

Lived Experiences of Meranao Women as Child-Mothers

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ABSTRACT

Child motherhood is a multifaceted and culturally ingrained phenomena influence by systemic disparities and societal standards. This study examined the lived experiences of Meranao women who became child mothers, focusing on the factors influencing their transition, the support structures that aided them, and the significance they attributed to their experiences. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with seven participants and analyzed by the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen technique. Finding showed theme 1 as the life as the turning point, theme 2, the Cultural Networks as a Source of Strength, Care, and Adaptation, theme 3, Theme 3: Motherhood as a Life Redirection. The child motherhood represents a notable period marked by an abrupt transition from childhood to maturity, influence by poverty, limited educational opportunities, and the premature domestic responsibilities. Nevertheless, these hurdles, participants were supported by strong cultural networks, especially familial and communal organizations that provided care, advice and sense of belonging. Over time, participants reinterpreted their experiences, converting child motherhood into a source of meaning, obligation and aspiration. This process reflects a shift from vulnerability to autonomy, where participants demonstrated a profound dedication to transforming the life of their paths of their children. The study concludes the child motherhood among Meranao women represents both a condition of constraint and catalyst for transformations, highlighting the necessity for culturally informed and community-oriented initiatives. These findings amplify the understanding of child motherhood and underscore the importance of including cultural context in policy and practice.

Keywords: Child motherhood; Meranao women; phenomenology; early marriage; cultural support systems; lived experiences; qualitative research; Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Child motherhood remains a persistent and deeply complex social reality, one that unfolds at the intersection of poverty, gender inequality, and culturally embedded practices. Across many developing contexts, early marriage continues to shape the life trajectories of young girls, often leading to early motherhood and its accompanying challenges. Globally, child marriage is recognized not only as a violation of human rights but also as a condition that exposes young girls to heightened physical, emotional, and social vulnerabilities (World Health Organization, 2020).

Within Muslim communities, early motherhood is often situated within broader socio-cultural and religious frameworks that influence family structures, gender roles, and expectations surrounding marriage. Studies have shown that young Muslim mothers frequently encounter compounded difficulties, including limited preparedness for motherhood, insufficient support systems, and psychological strain arising from early assumption of adult roles (Ali et al., 2020; Mahabbah et al., 2023). At the same time, intergenerational knowledge-sharing and extended family networks serve as crucial mechanisms of support, reflecting the deeply relational nature of caregiving within these communities (Erfina et al., 2022).

In the Philippine context, child motherhood is closely linked to the persistence of child marriage, particularly in geographically and socioeconomically marginalized areas. Despite the institutionalization of legal protections such as Republic Act No. 11596, or the Anti-Child Marriage Law, the practice remains embedded in certain

cultural and social structures, where it is often normalized and sustained through tradition, poverty, and limited access to education. As such, legal frameworks alone are insufficient to fully address the lived realities of those affected.

Among the Meranao, child motherhood is not merely an individual experience but a socially situated phenomenon shaped by family expectations, religious teachings, and community norms. Existing literature has documented the developmental and psychosocial challenges faced by adolescent mothers, including role conflict, emotional distress, and disrupted educational trajectories (Baluyot et al., 2024; Rachmawati et al., 2021). However, much of this literature remains externally framed, often emphasizing deficits without fully capturing how young mothers themselves interpret, navigate, and assign meaning to their experiences.

Phenomenological inquiry offers a critical lens through which these experiences can be understood not as abstract categories but as lived realities, grounded in perception, memory, and meaning-making (Moustakas, 1994). In attending closely to the voices of Meranao child mothers, this study seeks to move beyond generalized narratives and instead illuminate the nuanced, layered, and deeply human dimensions of early motherhood within a specific cultural context.

This study, therefore, explores the lived experiences of Meranao women who entered motherhood at a young age. It seeks to understand not only the conditions that shaped their early transition into motherhood but also the cultural support systems that sustained them and the meanings they have come to attach to their experiences. In doing so, the study contributes to a more culturally grounded and empathetic understanding of child motherhood, one that recognizes both its constraints and the resilience that emerges within it.

Research Objectives

This study seeks to explore and understand the lived experiences of Meranao women who entered motherhood at an early age. Grounded in a phenomenological orientation, it aims to illuminate the meanings they ascribe to their experiences, as well as the social and cultural conditions that have shaped their life trajectories.

Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Describe the physical, social, and emotional experiences of Meranao women who became mothers at an early age;
2. Identify the cultural support systems that help them navigate their experiences; and
3. Explore the meanings they attach to their experiences of early motherhood.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a phenomenological approach, to explore and understand the lived experiences of Meranao women who became mothers at an early age. Qualitative research is particularly suited for examining complex social phenomena and for capturing the meanings individuals attach to their experiences, allowing for a rich and contextualized understanding of human realities. In this study, phenomenology was adopted to uncover the essence of early motherhood as experienced by the participants, focusing on their perceptions, emotions, and interpretations of their life situations.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Munai, Lanao del Norte, a fourth-class inland municipality characterized by geographically isolated communities. The area is marked by widespread poverty, limited access to education, and sociocultural practices that contribute to the persistence of child marriage and early motherhood. These contextual conditions provided a relevant setting for exploring the lived realities of Meranao child mothers.

Participants and Sampling

The participants of the study consisted of seven Meranao women who had experienced early marriage and motherhood. They were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) aged 18 years and above at the time of the study, (2) married at a young age through arranged marriage, (3) gave birth between the ages of 13 and 15, (4) had at least one child, and (5) were residents of Munai, Lanao del Norte. The number of participants is consistent with phenomenological research, which typically involves a small sample to allow for in-depth exploration of lived experiences.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview protocol adapted from Seidman's (2006) three-interview series. The first interview focused on the participants' life histories, situating their experiences within a broader personal context. The second interview explored the detailed accounts of their experiences as child mothers, while the third interview invited participants to reflect on the meaning of these experiences.

Each participant underwent interview sessions, conducted across multiple sessions, typically three per participant, with each session lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The researcher established rapport with participants prior to the interviews and ensured that they were comfortable and willing to share their experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated where necessary to ensure accuracy and depth of analysis.

Data Analysis

The study utilized the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen method of phenomenological analysis as outlined by Moustakas (1994). The analysis followed a systematic process beginning with bracketing (epoche), where the researcher set aside personal biases and assumptions. This was followed by horizontalization, in which all statements were treated with equal value, and clustering of meanings, where significant statements were grouped into themes.

Subsequently, the researcher developed textural descriptions (what was experienced) and structural descriptions (how the experiences occurred), which were then synthesized to capture the essence of the phenomenon. This process allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribed to early motherhood.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor of the study, the principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were employed, following Lincoln and Guba's framework. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and peer consultation. Dependability was ensured through careful documentation of the research process, while confirmability was established through audit trails and reflexive practices. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study and interprets the lived experiences of Meranao women who became mothers at an early age. Through phenomenological analysis, the participants' narratives were organized into three overarching themes that capture the essence of early motherhood as experienced within the Meranao cultural context.

Theme 1: Life as Turning Point

Table 1. Categories, Descriptions, and Illustrative Verbatims for Theme 1

Category	Description	Illustrative Verbatims
Socioeconomic Constraints	Childhood experiences shaped by poverty and limited access to formal education, restricting life opportunities	“I stopped going to school because we had no money.” (P2) “My parents could not support my studies, so I stayed at home.” (P5)
Early Assumption of Adult Roles	Engagement in domestic responsibilities and caregiving at a young age, preparing them for adult roles	“I was already taking care of my younger siblings.” (P4) “Even when I was young, I was doing household chores every day.” (P6)
Lack of Preparedness for Motherhood	Limited knowledge and emotional readiness for marriage and childbearing	“I did not know what to do when I became a mother.” (P1) “No one taught me how to take care of a baby.” (P3)
Emotional and Psychological Disruption	Feelings of fear, confusion, and emotional distress during early motherhood	“I was afraid because everything was new to me.” (P3) “I felt overwhelmed because I was still young.” (P7)

Category 1: Socioeconomic Constraints

The findings indicate that early motherhood is structurally conditioned by poverty and limited access to education, which constrain life choices and normalize early marriage. Participants’ inability to continue schooling reflects how structural inequalities shape life trajectories. This aligns with evidence that economic deprivation and restricted educational access are key drivers of early marriage in marginalized contexts (Mourtada et al., 2017). These conditions position early motherhood not as an isolated event but as a socially patterned outcome.

Category 2: Early Assumption of Adult Roles

Participants described being introduced to adult responsibilities at a young age, particularly through caregiving and household labor. These early experiences functioned as a form of socialization, gradually preparing them for future roles as wives and mothers. The normalization of domestic responsibilities during childhood effectively blurred the boundary between childhood and adulthood.

This pattern reflects culturally embedded gender roles within the Meranao context, where young girls are expected to contribute to household functioning. Such early role socialization reinforces the continuity between childhood experiences and adult expectations, shaping the transition into motherhood. Similar findings have been noted in studies on gender roles in Meranao households, where domestic labor is central to female identity formation (Musa, 2005).

Category 3: Lack of Preparedness for Motherhood

A significant dimension of the turning point experience is the participants’ lack of preparedness for motherhood. Entering marriage and childbearing at a young age, they reported limited knowledge of reproductive health, childcare, and marital responsibilities. This lack of preparation resulted in uncertainty and difficulty in adjusting to their new roles.

Participants often relied on informal guidance from family members, highlighting the absence of structured education on maternal health and parenting. This aligns with studies indicating that adolescent mothers frequently experience a gap between developmental readiness and maternal expectations, which can complicate their ability to navigate early motherhood (Mahabbah et al., 2023).

Category 4: Emotional and Psychological Disruption

The transition into early motherhood was further characterized by emotional and psychological challenges. Participants expressed feelings of fear, confusion, and being overwhelmed, particularly during pregnancy and the early stages of child-rearing. These emotional responses reflect the abruptness of the transition and the lack of preparedness for adult responsibilities.

This finding is supported by research highlighting the psychological vulnerabilities of young mothers, including anxiety, emotional distress, and difficulties in role adaptation (Saud et al., 2023). The emotional burden experienced by participants underscores the developmental tension between adolescence and motherhood, where individuals are required to assume adult roles while still undergoing their own psychological development.

Altogether, these findings position early motherhood as a structurally mediated turning point, where developmental disruption is shaped by intersecting economic and social constraints.

Theme 2: Cultural Networks as a Source of Strength, Care, and Adaptation

Table 2. Subthemes, Descriptions, and Illustrative Verbatims for Theme 2

Category	Description	Illustrative Verbatims
Family as Primary Source of Care	Immediate and extended family members provide practical, emotional, and caregiving support	“My mother helped me take care of my baby.” (P2) “My mother-in-law guided me on what to do.” (P6)
Community as a Space of Normalization	Early motherhood is culturally accepted and integrated into community life	“In our place, it is normal to marry early.” (P4) “Many women here became mothers at a young age.” (P5)
Intergenerational Transmission of Knowledge	Childcare and parenting knowledge are passed down through family and elders	“They taught me how to bathe and feed my baby.” (P1) “I learned from my mother and the older women in our family.” (P3)
Adaptation Through Relational Support	Emotional reassurance and shared responsibility help participants adjust to motherhood	“They were always there when I needed help.” (P7) “I did not feel alone because my family supported me.” (P2)

Category 1: Family as Primary Source of Care

The findings highlight the central role of family—particularly mothers, mothers-in-law, and extended relatives—as the primary source of care and support for Meranao child mothers. Participants consistently described receiving assistance in childcare, household responsibilities, and emotional guidance, which enabled them to gradually adapt to their new roles.

This strong reliance on familial support reflects the collectivist orientation of Meranao society, where caregiving responsibilities are shared among family members rather than borne solely by the individual. In such contexts, early motherhood is sustained not only through individual resilience but through relational networks that provide stability and continuity.

This finding aligns with existing literature emphasizing the importance of family support in mitigating the challenges of early motherhood, particularly in collectivist cultures where extended family plays a central role in caregiving (Erfinia et al., 2022).

Category 2: Community as a Space of Normalization

Participants’ narratives reveal that early motherhood is embedded within a cultural framework that normalizes the experience. Within their communities, becoming a mother at a young age is not viewed as deviant but as a socially accepted and expected life course.

This normalization reduces stigma and allows young mothers to maintain a sense of belonging within their communities. However, it also contributes to the استمرار (continuation) of early marriage practices by reinforcing their acceptability within the social structure.

The findings resonate with studies indicating that child marriage and early motherhood are often sustained through deeply rooted cultural norms and social expectations, which shape community perceptions and practices (Mourtada et al., 2017).

Category 3: Intergenerational Transmission of Knowledge

Another significant aspect of cultural support lies in the transmission of knowledge across generations. Participants described learning essential childcare practices through guidance from mothers, elders, and other experienced women in their families.

This form of informal learning compensates for the lack of formal education on reproductive health and parenting, enabling young mothers to acquire practical skills necessary for child-rearing. The reliance on experiential and community-based knowledge reflects the culturally embedded nature of caregiving practices.

Such findings are supported by research highlighting the role of intergenerational knowledge-sharing in supporting young mothers, particularly in contexts where formal health education is limited (Erfina et al., 2022).

Category 4: Adaptation Through Relational Support

Participants’ ability to adapt to early motherhood was closely tied to the emotional and relational support they received from their families and communities. The presence of supportive relationships provided reassurance, reduced feelings of isolation, and facilitated the gradual adjustment to maternal responsibilities.

Rather than navigating motherhood independently, participants experienced it as a shared journey, where challenges were collectively managed. This relational dimension of adaptation underscores the importance of social connectedness in shaping the experiences of child mothers.

This finding reflects broader literature on social support and maternal adaptation, which suggests that strong relational networks are critical in promoting psychological well-being and caregiving competence among young mothers (Macintosh & Callister, 2021).

These dynamics highlight that adaptation to early motherhood is not an individual process but a relational one, grounded in culturally embedded systems of care.

Theme 3: Motherhood as a Life Redirection

Table 3. Subthemes, Descriptions, and Illustrative Verbatims for Theme 3

Category	Description	Illustrative Verbatims
Emergence of Responsibility and Maturity	Motherhood fosters a sense of accountability, growth, and adaptation to adult roles	“I became more responsible because I already have a child.” (P1) “I learned how to take care of my family even if I was still young.” (P6)

Children as Source of Meaning and Motivation	Children become central to participants' lives, providing purpose and emotional grounding	"My child is my strength." (P3) "Even if it is hard, I keep going because of my children." (P5)
Reinterpretation of Lived Experience	Participants reflect on early motherhood as both a hardship and a source of learning	"It was difficult, but it taught me many things." (P2) "Now I understand why I had to go through those experiences." (P7)
Aspirations for Intergenerational Change	Desire to alter the life trajectory of their children, particularly through education and delayed marriage	"I want my children to finish school first." (P4) "I do not want them to experience what I went through." (P6)

Category 1: Emergence of Responsibility and Maturity

The findings reveal that motherhood serves as a critical site for the development of responsibility and personal maturity among participants. Despite entering motherhood at a young age, the demands of caregiving and household management compelled them to adapt and assume adult roles. Over time, participants described a gradual process of learning, adjustment, and growth, reflecting an evolving sense of self shaped by their maternal responsibilities.

This transformation highlights how early motherhood, while initially disruptive, can foster adaptive capacities and personal development. Such findings are consistent with studies on maternal role attainment, which suggest that motherhood involves a developmental process through which individuals gradually acquire competence and confidence in caregiving roles (Mercer, 2004).

Category 2: Children as Source of Meaning and Motivation

Participants consistently identified their children as the central source of meaning in their lives. Despite the hardships associated with early motherhood, their children provided emotional grounding, motivation, and a renewed sense of purpose. Motherhood, in this sense, was not only a role but also a source of identity and fulfillment.

This meaning-making process reflects the dual nature of early motherhood, where challenges coexist with emotional rewards. The presence of children transforms the participants' perspectives, shifting their focus from personal limitations to relational commitments and aspirations.

This finding aligns with research emphasizing the role of children in shaping maternal identity and emotional well-being, particularly among young mothers who derive purpose and resilience from their caregiving roles (Macintosh & Callister, 2015).

Category 3: Reinterpretation of Lived Experience

A significant dimension of this theme is the participants' ability to reinterpret their lived experiences over time. Through reflection, early motherhood is no longer viewed solely as a hardship but also as a formative experience that contributed to personal growth and understanding.

Participants' narratives suggest a process of meaning reconstruction, where past struggles are reframed as sources of learning and strength. This reinterpretation reflects the dynamic nature of lived experience, where meaning is not fixed but continuously shaped through reflection and time.

This process is consistent with phenomenological perspectives that emphasize meaning-making as central to human experience, as individuals interpret and reframe their realities in light of evolving perspectives (McAdams, 1993).

Category 4: Aspirations for Intergenerational Change

Perhaps the most forward-looking aspect of the participants’ experiences is their aspiration to alter the life trajectories of their children. Many expressed a strong desire to prioritize education and delay marriage for the next generation, reflecting a critical awareness of the consequences of early motherhood.

These aspirations indicate a shift from passive acceptance to intentional agency, where participants seek to disrupt the cycle of early marriage within their own families. This transformation highlights the potential for intergenerational change emerging from lived experience.

Such findings resonate with research on resilience and developmental adaptation, which suggests that individuals who have experienced adversity often develop a strong commitment to creating better opportunities for future generations (Masten, 2001).

This transformation underscores the capacity of participants to reconstruct meaning and exercise agency despite early constraints.

Table 4. Synthesis of the Lived Experiences of Meranao Child Mothers

Dimension	Core Insight	Interpretive Meaning
Life as Turning Point	Early motherhood marks an abrupt transition from childhood to adulthood shaped by structural constraints	Childhood is prematurely disrupted, leading to developmental and emotional challenges
Cultural Networks as Source of Strength	Family and community provide care, guidance, and normalization of early motherhood	Resilience is relational and culturally embedded rather than purely individual
Motherhood as Life Redirection	Participants reinterpret their experiences and develop future-oriented aspirations	Early motherhood becomes a site of identity transformation and intergenerational change

The lived experiences of Meranao child mothers unfold as a transformative process that moves across three interconnected dimensions: an abrupt turning point shaped by structural conditions, a period of adaptation sustained through cultural networks, and a subsequent redirection of life grounded in meaning-making and future aspirations. These dimensions reveal that early motherhood is not a fixed or singular condition but an evolving experience, where vulnerability and resilience coexist within a culturally embedded context. Through this process, participants navigate the tensions between constraint and agency, ultimately reconstructing their identities and reimagining possibilities for the next generation.

CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the lived experiences of Meranao women who entered motherhood at an early age, revealing a complex interplay of structural constraints, cultural influences, and personal transformations. Early motherhood emerges as a profound turning point that disrupts the natural progression of childhood, shaped by poverty, limited access to education, and culturally embedded expectations surrounding marriage and gender roles.

Despite these challenges, the findings demonstrate that Meranao child mothers are not passive recipients of circumstance. Rather, their experiences are sustained and shaped by strong cultural networks, particularly family and community structures that provide care, guidance, and a sense of belonging. These relational systems play a critical role in enabling young mothers to adapt to their roles and navigate the demands of early motherhood.

Over time, participants engage in reflective meaning-making processes that transform their experiences into sources of growth, responsibility, and aspiration. Motherhood becomes a site of identity reconstruction, where participants develop a renewed sense of purpose centered on their children and a commitment to altering the life trajectories of the next generation.

Taken together, the findings underscore that early motherhood is both a condition of vulnerability and a site of resilience. Addressing this phenomenon therefore requires approaches that move beyond purely legal or individual interventions, and instead engage with the broader cultural, social, and structural contexts in which these experiences are embedded.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

For Communities and Families

Communities are encouraged to cultivate an environment of awareness and inclusivity, where child mothers are supported rather than marginalized. Family members, particularly elders, should play an active role in guiding young mothers and ensuring access to appropriate support systems.

For Religious and Educational Institutions

Madrasah and other educational platforms may serve as critical avenues for integrating age-appropriate education on parenting, reproductive health, and the responsibilities associated with marriage. Framing these within culturally and religiously grounded perspectives may enhance their acceptance and effectiveness.

For Local Government Units (LGUs)

Local government units are encouraged to develop and institutionalize policies and programs specifically addressing the needs of child mothers. This includes strengthening access to maternal and child health services, providing educational opportunities, and ensuring that support systems are culturally responsive and accessible.

For Social Work Practice

Social workers should adopt family-centered and community-based approaches that recognize the importance of cultural networks in shaping the experiences of child mothers. Interventions should not only address immediate needs but also empower young mothers as active participants in shaping their futures.

For Future Research

Future studies may explore longitudinal perspectives on child motherhood, as well as comparative analyses across different cultural contexts. There is also a need for participatory research approaches that engage child mothers as co-constructors of knowledge.

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the sample size was limited to seven participants, which is appropriate for phenomenological inquiry but may constrain the transferability of the findings. The study was conducted within a specific cultural and geographic context (Munai, Lanao del Norte), and thus the insights may not fully represent other Meranao communities or broader populations.

Additionally, the study relied on self-reported narratives, which may be influenced by recall bias or selective interpretation. While rigor was ensured through established qualitative procedures, the interpretive nature of phenomenological analysis means that findings are co-constructed by participants' accounts and the researcher's analytical lens.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The research process commenced with the approval of the Lourdes College Research and Ethics Committee (LCREC), ensuring that all ethical considerations were addressed prior to the conduct of the study. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report, namely respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Local Government Unit (LGU) Claveria Tourism Office. Participants were provided with a full explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were securely stored to ensure the privacy and protection of the information collected.

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