

Legal Counseling on Early Marriage Prevention in the Context of Reproductive Health Protection for Junior High School Students

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Abstract

The prevalence of early marriage in Indonesia remains high, with 5.90% nationally and 8.45% in South Sumatra, poses a significant risk to adolescent posing significant risks to adolescent reproductive and mental health, including high rates of maternal and infant mortality. The current minimum marriage age is 19 years for both genders as regulated by Law Number 16/2019. This community service aimed to address the lack of knowledge among adolescents on this critical issue. The activity at Junior High School 23 Palembang utilized the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, focusing on legal counseling and interactive discussions for ninth-grade students. The core material covered legal provisions, social, mental, and reproductive health impacts, and the roles of parents and schools. A key finding was the significant improvement in student understanding, as evidenced by the evaluation: the average score increased from 56.25 on the pre-test to 90.82 on the post-test, an increase of 34.58 points. This result confirms the effectiveness of the legal counseling in enhancing students' legal knowledge and fostering a positive attitude to reject early marriage and act as agents of change.

Keywords: early marriage, legal counseling, reproductive health, junior high school, marriage age limit

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1. Introduction

Marriage is a sacred moment carried out by a man and woman who are legally mature as husband and wife with the aim of forming a harmonious family. The World Health Organization (WHO) says that marriage performed before the age of 18 is a form of human rights violation. Many factors place early marriage as a form of offense, because it can put children at risk of marriage, including poverty. Although in practice it is more common among women, this early marriage violates human rights regardless of gender. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) also states that a marriage at a young age is a marriage that is formally or unofficially performed before the age of 18 years old. [1]

The age limit allowed to carry out marriage is based on Article 7 of Law Number 16/2019 concerning Amendments to Law Number 1 of 1974 that marriage is only allowed when a man and woman have reached the age of 19 years old. [2] The purpose of the minimum marriage limit set by law is to prevent early marriage which causes many losses, especially for the mother or in this case is the daughter. [3] The ideal time for the first pregnancy occurs at the age of 21-35 years and men are considered ready to marry and accompany their wife's pregnancy starting from the age of 25. This is considered risky

if the marriage is carried out under the age that has been mentioned.

Early marriage phenomena that occur in Indonesia triggers a high maternal and child mortality rate due to the unprepared reproductive system of women who marry underage, as well as the risk of other pregnancy diseases such as bleeding, preeclampsia, anemia and so on. [5] National Commision on Violence Against Women also argued that the dangers of early marriage if carried out, especially for girls, would be related to education, economy, violence and divorce, and stunting. [7]

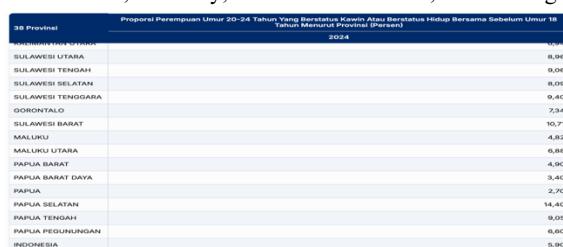


Figure. 1 Proportion of Women Aged 20-24 Years Who Are Married or Living Together Before the Age of 18 According to Province

Source: Central Statistics Agency (BPS), 2024

However, based on data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2024 regarding the proportion of women aged 20-24

years who have marital status or cohabitation status before the age of 18, it is known nationally that 5.90% of women experience this condition, where this percentage is equivalent to around 637,690 women. In this case, South Sumatra is included in the top 13 provinces with this condition with a percentage of 8.45%.

Factors that can cause early marriage apart from the existence of traditions or cultures that have declined, are also caused by promiscuity, resulting in many children in adolescence becoming pregnant out of wedlock and forced to be married by their parents. Economic problems are also one of the main causes of parents marrying their daughter.[9] Early marriage is also generally carried out because of the encouragement of parents who want their children to live independently amid economic difficulties faced. [10]

Based on the data above, the service team from the Faculty of Law, Sriwijaya University felt the need to carry out community service activities with the target of students with junior high school age (SMP) so as not to marry at an immature age, especially related to their reproductive period. Therefore, we carry out this community service activity with the theme of Legal Counseling for the Prevention of Early Marriage in the Context of Reproductive Health Protection for Students at Junior High School 23 Palembang.

2. Methods

The approach used in this service activity is Participatory Action Research (PAR), emphasizing the active participation of the community in efforts to overcome the problems faced.[12] Specifically, the community group that is the focus is adolescent students of the State Junior High School (SMP) 23 Palembang. The full involvement of Community Service (PKM) partners as collaborators is expected to be able to encourage positive changes for students, especially in preventing early marriage and expanding the socialization of the issue to the wider community. [13] The implementation of this community service activity refers to the steps that have been set by the service team, namely:

1. As a first step, discussions will be held and problems will be identified through initial consultation with Junior High School 23 Palembang to agree on the Community Service (PKM) agenda as well as identify problems and formulate relevant solutions collaboratively.
2. Carry out planning by working with all team members and socialization to develop a plan and determine an effective strategy for the implementation of all activities as well as inform the schedule, objectives and flow of the implementation of activities.
3. Carrying out the core activities of PKM by holding legal counseling that focuses on educating students on the impact of early marriage on adolescent reproductive and mental health.
4. Conduct interactive sessions for students by providing an open dialogue forum to facilitate in-depth discussions on the issue of early marriage being discussed.
5. A thorough evaluation was carried out at the end of the activity to measure the level of success and positive impact produced by the PKM that had been implemented.

3. Results and Discussions

This community service activity in the form of legal counseling will be carried out on October 30, 2025 at Junior High School 23 Palembang. The legal counseling activity with the theme "The Impact of Early Marriage for Junior High School Students" was held from 10.30 WIB to 12.00 WIB. The stages of implementing activities along with documentation are as follows:

- a. The legal counseling team was welcomed directly by the Principal of Junior High School 23 Palembang, Mrs. Nurzila Febrianita, M.Pd. In addition to coordinating preparations before the implementation of this legal counseling, the Principal of Junior High School 23 at this meeting expressed his hope for success and gratitude for the implementation of legal counseling at Junior High School 23 Palembang.



Figure. 2
Source: Field Data, 2025

- b. Furthermore, the legal counseling team chaired by Mrs. Dr. Sri Handayani, S.H., M.Hum., was invited to the location of the activity and accompanied by representatives of Junior High School 23 Palembang, namely Mr. and Mrs. teachers in charge of Guidance and Counseling (BK) subjects. Legal counseling activities are carried out for students who are in grade 9. The legal counseling activities were guided by the Master of Ceremony, one of the legal counseling teams, namely students in the Civil Law Specialization Program of Sriwijaya University. The activity began with a prayer reading led by the legal counseling team, namely students in the Civil Law Specificity Program of Sriwijaya University. Furthermore, remarks by the head of the legal counseling team and representatives of Junior High School 23 Palembang as well as the handing over of plaques to the school and souvenirs.



Figure. 3
Source: Field Data, 2025



Figure. 4
Source: Field Data, 2025



Figure. 5
Source: Field Data, 2025

c. The legal counseling team selected 3 students as Anti-Early Marriage Ambassadors. This has several important functions, both in terms of education, socialization, and student character formation. The Anti-Early Marriage Ambassador is expected to foster students' awareness and responsibility in rejecting the practice of early marriage and become agents of change in the school and community environment.



Figure. 6
Source: Field Data, 2025

d. Before the presentation of the counseling material was delivered to 9th grade students of Junior High School 23 Palembang, the legal counseling team first conducted a pre-test. This aims to find out the participants' initial ability to the material to be presented and as a comparison to see the effectiveness and achievement of the material after the presentation is completed. The results of the pre-test conducted on 24 samples of students participating in legal counseling can be seen through the following diagram:

The Results of the Pre-Test for Early Marriage Prevention in the Context of Reproductive Health Protection for Students at Junior High School 23 Palembang

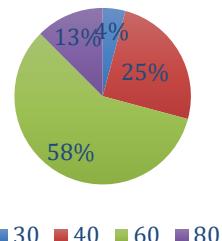


Figure. 7
Source: Field Data, 2025

e. After conducting the pre-test, the legal counseling team presented material related to the topic of counseling interspersed with question-and-answer sessions and giving rewards for students who were active during the material presentation activities.



Figure. 8
Source: Field Data, 2025



Figure. 9
Source: Field Data, 2025

f. To assess the learning outcomes or understanding of participants after participating in the presentation stage of counseling material, the legal counseling team conducted a post-test on 24 samples of students who were previously samples in the pre-test. The results of the post-test conducted on 24 samples of students participating in legal counseling can be seen through the following diagram:

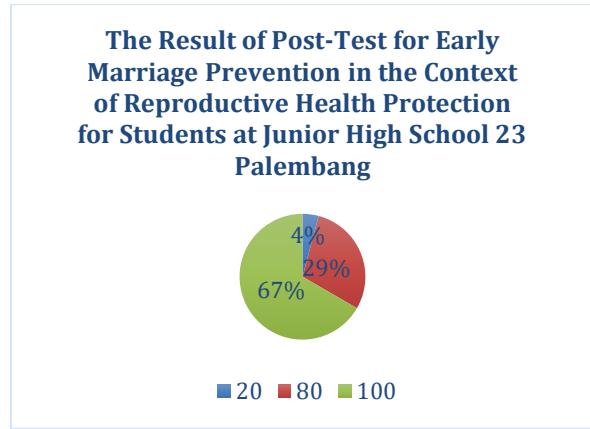


Figure. 10
Source: Field Data, 2025

g. The legal counseling activity was closed with a group photo session.



Figure. 11
Source: Field Data, 2025

The Relationship between Legal Education and Students' Behavioral Change are:

4. Increased Legal Knowledge and Awareness, legal education programs provide students with concrete understanding of the negative consequences of early marriage including health, psychological, social, and legal impacts. Students who initially viewed early marriage as a "normal" or "personal choice" begin to recognize that it carries serious legal consequences and may hinder their educational and personal development.
4. Shift in Attitudes toward Social and Moral Values, before receiving legal education, some students perceived early marriage as a responsible act or as part of cultural norms. However, after participating in the educational sessions, there is a value shift, students start appreciating education, emotional maturity, and personal growth as essential prerequisites before marriage. This reflects a transformation in moral reasoning and social awareness.
4. Strengthening Life Skills and Resistance to Social Pressure, legal education also helps students develop life skills, especially decision-making and assertive communication. Through simulations, discussions, and case studies, students learn to express their opinions

confidently and resist social or family pressure that might lead to early marriage. These practical exercises enhance students' critical thinking and self-efficacy.

4. Positive Impact on School Environment, following the implementation of the legal education program, teachers and school staff observed positive behavioral changes. Students became more open to discussing gender equality, reproductive health, and child protection issues. The school also witnessed the formation of peer educator groups that voluntarily promote anti-child marriage messages among their classmates, showing early signs of student-led advocacy and leadership development.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of legal counseling in enhancing adolescents' understanding of the risks and implications associated with early marriage, particularly within the context of reproductive health protection. Through the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, students of Junior High School 23 Palembang were actively engaged in identifying, discussing, and reflecting on the social, legal, psychological, and health-related consequences of early marriage. The counseling activities, combined with interactive discussions and pre- and post-test evaluations, effectively demonstrated a substantial increase in students' legal awareness—reflected in the improvement of scores from an average of 56.25 in the pre-test to 90.82 in the post-test. This significant gain confirms that targeted legal education interventions can foster critical knowledge, reshape values, and strengthen students' resistance to social pressures that may lead them into early marriage.

Moreover, this initiative shows that school-based legal education can stimulate positive behavioral change, cultivate students' capacity for informed decision-making, and empower them to become youth advocates who disseminate anti-early marriage messages within their peers and communities. The appointment of Anti-Early Marriage Ambassadors further reinforces the potential for student-led advocacy to support sustained cultural transformation.

This community service program contributes to efforts to protect adolescents' reproductive health and uphold their rights by promoting legal literacy and awareness. The findings underscore the importance of continuous, collaborative, and context-sensitive educational efforts involving legal experts, teachers, and students to prevent early marriage. Future programs may expand to include parental engagement, broader community involvement, and longitudinal monitoring to measure long-term behavioral outcomes and policy impacts.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors states no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

Ethical Approval

The research related to human use has complied with all relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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