisions to marry. Many of the previous and current Hmong child brides and grooms reported that they were willing to marry during their teen years due to their teenage romance experiences. However, in the southernmost provinces, the data showed that children's consent to marry is rare. Mostly, the Muslim children in the south were pushed into marriage due to circumstances such as children dating, pre-marital sex, and teenage pregnancy.

> "We decided to get married because we loved each other. We were a couple, so we wanted to be together. Once we decided that we wanted to be married, we told our parents and both of them agreed with us." (A Hmong child bride)
> "I got married when I was 15 years old. At that time, I did not want to marry but I got pregnant with my boyfriend. So, we did not have a choice but to marry." (A Muslim previous child bride)

Sub-theme 2.3: Child Maturity. The concept of maturity in both study locations are different from the international standards. While it is widely recognized that anyone below the age of 18 is a child, a child in the Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces refers to anyone who has not yet experienced menstruation and that in the Hmong communities in the northern provinces, this generally means anyone below the age of 10.

> "The word 'child' in child marriage in the Hmong culture means a child … like a three-year-old-child, because once the Hmong people reach 15 – 16, they are no longer children…. This is why marriage during the age of 16 – 18 is acceptable for the Hmong. Girls above 18 years old are considered old, so nobody wants to marry an 18-year-old-girl." (A male Hmong key specialist informant)
> "There are no differences between girls and boys before they reach 15 years of age. However, when both girls and boys reach their 15 birthdays, they are considered as being matured enough. Thus, they can get married. For girls, if their menstruation started prior the age of 15, then they reach their maturity at the point of having their first period." (A male Muslim religious leader)

Sub-theme 2.4: Social Media.

Social media, unexpectedly, was mentioned multiple times by different groups of participants as one of the biggest determinants of child marriage in both communities. For the Hmong and Muslim children, today, social media was reported as a tool to connect with friends and partners from the opposite sex. However, adults in both study areas view social media as a threat, which could lead to children dating, pre-marital sex, and pregnancy outside wedlock.

> "In the past, Hmong children would often get married after the Hmong New Year because it was the time girls and boys got to know each other and started dating. Today, things have changed. They do not need to wait until the Hmong New Year because there is social media that can connect them together." (A female Hmong teacher)
> "Today, there are many cases that children that got married at 12 – 15 years old. Most of these cases knew their partners from Facebook and TikTok. Once, they started talking and got attached to each other, their parents often took them to the Islamic committee for marriage, just to make it religiously right." (A male Muslim religious leader)

Sub-theme 2.5: Sex Education, Contraception, and Family Planning. Although pre-marital sex and pregnancy outside wedlock were perceived as taboo in both study areas, the knowledge about sex has not received much support and promotion. It was rare to find that the topic of sex, contraception, and family planning were discussed within the Hmong and Muslim families. Mostly, the participants explained that they learned about these topics in schools, or by themselves.

> "At first, I asked my parents about the use of contraception and family planning, but it did not go well. They often got mad at me when I asked them about it. So, I talked about this with my friends and learned it from school." (A previous Muslim child groom)
> "Nobody has ever told me about sex, contraception, and family planning. I learned about it by myself once I had a son. That was when I started to think about family planning." (A Hmong child bride)

Whilst the participants expressed their knowledge of contraception, it was found that contraception was actually prohibited in the Muslim communities due to religious doctrine, and unpopular in the Hmong communities due to the need to have many family members supporting livelihoods and family income.

> "Contraception is not allowed in [our] religion." (A male Muslim religious leader)
> "I think contraception is important, but the Hmong society does not pay attention to it that much, because having lots of children is a good thing in the Hmong culture." (Regular unmarried adolescent)

Theme 3: Intergenerational Oppression Supports the Persistence of Child Marriage

The concept of oppression in terms of gender inequality and women oppression against women across generations, was found among both study sites. However, this theme was found to be stronger in the Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces than in the Hmong communities up north.

Sub-theme 3.1: Education and Poverty as an Intergenerational Problem. Women, in this study, who were married as children were more likely to come from families in poverty, with low levels of education, and tended to have children who were married off at young ages with low education. Thus, this pattern of determinants leading up to child marriage has been repeated across generations. Girls in the Hmong and Muslim communities tended to have less educational opportunities compared to boys. However, it was found that the lack of education was not the primary reason that drove child marriage in both study regions. Some expressed that due to the lack of education, they had to marry, while others were in the educational system but decided to drop out after marriage.

> "In Islam, if you do not go to school, for girls, if a guy proposed to you, you needed to marry." (A mother of a Muslim child bride)
> "At first, I planned to go back to school, but now, not anymore because I have to raise my son." (A Hmong child bride)

Although the married girls are allowed to continue their education according to the state law, it was found that most of them decided not to go back to school. With no educational degrees, it allowed for fewer career opportunities, which left them in the cycle of poverty, as well as perpetuating the intergenerational cycle of child marriage.

> "I did not complete the sixth grade. I dropped out because I decided to marry. My husband completed the ninth grade and did not continue his education… Both of us could not apply for jobs due to our ages so we do not have other choices but had to work in the farms." (A previous Hmong child bride)

Sub-theme 3.2: Age Gap. In the Hmong communities in the north, the brides and grooms mostly have similar ages, or a small age gap, at the time of marriage. However, in the Muslim communities in the south, it was found that a much larger age gap between the brides and grooms were common. Mostly, the young brides, who were married to much older grooms, tended not to marry to become the first wife, but rather as a wife who was lower in the hierarchy. It was found that these young brides often had duties of taking care of the household and the children of their husbands' earlier marriage. Thus, their chances of education were gone.

> "My husband was my parents' ex-boss. When I married him, he already had four wives. His wife passed away prior to our marriage. So, I had to take care of his children after getting married to him." (A previous Muslim child bride)

Sub-theme 3.3: The Lack of Women's Support to Prevent Child Marriage. The data showed that those affected by child marriage in both study areas were mainly girls. However, it was found that there was a lack of unity among girls and women. Although they were aware that the causes leading them to child marriage were the products of gender inequality, empathy among them seemed to be missing, especially in the Muslim communities. While many of the girls and women participants opposed the idea of marriage as a solution of pre-marital sex and pregnancy, they tended to blame the girls and women who committed it rather than questioning the societies they lived in. This was found in the Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces, but not in the Hmong communities in the northern provinces. "Pregnancy outside wedlock is sinful in Islam." This was a message from a Muslim mother of a previous child bride, who expressed with condemnation and distress when asked about the opinion of extramarital pregnancy.

The Proposed Model from the Results of This Grounded Theory Research

The determinants of child marriage in the Hmong communities in the northern region and the Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces of Thailand were categorized in three main groups: patriarchy and culture of the region, the concept of pre-marital sex and pregnancy outside wedlock as being taboo, and intergenerational oppression. These three determinants strongly support the ongoing practice of child marriage in both individual and community levels.

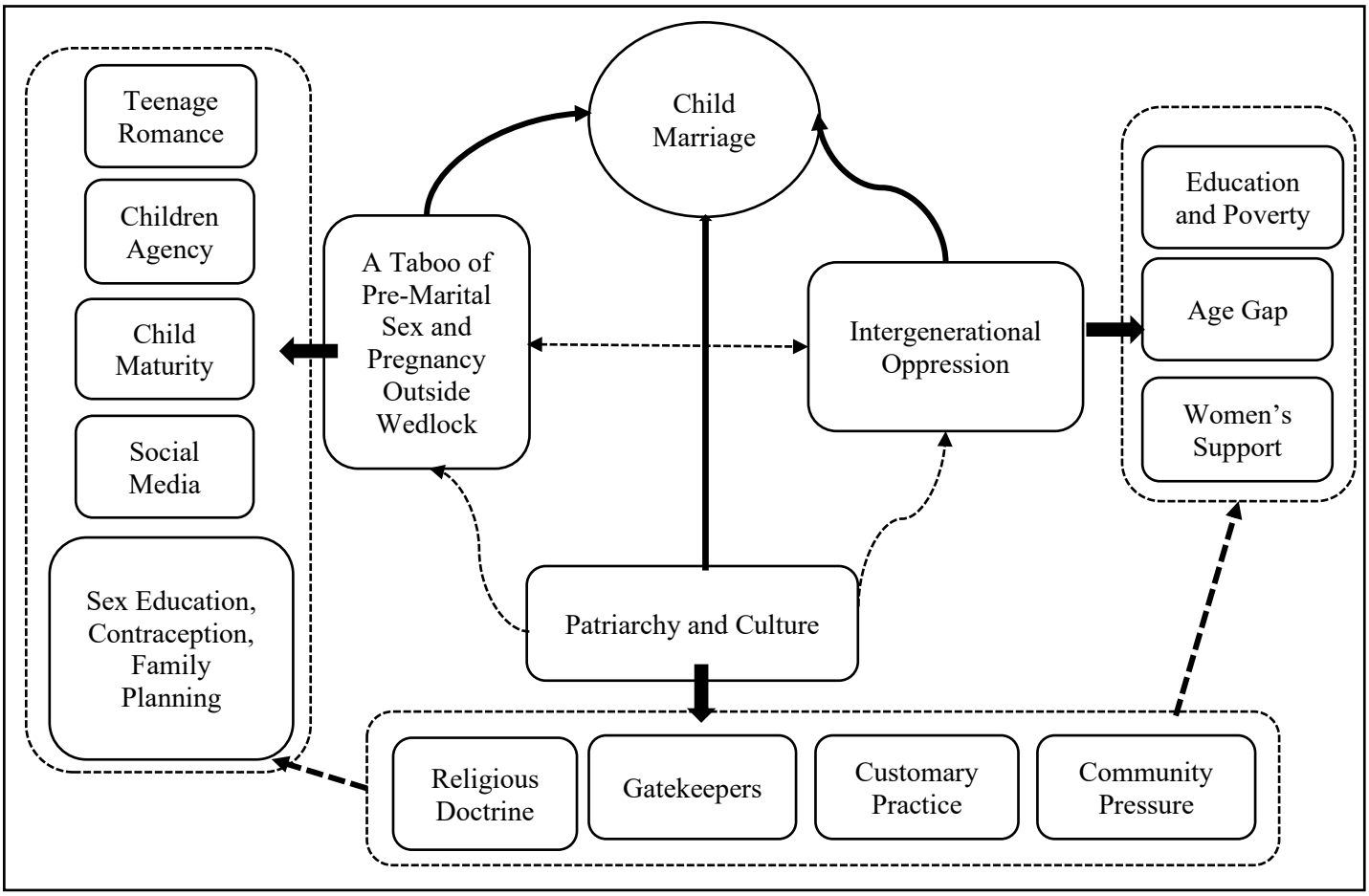
Figure 1 shows that while the three emerging themes independently drive children into marriage, they may also influence each other, making it a 'pool' of determinants that influence the existence of child marriage in Thailand. Patriarchy and culture were found to be the foundation that produced the negative perception towards extramarital sex and pregnancy and strengthened the intergenerational oppression that supports the persistence of child marriage.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion of Main Results

This study aimed to explore the determinants that support child marriage in the northern Hmong communities and southernmost provinces. The proposed model of the determinants of child marriage in Thailand suggested that the persistence of child marriage in the country has been mainly supported by three drivers: patriarchy and culture, a taboo of pre-marital sex and pregnancy outside wedlock, and intergenerational oppression on women. Although the cultural backgrounds between the Hmong communities and southernmost provinces differ, the findings suggested that patriarchy was reportedly strong in both study sites. Patriarchy that is embedded within and endorsed by the culture has also shown its linkage with the other two drivers in which it supported the idea of pre-marital sex and pregnancy outside wedlock being a taboo and allowed oppressive conceptions against women to maintain across generations. All these causes influence the ongoing prevalence of child marriage in both study sites.

Figure 1
A Model of the Determinants of Child Marriage in Thailand



Currently, the research on the topic of child marriage has tended to be conducted only in the regions where the rates of child marriage are critically high, such as South Asia and Africa (Efevbera & Bhabha, 2020). This has led to the presumption that the major causes of marriage were high poverty rates and low education, while patriarchy, and strong religious and cultural traditions also played significant, albeit lesser, roles in facilitating child marriage (Subramanee et al., 2022). While these notions may be true in said regions, it should not be concluded that the very same causes can be generalized to all regions. Even among the determinants of child marriage in the popular study sites, South Asia and Africa, there were significantly differences on the causes leading children towards child marriage (Petroni et al., 2017). This suggests that culture plays a role in these determinants.

The existing research suggests that Islamic religious doctrine was the primary driver of child marriage in the Muslim majority regions due to the holy script about the marriage of Aisha who was an underage girl by the time of her marriage (Samuri et al., 2022). This religious concept was also found to play major role in the cultural background that supported the ongoing practice of child marriage within the southernmost provinces, but not in the Hmong communities. The findings indicated that child marriage within the northern Hmong communities was more endorsed by the bride kidnapping tradition (CRC Coalition Thailand, 2018), and the cultural pressure on Hmong women that expected them to marry at young ages and enter motherhood early (Edinburgh et al., 2013). Underlying these different cultural backgrounds of the two study areas, patriarchy was strongly presented as a factor that justified child marriage.

In both communities, the findings suggested that male authorities significantly control the society and household levels. This reflected the unequal power relations between men and women, where women were controlled by men (Okin, 1999). These male authorities in the Hmong communities and southernmost

provinces acted as gatekeepers who organized the societies through their patriarchal viewpoints, which included the perception towards pre-marital sex and pregnancy outside wedlock as being a taboo and that any children who violated this social rule needed to be married off in order to maintain social order. It is true that not all children in this study who decided to get married were forced to do so. Some of them voluntarily took part in this practice, as was also the case in a study by Horii (2020a). Nonetheless, many of them, especially girls, who chose marriage might have been influenced by cultural norms or had the decision made for them, by the community leaders, religious leaders, or their parents (Horii, 2020b).

While some women have tried to challenge the community rules, it was surprising to find that many young women and girls in both study sites accepted the community pressure that set the standard of gender inequality, which Alwedinani (2017) called "internalised gender roles" (p.11). Women themselves can also unconsciously exercise their power to oppress other women, including their daughters. Mitchell (2015) proposed that patriarchy can be carried over generations. This is reflected through the concept of intergenerational oppression in this study, which explained why many mothers expressed support for their daughters' early marriage, and why women felt so negatively about other women who engaged in pre-marital sex or got pregnant outside of marriage. In general, the findings from this study suggest that child marriage cannot be looked at as being a merely problem of children. Rather, child marriage needs to be looked at as a continuing harmful practice that is carried across generations (Hartarto et al., 2024).

Limitations

This study contained some limitations. Firstly, the nature of a constructivist grounded theory, which was applied as the research methodology of this study, is to analyze the data based on participants' beliefs and opinions at the time the data is collected. As humans' beliefs and mindsets can change over time, the findings from this study may not be valid in representing the determinants of child marriage in the two study sites in the long run. Secondly, this study was conducted in merely two study sites: the Hmong communities in the north and the Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces. Thus, further studies are needed to prove if the results from this study can be generalized to the whole country. Lastly, the inclusion criteria for participants selection targeted those who lived in the study sites. Therefore, the Hmong people and Muslim population outside of the study locations were not included in this study. As a result, it cannot be concluded whether the findings from this study could apply to those target population who lived outside of the study areas.

Implications for Behavioral Science

The concept of intergenerational oppression, which could be explained by psychosocial theories is crucial in the way that it depicts how child marriage has been supported across generations, despite being a harmful practice to children. Additionally, the results in this study suggest that not all children in the study areas were victims of child marriage, and that not all children accepted child marriage. Children's decision to marry can be autonomously made by children or influenced by societal, cultural, and religious factors. Therefore, the factors that support the societies and children to reject child marriage should be further explored. If these key factors were systematically studied, the results could pave way for developing effective programs working against child marriage by empowering children's thoughts and behaviors, which could eventually end child marriage in the long run.

Conclusion

The proposed model presented in this study highlighted that patriarchy and culture, a taboo of pre-marital sex and pregnancy outside wedlock, and intergenerational oppression against women were strong determinants of child marriage in the northern Hmong communities and the Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. Whilst these three main drivers were found in both study areas, patriarchy and culture were shown to be a foundation that influence the perception of pre-marital sex and pregnancy as being a taboo, and intergenerational oppression against women. Therefore, to combat child marriage in Thailand, ones must pay more attention to the communities' structures in terms of patriarchy

and culture rather than the superficial surface of the practice as being the products of poverty and low education. This potentially highlights a limitation with many of the UN and CSO program initiatives, which primarily focus on keeping girls in school and/or promoting income generating activities for families.

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Declarations

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Institution for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University (IPSR-IRB-2022-144, on June 30, 2022).

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