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Article

Marriage for Gen-Z Hindu-Balinese Women: A Stage or a Life Choice?

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ABSTRACT ENGLISH:

The strong patriarchal norms in Hindu-Balinese society are reflected in the belief that marriage is a stage of life and a moral responsibility to maintain the continuity of the family line, especially sons. For Hindu-Balinese women, this is a reproductive obligation in addition to domestic, public and customary burdens. Ironically, they often lack control over decision-making or ownership of resources, so the post-marriage crisis pushes Gen-Z women to redefine the meaning of marriage and family. This study aims to reveal the views of Gen-Z Hindu-Balinese women in interpreting marriage as a life choice. Through qualitative methods with a life history approach and Stuart Hall's identity perspective, this study shows that Gen-Z negotiates their identity as "Balinese women." This negotiation process emerges from critical reflections on their experiences of growing up as Hindu-Balinese women, as well as from their observations of post-marital realities. For them, marriage is not simply a moral obligation or a stage in life, but rather a logical choice that aligns with their mental, economic, and personal autonomy. In other words, the uniqueness of this research lies in the efforts of Gen-Z Hindu-Balinese women to negotiate a space of independence without completely abandoning their cultural roots.

Keywords: Women, Gen-Z, Marriage, Identity, Balinese Culture.

ABSTRACT INDONESIAN:

Norma patriarki yang kuat dalam masyarakat Hindu-Bali memposisikan perkawinan sebagai tahapan penting dalam kehidupan sekaligus tanggung jawab moral untuk menjaga keberlanjutan garis keturunan keluarga, khususnya melalui anak laki-laki. Bagi perempuan Hindu-Bali, tuntutan ini menjelma menjadi kewajiban reproduktif yang berlapis dengan beban domestik, publik, dan adat. Ironisnya, di tengah berbagai beban tersebut, perempuan sering kali memiliki keterbatasan dalam pengambilan keputusan maupun kepemilikan sumber daya. Kondisi ini menyebabkan pengalaman pasca-perkawinan kerap memicu krisis yang mendorong perempuan Gen-Z untuk meninjau ulang dan mendefinisikan kembali makna perkawinan dan keluarga. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap pandangan perempuan Hindu-Bali Generasi Z dalam memaknai perkawinan sebagai sebuah pilihan hidup. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif melalui pendekatan *life history* serta perspektif identitas Stuart Hall, hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perempuan Gen-Z secara aktif melakukan negosiasi identitas sebagai "perempuan Bali." Proses negosiasi ini berangkat dari refleksi kritis atas pengalaman mereka tumbuh sebagai perempuan Hindu-Bali serta melihat realitas kehidupan pasca-perkawinan. Bagi mereka, perkawinan tidak lagi dipahami semata-mata sebagai kewajiban moral atau tahapan hidup yang harus dilalui, melainkan sebagai pilihan rasional yang mempertimbangkan kesehatan mental, kemandirian ekonomi, dan otonomi personal. Keunikan penelitian ini terletak pada upaya perempuan Hindu-Bali Generasi Z dalam membangun ruang kemandirian tanpa sepenuhnya meninggalkan akar budaya mereka.

Kata Kunci: Kesetaraan Gender; Konstruksi Sosial; Pesantren,

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Introduction

Marriage holds a complex meaning when understood as more than merely a social contract between two individuals, particularly when it involves spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions. Within Balinese Hindu society, the dominance of Hindu religious teachings intertwined with the authority of customary institutions logically leads to the strong influence of local culture, especially in interpreting the institution of marriage. For the Balinese Hindu community, marriage is a socio-religious institution and a marker of an individual's transition into the *Gṛhastha Āśrama* (householder phase) after passing through the *Brahmacārī* stage (student phase) (Laksmi, 2021). This stage is considered the most central and productive phase as it serves as the social, economic, and spiritual foundation of the society. However, this life stage, considered crucial, in practice gives rise to various issues, particularly for women, given that patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal cultures remain deeply rooted in the social structure of Balinese society.

Power imbalances and unequal resource distribution shape post-marriage life for Balinese Hindu women, often positioning them in subordinate roles. In patrilocal marriages, women are regarded as "guests" who must submit to the authority of their husbands and his family. The influence of patrilocal and patrilineal systems is also evident in inheritance patterns, where the family heirs are male children (*purusa*). According to Balinese customary law, a male child not only inherits family property but also assumes religious responsibilities in the *sanggah* (family temple) as well as social obligations *(ayahan)* at the *banjar* or traditional village *(desa adat)* levels. Critically, this system exerts significant pressure on women to bear male offspring as successors of the lineage. Various empirical studies have shown that son preference remains a significant determinant of fertility behaviour among Balinese women. In a patrilineal context, women may continue to bear children until they produce a male heir, reflecting sociocultural pressures related to inheritance, ritual obligations, and family continuity (Sukardiasih et al., 2025; Titisari et al., 2023; Withers & Browner, 2012). Although there are two alternative forms of marriage *(nyentana and pada gelahang*) both are still considered taboo and continue to operate within a value framework that prioritizes males while limiting women's autonomy and rights. This condition illustrates how the traditional marriage system functions as a determinant of social and cultural identity for Balinese Hindu women.

The reproductive landscape is only one example of the triple burden that Balinese Hindu women must bear. First, the domestic burden, which involves household management that not only consumes time but also physical energy, as there is no fixed time when they can be relieved from household chores, childcare, and ensuring the foundation of harmony and stability in the home. Second, the public burden, which includes economic roles and work productivity, yet still struggles to gain recognition in the public sphere. The third burden is the customary obligation that demands active involvement in religious duties and traditional ceremonies, which are considered crucial for cultural preservation. However, the decision-making processes they must undergo rarely take into account the voices resulting from women's participation. The combination of these three burdens places women in a crucial position as the guardians of family harmony and culture, yet simultaneously reveals the

structural burdens embedded in their identities. Various studies also find that these responsibilities cause mental stress and, in their social lives, limit their time for self-actualization.

The complexity described above affirms the strong social, cultural, and religious structures in Bali in shaping marriage as a key mechanism for constructing social identity, particularly that of the "ideal Balinese woman." However, this cultural authority is increasingly contested. Recent studies indicate that younger generations tend to delay marriage or approach it with caution. Research by the IDN Research Institute (2024) shows that many Gen Z individuals consider marriage without feeling pressured to pursue it immediately, while Tirta and Arifin (2025) highlight growing perceptions of marriage as an emotionally burdensome or even frightening commitment. These shifting attitudes suggest an emerging negotiation between inherited cultural expectations and contemporary values of autonomy.

The data above reinforces the phenomenon known as waithood culture, which refers to the practice of postponing marriage as a response to economic pressures, career demands, and personal readiness. Although specific data for Bali is not yet available, these national findings illustrate trends that likely reflect the attitudes of the younger generation in Bali, including Balinese Hindu women. This paradox is intriguing as it reflects a paradigm shift, the younger generation, particularly Gen Z women, tend to view marriage less as a moral and spiritual obligation and more as a rational decision considering the complexity of life needs. The cultural authority of Balinese Hinduism cultural authorities, which emphasize marriage as a life stage and a moral and spiritual obligation, have increasingly come under scrutiny when confronted with data on the marriage preferences of the younger generation (Vickers, 2012; Nordholt, 2006; Inglehart & Welzel, 2015; BPS, 2023, 2024). Besides the cultural authority of Balinese Hinduism, traditional institutions such as *desa adat,* which function to preserve local wisdom values, also face challenges when confronted with the reality that young Balinese Hindu women are increasingly selective and even reluctant to marry.

Generation Z becomes the main focus of this discussion because, juridically, the minimum marriage age regulated in Law Number 16 of 2019 (namely 19 years for both males and females) falls within the age range of this generation. According to the classification by the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS, 2024), generation Z includes those born between 1997 and 2012. Women are specifically chosen because they often occupy subordinate positions post-marriage, a fact that has been empirically proven. In the context of contemporary society, this paradox places Balinese Hindu Gen Z women at the crossroads between tradition and modernity. On one hand, they face demands to complete higher education and build careers, while simultaneously experiencing social pressure to marry as a form of fulfilling moral and spiritual roles. On the other hand, they live in the digital era, which offers values of equality and gender independence. The dilemma between preserving traditional values and forming new values as a result of advances in modern knowledge presents a real challenge for them. As Balinese Hindu women, they are positioned as guardians of lineage and cultural harmony. However, rational awareness leads them to understand that without economic readiness, mental resilience, and personal autonomy, marriage may instead risk placing them back into subordinate positions.

Based on the contradictory conditions described above, this paper aims to critically and in-depth explore how Balinese Hindu Gen-Z women negotiate their identity within a cultural context that positions marriage as a moral and social obligation. Within Stuart Hall's identity theory framework, this study questions how life experiences, customary norms, and cultural representations shape women's meanings of marriage. Furthermore, this study also traces the process of "becoming a Balinese woman." (the process of becoming Balinese women). This is articulated through personal narratives, observations of marriages in their immediate environment, and their efforts to maintain personal autonomy without completely relinquishing their cultural roots when they no longer perceive marriage as a life stage but as a life choice.

Literature Review

Identity Formation through Marriage

Identity in this study is understood as a social process through which individuals' position and make sense of themselves within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. Within this framework, marriage functions as a form of social identity, as it signifies an individual's position in the social structure, is shaped by cultural norms, and is sustained through social recognition. In many cultural settings, particularly for women, marriage is constructed as a compulsory life stage. Dominant narratives (such as the expectation to marry at a certain age and the stigmatization of unmarried women as "failed" or "deviant") reinforce gendered identity formations. Previous studies show that negative stereotypes associated with singlehood are disproportionately directed at women, reflecting the persistence of patriarchal values that frame women's worth through marital status (Lahad, 2017; Kislev & Marsh, 2023). As a result, women are more likely to internalize negative perceptions of singlehood, especially as they age (Mandujano-Salazar, 2019).

Marriage: The Arena of Reproductive Violence Against

Critical studies in the last five years reinforce the analysis that Hindu Balinese women occupy a subordinate position particularly in the domestic sphere, especially within marriage. The intersection of women's subordinate position is closely related to this study because the transformation of the logic of marriage from a life stage to a life choice is underpinned by Generation Z women's critical reflections on the reality of marriage around them. One central issue regarding women's subordinate position concerns reproductive violence experienced by Balinese women, who are morally expected to bear male children to continue the patrilineal lineage and inheritance due to the dominance of patrilocal and patrilineal systems (Sukardiasih et al., 2025; Titisari et al., 2024; Paramita et al., 2025). In some cases, women who do not have male children must bear the psychological burden ranging from stress to depression due to ostracism and feelings of guilt for failing to fulfil the ideal woman role. Moreover, the objectification of women's bodies as reproductive objects is implied in the cultural adage "*sing beling, sing nganten*" (Ismail, 2025).

Youth Vulnerability and Perspectives on Marriage

Amidst debates surrounding the quality of the younger generation, particularly Generation Z, it is undeniable that Gen-Z exhibits a critical stance toward the institution of marriage. Taufiqurrahman's (2025) research, demonstrates that the significance of the digital world colours Gen-Z's perception of marriage through the "Marriage is Scary" content circulating on *TikTok*. The digital realm is considered capable of providing young people with concrete insights into the challenges and issues faced in domestic life, including women's dual roles, economic factors, and socio-cultural relationships. For some women, this content generates feelings of anxiety and even trauma, whereas for the majority of men, it is interpreted as a selective and realistic approach to marriage. Tirta and Arifin (2025) emphasize that a combination of psychological, social, and cultural factors influences Generation Z's fear of married life. The identity of being digital natives also drives Gen-Z's understanding of marriage in accordance with personalized algorithms. Furthermore, Rafliyanto (2025) argues that the dichotomy of marriage from moral and rational perspectives can coexist when recognizing that local wisdom also highlights marriage as a life stage that requires the financial and mental preparedness of the partners.

Identity Negotiation: A Never-Ending Project

Identity has often been interpreted as a relatively static concept within cultural studies. However, Stuart Hall challenges this essentialist view by arguing that cultural identity is not fixed, but rather a continuous process shaped through historical, cultural, and power relations (Hall, 1997). His emphasis on identity as "becoming" rather than "being" underscores that identity is not something to be discovered, but something that is constantly produced and reproduced within representation (Hall, 1997). Furthermore, Hall highlights that power operates not only through economic and political structures but also through systems of representation and meaning-making, which shape how individuals and groups are understood (Hall, 1997). Representation thus becomes a crucial site where power relations are negotiated and where subjects may reproduce or resist dominant meanings. In this sense, identity formation is inseparable from the discursive field in which meanings are constructed and contested.

Hall's conceptualization of identity can be more accurately understood as a politics of positioning rather than an essence of being (Hall, 1997). Identity does not derive from a pure or stable origin; instead, it is constituted through the positions individuals or groups occupy within shifting historical and discursive contexts. This perspective opens up space for critical analysis of how identity is constructed, negotiated, and contested within systems of cultural representation. Consequently, identity should be understood not as a finished or fixed entity, but as an ongoing project, continuously in the process of becoming and renegotiating the meaning of the self within unequal power relations. This view aligns with broader post-structural perspectives that emphasize the fluid, fragmented, and contingent nature of identity (Hall, 1997; Barker, 2014).

Method

This study employs a qualitative life-history approach within the tradition of qualitative inquiry as outlined by Creswell & Creswell (2017). Life-history research reconstructs individuals' lived experiences across time, enabling an understanding of how personal trajectories are shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. This approach is particularly relevant for examining how gendered expectations and marriage norms are negotiated and reinterpreted. The primary data consists of life narratives from two Gen Z Hindu-Balinese women, selected purposively based on their critical reflections on women's subordinate position and their view of marriage as a personal choice rather than a compulsory life stage. In line with Creswell's emphasis on depth over generalization, the small number of participants allows for a detailed and contextually grounded analysis.

Data were collected over approximately 2–3 months through 2–3 in-depth semi-structured interviews per participant (60-90 minutes each), focusing on chronological life narratives, including early socialization, turning points, and current reflections on marriage. Observations in natural settings complemented the interviews to capture everyday social contexts. Documentation data were also collected for triangulation, including personal notes, reflective writings, and selected digital expressions (social media posts), providing additional insight into how participants construct and communicate meaning. Ethical considerations followed qualitative research standards Creswell & Creswell (2017), including informed consent, the right to withdraw, and the use of pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Given the sensitivity of the topic, interviews were conducted in a safe and non-judgmental environment, with careful data management.

Data analysis employed narrative and interpretative approaches. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and organized chronologically into four stages: early socialization, turning points, crisis moments, and identity work. The analysis is further informed by Hall (1997), which conceptualizes identity as dynamic and continuously constructed through cultural representation and lived experience. Integrating this perspective with Creswell's framework enables a nuanced understanding of how participants reinterpret marriage, navigate stigma, and negotiate their identities

Result and Discussion

The Triple Burden: The Real Lived Burdens of Hindu-Balinese Women as a Background

Only a few authors have taken the time to recognize that all informants agreed that the triple burden (domestic, public, and customary responsibilities) constitutes an exploitative constraint for Hindu-Balinese women. The informants revealed that socialization processes regarding gender roles have been ingrained in them from an early age through various social institutions. The three most influential domains are the family, educational institutions, and customary institutions. However, among these, educational and customary institutions are perceived as the most powerful

This research involved two Gen Z Hindu-Balinese women, DF and TN, who perceive marriage as a life choice. DF works in the education sector, while TN is a university student. Both were raised in nuclear families within Hindu-Balinese cultural settings. The informants' experiences indicate that formal education serves as the initial arena where gender inequality is learned and naturalized. Gender-unfriendly curricula are evident in teaching materials as well as daily learning activities. Stereotypical representations such as "mother cooking in the kitchen" and "father reading the newspaper" subtly reinforce traditional role divisions among children (Yasin, 2025). Additionally, certain school activities exacerbate these biases, for example, when female students are required to bring brooms and male students carry buckets during communal work. The process of gender labelling occurs intensively, often carried out by educators themselves. Females are expected to be "diligent," "neat," and "polite," while males' laziness, untidiness, or coarse language are often excused. Local content also serves as a medium for internalizing patriarchal values, for instance, the narrative that the quality of the household is entirely determined by a woman's ability to be a good wife and mother. At this point, the informants become aware that the moral burden of household responsibilities has been imposed on women even before they enter the phase of marriage.

If formal education symbolically reproduces inequality, customary institutions reinforce it through their structure and authority. Informants stated that women are never involved in strategic decision-making at the customary village level. Women tend to be seen as executors of men's decisions rather than decision-makers. Critical reflection arose when informants participated in youth organizations (*Seka Teruna Teruni*) and observed the roles of housewives within the *krama istri* structure. Informants noted that all customary and ritual activities heavily depend on women's labor, yet formal recognition, ownership rights, and voice remain very limited. This indicates a duality where women are highly required but lack power.

In contrast to educational and customary institutions, the nuclear families of the informants provide a relatively more egalitarian gender experience, particularly in the division of domestic labour. Parents tend to share household chores such as sweeping, mopping, preparing offerings (*mebanten*), washing, and ironing. However, equality has not fully extended to material authority and decision-making, as household management remains largely in the hands of mothers. This imbalance is illustrated by DF, who noted that women bear the heaviest domestic and ritual responsibilities while remaining excluded from inheritance-related decisions:

> "For example, during holidays, it's always the mother who is busy. From going to the market, making offerings, arranging them, organizing, cooking. If anything is not done correctly, it's the mother who is blamed. The father helps, but not much. Later, when it comes to inheritance matters, the mother is not invited. Even considered an outsider. Haha funny, right?" (DF, 2025).

The burden becomes more pronounced within customary and extended family contexts, where women's labour intensifies while recognition remains limited. Although customary responsibilities are normatively assigned to sons or husbands, women continue to act as the main organizers of ritual and communal activities. TN similarly observed this pattern through her experiences with female relatives, stating:

> "I usually feel sorry for my aunt; during each holiday, she is very busy by herself. Especially in Gianyar where the offerings are really big. Plus, she has to go here and there" (TN, 2025).

Raised in nuclear families with highly educated parents working in the public sector, the two informants experienced relatively egalitarian gender relations in their early domestic environments. This family context provided greater space for parents to transmit values of gender equality, particularly in the division of roles and expectations. Both informants emphasized that patriarchal pressure was felt more strongly within extended family settings rather than from their parents. Extended families often function as sites of social control over women, especially regarding expectations of domestic competence, readiness for marriage, and the ability to shoulder customary responsibilities. DF illustrated this contrast by explaining that demands imposed by the extended family were far more rigid than those within her parental household:

> "In the extended family, women are expected to be capable in many things (sewing, working) so that later they will not bring shame to the husband's family. My parents are more relaxed; if I can do it, I do it; if not, they will buy it" (DF, 2025).

Such pressures are frequently justified through the value of *menyama-braya*, which emphasizes brotherhood, solidarity, and collective belonging. While this principle plays an important role in maintaining social harmony, it also operates as a moral framework that legitimizes gendered expectations within extended family and customary contexts. TN highlighted how these expectations intersect with reproductive norms, particularly the preference for sons, noting that women are often blamed when these ideals are not fulfilled:

> "The most annoying thing is when the extended family or community constantly asks about having a son. If you have a son, it is considered a great pride. But if you only have daughters, it's as if you don't have children at all, and the woman is always blamed" (TN, 2025).

The experiences of the informants indicate that the triple burden faced by Hindu-Balinese women is not merely a matter of workload but the result of the continuous reproduction of gender inequality through educational, customary, and extended family institutions. Although nuclear families may provide spaces of resistance by promoting more egalitarian values, these are often overshadowed by broader cultural mechanisms that reinforce women's subordinate positions from an early age. Consequently, Hindu-Balinese women occupy a paradoxical position as central actors in domestic, public, and customary labour while remaining excluded from material ownership rights and strategic decision-making. This condition demonstrates that women's burdens stem not from individual incapacity but from social structures that sustain patriarchal norms, positioning the triple burden as a form of social control that limits women's life choices.

Daring to Be Different: Marriage as an Absolute Life Choice

The long journey of becoming a Hindu-Balinese woman within a patrilocal and patriarchal cultural context has shaped the informants' consciousness that female identity is embedded within structural and cultural inequalities. Recent studies show that patriarchal values remain deeply institutionalized in Balinese customs and social practices, reinforcing male authority and shaping women's lived experiences (Mahaputri, 2025). Both informants expressed that post-

marriage happiness often appears utopian, as marriage is perceived as a decisive turning point that determines the trajectory of a woman's life. In many cases, women are positioned within intersecting burdens (domestic, economic, and customary responsibilities) embedded in cultural expectations surrounding marriage and lineage continuity (Yasin, 2025).

Since childhood, both informants internalized the belief that marriage is a necessary life stage, comparable to formal education. This reflects how cultural narratives and institutional practices normalize marriage as a compulsory trajectory. Contemporary studies on Balinese marriage culture show that norms surrounding fertility, lineage, and family continuity continue to shape expectations of women's life paths and reinforce marriage as a socio-cultural obligation rather than purely individual choice (Breger & Hill, 2021). DF's experience further illustrates how intimate relationships are embedded within unequal gender power relations. Empirical research on Balinese women highlights that marriage and relational expectations often function as mechanisms for maintaining broader social structures, including gender hierarchy and lineage systems (Wagiswari & Valentina, 2025; Zulia & Rahman, 2024). Similarly, TN's experience reflects broader patterns in which women are disproportionately subjected to moral judgment and social sanctions in relation to sexuality and marriage. Recent gender studies in Bali demonstrate that women are often positioned as primary bearers of moral responsibility, while men are relatively less scrutinized, reinforcing gender asymmetry within social norms and institutions.

The Long Dilemma of Identity Certainty

Cultural norms that bind Balinese women shape not only the responsibilities they must bear but also the standards through which Balinese female identity is defined (Chant, 2016; Kabeer, 2016). Within customary environments, marriage often imposes disproportionate moral and emotional burdens on women, while men experience relatively fewer expectations (UN Women, 2020). Women are required to sacrifice time, energy, and emotional labor in order to be recognized as "good women" or "ideal daughters-in-law," categories that are socially constructed and sustained within patriarchal cultural systems rather than arising from women's own desires (Kandiyoti, 2016).

Although these gendered expectations have long been normalized, greater access to education and information (particularly among Generation Z) has enabled critical questioning of such inherited norms (UNESCO, 2021). Social media plays a significant role in this process, not merely as a space for entertainment but as a medium through which collective awareness is formed (Papacharissi, 2015). DF described how exposure to narratives of marital conflict and divorce on social media prompted reflection on the fragility of marriage when emotional and moral readiness is absent:

> "…we often see divorces on TikTok; it turns out that no matter how beautiful a woman is, has a decent job, or loves her partner, it doesn't matter, they won't cheat on this. perhaps the idea that a woman must have firm principles arises" (DF, 2025).

Similar reflections emerged from TN, who associated marriage anxiety with the economic and emotional unpreparedness of partners frequently portrayed online. Observing cases of neglected children and unstable households reinforced her belief that marriage should not be pursued without adequate readiness (UNICEF, 2021):

> "From social media, I saw many cases of children being abandoned by unprepared parents economically… So why marry if you are still poor?" (TN, 2025).

These observations strengthened the informants' conviction that emotional independence and personal readiness are central to women's well-being. Despite this growing rational awareness, the informants' negotiation of marriage as a life choice unfolded amid strong religious and cultural narratives that frame marriage as a sacred life stage (Vickers, 2012). These internalized teachings continue to shape societal expectations, making it difficult for women to detach marriage from moral obligation. DF, for instance, frequently encountered stigmatizing questions such as "what else are you looking for?" and "why aren't you married yet?", which implied that marriage represents a woman's ultimate life purpose. At times, such pressure led DF to momentarily question herself, before recognizing that these doubts were socially imposed rather than personally grounded.

DF's hesitation was further informed by reflections on women's precarious positions after divorce in Bali. Divorced women often face uncertainty, as returning to their natal home (*mulih bajang*) is not always socially accepted, while their status within the husband's family remains marginal (Parker, 2016). This structural vulnerability reinforced DF's awareness that marriage could entail long-term risks for women, particularly when responsibility for marital harmony is disproportionately placed on wives. As DF recalled, when advised that her former partner would "change after marriage," she responded by acknowledging the risk involved: "Yes, if he wants to change, but if not, then I am the one gambling with my life."

TN's reflections followed a similar trajectory, shaped by repeated warnings about becoming an "old maid" and fears surrounding care in old age. These anxieties, commonly imposed on unmarried women, initially influenced her perceptions of marriage (Holmes, 2019). However, through higher education, TN began to critically unpack these narratives, recognizing them as social constructions rather than natural truths. As she stated, "we know that the idea that women must marry is a social construct." This awareness strengthened her sense of self-authority, which was further reinforced by peer groups that shared similar values regarding relationships and autonomy.

Ultimately, the informants' decision to regard marriage as a choice emerged from sustained reflection on the burdens experienced by women in their immediate surroundings, including mothers, aunts, and other female relatives. Observing how economic instability, emotional immaturity, and unequal gender expectations disrupt family harmony led them to reject marriage as a compulsory life stage. Instead, marriage is understood as a rational decision grounded in personal readiness, mutual compatibility, and the pursuit of an equitable partnership (UNFPA, 2022).

Finding a New Self

The perception of marriage as an inherited life stage no longer confines Generation Z, who demonstrate growing awareness and resistance toward the passive acceptance of traditional norms (Inglehart & Welzel, 2015; UNFPA, 2022). Informants no longer position themselves merely as agents responsible for perpetuating values that were previously taken for granted. This critical awareness is cultivated through higher education and access to diverse sources of information, enabling them to compare multiple life trajectories and openly engage with

narratives that once shaped fear around marriage, such as anxieties about having no caretaker in old age (UNESCO, 2021). As social conditions shift, identity standards that were once considered fixed increasingly evolve in response to dynamic social realities (Giddens, 2020).

As TN stated, "Having children doesn't necessarily mean they will take care of us; it's better to work hard and be financially secure with savings" (TN, 2025). Rather than rejecting marriage altogether, informants adopted new values that repositioned marriage as a choice rather than an obligation, particularly in relation to the complex intersections of religion, social expectations, cultural values, and gendered demands (Parker, 2016; UN Women, 2020). Marriage is no longer viewed as an unquestioned moral stage within the *Gṛhastha Āśrama* or solely as a mechanism for lineage continuity, but as a decision that must align with personal readiness and autonomy. This shift in perspective does not weaken their sense of identity as Balinese women. Instead, informants assert that cultural identity is not exclusively enacted through marriage (Hall, 1997). As DF explained:

> "My identity as a Balinese woman doesn't change even if I choose not to marry. I still practice Balinese customs like menyama braya, making offerings at home. What changes is only the perspective. For others, it might be a stage, but for me, it's a choice" (DF, 2025).

Similarly, TN emphasized that her identity remains intact through participation in customary practices, devotion to family, and her birth right as a Balinese woman (TN, 2025). The findings of this study demonstrate that perceiving marriage as a choice does not diminish women's cultural identity. Normative standards defining the "ideal" Balinese woman often obscure the fact that responsibilities (domestic, economic, and customary) are borne individually rather than collectively (Chant, 2016). Therefore, exercising self-authority in life decisions cannot be considered deviant. Informants also expressed hopes for broader structural change, particularly regarding women's independence and equal recognition within marriage and customary life (UN Women, 2020). As DF stated, "Even if married into the husband's house, our opinions should also be listened to" (DF, 2025), while TN highlighted the importance of education and self-reliance for Balinese women's autonomy (TN, 2025).

Identity Negotiation and Marriage Choices in Stuart Hall's Theory

Using Stuart Hall's perspective on identity, this analytical section positions marriage not merely as a social practice or normative institution, but as an arena of representation in which meanings about "Balinese womanhood" are produced, normalized, and contested (Hall, 1997). Hall emphasizes that identity is never essential, stable, or final; rather, it is always in a state of becoming—shaped through relations of power, discourse, and historical experiences (Hall, 1997). Accordingly, the identity of Gen Z Hindu-Balinese women is understood as the outcome of continuous negotiation between patriarchal cultural structures and critical reflection on lived experience. Within the Balinese context, marriage functions as a primary mechanism through which women's cultural identity is constructed (Vickers, 2012; Parker, 2016). Through religious teachings, customary law, and everyday practices, women are represented as guardians of family harmony and patrilineal continuity. These form what Hall terms a regime of representation that shapes both social expectations and self-understanding (Hall, 1997). The "ideal Balinese woman" is tied to marital status, reproductive capacity (particularly bearing sons), and willingness to shoulder domestic and customary responsibilities (Chant, 2016),

positioning marriage within unequal power relations.

However, representation is never fully closed. It allows space for resistance, ambivalence, and re-articulation (Hall, 1997). The findings show that Gen Z Hindu-Balinese women do not passively accept identities imposed through marriage. Drawing on life experiences and digital exposure, the informants critically reinterpreted its meaning (Papacharissi, 2015), reflecting identity as an active process of production (Hall, 1997). This becomes evident as informants begin separating cultural identity from marriage as a singular moral obligation. Rather than rejecting culture, they redefine what it means to be Balinese women through cultural participation, religious practice, and personal autonomy. This process also reveals the political dimension of identity. Delaying or refusing marriage becomes a symbolic act that challenges hegemonic meanings (Hall, 1997). When Gen Z women frame marriage as contingent upon readiness and equality, they produce counter-discourses to narratives of female sacrifice (UN Women, 2020). Experiences of witnessing post-marital suffering further act as moments of rupture that enable critical reflection and re-articulation of identity.

Consequently, the identity of Gen Z Hindu-Balinese women can be understood as hybrid and ambivalent (Barker, 2014). This ambivalence reflects critical consciousness rather than confusion. As Hall argues, identity is inherently fragmented and dynamic (Hall, 1997). Thus, the shift in viewing marriage from obligation to choice represents an ongoing process of identity production. Gen Z Hindu-Balinese women are not losing their cultural identity but actively reshaping it within a contested field of meaning that remains open to transformation (Hall, 1997).

Conclusion

This study concludes that Gen Z Hindu-Balinese women occupy a complex position at the intersection of tradition and modernity, where marriage is socially constructed as a moral obligation tied to lineage continuity and cultural harmony. However, through lived experience and critical reflection, these women recognize that marriage without economic readiness, mental preparedness, and personal autonomy risks reproducing unequal gender relations within patriarchal structures. Using a life history approach and Stuart Hall's identity perspective, this research highlights how identity is not fixed but continuously negotiated.

The findings demonstrate that Balinese women experience a persistent triple burden encompassing domestic, public, and customary responsibilities. Gender role socialization begins early, including within formal education, and is reinforced by customary institutions through authority, structure, and a patrilocal patriarchal system. These conditions shape women's consciousness of marriage as an institution that often idealizes harmony while obscuring structural inequality. Within this context, Gen Z Hindu-Balinese women increasingly reinterpret marriage as a rational and conscious life choice rather than a compulsory life stage. Influenced by education, social media, and open spaces for dialogue, they negotiate new meanings of womanhood and marriage while maintaining a strong sense of Balinese cultural identity. This identity is expressed not solely through marriage, but also

through participation in customary practices, communal engagement, and cultural belonging by birth. Ultimately, this study underscores the dynamic negotiation of autonomy and tradition, illustrating how Gen Z Hindu-Balinese women carve out spaces of independence without fully disengaging from their cultural roots.

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