


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fatherlessness and marital anxiety: A qualitative exploration of psychological dynamics among young adult women in Padang, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Fatherlessness, defined as the physical or psychological absence of a father figure, is a prevalent phenomenon with significant long-term psychological consequences. This qualitative case study investigates the underexplored link between fatherlessness and marital anxiety among early adult women in Padang, Indonesia, a context with strong traditional and patriarchal norms. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis of two purposively selected participants (aged 21 and 22), the study examines the subjective experience and psychological underpinnings of this anxiety. Findings reveal that marital anxiety is not a singular fear but a complex syndrome stemming from a disrupted father-daughter attachment, which fosters a profound and generalized distrust of men. This foundational trauma interacts with the participants' critical consciousness of patriarchal inequalities within marriage, transforming anxiety into a form of ideological resistance against perceived systemic injustice. Furthermore, sociocultural pressures to marry and constant exposure to negative marital narratives exacerbate this distress. A key insight is the identification of a distinct relational pathway leading to marital avoidance, contrasting with other documented responses to paternal absence. The study concludes that for these women, marital anxiety represents a meaningful, adaptive response to personal trauma and structural inequity. These findings underscore the need for support frameworks that address both attachment wounds and sociocultural critiques, offering a nuanced perspective for clinicians and researchers working on intergenerational trauma and gender-based psychological distress.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of fatherlessness, characterized by the physical or psychological absence of a father figure, is a growing social concern in Indonesia. Notably, Indonesia has been identified as having

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one of the highest rates of fatherlessness globally (Arbiyana & Kholil, 2024). The construct extends beyond paternal bereavement to include situations where a biological father is present but emotionally or functionally absent in a child's life (Ni'ami, 2021; Permatasari, 2023). The implications of fatherlessness are profound and long-lasting, extending from childhood into adolescence and adulthood.

One significant psychological consequence for women who experience fatherlessness is the development of low self-esteem. Empirical evidence suggests a positive correlation between the strength of a father's role and a woman's self-esteem, whereas paternal absence is associated with diminished self-worth (Salsabila et al., 2020). This deficit in self-esteem can further complicate the formation of healthy interpersonal relationships, particularly with the opposite sex (Putri et al., 2022). Existing literature also indicates that young women from families marked by parental discord, divorce, or infidelity are prone to experiencing marital anxiety, often rooted in negative perceptions of marriage formed through observation of their parents' relationships (Alpriansyah & Bayhaqy, 2023; Paramitha et al., 2019).

Marital anxiety, defined as an excessive and debilitating fear of entering marriage, is increasingly prevalent among young adults, fueled by widespread public discourse on marital problems such as infidelity and divorce (Bahjatunnisa, 2024; Riswandi, 2025). Research consistently identifies young adult women as a demographic particularly susceptible to this anxiety (Amanda, 2020; Pebyamoriski et al., 2022; Rachmanulia, 2023). Zimmer (1986) conceptualized marital anxiety across three dimensions: (a) security (fears of abandonment, manipulation, infidelity, and divorce), (b) fulfillment (fears of diminished intimacy, inequality, unmet emotional needs, and loss of romance), and (c) joy (fears that marriage will become boring and restrictive). This anxiety often emerges in early adulthood (ages 18-40), a developmental stage where individuals are expected to assume new social roles, including that of a spouse, and where sexual maturity drives considerations of marital commitment (Hurlock, 1996; Rahmi, 2021). Myers (1983) posited that women may be more vulnerable to such anxieties due to greater sensitivity and susceptibility to societal pressures.

The present study was conducted in Padang, Indonesia, a context where traditional family systems remain influential. In this system, men are predominantly viewed as breadwinners and women as responsible for the domestic sphere (Ratnasartika et al., 2023). This paradigm often places disproportionate blame on mothers for child developmental issues, potentially exacerbating the conditions for fatherlessness by undervaluing the necessity of shared parental responsibility. This sociocultural backdrop makes Padang a pertinent location for investigating the nexus between fatherlessness and marital anxiety.

Preliminary interviews conducted for this study revealed complex psychological responses to fatherlessness. One participant (RZH), whose parents remained legally married but were separated due to paternal infidelity, reported a negative perception of men, a deliberate plan to avoid marriage, and a complete cessation of communication and support from her father. A second participant (AJZ), from a divorced family, described profound difficulty in trusting men and significant anxiety about future marital relationships, also linking these feelings to a deficient relationship with her father. These subjective accounts suggest a direct link between paternal absence and marital apprehension.

However, these narratives contrast with findings from Poernomo et al. (2024), who reported that fatherless women seek romantic partners to compensate for the absence of a father figure. This discrepancy highlights that the psychological impact of fatherlessness is not uniform and can manifest in opposing relational strategies, either avoidance or compulsive seeking of intimacy. This variation

underscores the need for deeper qualitative inquiry into the individual psychological and contextual factors that shape these divergent outcomes.

Therefore, this study aims to qualitatively explore the subjective experiences of young adult women in Padang who have experienced fatherlessness, with a specific focus on understanding its perceived impact on their attitudes toward marriage and experiences of marital anxiety. By examining the nuanced psychological processes from the participants' own perspectives, this research seeks to contribute a more refined understanding of the diverse pathways through which paternal absence influences marital development.

METHOD

This research utilized a qualitative design, specifically employing a case study methodology. A case study approach was considered suitable as it enables a comprehensive examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its actual context, especially for probing "how" or "why" inquiries (Yin, 2018). This research aimed to elucidate the impact of fatherlessness on young adult women's perceptions and anxieties concerning marriage, in accordance with the specified investigative focus.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling to identify cases with substantial information relevant to the research phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). The inclusion criteria were: (a) identifying as a woman; (b) being aged 18-25 years (early adulthood); (c) self-identifying as having experienced fatherlessness (characterized as the physical or profound psychological absence of a biological father during a significant period of childhood and/or adolescence); and (d) reporting considerable apprehension or anxiety regarding marriage. Two participants who fulfilled these criteria were enrolled in the study: RZH (21 years old) and AJZ (22 years old). Written informed consent was obtained from both participants prior to data collection. All procedures conducted in this study adhered to the ethical standards established by institutional and national research committees.

The data were gathered using two main methods: in-depth, semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. The principal data source comprised a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted individually with each participant. An interview guide was created after a thorough review of the literature on fatherlessness and marital anxiety. The guide included open-ended questions meant to get participants to share detailed stories about their childhood experiences with their fathers, how they feel about marriage and romantic relationships, and their specific fears or worries about their future married life. Each interview lasted about 60 to 90 minutes and was recorded with permission. The recordings were then transcribed word-for-word for analysis. During the interview sessions, non-participant observation was employed to record non-verbal cues, affective responses (such as pauses and emotional tone), and overall demeanor, thereby supplying contextual data to enhance the interpretation of the verbal transcripts.

The data analysis adhered to the iterative phases for qualitative research delineated by Creswell and Poth (2018). The steps were: 1) Data management: putting together the raw data, like transcripts of interviews and notes from observations; 2) reading and memoing: going over the transcripts several times to get a feel for them and writing initial analytical memos; 3) describing: Writing a full description of each case and the place where it happened; 4) classifying: using coding to make groups and themes out of the data. This included initial coding, then focused coding to put the data into groups and make sense of it; 5) interpreting: figuring out what the categorized data means by making thematic assertions and looking for patterns in both cases; and 5) representing and visualizing: showing the results through detailed narrative descriptions and thematic summaries. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation was employed (Denzin, 2017). This

involved comparing and cross-verifying data gathered from the primary interview transcripts with the observational notes taken during the sessions. This process helped to validate the consistency of the participants' accounts and provided a more holistic basis for interpretation.

RESULT

Through in-depth interviews and observational analysis, the data revealed that both participants, RZH and AJZ, exhibited significant marital anxiety. This was manifested in narratives that expressed profound doubt, fear, and negative expectations about marital relationships. The following sections present a thematic analysis of each case, followed by a synthesis of the cross-case factors contributing to their marital anxiety.

Subject RZH

Normative pressure versus personal readiness

RZH conceptualized marriage primarily as a normative social obligation expected of adult women, particularly after completing education. She articulated a perception of collective societal pressure where marriage is viewed as a requisite marker of female success and completeness. This external expectation generated an internal conflict, as she reported a personal sense of unreadiness and a lack of intrinsic emotional drive to marry, creating a tension between sociocultural scripts and her subjective state.

Profound distrust in male fidelity and commitment

A central feature of RZH's anxiety was a deeply entrenched distrust of men, specifically concerning loyalty. She generalized her belief, stating, "Every man will inevitably cheat," a perspective informed by both her personal familial experience and her observations of broader social phenomena. This distrust fostered a self-protective relational strategy characterized by hyper-vigilance and a tendency to preemptively end relationships at the first sign of potential betrayal, effectively acting as a barrier to long-term commitment.

Relational trauma rooted in paternal betrayal

The participant's father was identified as the focal point of relational trauma. Witnessing her father's infidelity shattered his prior role as an idealized figure and served as a formative template for understanding male behavior. This betrayal transcended the father-daughter relationship, morphing into a generalized schema that all men possess the latent potential to inflict similar hurt. Consequently, she described erecting "a high emotional barrier" when contemplating marriage.

Critical resistance to patriarchal and religious norms

RZH demonstrated a reflective and critical stance toward patriarchal structures, which she perceived as institutionalizing female inferiority within marriage. She specifically criticized religious interpretations that mandate unilateral wifely obedience, viewing them as tools for male dominance rather than spiritual guidance. Her resistance was principle-based, centering on a desire for justice and logical application of religious teachings, and fueled anxiety about entering a union that might constrain her autonomy.

Cognitive anxiety over relational dynamics

Beyond instinctive fear, RZH's anxiety was notably cognitive. She expressed specific concerns about maladaptive interpersonal patterns in marriage, such as clashing communication styles (e.g., avoidant

vs. anxious) and the potential for emotional abandonment. This reflected an analytical apprehension about the psychological complexity of sustaining a healthy, intimate partnership, further dampening her outlook on marital success.

Subject AJZ

Erosion of trust from paternal emotional absence

AJZ's marital anxiety was fundamentally linked to the emotional absence and unreliability of her father during childhood. Growing up in a disharmonious household, she internalized a model in which men are initially appealing but ultimately disappoint. This resulted in a pervasive distrust of men within long-term contexts and a significant deficit in positive male relationship role models, making the prospect of marriage appear inherently risky.

Catastrophic fear of repetition and marital failure

A dominant theme was AJZ's catastrophic fear of replicating her parents' failed marriage. She described her childhood environment as devoid of warmth or support, instead characterized by conflict, dishonesty, and disappointment. This led her to perceive marriage as a probable source of suffering. Lacking any blueprint for a healthy union, she viewed marital failure not as a possibility but as an inevitability, leading to a defensive reluctance to engage in serious relationships.

Rejection of patriarchal power imbalances

Similar to RZH, AJZ strongly rejected patriarchal relational patterns, which she associated with injustice and emotional pain, as observed in her mother's marital experience. She equated patriarchy with control, domination, and the suppression of female autonomy. Her ideal of a "healthy relationship" was explicitly defined by mutual trust, honesty, and the absence of restrictive control, positioning patriarchal structures as direct antitheses to marital safety and happiness.

Synthesis of contributing factors to marital anxiety

Analysis across both cases identified a confluence of interlocking factors that exacerbated marital anxiety, categorized below:

Internalized sociocultural and gendered norms. Both participants reported intense pressure from familial and social circles to marry as a mandatory rite of passage for women. This normative demand created a conflict between external expectations and internal unpreparedness, transforming marriage from a potential choice into a source of obligatory stress.

Direct paternal trauma and absence. The foundational factor was the experience of fatherlessness, manifested as betrayal (RZH) or chronic emotional neglect and manipulation (AJZ). This resulted not only in the loss of a father figure but, critically, in the loss of a model for safe, trusting cross-gender relationships. The resulting trauma directly shaped a worldview in which men are perceived as inherently untrustworthy and relationships as dangerous.

Critical awareness of patriarchal and structural inequality. Both women possessed a heightened, critical consciousness of gender inequality within marital institutions. Their anxiety was compounded by the realistic fear that marriage could entail a loss of autonomy, enforced submission, and immersion into unjust power dynamics, as observed in their families and society.

Vicarious reinforcement through media and environmental exposure. Marital anxiety was systematically reinforced by constant exposure to negative narratives about marriage. Both participants cited media reports and community cases of infidelity, domestic violence, and divorce as

evidence confirming their pessimistic beliefs. This environmental feedback loop served to normalize marital distress and invalidate potential positive models.

Anticipation of partner incapacity. AJZ introduced an additional, socially grounded fear: that patriarchal socialization renders many men emotionally unprepared for egalitarian partnership. She expressed anxiety that potential partners would lack the necessary communication skills and emotional maturity, dooming any marriage to inequality and misunderstanding from the outset.

DISCUSSION

This study provides an in-depth qualitative exploration of how the experience of fatherlessness contributes to the development of marital anxiety among early adult women in Padang, Indonesia. The findings reveal a complex interplay between personal trauma, disrupted attachment, and critical engagement with sociocultural norms, creating a multifaceted psychological barrier to marital commitment.

The narratives of RZH and AJZ illustrate that marital anxiety is not a monolithic fear but a constellation of interconnected apprehensions. For both participants, anxiety was rooted in a generalized relational distrust, primarily directed toward men. This finding extends prior research on fatherlessness and self-esteem (Salsabila et al., 2020; Putri et al., 2022) by demonstrating a specific relational consequence: the internalization of paternal unreliability into a schema that anticipates betrayal from all potential male partners. As posited by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), the father, as a primary attachment figure, serves as a prototype for future relationships. His physical or emotional absence, or his role as a source of betrayal, disrupts the development of a secure base. Consequently, individuals like RZH and AJZ approach intimacy not from a stance of secure exploration but from one of hypervigilance and preemptive self-protection, manifesting as a profound anxiety about the risks inherent in marital commitment.

Furthermore, the anxiety exhibited was deeply cognitive and ideological, moving beyond emotional wounding. Both participants demonstrated a sophisticated critique of the patriarchal structures embedded within marital institutions. Their fear was not only of being hurt by an individual man but of being subsumed by a system they perceived as inherently unjust. RZH's resistance to biased religious interpretations and AJZ's rejection of dominant-submissive relationship dynamics highlight how marital anxiety can be fueled by a critical consciousness of gender inequality. This aligns with and expands upon the work of Diana and Agustina (2023) on patriarchal culture, suggesting that for some women, anxiety is a rational response to anticipated structural oppression rather than a mere symptom of personal insecurity.

The anticipatory fear of repetition was a potent theme, particularly for AJZ. Witnessing parental marital failure created a template where marriage was synonymous with suffering and dissolution. This supports Aprianti's (2023) findings on the intergenerational transmission of divorce trauma. The lack of a positive model for a healthy, stable marriage left participants without a cognitive or emotional blueprint for success, making the prospect of marriage feel like a step into a pre-scripted narrative of failure. This "learned hopelessness" regarding relational outcomes is a significant psychological consequence of fatherlessness within a conflictual family system.

The data point to an integrative model where multiple factors converge to amplify marital anxiety: 1) core trauma: the disrupted father-daughter attachment. The foundational factor is the experience of fatherlessness, whether through betrayal (RZH) or manipulative absence (AJZ). This creates the primary wound: a deep-seated distrust in male reliability and the safety of attachment; 2) cognitive appraisal: critical consciousness of inequality. This core trauma is processed through a lens sharpened

by observations of gender inequality. Participants actively critique patriarchal norms in their society (Ratnasartika et al., 2023) and religious interpretations (Khairanis & Aldi, 2025), viewing marriage as a potential vehicle for their own disempowerment; 3) sociocultural amplification: normative pressure and vicarious learning. Anxiety is intensified by external forces. The strong sociocultural mandate for women to marry (Intan & Machdalena, 2021; Alitha et al., 2025) creates a conflict between personal reluctance and social expectations, leading to guilt and stress. Simultaneously, constant exposure to media and environmental narratives of marital conflict (Fathiyati et al., 2025; Sakti, 2024) serves as a confirmatory feedback loop, validating their fears and normalizing negative outcomes; 4) psychological outcome: defensive relational schemas. The convergence of the above factors results in the development of protective but restrictive schemas. These include avoidance of intimacy, preemptive rejection of partners, and an overarching belief that marriage is a high-risk, low-reward institution, culminating in the clinical presentation of marital anxiety as defined by Zimmer (1986).

An interesting nuance emerges when comparing these findings with those of Poernomo et al. (2024), who found that fatherlessness could drive some women to seek romantic partners to fill the paternal void. The present study reveals the opposite relational strategy: avoidance. This divergence underscores that fatherlessness does not produce a uniform outcome. The critical difference may lie in the quality of the paternal absence and the interpretive framework developed by the individual. For RZH and AJZ, the father was not merely absent but was actively a source of betrayal and pain. Combined with their critical feminist consciousness, this led to a generalized defensive posture. In other cases, an absent but not overtly hostile father might create a yearning for male validation, leading to partner-seeking behavior. This highlights the importance of qualitative, context-sensitive research in capturing the full spectrum of psychological responses to paternal absence.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study elucidates the intricate psychological dynamics through which the experience of fatherlessness contributes to pronounced marital anxiety among early adult women in Padang, Indonesia. The findings reveal that this anxiety is not merely an individual emotional response but a multifaceted construct forged at the intersection of personal trauma, disrupted attachment, and critical engagement with pervasive sociocultural norms. The analysis demonstrates that paternal absence, characterized by betrayal, emotional neglect, or manipulative behavior, fundamentally undermines the development of a secure relational base. This deficit manifests as a generalized and profound distrust towards men, which transforms the prospect of marriage from a potential partnership into a perceived arena of high risk and potential re-traumatization. Furthermore, the participants' anxiety is significantly compounded by their acute awareness and critique of patriarchal structures within marital institutions, viewing them as systems that institutionalize gender inequality and threaten personal autonomy. The theoretical implications of this study suggest that models of marital anxiety should integrate attachment-based perspectives with a critical sociology of gender. Practically, the findings indicate that interventions for young women experiencing marital anxiety related to fatherlessness should not only address individual attachment wounds but also validate their critical perceptions of social inequality and help them navigate the pressure of sociocultural norms.

DECLARATION

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Author contribution statement

Kharisma Wulan Abrar was responsible for conceptualization, methodology, data curation, investigation, and writing, including the preparation of the original draft, the review, and the editing. Dewi Fitriana contributed to the conceptualization, investigation, data curation, formal analysis, and translation of the final draft. Rena Kinnara Arlotas handled review & editing, visualization, project administration, and translation.

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The data described in this article can be accessed by contacting the first author.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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