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Parents' Sociocultural Preferences and the Social Construction of Child Marriage in Mandar Society, Indonesia

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Abstract

Child marriage remains embedded in sociocultural expectations despite Indonesia's statutory minimum marriage age of 19 years. This study examines how parental sociocultural preferences contribute to the production, institutional legitimation, and internalization of child marriage among Mandar families in Campalagian, Polewali Mandar Regency, West Sulawesi. An interpretive qualitative case-study design was employed, involving 62 participants comprising 24 parents, 24 married children, and 14 key informants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentary analysis, and examined using iterative qualitative analysis and source triangulation. Findings identified premarital pregnancy as the most frequent initiating circumstance (7 cases), followed by elopement (5), economic pressure (5), kinship proposals (3), community intervention (2), and child-initiated alternatives to arranged matchmaking (2). Fourteen marriages involved circumstances initiated by young couples, challenging assumptions of exclusively parental decision-making. Institutional legitimation operated through formal marriage dispensation and informal religious solemnization. Religious Court records showed approval rates of 90.9% in 2024 and 81.0% in 2025. Internalization manifested through reluctant parental accommodation, shaped by family honor, perceived destiny, and responsibility. The study demonstrates that child marriage persists through interconnected sociocultural and institutional mechanisms, requiring prevention strategies beyond legal restrictions and parental awareness.

Keywords: *child marriage; legal pluralism; Mandar society; parental preferences; social construction; sociocultural norms.*

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INTRODUCTION

Child marriage remains a persistent social and institutional challenge in Indonesia, reflecting the complex interaction between statutory marriage regulations, economic vulnerability, religious legitimacy, and culturally embedded expectations concerning family honor and social responsibility. The amendment introduced through Law No. 16 of 2019 established 19 years as the minimum legal marriage age for both women and men, yet the persistence of marriages below this threshold indicates that regulatory reform does not necessarily transform the social arrangements through which marriage decisions acquire legitimacy. National household evidence demonstrates that early marriage is associated with significant differences in subsequent educational, economic, and marital experiences, establishing its relevance beyond the immediate question of legal compliance (Cameron et al., 2023). Research examining Indonesian marriage practices further identifies the interaction of socioeconomic conditions, familial expectations, and religious considerations as factors that complicate efforts to prevent child marriage through regulatory intervention alone (Liem et al., 2024). The persistence of this practice becomes particularly significant in communities where marriage operates as a mechanism for protecting collective reputation, maintaining kinship relationships, and responding to perceived moral transgressions. Studies conducted in West Sulawesi identify parental understanding, educational circumstances, and sociocultural pressures as relevant dimensions of child marriage, while research on coastal communities demonstrates how marriage may be socially interpreted as a transfer of economic responsibility from parents to husbands (Amin et al., 2024; Suhan et al., 2022). The intersection between customary expectations and formal marriage regulations further complicates the distinction between socially legitimate and legally recognized marital relationships, particularly where religious and cultural obligations influence decisions independently of statutory requirements

(Ahmad et al., 2023). Contemporary scholarship also emphasizes that child marriage must be examined critically in relation to the social production of acceptable choices rather than exclusively through interpretations that position children and families as passive subjects of tradition (Adriany et al., 2026). These conditions establish the scientific significance of investigating how parental sociocultural preferences are constructed, negotiated, and reproduced within the Mandar community of Campalagian, Polewali Mandar Regency, where marriage decisions are situated within overlapping structures of kinship, customary authority, Islamic legitimacy, and state regulation.

Contemporary scholarship on child marriage can be organized into interconnected analytical traditions addressing structural vulnerability, sociocultural normalization, parental decision-making, and institutional legitimacy. Research emphasizing socioeconomic circumstances associates early marriage with educational disadvantage, household insecurity, and socially constrained life choices, while studies examining unintended pregnancy identify marriage as a response through which families attempt to manage perceived reputational and moral consequences (Aisyah et al., 2023; Triyono, 2022; Sundari & Retnowati, 2024). Sociological investigations increasingly approach child marriage as an institutionalized practice whose perceived normality emerges through repeated interaction, collective expectations, and locally accepted interpretations of responsibility. Evidence from communities in Jember, Bayah, and Tanah Laut demonstrates how social acceptance can sustain early marriage even where its disadvantages are recognized, although the specific configurations of parental authority and community expectations differ across local settings (Barisa, 2024; Ambarwati et al., 2024; Falahudin & Damaiyanti, 2024). A related body of scholarship examines marriage through customary honor and socially enforced moral obligations, identifying the significance of siri' na pacce, communal reputation, and symbolic power in shaping the circumstances under which marriage becomes socially compelling (Alghifari et al., 2025; Riswanto & Muchtar, 2025; Murlianti et al., 2026). Studies of parental social action in South Sulawesi further support the interpretation that marriage decisions involve culturally structured judgments rather than purely individual preferences, while research on matchmaking and culturally embedded marital expectations highlights the relevance of traditional action and established social relationships (Darwis & Harifuddin, 2024; Sitompul et al., 2024). Scholarship addressing elopement and customary reconciliation introduces another dimension, showing that marriage practices cannot be separated from the procedures through which families negotiate damaged reputation and restore social relationships (Burhan, 2019; Laman, 2022; Ismar, 2024; Ungawaru et al., 2024). Investigations of marriage dispensations, unregistered unions, and religiously mediated marriages additionally reveal how formal legal recognition may coexist with alternative sources of social and religious legitimacy (Surasa et al., 2025; Muzakki et al., 2025; Bakence et al., 2025). This body of research establishes that child marriage is not adequately explained by a single economic, cultural, or legal determinant, but requires attention to the relationships through which marital decisions become collectively acceptable.

The principal research gap concerns the limited integration of parental decision-making, institutional legitimation, and the internalization of marital expectations into a single explanatory account of child marriage within Mandar society. Existing studies provide substantial evidence concerning socioeconomic vulnerability, traditional obligations, family authority, and the normalization of early marriage, but their analytical emphases frequently isolate particular determinants or institutional arrangements rather than examining their relationships as successive moments of social construction. Research discussing child marriage as a culturally normalized practice clarifies how collective expectations sustain marital decisions, yet does not necessarily explain how an initially contested decision becomes institutionalized and subsequently accepted by the individuals involved (Aisyah et al., 2023; Barisa, 2024; Gusnita, 2022). Similarly, studies addressing customary marriage, parental matchmaking, and symbolic honor identify culturally significant pressures without consistently tracing how these pressures interact with the alternative legal and religious mechanisms through which marriages obtain recognition (Ahmad et al., 2023; Darwis & Harifuddin, 2024; Alghifari et al., 2025). Research on marriage dispensations and religiously mediated marital practices contributes important institutional explanations, although the relationship between formal authorization, informal legitimacy, and subsequent parental acceptance remains insufficiently integrated within the literature reviewed for this study (Surasa et al., 2025; Muzakki et al., 2025). A further conceptual limitation concerns the tendency to treat parental preference as an antecedent of child marriage, potentially obscuring situations in which pregnancy,

elopement, or community intervention precedes parental agreement and requires families to negotiate decisions initiated by other actors. Social construction theory provides a relevant analytical foundation because externalization, objectivation, and internalization distinguish the production of social practices, their institutional stabilization, and their incorporation into individual understandings of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 2012). Cultural beliefs concerning marriage proposals and destined relationships also indicate that marital expectations may acquire normative force through inherited meanings, while religious interpretations can contribute to the symbolic legitimation of socially established arrangements (Mutmainnah, 2018; Shalehah, 2025). The unresolved question is how these different processes interact within one local social setting, particularly when parental acceptance does not necessarily represent parental initiation or unqualified approval.

The absence of an integrated explanation has implications for both sociological interpretation and the design of interventions intended to reduce child marriage. Explanations emphasizing economic hardship alone risk overlooking the influence of social sanctions, reputational concerns, and religious interpretations that may continue to structure family decisions even when material conditions improve. Conversely, explanations emphasizing tradition without examining the institutional organization of marriage may insufficiently account for the distinction between customary acceptance, religious validity, and legal recognition. Research on child marriage and human rights identifies the vulnerability of children whose marital arrangements are shaped by parental decisions, while investigations of early marital difficulties indicate that marriage may reproduce rather than resolve socioeconomic insecurity and familial instability (Yulestari et al., 2025; Kusuma & Erlina, 2021). The scientific relevance of these problems extends to the interpretation of parental agency, since parental agreement may reflect the accommodation of perceived social threats rather than an independently formulated intention to arrange an early marriage. Scholarship addressing the relationship between child marriage and symbolic power suggests that collective expectations concerning honor may restrict the range of socially acceptable alternatives available to families (Murlianti et al., 2026). Related studies of marriage following premarital pregnancy demonstrate the importance of examining how perceived moral obligations intersect with religious and sociocultural considerations when families evaluate available responses (Bakence et al., 2025; Sundari & Retnowati, 2024). The distinction between perceived necessity and voluntary preference is especially consequential for policies that rely on parental counseling, legal-age restrictions, and marriage dispensation procedures without addressing the informal institutions that influence marital legitimacy. Research on child marriage in West Sulawesi and its neighboring sociocultural settings provides a foundation for recognizing these interacting pressures, but it does not eliminate the need for a localized explanation of how families interpret competing obligations (Amin et al., 2024; Suhan et al., 2022). A more precise understanding of these processes would contribute to sociological debates concerning agency and institutional reproduction while providing an empirically grounded basis for evaluating whether interventions address the social mechanisms through which child marriage remains acceptable.

This study is positioned at the intersection of the sociology of marriage, the social construction of reality, and the study of legal and religious pluralism, with a specific focus on parental sociocultural preferences among Mandar families in Campalagian, Polewali Mandar Regency, West Sulawesi. Its proposed originality lies in treating parental preferences not as fixed individual attitudes or independent explanatory variables, but as socially constituted judgments that may emerge through negotiations involving children, relatives, community members, religious figures, and formal institutions. The analytical framework applies the interconnected processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization to distinguish the circumstances that generate marriage decisions, the mechanisms that confer social or institutional legitimacy upon those decisions, and the meanings through which parents and children subsequently interpret them (Berger & Luckmann, 2012). This approach extends beyond studies that primarily identify determinants of child marriage, evaluate parental decision-making, or describe customary marital practices as separate phenomena (Cameron et al., 2023; Darwis & Harifuddin, 2024; Riswanto & Muchtar, 2025). The study also introduces a focused examination of the relationship between formal marriage dispensation and informal religiously mediated marriage as potentially parallel sources of legitimation, without presupposing institutional coordination or equivalent legal status. The conceptual distinction is informed by scholarship on customary and Islamic marriage arrangements, marriage dispensations, and the social

authority of religious figures (Ahmad et al., 2023; Surasa et al., 2025; Muzakki et al., 2025). Methodologically, the study employs an interpretive qualitative case-study design grounded in the examination of contextually situated experiences, documentary evidence, and multiple participant perspectives, consistent with established approaches to qualitative inquiry and case-study research (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2015; Moleong, 2021). The analytical procedure combines thematic categorization with iterative comparison and interpretation, drawing on methodological principles of systematic qualitative data organization and analysis (Machmud, 2022). The intended contribution is a contextually grounded explanatory account that connects culturally perceived threats, competing channels of marital legitimacy, and the subsequent acceptance of child marriage, rather than presenting another inventory of its associated factors.

The present study aims to examine how parental sociocultural preferences contribute to the production, legitimization, and reproduction of child marriage within the Mandar community of Campalagian, Polewali Mandar Regency, West Sulawesi. Three interrelated objectives guide the investigation: identifying the circumstances and culturally embedded meanings through which marriage below the statutory minimum age becomes an acceptable response to familial and social pressures; analyzing the formal and informal institutional mechanisms through which such marriages acquire legal, religious, or communal recognition; and examining how parents and married children interpret, negotiate, and incorporate these marital arrangements into their understandings of responsibility, family honor, and social obligation. The investigation adopts a qualitative case-study approach involving parents, married children, relevant institutional representatives, and community informants, supported by observations and documentary evidence. Its analytical emphasis is placed on the relationships among socially produced expectations, institutional forms of legitimacy, and the meanings attributed to marriage decisions, while maintaining a distinction between voluntary preference, constrained acceptance, and collective pressure. The anticipated theoretical contribution is a more differentiated application of social construction theory to family decision-making under overlapping customary, religious, and statutory normative arrangements. The methodological contribution rests on integrating multiple participant perspectives and institutional evidence within a coherent analysis of the three moments of social construction. The practical contribution concerns the development of a more precise understanding of why statutory restrictions and parent-oriented interventions may encounter limitations when marital decisions are shaped by socially recognized obligations and alternative legitimating institutions. The study ultimately seeks to establish an empirically accountable explanation of parental sociocultural preferences that can inform further comparative research and support more context-sensitive approaches to preventing child marriage without presuming that parental agreement necessarily constitutes autonomous parental choice.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case-study design within an interpretive research paradigm to examine the social construction of child marriage through parental sociocultural preferences in Campalagian Subdistrict, Polewali Mandar Regency, West Sulawesi, Indonesia. The unit of analysis comprised family experiences and the sociocultural processes through which marriage below the statutory minimum age of 19 was initiated, legitimized, and subsequently interpreted. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in child marriage or their institutional and community responsibilities concerning marriage practices. The study involved 62 participants, consisting of 24 parents who had married off at least one child before the age of 19, 24 married children from those families who had entered marriage between the ages of 12 and 18, and 14 key informants. The parental participants comprised 22 mothers and two fathers, while the key informants included five population and family planning officials, three local government representatives at subdistrict and village administrative levels, one Religious Court judge, two religious affairs officials, one community elder, and two child-welfare advocates.

Table 1. Participants and Data Sources

Participant group	n	Composition
Parents	24	22 mothers and 2 fathers who had married off a child below age 19
Married children	24	Married at ages 12–18 (median 16)
Key informants	14	Population and family planning officials (5); local government representatives (3); Religious Court judge (1); religious affairs officials (2); community elder (1); child-welfare advocates (2)
Total participants	62	24 parents, 24 married children, and 14 key informants
Observation and documents	—	Community observations; Religious Court marriage dispensation records (2024–2025); provincial family data (2023)

Source: Primary research data, March 2026.

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted between 5 and 25 March 2026, using interview guides to obtain accounts of marriage decisions, family expectations, customary obligations, religious considerations, and institutional practices. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian, although participants occasionally used local expressions, which were translated into English by the researchers for presentation. Direct observation of community settings supplemented the interview material, while documentary sources included Religious Court records concerning marriage dispensation applications for 2024–2025 and provincial family data for 2023. These sources provided complementary perspectives on familial decision-making, institutional recognition, and the broader administrative circumstances associated with child marriage. The study received institutional permission from Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang and the West Sulawesi provincial government, and written consent was obtained from participants. The available research documentation did not specify an ethical review committee or approval number.

Data analysis followed an iterative qualitative procedure involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, with analytical categories developed through the social construction framework of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Interview accounts, observational information, and documentary evidence were examined to identify how particular circumstances generated marriage decisions, how religious and state institutions contributed to their recognition, and how parents and married children interpreted these arrangements within established sociocultural expectations. Initial categorization distinguished the three interconnected processes of social construction, while subsequent analysis identified the specific circumstances, institutional mechanisms, and interpretive patterns represented within each process. Family accounts were examined comparatively to distinguish decisions initiated by parents, children, relatives, or community pressures and to identify variations in parental responses to premarital pregnancy, elopement, customary expectations, and economic constraints. The principal circumstances associated with marriage were classified according to the dominant factor identified in each of the 24 family accounts, allowing the qualitative material to be organized systematically without treating the purposively selected participants as a statistically representative sample. Documentary records concerning marriage dispensation were examined descriptively to establish the distribution of recorded case dispositions across the two available years, without making inferential statistical claims or attributing causal relationships to administrative differences. Analytical interpretation proceeded iteratively, with comparisons repeated until the categories identified in the available material no longer changed. Credibility was examined through source triangulation by comparing parental narratives with accounts provided by their married children, statements from institutional and community informants, field observations, and relevant administrative documents. Differences between individual accounts and institutional records were retained as analytical distinctions rather than automatically reconciled, particularly where participant statements reflected personal interpretations or perceptions instead of independently measured circumstances. The analysis also distinguished customary legitimacy, religious recognition, and formal legal authorization to avoid treating these institutional dimensions as equivalent. This procedure supported a contextual interpretation of the relationships among sociocultural expectations, marital decision-making,

institutional legitimation, and the subsequent acceptance of child marriage within the boundaries of the investigated case.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Externalization of Child Marriage: Family Honor, Sociocultural Expectations, and Parental Decision-Making

The externalization of child marriage in the Mandar community of Campalagian reflects the interaction between individual circumstances, collective moral expectations, and culturally embedded interpretations of family responsibility. The qualitative evidence obtained from 24 families indicates that marriage decisions emerged through different circumstances, including premarital pregnancy, elopement, economic insecurity, kinship arrangements, and community intervention, rather than through a uniform pattern of parental matchmaking. These circumstances demonstrate that parental sociocultural preferences cannot be interpreted exclusively as autonomous decisions because familial responses are frequently shaped by events initiated by children or pressures imposed by surrounding social relationships. Berger and Luckmann's (2012) social construction framework provides an analytical basis for understanding externalization as a process through which individual actions and collective interpretations contribute to the reproduction of socially recognized marital practices, while Darwis and Harifuddin (2024) emphasize the relevance of culturally structured parental action in understanding early marriage in South Sulawesi.

Premarital pregnancy constituted the most frequently identified circumstance, accounting for seven of the 24 family cases, and was commonly interpreted through the perceived necessity of preserving familial dignity and avoiding public condemnation. Parental accounts revealed that pregnancy could transform marriage from a planned familial transition into an immediate social obligation, particularly when delaying the union was perceived as exposing both the child and the family to sustained reputational consequences. The responses of mothers WLA and NBY illustrate this constrained decision-making, as pregnancy was described through expressions of misfortune, resignation, and acceptance rather than through expectations of marital readiness or educational continuity. Triyono (2022) identifies psychological tensions within parental decisions following premarital pregnancy, while Bakence et al. (2025) and Sundari and Retnowati (2024) provide complementary explanations of how cultural obligations and perceived moral responsibility influence marriage decisions under comparable circumstances.

The cultural significance of siri’, understood through interconnected meanings of shame, personal dignity, and collective honor, provides an important interpretive basis for understanding why marriage becomes an acceptable response to situations regarded as socially disruptive. Within the Mandar accounts, the expression dipaccingi, referring to a process of being made clean, associates marriage with the restoration of moral and social standing rather than exclusively with the establishment of a legally recognized family relationship. This interpretation suggests that the perceived function of marriage extends beyond the relationship between prospective spouses because its social consequences are evaluated through the reputation of parents, relatives, and the broader kinship network. Alghifari et al. (2025) identify the relationship between siri’ na pacce and coercive marital practices, whereas Murlianti et al. (2026) examine how communal power and symbolic expectations concerning honor can contribute to the reproduction of child marriage.

The distribution of marriage circumstances demonstrates considerable variation in the mechanisms through which parental involvement was established, particularly concerning whether parents initiated, negotiated, or subsequently accepted the proposed marital arrangement. Pregnancy and elopement represented circumstances in which the conduct of the young couple commonly preceded parental approval, while economic difficulties and kinship proposals involved different combinations of family initiative and perceived necessity. The classification also distinguishes community-enforced marriage from family-mediated decisions, indicating that parental participation does not necessarily imply control over the circumstances producing the union. This variation is consistent with sociological explanations emphasizing the interaction of collective norms and individual action, although the relative influence of these mechanisms remains dependent on the particular circumstances represented in each family account (Sitompul et al., 2024; Adriany et al., 2026).

Table 2. Pathways to Marriage Below the Statutory Minimum Age Among the Participating Families

Main circumstance	Cases (n)	Percentage (%)	Age at marriage	Principal initiating actor
Premarital pregnancy	7	29.2	15–18	Young couple; parents subsequently responded
Elopement through Pua Imam (silariang)	5	20.8	13–17	Young couple; parents informed afterwards
Community intervention (Tisaka)	2	8.3	12 and 14	Neighbors and community members
Economic pressure	5	20.8	15–17	Parents or child following educational discontinuation
Kinship-based marriage proposal	3	12.5	15–18	Relatives; parents accepted the proposal
Child-initiated marriage preceding arranged matchmaking	2	8.3	15–17	Child
Total	24	99.9*	12–18	—

Source: Primary interview data, March 2026, classified according to the principal circumstance in each family account. Percentages were calculated from 24 families. The total differs from 100% because of rounding.

The classification presented in Table 2 indicates that premarital pregnancy accounted for the largest individual category, followed by elopement and economic pressure, each representing five family cases. Pregnancy, elopement, and child-initiated marriage preceding arranged matchmaking collectively accounted for 14 cases, equivalent to 58.3% of the participating families, although these classifications do not establish that every decision was freely initiated or independently controlled by the children involved. The distribution challenges a simplified interpretation of child marriage as predominantly the consequence of parental coercion, since parents frequently occupied a responsive position after the circumstances leading toward marriage had already developed. This distinction corresponds with Adriany et al. (2026), who question reductive representations of agency in Indonesian child marriage, while Cameron et al. (2023) demonstrate the importance of examining early marriage through differentiated individual and household experiences.

Elopement through silariang constituted a distinct mechanism of externalization in five families because marriage was initiated through the movement of the young couple toward an informal religious figure, locally identified as Pua Imam, before parental approval was formally established. The accounts of mothers DAH and SPA indicate that subsequent parental acceptance was closely associated with concerns about public ridicule, the perceived disgrace of returning an unmarried daughter, and the expectation that a completed marriage would restore familial standing. Religious mediation consequently served not merely as a procedural arrangement but also as a socially recognized means of addressing an already established conflict between individual conduct and customary expectations. Burhan (2019) examines familial reconciliation following elopement, while Laman (2022), Ismar (2024), and Ungawaru et al. (2024) demonstrate the relevance of customary and Islamic interpretations in understanding silariang and its consequences for family relationships.

Economic circumstances contributed to five marriages, particularly where educational discontinuation and uncertainty regarding household financial support influenced expectations surrounding the child's future. The account associated with mother SNA illustrates how interrupted vocational education, parental separation, and financial insecurity could make marriage appear to offer an alternative arrangement for economic support, although the anticipated transfer of responsibility was not necessarily guaranteed. The available family accounts also indicate that at least two husbands were unemployed and at least four married couples resided in the bride's parental household, suggesting that the expectation of economic relief could coexist with continued dependence on the original family. Amin et al. (2024) identify socioeconomic and educational factors associated with child marriage in West Sulawesi, while Suhan et al. (2022) and Liem et al. (2024)

provide supporting evidence concerning the role of household vulnerability and socially structured economic considerations in early marriage.

Kinship expectations and community intervention further demonstrate that marriage decisions were produced through different forms of collective influence rather than through a single structure of parental authority. Three families accepted proposals originating within kinship networks, with parental explanations referring to inherited beliefs that refusing an available marriage proposal might jeopardize a child's future marital prospects, while two additional cases involved Tisaka, in which community members intervened after identifying conduct regarded as socially inappropriate. The latter cases, involving children aged 12 and 14, illustrate a more direct form of communal enforcement in which the expectation of marriage was established through external pressure rather than a documented process of voluntary familial planning. Ahmad et al. (2023) examine the interaction between customary expectations, Islamic principles, and state law in South Sulawesi marriage practices, while Mutmainnah (2018) identifies cultural meanings associated with refusing marriage proposals and Sitompul et al. (2024) offer an account of matchmaking through socially conditioned action.

The evidence indicates that externalization operates through the continuous negotiation of familial dignity, perceived moral obligations, economic constraints, and the actions of children and other community members, rather than through a stable preference for child marriage shared by participating parents. Parental responses frequently reflected an attempt to reconcile conflicting responsibilities, particularly the desire to protect children's educational and personal futures against fears of reputational damage or the consequences of rejecting socially recognized marital expectations. The distinction between initiating marriage and accepting marriage after a perceived social transgression is analytically significant because the latter represents accommodation to an established circumstance rather than necessarily an independently formulated parental intention. Falahudin and Damaiyanti (2024) and Barisa (2024) associate the normalization of child marriage with socially reproduced expectations, while Aisyah et al. (2023) and Ambarwati et al. (2024) demonstrate the relevance of collective interpretation in shaping the perceived legitimacy of early marriage, supporting an understanding of externalization as a socially negotiated process whose institutional recognition requires further examination.

Objectivation of Child Marriage: Legal Pluralism, Religious Legitimacy, and Institutional Recognition

The objectivation of child marriage in the Mandar community of Campalagian reflects the institutional processes through which socially negotiated marriage decisions acquire recognition, legitimacy, and an apparently established position within collective life. The qualitative evidence identifies two principal channels of marital recognition: formal authorization through marriage dispensation granted by the Religious Court and informal religious solemnization conducted by locally recognized religious figures, particularly Pua Imam. These channels operate under different normative arrangements, since formal authorization is governed by statutory marriage requirements, whereas informal religious solemnization derives its social authority from community understandings of Islamic marriage validity and established customary practices. Berger and Luckmann (2012) conceptualize objectivation as the process through which socially produced arrangements acquire an institutional character, while Ahmad et al. (2023) demonstrate the relevance of interactions among state regulation, Islamic law, and customary authority in understanding marriage practices among South Sulawesi communities.

Formal marriage dispensation represents the legally established mechanism through which individuals below the statutory minimum marriage age may obtain judicial authorization to marry under Indonesian law. Law No. 16 of 2019 establishes a minimum marriage age of 19 years for women and men, while permitting parents to seek judicial dispensation under legally prescribed conditions, making the Religious Court an important institution in determining whether an exception should be authorized. The interview with a Religious Court judge indicates that consideration of the child's circumstances, potential benefits and harms, and willingness to marry formed part of the judicial reasoning described by the informant, including an account of a petition refused because the proposed marriage did not reflect the child's wishes. Surasa et al. (2025) examine marriage dispensation through legal and sociological considerations, while Liem et al. (2024) situate child

marriage within broader interactions among familial circumstances, social conditions, and institutional arrangements.

Religious Court records provide an administrative basis for examining the formal institutional recognition of marriage below the statutory minimum age in Polewali Mandar Regency during 2024 and 2025. The records identify 99 marriage dispensation petitions in 2024 and 100 petitions in 2025, indicating relatively similar annual caseloads across the two observed years rather than sufficient evidence of a sustained increase or decline. The number of granted petitions decreased from 90 to 81, while petitions recorded as refused increased from none in 2024 to nine in 2025, demonstrating variation in recorded judicial dispositions despite the comparable total number of applications. These administrative patterns require interpretation as descriptions of court decisions rather than direct measurements of child marriage prevalence, since marriage dispensation records do not capture unions performed without formal judicial authorization (Surasa et al., 2025; Ahmad et al., 2023).

The distribution of marriage dispensation decisions is presented in Table 3, retaining the original administrative classifications to distinguish outcomes that have different procedural meanings. The calculated proportions indicate the share of applications granted relative to the recorded total for each year, while the remaining categories represent refusals or other procedural dispositions that should not be treated as interchangeable judicial determinations. Maintaining the original classifications is particularly important because the available records do not provide sufficient information to reconstruct the legal grounds underlying each disposition. This distinction accords with the need to separate institutional decision-making from the wider sociological processes through which marriage acquires legitimacy and social acceptance (Berger & Luckmann, 2012; Surasa et al., 2025).

Table 3. Marriage Dispensation Case Dispositions at the Polewali Religious Court, 2024–2025

Case disposition	2024 (n)	2025 (n)	Change (2025–2024)
Dikabulkan (granted)	90	81	−9
Ditolak (refused)	0	9	+9
Dicabut (withdrawn)	2	4	+2
Digugurkan	4	3	−1
Gugur	1	2	+1
Tidak Dapat	2	1	−1
Total petitions	99	100	+1
Granted petitions (%)	90.9	81.0	−9.9 percentage points

Source: Polewali Religious Court administrative data, 2024–2025.

Table 3 demonstrates that judicial authorization accounted for a substantial proportion of recorded marriage dispensation applications in both years, although the proportion granted declined by 9.9 percentage points between 2024 and 2025. The increase in refused petitions suggests a difference in recorded case outcomes, but the available administrative data do not establish whether this reflects changes in judicial interpretation, applicant circumstances, evidentiary requirements, or other procedural considerations. The interviewed judge described decisions through an assessment of competing benefits and harms, while a religious affairs official referred to the requirement for medical documentation when pregnancy was presented as a circumstance supporting an application. These accounts illustrate how the formal institutional assessment of child marriage incorporates legal and case-specific considerations, although the coexistence of different religious and customary expectations complicates the wider social reception of judicial decisions (Sundari & Retnowati, 2024; Surasa et al., 2025).

Informal religious solemnization constitutes a second channel through which child marriage may acquire communal recognition without initially obtaining the legal documentation associated with a registered marriage. Interview accounts from three married children explicitly identified the absence of marriage certificates, including circumstances in which individuals possessed only village documentation, had not pursued formal registration, or intended to register after reaching the statutory minimum marriage age. Religious affairs informants explained that community recognition of

marriage frequently depends on the perceived fulfillment of Islamic marital requirements, including the participation of a guardian, witnesses, and the provision of a marital gift, even when formal state registration has not occurred. Muzakki et al. (2025) examine the social legitimacy associated with religiously mediated and unregistered marriages, while Bakence et al. (2025) demonstrate how religious pragmatism and legal pluralism can influence marital practices when sociocultural expectations compete with formal regulatory arrangements.

The involvement of Pua Imam demonstrates how informal religious authority can function as an institutionalized source of marital recognition within the local community. In the five elopement cases, the young couples approached an informal religious figure who performed the marriage and subsequently informed the parents, establishing a sequence in which religious solemnization preceded parental accommodation and formal administrative recognition. The institutional significance of this arrangement lies in the community's willingness to recognize a marriage as socially meaningful despite the absence of evidence that the informal religious figure possessed formal authority to authorize or register a marriage below the statutory minimum age. Burhan (2019), Laman (2022), and Ungawaru et al. (2024) discuss the intersection of elopement, customary expectations, and Islamic marital practices, while Ahmad et al. (2023) identify the broader interaction of religious, customary, and statutory norms in South Sulawesi marriage arrangements.

The coexistence of judicial dispensation and informal religious solemnization indicates a form of parallel legitimation in which distinct institutions provide different kinds of recognition rather than operating through an integrated administrative process. Formal judicial dispensation addresses the statutory requirements governing marriage eligibility, whereas informal religious solemnization responds to locally accepted understandings of marital validity and the perceived urgency of resolving pregnancy, elopement, or reputational conflict. The interviews also indicate that some unregistered marriages may subsequently be brought into contact with formal administrative procedures through marriage registration or judicial confirmation, although the available evidence does not establish the frequency or outcomes of such processes among the participating families. Berger and Luckmann (2012) provide a conceptual basis for interpreting these practices as institutional arrangements sustained through repeated social recognition, while Muzakki et al. (2025) and Ahmad et al. (2023) demonstrate why religious legitimacy and formal legal recognition must remain analytically distinct.

Religious interpretations of destiny and predestined marital relationships contribute an additional dimension to the objectivation process by presenting socially negotiated decisions as outcomes consistent with a broader moral order. Parents who interpreted pregnancy, elopement, or an unexpected marriage proposal as manifestations of fate did not necessarily regard the circumstances as desirable, but such interpretations could reduce the perceived legitimacy of resisting an arrangement that had already become socially difficult to reverse. Religious legitimation consequently operated not merely through the performance of marriage rituals but also through explanatory beliefs that connected individual circumstances to established collective understandings of moral obligation and responsibility. Shalehah (2025) discusses religious symbolic legitimation through the concept of the sacred canopy, while Mutmainnah (2018) and Ahmad et al. (2023) provide relevant accounts of culturally embedded marriage expectations and the interaction between communal beliefs and religiously informed marital practices.

The institutional reproduction of child marriage in Campalagian cannot be adequately understood through marriage dispensation decisions alone because formal authorization represents only one component of the broader system through which marriages become socially recognizable. The available evidence indicates that the Religious Court, religious affairs institutions, informal religious figures, and local communities occupy differentiated positions in the recognition and normalization of marital arrangements, without establishing that these actors coordinate or apply equivalent standards of legality. This differentiation has practical significance because interventions limited to judicial procedures may not address the informal forms of legitimacy through which families regard a marriage as valid, socially binding, or morally necessary. Studies of marriage dispensation, unregistered marriage, and culturally regulated marital relationships similarly indicate that institutional authority must be examined alongside collective recognition and familial expectations (Surasa et al., 2025; Muzakki et al., 2025; Bakence et al., 2025). The evidence supports an interpretation of objectivation as the stabilization of child marriage through partially overlapping legal, religious, and communal institutions, establishing the conditions under which initially contested

marital decisions may subsequently become incorporated into parental and individual understandings of acceptable family responsibility.

Internalization of Child Marriage: Parental Accommodation, Moral Rationalization, and the Reproduction of Sociocultural Norms

The internalization of child marriage among Mandar families in Campalagian reflects a process through which culturally established expectations concerning honor, responsibility, and marital legitimacy become incorporated into individual interpretations of acceptable family decisions. Interview accounts indicate that parental acceptance did not consistently emerge from an affirmative preference for early marriage, but frequently developed after pregnancy, elopement, or communal intervention had restricted the alternatives perceived as socially acceptable. The recurring expression daripada, meaning “rather than,” provides an interpretive indication of this process because parents compared the anticipated consequences of refusing marriage with those associated with accepting an arrangement they had not necessarily intended. Berger and Luckmann (2012) conceptualize internalization as the incorporation of socially objectivated meanings into subjective consciousness, while Adriany et al. (2026) emphasize the need to examine how social expectations and unequal power relations shape the apparent choices available to individuals involved in child marriage.

Parental accommodation was particularly evident in accounts involving premarital pregnancy, where marriage was understood less as a desirable transition to adulthood than as a response to anticipated reputational consequences. Mother WLA characterized her daughter's pregnancy as a misfortune, while mother NBY described an emotional response followed by acceptance of the marriage as an event associated with the child's perceived destiny. These accounts indicate that recognition of the undesirable circumstances surrounding marriage could coexist with the belief that allowing the union represented the least socially damaging response available to the family. Triyono (2022) examines the psychological complexity of parental decisions following unintended pregnancy, while Sundari and Retnowati (2024) and Bakence et al. (2025) identify the tension between perceived moral obligations and considerations concerning children's welfare in marriage following premarital pregnancy.

The internalization of marital expectations was also expressed through the reinterpretation of family honor as an obligation to accommodate decisions already initiated by children or enforced through community relationships. Mothers SPA and DAH described circumstances in which their daughters had entered arrangements involving Pua Imam before parental agreement was established, leaving the families to evaluate whether rejecting the marriage would intensify public humiliation or damage established kinship relationships. Parental acceptance under these circumstances did not eliminate disappointment or demonstrate unrestricted approval, but reflected the incorporation of collective expectations into the criteria through which parents assessed their available responses. Alghifari et al. (2025) associate siri’ na pacce with culturally structured pressures surrounding marriage, while Murlianti et al. (2026) examine the reproduction of child marriage through symbolic power and communal understandings of honor.

The empirical distinction between marriage circumstances and subsequent parental responses provides an analytical basis for evaluating how internalization differs from the initial production of marital decisions. Family accounts reveal that parents could occupy different positions in the decision-making process, including initiating marriage, accepting arrangements proposed by relatives, responding to children's conduct, or accommodating decisions imposed through community intervention. These variations indicate that acceptance should not be treated as an equivalent expression of independent preference across all participating families, particularly when the available alternatives were shaped by reputational concerns and previously established social obligations. The relationship between initiating circumstances and subsequent accommodation is summarized in Table 4, drawing on the documented classification of 24 families and the qualitative interpretations supported by the interview material (Darwis & Harifuddin, 2024; Sitompul et al., 2024).

Table 4. Marriage Initiation Circumstances and Interpretive Dimensions of Parental Accommodation in Campalagian

Marriage circumstance	Families (n)	Initiating circumstances or actors	Documented basis of parental response	Relevant dimension of internalization
Premarital pregnancy	7	Pregnancy involving the young couple	Concern about family reputation, perceived necessity, and acceptance of circumstances	Marriage interpreted as a response to anticipated shame
Elopement through Pua Imam	5	Child or young couple before parental approval	Concern about public ridicule and the consequences of rejecting an already solemnized union	Accommodation of religiously mediated marriage
Community intervention (Tisaka)	2	Neighbors or community members	Pressure to resolve conduct regarded as socially inappropriate	Acceptance shaped by communal enforcement
Economic pressure	5	Parents or children following educational discontinuation	Expectation of economic support and reduced parental responsibility	Marriage interpreted as a possible response to insecurity
Kinship-based proposal	3	Relatives proposing a marital arrangement	Concern about refusing a proposal and losing a perceived marital opportunity	Acceptance of inherited kinship expectations
Child-initiated marriage preceding arranged matchmaking	2	Child seeking an alternative to an anticipated arrangement	Accommodation of a decision initiated by the child	Negotiation between child agency and parental expectations
Total	24	—	—	—

Source: Primary interview data, March 2026.

Table 4 indicates that parental accommodation emerged through distinguishable circumstances rather than through a single pattern of approval, making it necessary to differentiate the social origins of marriage from the meanings subsequently attributed to it. The 14 families associated with pregnancy, elopement, and child-initiated marriage preceding arranged matchmaking represented 58.3% of the participating cases, although this descriptive proportion cannot establish the extent of voluntary child agency or the absence of parental influence before the events occurred. Economic hardship, kinship proposals, and community intervention accounted for the remaining ten cases, demonstrating that the incorporation of marital expectations could also occur through material insecurity and collective obligations that did not originate primarily from the young couple. Cameron et al. (2023) demonstrate the relevance of differentiated marital experiences when examining early marriage, while Aisyah et al. (2023) and Falahudin and Damaiyanti (2024) associate its normalization with the reproduction of socially accepted expectations that influence family decisions.

The relationship between parental accommodation and the perceived responsibility to protect children was especially apparent where parents continued providing material and emotional support after marriage. The accounts indicate that at least four married couples resided in the bride's parental household and that at least two husbands were unemployed, suggesting that marriage did not necessarily achieve the anticipated transfer of economic responsibility from parents to husbands. Mother NBY's continued support for her daughter and son-in-law illustrates how acceptance of marriage could coexist with ongoing parental responsibility, rather than representing a complete transition toward an economically independent household. Amin et al. (2024) identify socioeconomic

vulnerability among factors associated with child marriage in West Sulawesi, while Suhan et al. (2022) examine the social construction of marriage as a response to household economic responsibilities and Liem et al. (2024) highlight the relevance of broader socioeconomic conditions to child marriage in Indonesia.

Educational discontinuation and marital instability introduce further tensions into the internalization of child marriage because the perceived obligation to protect family honor may conflict with parental expectations concerning children's long-term welfare. The documented family experiences include interrupted schooling, six marital separations, and two separations following domestic violence, while one young woman relinquished an opportunity to enter a state university after becoming pregnant. These circumstances illustrate the limitations of interpreting early marriage exclusively as an effective means of restoring social order, since the resolution of an immediate reputational concern does not necessarily remove the social and economic difficulties experienced after marriage. Cameron et al. (2023) examine differences in subsequent life experiences associated with early marriage, while Yulestari et al. (2025) identify child-rights concerns arising from marriage arrangements shaped by parental decisions and Gusnita (2022) discusses the broader sociocultural problems associated with the persistence of child marriage.

Religious interpretations of destiny and inherited beliefs concerning marital opportunity contributed to the moral rationalization of decisions that parents sometimes experienced as undesirable or difficult to reverse. References to predetermined matches and the perceived consequences of refusing marriage proposals provided explanations through which unexpected marital arrangements could be interpreted as consistent with an established moral order rather than solely as outcomes of individual conduct. Such interpretations do not establish that religious beliefs independently caused marriage decisions, but they indicate how culturally meaningful explanations may reduce resistance to arrangements that have already acquired communal or religious recognition. Shalehah (2025) discusses the relationship between religious symbolism and the legitimation of collective realities, while Mutmainnah (2018) documents inherited beliefs surrounding rejected marriage proposals and Ahmad et al. (2023) examine the interaction between religious and customary expectations in marriage practices.

The distinction between parental acceptance and genuine normative endorsement remains central to interpreting the reproduction of child marriage within the participating families. Expressions of disappointment, sadness, and resignation indicate that some parents recognized the undesirable consequences of early marriage while continuing to regard acceptance as an appropriate response to circumstances shaped by family honor, religious recognition, and collective pressure. Such ambivalence qualifies interpretations that portray child marriage as an uncontested cultural preference, because the incorporation of established expectations may involve negotiation, emotional conflict, and perceived restrictions on available alternatives rather than complete identification with the practice. Barisa (2024) and Ambarwati et al. (2024) examine the normalization of early marriage through collective social interpretations, while Adriany et al. (2026) provide a critical basis for questioning simplified distinctions between individual choice and culturally imposed expectations.

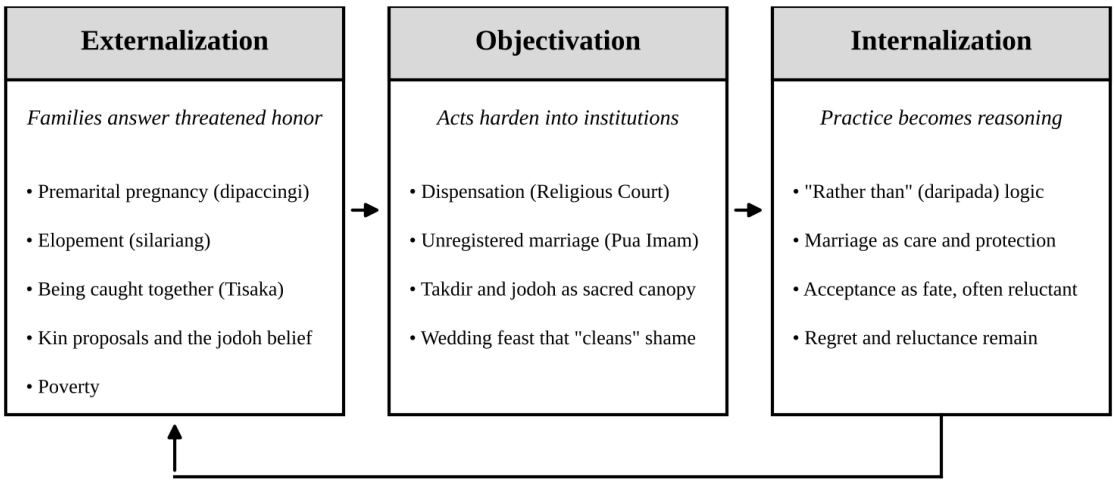


Figure 1. The Dialectic Of Child Marriage In Campalagian

The relationship among externalization, objectivation, and internalization suggests that the persistence of child marriage cannot be attributed exclusively to parental intentions, statutory exceptions, or inherited customary obligations considered independently. Family circumstances initially produced pressure toward marriage, legal and religious institutions offered different forms of recognition, and parents subsequently interpreted their accommodation through established understandings of honor, destiny, and responsibility, although these processes should not be assumed to follow an identical sequence in every family. The findings support a contextually bounded interpretation of child marriage as a socially reproduced practice in which perceived parental care can coexist with constrained decision-making and recognition of unfavorable marital consequences, without demonstrating that these mechanisms operate uniformly across Mandar communities. Berger and Luckmann (2012) provide the conceptual foundation for interpreting this relationship as the reproduction of institutionalized social meanings, while Adriany et al. (2026), Darwis and Harifuddin (2024), and Murlianti et al. (2026) support the need to examine the interaction of agency, parental authority, and symbolic power when assessing the sociocultural persistence of child marriage.

CONCLUSION

Child marriage among Mandar families in Campalagian, Polewali Mandar Regency, is sustained through interconnected processes of sociocultural externalization, institutional objectivation, and subjective internalization rather than through parental preference alone. The qualitative evidence from 24 families, comprising interviews with 24 parents, 24 married children, and 14 key informants, identifies premarital pregnancy as the most frequently reported circumstance, accounting for seven cases, followed by elopement and economic pressure with five cases each, kinship-based proposals with three cases, and community intervention and child-initiated marriage preceding arranged matchmaking with two cases each. Fourteen of the 24 marriages originated in circumstances involving pregnancy, elopement, or child-initiated alternatives to arranged matchmaking, indicating that parental acceptance frequently followed events initiated by children rather than independently formulated parental intentions. The objectivation of these arrangements occurred through distinct channels of recognition, including formal marriage dispensation administered by the Religious Court and informal religious solemnization conducted by locally recognized figures such as Pua Imam, whose community legitimacy did not constitute equivalent statutory authorization. Religious Court records documented 99 dispensation petitions in 2024 and 100 in 2025, with approval proportions of 90.9% and 81.0%, respectively, demonstrating variation in formal judicial dispositions without establishing a broader trend in child marriage prevalence. Internalization was characterized by reluctant accommodation, particularly through parental reasoning that interpreted marriage as a preferable response to perceived reputational damage, economic insecurity, or social exclusion. These findings establish that parental sociocultural preferences are not necessarily stable antecedents of

child marriage but may develop through negotiations among children's actions, customary expectations, religious recognition, and perceived familial obligations.

The principal theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating how the three moments of social construction can be analytically connected to distinguish the initiation of child marriage, its institutional recognition, and its subsequent acceptance within familial relationships. The findings refine interpretations of parental agency by distinguishing autonomous initiation from constrained accommodation, while identifying parallel legal and religious legitimating arrangements without assuming institutional coordination or equivalent legal standing. The coexistence of parental disappointment, continuing economic dependence, interrupted education, and marital separation further indicates that acceptance of child marriage should not be interpreted as evidence of favorable marital consequences or unrestricted cultural endorsement. These findings suggest that prevention strategies focused exclusively on statutory marriage restrictions, judicial dispensation, or parental awareness may be insufficient when informal religious authority, communal expectations concerning siri', and children's own actions contribute to marital decisions. More context-sensitive interventions should address the social consequences associated with refusing or postponing marriage, engage relevant religious and community actors, and strengthen opportunities for children and families to respond to pregnancy, elopement, and economic insecurity without resorting to early marriage. The study's explanatory scope remains limited to one subdistrict, a purposively selected group of families who had already experienced child marriage, and parental accounts predominantly provided by mothers, preventing statistical generalization or direct comparison with families who successfully delayed marriage. Future research should incorporate families who resisted early marriage, examine paternal and adolescent decision-making more extensively, and compare formal and informal marital recognition across other Mandar communities to assess the transferability of the identified sociocultural mechanisms.

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