



# The Role of the Office of Religious Affairs in Addressing Underage Marriage

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## Abstract

Child marriage is a complex issue that remains prevalent in Indonesia, despite being regulated by Law No. 16 of 2019, which sets the minimum age for marriage at nineteen years. This phenomenon not only impacts children's fundamental rights, such as access to education and healthcare, but also has the potential to trigger long-term social, economic, and psychological issues. This study aims to analyze the extent to which the Religious Affairs Office fulfills its role in preventing child marriage, as well as to identify the challenges and strategies implemented within the social and cultural context of the local community. This study uses a qualitative approach with a field study method. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with Religious Affairs Office officials, religious leaders, village officials, and the community, and analyzed using descriptive qualitative methods. The results of the study show that the Religious Affairs Office has a strategic role in preventing child marriage, particularly through religious counseling and age verification of prospective brides and grooms. However, this role still faces significant obstacles, such as low public legal awareness, cultural and economic pressures, and the limited authority of the Religious Affairs Office to reject marriages that have obtained a dispensation from the court. However, the active involvement of the Office of Religious Affairs in collaborating with other agencies and community leaders has reduced the incidence of child marriage in recent years. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of strengthening the institutional capacity of the Office of Religious Affairs as the frontline in protecting children's rights.

## INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is a complex social reality, reflecting the intersection of social structures, local culture, religious values, and weak law enforcement (Kamba & Kasim, 2022; Khotimah et al., 2024; Safira et al., 2021). Despite national regulatory advancements that have affirmed the protection of children's rights, the practice of early marriage remains widespread in many regions of Indonesia. This phenomenon reflects the gap between positive legal norms and the social-cultural norms prevalent in society (Dariyo et al., 2020; Novriansyah, 2021).

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Normatively, the state, through Law No. 16 of 2019 as an amendment to Law No. 1 of 1974 on Marriage, has set a minimum age of nineteen years for men and women to marry. However, data from the Central Statistics Agency in 2022 reveals that ten percent of women aged twenty to twenty-four years old had married before the age of eighteen, a fact that underscores that legal regulations have not been able to effectively address the structural and cultural roots of this practice (Tulab, 2022; Siregar & Kelana, 2022).

The implications of child marriage are not only a violation of children's civil rights, but also threaten the integrity of the future of the nation's generation. In terms of education, children who marry early are more likely to drop out of school and lose essential opportunities for self-development (Fan & Koski, 2022). From a health perspective, the risk of pregnancy and childbirth complications increases significantly among adolescent girls who are not yet biologically mature. According to the World Health Organization, adolescents who give birth before the age of 18 have a 60% higher risk of death compared to those who give birth after reaching adulthood. Moreover, psychosocial impacts such as anxiety, depression, economic dependence, and even domestic violence loom as unavoidable shadows. In other words, child marriage not only perpetuates the cycle of structural poverty but also weakens family resilience and national competitiveness (Wahdi et al., 2024; Winarsih & Ismail, 2024).

Theologically, Islam views marriage not merely as a social contract, but as a sacred bond (*mitsaqan ghalizā*) that entails moral, emotional, and spiritual responsibilities. Marriage in Islam requires substantive readiness to reach the age of puberty, not merely biological readiness (Mukarrom, 2021). The Prophet Muhammad, in the hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim, emphasized the importance of individual awareness and consent in marriage, as he said: “Do not marry a widow before seeking her consent, and do not marry a virgin before seeking her permission.” This underscores that psychological maturity and freedom of choice are essential prerequisites for marriage (Amanda et al., 2023; Ananda & Dewi Aryanti, 2023). Therefore, the practice of child marriage conducted under cultural pressure, without full readiness and awareness, fundamentally contradicts the *maqashid al-syari'ah*, particularly in the aspects of *hifz al-nafs* (protection of life), *hifz al-aql* (protection of intellect), and *hifz al-nasl* (protection of lineage).

In this context, the Office of Religious Affairs has a strategic position as a state institution that not only functions as a marriage registrar but also as a key actor in providing education, guidance, and social control over marriage practices that deviate from legal norms and values of justice (Nasrulloh & Fauzi, 2025; Pranoto et al., 2025). Through its functions of age verification, premarital counseling, and refusal to register marriages that do not meet the requirements, the Religious Affairs Office can act as an agent of social change that balances religious norms, positive law, and the social reality of society. However, the idealism of this role often collides with structural problems, such as limited competent human resources, minimal operational budgets, and weak inter-agency coordination. Furthermore, the Religious Affairs Office also faces strong cultural resistance, as well as the practice of granting marriage dispensations by religious courts, which remains lenient and fails to consider the psychosocial aspects of child brides and grooms (Basri & Anom, 2023; Nurfatoni et al., 2024).

Several research findings reinforce the importance of revitalizing the role of the Office of Religious Affairs in curbing child marriage practices. The educational and preventive approach taken by the Office of Religious Affairs has succeeded in reducing the rate of early marriage. The effectiveness of the Batubara Office of Religious Affairs in building cross-sectoral networks, such as with the Social Services Agency and community leaders, has been noted. The Religious Affairs Office even noted that the Suscatin program has significantly improved teenagers' literacy

regarding marital responsibilities. Highly effective in shaping collective awareness among the community regarding the dangers of child marriage, especially when combined with psychosocial empowerment and participatory cultural approaches.

However, various structural and cultural challenges still overshadow these efforts. The limitations of the role of the Office of Religious Affairs are not solely due to internal factors, but also result from the weak commitment of local policies to child protection issues (Engkizar et al., 2025). The granting of marriage dispensations, which should be exceptional and based on comprehensive psychosocial assessments, is often granted solely based on concerns about promiscuity, without considering the rights and future of the child in a holistic manner. On the other hand, many people still view marriage as an instant solution to economic and social pressures, rather than as an effort to build a healthy and quality family (Musta'in, 2022).

This study aims to critically and comprehensively analyze how the Office of Religious Affairs plays a role in efforts to prevent underage marriage, particularly in the socio-cultural context of rural communities. The analysis will focus on normative, institutional, and implementational dimensions, taking into account the interaction between legal regulations, religious values, and community perceptions (Engkizar et al., 2025). Thus, this study not only seeks to identify challenges and opportunities in the role of the Religious Affairs Office but also offers institutional strengthening strategies and evidence-based policy formulation that can support the creation of a holistic and sustainable child protection ecosystem. It is hoped that this study can serve as both a scientific contribution and social advocacy to strengthen the position of the Office of Religious Affairs as a vanguard in preventing child marriage and protecting the future of the nation's generation.

## **METHODS**

This study is a field research with a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to provide a systematic and factual description of the role of the Office of Religious Affairs in handling underage marriages (Dasopang et al., 2022; Irama et al., 2023; Kaputra et al., 2022). The research was conducted using an empirical legal approach, specifically a sociological legal approach, which aims to examine and understand the applicability of unwritten laws in society, such as customary law and Islamic law, in the context of early marriage. To obtain in-depth data, the researcher used purposive sampling techniques to determine informants with relevant experience, as well as two adolescents who had directly experienced marriage at a young age.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Role of the Office of Religious Affairs in Carrying Out Administrative Functions in Accordance with Regulations**

The Office of Religious Affairs occupies a very strategic position in carrying out administrative functions related to enforcing the minimum age for marriage as strictly regulated in Law Number 16 of 2019 (Judiasih, 2023). This regulation sets the minimum age for marriage at nineteen years for both men and women as a legal standard that must be adhered to. In carrying out its duties, the Religious Affairs Office is not permitted to register marriages of children under the minimum age, except in cases where there is an official dispensation decision from the Religious Court. This condition indicates that administratively, the Religious Affairs Office operates in accordance with the applicable legal framework and carries out its supervisory function in the marriage registration process (Prasetia, 2023). However, in its implementation in the field, even though the regulations have been strictly enforced, there are legal

loopholes that are still exploited by some people through unregistered marriages that take place outside of state supervision. This practice indicates a disparity between formal legal norms and the social reality that occurs in society.

The Office of Religious Affairs does not have the authority to grant permission for underage marriages without a court decision, demonstrating a strong administrative commitment to law enforcement. However, internal data from the Religious Affairs Office for the period 2019 to 2023 shows that there were eight cases of marriage dispensations and twenty-one cases of unregistered marriages, most of which involved children under the age of nineteen. This fact indicates that administrative measures alone are insufficient to curb child marriage practices, especially without fundamental changes in the social and cultural understanding of society that underlies such behavior. Therefore, the role of the Religious Affairs Office in this context is not merely as an administrative body enforcing regulations but also as part of the social legal system that requires support from educational efforts and cultural transformation to ensure that law enforcement can be effective and sustainable (Marwiyah et al., 2025; Perkawinan, 2025).

### **Social and Cultural Dynamics Supporting Child Marriage Practices**

One significant finding in this study reveals that child marriage practices do not stem solely from ignorance of applicable laws, but are rooted in social, cultural, and religious values that have become an integral part of the structure of society. In this context, the social perception of the obligation to marry off young girls is often seen as a strategic effort to maintain the dignity and honor of the family, especially when the child has entered into a relationship with the opposite sex (Mardiansyah et al., 2024). Such strong social pressure creates a cultural cycle that forces children to enter into marriage, even though emotionally and biologically they have not yet reached the ideal level of maturity (Meilinda, 2024; Suryaputri et al., 2025).

Traditional norms that equate biological maturity with readiness for marriage are one of the fundamental factors that have not been effectively addressed by formal legal mechanisms. In some cases, parents even take pride in marrying off their daughters at an early age, as this is seen as an achievement in preserving family honor (Pratiwi & Syafiq, 2022). This phenomenon indicates that preventing child marriage is not sufficient by merely strengthening law enforcement but requires a multidimensional approach involving deep cultural and social transformation. Educational efforts and shifts in societal value paradigms are crucial steps to erode norms that may encourage child marriage practices, thereby ensuring more comprehensive and sustainable protection of children's rights.

### **Ambiguous Religious Understanding and the Role of Religious Leaders**

The role of religious leaders in the social structure of rural communities is very strategic, especially in matters of marriage, which involve not only legal aspects but also religious values and social norms. However, in the context of efforts to prevent child marriage, religious leaders often face complex moral dilemmas (Ariani et al., 2025; Sehoni & Fernando, 2025). They must balance compliance with state laws regulating the minimum age for marriage with social pressures and real-world conditions that sometimes force early marriage. There is ambiguity in the understanding of religious teachings at the grassroots level. Communities often interpret religious values pragmatically, especially in situations considered urgent, such as pregnancy outside of marriage (Rawanita & Walidin, 2025; Santiago & Asnawi, 2024). In such circumstances, marriage is perceived as the only solution to legitimize the relationship, without considering the child's age and psychosocial maturity.

### **Economic Factors as a Trigger for Child Marriage**

Economic factors play a very significant role in encouraging the practice of child marriage, especially in rural areas (Gusti, 2024; Manuel Costa Alves & Moh Safei, 2024). Limited economic conditions lead many families to decide to marry off their children at an early age as a pragmatic strategy to reduce the family's financial burden. This occurs in the context of structural poverty accompanied by limited access to adequate education and information. The close link between economic constraints and low levels of education gives rise to early marriage as an alternative solution for families who feel financially powerless. However, child marriage, which is seen as a practical solution, is in fact a layered and complex problem.

Young couples who marry at an early age generally lack emotional maturity and adequate life skills, putting them at risk of economic instability, family conflict, divorce, and entrapment in a cycle of intergenerational poverty (Saraswati & Sugiasih, 2020). Therefore, multidimensional interventions from the government and social institutions are urgently needed, particularly in the form of programs to improve access to quality education and economic empowerment for poor families. This approach aims to open new opportunities for adolescents to develop their potential optimally, so that marriage is no longer the only way out of economic limitations. Thus, it is hoped that there will be a paradigm shift in societal thinking, from viewing early marriage as a solution to understanding that education and economic empowerment are the key to improving the well-being and quality of life of the younger generation.

### **The Impact of Child Marriage on Family Health and Well-being**

Child marriage has serious and multidimensional consequences for physical and psychological health, as well as family well-being, especially for girls and their offspring (Labibah et al., 2025; Ningrum & Ningsih, 2024). Pregnancy at a young age carries significant health risks for both the mother and the baby, which have been medically proven to potentially lead to obstetric complications, premature birth, and neonatal death. Early marriage can have adverse effects not only on the physical health of young mothers but also on the optimal development of the children they give birth to (Tampubolon, 2021; Sekarayu & Nurwati, 2021). The lack of understanding and access to reproductive health education, adequate nutrition, and appropriate parenting practices creates a significant gap in efforts to ensure the well-being of young families.

Many children from early marriages experience stunting, delayed cognitive and speech development, and various other growth and development disorders that hinder their overall potential (Kristiningrum et al., 2023; Zulkhakim et al., 2022). This phenomenon reinforces the structural poverty cycle that has long been difficult to break, as human resources born and raised in suboptimal conditions tend to face limitations in education and employment in the future. Therefore, efforts to prevent child marriage are not merely a matter of enforcing laws or social norms, but a fundamental long-term strategic investment in building healthy families and producing quality and productive generations (Engkizar et al., 2022). Holistic and sustainable interventions, including reproductive health education, improved access to maternal and child health services, and psychosocial support, are integral components in reducing the negative impacts of early marriage on family and societal well-being.

### **Educational Efforts and Limitations in the Implementation of Programs by the Office of Religious Affairs**

As part of its strategy to prevent child marriage, the Office of Religious Affairs has initiated various educational programs aimed at raising public awareness of the

importance of reproductive health, religious values related to marriage in accordance with Islamic law, and knowledge of applicable marriage laws. These programs include reproductive health counseling in schools, religious lectures, and socialization of legal regulations through cross-sectoral collaboration involving community health centers, educational institutions, religious leaders, and village officials. Despite being implemented continuously, the effectiveness of these programs still faces significant challenges. The phenomenon of social apathy is one of the main obstacles to achieving the desired behavioral change. The lack of interest among the community, especially the younger generation and parents, in formal education programs indicates the need for innovation in message delivery methods and more effective communication approaches (Yarmi & Kustandi, 2025).

Therefore, a more communicative, interactive, and contextual communication strategy is needed in line with local culture. The use of social media as a platform for disseminating information can increase the reach and appeal of educational messages, while real testimonials from victims of early marriage can have a stronger emotional impact and raise public awareness. Additionally, empowering youth groups as agents of social change has the potential to create positive peer influence dynamics, enabling educational programs to be more widely and sustainably accepted (Jasmin et al., 2024; Sulaksono et al., 2025). A multidimensional approach that integrates educational, communication, and community empowerment aspects is a key factor in enhancing the effectiveness of child marriage prevention efforts in this region. Strong collaboration between the Religious Affairs Office, educational institutions, health services, and local communities is essential to ensure that these programs are not merely ceremonial but genuinely make a significant impact in changing the mindset and social practices that have long been entrenched.

#### **Limitations of Supervision and Clashes between Legal and Cultural Values**

The Office of Religious Affairs faces significant challenges in supervising siri marriages, which are marriages that are not recorded in the state administrative system. These siri marriages are practically beyond the formal oversight of the Office of Religious Affairs and the government, yet they are accepted and considered valid within the social and cultural context of the local community (Palahuwata & Aruan, 2025; Pohan et al., 2024). This phenomenon has serious implications, particularly for the legal status of children born from these marriages, who often lack valid identity documents such as birth certificates. This situation then limits their access to basic public services such as education and healthcare, thereby hindering the development of the potential and quality of life of the younger generation.

Furthermore, this phenomenon illustrates a fundamental clash between formal legal norms and socio-cultural norms that are deeply ingrained in society (DM et al., 2024; Yunita Bernanda et al., 2025). This reality shows that people often prioritize obedience to social norms and local religious values over formal, written state regulations. From a legal-empirical perspective, law is not only understood as binding written rules, but also as a manifestation of the values and social practices that are alive and evolving within society. Therefore, an approach that focuses solely on enforcing formal law without considering the cultural and social context will be limited in its effectiveness. For this reason, a comprehensive and holistic approach is needed that integrates legal, cultural, and active community participation aspects (Irham Azmi, 2024; Suganda, 2022). Synergy between legal regulations, socio-cultural education, and community empowerment is key to ensuring that changes in social values and practices occur in a profound, comprehensive, and sustainable manner. Such a collaborative approach not only strengthens the legal legitimacy in the eyes of the community but also drives social transformation capable of eroding practices that contradict the legal objectives of child and family protection.

### **The Role of the Younger Generation and Hopes for Social Change**

Although child marriage is still a fairly widespread phenomenon, there is a glimmer of optimism emerging from the younger generation's awareness of the importance of delaying marriage until they reach a mature age psychologically, physically, and socially. This statement reflects a paradigm shift among young people who are beginning to view marriage as part of a well-planned life, rather than merely a social obligation (Vemi Indah Sari, 2024). However, this awareness is often hindered by family power structures and intense social pressure, leaving young people with little room to negotiate their own future. Therefore, efforts to prevent child marriage cannot solely focus on education and socialization for the younger generation but must be carried out holistically, involving all elements of society, including parents, traditional leaders, religious leaders, and civil society groups.

This inclusive approach involving multiple generations is crucial to shifting norms and practices that have long been entrenched in society (Engkizar et al., 2021). By fostering intergenerational dialogue and strengthening community capacity to understand the negative impacts of child marriage, the likelihood of achieving sustainable social transformation increases significantly. An intergenerational movement for change can accelerate the emergence of a new paradigm that values children's rights to grow and develop optimally before entering into marriage. This is a strategic step that not only protects the rights of the younger generation but also contributes to the improvement of human resources quality on a broader scale.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study shows that the Office of Religious Affairs plays a strategic role in preventing underage marriage by enforcing age limits in accordance with Law No. 16 of 2019. Although the Religious Affairs Office has firmly refused to register marriages for children who have not reached the minimum age without a court dispensation, the practice of unregistered marriages remains widespread due to social, cultural, economic pressures, and incomplete religious understanding. Local cultural values that view underage marriage as a way to preserve family honor, combined with difficult economic conditions, drive parents to marry off their children to reduce the burden of life. On the other hand, religious leaders, who should be agents of change, often find themselves caught in moral dilemmas and societal pressures. The consequences of underage marriage are severe, ranging from health risks for mothers and children, the potential for stunting, to intergenerational poverty. Educational efforts by the Religious Affairs Office through outreach programs are deemed not fully effective due to low community participation and strong resistance to new values. Therefore, preventing underage marriage requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving cultural transformation, improved education, economic empowerment, and cross-sectoral collaboration.

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