

The Impact of Co-residence with Parents on Marital Satisfaction: Evidence from Indonesian Muslim Households

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ABSTRACT:

Background: In Indonesian Muslim communities, it is common for married couples to live with their parents or in-laws due to cultural traditions and economic factors. While this arrangement may provide support, it can also affect the quality of the marital relationship, especially in terms of privacy and emotional independence.

Aims: This study aims to explore the impact of co-residence with parents or in-laws on marital satisfaction and compare it to couples who live independently in a rural Muslim setting.

Methods: A qualitative field study was conducted in Pekon Rawas, Pesisir Barat, Indonesia. In-depth interviews were held with 20 Muslim couples—10 co-residing with parents or in-laws, and 10 living separately. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to relationship harmony, autonomy, and family involvement.

Results: Couples who lived independently reported higher marital satisfaction, citing better emotional connection, greater privacy, and autonomy in decision-making. In contrast, co-residing couples experienced more tension due to frequent interference from parents or in-laws. Despite the challenges, no cases of marital separation were found.

Conclusion: Living arrangements play a crucial role in shaping marital dynamics. Independent living tends to promote greater harmony and autonomy, while co-residence may pose risks to marital privacy and satisfaction. These findings offer insights for family counselors and policymakers working with traditional Muslim households.

Keyword:

Autonomy in Marriage; Intergenerational Co-residence; Marital Harmony; Muslim Family Dynamics.

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INTRODUCTION

This study explores a socially embedded tradition in Muslim communities—co-residence with parents or in-laws—that is often normalized but rarely examined critically in relation to marital outcomes. Such living arrangements, particularly in rural Indonesia, are frequently seen as expressions of familial duty and religious values (Absor et al., 2024; Titisari et al., 2024). However, beneath this cultural norm lie complex interpersonal consequences, including diminished privacy and emotional strain within the marriage (Shah, 2024; Tang, 2022). Although intended to support family unity, this arrangement may also challenge the couple's independence and relationship dynamics. Despite being widespread, the topic remains underexplored in scholarly discussions on marriage and family. Its investigation is therefore both timely and necessary. Understanding how household structures affect emotional and relational outcomes can help bridge traditional expectations with contemporary marital needs. This study offers insights for families, counselors, and community leaders navigating the intersection of cultural norms and marital satisfaction.

Marriage in Indonesia often involves not just two individuals but two extended families coming together under shared expectations (Fitriani et al., 2023; Himawan et al., 2022). For many newlyweds, especially in rural settings, living with parents or in-laws is not just a choice but a presumed responsibility. This setup may ease financial pressures and provide caregiving support, but it can also blur the lines between autonomy and dependency (Culberson et al., 2023; Gkiolnta et al., 2025). When young couples struggle to assert their roles within an already established family structure, emotional friction may arise. Decisions about finances, childcare, and daily routines can become contested, often leading to conflict. These tensions can gradually erode intimacy and mutual understanding between spouses. In such cases, the physical structure of the household becomes a symbolic battleground for emotional and relational space. Hence, examining the living arrangement is essential in assessing the stability of a marriage.

Islamic principles play a fundamental role in shaping family structures and expectations in Indonesia. Honoring one's parents and maintaining strong family ties are core values upheld by many Muslim families. These teachings often support the practice of co-residence as a religiously virtuous act (Mohnot et al., 2021; Park, 2021). Nevertheless, Islam also emphasizes justice, compassion, and mutual respect within marriage. When co-residence limits emotional support or decision-making between spouses, a conflict may emerge between religious ideals and marital reality (Harvey, 2022; Khan et al., 2022; Wright, 2022). Young couples may feel torn between upholding religious and cultural duties while trying to establish their own household autonomy. These dilemmas are not merely personal but deeply embedded in the broader social fabric. This study addresses such complexities by examining how Islamic values and household structures shape marital dynamics.

Extended families in rural areas often maintain well-defined roles and hierarchies that can intensify pressure on younger couples (Cox et al., 2022; Török & Biró, 2023). Men are commonly positioned as household heads, while women are tasked with domestic responsibilities. These roles may be further reinforced when in-laws are present, creating expectations that may not align with the couple's personal values. A desire for more egalitarian or private relationships may clash with traditional norms. For example, when a husband prioritizes his parents' wishes over his wife's needs, emotional strain is likely to develop. Likewise, a wife may feel sidelined in a household where

seniority is prioritized. These relational patterns show how cultural hierarchy can affect emotional closeness in marriage (Chiang & Bai, 2022; Kurşuncu & Sümer, 2023). Exploring this influence is essential to understand the roots of marital dissatisfaction in extended family systems.

Although the co-residential model is widespread, its direct effects on marital satisfaction remain insufficiently documented (He & Jia, 2022; Kumar & Williams, 2021). Most studies tend to emphasize individual traits such as income, education, or communication as predictors of marital health. However, the spatial and relational environment in which a couple lives can also be highly influential (Ferguson & Catney, 2023; Hao et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021). Couples who reside independently often report more harmony, citing freedom and privacy as key factors. On the other hand, those sharing homes with in-laws frequently describe emotional discomfort and conflict. These contrasting outcomes highlight the importance of physical separation in fostering emotional closeness. By focusing on this often-overlooked dimension, the study contributes to a fuller understanding of family wellbeing.

The early phase of marriage is a time of emotional bonding and identity formation between spouses (Chandler & Lawrence, 2022; Jamison & Sanner, 2021). For this process to unfold successfully, couples typically need time, space, and freedom from external interference. Co-residence with parents or in-laws may interrupt this process, limiting opportunities for open dialogue and shared decision-making (Akanle & Ogunkan, 2021; Dong, 2022). When emotional boundaries are not respected, resentment and misunderstandings tend to grow. These unresolved issues may compound over time, reducing satisfaction and mutual support. In such contexts, the household becomes a site of emotional tension rather than comfort. Recognizing this transformation is crucial in understanding how living arrangements shape marital resilience. This study seeks to bring such emotional dimensions into the center of family research.

Gender roles significantly influence how co-residence is experienced within marriages (Trappolini et al., 2021; van der Wiel et al., 2023). Women, particularly daughters-in-law, often carry the emotional and domestic weight in extended households (Shekhani, 2024; Singh et al., 2023). Social norms may pressure them to conform to expectations that suppress their autonomy and emotional needs. Men, meanwhile, may struggle with loyalty conflicts between their spouse and parents. These tensions, if unmanaged, can weaken the marital bond and foster distrust. When both partners feel constrained by expectations, the relationship may suffer from emotional distance and lack of communication. Understanding these gendered dynamics allows for a more holistic view of marital challenges in shared households. It also underlines the need for more inclusive support systems within the family structure.

In the context of rapid social change, younger generations are increasingly questioning traditional family roles and seeking more autonomy in marriage (Alteneiji, 2023; Cheng & Yang, 2021). While co-residence may offer stability, it can also hinder the emotional growth of a marital relationship. As more couples prioritize personal space, emotional wellbeing, and decision-making freedom, rigid adherence to tradition may no longer meet their needs (Mensah et al., 2022). Yet, balancing these modern expectations with cultural and religious obligations remains a sensitive challenge. This research aims to explore how couples navigate this complex terrain. By focusing on Muslim households in rural Indonesia, it brings local nuance to global discussions on marriage and

family. The findings are expected to inform more adaptive family policies and culturally sensitive marital guidance.

The concept of marital harmony has been explored across various disciplines, reflecting its complex nature and cultural specificity. Recent work by Thargay & Giri (2025) highlights how emotional compatibility, particularly through similar attachment patterns, significantly contributes to relationship harmony. Their analysis demonstrates that alignment in emotional needs can enhance mutual understanding and reduce conflict within marriages. Cultural and spiritual dimensions also offer valuable insights. Munirah et al. (2025) examined the Bugis tradition of Rapo-rapoang, revealing how spiritual communication plays a central role in maintaining harmony among Muslim couples. This reflects how localized religious practices can serve as effective relational tools. Supporting this, Soliman et al. (2022) introduced a counseling framework tailored to the unique needs of Muslim families, reinforcing the importance of integrating religious norms into marital support systems. From a health perspective, Yanikkerem et al. (2025) investigated how psychological stress due to infertility affects marital and sexual wellbeing, especially among women. Complementing this, Besral et al. (2023) presented a mobile health (mHealth) solution, MIESRA, to support marital satisfaction during pregnancy. Bhamani et al. (2024) also emphasized the value of mental health resilience programs for expectant mothers, which indirectly enhance emotional stability within marriages. Marriages tested by trauma or major life events are another critical focus. Buchanan (2023) explored how couples navigate grief after losing a child, identifying both strengthening and straining effects on the relationship. In a digital context, Wang et al. (2024) examined the online behavior of divorced youth in China, finding that social media can be a means of relational recovery and self-redefinition after marital breakdown. Social, artistic, and historical analyses further enrich the discourse. Chireshe (2022) explored how musical expression, through selected works by Oliver Mtukudzi, can reflect and reinforce values associated with healthy marital relationships. Sinclair (2020) revisited Lucrezia Marinella's 17th-century feminist text, interpreting it as both a call for marital harmony and a subtle critique of patriarchal norms. Bicheev (2021) offered an ethnographic account of Eurasian communities where marital breakdowns are believed to invite misfortune, revealing the symbolic weight of harmony in traditional societies. Other studies provide empirical insight into marital satisfaction and preparation. Obradović & Čudina (2023) identified communication, emotional intimacy, and shared life goals as key factors shaping marital quality in Croatian households. Muluhy Keverenge et al. (2020) underscored the role of premarital counseling in fostering long-term harmony, demonstrating that intentional preparation can help prevent future conflict. Taken together, this body of research underscores the multi-dimensional nature of marital harmony—rooted in emotional, cultural, spiritual, psychological, and social systems. However, these studies rarely address how structural living arrangements—such as co-residence with parents—affect relationship quality, especially within Muslim-majority communities. This presents a critical research gap that the present study seeks to explore in the context of rural Indonesia

Although a considerable body of literature has explored marital harmony through psychological, cultural, and religious frameworks, the influence of living arrangements—particularly when couples reside with parents or in-laws—has not been sufficiently examined. In Muslim-majority societies, co-residence is often viewed as an expression of respect and religious

commitment, yet its implications for marital dynamics are rarely addressed in depth. Studies frequently focus on emotional communication, reproductive health, and religious practices, but tend to overlook how the presence of extended family members within the same household may influence autonomy, privacy, and emotional bonding between spouses. Moreover, research comparing independently living couples and those in multigenerational households is still limited, especially in Southeast Asia. This gap is especially relevant in the context of rural Indonesia, where traditional expectations strongly shape domestic life but where empirical evidence on their effects on marital quality remains scarce.

This study seeks to examine how living with parents or in-laws affects the harmony of marital relationships among Muslim couples in rural Indonesian communities. By comparing couples who live independently with those who share their home with extended family members, the research explores differences in emotional closeness, personal autonomy, and the nature of interpersonal conflict. The study also considers how cultural and religious values influence the way couples perceive and adapt to their living arrangements. Through this comparative approach, the research aims to provide deeper insights into the connection between household structure and marital well-being in socially and religiously embedded environments.

METHOD

Research Design

This research was conducted using a qualitative descriptive approach with a field study strategy. This design was chosen to allow the researcher to explore the real-life experiences of married couples living either independently or with extended family members. A qualitative framework is considered appropriate for capturing social and emotional dynamics that are shaped by cultural and religious contexts. The fieldwork approach enabled the collection of firsthand information through direct interaction with participants in their natural settings.

Participant

The study involved 20 Muslim couples residing in Pekon Rawas, located in Pesisir Tengah District, Pesisir Barat Regency, Indonesia. These couples were equally divided into two groups: ten couples who lived in the same household as their parents or in-laws, and ten who maintained independent households. Participants were selected purposively based on their living arrangement and willingness to engage openly in the research. All participants had been married for at least one year. Variation in age, marital duration, and socioeconomic background was considered to enrich the diversity of perspectives.

Instrument

The primary tool used in data collection was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. The guide consisted of open-ended questions that explored themes such as emotional intimacy, autonomy in decision-making, and the influence of extended family on marital dynamics. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded with the participants' consent. Field notes were also taken during each session to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. To ensure clarity

and cultural appropriateness, the instrument was reviewed and refined through feedback from academic peers.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model introduced by Miles and Huberman, which involves three interconnected steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, relevant information from interview transcripts was identified and categorized into thematic clusters. These themes were then organized visually to facilitate interpretation and comparison. The final conclusions were developed by connecting these thematic patterns with the study's objectives. To ensure the reliability and credibility of the findings, triangulation was applied through cross-checking interview data with observational notes, and member checking was conducted by inviting selected participants to review the interpretations.



Figure 1. Research Method Flowchart

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The study revealed clear contrasts between couples living independently and those who co-reside with their parents or in-laws. Participants who lived independently reported higher levels of emotional intimacy, communication, and shared autonomy in household decisions. Most of them described their marriages as harmonious, with minimal external interference, allowing them to maintain mutual respect and emotional closeness. In contrast, couples who lived with parents or in-laws often experienced relational tension, which stemmed from lack of privacy, overlapping authority, and unsolicited input from extended family members. Some noted that their disagreements were prolonged or intensified due to in-law involvement, and emotional distance developed as a result.

However, a few co-residing couples acknowledged practical support from their parents, such as childcare assistance, though it did not necessarily enhance their marital quality. To illustrate these findings, Figure 2 presents a comparative overview of five key marital aspects—emotional intimacy, privacy, decision autonomy, conflict frequency, and perceived in-law support. As shown in the chart, independently living couples scored higher on emotional intimacy (4.5), privacy (4.7), and autonomy (4.6), while co-residing couples reported lower values on these aspects (3.2, 2.8, and 3.0, respectively). Meanwhile, conflict frequency was noticeably higher among co-residing couples (3.9), and perceived in-law support was also more prominent in this group (4.2). These patterns affirm that physical and emotional space contribute significantly to the overall quality of marital relationships, particularly in rural Muslim communities where multigenerational living is common

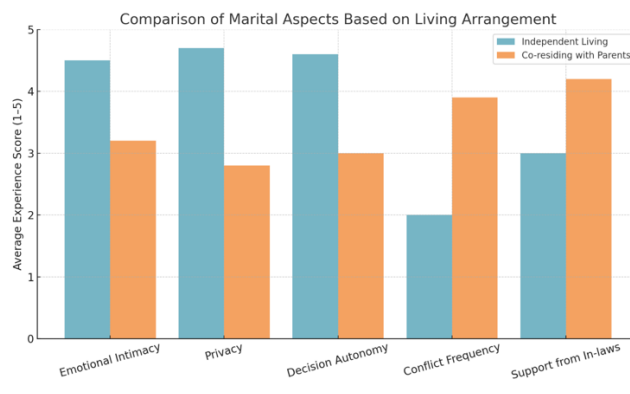


Figure 2. Comparison of Marital Aspects Based on Living Arrangement

Discussion

The results suggest that marital harmony is more frequently achieved by couples who live separately from their extended families. This supports insights by Thargay and Giri (2025), who emphasized the role of shared emotional space in relationship stability. Participants associated independent living with freedom to express emotions and solve problems without parental interference. In contrast, those in co-residing arrangements described emotional suppression due to constant oversight. These limitations hampered natural interaction and contributed to emotional tension. Obradović and Čudina (2023) similarly found that autonomy enables couples to deepen intimacy. In essence, emotional harmony appears to flourish when couples are afforded relational and spatial freedom.

Privacy was another key differentiator. Couples living apart from parents emphasized the value of uninterrupted personal space for communication and emotional bonding. Their experiences resonate with Soliman et al. (2022), who found that emotional safety and privacy are interdependent. Co-residing couples described environments where even minor conversations could be overheard, leading to cautious communication. Many admitted they avoided addressing conflicts to prevent escalation. This aligns with the notion that a lack of personal space can deteriorate emotional intimacy. Ultimately, the findings confirm that physical privacy is an essential part of marital resilience and trust.

Autonomy in decision-making further separated the two groups. Those living independently had more freedom in managing finances, parenting roles, and setting household norms. In contrast, co-residing couples often needed to consider or defer to elders. Sinclair (2020) discussed how traditional family hierarchies can restrict spousal equality, especially for women. This was reflected in accounts from wives who felt marginalized in household decisions. Husbands also struggled to balance allegiance between spouse and parent. Muluha Keverenge et al. (2020) emphasized the value of premarital guidance in managing such boundaries. In this study, autonomy was consistently linked to a greater sense of mutual respect and partnership.

Conflict management was significantly shaped by the presence or absence of extended family. Independent couples felt safe discussing disagreements without fear of outside intervention. Co-residing couples, however, reported that disputes often escalated when family members took sides. This aligns with Buchanan (2023), who identified third-party involvement as a complication in marital recovery. The co-residing group experienced long-lasting tensions due to unresolved conflicts. Some avoided communication entirely, leading to emotional distance. These findings indicate that relational privacy allows couples to navigate conflicts more constructively. Autonomy enhances not just decision-making but also emotional repair.

Although some benefits were acknowledged, such as help with child-rearing and finances, these did not equate to stronger emotional bonds. Bicheev (2021) described similar patterns where logistical advantages did not offset emotional tension. Couples receiving parental support often felt obliged to tolerate intrusions. In contrast, independent couples expressed pride in facing challenges together. Their narratives highlighted growth, resilience, and shared achievement. This suggests that independence fosters a sense of emotional partnership. Thus, external support should not replace or compromise relational self-sufficiency.

Gender roles also played a substantial role in shaping relational experiences. Co-residing women, particularly daughters-in-law, reported pressure to conform to traditional expectations. These included domestic duties and emotional labor. Men, on the other hand, faced tension between fulfilling parental expectations and supporting their spouses. Wang and Guo (2024) found that unclear familial roles created conflict and stress. Couples living independently reported more flexibility and shared responsibility. This equality improved communication and emotional stability. Addressing gender dynamics in traditional settings remains crucial for marital health.

Cultural and religious values often underpinned the choice to co-reside. Many cited it as an expression of religious duty and social norm. However, Munirah et al. (2025) argued that Islamic principles should also support fairness and compassion between spouses. Couples who balanced religious values with independence seemed more emotionally stable. Strict adherence to tradition without considering emotional consequences can hinder intimacy. As Chireshe (2022) noted, relational harmony is achieved not only through obedience but through empathy. This study suggests that reinterpretation of tradition is necessary in evolving social contexts. Broader implications were observed in how younger generations balance modern aspirations with inherited values. Besral et al. (2023) proposed that tailored counseling and digital tools could support this shift. Findings from this study validate that sustainable marriages require emotional independence, not just shared history. Support structures must evolve to promote mutual growth, even in culturally conservative

communities. Where couples are empowered to create boundaries, relational health improves. This does not diminish tradition but reframes it for contemporary challenges. Marriage guidance and policy must account for evolving social dynamics. Overall, this research invites deeper reflection on how families in Muslim communities define and support harmonious relationships.

Implications

The research findings encourage a culturally-sensitive approach to marital counseling, especially for couples navigating extended family living. Community leaders and religious figures can promote interpretations of family values that prioritize relational wellbeing. Counseling programs should integrate topics like privacy, emotional boundaries, and in-law relationships. Marriage preparation initiatives must address practical aspects of co-residence, including conflict triggers and shared responsibilities. Policymakers can consider offering housing or rental incentives to support marital independence. Education programs should also inform parents about the potential emotional cost of controlling household dynamics. Emotional wellbeing needs to be treated as central to family success. These implications are relevant for both local and national strategies to strengthen family resilience.

Limitations

The study's qualitative nature limits generalizability across larger populations. With only 20 participants from one geographic area, findings may not represent wider regional or cultural diversity. The reliance on interviews means that subjective perception may color the data. Social desirability bias might have shaped how openly participants described negative experiences. Additionally, the absence of observational data or spouse comparisons weakens empirical triangulation. The study also does not account for the influence of economic class or education level. Further, it lacks longitudinal depth, which would allow observation of relationship changes over time. These limitations suggest future research should adopt mixed methods and broader sampling.

Suggestions

Future research should expand into urban Muslim communities to assess how modernization influences household dynamics. Long-term studies could track how relationships evolve across different types of living arrangements. Surveys and marital satisfaction scales would provide richer quantitative data to complement qualitative interviews. Research should also explore the role of parental expectations as both support and source of pressure. Studies comparing couples who transitioned from co-residence to independence could highlight psychological growth. Gender-based research may further expose hidden burdens in traditional settings. Testing community-based counseling frameworks would also be valuable. Ultimately, interdisciplinary approaches are needed to inform culturally grounded yet adaptive marital support systems.

CONCLUSION

This research explored how different household settings influence the quality of marital relationships, focusing on Muslim couples residing either independently or with extended family members in rural Indonesia. The results clearly demonstrate that couples who manage their own

households tend to enjoy higher levels of emotional closeness, personal privacy, and shared control in decision-making. These factors collectively enhance the stability and satisfaction of the marital relationship. On the other hand, those who live with parents or in-laws often face emotional constraints, increased conflict, and diminished autonomy due to overlapping authority and frequent outside involvement. Although some couples acknowledged benefits such as financial or childcare support in co-residing settings, these advantages did not offset the emotional tension they experienced. Traditional gender roles and cultural expectations were also found to influence how couples navigated their relationships, with women often shouldering more emotional and domestic responsibilities. The findings suggest that to maintain marital wellbeing, it is essential to balance cultural obligations with the couple's need for independence and mutual respect. Where possible, enabling couples to build their marriage in a space of autonomy can lead to stronger emotional bonds and greater resilience in facing relational challenges.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Okta Yutami led the development of the research design, carried out the data collection process, and performed the analysis of interview results. She also prepared the initial draft of the manuscript and organized the narrative structure of the findings.

Erina Pane provided academic supervision, offered insights into the theoretical and conceptual framework, and reviewed multiple manuscript revisions to ensure clarity and coherence.

Marwin contributed to refining the methodology, ensured the accuracy of the data interpretation, and supported the overall integrity of the study's conclusions.

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