

'Cultural, religious norms' used as basis for early marriage

Rita Widiadana

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Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Minister Yohana Susana Yembise said it was difficult to combat early marriage in Indonesia because "cultural and religious values and norms" had been used as a basis for the practice.

"Child marriage has been such an ongoing, controversial issue. It has been practiced on the grounds of cultural and religious values and norms here in Indonesia," Yembise said during an interview with *The Jakarta Post* recently.

In a village in Boyolali, Central Java, for example, getting married before 18 is the norm. Parents there encourage their daughters to marry quickly to avoid *zina* (adultery and premarital sex). They also believe that when a girl is 17 but not yet married, she is an

"old virgin".

UNICEF and the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) published a report in 2016, which showed that the prevalence of early marriage stood at 22.82 percent in 2015, slightly down from 24.17 percent in 2013.

The number shows that one in five women aged between 20 and 24 said they had been married at least once before they reached 18 years old. The report showed that many of them had married when they were 16 or 17.

In 2015, the prevalence of women marrying before 16 was 3.54 percent, and the prevalence decreased to 1.12 percent when it comes to marrying before 15.

The prevalence is also higher in rural areas, with 27.11 percent, compared to 17.09 percent in urban areas, according to data in 2015.

In ASEAN, Indonesia ranks fifth in terms of child marriage

prevalence, after Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and the Philippines. However, due to its large population, Indonesia has the highest burden of child marriage in the region.

"The government, together, with civil society groups, international agencies, local and international NGOs [non-governmental agencies] have been struggling for years to fight to end child marriage as it strongly links to the Indonesian government's strong commitment to protect children's rights," the minister said.

The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) state that child marriage is a violation of children's rights. Goal five, point three of SDGs requires nations to eliminate all harmful practices of early and forced marriage.

Research has shown that early marriage contributes to maternal

mortality rates.

Emilie Minnick, child protection and gender specialist at UNICEF Indonesia, said there were many interrelated factors that underlie the practice of child marriage in Indonesia. Analysis of data conducted by the BPS indicated that poverty, poor education and social norms are three key factors behind the high numbers of girls marrying before 18.

"However, the causes may vary from place to place as social norms, poverty levels and access to education differ," Minnick said.

Child marriage not only harms the girls, their families and the community, but also has a significant cost on the economy and the development potential of Indonesia, with 1.7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) being lost due to child marriage, she added.