

Cultural Power, Social Norms, and Child Marriage Prevention: A Phenomenological Study and Development of a Culturally Tailored Communication Model in Indonesia

Ayu Dwi Putri Rusman^{1*}, Muhammad Syafar², Lalu Muhammad Saleh³, Stang⁴,
Muhammad Farid⁵

¹Department of Doctor of Public Health Sciences, Faculty of Public Health, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

²Department of Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences, Faculty of Public Health, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

³Department of Health and Safety, Faculty of Public Health, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

⁴Department of Statistics, Faculty of Public Health, Hasanuddin University

⁵Department of Communication Studies, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

*Correspondence: ayhoedwi@gmail.com

Abstract

Background:

Child marriage remains a critical global public and social health issue, especially in environments where cultural norms, power hierarchies, and collective values profoundly influence family decision-making. While there is growing evidence about adverse health and social consequences, limited research has integrated cultural theory with behavior change frameworks to inform context-sensitive prevention strategies.

Objective:

This study aims to explore the cultural dimensions that influence child marriage in the Bugis community in Indonesia, developing culturally appropriate health communication interventions based on local theories and contexts.

Methods:

Qualitative phenomenological design was used, involving in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation with parents, adolescents, community leaders, religious leaders, and institutional stakeholders. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by MAXQDA. The study was theoretically informed by Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory and integrated with the PRECEDE-PROCEED Model, as well as the I-Change Model to guide the interpretation and development of interventions.

Results:

Findings reveal that high power distance, collectivist norms, gender expectations, and strong uncertainty avoidance significantly shape family decisions about child marriage. Cultural values such as *siri* (family honor), social pressure, and parental authority emerge as dominant drivers, often greater than individual agency. Economic vulnerability, limited knowledge of reproductive health, and fear of social stigma further reinforce the practice. The study also identified the role of influential communities and religious leaders in legitimizing norms. Based on these insights, a culturally adjusted communication module was developed and tested, showing a substantial improvement in family knowledge scores (mean increase from 68.33 to 90.42; $p = 0.002$).

Conclusion:

Child marriage in this context is embedded in cultural power structures and social norms, which require interventions that move beyond individual-level approaches. This study contributes by integrating cultural theory and behavior change models to develop context-sensitive communication strategies. These findings highlight the importance of culturally based and community-engaged interventions to effectively address child marriage in similar sociocultural settings.

Keywords:

Child marriage; cultural dimension; social norms; health communication; qualitative research; Indonesia

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Introduction

Child marriage remains an ongoing global public and social health challenge, especially in low- and middle-income countries where structural inequalities, gender norms, and cultural expectations intersect. Globally,

millions of children, especially girls, marry before the age of 18, which exposes them to increased risks of adverse reproductive health, educational discontinuity, and long-term socioeconomic vulnerability. Beyond its immediate health consequences, child marriage perpetuates cycles of poverty and intergenerational

social inequality, limits opportunities for human development and reinforces gender gaps. (Joyce, 2023; Roy & Chouhan, 2022) (Parvin et al., 2022) In addition to physical health risks, child marriage has significant psychological and social consequences. Child marriage is associated with increased susceptibility to depression, anxiety and trauma, mainly due to loss of autonomy, as well as exposure to marital instability or violence. These outcomes are often exacerbated in the context of economic hardship and social pressures, where young girls are expected to conform to traditional gender roles and family expectations. Despite extensive documentation of these impacts, existing research remains largely descriptive, focusing on outcomes rather than examining in depth the sociocultural mechanisms that sustain the practice. (Cameron et al., 2023; Lewandowska et al., 2022) (Shukla et al., 2023; Wang & Yi, 2023)

The fundamental weakness in previous studies lies in the treatment of culture that is more often positioned as a background rather than as a central analytical construct. While some studies acknowledge the influence of social norms, family expectations, and societal pressures, few have systematically explored how cultural values, social hierarchies, and normative systems shape family decision-making processes related to child marriage. This gap limits the development of interventions that are not only culturally effective but also culturally meaningful and socially acceptable in the context of a particular community. (Mahmuddin et al., 2023)

From a theoretical point of view, culture is understood as a dynamic system that includes values, meanings, and power relations that shape and direct social behavior. Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory offers a valuable framework for analyzing how dimensions such as power distance, collectivism, gender orientation, and uncertainty avoidance affect decision-making in families and communities. From a theoretical perspective, culture is understood as a dynamic system that encompasses values, meanings, and power relations that shape and direct social behavior. In a society characterized by strong collectivism values and hierarchical social structures, the system is manifested in a pattern of decision-making in which individual choices, especially related to marriage, tend to be subordinated to collective interests, family authority, and efforts to maintain social reputation. However, despite its relevance, the application of cultural dimension theory in understanding and preventing child marriage is still limited. (Nickerson, 2023)

At the same time, behavioural change frameworks such as the PRECEDE-PROCEED Model and the I-Change Model have been widely used to design health

interventions. These models emphasize the role of predisposition, reinforcement, and driving factors, as well as the cognitive and motivational processes underlying behavioral change. Nevertheless, its application often prioritizes individual-level determinants and tends to ignore the broader cultural and social structures that shape behavior. This creates a disconnect between theoretically informed intervention design and the realities of community life where social norms and cultural expectations strongly govern the decision-making process.

Indonesia represents a critical context to examine this dynamic. In particular, within the Bugis ethnic community in South Sulawesi, child marriage is embedded in a complex system of cultural values and social expectations. Cultural beliefs emphasize the importance of family honor, social conformity, and adherence to traditional norms, where early marriage is often considered a strategy to protect family reputations and prevent social stigma. Despite various intervention efforts, the prevalence of child marriage in this context remains relatively high, demonstrating the persistence of entrenched cultural influences. (Wibowo et al., 2021) (DP3APPKB SOUTH SULAWESI, 2023; Wibowo et al., 2021)

Although previous research has highlighted the role of cultural and social factors in sustaining child marriage, there is still limited research that systematically integrates cultural theory with behavioral frameworks to understand and address these issues. In addition, existing interventions often rely on general approaches that are not sufficiently adapted to the local cultural context, thus reducing their effectiveness and sustainability. (Bappenas, 2020)

Addressing these gaps, this study aims to explore the cultural dimensions that influence child marriage practices in Bugis communities in Indonesia and to develop culturally appropriate health communication interventions based on cultural theories and behavioral change frameworks. By integrating Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory with the PRECEDE-PROCEED Model and the I-Change Model, this study seeks to bridge the gap between cultural analysis and intervention design.

This research provides three main contributions. First, it advances a theoretical understanding of child marriage by positioning culture, specifically power relations and social norms, as central determinants rather than peripheral factors. Second, it shows how integrating cultural and behavioral frameworks can provide a more comprehensive approach to analyzing complex social practices. Third, it offers practical contributions through the development of culturally based communication strategies and the provision of evidence-based models for context-sensitive interventions in similar sociocultural settings.

Method

Study Design

This study uses qualitative phenomenological design to explore the life experiences, cultural meanings, and social dynamics underlying child marriage practices in the Bugis community in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. A phenomenological approach was chosen to capture participants' subjective interpretations and understand how cultural values, as well as social norms shape the decision-making processes associated with early marriage. The study also incorporates the development phases of the intervention, resulting in culturally tailored health communication modules.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by an integrated theoretical framework that combines Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory, the PRECEDE-PROCEED Model, and the I-Change Model. The Hofstede framework is used to analyze cultural dimensions such as power distance, collectivism, gender norms, and the avoidance of uncertainty that affect family and societal decision-making. The PRECEDE-PROCEED model guides the identification of predisposition, reinforcement, and enabling factors associated with child marriage. The I-Change model is applied to understand behavioral determinants, including awareness, motivation, and intention, and to inform the development of communication interventions.

Study and Participant Settings

The study was conducted in the Bugis community in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, where child marriage remains influenced by strong cultural norms and social expectations. Participants were selected intentionally to ensure diversity of perspectives and include:

- Parents of teenagers
- Teenagers (both married and unmarried)
- Community leaders
- Religious leaders
- Health workers and local government stakeholders

The inclusion criteria consist of individuals aged 15 years and above who have direct or indirect experience related to the practice of child marriage in the community. The process of collecting informants is carried out continuously until no new information is found or has reached a data saturation point.

Data Collection

Data were collected using several qualitative methods to ensure depth and triangulation:

1. **In-depth interviews:** Conducted with parents, teens, and stakeholders to explore personal experiences, beliefs, and decision-making processes.
2. **Focus group discussions (FGDs):** Conducted separately with community

members to capture shared norms, collective values, and social expectations.

3. **Participant observation:** Conducted to understand community interactions, cultural practices, and contextual dynamics that affect child marriage.

All interviews and discussions were conducted in the local language, recorded audio-wise, and transcribed verbatim. Field records were taken to document nonverbal cues and contextual information.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following an inductive-deductive approach. The analysis process involves:

1. Familiarize yourself with the data through repeated transcript reading
2. Initial coding to identify meaningful units
3. Category and theme development
4. Interpretation of themes using an integrated theoretical framework

The analysis is supported by qualitative data analysis software (e.g. MAXQDA). Theoretical constructions of the cultural dimensions of Hofstede, PRECEDE-PROCEED, and the I-Change Model are used to guide interpretation, as well as ensure analytical depth.

Intervention Development

Findings from the qualitative phase were used to develop culturally tailored health communication modules. The development process includes:

- Identify key cultural beliefs and behavioural determinants
- Map findings to the PRECEDE-PROCEED component
- Designing communication messages that align with local cultural values
- Incorporate behavior change strategies based on the I-Change Model

The module is piloted in the community to assess initial feasibility and effectiveness.

Accuracy and Trust

To ensure methodological accuracy, this study applied the following strategies:

- **Credibility:** Triangulation of data sources (interviews, FGDs, observations)
- **Reliability:** Use of a systematic and transparent analysis process
- **Confirmation:** Peer briefing and audit trail documentation
- **Transferability:** Detailed descriptions of the context and participants

Ethical Considerations

This research has received approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Public Health, Hasanuddin University (approval number: 6490/UN4.14.1/TP.01.02/2023, dated December 20,

2023, protocol number: 41223093038). This research has also obtained permission from the Parepare City Government, especially from the One-Stop Investment and Integrated Services Office. All participants had given informed *consent* before participating in this study. For participants under the age of 18, consent is obtained from both parents or guardians and the participant himself/herself. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured during the study.

Results

Qualitative data analysis reveals a series of interconnected themes that explain how cultural values, social norms, and structural constraints together shape child marriage practices in the Bugis community. These themes do not stand alone, but operate as a dynamic system of influence within the broader socio-cultural structure, where power relations, collective expectations, and structural conditions reinforce each other in the decision-making process. In line with the analytical approach used, the interpretation of these findings is guided by Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, and is integrated with the PRECEDE-PROCEED Model and the I-Change Model to understand the relationship between cultural dimensions, behavioral determinants, and the social context that surrounds them.

Cultural Power and Parental Authority

The findings suggest that decision-making regarding child marriage is dominated by parental authority in a hierarchical family structure. In this context, the involvement of adolescents, especially women, tends to be limited because decisions are positioned as part of parental responsibility and authority. Participants described compliance with the decision as a form of socially reasonable and expected norms, not as a form of coercion.

Within the framework of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, these findings reflect the characteristics of *high power distance*, in which unequal power relations are accepted as part of the social order. In the perspective of the PRECEDE-PROCEED Model, this condition serves as a *reinforcing factor* that strengthens practices through social legitimacy. Meanwhile, in the I-Change Model, parental authority functions as a form of dominant social influence that shapes motivation as well as individual behavioral intentions. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that family hierarchy and compliance norms significantly influence early marriage decisions in collectivist societies. (Mahmuddin et al., 2023; Wibowo et al., 2021)

Collective Norms and Social Conformity

The practice of child marriage in this context is also strongly shaped by collective norms that define the

boundaries of behavior that are considered acceptable in society. Participants described intense social pressure to conform to these expectations, especially related to the timing of marriage in adolescent girls. Any deviation from this norm is perceived to risk triggering gossip, social stigma, and damaging the family's reputation.

These findings reflect the characteristics of collectivist culture as described in Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, where group interests and social harmony are placed above individual preferences. Within the framework of the PRECEDE-PROCEED Model, these social norms act as predisposing factors that shape beliefs and attitudes towards child marriage practices. Meanwhile, in the I-Change Model, perception of social norms affects the formation of awareness and behavioral intentions. These findings are also consistent with previous studies that show that social expectations and societal surveillance mechanisms are key factors in sustaining child marriage practices. (Joyce, 2023; Parvin et al., 2022)

Siri' (Honor) and Social Risk Avoidance

The cultural value of *siri'* (family honor) emerged as a key factor that connects the cultural dimension with social practices. In this context, child marriage is often understood as a preventive strategy to avoid potential violations of moral norms and maintain family reputation. Participants emphasized that social risks, such as shame and stigma, have greater consequences compared to the long-term impact of early marriage itself.

In the perspective of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, these findings reflect a tendency of *uncertainty avoidance*, in which societies seek to minimize uncertainty through strict social control. In the PRECEDE-PROCEED Model, *the value of the series'* functions as a *predisposing factor* that forms the orientation of values and attitudes. Meanwhile, in the I-Change Model, this is reflected in the perception of social risks that affect behavioral decisions. These findings are consistent with the literature highlighting the role of honor-based norms and fear of stigma in strengthening early marriage. (Cameron et al., 2023; Shukla et al., 2023)

Gender Norms and the Structuring of Female Roles

Traditional gender expectations also reinforce the practice of child marriage, in which women are positioned in both domestic and reproductive roles. Participants described that early marriage is seen as part of a "normal" life cycle for women, thus limiting space for alternative choices, such as education or self-development.

Within the framework of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, this condition is related to the construction of gender roles in the cultural dimension.

In the PRECEDE–PROCEED Model, these beliefs function as *predisposing factors* that shape attitudes. Meanwhile, in the I-Change Model, this gender norm is internalized as an attitude that affects behavioral tendencies. These results corroborate previous findings that gender norms significantly influence the persistence of child marriage in a variety of sociocultural contexts. (Lewandowska et al., 2022; Wang & Yi, 2023)

Structural Constraints and Limited Behavioral Agency

In addition to cultural and social factors, the findings also show that structural constraints play an important role in maintaining child marriage practices. Economic limitations, low access to education, and lack of reproductive health information limit the options available to adolescents and families. In these conditions, child marriage is often seen as a pragmatic solution to the limitations faced.

In the PRECEDE–PROCEED Model, these factors serve as *enabling factors* that enable behavior to occur. Meanwhile, in the I-Change Model, this limitation affects the individual's ability and limits the formation of the intention to choose other alternatives. These findings are supported by existing evidence linking economic vulnerability and educational discontinuity with an increased risk of child marriage. (Roy & Chouhan, 2022)

structural constraints interact to shape child marriage practices."

Discussion

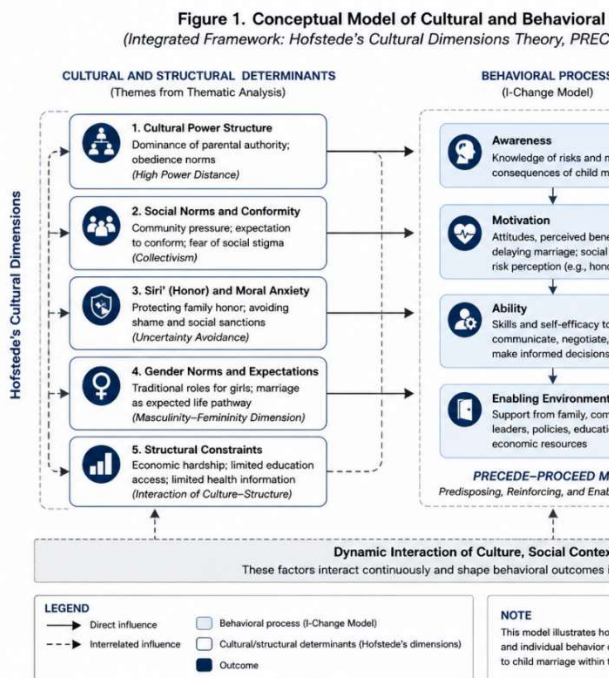
This research expands the understanding of child marriage by positioning the interaction between cultural power, social norms, and structural constraints as the core of the decision-making process in the Bugis community in Indonesia. Through the integration of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, the PRECEDE–PROCEED Model, and the I-Change Model, this research goes beyond phenomenological descriptions and offers a more comprehensive analytical framework in explaining the sustainability of child marriage practices.

This study shows that the practice of child marriage cannot be understood as a mere individual decision, but rather as a product of a complex interaction between cultural power structures, social norms, honor values, gender expectations, and interlocking structural constraints. These findings confirm that behavior is not formed in a vacuum, but is constructed through sociocultural systems that regulate, limit, and legitimize individual choices.

In this context, parental dominance of authority represents a concrete manifestation of a power structure embedded in culture. The limited involvement of adolescents, especially women, suggests that individual agency is negotiated in hierarchical relations that are socially legitimized. Compliance with parental decisions is not interpreted as coercion, but as a normative obligation that is in harmony with collective values. In the perspective of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, this phenomenon reflects the characteristics of (*high power distance*, where power inequality is accepted as part of a legitimate social order.

Furthermore, these findings show that social norms and gender norms operate as mutually reinforcing regulatory systems. Collective norms define the boundaries of acceptable behavior, while gender norms specifically direct expectations towards women, especially regarding time and roles in marriage. In practice, social surveillance mechanisms such as gossip, stigma, and reputation control not only maintain social conformity, but also actively reproduce gender inequality. Thus, the pressure to conform is not neutral, but is unevenly distributed and more intensely experienced by women. (Joyce, 2023; Parvin et al., 2022)

Within the framework of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, this condition reflects the dominance of collectivist values that place social harmony above individual preferences, while institutionalizing the role of gender in cultural systems. Integration with the PRECEDE–PROCEED Model



"Figure 1 presents a conceptual model derived from thematic analysis, illustrating how cultural forces, social norms, honor values, gender expectations, and

shows that social and gender norms serve as *predisposing factors* that shape beliefs and attitudes towards child marriage. Meanwhile, the I-Change Model explains how these norms are internalized as social perceptions that affect awareness, motivation, and behavioral intentions.

The cultural value of *siri'* (honor) further strengthens this system by linking moral expectations with decision-making. Child marriage is positioned as a preventive strategy to avoid social risks, especially those related to violations of sexual norms and the potential loss of family reputation. In this context, the logic of decision-making is not based on consideration of long-term risks, but rather on efforts to avoid social consequences that are direct and collective. This reflects the tendency of (Cameron et al., 2023; Shukla et al., 2023) *uncertainty avoidance* in Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, where society seeks to minimize uncertainty through strict social control.

On the other hand, structural constraints such as poverty, limited access to education, and lack of health information have also narrowed the space of choice available to individuals. In these conditions, child marriage is often seen as a pragmatic response to the limitations faced (Field & Ambrus, 2020; Roy & Chouhan, 2022). Within the framework of the PRECEDE-PROCEED Model, these factors serve as *enabling factors* that enable behavior to occur. Meanwhile, the I-Change Model emphasizes that these limitations limit *perceived behavioral control* and reduce the likelihood of individuals choosing other alternatives.

Overall, the findings of this study show that the practice of child marriage is maintained through an integrated system, where cultural power, social norms, honor values, gender expectations, and structural constraints interact with and reinforce each other. This system works not only through external pressures, but also through a process of internalizing values that make the practice seem "natural" and inevitable.

The main contribution of this research lies in its ability to integrate cultural and behavioral perspectives in one coherent analytical framework. By combining Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory with the PRECEDE-PROCEED Model and the I-Change Model, the study sheds light not only on "what" happens, but also on the "how" and "why" of child marriage practices persisting. This approach goes beyond descriptive analysis by offering a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying complex social practices.

The implication is that efforts to prevent child marriage cannot only focus on changing individual behavior, but must target the broader socio-cultural system. Interventions need to be designed context-

sensitive, involving family authority structures, shifting collective norms, reconstructing cultural values such as *siri'*, and addressing structural constraints that limit individual choice. Without a comprehensive and integrated approach, interventions risk being ineffective because they do not touch the underlying root causes of the practice.

Conclusion

This study shows that child marriage is shaped by the interaction between cultural power structures, social norms, *honor-based values*, gender expectations, and structural barriers. These factors operate as an interconnected system that regulates behavior and limits individual agency.

The integration of Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory with the PRECEDE-PROCEED Model and the I-Change Model in this study results in a more comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing child marriage issues.

The findings of this study confirm that effective interventions must go beyond approaches at the individual level, and instead, must interact directly with cultural norms, family authority structures, as well as existing structural conditions. Strategies that are based on cultural values (*culturally grounded*) and informed by theory are essential to ensure relevance and sustainability in efforts to prevent child marriage.

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