Are You Ready to Marry? Describing Marital Readiness among Marriage Dispensation Applicants

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Abstract
Child marriage harms various aspects of children’s growth and development as well as social impacts. However, conditions in society still show a high rate of child marriage. In Malang Regency, throughout 2022 the number of marriage dispensation applications reached 1,434 cases. This research aims to determine the marital readiness of children of marriage dispensation applicants at the Malang Regency Religious Court between January and December 2023. The sampling technique used was total sampling with the criteria of children of marriage dispensation applicants attending premarital counseling at the Pojok Konseling of the Malang Regency Religious Court. The instrument used were the Marriage Readiness Scale and interview. From 1009 respondents (15% men and 85% women), data was obtained that the marital readiness of the respondents was in the high category 27%, medium 27%, and low 46%. This marital readiness assessment result is one of the bases for recommending judges to grant or reject requests for marriage dispensation.

Key words: child marriage, marital dispensation, marital readiness

Introduction
Child marriage has many negative impacts both from a psychological, health, economic and social perspective (Djamila, 2014). However, previous data indicated that the number of child marriages in Indonesia is still relatively high. UU No 16 of 2019 as a replacement for UU 1974 concerning Marriage requires that both prospective bride and groom be at least 19 years old as the legal age for marriage. However, if there is a bride and groom who is under 19 years old, they can apply for a marriage dispensation to the court to obtain legal recognition of their marriage.

Data from the Malang Regency Religious Court for the last 3 years shows a high number of application for marriage dispensation from prospective brides and grooms who are less than 19 years old. In 2020, 1,783 requests were registered, of which 1,728 were granted. Furthermore, in 2021 there were 1,762 requests registered with 1,711 being granted. The latest record in 2022 was that requests for marriage dispensation were registered at 1,433 with 1,392 being granted. With this number, Malang Regency is listed as the district with the highest application for Marriage Dispensation in East Java Province (Pengadilan Agama Kabupaten Malang, 2023).

In 2022, the Faculty of Psychology UMM collaborated with the Malang Regency Religious Court initiating the Pojok Konseling service. This service is integrated with the marriage dispensation application service flow system.
within the scope of work of the Malang Regency Religious Court. It provides an assessment of the applicant’s marital readiness and premarital counseling for the prospective brides and grooms. From data during October 2022, most of the applicants showed low marital readiness scores.

This research aims to determine the marital readiness among applicants for marriage dispensation in 2023. This research result can be used as a basis for developing appropriate and needed interventions for services at the Pojok Konseling of the Malang Regency Religious Court. Moreover, the result may provide basic data to conduct several promotion and prevention programs to prevent child marriage as further collaboration between the government, universities, and local community.

Marital readiness refers to one’s perception of their ability to have a long-term relationship with another person, namely marriage, along with their rights and obligations (Caroll, et al 2009). According to Wiryasti (2004), it is stated that there are eight aspects that can determine an individual’s level of marriage readiness, namely: (1) communication, which refers to the individual’s ability to express opinions and being able to accept the partner’s opinion. (2) finance, which is related to economic management in the family. (3) children and parenting styles, which refers to conceptualizations related to child ownership and care. (4) division of roles, which refers to the division of roles in the household. (5) the background of the couple and family, which refers to the norms and systems that contribute to the formation of individual character. (6) religion, which relates to religious values that are believed to guide marriage. (7) interests and styles of using free time, which regarding to attitudes towards the partner’s interest in spending free time, including agreements made regarding this matter. (8) changes in the partner and lifestyle, that relate to attitudes towards the partner’s lifestyle which are likely to change as the age of marriage increases.

Marriage readiness is influenced by several factors, namely: emotional readiness, age readiness, social readiness, role readiness, sexual readiness, communication skills, spiritual readiness, and financial readiness (Goleman, 1997; Holman et al., 2015; Duval & Miller, 1985; Blood, 1978 in Elfira, 2018). Understanding the child’s psychological, sociological, economic, educational, and health condition, as well as considering the various impacts that might occur if the reason is accepted, so that the judge can draw the right conclusion about whether it is appropriate or not to grant a request for marriage dispensation. The reasons for marriage dispensation, apart from out-of-wedlock pregnancies, include concerns about violating religious teachings, economic factors, and customs/culture, which are reasons that are still anticipatory in nature, so not only from a social perspective, this condition is also prone to causing further negative effects. In other words, it can still be returned to the responsibility, role and awareness of parents. Meanwhile, pregnancy out of wedlock has different legal impacts for these reasons. Pregnancy out of wedlock or unwanted pregnancy can be said to be the impact that has occurred from extramarital relations between a man and a woman and has given rise to a new legal status related to the child being conceived by a woman.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sampling technique used was total sampling with the criteria of children (14-19 years old) applying for marriage dispensation who attended premarital counseling at the Pojok Konseling of the Malang Regency Religious Court total of 1009 respondents in 2023 (15% men and 85% women).

**Research Instruments**

The research instrument used is the Marriage Readiness Scale by Wulandari (2020) based on aspects from Holman & Larson (1994) and Olson & Olson (1997) that first developed by Wiryasti (2004). There are 36 items that consist of 17 favorable items and 19 unfavorable items. Validity scores 0.325–0.687 with reliability score 0.838. It can be concluded that the instrument has proper validity and reliability. We also use observation and interviews to collect marital readiness and demographic data.

**Data Analysis Techniques**

This research uses a mixed-method embedded design. In embedded design, researchers may use both qualitative and quantitative approaches, and choose which one is the more prioritized (Vebrianto et al, 2020). In this research, we prioritize quantitative one.
Results and Discussion

Results

There were 1009 respondents in this research, specifically 172 boys and 837 girls. The percentage of respondents under 15 years old was 2.3%. One of the factors of child marriage is unwanted pregnancy. In this research, 177 female respondents experienced unwanted pregnancy.

Based on data, 47% of applicants had low scores, 27% moderate, and 26% high scores of marital readiness that were assessed from the Marriage Readiness Scale and interview. Of all of the applicants, 550 applicants were not recommended to marry due to their low–moderate marital readiness. Nevertheless, 936 registered applications of marital dispensation were granted by the judges in 2023.

![Figure 1. Marital Readiness Level](image1.png)

As much as 14% applicants never attended school, 31% graduated from elementary school, 45% graduated from junior high school, and only 10% finished senior high school. Among all respondents, 634 are unemployed, and the rest 375 respondents are working in informal sectors.

![Figure 2. Educational Background](image2.png)

Discussion

Based on the data, girls are the dominant group in the phenomenon of child marriage. Data conducted by UNICEF (2020) in 2018 showed that girls who experienced child marriage were estimated to be 1,220,090. The prevalence of data conducted by SUSENAS in 2018 was 0.56% of women were experienced child marriage. This data indicated that girls are the main subject of child marriage, therefore they are a more vulnerable demographic group. UNICEF (2020) further states that more girls are married off as children in rural areas than in cities. In cities, the rate of female child marriage is 7.15%, while in rural areas it is 16.87%. Meanwhile, the prevalence of male child marriage tends to be quite similar at 1.06% in cities and 0.77% in rural areas.

One of the causes of child marriage is gender inequality. Boys are given preference in families and communities since it is assumed that they will take care of their parents, whereas girls are seen as less important than boys outside of their responsibilities as husbands (Delprato et al., 2015). Furthermore, girls are seen as a financial burden, and this perception grows when marriage is postponed and a higher dowry is required (Delprato et al., 2015). The existence of a negative view or stigma that is still strong in Indonesia, especially in rural areas, makes women a more vulnerable group to experience child marriage. This is in line with the research conducted by Oktaviani et al. (2018) stated that if girls who are 15–17 years old but still not married are considered ‘undesirable’ even though they still want to continue their education, it is only hampered by the family economy. Women who are living in low-income families are more likely to marry off their daughters as a way to reduce the family’s financial burden (UNICEF, 2020). Parents think
that marrying off their children earlier will reduce the economic burden on the family. It can be understood why girls are more vulnerable to child marriage than boys.

Child marriage will also have negative impacts on children’s further education. Based on the data above, in Malang Regency marriage dispensation applicant’s educational background is mostly in junior high school (45%). Data conducted by UNICEF (2020) in 2018 showed that women who experienced child marriage mostly had a junior high school educational background (44.86%), while men mostly had an educational background as graduated from elementary school (36.61%). This condition indicated similar situations between local and national. The level of education affects children’s knowledge and attitude about the impact of child marriage (Oktaviani & Nurwanti, 2020). Previous research findings showed that individuals who had a lower level of education tended to commit child marriage (Stang, 2011). The respondents also state that they do not want to continue their studies after getting married. It is aligned with previous findings that children as subjects of child marriage tend to drop out from school (Djamilah, 2014).

As much as 47% of respondents in this research had low levels of marital readiness scores, therefore most of them were not recommended to marry. According to The National Population and Family Planning Board (Badan Kependudukan dan Keluarga Berencana Nasional) the ideal age of marriage is 21 for women and 25 for men. This age range, in terms of developmental theory, is categorized as the early adulthood phase. This phase begins in the early 20s and lasts until the early 30s, characterized by progressing in their careers, and for the most part initiating the process of selecting a life partner, getting to know someone more intimately, establishing a family, and raising children (Santrock, 2012). Children who commit child marriage in this research are still in the adolescent phase, so they have different characteristics and developmental tasks. Therefore, they are still not ready to get married and carry out new roles as a married couple. Although individuals who experience earlier puberty (pubertas praecox) are more likely to engage in early sexual activity which raises the possibility of pregnancy and child marriage, it does not mean they show earlier emotional maturity (Souza, 2022). Whereas emotional maturity has a positive correlation with marital readiness (Putri, 2023).

Individuals who commit child marriages are most likely to have less preparation for marriage so they tend to experience stress before the wedding as they show low marital readiness scores. The quality of child development and family success can also be determined by marital readiness, which is the state in which both the prospective bride and groom are prepared for their new roles and responsibilities after marriage, including child care (Rahmah & Kurniawati, 2021). One aspect of marital readiness is children and parenting styles, but most of the respondents never discuss this topic with their partners. As much as 17.57% of respondents who experienced unwanted pregnancy showed low marital readiness and parental self-esteem. They perceive themselves as incompetent to live motherhood life. It is in line with previous research that marital readiness is correlated to the readiness of prospective brides to perform a new role as a wife and a mother (Rahmah & Kurniawati, 2021). Utami (2016) in their research stated that children who commit child marriage experience negative psychological impacts such as the presence of sadness, confusion, discomfort, or regret due to a lack of marital readiness.

Moreover, 634 respondents remain unemployed or dropped out of school. Meanwhile, 375 respondents are working in informal sectors. Considering their educational backgrounds, it is challenging to have a better employment option. They do not have a future orientation about how to fulfill their prospective family’s financial needs. They tend to be dependent on their parents to raise their future family. This condition can increase the risk of a poverty cycle trap. Several previous studies also highlighted this risk, child couples most likely have a low standard of living as a result of their inability to meet financial needs (Yanti, Hamidah, & Wiwita, 2018; UNICEF, 2020).

Research results showed that couples who marry at an early age are more vulnerable to ending in divorce because of the low marital readiness of both partners (Oktaviani & Nurwanti, 2020). In this research, the respondents who had low and middle scores of marital readiness had limited information about their partner’s characteristics and family background. This condition may lead to incompatibility in the future couple’s life.

As many as 550 respondents in this research were not recommended to marry due to their low or middle scores of marital readiness. Nevertheless, 92% applications of for marriage dispensation were granted by the judges. This shows that marital readiness is not the judge’s only consideration when granting a request for dispensation. Other conditions such as the presence of the children of the child’s couple, and social support from the extended family were considered.

This research uses a huge number of respondents in Malang Regency Religious Court, so it is limited to subjects that apply for registered marriage. It does not show a comprehensive picture of child marriage cases in Malang Regency, including unregistered marriages. The assessment of respondents’ economic capabilities is limited to the work they currently do, not an in-depth assessment of an individual’s ability to meet basic needs as in SUSENAS.
Conclusion

Marriage dispensation applicants, who are individuals in the adolescence phase, most likely have a low level of marital readiness score. Therefore, they were not recommended to marry. Girls from middle–low–income families and low educational backgrounds tend to marry at a very young age.

Implication

Based on the result, we strongly suggest developing and conducting a specific procedure of premarital counseling for marital dispensation applicants. We also suggest a holistic approach in collaboration between the government, universities, and local communities to prevent child marriage i.e. improve the quality of education especially for girls and conduct reproduction health education for teenagers.

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Authors’ Contributions

REP designed the study and analyzed the data, SNI and NTP were collected and analyzed the data. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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