

Reconstructing Cultural Values to Transform Child Marriage Stigma: Qualitative Evidence from Indonesian Islamic Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Child marriage remains a persistent development and child-protection challenge in Indonesia, driven primarily by deeply embedded cultural values and social stigmas rather than legal loopholes. While conventional state interventions rely on top-down legal enforcement or medical-risk warnings, little is known about how local values can be internally reconstructed to relieve grassroots social anxiety. This study examines how a structured, dialogue-based socialization programme reconstructs local cultural values and transforms community stigma without eroding cultural identity. Framed within a naturalistic qualitative design, field research was conducted at Madrasah Aliyah As'adiyah Uloe, South Sulawesi. Data were collected via participant observation, documentary analysis, and in-depth interviews with 24 purposively selected informants (students, parents, customary elites, religious leaders, and facilitators), analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model. Findings reveal that early marriage stigma—traditionally framed as a safeguard against premarital sex (*zina*) and economic burden—was renegotiated through three mechanisms: *neutralization* (defusing spinsterhood anxiety), *replacement* (substituting moral protection with moral autonomy via education), and *validation* (structural endorsement by trusted leaders). Reframing family honour (*siri*) from early betrothal to educational empowerment shifted community orientation from permissive acceptance to selective prevention. Ultimately, cultural reconstruction offers a transferable framework, demonstrating that child-protection policies must pivot from instructive campaigns to persuasive, community-grounded dialogue.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Child marriage remains one of the most pressing human-development concerns of the twenty-first century (Pandey, 2021; Trask, 2024). Globally, millions of girls marry

before the age of eighteen, a phenomenon that directly impedes progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those concerning gender equality, maternal and child health, and poverty alleviation (Cordova-Pozo et al., 2023; Yousif, 2026). In Indonesia, although Law Number 16 of 2019 raised the minimum legal age of marriage to nineteen for both women and men, the volume of marriage-dispensation petitions across many regions has continued to follow a worrying upward trend. This persistence indicates that child marriage is not merely an administrative or legal matter; rather, it is a systemic problem rooted in durable social constructions (Astuti et al., 2025).

Early marriage is frequently regarded as a “safety valve” against an array of social and economic pressures. Field realities, however, reveal contradictory outcomes (Suyanto et al., 2023). Health data indicate that adolescent pregnancy increases the risk of maternal mortality and child stunting (Ichsan & Hidayat, 2025). From an educational standpoint, early marriage is a leading driver of school dropout, which in turn severs the chain of upward economic mobility for families (Purmini et al., 2025). Efforts to address child marriage therefore cannot rely solely on legal-formal approaches; they must reach the most fundamental layer of the problem: cultural values and social stigma (Khan et al., 2024).

A central obstacle in addressing child marriage is the existence of cultural values internalized across generations (Nhampona & Maritz, 2024). In many communities, early marriage is regarded not as a problem but as an achievement or a protective solution. A strong social stigma attaches to women who remain unmarried beyond a certain age—often labelled a “spinster” (*perawan tua*) or a burden upon the family (Rahayu et al., 2021). Conversely, early marriage is widely construed as an effective means of avoiding premarital sex (*zina*) and protecting the family’s good name from the perceived dangers of free association among the young (Fitriyani et al., 2025).

Such stigma generates intense psychosocial pressure on adolescents and parents alike. Cultural values that elevate marriage as the goal for women relegate education and career to secondary priorities (Masyhuri et al., 2025). It is precisely this social construction that causes government policies to collide with a high wall at the grassroots level. Communities—particularly in culturally conservative settings like South Sulawesi—tend to defer more readily to customary norms (*adat*) and family honour (*siri*) than to positive law, which is often perceived as “foreign” or incongruent with local wisdom (Prasetio et al., 2025).

Socialization campaigns have long been conducted by a range of actors, from state agencies—such as the National Population and Family Planning Board (BKKBN)—to non-governmental organizations. Many such programs have nonetheless produced limited long-term impact because they adopt an instructive, top-down posture that tends to pass judgement on local tradition. Socialization that remains purely informational regarding medical or legal risks often proves insufficient to dismantle a firmly established edifice of social stigma.

What is required is a socialization model that is reconstructive in character. Reconstruction here does not mean erasing culture wholesale; rather, it entails

renegotiating existing values. The core theoretical question becomes how the value of family honour, formerly enacted through early marriage, can be reconstructed into honour attained through educational achievement and psychological readiness. Socialization must enter cultural spaces and speak in the idiom of local culture so that perceptual change occurs organically, rather than through regulatory coercion (Greenfield, 2016).

While research on child marriage is abundant, most existing literature has concentrated heavily on economic causation or quantitatively measured health outcomes (Napilah et al., 2026; Rohman et al., 2024; Rumble et al., 2018). The novelty of the present study lies in three principal respects. First, it advances a reconstructive rather than a deconstructive stance: in contrast to prior work that tends to frame local culture primarily as an obstacle, this study positions culture as an instrument of the solution, offering a mechanism by which long-standing values are re-signified ("rebranded") to align with marriage maturity without dissolving the community's cultural identity.

Second, the study treats the transformation of stigma as its primary object of analysis. It specifically dissects social stigma—such as the fear of premarital sex or the social anxiety of having an "unmarriageable" daughter—and examines how that stigma can be reconfigured through targeted, dialogue-based socialization. Stigma is conceived not as a static barrier, but as fluid and re-formable. Third, the study foregrounds the strategic integration of local opinion leaders, emphasising a socialization framework in which customary (adat) and religious figures act as active agents of reconstruction. The success of value change is gauged by the extent to which the languages of religion and custom are mobilised in support of child-protection goals—a dynamic rarely explored in depth within the sociology of communication and educational campaigns.

Without an intentional effort at value reconstruction, prevention programs touch only the surface. A community may well be aware of the health risks of early marriage yet continue the practice because the fear of immediate social stigma far outweighs the fear of an abstract medical risk. This gap between knowledge and social action constitutes the central problem investigated in this study.

Accordingly, this study pursues three primary objectives: (1) to identify the dominant cultural values and social stigmas that perpetuate child marriage; (2) to analyse the communicative mechanisms of a dialogue-based socialization model in shifting community perception; and (3) to formulate a strategy of cultural-value reconstruction that can be applied to foster sustainable child-marriage prevention. These objectives are guided by three central research questions:

1. RQ1: Which dominant cultural values and forms of stigma sustain the practice of child marriage in the studied community?
2. RQ2: Through what communicative processes does dialogue-based socialization reconstruct these cultural values?
3. RQ3: How do local opinion leaders legitimize newly reconstructed values within customary and religious frameworks?

Ultimately, this study aims to contribute theoretically to the sociology of education and child protection, while offering actionable, culturally grounded insights for policymakers designing social intervention campaigns.

2. METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive-analytic design framed within a naturalistic inquiry paradigm. This approach was selected to provide a contextualized, in-depth understanding of how cultural values are reconstructed and how community stigma surrounding child marriage transforms over time. In alignment with qualitative methodology principles, the research team served as the primary instrument, capturing nuanced contextual meanings, emotional shifts, and non-verbal cues embedded in social interactions throughout the dialogue process. The study was conducted at Madrasah Aliyah As'adiyah Uloe, located in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. This site was selected purposively based on two key criteria: (1) the region's historically persistent rate of child marriage dispensation petitions, and (2) its role as the host site for a structured, dialogue-based cultural intervention programme. This setting offered a unique naturalistic environment to observe the real-time dynamics of value negotiation within a culturally conservative Bugis community.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their operational roles in the cultural transformation process. Data collection was continued until data saturation was achieved—the point at which subsequent interviews produced no new conceptual categories or dimensional variations regarding stigma transformation. A total of 24 informants participated in the study, structured into three distinct analytical categories:

Table 1. Informants Participated

Category	Description / Role	Code	n
Key Agents of Change	Customary leaders (tokoh adat), religious leaders (alok/ustadz), village authority, and school administrators	KC-01 to KC-06	6
Target Group	Parents of adolescent students, alongside male and female senior secondary students	TG-01 to TG-12	12
Programme Implementers	Field extension workers and social facilitators delivering the intervention	PI-01 to PI-06	6

Data were collected through three complementary qualitative techniques to facilitate rigorous triangulation:

- **Participant Observation:** The research team conducted non-disruptive participant observations during all intervention sessions. Detailed field notes were maintained to record community members' verbal reactions, body language, resistance patterns, and spontaneous narrative exchanges during value-reconstruction dialogues.
- **In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews:** Face-to-face interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. The discussions probed informants' initial perceptions of social stigmas (specifically *perawan tua* and economic

burden), their experiences during the intervention, and their revised post-socialization attitudes. Interviews lasted between 45 to 75 minutes and were audio-recorded with explicit consent.

- **Documentary Analysis:** Secondary documentary evidence was gathered to contextualize field observations, including marriage dispensation records from the local Office of Religious Affairs (*Kantor Urusan Agama / KUA*), socialization modules, school attendance registries, and relevant village-level child-protection policies.

The observed socialization program operated through three sequential stages designed to facilitate cultural shift:

1. **Identification Phase:** Mapping historical cultural values and social anxieties that perpetuate early marriage.
2. **Deconstruction Phase:** Dissecting the medical, economic, and psychosocial risks of early marriage through culturally resonant idioms and religious texts.
3. **Reconstruction Phase:** Re-signifying core cultural values—such as reframing family honour (*siri'*) from early marriage to educational attainment and psychological readiness.

Data were analyzed systematically using the interactive analysis model of Miles et al. (2014), executing four interconnected data streams:

1. **Data Collection:** Transcribing audio recordings verbatim and consolidating observational field notes immediately following each field session.
2. **Data Condensation:** Systematically coding, segmenting, and categorizing qualitative excerpts to isolate core themes related to value transformation (specifically *neutralization*, *replacement*, and *validation*).
3. **Data Display:** Structuring condensed data into qualitative thematic matrices and narrative networks to track visible shifts in stigma perception across different informant groups.
4. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:** Formulating conceptual conclusions and continuously verifying them through cross-case comparison and peer debriefing.

To establish trustworthiness (*credibility*, *transferability*, and *confirmability*), the study executed source triangulation (comparing accounts across customary leaders, parents, and students) and technique triangulation (cross-verifying interview transcripts against observational field notes and document records).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Baseline Context: Initial Stigma and Traditional Cultural Tropes

Prior to the intervention, field observations and baseline interviews revealed that early marriage in the studied community was heavily driven by intense social anxieties linked to family honour (*siri'*) and moral protection. Postponing marriage after completing secondary education was widely perceived as a severe social vulnerability for young women.

Neighborhood dynamics strongly reinforced this psychosocial pressure. Parents expressed acute apprehension regarding neighborhood gossip (*tobicara*) whenever their

daughters returned home late from school or organizational activities, which frequently sparked rumors of premarital free association. As one mother explained:

"Truth be told, I want my daughter to pursue higher education, but I am terrified of becoming the talk of the town (dijagai tau) if she remains unmarried too long. I constantly worry she might fall into premarital sin (zina) or be labeled an unmarried spinster (perawan tua). If a suitor proposes, my heart is finally at ease." Informant TG-04 (Parent, Female, 44)

This perspective was corroborated by local customary figures, who acknowledged that early marriage historically functioned as a protective "moral buffer" to defend the collective dignity of the family against potential social disgrace.

Core Mechanisms of Cultural-Value Reconstruction

The dialogue-based socialization operated not by imposing external frameworks, but by facilitating an internal re-signification ("rebranding") of existing values. This shift occurred across three operational phases:

Neutralization: Defusing the Fear of Social Stigma

Neutralization functioned by systematically dismantling the fear surrounding the *perawan tua* label and the perceived urgency of early marriage. Facilitators presented empirical evidence and local counternarratives of educated women who achieved professional stability without sacrificing religious integrity. By contextualizing delayed marriage as purposeful preparation rather than social failure, the immediate neighborhood panic began to subside. One field facilitator observed:

"When we showed real examples of local girls who completed their university degrees and brought tangible honor to their parents, the audience quieted down. The fear of being 'left behind' was neutralized once parents realized that education does not diminish a girl's marriageability." Informant PI-02 (Field Facilitator, Female, 31)

Replacement: Substituting Moral Safety with Moral Autonomy

The second mechanism replaced the traditional belief of "moral safety through early marriage" with "moral autonomy through education." Local religious scholars (*ustadz*) reframed higher education as an Islamic imperative (*fardhu*) that equips women with the wisdom required to raise future generations. During a community dialogue at the village hall, a prominent religious figure articulated this conceptual transition:

"We deliberately altered our idiom. We did not say, 'your culture is wrong.' Instead, we taught that honoring a daughter (pakalebbi') means equipping her with knowledge so she can raise pious, resilient grandchildren. Marriage is worship but

establishing psychological and spiritual readiness is a prior religious obligation." Informant KC-02 (Religious Leader, Male, 52)

Validation: Structural Legitimation by Opinion Leaders

The final mechanism relied on explicit endorsement from trusted opinion leaders. Customary elites (*tokoh adat*) and religious authority figures publicly affirmed that postponing marriage for educational attainment violates neither Islamic jurisprudence (*sharia*) nor ancestral tradition (*adat*). This structural validation provided families with social immunity against traditional peer pressure. A customary leader noted:

"Custom is not rigid; it exists to protect human dignity. When we as customary leaders state publicly that sending a daughter to college honors siri' far more than marrying her off at sixteen, the community takes note and follows." Informant KC-01 (Customary Leader, Male, 61)

Post-Intervention Shift: Education as the "New Honour"

Following the implementation of the dialogue sessions, community perceptions shifted noticeably. Female educational attainment emerged as a prestigious symbol of family status, progressively displacing the tradition of early betrothal.

An adolescent female student recounted the tangible shift within her domestic sphere:

"Whenever extended family gathered, relatives constantly pressured me about when I would marry. But after my mother attended the dialogue sessions, her attitude changed completely. She enrolled me in a vocational computer course and now tells neighbors that our family's honor lies in raising an educated daughter, not merely a married one." Informant TG-09 (Adolescent Student, Female, 17)

Across the field site, public discourse reoriented toward celebrating young women securing university admission or professional certification. This structural shift marks a transition in community orientation from permissive acceptance of child marriage to selective and preventive social norms.

Systematic Synthesis of Findings

Table 2. *Matrix of Cultural-Value Reconstruction and Stigma Transformation*

Cultural Dimension	Pre-Intervention Baseline (Old Stigma)	Post-Intervention Status (Reconstructed Value)	Primary Mechanism of Shift
Family Honour (<i>Siri'</i>)	Measured by marrying off a daughter quickly to protect moral reputation.	Measured by a daughter's educational achievement, agency, and economic readiness.	Replacement
Primary Social Fear	The <i>perawan tua</i> stigma, neighborhood gossip (<i>tobicara</i>), and fear of zina.	Premature school dropout, adolescent health risks, and generational poverty.	Neutralization

Cultural Dimension	Pre-Intervention Baseline (Old Stigma)	Post-Intervention Status (Reconstructed Value)	Primary Mechanism of Shift
Perceived Solution	Immediate marriage as a social and economic safety valve.	Higher education and skill development as long-term family investment.	Validation



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Cultural-Value Reconstruction Process

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that child marriage in culturally conservative settings is sustained primarily by social stigma and the preservation of family honour (*siri'*), rather than solely by economic necessity. By evaluating a dialogue-based intervention, this research illustrates how traditional values can be internally reconstructed through three pivotal mechanisms: Neutralization, Replacement, and Validation.

The Dialectic of Social Construction: Neutralizing Stigma

Our findings align with Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory, which posits that social reality is continuously produced, objectified, and internalized. The *perawan tua* (spinster) and economic-burden stigmas observed in the research site are not immutable cultural dogmas; rather, they represent historicized objectifications transmitted across generations (Dreher, 2016; Döbler, 2022; Knoblauch & Wilke, 2016).

The reconstructive socialization achieved a new internalization: when local actors reframed "education as family dignity," residents actively renegotiated their perception of social risk. This process of Neutralization defused the community's acute fear of neighborhood gossip (*tobicara*). Contrary to traditional top-down anti-marriage

campaigns that explicitly condemn local traditions (Parsons et al., 2024), our results show that behavioral transformation in communal societies cannot occur through individual enlightenment alone; it requires a collective re-negotiation of shared meanings validated by customary authority.

From Moral Constraint to Moral Autonomy: Value Replacement

While previous literature overwhelmingly frames economic hardship as the primary driver of early marriage (Rumble et al., 2018; Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021), this study offers a crucial counter-perspective: cultural anxiety and the "fear of shame" often exert a far more immediate pressure on parental decision-making than financial poverty.

Through the mechanism of Replacement, the intervention successfully substituted the traditional paradigm of "moral protection via early marriage" (a reactive morality aimed at avoiding *zina*) with "moral autonomy via higher education" (a proactive morality grounded in character development and spiritual maturity). This finding explains why state-sponsored economic subsidies or legal bans (such as Indonesia's Law No. 16 of 2019) frequently encounter high resistance at the grassroots level when uncoupled from cultural intervention (Platt, 2025). Without shifting the underlying cultural ethos, financial aid cannot deter child marriage if parents remain socially terrified of harboring an unmarried adult daughter.

Religious Idioms and Opinion Leadership: Structural Validation

A central theoretical contribution of this study lies in highlighting the strategic function of religious and customary opinion leaders. Framed within Katz and Lazarsfeld's Two-Step Flow Theory (Choi, 2015; Schenk, 2026), external developmental messages—whether from state agencies like BKKBN or non-governmental organizations—gain normative legitimacy only when filtered and re-articulated by trusted local figures.

In our study, Validation occurred when local religious scholars (*ustadz*) redefined the theological parameters of marriage. By framing physical, psychological, and educational readiness as prior religious obligations (*fardhu*) rather than mere modern preferences, opinion leaders neutralized the perceived conflict between religious piety and delayed marriage. This corroborates recent scholarship in Islamic sociology indicating that moderate, culturally embedded religious discourse is significantly more effective in driving demographic and educational reform than secular legal mandates (Chande, 2023; Rahman, 2025).

Theoretical Contributions and Policy Implications

Theoretically, this study advances a "Value-Reconstruction Model" within the sociology of education and social change. It demonstrates that culture should not be treated as an obstacle to be dismantled (*deconstructive stance*), but as a resource containing symbolic idioms that can be re-signified to legitimize modern rights, educational empowerment, and reproductive health (*reconstructive stance*).

Practically, these findings provide a blueprint for policy redirection across government institutions (e.g., Ministry of Religious Affairs, BKKBN, and provincial education boards). Interventions must pivot away from instructive, fear-based public campaigns toward community-embedded, dialogue-based engagement. The overarching strategic goal should focus on converting stigma into a new source of social status—transitioning community pride from a daughter’s early betrothal to her educational and vocational attainment.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is bound by its qualitative focus on a single cultural setting (a Bugis Islamic madrasah context in South Sulawesi); its conclusions offer conceptual and analytical generalizability rather than statistical representativeness. Furthermore, relying on self-reported perceptual shifts immediately following the intervention cannot fully guarantee the long-term durability of these new social norms. Future research should pursue longitudinal designs to track actual marriage-dispensation rates over a multi-year period or employ quantitative structural equation modeling (SEM) to measure the precise mediating effects of opinion-leader credibility on stigma reduction.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that child marriage in culturally conservative communities extends beyond a mere economic vulnerability, operating as a durable product of social construction and entrenched stigma. Empirical evidence demonstrates that a dialogue-based socialization strategy, executed through a reconstructive framework, successfully renegotiates established community paradigms without inducing cultural friction or acute shock. By leveraging the structural authority of local opinion leaders—specifically customary elites and religious figures—the intervention reframed the traditional conception of family honor (*siri*’), shifting its metric from early betrothal to educational empowerment and adolescent readiness.

This cultural transformation operates across three core operational mechanisms that bridge traditional heritage with modern human-development imperatives. First, neutralization defuses the psychosocial anxiety surrounding the *perawan tua* (spinster) stigma by introducing compelling counternarratives of educated local women. Second, replacement substitutes reactive moral protection—such as early marriage to avert zina—with proactive moral autonomy rooted in educational character building. Finally, validation secures explicit customary and religious endorsements, affirming that delayed marriage aligns with Islamic principles and local heritage. Ultimately, this persuasive, dialogue-driven approach demonstrates that culturally respectful interventions are significantly more effective than instructive, top-down legal enforcement.

Based on these empirical insights, the study outlines targeted strategic recommendations alongside key research limitations. Policy design by government agencies, such as BKKBN and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, must transition from instructive, top-down campaigns to community-embedded, dialogue-driven modules

that pivot the notion of family prestige toward adolescent educational and vocational attainment. To operationalize this shift, capacity-building programs should systematically train customary elites (*tokoh adat*) and religious scholars (*ustadz*) as primary agents of value reconstruction using integrated frameworks of reproductive health and contextualized theological idioms, while local governments incentivize village-level regulations (*peraturan desa*) supporting female secondary and higher education. However, the study's reliance on a qualitative single-context Bugis Islamic madrasah setting and immediate post-intervention perceptual data restricts statistical representativeness and insight into long-term behavioral durability. Consequently, future research should implement longitudinal tracking of marriage dispensation petition rates over a three-to-five-year horizon and apply Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to quantify the mediating impact of opinion-leader credibility on stigma reduction across broader geographical populations.

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