

Gender Dynamics in Early Marital Adaptation among Young Married Couples: Implications for Gender-Based Counseling

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ABSTRACT

Background: Early-stage marital adaptation among young couples often involves complex challenges related to communication, gender roles, economic pressure, and family intervention, all of which can affect marital stability and relationship quality. **Aim:** This study aims to analyze the dynamics of early marital adaptation among young couples and examine the relevance of gender-based counseling in supporting healthier relationship adjustment within marriage. **Method:** This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design involving four young married couples. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies, and were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to communication, gender construction, conflict, and relational adaptation. **Results and Discussion:** The findings reveal that premarital communication quality consistently shaped the pace and quality of marital adaptation. Couples with limited relational interaction before marriage experienced greater emotional tension and communication difficulties during the early years of marriage. Patriarchal gender constructions remained dominant in the division of domestic roles and decision-making, often creating an unequal burden for wives, particularly when they also contributed economically. Marital conflict was mainly triggered by economic pressure, unequal domestic responsibilities, and extended-family interference. Despite these challenges, several couples gradually developed more cooperative and flexible relationships through shared experience and open communication. All participants expressed a strong need for accessible, contextual marriage counseling services. **Conclusion:** Gender-based counseling is relevant as an educational and preventive approach to help young couples develop healthier communication, negotiate roles more fairly, and build more adaptive and sustainable marital relationships.

Keywords: Marital Adaptation, Young Couples, Gender Roles, Marital Conflict, Gender-Based Counseling.



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INTRODUCTION

Early marriage remains a persistent social phenomenon across various community contexts in Indonesia. Based on national demographic data (BPS, 2022), Indonesia ranks among the countries with the highest prevalence of early marriage in Southeast Asia, with approximately 9.23% of women aged 20–24 having married before the age of 18. In South Sulawesi province, this figure exceeds the national average, and local records from the Palopo City Religious Affairs Office (KUA) and the Office of Population and Civil Registration (Disdukcapil Kota Palopo) indicate that early marriage registrations in Palopo City have consistently represented a proportion of total marriage cases notably higher than comparable urban areas within the province. In 2022 alone, the KUA Palopo recorded that approximately 14.7% of marriage applications involved at least one partner below the age of 22 a figure substantially above the urban South Sulawesi average of 9.3% in the same year (Disdukcapil Kota Palopo, 2022). This persistent prevalence transforms early marriage from a historical or purely rural concern into a contemporary urban challenge requiring systematic professional attention. The practice is shaped not merely by individual choice but also by social constructions legitimized by collective norms, family pressure, and pragmatic considerations (Lowe et al., 2020; Sagalova et al., 2021; Stark, 2018). Early marriage also represents a transitional phase toward social adulthood that demands psychological, emotional, and interpersonal readiness (Hermita et al., 2025; Pike et al., 2018). However, the limited maturity of young couples transforms this phenomenon into a complex socio-psychological process that affects the quality of family relationships and long-term family resilience.

Although early marriage receives social legitimacy in many cultural contexts, young couples are frequently confronted with complex, non-trivial problems. Unpreparedness in psychological, economic, and social aspects often triggers conflict, whether latent or manifest (Binyamini & Shoshana, 2023; Cameron et al., 2023). In addition, limited experience in managing emotions and interpersonal communication further heightens the potential for relational tension (Paskewitz, 2021; Vize et al., 2024). This underscores that

marriage cannot rely solely on biological readiness but also requires maturity in building and managing interpersonal relationships in an adaptive and sustainable manner.

One crucial aspect of the early phase of married life is the process of marital adaptation, which plays an important role in determining the long-term quality of a couple's relationship (Nurjanis, 2025). This adaptation encompasses the couple's ability to adjust to new roles, build effective communication patterns, and carry out responsibilities within the family system (Doho & Setiawan, 2022). Among young couples, this adaptation process often unfolds in a more complex manner because they are still at a stage of psychological and emotional development that has not yet fully matured (A.A. & Yu.A., 2019). Successful marital adaptation becomes a key factor in shaping family harmony and resilience.

Within this adaptation process, a gender perspective becomes a highly determining dimension of husband-wife relational patterns. The division of household roles is frequently shaped by social constructions that position men and women unequally, whether in economic, domestic, or decision-making matters (Ivan Nurseha, 2024; Maspika et al., 2023). This imbalance can generate relational tension, particularly when normative expectations about gender roles do not align with the actual conditions couples face (Alzate-Torres, 2020; Rodríguez Salazar & Rodríguez Morales, 2025). This situation demonstrates that a critical understanding of gender issues is an essential element in managing fair and sustainable relationships.

Gender-relation problems within young families manifest in various forms, ranging from the dominance of one party and the double burden typically borne by wives to limited participation in family decision-making (Carter, 2019; Genta, 2021). Such unbalanced relational patterns are often rooted in the internalization of gender-biased social norms. Their impact not only affects the quality of husband-wife interaction but also has the potential to generate emotional tension and prolonged conflict. This condition calls for constructive efforts to build fairer, more equal, and mutually respectful relationships within young family life.

In this context, guidance and counseling play a strategic role as a professional intervention to help young couples navigate the dynamics of early married life (Hidayah et al., 2023). Through a family counseling approach, couples are facilitated to understand themselves, their partner, and the relational patterns that have formed. The counseling process also functions as a reflective space that allows individuals to explore the values, expectations, and perceptions that influence their relationship. In addition, this approach helps couples develop interpersonal communication skills, conflict resolution, and collaborative decision-making (King, 2022; Ningsih et al., 2025).

A gender-based counseling approach is crucial to ensure that the facilitation process is not solely oriented toward conflict resolution but also toward transforming relational awareness into a fairer and more equal form (Gustama et al., 2025; Hoffer-Pober & Steinböck, 2017). Through gender-based counseling, couples are encouraged to reflect on the values they hold, identify biases or stereotypes that influence their interactions, and build more inclusive and mutually respectful relational patterns (Sutherland et al., 2016; Waddell & Overall, 2023). This process not only strengthens the quality of communication and empathy but also opens space for more flexible role negotiation suited to the couple's life context.

Although research on early marriage has developed from various perspectives, studies specifically examining the marital adaptation process through a gender-based counseling approach remain relatively limited. Most studies tend to focus on social, economic, or reproductive health aspects without giving adequate attention to the dynamics of gender relations within the context of family counseling (Teresa et al., 2024; Nurushobah, 2025; S et al., 2024). A review of relevant literature published between 2019 and 2024 reveals that while early marriage has been examined from legal, health, and sociological standpoints, its intersection with gender-based counseling as an intervention framework remains largely unexplored, particularly within the Indonesian sociocultural context (Gustama et al., 2025; Maspika et al., 2023). Of the counseling-focused studies identified, fewer address gender dynamics as a central analytical category, and none specifically examine gender-based counseling as an adaptive framework for young married couples undergoing early marital adjustment. This gap is a critical concern given consistent evidence that unresolved gender dynamics within young families predict relational instability and reduced family resilience (Alzate-Torres, 2020; Rodríguez Salazar & Rodríguez Morales, 2025).

The urgency of this study is underscored by the ongoing prevalence of early marriage in Indonesia particularly in South Sulawesi where formal counseling services specifically designed to address the relational and gender dynamics of young married couples remain scarce and largely underutilized. Existing informal support channels, such as religious figures and extended family members, tend to reinforce traditional gender expectations rather than facilitate critical reflection on relational patterns. Without empirically grounded, gender-responsive counseling models, practitioners and policymakers lack the conceptual tools needed to support the relational wellbeing of this vulnerable population.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach: examining early marital adaptation and gender-based counseling not as separate constructs but as an interconnected analytical framework within which each dimension informs the other. Unlike prior studies that have examined marital adaptation or gender counseling in isolation, this research positions gender dynamics simultaneously as the subject of inquiry and as the evaluative lens through which counseling relevance is assessed. This dual focus, combined with a multi-case study design situated within the Indonesian sociocultural context, constitutes a distinctive theoretical and empirical contribution to the guidance and counseling discipline.

This study aims to examine the process of early marriage adaptation among young married couples from a gender counseling perspective. It is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of guidance and counseling as a discipline, particularly in efforts to strengthen the resilience of young families based on gender equality.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design aimed at examining in depth the process of early marriage adaptation among young married couples from a gender counseling perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018; lin Salsabila et al., 2025). A case study approach was chosen because this research focuses on understanding the phenomenon contextually, comprehensively, and in depth within a real-life setting, particularly concerning the dynamics of gender relations, role division, and interaction patterns within young families. Through case studies, the researcher was able to compare and identify both general patterns and the unique characteristics that emerged in each case, producing a richer and more holistic understanding.

The research was conducted in Palopo City, selected based on empirical data indicating a relatively high incidence of early marriage compared to other urban areas in South Sulawesi province. According to records from the Palopo City Religious Affairs Office (KUA) and the Office of Population and Civil Registration (Disdukcapil Kota Palopo, 2022), early marriage registrations defined as cases where at least one spouse was under 22 years of age at the time of marriage accounted for approximately 14.7% of all marriage registrations in Palopo City in 2022, compared to an average of 9.3% across other urban districts in South Sulawesi during the same period. This figure positions Palopo City among the urban areas with a comparatively high incidence of early marriage in the province, reflecting persistent socio-cultural factors facilitating early union formation and making it an information-rich and contextually appropriate site for this study.

Research subjects were determined using purposive sampling (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The age criterion of under 22 years at the time of marriage was adopted in alignment with the National Population and Family Development Board (BKKBN) classification, which categorizes marriage contracted before age 22 as early marriage based on its implications for psychological readiness and reproductive health outcomes. This threshold is further supported by developmental psychology research demonstrating that adult identity formation and socio-emotional maturity are typically still incomplete in individuals below this age (A.A. & Yu.A., 2019), making early marital adaptation particularly challenging.

The criterion of one to four years of marriage was established to ensure that informants' early adaptation experiences remained temporally accessible and emotionally proximate, minimizing retrospective recall bias. Theoretically, the early marital adaptation phase spans the first three to five years of marriage a window during which relational patterns, role expectations, and communication dynamics are still being actively negotiated and established (Williamson, 2021). Within this period, couples' reflections on gender dynamics and role negotiation were expected to be most vivid, contextually grounded, and analytically productive.

The selection of four couples was guided by the principle of purposive information richness, which prioritizes case diversity and experiential depth over statistical representativeness consistent with qualitative case study tradition (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The four couples were selected to represent diverse marriage backgrounds: mutual agreement (Couple A), family arrangement on religious and traditional grounds (Couple B), premarital pregnancy (Couple C), and arranged marriage with no prior acquaintance (Couple D). This diversity was deliberately designed to enable meaningful cross-case analysis while maintaining the contextual depth essential to the case study approach. In qualitative case study research, the number of cases is determined by theoretical coverage and the degree to which each case contributes a distinctive experiential dimension rather than by sample size conventions from quantitative traditions; four cases were considered sufficient to achieve thematic coverage across the key dimensions under investigation (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024).

Supporting informants comprised three professional counselors two school counselors with formal experience in family and adolescent counseling, and one certified marriage counselor affiliated with a local government family welfare program (Program Keluarga Berencana) along with two community figures who routinely serve as informal mediators in household disputes, and three family members with close relationships to the research subjects.

Prior to presenting the participants' profiles, two methodological clarifications are necessary. First, the education level reported in Table I reflects the highest completed schooling level for both the husband and wife in each couple; all four couples shared an equivalent educational background senior high school for both spouses. Second, economic status was categorized based on the combined monthly household income as reported by informants during the initial screening phase. Households reporting income below IDR 2,000,000 per month were classified as 'lower-middle'; those reporting income between IDR 2,000,000 and IDR 5,000,000 were classified as 'middle'; and those reporting income above IDR 5,000,000 were classified as 'upper-middle' consistent with the household expenditure quintile categories used by Indonesia's Central Statistics Agency (BPS, 2023). None of the participating couples fell within the upper-middle category. Table I summarizes the profiles of the four research couples.

Table I. Profile of Research Subjects

Couple	Name (Initials) & Current Age	Age at Marriage	Education (Husband & Wife)	Economic Status	Marriage Background
A	Rf. (Husband, 21) & Nf. (Wife, 19)	Husband 20 / Wife 18	Senior high school (both)	Lower-middle	Mutual agreement
B	Ad. (Husband, 23) & Nn. (Wife, 20)	Husband 21 / Wife 18	Senior high school (both)	Middle	Family-arranged (religious & traditional grounds)
C	Dk. (Husband, 22) & Ry. (Wife, 20)	Husband 21 / Wife 19	Senior high school (both)	Lower-middle	Premarital pregnancy
D	Hr. (Husband, 24) & Sm. (Wife, 21)	Husband 22 / Wife 20	Senior high school (both)	Middle	Arranged marriage (no prior acquaintance)

Note. Economic status based on combined monthly household income: lower-middle < IDR 2,000,000; middle = IDR 2,000,000–5,000,000 (BPS, 2023). Education level reported for both husband and wife in each couple.

Data collection techniques included semi-structured in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies. The interview guide was developed based on two theoretical frameworks: (1) Olson's (2000) Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems, which identifies cohesion, flexibility, and communication as the core dimensions of healthy marital functioning; and (2) gender-role theory and feminist family therapy principles, which directed the exploration of power dynamics, role expectations, and decision-making patterns within the household (Sutherland et al., 2016). The guide was structured around five thematic domains: (1) marriage history and contextual background, (2) communication and interaction patterns, (3) domestic role division and decision-making, (4) conflict patterns and resolution strategies, and (5) awareness of and need for gender-sensitive counseling. Prior to data collection, the interview guide underwent content validation by two experts in guidance and counseling one specialist in family counseling and one in gender studies whose feedback was incorporated to refine question wording and ensure cultural appropriateness. Inter-rater reliability was assessed through independent thematic coding of a subset of interview transcripts by two researchers, yielding a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.78, indicating substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). In-depth interviews were used to explore couples' subjective experiences of marital adaptation, including the dynamics of gender relations, emerging conflicts, and resolution strategies. Each interview session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, conducted across two to three sessions per couple to ensure comprehensiveness and minimize participant fatigue.

Participatory observation was conducted to directly examine patterns of interaction, communication, and role division in daily life. Observation sessions were conducted at the couples' homes across two to three visits per couple. Field notes were recorded immediately following each session and documented: (1) the use and organization of domestic spaces (e.g., who managed which household areas and activities), (2) patterns of non-verbal communication when sensitive topics such as finances or domestic responsibilities were raised, and (3) interaction dynamics during routine daily conversations, including turn-taking, interruptions, and deference patterns. Observational data were subsequently compared with interview data as part of the source and method triangulation process, enabling cross-validation of participant self-reports. Documentation studies provided supplementary contextual data on the couples' household backgrounds. In this study, the researcher served as the primary instrument, directly involved throughout the entire research process.

Data analysis was conducted thematically based on the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Thematic analysis followed the six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Cross-case analysis was performed to identify similarities and differences in adaptation patterns and gender dynamics across the four couples. Data trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation (multiple informants) and method triangulation (interviews, observation, and documentation) and was further strengthened through member checking with key informants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

A novel finding of this study is the identification of how gender dynamics simultaneously operate across multiple relational dimensions role division, decision-making, conflict generation, and conflict resolution in ways that are mutually reinforcing and not fully captured by studies examining each dimension in isolation. A further novel contribution is the documentation of how economic pressure functions as an inadvertent catalyst for partial gender-role renegotiation: wives' economic contributions implicitly created leverage for requesting greater domestic participation from husbands, yet this renegotiation remained unacknowledged within the couples' explicit discourse on gender roles. These dynamics are presented below.

The findings show that all couples experienced a challenging adaptation phase during the first year of marriage. The adaptation process involved not only adjustment to everyday living habits but also the adjustment of expectations, communication patterns, and the division of household responsibilities. Overall, three main dimensions of adaptation consistently emerged across all cases: (1)

adjustment to daily habits and routines, (2) negotiation of role expectations, and (3) the development of communication patterns between partners.

Early Marital Adaptation Dynamics among Young Couples: Within-Case Analysis

Couple A (Rf., 21 yrs & Nf., 19 yrs) married at a very young age, with the husband aged 20 and the wife aged 18, both with a senior-high-school education and limited economic conditions. In the early phase of marriage, both faced layered adaptation challenges: adjusting to shared living habits, domestic responsibilities, and economic pressure that arrived simultaneously. The wife revealed that this initial condition felt heavy because she had not yet been adequately prepared to take on the role of wife and household manager at the same time.

"Awalnya susah, karena kami berdua sama-sama belum terbiasa. Saya masih belajar masak, dia juga masih belajar cari nafkah. Jadi kadang kami saling maklumi, tapi kadang juga saling jengkel karena tidak ada yang bisa diandalkan dulu." (Nf., Wife of Couple A)

"Saya juga masih belajar jadi suami. Kadang saya ingin bantu istri, tapi teringat kata orang tua dulu kalau urusan dapur itu kerjaan istri. Jadi saya bingung sendiri harus bagaimana." (Rf., Husband of Couple A)

The husband's statement from Couple A reveals a tension between the desire to help one another and the gendered norms internalized from his family of origin. This condition reflects how internalized patriarchal values can hinder role flexibility even when a couple genuinely intends to adapt in a more egalitarian way. Even so, both agreed that a shared commitment to 'learning together' became the primary anchor that helped them through the most difficult periods. This process gradually built a sense of mutual understanding that grew through everyday life experience.

Couple B (Ad., 23 yrs & Nn., 20 yrs) married on the basis of family agreement, taking into account local religious values and traditions. Before marrying, the two had only met a few times in formal settings supervised by family, so their mutual acquaintance was very limited. This condition caused the adaptation process to proceed more slowly than for Couple A, since both had to start from zero in getting to know each other's personality, habits, and expectations.

"Kami baru benar-benar saling kenal setelah menikah. Awalnya canggung sekali, bahkan untuk bicara hal sederhana saja saya masih malu-malu." (Nn., Wife of Couple B)

"Saya kira menikah itu istri akan ikut saja apa kata suami. Ternyata banyak hal yang harus dibicarakan dulu, tidak bisa langsung jalan begitu saja." (Ad., Husband of Couple B)

The husband's statement from Couple B indicates a strong normative expectation that the wife would play a submissive role. When this expectation was not met, a sense of surprise and unpreparedness emerged in facing a more complex relational reality. The adaptation process for Couple B lasted nearly two years before the two found a more comfortable communication rhythm, assisted by the involvement of a religious figure who acted as an informal mediator when conflict began to peak.

Couple C (Dk., 22 yrs & Ry., 20 yrs) faced the most complex situation among the four cases, as the marriage took place after the wife's pregnancy was discovered. Their marital adaptation process involved not only adjusting to the husband-wife relationship but also simultaneously preparing for parenthood under psychological conditions that were not yet fully stable. The wife bore a substantial physical and emotional burden due to the pregnancy, while the husband had to immediately assume responsibilities far beyond what his age had prepared him for.

"Saat itu saya takut sekali, bingung harus bagaimana. Untungnya suami saya mau bertanggung jawab dan kami sama-sama belajar menerima keadaan." (Ry., Wife of Couple C)

"Saya belum siap sebenarnya, tapi saya pikir ini sudah tanggung jawab saya. Jadi saya coba kuatkan diri demi istri dan anak saya nanti." (Dk., Husband of Couple C)

Statements from both informants of Couple C illustrate how a shared crisis can become a catalyst for relational solidarity. Although their early marital conditions were far from ideal, the commitment not to blame one another and to face the situation together became a source of resilience. Despite having the most vulnerable starting conditions, Couple C showed fairly good adaptation progress by the third year of marriage, owing to the foundation of solidarity built through weathering a crisis together.

Couple D (Hr., 24 yrs & Sm., 21 yrs) married through an arranged process facilitated by their extended families, with both parties previously unacquainted. Unlike Couple B, who had at least met a few times before marrying, Couple D had almost no meaningful interaction before the marriage contract. Interference from extended family members who felt entitled to intervene further complicated the existing dynamics. Couple D exhibited the highest level of conflict among all the cases, particularly during the first year of marriage.

"Saya menikah karena permintaan keluarga. Awalnya saya tidak terlalu kenal dengan suami saya, jadi rasanya seperti tinggal bersama orang asing." (Sm., Wife of Couple D)

"Keluarga besar sering ikut campur urusan rumah tangga kami, jadi saya dan istri sulit menyelesaikan masalah berdua saja." (Hr., Husband of Couple D)

Statements from both informants of Couple D underscore that they were trapped in a situation they had not fully chosen autonomously. Their adaptation process was hindered not solely by personality differences but also by a sense of powerlessness in determining the direction of their relationship, owing to continued strong family intervention. This created very narrow space for negotiation between husband and wife, making conflict difficult to resolve internally.

Based on the within-case analysis of the four couples, four key factors were found to consistently influence the dynamics of early marital adaptation. First, premarital communication quality proved to be an important early predictor: couples who had a longer opportunity to know each other before marriage showed relatively faster adaptation. Second, the gender constructions held by each partner directly affected role expectations; when expectations were not met, friction emerged with the potential to develop into open conflict. Third, the availability of external support had an ambivalent effect: serving either as emotional support or as a source of interference. Fourth, the ability to set aside ego and the willingness to listen to one another were identified by all couples as the most decisive relational skills in getting through the early adaptation phase.

Gender Role Construction

One central finding of this study is the strong influence of gender social construction in shaping the division of roles among young couples. Across all cases, a dominant pattern emerged in which the husband was positioned as the head of the family responsible for the economy, while the wife was expected to manage domestic affairs and caregiving. This pattern was deeply internalized, even among couples living in urban environments.

"Ya namanya juga suami, harus cari nafkah. Kalau istri di rumah saja urus anak dan rumah, itu sudah biasa." (Ad., Husband of Couple B)

"Saya juga tidak pernah pikir untuk minta dibantu suami soal rumah, karena memang itu tugas saya sebagai istri." (Sm., Wife of Couple D)

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal latent tension when gender-role expectations collide with the realities of daily life. In Couples A and C, wives were compelled to also work due to economic constraints, bearing a double burden of paid work and domestic duties. This condition produced physical and emotional fatigue with the potential to trigger conflict.

"Saya ikut jualan kecil-kecilan untuk bantu suami, tapi pulang jualan saya juga yang masak, cuci, urus rumah. Capek, tapi mau bagaimana lagi." (Nf., Wife of Couple A)

"Saya kerja serabutan juga, tapi tetap saja kalau di rumah istri yang lebih banyak kerjanya." (Ry., Wife of Couple C)

In terms of decision-making, three of the four couples showed a pattern in which strategic decisions such as financial management and housing plans tended to be dominated by the husband, while the wife had more limited room to negotiate.

"Soal uang dan rencana ke depan, biasanya saya yang putuskan, istri saya tinggal ikut saja." (Ad., Husband of Couple B)

"Sebenarnya saya ingin juga dilibatkan, tapi suami biasanya sudah putuskan duluan sebelum cerita ke saya." (Sm., Wife of Couple D)

Conflict Patterns and Resolution Strategies from a Gender Perspective

The findings show that conflict in the household life of young couples does not arise from a single cause but is influenced by various interrelated factors, particularly the gender dynamics internalized within the couple's life. Conflicts that emerged generally related to economic pressure, the division of domestic roles, communication patterns, and the involvement of extended family in household decision-making.

"Kalau gaji habis, biasanya kami mulai cekcok. Saya merasa kurang bisa kasih yang terbaik untuk keluarga." (Rf., Husband of Couple A)

This statement shows that economic pressure not only affects a family's material condition but also influences the couple's emotional stability. The husband's position as the party socially constructed as the primary breadwinner causes men to experience psychological pressure when unable to optimally meet economic expectations. In such situations, conflict frequently arises not merely from financial shortfall but from a sense of failing to fulfill the gender role attached to men.

"Saya paham suami sedang susah, tapi kebutuhan rumah tetap jalan terus. Jadi kadang saya tidak tahan juga untuk tidak menyinggung soal itu." (Ry., Wife of Couple C)

Beyond economic factors, conflict was also frequently triggered by an unequal distribution of domestic roles. Among couples where the wife also worked outside the home, there was a tendency for domestic responsibilities to remain almost entirely the wife's burden.

"Saya juga kerja, tapi tetap saja semua urusan rumah jatuh ke saya. Suami jarang mau bantu-bantu." (Nf., Wife of Couple A)

"Kalau saya minta tolong, suami bilang itu sudah kerjaan perempuan. Padahal saya juga capek kerja di luar." (Ry., Wife of Couple C)

Other conflicts arose from differing expectations regarding individual freedom, social interaction, and extended-family involvement in household life. In some couples, the extended family held considerable influence over the direction of the couple's relationship, narrowing the space for negotiation.

"Keluarga suami sering ikut atur urusan kami, jadi saya merasa tidak bebas mengatur rumah tangga sendiri." (Sm., Wife of Couple D)

"Istri saya kadang ingin keluar bertemu teman, tapi saya merasa kurang nyaman karena sudah berumah tangga, sebaiknya fokus di rumah saja." (Ad., Husband of Couple B)

Regarding conflict-resolution strategies, the study found a fairly clear difference in patterns based on gender construction. Couples with more egalitarian gender views tended to resolve conflict through open communication, mutual listening, and joint negotiation.

"Kalau ada masalah, sekarang kami coba bicarakan baik-baik. Dulu sering pendam sendiri, sekarang lebih terbuka." (Rf., Husband of Couple A)

"Kami sudah sama-sama belajar, jadi kalau ada masalah kami coba cari jalan tengah bersama." (Ry., Wife of Couple C)

By contrast, in couples with a more patriarchal gender construction, conflict tended to be resolved through the husband's unilateral decisions, while the wife chose to accept the situation to maintain household stability.

"Biasanya saya mengalah saja, daripada bertengkar berkepanjangan. Yang penting rumah tangga tetap tenang." (Nn., Wife of Couple B)

"Saya lebih banyak diam saja kalau suami sudah putuskan sesuatu, daripada ribut terus." (Sm., Wife of Couple D)

These findings indicate that gender inequality is reflected not only in the division of domestic and economic roles but also clearly in communication patterns, decision-making processes, and conflict-resolution strategies. Conflict dynamics in early marriage thus need to be understood not merely as an interpersonal matter but also as a reflection of the gender social construction that shapes how couples build and manage their relationships.

The Need for Gender Counseling

The findings show that none of the couples in this study had ever participated in formal marriage counseling, either before or after marriage. Their knowledge of household life was largely obtained from family experience, the surrounding social environment, and advice from local religious figures. When facing conflict or difficulty in their marital relationship, couples tended to resolve it independently or seek help from close acquaintances regarded as more experienced.

"Kalau ada masalah biasanya saya cerita ke ibu saya, minta saran bagaimana baiknya." (Nf., Wife of Couple A)

This statement shows that emotional support from family remains the primary source of help for young couples. However, the assistance provided tends to consist of practical advice based on personal experience and has not yet touched on relational communication in depth. This reveals that young couples still lack adequate access to professional counseling services capable of helping them understand relational dynamics in a more objective and structured way.

"Biasanya kalau ada masalah besar, kami minta nasihat ke ustaz di kampung, supaya dikasih jalan keluar." (Ad., Husband of Couple B)

Family figures and religious leaders occupy an important position as informal mediators in resolving household conflict. Nevertheless, the approach they offer tends to be normative and oriented toward immediate resolution, without fully helping couples understand the root of the relational problems they face — particularly those related to communication and the division of gender roles.

"Kadang nasihat yang dikasih itu suruh istri sabar dan mengalah saja, supaya rumah tangga tetap rukun." (Sm., Wife of Couple D)

This statement shows that solutions offered by the social environment are often still shaped by traditional gender constructions. Women are encouraged to preserve household harmony through acceptance and self-restraint, while the space for building more open and equal communication remains limited. As a result, conflict is not genuinely resolved in substance but is merely suppressed.

Data from the three professional counselor informants provided an important supplementary perspective on these dynamics. All three counselors consistently observed that young couples who sought guidance rarely named gender inequality as the source of their difficulties. Instead, they typically presented surface-level concerns about communication breakdowns, financial disputes, or in-law interference. One school counselor noted: "Young couples often do not realize that what they describe as a communication problem is actually rooted in gender-role expectations. The husband expects the wife to manage everything at home, and the wife has

internalized that expectation — but she carries the weight of it alone, without it being openly acknowledged." A marriage counselor affiliated with a local government program further reported that most young couples who sought assistance had already reached a crisis point before doing so, and that preventive counseling during the early years of marriage was virtually nonexistent in the local context. These observations from professional counselors reinforce the need for a gender-aware counseling approach that helps young couples recognize, name, and critically examine the structural dimensions of their relational difficulties — not only after conflict has escalated, but as part of proactive, routine relational support during the early years of marriage.

When the researcher introduced the concept of gender-based counseling during the interview process, all couples responded positively and with enthusiasm.

"Kalau ada tempat untuk konsultasi seperti itu, saya mau sekali. Supaya kami bisa belajar berkomunikasi lebih baik lagi." (Nf., Wife of Couple A)

"Saya juga baru sadar, ternyata selama ini saya jarang tanya perasaan istri saya. Mungkin kalau ada konseling begitu bisa membantu kami." (Dk., Husband of Couple C)

"Kalau ada yang bisa bantu kami bicara dari hati ke hati, pasti lebih mudah menyelesaikan masalah daripada memendam sendiri." (Ry., Wife of Couple C)

"Kalau ada konseling untuk pasangan muda seperti kami, mungkin kami bisa lebih siap menghadapi masalah rumah tangga ke depannya." (Rf., Husband of Couple A)

These findings affirm that the counseling needs of young couples cannot be understood merely as a need for conflict resolution. Couples require a supportive space that can help them understand relational dynamics more reflectively, including how gender constructions shape communication patterns, role division, decision-making, and conflict-resolution strategies within the household.

Cross-Case Analysis

Cross-case analysis identified adaptation patterns that cut across couples as well as distinctive features that emerged in each individual case. In general, all couples showed an adaptation pattern that unfolded gradually and dynamically rather than as a smooth, linear process (Williamson, 2021; Doho & Setiawan, 2022; Nurjanis, 2025). The initial turbulence phase in the first year of marriage was marked by a high frequency of conflict, role uncertainty, and substantial emotional dependence on the family of origin (Binyamini & Shoshana, 2023; Cameron et al., 2023). Entering the second and third years, couples began to find a more stable rhythm through repeated processes of informal negotiation (Overall & McNulty, 2017; Wang & Brisini, 2025). Table II summarizes the cross-case analysis of the four couples.

Table II. Cross-Case Analysis of Marital Adaptation Patterns

Adaptation Theme	Couple A	Couple B	Couple C	Couple D	Adaptation Speed
Premarital communication	Limited, mutual learning	Very limited, formal	None before marriage	No interaction	Moderate
Gender construction	Patriarchal → beginning to shift	Strongly patriarchal	Situational solidarity	Passive (family-arranged)	Slow
Dominant conflict source	Economy & domestic roles	Role expectations & communication	Pregnancy pressure & new roles	Personality differences & family intervention	Mod.–good (yr 3)
Resolution strategy	Gradual open dialogue	Religious-figure mediator	Crisis solidarity	Very limited	Slowest

The distinctive feature of each case lies in the adaptation resources available to the couple: Couple A relied on communicative openness despite its limits; Couple B made use of a religious figure as mediator; Couple C demonstrated solidarity formed through shared crisis experience; while Couple D showed the slowest adaptation due to a weak premarital relational foundation and persistent family intervention (Cameron et al., 2023; Maspika et al., 2023). These differences underscore the importance of counseling interventions that are individualized and responsive to each couple's specific context (Markman et al., 2022; Shuck et al., 2024).

Discussion

The Influence of Premarital Communication Quality on Marital Adaptation

The results show that premarital communication quality has a notable influence on the early adaptation process of young couples. Couples with more intensive premarital communication tended to find it easier to build emotional closeness and stable patterns of interaction after marriage. In contrast, couples with limited premarital communication had difficulty understanding each other's character, emotional needs, and approach to conflict resolution. This was especially evident among couples who married due to family pressure or particular circumstances without having known each other deeply beforehand.

This finding is consistent with Williamson (2021), who showed that communication patterns in the early years of marriage function as a predictor of long-term relationship quality. Open communication allows couples to build mutual trust and understand each other's expectations before entering married life. From a theoretical perspective, this can be understood through Social Learning Theory, which explains that interpersonal behavioral patterns are formed through prior interactional experience. Couples learn to build relationships based on the communicative experiences they accumulate from the early stages of their relationship. When premarital communication is limited, couples lack sufficient experience to understand each other's thought patterns and emotional responses, making the post-marital adaptation process slower and more emotionally tense.

The Dominance of Patriarchal Gender Construction in Young Families

This study also found that patriarchal gender construction remains highly dominant in the household life of young couples. Most couples regarded the husband as responsible for earning a living, while the wife was considered primarily responsible for household affairs and childcare. This division of roles was accepted as natural, having been transmitted through the family environment and surrounding cultural values. Even among couples living in urban settings, traditional relational patterns remained clearly visible in daily life.

This finding aligns with Peker-Dural & Meşe (2024), who showed that gender relations in the household are often reproduced through everyday practices that couples regard as normal. In this study, women tended to accept domestic responsibility as part of their natural role after marriage, while men primarily viewed breadwinning as the household's main responsibility. This pattern resulted in an uneven distribution of labor, with women often bearing a heavier workload when they were also involved in economic activity outside the home.

Nevertheless, this study also found instances of change and renegotiation of gender roles among some couples. Among couples facing economic pressure, the wife's contribution to outside employment indirectly encouraged a more flexible distribution of roles. Some husbands began to take part in household chores, albeit on a limited scale. These findings indicate that economic realities can serve as a driving factor for changes in gender-relational patterns within young families, showing that gender construction is not entirely static but can evolve in line with a couple's life experience.

Conflict Dynamics and Resolution Strategies from a Gender Perspective

This study found that household conflict among young couples is shaped by a range of interrelated factors, particularly the internalized gender dynamics within the couple's life. Conflict was generally related to economic pressure, an unequal distribution of domestic roles, communication patterns, and extended-family involvement in household decision-making. Extended-family involvement also emerged as an important factor in the conflict dynamics of young couples, leaving the couple with limited room to negotiate their own life choices. Family interference often made conflict resolution more difficult, as couples had to weigh social pressure and family expectations as an important consideration within Indonesia's collectivist cultural context.

Conflict-resolution strategy patterns showed clear differences based on couples' gender-relational orientation. Couples with a more egalitarian relational pattern tended to resolve conflict through open dialogue, mutual listening, and joint negotiation. By contrast, couples with a more patriarchal orientation more often resolved conflict through the husband's unilateral decisions, with the wife choosing to yield in order to maintain household harmony. This finding is consistent with Overall & McNulty (2017), who showed that communication quality influences the success of conflict resolution in intimate relationships, and with Wang & Brisini (2025), who found that unresolved conflict develops into a chronic conflict pattern that reduces marital relationship quality.

Counseling Needs and the Relevance of Gender-Based Counseling

The results show that none of the couples in this study had ever participated in formal marriage counseling, either before or after marriage. Their knowledge of household life was largely derived from family experience, the social environment, and advice from religious figures. When facing conflict or difficulty in their marital relationship, couples tended to resolve it independently or seek help from close acquaintances regarded as more experienced.

When introduced to the concept of gender-based counseling, all couples responded positively. They felt a need for a facilitative space to help build healthier communication, understand role division more fairly, and improve their joint conflict-resolution abilities. This finding reinforces that of Markman et al. (2022), who stated that young couples need family counseling services that are more contextual and accessible. In addition, Shuck et al. (2024) explained that gender bias in couple relationships often occurs unconsciously, requiring a reflective and educational counseling approach.

Gender-based counseling is relevant because it focuses not only on resolving surface-level problems but also on helping couples evaluate relational patterns previously regarded as normal in household life. Through this approach, couples can be encouraged to build more open communication, more flexible role division, and a fairer, more mutually respectful relationship. Gender-based counseling thus functions not only as a problem-solving tool but also as a medium of relational education for young couples.

These findings align with and extend the existing literature in several important ways. Consistent with Markman et al. (2022), the data confirm that formal counseling services whether premarital or marital — remain largely inaccessible or unknown to young couples in the Indonesian context. The findings add empirical depth to the argument by Shuck et al. (2024) that gender bias operates unconsciously within couple relationships, requiring a reflective and educational counseling approach. The virtual absence of gender-responsive counseling services in the local context, as documented by both the couples and the professional counselors in this study, represents a critical institutional gap that remains inadequately addressed in the current early marriage intervention literature.

Implications

Theoretically, this study reinforces the understanding that marital adaptation among young couples cannot be separated from gender social construction, communication history, and the broader cultural context in which the couple is situated. These findings contribute to the family counseling literature by emphasizing that gender-relational dynamics are not peripheral but central to understanding the trajectory of marital adjustment.

Practically, these findings highlight the urgent need for family counseling services that are accessible, contextually responsive, and gender-informed. Counselors and practitioners working with young couples need to be equipped to integrate gender awareness into their facilitation process not only to address emerging conflict but also to promote long-term relational equality, communication competence, and reflective partnership. Premarital counseling programs that prepare couples for the realities of negotiating roles and gender expectations are strongly recommended as a preventive measure.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study focused exclusively on young married couples in Palopo City, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other geographical, cultural, or socioeconomic contexts. Second, the relatively small sample of four couples, while appropriate for a qualitative case study, does not capture the full diversity of early marital experiences. Third, data collection relied heavily on self-report through interviews, which may be susceptible to social-desirability bias. Fourth, this study did not examine longitudinal change in couple dynamics over a longer period, leaving open questions about how adaptation trajectories develop beyond the first four years of marriage. Future research is encouraged to employ larger samples, longitudinal designs, and mixed methods to more comprehensively measure the effectiveness of gender-based counseling interventions for young couples.

Table III. Comparison with Previous Research

Comparison Aspect	Williamson (2021)	Peker-Dural & Meşe (2024)	Markman et al. (2022)	This Study
Research focus	Early-marriage communication patterns	Gender construction & domestic inequality	Effectiveness of couple counseling programs	Early marriage adaptation from a gender counseling perspective
Method	Quantitative longitudinal	Foucauldian discourse analysis	Meta-analysis & experimental	Qualitative case study (four couples)
Key findings	Early communication predicts long-term relationship quality	Gender is reproduced through everyday practices regarded as normal	Premarital counseling programs effectively improve relationship quality	Premarital communication & gender construction determine adaptation speed; gender-based counseling needed as preventive measure
Context	Western (USA)	Turkey (Izmir)	Cross-cultural (meta-analysis)	Indonesia (Palopo City, South Sulawesi)

Based on the comparison in Table III, this study presents several distinctive features. First, thematically, this study integrates two dimensions that have often been examined separately marital adaptation and gender-based counseling within a single, unified research framework. Second, contextually, this study provides empirical evidence from Indonesia, particularly South Sulawesi, a region that remains underrepresented in the international literature on early marriage adaptation. Third, the use of a multi-case study with cross-case analysis enables the identification of both each couple's distinctive characteristics and the general adaptation patterns that emerge across cases.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that early marital adaptation among young couples is a complex and dynamic process shaped by premarital communication quality, gender role construction, economic conditions, and the relational support available. Couples with stronger premarital communication tended to build more adaptive relationships, while patriarchal gender construction remained a dominant factor shaping role distribution, decision-making patterns, and conflict-resolution strategies. Although a tendency toward more flexible and cooperative relationships emerged particularly under economic pressure this shift was largely pragmatic rather than grounded in a conceptual understanding of gender equality.

This study affirms that household conflict among young couples cannot be understood merely as an interpersonal problem but is closely tied to social structure, gender norms, and the influence of the extended family. In this context, open communication, a willingness to listen, and solidarity in facing hardship emerge as important factors supporting early marital adaptation. These findings also affirm a real need for family counseling services that are contextual, accessible, and gender-responsive. Gender-based counseling is relevant not only as a curative intervention but also as a preventive and educational approach to building healthier, fairer, and more reflective marital relationships among young couples. This study thus contributes to broadening the understanding of early marital adaptation within the Indonesian sociocultural context, while affirming the importance of developing family counseling services that are preventive, educational, and supportive of the sustainability of young families.

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