

The Role of PUSPAGA in Preventing Child Marriage: A Case Study in Tuban Regency

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Abstract: Child marriage remains a pressing issue in Indonesia, particularly in traditional communities such as Tuban Regency, East Java. This study explores the role of PUSPAGA (Family Learning Center) as a government initiative in reducing the incidence of child marriage through premarital counseling for marriage dispensation applicants. Using a qualitative case study method, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation at the Department of Social Affairs, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection in Tuban. Findings reveal that most applicants are aged 15–18 and have low educational backgrounds, with economic hardship, premarital pregnancy, and cultural norms being the main drivers of early marriage. PUSPAGA plays a crucial role in assessing the readiness of prospective underage couples and educating families about the psychological, social, and legal consequences of early marriage. The counseling process also serves as a social intervention that challenges patriarchal values and strengthens family resilience. The study underscores the importance of preventive psychosocial services in protecting children's rights and promoting gender-sensitive development.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Gender and Culture, Premarital Counseling, PUSPAGA, Marriage Dispensation

1 INTRODUCTION

Societal dynamics will certainly continue to undergo changes that will inevitably impact all aspects of life, including economic, health, education, and social issues. One of the most pressing social issues is the persistently high rate of child marriage or early marriage in Indonesia. Child marriage or early marriage refers to a marriage that occurs before the legal age or a marriage involving children who are still very young, often occurring during the developmental stage between the ages of 10 and 18 (Wudiati & Setyowati Nanik, 2023). According to Law Number 16 of 2019 on marriage, the minimum age for marriage for both women and men is 19 years old (Indawati et al., 2024). The law states that marriage can only be conducted by women and men who have reached the age of 19 (Raudlatun & Asiah, 2020). This age limit is one of the legal age requirements, so that those who have not reached this age are still categorized as minors and cannot marry. At this age, children have not yet fully developed the emotional and mental maturity to handle household issues (Fitriani & Etrawati, 2024). Based on data from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2023, there are 25.53 million women in Indonesia who married before the age of 18. The high rate of early marriage is caused by various factors, including social environment, customs, culture, education, and economic conditions (Sona et al., 2024). Early marriage is common in several regions in Indonesia, especially where culture, customs, and religion are deeply ingrained in society, making this issue seem normal (Indawati et al., 2024). One such case is in Tuban Regency, East Java. Early marriage in Tuban Regency ranks 10th in East Java. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics of East Java Province, 22.61 percent of women aged 10 years and older marry for the first time before the age of 17. According to research conducted by Sona et al. (2024), adolescents who marry below the legal age are often emotionally and mentally immature, making them unprepared to handle the responsibilities of marriage and household management. These issues contribute to mental health problems, social pressure, and domestic conflicts. Various roles and social demands that are not understood by children who marry early also lead to other social problems, such as cases of domestic violence, child neglect, and divorce (Fadlyana & Larasaty, 2016).

Several approaches have emerged in response to these ongoing challenges. One policy that can reduce the rate of early marriage is the PUSPAGA service. PUSPAGA, or the Family Learning Center, is one of the service units aimed at enhancing family well-being by improving parental quality in fulfilling their responsibilities and protecting children under the jurisdiction of the Social Affairs, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection Department, as well as the Community and Village Empowerment Department of Tuban Regency. One of PUSPAGA's services is counseling for marriage dispensations for underage marriages. Marriage dispensation counseling itself involves providing knowledge, skills, understanding, and raising awareness about married life to each prospective bride and groom by professional

counselors (Afifah, 2024). The counseling and education services provided will strengthen family resilience, thereby reducing the rate of early marriage. This aligns with a study conducted in the Pekalongan region, which showed that collaboration between the local government and PUSPAGA, along with professional psychology associations, can reduce levels of violence and mistreatment of children, including the practice of early marriage (Lailiyah, K., & Nirmala, AP, 2023). In this context, the Department of Social Affairs, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection, as well as Community and Village Empowerment of Tuban Regency, is one of the government agencies involved in social services and plays a strategic role in providing services, protection, and empowerment for women and children. This agency has also addressed various complex social issues, such as domestic violence, child exploitation, child abandonment, and women's empowerment in economic and social fields. Therefore, this study aims to describe further on the role of PUSPAGA specifically in preventing child marriage.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study uses qualitative research methods. Qualitative research aims to understand social phenomena through description, in-depth interpretation, and contextual analysis. This study employs a case study research design. A case study design involves a comprehensive, detailed, and in-depth investigation of a program, event, or activity at the individual, group, institutional, or organizational level to gain a thorough and profound understanding of an event. The data collection techniques used are observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis techniques use the Miles and Huberman model through four stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Informants in the study were determined using purposive sampling.

The research subjects selected met the following criteria: (1) Head of the PPPA Department of Tuban Regency; (2) Young expert staff in the PPPA Department of Tuban Regency; (3) Expert team of psychologists in the PPPA Department of Tuban Regency; and (4) Expert counselors in the PPPA Department of Tuban Regency. The research location was at the office of the Department of Social Affairs, Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, and Community and Village Empowerment of Tuban Regency.

The phenomenon of early marriage in the Tuban Regency can be analyzed using social psychology theory. Early marriage is often motivated by overly intimate relationships between underage couples. To avoid societal judgment or criticism of actions that violate norms, couples are pressured to marry immediately, regardless of their age. The strong influence of social and cultural norms in shaping individual decisions, where early marriage is seen as a solution to conditions deemed shameful or deviant by society. This phenomenon can be explained through Solomon Asch's (1951) conformity theory, which states that individuals tend to adjust their behavior and opinions to the expectations or demands of the social group in order to remain accepted. Society's views on such events are often reinforced by stereotypes that develop within the social environment, particularly toward women who become pregnant outside of marriage.

According to Allport (1954), stereotypes are rigid and overly generalized beliefs about a social group or category. He emphasizes that stereotypes are rooted in the process of social categorization and can form the basis of prejudice and discrimination. Teenage girls are more likely to accept early marriage as a "solution" because they are raised in an environment that emphasizes the importance of maintaining family honor and conforming to traditional norms (Eagly & Wood, 2012). In traditional societies, people tend to adhere strictly to social norms without a deep understanding of emotional, psychological, and social responsibilities. According to Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981), women are directed from an early age to understand their roles within a rigid binary framework as wives, mothers, and individuals who are obedient to male authority. In such societies, patriarchal beliefs are often deeply ingrained, so social norms and gender structures remain firmly entrenched.

3 RESULTS

Observations and participation in internship activities show that the pre-marital counseling services provided by PUSPAGA Tuban Regency are one of the key interventions in addressing cases of child marriage. These services target couples who apply for marriage dispensation through the Religious Court and are one of the administrative requirements prior to the trial.

During the internship period, it was noted that the number of applicants for marriage dispensation counseling was relatively high. In the first semester of 2025, around 150 client couples participated in counseling sessions, with an average of 1 to 3 couples per day, and on certain days reaching 6 couples per day. This shows that the incidence of early marriage is still quite high in Tuban Regency.

Table 1.1 Clients Seeking Marriage Dispensation Counseling

Year	Number of Clients
2023	454
2024	301

The age range of applicants for marriage dispensation is between 15 and 18 years old, and most of them come from elementary school or junior high school educational backgrounds. Most of them do not continue their formal education. Data also shows that the main reason for discontinuing education is economic factors, which force children to work and then choose to marry early.

Table 1.2 Educational Level of Applicants for Marriage Dispensation Counseling

Educational Level	Number of Applicants
Kindergarten	3
Primary School (SD)	29
Junior High School (SMP)	85
Senior High School (SMA)	24
Total	141

Based on interviews with counselors, there are several dominant factors behind the application for marriage dispensation, namely:

1. Economic factors, which encourage families to marry off their children to ease their financial burden.
2. Pregnancy outside of marriage, which is the most common cause (married by accident).
3. Cultural factors, including local practices such as “Ambrok” (spending the night together at home before marriage) and arranged marriages by parents.
4. Family factors, including the absence of parents, domestic conflicts, and the repetition of early marriage patterns within the family by subsequent generations.

The findings also show a disparity in responses during counseling. Male prospective spouses tend to be more active in answering questions, while female prospective spouses are often confused, passive, and unable to express their opinions or decisions clearly. Furthermore, the aspects examined in counseling sessions include readiness for marriage, economic conditions, emotional aspects, social relationships, and future planning.

Based on the assessment results, counselors provide education to couples and parents regarding the risks and impacts of early marriage. In some cases, this education has a positive impact, leading parents to decide to postpone their children's marriage. However, most families still choose to continue with the marriage dispensation process.

4 DISCUSSIONS

The phenomenon of marriage dispensation provides social evidence that the practice of dispensation for underage marriage is rooted in social values and norms that remain deeply entrenched (Rosanti et al., 2020). The practice of early marriage continues to occur among minors because they are unable to challenge prevailing norms and do not have the opportunity to make their own choices. In some cases, the decision to marry at a young age is not the result of desire and a full understanding of the meaning of marriage, but arises from internal and external influences. These internal influences come from the thoughts of the individuals involved in early marriage. Most individuals involved in early marriage believe that they are physically and mentally ready for marriage (Indawati et al., 2024). In addition, there are external factors that arise from external influences that affect individuals in their decision to marry early, such as culture, social norms, gender roles, social structures, and interactions with various social groups that can influence individuals directly or indirectly (Aseri, 2021). The decision in question arises from social pressure that is understood as a group demand.

In some areas, especially rural areas, early marriage is common. This occurs because there is still a view that dating or forming relationships without a legal bond risks bringing shame to the couple and their families (Berliana & Avezahra,

2024). Parents' concerns about promiscuity among teenagers support this view and concerns about their image in society. Intimate relationships carry the risk of leading to promiscuity and causing out-of-wedlock pregnancies, which are considered a major disgrace for the family, prompting the decision to marry quickly (married by accident) without considering other aspects of readiness (Fitriani & Etrawati, 2024; Berliana & Avezahra, 2024). In many cases, parents feel the need to protect the family's reputation by resolving the issue through marriage rather than facing the stigma associated with pregnancy outside of marriage (Mamulaty et al., 2023). According to the society, marriage becomes a shortcut to avoid unpleasant conversations from the community. The society's perspective of such events is often reinforced by stereotypes that develop in the social environment, especially for women who get pregnant out of marriage. According to Gordon Allport (1954), stereotypes are rigid and overly generalized beliefs about a social group or category. He emphasizes that stereotypes are rooted in the process of social categorization and can form the basis of prejudice and discrimination. This can be interpreted as a form of judgment or assumption that generalizes certain individuals or groups, which is usually not based on complete facts or direct experience. These stereotypes not only create social pressure for individuals but also influence family decisions, which then feel compelled to marry off their children quickly to avoid shame and judgment from society.

Pressure from family and the surrounding community, who view marriage as the only appropriate option to avoid stigma or negative perceptions, leaves adolescents with no choice but to follow their parents and society. As a result, the decision to marry is seen as more socially acceptable because it avoids adultery and gossip (Haidi Nurfadilah et al., 2021). In this environment, there is an emphasis on family honor, social reputation, and control over women's sexual behavior, so early marriage is often seen as a "preventive" solution to potential shame and damage to the family's reputation. Thus, families and local communities advocate for marrying off children even if they are underage. This is a form of social conformity adaptation. Conformity itself is a change in social behavior as an effort to adapt to a group, whether positively or negatively (Berliana & Avezahra, 2024). In this context, conformity is defined by Solomon Asch (1951) as an action where individuals tend to adjust their behavior and opinions to meet the expectations or demands of a social group in order to remain accepted. In this case, the decision to marry early is made to save the honor of the girl and her family, even though the child is not yet fully prepared mentally and emotionally.

Another empirical fact is that children who apply for marriage dispensation, especially underage girls, mostly decide to drop out of school for economic reasons (Mamulaty et al., 2023). In a patriarchal society, the assumption that girls should not pursue higher education perpetuates the practice of early marriage (Indawati et al., 2024). In some areas, girls who do not marry in their teens are even considered deviant from social expectations. Parents view unmarried teenage girls as old maids, so they tend to push their children to marry in their teens because their own parents married as teenagers, and it has become a family tradition and social norm that they consider normal (Rosanti et al., 2020). According to research conducted by Mamulaty et al. (2023), such views are more prevalent in rural communities than in urban areas, particularly among families with limited financial resources or low educational levels, and often occur when teenagers are forced to drop out of school to help support the family financially. Traditional communities believe that the most important education is for children to be able to read, write, and count, which is considered sufficient, or that six years of basic education is enough for life (Indawati et al., 2024). Women who drop out of school and choose to marry at a young age often lack the education or skills needed to secure employment and generate income, leaving them dependent on their partners (Mamulaty et al., 2023). Additionally, low levels of education result in a lack of understanding among adolescents, particularly girls, about reproductive health, the risks of early pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and the risks of maternal and infant mortality (Indawati et al., 2024).

Teenagers who marry below the legal age are often emotionally and mentally immature, making them ill-prepared to handle the responsibilities of marriage and family life (Sona et al., 2024). The effects of early marriage are not only physical but can also impact the psychological aspects of teenagers, as evidenced by increased levels of stress, depression, and anxiety commonly experienced by young couples (Sihombing & Cutmetia, 2024). At this young age, adolescents or teenagers who have not yet reached this stage tend to be easily swayed by their emotions and are not yet ready to face the emotional pressures of married life. The lack of emotional maturity in adolescents is one of the main risks of early marriage, as it can lead to domestic conflicts, relationship instability, and even mental health issues for young couples, particularly women. Teenagers who marry at a young age or engage in early marriage are faced with the reality of the demands of their roles as wives and mothers at a young age. These feelings arise because they worry about the family's unstable finances, leading to arguments with their husbands. Some even resort to domestic violence (DV). After marriage, teenage girls become mothers responsible for raising children, which also becomes a source of concern for teenagers (Fitriani & Etrawati, 2024).

Low educational attainment among the population is closely linked to low economic conditions. In some cases, the decision to marry early is due to unstable economic conditions, leading people to believe that marriage is one way out, as a means of helping the economy (Mamulaty et al., 2023). School-age children from disadvantaged families often choose to drop out of school and marry as a way to help alleviate their family's economic burden. In such situations, they may voluntarily or under pressure accept an arranged marriage with an older man who has stable financial conditions (Kurniawati & Sari, 2020). In this case, parents marry off their children to ease their burden without knowing the risks they will face and as a way to raise their status in society. This is in line with research conducted by Berliana & Avezahra (2024) that marriage is also a way to increase one's status and improve one's social standing in society. In this context,

child marriage forms a recognition that is valued by society. In such circumstances, adolescents, particularly girls, can only submit, feel powerless, and agree to early marriage.

What is very unfortunate in this case is that those applying for marriage dispensation do not yet have an understanding of the dynamics of marriage, parenting patterns, and the social roles that must be performed after marriage. In traditional societies, people tend to adhere strictly to social norms without a deep understanding of emotional, psychological, and social responsibilities. According to Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981), women are directed from an early age to understand their roles within a rigid binary framework as wives, mothers, and individuals who are obedient to male authority. In this society, patriarchal beliefs are usually still deeply rooted, so social norms and gender structures remain the norm. This view suggests that the division of roles in marriage, where the man or husband makes decisions and provides for the family, while the woman or wife complies with all decisions and manages the household, such as cooking, caring for children, cleaning the house, and providing for all needs (Madut, 2020). Thus, in practice, young women are excluded from education and positioned in caregiving roles, while marital authority lies with men and the extended family structure (Madut, 2020). This aligns with the theory proposed by Eagly & Wood (1991), which explains that differences in male and female behavior in society are not solely determined by biological factors but are more influenced by social and cultural expectations regarding gender roles. This is the role of women in society, which is shaped by the society and culture that have been passed down through generations. In various contexts, women as wives are still often overlooked and positioned as individuals whose sole responsibility is to manage the household, care for children, and support their husbands' decisions. This role is often viewed as the "natural" role of women by society, thereby limiting perceptions and expectations of how women should act and contribute.

As a result of these societal views, girls who marry early are at greater risk of economic dependence, domestic violence, and difficulties in accessing health and education services (UNICEF, 2020). In addition, women are vulnerable to discrimination in terms of their rights, especially in education and formal employment. This is certainly an issue that needs to be addressed immediately. Every child, whether male or female, should have equal rights to education, protection, and decision-making without pressure. Furthermore, all children, especially girls, should have the knowledge to develop their potential, the freedom to explore, and the ability to plan their future. At the age of 13, teenagers should have the opportunity to receive a high level of formal education and will tend to focus on activities that have a positive impact and plan their future. Adolescents who have sufficient knowledge to consider the impact of early marriage on their physical and mental readiness. Efforts to raise awareness about the rights of children and adolescents, including the right to education and equal opportunities for self-development, should be a key focus in preventing early marriage (Aseri, 2021).

5 CONCLUSIONS

Child marriage remains as a deep-rooted phenomenon in traditional communities such as in Tuban Regency, driven by economic, social, and cultural factors. Premarital counseling services through PUSPAGA are an important intervention in identifying the readiness of prospective child brides and providing education for them and their families. The findings show that early marriage is not solely due to individual decisions, but is influenced by structural pressures such as poverty, cultural norms, and premarital pregnancy. Through a psychosocial approach, PUSPAGA plays a role not only as an administrative filter for marriage dispensation applications, but also as an agent of social change that strengthens awareness, family resilience, and protection of children's and women's rights.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank PUSPAGA for its support in participating in this scientific activity.

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