Prevalence and Factors Affecting Child Marriage Practice among Rural Indigenous Communities in Sibu, Sarawak.

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Abstract
Child marriage could impinge the accomplishment of at least six out of eight of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Malaysia recorded an average of 1000 child marriage applications annually. Sarawak recorded the highest child marriage cases. This study aimed to determine the prevalence and factors affecting child marriage among rural indigenous communities in Sibu, Sarawak, Malaysia. A validated questionnaire assessed the socio-demographic, knowledge on marriage law, and perceptions on child marriage factors among 244 respondents, aged between 13 to 50 years old. The mean age of the respondents was 34.9 (SD=10.4) years old. The prevalence of female child marriage was as high as 13.2%. More than 50% respondents perceived that child marriage could protect girls from premarital sex and unwanted pregnancy. Almost all respondents (91%) have a misconception about the minimum age of marriage. Education and gender were significant factors that explained about 25% of the total variance of the child marriage occurrence. Based on these findings, there is an urgency for an effective education for sexual health among teens to prevent teenage pregnancy; reformation of the educational system for each child to complete their secondary education up to Form 5; and certainly to establish a clear legal age for marriage at 18 consistent with the international standard.
Keywords: Child Marriage, Determinants, Indigenous, Malaysia

Introduction
If the child marriage trend continues to persist, many girls will be deprived from their fundamental rights to health, education and safety (UNICEF, 2018). Child marriage, defined as the formal marriage before the age of 18, is currently affecting 650 million women and over 150 million men (UNICEF, 2020). It is often a precursor to teenage pregnancy, which poses severe health risks towards teenagers whose bodies have not fully matured enough for motherhood (United Nations Population Fund, 2020). Teenagers who give birth before the age of 15 are reported to be five times more likely to die in childbirth than girls in their 20s (World Health Organisation, 2020). Besides maternal

mortality, child marriage could expose these teenagers to sexually transmitted diseases; domestic violence and abuse; dropping out of school; and deprived from economic opportunities (Hotchkiss, Godha, Gage, & Cappa, 2016; Kalamar, Lee-Rife, & Hindin, 2016; Kibret, 2014; Arfaee et al., 2014). In general, child marriage deters the achievement of six out of the eight Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in education, income and maternal and child health aspects.

The practice of child marriage has existed for thousands of years, which is most rampant in South Asia and Africa (United Nations Children's Fund, 2014). Recently, the global proportion of child marriage have decreased from one in four to approximately one in five (Wylie, 2019). Although the global trend of child marriage is declining, the progress has been uneven and is declining slowly (United Nations Population Fund, 2020). In Malaysia, the 2010 Malaysian Population and Housing Census reported about 82,382 people were married at the age of 15 to 19 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Malaysia recorded an average of over 1000 child marriage applications annually. Among the states in Malaysia, Sarawak recorded the highest applications (2,064 cases), followed by Kelantan (1,929 cases), and Terengganu (924 cases) (Samuri, 2018).

Socioeconomic factors, such as rural residence, poverty, and education have been repeatedly found to be associated with the practice of child marriage (Loaiza & Wong, 2012). Besides that, evidence suggests that social norms play a key role in perpetuating child marriage. Social norm is defined as people's beliefs about what others in their group do and the extent to which others in the group approve or disapprove of something (Cislaghi, Mackie, Nkwi, & Shakya, 2019).

In Sarawak, high cases of child marriage reported to be closely related to customary marriage. Under the Sarawak native customary laws, the minimum age for marriage was not clearly stated, indirectly permits child marriage (Ling, 2018). Apart from this, findings from a qualitative study conducted in Sarawak, reported health risk behaviour, poverty, early marriage as fate, and family disharmony as factors leading to child marriage (Kohno, Dahlui, Farid, Safii, & Nakayama, 2020). Studies on child marriage among indigenous communities who practice customary marriage in Malaysia are still very limited, thus requiring more research in order to build strong evidence for decision-making. Different factors of child marriage practice may apply to different ethnics, regions and different times.

In order to reduce child marriage and to improve the living conditions of girls, who are mostly affected, it is of the highest importance to further investigate the background factors of child marriage in the local context. This is in line with the United Nations General Assembly calls to conduct research on determinants of child marriage, identify effective and feasible legal, social and economic measures to prevent it (Svanemyr, Chandra-Mouli, Christiansen, & Mbizvo, 2012).

For these reasons, our study was conducted to determine the prevalence of child marriage and predict factors affecting child marriage among rural indigenous communities in Sibu, Sarawak. This study was guided by a socioeconomic model of marriage timing (Becker, 1974) and social norms perspective (Cislaghi et al., 2019). The socioeconomic model predicts that the child marriage practice occurred if the perceived benefits from marriage exceed the costs (Anderson, Hill, & Butler, 1987). While the social norms theory emphasizes that child marriage practice is often influenced by what

other people do and by what other people think should be done. Compliance with social norms is reinforced by individual's belief that compliers could earn social rewards and non-compliers could suffer social punishments (Cislaghi et al., 2019).

Research Methods

This research is a cross-sectional study that analyses data collected from rural indigenous communities residing in longhouses in Sibu, Sarawak. Sarawak is inhabited by almost 40% of indigenous communities, with two biggest ethnic groups which are the Iban and the Bidayuh. By using a multistage sampling technique (districts, longhouses, and households), a total of 244 men and women of reproductive age group, aged 13 to 50 years old participated in this study. The sample size was determined by a single proportion formula based on child marriage prevalence, which is 20% (Raj, McDougal, & Rusch, 2012).

A validated questionnaire from a previous study (Kibret, 2014) was used to predict factors of child marriage. This questionnaire was consisting of; 1). socio-demographic parameters; age, gender, education level, marital status, household monthly income and marriage age; 2). perceptions on child marriage practice; 3). knowledge on customary law marriage. Perceptions were measured by 18 items that had four subscales; perceived social benefits, perceived economic benefits, perceived consequences of child marriage, and who are accountable for child marriage. All items on perceptions are rated using a 4-point Likert scale; with response "1" representing strongly disagree to "4" denotes strongly agree. Knowledge regarding customary laws on child marriage were measured by two items with "Yes" and "No" responses. The questionnaire was translated into the Iban language and piloted on 30 respondents who had similar socio-demographic characteristics of the intended study samples. The Cronbach's alpha obtained for the 18 perception items was 0.83, which is an acceptable internal consistency of the instrument. Difficult terms such as "social stigma" was explained by using Iban analogy e.g. "*tinggal bas", "endak laku", "maku"*.

Data collection was done in the homes of the participants in the evening. The data was collected by a researcher and two trained research assistants who speak fluent Iban language. The collected data were entered into the SPSS version 21 and analysed by using the multivariate logistic regression to identify the factors affecting child marriage.

Ethical approval to conduct this study was received from the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak Ethics Committee. In case of minors aged less than 18 years, written consent was obtained from their legal guardian.

Findings

Sociodemographic and Prevalence of child marriage practice

The occurrence of child marriage among female in this study was 13.2%, while among male was 3.4%. The prevalence was calculated based on marriage age before 18 years old. The mean age of respondents was 34.9 (SD=10.4) years old. Among 244 respondents, 210 (86%) of them were married. The mean household income was RM1368 per month (SD=931), with approximately 39% having an income below RM1000 per month (Table 1).

	Frequency	%	Mean	SD
Age			34.9	10.4
< 18 years old	15	6.1		
> 18 years old	229	93.9		
Gender				
Female	138	56.6		
Male	106	43.4		
Monthly Income (RM)			1368	931
Below RM 1000 (USD300)	39	39.4		
Above RM1000 (USD300)	60	60.6		
Education Attainment				
Did not receive formal education	14	5.7		
Primary 1 to Primary 6	33	13.5		
Form 1 – Form 5	164	67.2		
College/University	33	13.5		
Occupation				
Farmer	71	30.2		
Housewife	64	27.2		
Government sector	43	18.3		
Private Sector	57	24.3		
Marital status				
Married	197	80.7		
Not married	34	13.9		
Divorced	10	4.1		
Widowed	3	1.2		
Married before age 18 years old				

Female (n=121)	16	13.2
Male (n=89)	3	3.4

Table 1: Respondent's socio-demographic and prevalence of child marriage practice

Factors affecting child marriage practice
Table 2 shows the descriptive results on factors affecting child marriage practice. More than half of the respondents (52%) perceived that early marriage could protect girls from premarital sex and unwanted pregnancy. While 32% of them perceived that child marriage is a way to avoid social stigma. About 41% of the respondents agreed that child marriage has no social benefits at all. As for economic benefits, about one third of the respondents perceived that child marriage gave benefits; getting asset from the husband (24%) and creating job opportunities for the child (40%).

Variables	Agree/ Strongly agree	%
Perceived social benefits of child marriage for the girl		
Protecting girl child from premarital sex and unwanted pregnancy	128	52.5
To avoid social stigma	77	31.6
To get honour from the community like married women	64	26.2
No benefit at all	100	41.0
Perceived economic benefits		
To get assets from husband's family for married girls	58	23.8
To create job opportunity to the child	97	39.8
No benefit at all	104	42.6
Perceived consequences of child marriage		
School termination	200	82.0
Pregnancy and delivery complications	188	77.0
Unable to manage family	185	75.8
Divorce	178	73.0
Premature labour	173	70.9
No consequence at all	66	27.0

Who are accountable for child marriage?

Family/parents	32	13.1
The husband	114	46.7
Community members who participate marriage process	40	16.4
Community members who participate in wedding ceremony	42	17.2
No one will be accountable, but self	50	79.5
Knowledge on customary law marriage		
Adat Istiadat 1993 allows marriage below 18 years old	41	16.8
Child Act (amendment) 2016 allows marriage below 18 years old	223	91.4

Table 2: Descriptive analysis on factors affecting child marriage practice

About 71% to 82% of the respondents agreed that child marriage causes school termination, divorce, unable to manage family, pregnancy and delivery complications, and premature labour. While less than 27% of respondents think there is no bad consequences of child marriage. As many as 83.2 % of respondents do not know the provision of their customary law (Adat Istiadat Iban 1993) on marriage age. Whereas almost all of them (91%) have misconception about the civil laws, which they thought allows marriage before the age of 18. The majority of the respondents (80%) stated that a person itself should be accountable for her or his marriage.

As shown in Table 3, education and gender were significant factors in influencing child marriage practice. The 2-factor model explained 25% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the total variance in child marriage occurrence. Those respondents with lower education will have a 9.5 times higher risk of marrying early compared to respondents with higher education. While the chances for females to get married early is 5.4 times higher than males.

Variables	Coefficient β	P value	Odds ratio	Model coefficient	Cox and Snell, R^2	Nagelkerke R^2
Education	2.25	0.000	9.52	25.49	0.11	0.25
Gender	1.69	0.012	5.42	25.49	0.11	0.25
Constant	-4.37	0.000	0.01			

Table 3: Child marriage predictors based on logistic regression model

Discussion
Prevalence of child marriage
Our study reported a prevalence of 13.2% of child marriage among indigenous women residing in rural areas in Sibu, Sarawak. The prevalence of child marriage may possibly be higher, as many pairs do not register their unions. To the best of our knowledge, official statistics on the prevalence of child marriage among indigenous communities in Sarawak, Malaysia are not systematically collected, analysed or published. In comparison, the prevalence of child marriage in South Asia and African countries can be as high as 78% (Naveed & Butt, 2015). Country such as Niger recorded the highest occurrence of child marriage (75%). Others are Chad and Central African Republic (68%); Bangladesh (66%); Guinea (63%); Mozambique (56%); Mali (55%); Burkina Faso and South Sudan (52%); and Malawi (50%) (World Health Organization, 2013). In India, the prevalence of child marriage was 45% (Raj, Saggurti, Balaiah, & Silverman, 2009). It is understood that child marriage in these countries are high because they are in fragile situation, either the country is extremely poor or in war zones. They may see child marriage as a survival approach. Their context is different than those in developing and developed countries. In developed country such as USA, about 9% of women were married below age 18 (Le Strat, Dubertret, & Le Foll, 2011).

Factors affecting child marriage
On the perceived benefits of child marriage, the present study found up to 42% of the respondents perceived that child marriage has no social and economic benefits. Compared to the previous findings from Ethiopia, only 3.7% of respondents reported that early marriage has no benefits (Kibret, 2014). From the socioeconomic cost-benefit analysis of marriage (Field, Glennerster, Buchmann, & Murphy, 2016), this perception indicates a healthy sign among indigenous communities in Sarawak. Assuming with less social and economic "gain" from child marriage, this practice may eventually die off. In Bangladesh, the cost-benefit approach was used as a strategy to reduce child marriage. Providing direct financial incentives to girls noted to be the most cost effective means to avert underage marriages (Field et al., 2016).

However, more than half of respondents in the present study perceived that child marriage could protect girls from premarital sex and unintended pregnancy. Parents think that marrying their daughters young could afford protection to their daughters from rape, premarital sex and unwanted pregnancies (Nour, 2009). In Malaysia, girls who get pregnant out of wedlock are humiliated for tarnishing their family status or reputation, resulting in early marriage, abortions, and baby dumping. In line with these perceptions, about 32% of the study respondents agreed that child marriage is a resolution to avoid social stigma and negative stereotypes of unwed pregnancy. With such perceptions, unwed pregnancy could be another important driver to child marriage practice (Mohd, Adibah, & Haliza, 2015). In Malaysia, the number of teenage girls who become pregnant are steadily increasing. Between 2009 and 2011, there were almost 20,000 teenage mothers, many were from unwed pregnancies (Mohd et al., 2015). This is equivalent to about 50 cases of teenage pregnancy per day. One of the reasons that attribute to a high number of teenage pregnancy cases is due to the lack of awareness among adolescents on reproductive and sexual health. In Malaysia, talks on sexuality is regarded as taboo and embarrassing. Moreover, sexual health education is not fully institutionalized (Talib, Mamat, Ibrahim, & Mohamad, 2012). In fact, the idea of introducing sex

education is to provide teenagers with the appropriate knowledge and skills so that they could be responsible for their own sexual behaviour, as well as encourages abstinence. In Japan, citizens from the age of 10 are exposed to sex education, focusing on biological topics (Nur Farzana Izzati Shaharuddin, 2016).

Majority of the study respondents (71%) have awareness about the negative effects of child marriage such as school termination, divorce, unable to manage family, pregnancy and delivery complications, and premature labour. In Dare salaam, about 52% of the people have limited knowledge on the consequences of child marriage (Mtengeti, Jackson, Masabo, William, & Mghamba, 2008). Another study reported about 22% to 31% of their study respondents mentioned consequences on school termination, pregnancy complications, and inability to manage family (Kibret, 2014).

The findings of the present study revealed how low education level and gender as predictors of child marriage, which corroborated well with previous findings, where child marriage was common among the poor, lack of education, and reside in countryside ((Le Strat et al., 2011; Loaiza Sr & Wong, 2012). Research conducted in Bangladesh found that women with low education level was the sole significant predictor of child marriage (Kamal, Hassan, Alam, & Ying, 2015). Another finding from a qualitative study in Pakistan among women of reproductive age who were married before 18, are those with low education level, poor, and working as housemaids. These results showed that these women were ignorant of the negative health outcomes of child marriages (Nasrullah, Muazzam, Bhutta, & Raj, 2014).

Evidence from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan identify programmes that focus into improving girl's education and urban migration have reduced the occurrence of child marriage in South Asia (Raj et al., 2012). Programmes that give families incentives to keep their daughters in school, feed children during school hours, and those provide employment once girls have completed their schooling shown success in reducing child marriage (Malhotra, Warner, McGonagle, & Lee-Rife, 2011; Nour, 2009).

Another report by Davis, Postles, and Rosa (2013) reiterates similar approach to end child marriage by encouraging girls to complete their school years. Schooling could delay marriage, pregnancy, and childbearing. Furthermore schools via its sexual education programme is effective in changing the teenager's awareness, attitudes, and practices leading to healthy sexual behaviour (Nour, 2009). Unfortunately, sexual health education is not fully institutionalised in Malaysia due to many controversial taboo issues (Talib et al., 2012).

In our present study, most of the respondents were confused about the legal age of marriage. Almost all of them have misconception about the civil law, which they thought allows marriage before the age of 18. This confusion is reasonable as Malaysia have a complex legal system for marriage, which comprises of shariah, civil and customary law. Under the civil law, the legal age of marriage for non-Muslims is 18 (although females aged 16 to 18 may marry with the consent of their state Chief Minister or Menteri Besar). While, under the Shariah law, girls may marry at 16 and boys at 18 and the Shariah Court may grant permission to marry below those ages (i.e. below 16 for girls and below 18 for boys) (Noor Aziah Mohd Awal Mohd Al Adib Samuri, 2018). Under the Sarawak native

customary law, the minimum age for marriage was not clearly stated (Ling, 2018). As a general rule, Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia have different set of marriage laws and both laws allow child marriage under special circumstances. Certainly, there is a need to establish a clear legal age for marriage at 18 consistent with international standards.

Law reforms might be a popular approach to end child marriage that has existed for decades and is still an ongoing battle. However, the experience from Bangladesh, India, and Nepal need to be considered. These countries has set legal marriage age for girls at 16 and 18, but this law reform appears to have little effect to reduce child marriage (Raj et al., 2012). In India, child marriage has been banned for about 30 years, but still about half of girls marry before 18 years old. The lack of legislation impact could be related to customary, cultural and religious (Nguyen & Wodon, 2015). Similar to Malaysia context, law reform can be challenging as culture and traditions are intertwined with Islamic religion. As such, education reforms should instead co-exist with marriage law reforms and sexual education programme to reduce teenage pregnancy, consequently to reduce child marriage. By making mandatory secondary education for all Malaysian children of ages up to Form 5 9 (age 17 / 18), girls stay longer years in schools. Presently, under the Education (Amendment) Act 2002, only the six years of primary education is mandatory (6-12 years old).

Strength and limitations
This study added useful insight to the body of knowledge on prevalence and factors affecting child marriage among indigenous communities in Malaysia. However, the study maybe subject to social desirability biases as a result of being conducted through face to face interviews. Apart from that, these findings are limited to indigenous ethnic group, therefore not generalizable to other indigenous groups in Malaysia.

Conclusions
Child marriage practice could impinge the achievement of millennium development goals. It is still a concern among indigenous communities in Sarawak, Malaysia. The indigenous communities perceived that early marriage is still a form of a protection from unwanted pregnancies. Additionally, the different set of marriage laws and lack in understanding on the minimum age of marriage may further complicate the child marriage practice among indigenous communities. Our findings also echo on low education attainment as a factor affecting child marriage. Based on these findings, there is an urgency for an effective education for sexual health among teens to prevent teenage pregnancy; reformation of the educational system for each child to complete their secondary education up to Form 5; and certainly to establish a clear legal age for marriage at 18 consistent with the international standard.

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Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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