



THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SPINSTERHOOD AMONG THE PEKAL TRIBE IN NAPAL PUTIH, NORTH BENGKULU REGENCY

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Abstract

This study explores the social construction of spinsterhood among the Pekal Tribe, who predominantly inhabit Napal Putih in North Bengkulu Regency. The research investigates the socio-cultural meanings attached to unmarried women of a certain age and their implications for women's social status and mental well-being in the community. Utilizing a qualitative approach and a case study method, the study involved five Pekalese women—both married and unmarried—as primary informants. Data were collected through interviews and documentation, and validated using source triangulation. The analysis followed the Miles and Huberman framework, involving data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that being labeled a spinster is associated with negative connotations in Pekal society, driven by patriarchal culture, limited educational awareness, economic hardship, and strong societal expectations that women marry before the age of 25. These factors collectively shape a perception that unmarried women are socially undesirable. Applying Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction Theory, the study illustrates how societal norms are formed through externalization, objectification, and internalization, institutionalizing the stigma surrounding spinsterhood. As a result, the concept evolves into a socially constructed label that significantly influences women's opportunities, autonomy, and psychological health within the Pekal community.

Keywords: *Social Construction, Spinsterhood, Pekal Tribe, Gender Roles, Stigma*

A. Introduction

In Indonesian society, marriage is not only seen as the union of two individuals but also as a social obligation imbued with cultural values (Selian & Syafriana, 2024). The stigmatization of unmarried women, often labeled as "spinsters," remains prevalent, particularly in traditional communities. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon, including the high cost of dowries in certain ethnic groups and deep-rooted patriarchal norms that position women as subordinate to men. In response, elopement practices such as *bujul* in Southeast Aceh, *merariq* in Lombok, and similar traditions in Bali, Lampung, Batak, Bugis, and Maluku have emerged as alternatives to conventional marriage customs (Muhsinin et al., 2022; Mulia & Febria, 2022; Agfar et al., 2021).

Such cultural pressures have reshaped the meaning of spinsterhood, transforming it into a negative label. In many communities, including the Pekal Tribe in Napal Putih, North Bengkulu, being an unmarried woman beyond the perceived ideal age (18–22 years) results in social stigma and exclusion (Zulaikha & Firmonasari, 2023). These women are derogatorily referred to as *lajang kolot* or *bujang dalam*, terms that imply personal failure or social deviance (Wijayanti & Jatiningsih, 2022). Furthermore, this stigma extends beyond the individual, impacting their families, who are often perceived as incapable of fulfilling their social roles (Damanhuri, 2020).

The social construction of spinsterhood within the Pekal community is heavily influenced by patriarchal belief systems and mechanisms of customary and religious control. Practices such as *rempung adat* (customary deliberation) and *guno-guno* (social gossip) serve as tools of social surveillance, reinforcing the expectation that women should marry early (Oktawirawan & Yudiarso, 2020; Rohmaniyah, 2018). Women who remain unmarried often face emotional distress, social isolation, and even pressure to accept undesirable marriages to avoid the spinster label (Suhan, 2023; Muniri et al., 2019).

In the modern context, where women increasingly access higher education and economic independence, a conflict arises between individual autonomy and traditional expectations (Bangun & Brahmana, 2023). Spinsterhood, rather than being a neutral status, is viewed as a deviation or taboo (Munawarah et al., 2020). It becomes a form of social labeling—marking women as less competent or even immature, which in turn reinforces gender inequality (Eliana et al., 2024; Yovita et al., 2022).

Within the Pekal community, this construction results in significant mental and emotional impacts. Women often feel pressured, cornered, and devalued, facing limitations in pursuing education or personal growth due to fear of social rejection (Musahwi et al., 2022). In extreme cases, families may discourage higher education altogether, believing that educated women are less likely to attract suitors. This study is essential not only for documenting the socio-cultural dynamics of the Pekal Tribe but also for critiquing the systemic reinforcement of gender-based stigma through cultural narratives. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, this research aims to: (1) examine how the concept of spinsterhood is constructed within the Pekal community; (2) analyze the cultural and structural factors sustaining the stigma; and (3) explore how Pekal women respond to, resist, or internalize this label in their everyday lives.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the social construction of spinsterhood among the Pekal Tribe in Napal Putih, North Bengkulu. According to Moleong (2018), qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena experienced by research subjects—such as behavior, perceptions, motivations, and actions—in a holistic manner, using descriptive narratives within a natural context. The research utilized a case study method, which is suitable for exploring specific, unique social phenomena in depth.

Case studies enable the researcher to uncover rich contextual data by focusing on a limited number of subjects who exhibit characteristics relevant to the study.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants. As described by Sugiyono (2018), purposive sampling involves selecting individuals based on specific characteristics aligned with the study's objectives. In this research, participants were selected from among unmarried and married women from the Pekal Tribe, with primary informants being unmarried women over the age of 20, and secondary informants being married women of a similar age range. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews and documentation. Interviews were conducted with five women from the Pekal Tribe—both married and unmarried—focusing on their personal experiences, perceptions, and the socio-cultural pressures they faced. Data were triangulated through corroboration with supporting informants, such as the participants' parents, to enhance the reliability of the findings.

The data analysis process followed the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three main steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction phase, the collected data were sorted and categorized based on relevance, discarding irrelevant information. The remaining data were then organized into themes and displayed systematically to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn by synthesizing these themes in relation to the theoretical framework of social construction. The study's five informants all shared characteristics relevant to the research: each had faced societal expectations to marry early, and several reported being pressured into marriage before pursuing higher education. Interviews were conducted in their homes in April and June 2024, allowing the researchers to observe participants in their natural environment. To ensure data validity, source triangulation was applied by comparing interview data with documentation and other informants' perspectives.

C. Results and Discussion

1. The Social Meaning of Spinsterhood in the Pekal Tribe

In the Pekal community, the term “spinster” (*perawan tua*) refers to women who remain unmarried beyond what is considered the ideal age—typically after 25 years. This designation is not merely descriptive but is deeply embedded in cultural, religious, and gendered expectations. A woman who does not marry within this socially prescribed timeframe is often viewed as failing to fulfill her role in society, and her status reflects negatively on her family's honor and social standing. Several informants shared personal accounts that illustrate this social meaning. FA (personal communication, April 2024), a 19-year-old woman who married shortly after high school, stated:

“I was forced to marry and give up my dream of going to university because my family believed that if I studied too long, men would be afraid to propose. So, I asked my boyfriend to marry me just two months after graduating.”

Likewise, MB (personal communication, April 2024), a 20-year-old unmarried university student, recalled:

“My parents told me to stop studying because they were afraid I would have a hard time finding a partner and end up an old maid.”

These narratives show that the concept of spinsterhood in the Pekal community is not just an individual issue but a relational and communal concern, intimately tied to family reputation and adherence to traditional gender norms. Furthermore, local language reinforces this cultural view. Terms like *perawan toun* or *lalau* carry pejorative connotations, functioning as tools of social regulation that police women's marital status. These terms signal a woman's perceived failure to fulfill her prescribed role, serving to maintain the broader symbolic order of gender in Pekal society.

From a theoretical perspective, this construction of spinsterhood exemplifies the externalization stage in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction framework. Externalization refers to the process by which a society's members project their culturally rooted norms into shared social reality. In this context, beliefs such as “a good woman marries early” or “unmarried women bring shame” are not private thoughts but publicly reinforced expectations. They are embedded through repeated interactions in the family, religious teachings, gossip networks, and local idioms.

The Pekal case illustrates how language and cultural labels serve as mechanisms of symbolic control, shaping individual aspirations and social behavior. The repeated use of pejorative terms and the internalized pressure reflected in FA's and MB's experiences demonstrate how social meanings become personal constraints. Over time, these meanings become part of one's self-concept, influencing decisions such as education, marriage timing, and social participation. This also aligns with previous studies on gender roles in traditional Indonesian communities, where women's identities are largely framed by their marital status (Zulaikha & Firmonasari, 2023; Damanhuri, 2020). However, the Pekal case adds depth by showing how these norms are ritually and linguistically institutionalized, making deviation not only socially costly but emotionally burdensome.

2. Cultural and Structural Factors Sustaining the Stigma

The persistent stigma surrounding spinsterhood in the Pekal community is not simply a matter of personal bias or isolated opinions. Instead, it is the product of a deeply rooted cultural and structural framework that reinforces gender roles through multiple intersecting systems—patriarchal values, religious and traditional authority, economic limitations, and mechanisms of informal social surveillance. These systems collaborate, both implicitly and explicitly, to maintain the pressure on women to marry within a narrow age window and to discourage alternative life choices.

a. Patriarchal Cultural Norms

The influence of patriarchy is particularly visible in how the Pekal community positions marriage as a mandatory milestone for women. A woman who remains unmarried beyond her early twenties is perceived not as independent, but as lacking, problematic, or socially deviant. FA (personal communication, April 2024), a 19-year-old married woman, described:

“I was forced to get married and leave my dream of going to university because my family said that if I continued my studies, no man would dare to propose.”

This statement reflects how social norms override personal aspirations. In many cases, these norms are internalized not only by parents but by the women themselves, who accept the logic that their value diminishes with age. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), this is a clear case of objectification—the transformation of subjective expectations (e.g., “women should marry early”) into objective societal rules that define what is normal and acceptable. The normative pressure to marry early acts as a gatekeeper to other life opportunities, particularly education. Rather than being seen as complementary, education and marriage are framed as mutually exclusive for women. In this context, patriarchal culture does not only prescribe roles but actively regulates the timing and legitimacy of a woman's development.

b. Religious and Traditional Justifications

In Pekal society, religious discourse—often informed by Islam and fused with local Malay customs—serves to reinforce and legitimize the cultural imperative to marry young. Religious expectations are interpreted to suggest that marriage is not only ideal but obligatory for moral and spiritual fulfillment. LJ (personal communication, May 2024), a 24-year-old unmarried woman, shared:

“People here say it’s better to marry young than to be a burden to the family. They believe that single women bring *bahala* (misfortune).”

This belief exemplifies what Berger and Luckmann define as externalization, where cultural interpretations of religion become moral codes that influence individual behavior. In the case of the Pekal community, marriage is not simply a social goal but a sacred duty, and failure to fulfill it results in stigma not only for the woman but for her entire family.

The concept of *bahala* adds a supernatural consequence to spinsterhood, making the label spiritually dangerous. This blends religious, familial, and supernatural concerns into a powerful ideological narrative that frames unmarried women as threats to social and cosmic harmony. These interpretations, while local in form, echo broader patterns in patriarchal religious communities where women’s identities are tied to their reproductive and relational status.

c. Economic Constraints

Economic hardship further amplifies the stigma by framing marriage as the most practical path for daughters in low-income families. Educational aspirations are often viewed as secondary or even wasteful when marriage is perceived as imminent. Te (AK, personal communication, June 2024), a 22-year-old woman who married directly after high school, explained:

“My parents said, ‘Why continue school if you're going to get married anyway?’ Even though I wanted to continue, I had no choice.”

This illustrates how economic rationalization becomes entangled with gendered expectations. Parents often prioritize marriage over education for daughters because of

the assumption that women are unlikely to contribute financially in the long term. Thus, pursuing a university degree is seen as economically inefficient, especially when cultural norms suggest that marriage should occur before the age of 25. Here, Berger and Luckmann's notion of institutionalization becomes particularly relevant. Cultural patterns are reinforced by economic realities, and vice versa, creating a structural system where women's roles are circumscribed by both tradition and necessity. Over time, this creates an internalized worldview in which even the women themselves question the value of education in comparison to marriage.

d. Informal Social Surveillance

Social control in the Pekal community is not always overt or institutional; it is often exercised through informal channels such as gossip and community commentary. This form of surveillance is highly effective because it creates constant psychological pressure. Al (MS, personal communication, April 2024), a 23-year-old married woman, recounted:

“When a girl isn't married by her early twenties, people start talking. They say she's too choosy, or maybe she has a bad attitude. That talk forces some girls to marry anyone who asks.”

The practice of *guno-guno*—communal gossip and commentary—functions as a disciplinary mechanism. It not only stigmatizes unmarried women but also discourages deviation from established social norms. This aligns closely with Berger and Luckmann's idea of internalization, where individuals adopt societal expectations so deeply that they act upon them without needing overt coercion. This form of informal social regulation is particularly insidious because it operates at the micro-level—within conversations, jokes, questions, and silences. It reinforces norms not through rules but through repetition and fear of humiliation, thus becoming a self-sustaining mechanism that polices gender roles within the community.

Together, these four dimensions—patriarchy, religious ideology, economic limitation, and informal surveillance—form a dense web of social control that constructs and perpetuates the stigma of spinsterhood in the Pekal community. Through Berger and Luckmann's (1966) triadic model—externalization, objectification, and internalization—we can trace how a seemingly individual label becomes a deeply embedded cultural institution. It is not simply that unmarried women are seen as incomplete; rather, the community has structured its worldview in such a way that early marriage is the only path to full social recognition and dignity.

3. Responses and Coping Strategies of Pekal Women Facing Stigma

Despite the deeply rooted stigma surrounding spinsterhood in the Pekal community, women do not always respond passively. Their coping strategies reflect a range of responses—from submission and conformity to subtle resistance and personal negotiation. These responses are shaped not only by cultural pressures but also by each woman's educational background, family support, and personal aspirations. While many

choose to comply with societal expectations, others attempt to navigate or challenge the stigma in nuanced ways.

a. Compliance and Forced Marriage

The most common response among young Pekal women is compliance—a decision to marry early in order to avoid the label of spinsterhood. This choice is often made under familial and communal pressure, rather than personal readiness. FA (personal communication, April 2024), a 19-year-old woman, explained:

“I got married two months after graduating from high school, even though I wanted to study further. I didn’t want to be called *perawan tua*.”

In this case, marriage is not a choice of partnership, but an escape from stigma. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), this demonstrates internalization, where individuals adopt cultural expectations as part of their identity. FA’s early marriage is not merely a familial decision—it is a reflection of how societal norms become internal benchmarks for behavior. However, such marriages are often fragile. LJ (personal communication, May 2024), a 24-year-old unmarried woman, observed:

“Many of my friends who married young just to avoid being labeled end up unhappy, some even divorced.”

This shows how early compliance may lead to long-term dissatisfaction, suggesting that conformity under pressure does not guarantee stability.

b. Negotiating Identity Through Education

While early marriage is prevalent, some women seek to negotiate their identity by pursuing education, despite societal disapproval. MB (personal communication, April 2024), a 20-year-old university student, stated:

“I told my parents that I’d be more useful if I finish school and get a job. They still worry about me not getting married, but I try to prove I can succeed in other ways.”

MB’s response reflects strategic negotiation—she does not reject marriage outright but reframes her value as tied to education and potential economic contribution. This reflects a selective internalization, where cultural expectations are modified rather than fully accepted. Her strategy resonates with Frelians & Astuti (2024), who argue that single women in patriarchal societies often develop communicative resistance to stigma, positioning themselves as contributors through other social roles.

c. Quiet Resistance and Emotional Withdrawal

Other women respond through quiet resistance, withdrawing from public spaces or reducing social interaction to avoid criticism. Te (AK, personal communication, June 2024) shared:

“I know some women who avoid social gatherings because people always ask, ‘Why aren’t you married yet?’ It makes them feel small, so they prefer to stay home.”

This response may seem passive, but it represents a form of emotional boundary-setting. While not overtly oppositional, withdrawal protects self-esteem and minimizes exposure to symbolic violence. However, it can also lead to social exclusion and emotional isolation, reinforcing the very stigma it seeks to avoid. According to Yovita et al. (2022), this pattern is common in stigmatized women who internalize social narratives but lack the support to challenge them directly.

d. Reconstructing Meaning Collectively

Although limited in scope, some women and community members are beginning to reinterpret the concept of womanhood and success. Among younger, educated Pekal women, there are efforts to deconstruct the binary view that equates womanhood solely with marital status. MB mentioned:

“Some of us talk about how women should have the right to study, work, and marry when they’re ready. But we say it quietly. Not everyone agrees yet.”

This reflects a nascent effort to externalize alternative narratives—a crucial first step in challenging dominant social constructions. Although not yet institutionalized, such discourse creates the potential for cultural transformation. Berger and Luckmann (1966) remind us that all social realities are human products; thus, the emergence of new meanings—even if marginal—can gradually reshape what is considered “normal.”

The responses of Pekal women to spinsterhood stigma illustrate the complex interaction between structure and agency. While many conform to expectations through early marriage, others navigate or resist in subtle ways—whether through education, withdrawal, or quiet discourse. These actions reflect varying degrees of internalization, negotiation, and reinterpretation. Importantly, these coping mechanisms show that social constructions are not static. They are constantly being reinforced, contested, and possibly transformed through everyday actions. As such, the Pekal case underscores the dialectical nature of social reality—where women are both subjects of cultural constraint and agents of cultural change.

D. Conclusion

This study has revealed that the social construction of spinsterhood among the Pekal Tribe is a deeply entrenched system of meaning that shapes women's life trajectories in powerful ways. Through cultural norms, religious interpretations, economic pressures, and mechanisms of social surveillance, unmarried women beyond the age of 25 are systematically labeled as deviant, undesirable, or even dangerous. This labeling has far-reaching consequences—not only in terms of identity and mental well-being but also in limiting women's access to education, delaying autonomy, and perpetuating gender inequality. Using Berger and Luckmann's theory of social construction, the study illustrates how this stigma is formed and sustained through the three stages of externalization, objectification, and internalization. Cultural beliefs that prioritize early marriage are projected outward (externalization), institutionalized through

family, religion, and language (objectification), and ultimately accepted as self-evident truths by individuals within the community (internalization).

However, the findings also show that women are not merely passive recipients of these norms. Their responses range from forced compliance to strategic negotiation and subtle forms of resistance. Some pursue education despite disapproval, while others withdraw emotionally to protect themselves. A few are beginning to articulate alternative definitions of womanhood, signaling the early stages of counter-narratives that could challenge dominant cultural norms in the future. This research contributes to the broader discourse on gender, culture, and social control by offering an ethnographically grounded account of how stigma is socially constructed and individually experienced. It underscores the need to question naturalized gender expectations and to support culturally sensitive but progressive spaces where women can redefine their roles beyond marriage. Further studies may explore how such counter-discourses evolve and what social conditions enable their expansion into collective action or institutional change.

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