

Preventing Early Marriage: The Role of Management Strategies of the Office of Religious Affairs in Panai Hulu District

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to analyze how the management of the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) addresses early marriage at the sub-district level. The study positions the KUA as a strategic actor that not only performs administrative functions but also plays an educational and preventive role based on religious values.

Method – The research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using interviews, observations, and documentation, which are analyzed through stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Findings – The findings show that KUA management is implemented through the functions of planning, organizing, implementation, as well as monitoring and evaluation. Planning is carried out by identifying causal factors contextually; organizing is integrative without a specific structure but strengthened through cross-institutional collaboration; implementation is realized through premarital counseling in schools and religious forums involving both youth and parents; and monitoring is conducted through the observation of marriage and marriage dispensation data, as well as internal reflection. Overall, KUA management demonstrates an adaptive and collaborative approach in efforts to prevent early marriage, although it still faces limitations in terms of resources and evaluation systems.

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Da'wah Management.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of early marriage remains a complex global issue with multidimensional impacts, involving social, economic, health, and educational aspects. According to UNICEF (2023), approximately 12 million girls marry each year worldwide, most of them in developing countries.

Indonesia ranks eighth globally in terms of early marriage prevalence (BPS, 2020). The impacts are not limited to increased school dropout rates but also include reproductive health risks, intergenerational poverty, and weakened women's empowerment.

As stated in the Qur'an, Surah An-Nur [24]: 32: "*And marry off the single among you and the righteous among your male and female slaves. If they are poor, Allah will enrich them from His bounty. And Allah is All-Encompassing, All-Knowing.*" This verse indicates that marriage should be undertaken with proper readiness, both economically and in terms of moral responsibility, rather than due to social or cultural pressure.

The Indonesian government has demonstrated a strong commitment through the revision of Law Number 16 of 2019, which raised the minimum legal age for marriage to 19 years for both men and women, replacing the previous discriminatory provision that set it at 16 for women. This policy aligns with the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and represents a progressive step in child protection. However, its implementation still faces significant challenges in rural and semi-urban areas, including Labuhanbatu Regency, where patriarchal cultural norms, family economic pressures, limited access to quality education, and traditional perceptions of gender roles often outweigh legal regulations (Surasa et al., 2025). According to Persatker (2022), Labuhanbatu is among the top five regions in North Sumatra with the highest number of marriage dispensation applications, indicating a gap between formal policy and social practice and highlighting the need for more intensive and comprehensive interventions.

The phenomenon of early marriage cannot be separated from various interrelated factors at the individual, family, and societal levels. This condition indicates that prevention efforts cannot rely solely on regulation but also require the active involvement of institutions that directly engage with the community. In this context, the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) holds a strategic position as a state institution that directly interacts with society in marriage administration and family development (Jamin et al., 2024).

The role of the KUA is not limited to administrative functions but also extends to acting as an agent of religious outreach and communication in fostering *sakinah, mawaddah, warahmah* families. According to Sulidar et al. (2023), participatory and inclusive community empowerment-based management is an important approach to reducing early marriage rates through premarital guidance programs based on standardized modules, religious counseling emphasizing maturity in marriage, public awareness campaigns, and cross-sector coordination with education, health, social agencies, and civil society organizations. However, its effectiveness depends on factors such as the human resource capacity of KUA (competence, motivation, workload), vertical and horizontal coordination systems, the availability of adequate budgets, political support from local governments, the commitment of religious and traditional leaders, and information technology infrastructure for monitoring and evaluation (Adriansyah & Khatibah, 2026).

Research trends indicate a shift from normative approaches to managerial and socio-religious approaches in understanding the role of KUA. Some studies find that KUA in rural areas faces limitations in data and resources to carry out preventive interventions (Rahadiani & Muslim, 2023). However, other studies highlight innovative initiatives such as the *Kampung Keluarga Berkualitas*

(Quality Family Village), which has successfully reduced early marriage rates through collaboration between KUA and BKKBN. Academic debates have emerged regarding the effectiveness of regulation-based models versus community-based models, with some researchers arguing that formal policies have not sufficiently addressed the socio-economic roots of the problem (Friska et al., 2024).

The context of Panai Hulu Sub-district is particularly interesting and relevant for in-depth study due to its strong socio-religious characteristics and agrarian-plantation-based economy, where patriarchal family structures still dominate reproductive and marital decision-making, access to higher secondary education is limited, and women's social mobility remains largely confined to domestic roles. According to BPS Labuhanbatu (2023), the rate of marriages under the age of 19 reaches 14% of total annual marriages in the sub-district, significantly higher than the national average and indicating the urgency of specific local interventions. This condition highlights the need for adaptive KUA managerial strategies that are sensitive to local cultural contexts and capable of integrating Islamic values emphasizing welfare and child protection with socio-cultural approaches that consider local power dynamics, political economy, and community social capital (Syahputra et al., 2025).

A number of studies have examined the issue of early marriage and the role of institutions in its prevention. Research by Najah et al. (2021) found that premarital guidance programs contributed 70.04% to marriage readiness, indicating the importance of such programs in preparing prospective couples. Research by Febriyanti et al. (2025) also shows that policy implementation reduced early marriage rates by 51% during the 2023–2024 period, although the practice still persists, particularly in rural areas. This success is supported by increased public literacy, family economic empowerment, and monitoring of marriage dispensations. However, challenges such as strong cultural influences, economic limitations, and low access to education remain significant.

Meanwhile, Azmi & Rokan (2025) reveal that KUA still faces limitations in human resources, particularly in handling interfaith marriages. These challenges include a lack of procedural understanding, administrative complexity, and weak cross-sector coordination. On the other hand, Sulidar et al. (2023) show that the implementation of premarital guidance at KUA has been carried out through various activities, such as online registration, provision of materials on the roles of husbands and wives, strengthening religious understanding, and marriage contract simulations, all aimed at improving the readiness of prospective couples.

Based on these studies, it is evident that research on early marriage has been widely conducted; however, there are still limitations in comprehensively examining the internal managerial aspects of KUA, particularly at the sub-district level. In fact, management aspects such as planning, organizing, implementation, and evaluation of premarital guidance programs are key factors in determining the effectiveness of interventions in the field. Therefore, there exists a research gap in understanding how KUA managerial practices are concretely implemented within specific local contexts.

Previous studies remain limited in exploring how internal KUA management influences the effectiveness of early marriage prevention at the sub-district level. Most studies focus on national

policy analysis or regional government programs (Sulaiman & Fauzan, 2021). Thus, there is a research gap in understanding managerial aspects such as planning, implementation, and evaluation of premarital guidance programs at the local level.

This study aims to comprehensively analyze the management of the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) in addressing early marriage in Panai Hulu Sub-district, Labuhanbatu Regency, with an emphasis on participatory strategic planning, evidence-based program implementation, cross-stakeholder coordination (village government, schools, health centers, youth and women's organizations), data utilization for decision-making, and sustainability through local capacity building.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to provide an in-depth understanding of the management of the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) in addressing early marriage in Panai Hulu Sub-district, Labuhanbatu Regency. This approach is chosen because it enables the exploration of meanings behind behaviors, policies, and institutional practices within specific social and cultural contexts (Cresswell, 2014). The descriptive design is used to present a factual and systematic account of managerial strategies, constraints, and the effectiveness of programs implemented by the KUA in preventing early marriage (Sugiyono, 2021).

The research subjects consist of the Head of the KUA, marriage registrars (*penghulu*), and administrative staff directly involved in premarital guidance programs and early marriage prevention efforts. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on criteria of relevance and direct involvement with the research issue. The number of informants was determined according to the principle of data saturation, meaning that interviews were concluded when no new information emerged (Miles et al., 2020).

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis process was carried out simultaneously from the data collection phase to the final interpretation stage, with findings categorized based on the management functions proposed by Terry & Rue (2019)—Planning, Organizing, Actuating, and Controlling (POAC), to align with the research focus. To ensure data validity, this study employed source and method triangulation techniques, as well as member checking with informants to verify the accuracy of the interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Early marriage remains one of the social issues that continues to receive serious attention in various regions of Indonesia. This practice is not only related to legal aspects but also has wide-ranging impacts on reproductive health, psychological readiness, and the continuity of adolescents' education. The consequences are significant, affecting not only the reproductive health of young women but also their education, economic conditions, and social well-being (Gusmawati et al., 2025).

In the context of Panai Hulu Sub-district, the phenomenon of early marriage is still frequently observed and shows a relatively consistent pattern from year to year. This condition reflects that the prevention efforts that have been implemented have not yet been fully effective in significantly reducing the rate of early marriage. Therefore, a deeper understanding is needed regarding how this practice occurs and how relevant institutions, particularly the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA), respond to this phenomenon.

Based on field observations and in-depth interviews with KUA staff in Panai Hulu Sub-district, it was found that early marriage practices still occur, particularly among families with limited economic conditions and low levels of education. Informants also revealed that applications for marriage dispensation are still present, indicating that the minimum legal age for marriage is not fully adhered to in social practice.

In responding to this condition, the KUA of Panai Hulu Sub-district has undertaken various efforts through a managerial approach that reflects the functions of management (POAC), including planning, organizing, implementation, and monitoring of early marriage prevention programs.

1. Planning

The planning stage is carried out by identifying the factors that cause early marriage in the Panai Hulu area. Research informants stated that the KUA routinely conducts problem mapping based on community reports, marriage data, and communication with religious leaders and village authorities. From a management perspective, effective planning must be based on an analysis of needs and environmental conditions (Suhardi, 2018). Therefore, mapping social, cultural, economic, and educational factors becomes a crucial initial step in formulating early marriage prevention strategies.

The findings show that several key factors trigger early marriage in this region. These include:

- a) Cultural factors: The social culture in Panai Hulu still views early marriage as a solution to moral and economic problems. The predominantly agrarian and plantation-based community has a strong communal lifestyle, where marriage decisions are often influenced by traditional norms and the opinions of community leaders.
- b) Social environmental factors: Adolescents who are involved in risky social interactions or who frequently associate with peers who are already married tend to be encouraged to follow similar practices.
- c) Educational factors: Adolescents who drop out of school are more vulnerable to economic and social pressures and have limited understanding of the health, psychological, and legal risks of early marriage.

These conditions indicate that the three factors are interrelated and form a recurring pattern. Low educational attainment limits economic opportunities, which is then reinforced by social norms that legitimize early marriage as a solution. This pattern reflects a “social cycle” that is difficult to break without interventions that address multiple aspects simultaneously.

These findings are consistent with research by Pramitasari & Megatsari (2022), which states that significant factors influencing early marriage include education level, knowledge, family support, peer influence, and access to information. Additionally, Lubis & Romadhona (2024) and Salsabila et al. (2024) found that most adolescents who engage in early marriage come from low-income backgrounds and rural areas. Furthermore, the practice is still influenced by strong traditional values within the community.

Based on this identification, the KUA of Panai Hulu Sub-district formulated several strategic programs as part of the planning stage. These programs include: (1) premarital counseling in senior high schools conducted regularly in collaboration with schools; (2) guidance and educational activities through religious forums such as *perwiritan* targeting parents and community leaders; and (3) socialization of the legal marriage age and the impacts of early marriage through religious activities and consultation services at the KUA.

In addition, informants stated that over the past year, counseling activities have been conducted in several villages with frequencies adjusted to the needs of each area. The materials delivered cover not only legal aspects of marriage but also psychological readiness, reproductive health, and social responsibility in building a family. This indicates that the program planning carried out by the KUA has moved toward a more comprehensive and contextual approach.

2. Organizing

Interview results show that the organization of early marriage prevention programs at the KUA of Panai Hulu Sub-district is functional rather than structural. This means that although there is no specific team or unit, the program continues to operate through integration into the main duties of staff members. This condition reflects an adaptive form of organization in response to resource limitations, where each staff member performs multiple roles according to field needs.

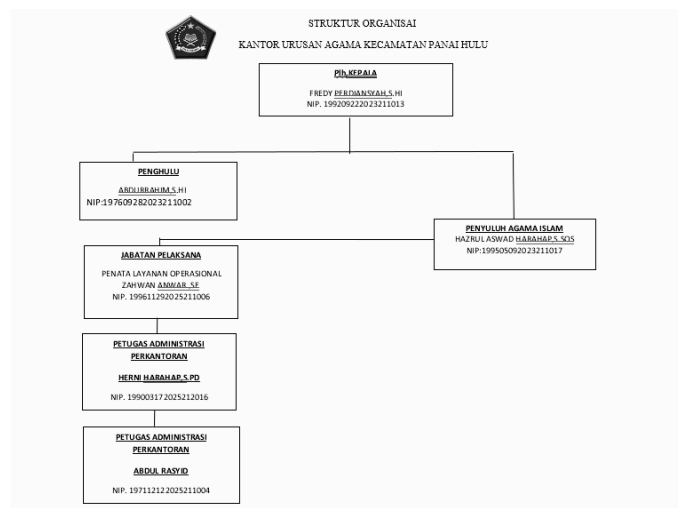


Figure 1. Organizational Structure of the KUA of Panai Hulu Sub-district

Limited human resources are one of the reasons why no specific structure has been established for this program. The limited number of KUA staff must handle various administrative and religious services simultaneously. However, through cross-institutional collaboration and a contextual approach, the program can still be implemented. This model is relevant for institutions with limited resources, as it allows for more dynamic task distribution without relying on complex formal structures.

In addition, the KUA strengthens collaboration with other institutions such as schools, health centers, as well as religious and community leaders. Through the support of these figures, counseling messages are more trusted and accepted by the community because they are delivered by respected individuals. Although the number of KUA staff is not proportional to the size of the area and the number of schools, local social and cultural networks serve as important capital in maintaining program sustainability.

These findings are consistent with research by Azizah & R (2025), which highlights the importance of institutional roles in integrating educational programs through cross-sector collaboration. Research by Gayos Alfajri & Khotami (2025) also reveals that although stakeholder collaboration has not yet been optimal, the involvement of various parties still contributes to reducing early marriage rates. Furthermore, Putra (2025) emphasizes that successful collaboration is strongly influenced by open communication, facilitative leadership, and clarity of roles within institutional structures. Thus, an organizational approach that not only relies on internal structures but also leverages external networks becomes a relevant strategy in this context.

The organizational model implemented by the KUA reflects a practice of faith-based social management, where religious values serve as the foundation for public policies that support child and family protection. This strategy is not only administratively effective but also effective in fostering changes in attitudes and public awareness, making it a potential model for other regions with similar socio-cultural characteristics. The researcher also observes that this approach is effective in building public awareness, as religious values hold strong legitimacy in the social life of the Panai Hulu community.

Although the number of KUA staff is not proportional to the size of the working area and program targets, the utilization of local social and cultural networks becomes an important asset in sustaining the program. This indicates that the success of organizational management is not always determined by the quantity of resources, but also by the institution's ability to manage and utilize the potential within its surrounding environment.

3. Implementation (Actuating)

The implementation of early marriage prevention programs at the KUA of Panai Hulu Sub-district is carried out through various outreach activities targeting not only adolescents but also parents. This approach is based on the understanding that families play a crucial role in decision-making related to children's marriage. Therefore, the KUA does

not only position adolescents as objects of intervention but also involves parents as primary agents in shaping mindset changes and decision-making processes.

Based on interview results, program implementation heavily depends on the initiative and commitment of individual staff members. The Head of the KUA acts as a coordinator, while marriage registrars (*penghulu*) and religious counselors serve as technical implementers in the field. They incorporate early marriage prevention materials into premarital guidance, religious sermons, and outreach activities in schools and community forums.

This condition indicates that the actuating function is not only related to the technical execution of programs but also involves efforts to mobilize and motivate organizational members to work optimally toward achieving predetermined goals. George R. Terry states that actuating is the process of encouraging organizational members to willingly work together to achieve established objectives (Muhammad, 2022). Although the KUA faces resource limitations, the success of program implementation is strongly influenced by personal commitment and the social closeness of staff to the community, which becomes a significant strength in a context of close social relations.

In its implementation, the KUA plays an important role as a moral and educational facilitator, delivering religious messages that are also relevant to local social and economic contexts. The materials presented do not focus solely on legal aspects but also emphasize psychological readiness, social responsibility, and the long-term impacts of early marriage. This approach is considered effective as it aligns with the characteristics of a religious community.

In line with Purwanto (2024), “The role of religious institutions becomes strategic when they are able to integrate spiritual values with community-based social programs, as this enhances both legitimacy and effectiveness at the grassroots level.”

From an Islamic perspective, marriage is indeed encouraged, but it must be based on physical and psychological readiness. As stated in a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ: “*O young people, whoever among you is able (to marry), let him marry, for it helps lower the gaze and guard chastity.*” (Narrated by Bukhari and Muslim).

Program implementation is carried out through face-to-face activities in schools, *majelis taklim*, and other community forums. However, a major constraint is the limitation of human resources. The KUA does not have a dedicated team for early marriage prevention, so implementation heavily depends on the number and capacity of existing staff. This flexibility is an advantage but also has the potential to create inconsistencies if not supported by a more structured system.

Overall, the implementation of early marriage prevention programs at the KUA of Panai Hulu Sub-district shows that a value-based approach rooted in religion, social proximity, and individual commitment are key factors in executing the actuating function. Despite resource limitations, this strategy remains effective in reaching the community, particularly in raising awareness and shifting mindsets regarding early marriage.

4. Monitoring and Evaluation (Controlling)

The monitoring and evaluation function in early marriage prevention programs at the KUA of Panai Hulu Sub-district shows a pattern that is still relatively simple and contextual. The findings indicate that monitoring and evaluation are conducted by comparing the number of underage marriages and marriage dispensations from year to year. A decrease in the number of dispensations is interpreted as an indicator of the success of the outreach programs that have been implemented.

**DATA NIKAH DAN RUJUK
KANTOR URUSAN AGAMA KECAMATAN PANAI HULU
TAHUN 2025**

NO	BULAN	USIA KAWIN 16-17 18-19 <19	JENIS KELAMIN		DATA PENDIDIKAN						JLH RUJUK	KET	
			L	P	SD	SLTP	SLTA	SARMUD	S1	<S2			
1	JANUARI	- - 9	21	21	4	3	27	-	8	-	-	-	-
2	FEBRUARI	- - 4	21	21	8	4	27	-	3	-	-	-	-
3	MARET	- - -	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4	APRIL	- - 7	32	32	8	9	35	-	11	-	-	-	-
5	MEI	- - 1	13	13	2	3	21	-	-	-	-	-	-
6	JUNI	- - 3	37	37	9	14	25	-	25	-	-	-	-
7	JULI	- - -	12	12	0	3	11	-	6	-	-	-	-
8	AGUSTUS	- - 4	31	31	3	8	44	-	7	-	-	-	-
9	SEPTEMBER	- - 4	31	31	3	8	44	-	-	-	-	-	-
10	OKTOBER	- - -	14	14	2	4	12	-	6	-	-	-	-
11	NOVEMBER	- - -	9	9	4	1	11	-	2	-	-	-	-
12	DESEMBER	- - 4	24	24	4	6	31	-	7	-	-	-	-

Figure 2. Marriage Data for 2025

Program evaluation is conducted in a simple manner through monitoring trends in the decline of early marriage rates within the KUA’s working area. Internal data indicate a decrease in the number of marriage dispensations each year, suggesting progress in prevention efforts. The research findings show that outreach programs have contributed to preventing early marriage in Panai Hulu Sub-district. In addition, there are indications of increased public awareness regarding the social, psychological, and health risks of early marriage, although the evaluation has not yet been conducted using a systematic methodology. This suggests a positive impact of the implemented programs, despite the absence of a structured evaluation system. Furthermore, interviews with informants also indicate an increase in community awareness of the social, psychological, and health risks associated with early marriage, particularly after participating in outreach activities.

This condition indicates that the controlling function has been implemented, but is still at a basic level, primarily limited to administrative monitoring and general observation of social changes. Theoretically, controlling activities aim to assess program implementation, compile evaluation results, and provide input for future improvement and development (Wijayanti & Wicaksana, 2023). Additionally, control serves as a mechanism for managers to evaluate whether organizational goals have been achieved and to identify influencing factors. However, in practice, the supervisory function within the KUA has not yet been carried out in a fully systematic and measurable manner.

In this regard, the use of marriage dispensation data as an indicator of success is relevant but insufficient to fully capture program effectiveness. This is because the decline in such figures may be influenced by various other factors, such as policy changes, social pressure, or economic conditions. Therefore, additional indicators are needed, such as the number of outreach participants, levels of community participation, changes in understanding before and after outreach activities, and follow-up actions from implemented programs.

Moreover, the absence of a formally documented evaluation system represents a limitation in program management. Evaluations conducted informally and internally may hinder the measurement of long-term impacts and the sustainable development of programs. If evaluations are carried out using more structured indicators—such as recording the number of participants, participation rates, and follow-up actions, the effectiveness of the program can be measured more objectively.

Overall, the controlling function at the KUA of Panai Hulu Sub-district has been implemented in the form of administrative monitoring and social reflection, although it has not yet utilized a written, instrument-based evaluation system. This monitoring model is relatively effective given resource limitations, but still requires strengthening in terms of documentation, periodic reporting, and the development of program success indicators to ensure sustainability and accountability.

CONCLUSION

The management of the KUA in Panai Hulu Sub-district in addressing early marriage has been implemented through the functions of planning, organizing, implementation, as well as monitoring and evaluation. At the planning stage, the KUA identifies social, cultural, economic, and educational factors as the basis for developing contextual prevention programs.

In terms of organizing, the program is not carried out through a specific structure but is integrated into the existing duties of staff, supported by collaboration with schools, health centers, and religious and community leaders. At the implementation stage, the KUA conducts premarital outreach in schools and religious forums, involving both adolescents and parents to build awareness of appropriate marriage age and responsibilities.

Meanwhile, monitoring and evaluation are conducted through the observation of marriage data and marriage dispensations, as well as internal reflection on community responses. Although the evaluation system is not yet formally documented, there are indications of increased public awareness regarding the risks of early marriage. Overall, KUA management has been adaptive and collaborative, although it still faces challenges in several aspects.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that the KUA of Panai Hulu Sub-district strengthen its monitoring and evaluation system by developing more structured and periodically documented program success indicators. Enhancing human resource capacity and establishing a dedicated team or coordinator for early marriage prevention programs may also be considered to improve effectiveness and sustainability.

In addition, cross-sector collaboration that has already been established should continue to be developed more systematically through regular coordination forums to optimize synergy among institutions. The use of digital media as an educational tool for adolescents can also serve as a strategic innovation to expand the reach of outreach programs.

For future research, it is recommended to conduct more in-depth studies on the long-term impact of early marriage prevention programs on behavioral change within the community, as well as comparative analyses among different KUA offices across regions to develop more comprehensive and applicable management models.

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