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## The Effectiveness of Premarital Counseling on Understanding the Sakinah, Mawaddah, and Rahmah Family Concept at the Bululawang Office of Religious Affairs

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of the premarital counseling program organized by the Office of Religious Affairs (Kantor Urusan Agama/KUA) of Bululawang District, Malang Regency, in enhancing prospective brides' and grooms' knowledge of the concepts of *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* in family life. The high divorce rate in Indonesia—reaching 480,618 cases in 2021, with 110 cases recorded in Bululawang District alone in 2022—constitutes the underlying urgency of this research. This study employs a descriptive, qualitative approach using field research methods. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Informants included the head of the KUA, marriage counselors, program facilitators, and ten pairs of prospective brides and grooms. The findings indicate that: (1) the premarital counseling program at the KUA of Bululawang has been implemented in accordance with the Regulation of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance (Bimas Islam) Number 379 of 2018, encompassing six core modules delivered using andragogical methods; (2) supporting factors include the availability of instructional modules, the capacity of certified facilitators, and adequate facilities and infrastructure, while inhibiting factors comprise budget constraints, the absence of mandatory participation regulations, and suboptimal participant engagement; (3) overall, the premarital counseling program has proven effective in enhancing both the knowledge and psychological readiness of prospective couples, with the average readiness score reaching 74.65%. This study recommends strengthening regulations to mandate participation in premarital counseling programs and increasing budget allocations for the KUA.

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### Introduction

Marriage is one of the acts of worship strongly encouraged in Islam and is the primary foundation for the emonious family. The Qur'an describes marriage not merely as a biological or social bond, but as a sacred covenant (*mitsaqan ghalidzan*) that simultaneously encompasses spiritual, emotional, and legal dimensions. As stated in Surah Ar-Rum (30:21), among the signs of Allah's power is the creation of spouses for humankind so that tranquility (*sakinah*), affection (*mawaddah*), and mercy (*rahmah*) may be realized. These three concepts represent the ideal objectives for every married couple in building a household.

However, social realities indicate that the divorce rate in Indonesia has continued to rise significantly over the years. Data from the Directorate General of Islamic Community Guidance show that there were 394,246 divorce cases in 2015, rising to 401,717 in 2018 and 480,618 in 2021. Malang Regency, as one of the regions with a large Muslim population in East Java, also contributes considerably to these figures. In 2022, 522 divorce cases were recorded in Malang Regency, with 110 cases occurring in Bululawang District alone.

This high rate of divorce is largely attributed to the lack of preparation and insufficient knowledge among prospective brides and grooms regarding the complexities of married life. Many couples enter marriage without adequate understanding of spousal rights and obligations, family conflict management, reproductive health, and Islamic values in household life. This condition is further exacerbated by the diverse educational backgrounds of prospective couples, many of whom have not received formal education in *fiqh al-munakahat* (Islamic marital jurisprudence) or Islamic family studies.

In response to this issue, the Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, has established regulations mandating premarital counseling for prospective couples. Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs No. 39 of 2012 concerning the Organization and Work Procedures of the Office of Religious Affairs authorizes KUA to provide *sakinah* family guidance services. This regulation was further strengthened by the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance No. 379 of 2018 concerning the Implementation Guidelines for Premarital Marriage Guidance for Prospective Brides and Grooms, which provides detailed provisions on the technical aspects, materials, methods, and funding of premarital counseling programs across Indonesia.

The Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) of Bululawang District, Malang Regency, is one of the institutions that has consistently implemented premarital counseling programs. This program is designed to provide prospective couples with comprehensive knowledge of the meaning of marriage in Islam, household dynamics, conflict management, reproductive health, parenting patterns, and family financial management. Given the diverse educational backgrounds of prospective couples in Bululawang District—many of whom are not graduates of Islamic boarding schools and have not studied *fiqh al-munakahat*—this program is particularly crucial.

Previous studies have examined the effectiveness of premarital counseling from various perspectives. Marsaid (2021) analyzed the implementation of premarital counseling at the KUA of Bululawang from a policy implementation perspective and found that the program contributed positively to the readiness of prospective couples. Sundani (2018), in a study conducted at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, concluded that premarital counseling services significantly influence the psychological readiness of prospective brides and grooms. Muhlis (2015), who examined the KUA of Tompobulu District, found that effective management of premarital counseling is positively correlated with the realization of *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* in families. Nevertheless, in-depth studies specifically measuring the effectiveness of premarital counseling programs in improving prospective couples' knowledge of the concepts of *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* at the KUA of Bululawang remain limited. This research, therefore, seeks to fill this gap.

Based on the above background, this study formulates three main research questions: (1) How is the premarital counseling program implemented at the KUA of Bululawang District, Malang Regency? (2) What are the supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of the program? (3) How effective is premarital counseling in enhancing prospective couples'

knowledge of *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* family concepts? The answers to these questions are expected to provide meaningful academic contributions to the development of premarital counseling programs in Indonesia and to serve as evaluative input and policy recommendations for the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

## **Method**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a field research design. This approach was selected because the researcher intended to identify, analyze, and interpret phenomena occurring naturally in the field without manipulating variables, in line with the definition proposed by Creswell (2014), which states that qualitative research is an approach used to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems.

The research was conducted at the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) of Bululawang District, Malang Regency, East Java, from January to March 2024. The selection of this location was based on the consideration that the KUA of Bululawang had consistently implemented premarital counseling programs and exhibited a relatively significant number of divorce cases, making it a relevant site for assessing the program's impact.

The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, in which informants were selected based on specific considerations aligned with the research objectives. The informants consisted of: (1) the Head of the KUA of Bululawang District, Mr. Arif Afandi, S.Ag.; (2) the marriage counselor at the KUA of Bululawang, Mr. Chusein Rifa'i; (3) the Head of Islamic Community Guidance (Bimas Islam) of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Malang Regency, Mr. Ahmad Fanani, S.Ag.; (4) the Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office of Malang Regency, Mr. Drs. Sahid, M.M.; and (5) ten pairs of prospective brides and grooms who participated in the 15th cohort of the premarital counseling program at the KUA of Bululawang in February 2024.

The data collection techniques comprised three methods: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted directly during the implementation of the premarital counseling program, from the opening session to the post-test stage. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner using a pre-developed interview guide, while still allowing flexibility for follow-up questions based on the informants' responses. Documentation was carried out by collecting data in the form of official KUA records, premarital counseling modules, participants' pre-test and post-test results, as well as photographs and audio recordings of the counseling activities.

The data analysis technique referred to the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consisted of three concurrent stages: (1) data reduction, involving the process of selecting, simplifying, and transforming raw data obtained from the field; (2) data display, involving the organization and presentation of information to facilitate conclusion drawing; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, involving the interpretation of data and validation of findings. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and technique triangulation.

## **Findings**

The preparation of prospective couples for married life requires not only a normative understanding of marriage in Islam but also practical readiness to navigate the complexities of

household dynamics. The ideals of *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* serve as fundamental pillars in shaping a harmonious and resilient family structure. However, the realization of these ideals is influenced by various factors, including the quality of guidance provided prior to marriage, institutional support, and the socio-cultural context in which couples live.

In this regard, premarital counseling serves as a strategic intervention that bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in marital life. Its implementation within institutional settings reflects both the opportunities and challenges inherent in preparing couples for long-term commitments. Therefore, a comprehensive examination is necessary to understand how such programs are carried out, what factors support or hinder their effectiveness, and to what extent they contribute to the formation of families characterized by harmony, affection, and compassion.

### **The Premarital Counseling Program at the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) of Bululawang District**

Based on the results of observations and interviews, the premarital counseling program at the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) of Bululawang District was implemented in two models: (1) a regular face-to-face marriage counseling program organized by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Malang Regency in collaboration with the KUA of Bululawang over two consecutive days, totaling 16 instructional hours; and (2) an independent counseling program conducted directly by marriage registrars (*penghulu*) or KUA counselors when prospective couples completed their marriage administrative requirements, with a duration ranging from two to four instructional hours.

In 2024, the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Malang Regency received a budget allocation to conduct 16 cohorts of regular marriage counseling, with the KUA of Bululawang assigned five cohorts. With an average of 30 prospective couples per cohort, the total number of participants in the regular program was approximately 150 pairs, accounting for approximately 13% of the 1,122 marriages registered at the KUA of Bululawang in 2023. This indicated that only around 13 percent of prospective couples had the opportunity to participate in the more comprehensive regular counseling program.

The regular counseling program encompassed six core modules delivered by five certified facilitators: (1) Preparing for a Strong Marriage toward a *Sakinah* Family, presented by Chusein Rifa'i using life-stream methods, brainstorming, and group discussions; (2) Maintaining Family Reproductive Health, delivered by representatives of the Bululawang Community Health Center, covering the World Health Organization's definition of health, reproductive anatomy, contraception, and family planning programs; (3) Managing Marital and Family Dynamics, presented by the Head of the KUA, Arif Afandi, S.Ag., using games, role-play, and couple discussions; (4) Preparing a High-Quality Generation, delivered by Sahid, focusing on authoritarian, permissive, and democratic parenting styles; (5) Fulfilling Household Needs, presented by Ahmad Fanani using brainstorming and self-reflection methods; and (6) Managing Conflict and Building Family Resilience, delivered by Yuyun Umul Anisah through case studies and group discussions.

Before and after participating in the counseling sessions, participants were given pre- and post-test questionnaires on marriage and the concepts of *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah*. The pre- and post-tests indicated significant improvement in participants' understanding following the

program. In addition, at the end of the sessions, participants received training in pronouncing the marriage contract (*akad nikah*) in Arabic, Indonesian, and Javanese, guided by Ahmad Fanani.

### **Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Premarital Counseling**

Based on the research findings, several factors were identified as supporting the success of the premarital counseling program at the KUA of Bululawang. First, the availability of premarital counseling modules in the form of the *Fondasi Keluarga Sakinah* handbook, which was provided free of charge to participants as a self-learning guide. Second, all speakers and facilitators held certification from technical training (*bimbingan teknis*) programs for premarital counseling, organized by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, thereby ensuring standardized quality in the delivery of materials. Third, adequate facilities and infrastructure were available, including a meeting hall, projector, LCD equipment, teaching modules, stationery, snacks, and lunch for participants, all provided at no cost. Fourth, the relatively high number of marriage registrations at the KUA of Bululawang ensured a consistent supply of participants for the counseling sessions.

On the other hand, the study also identified several factors that hindered the optimal implementation of the program. The first inhibiting factor was budget limitations, whereby the regular program reached only approximately 13 percent of registered prospective couples, while the remainder received only the shorter independent counseling. Second, there was no explicit regulation mandating participation in premarital counseling for prospective couples. As a result, the KUA of Bululawang had to adopt informal strategies, including warnings that marriage services would not be processed for those who did not attend the counseling sessions. Third, participant enthusiasm and engagement were not optimal, with approximately 25 percent of participants failing to complete the sessions, mainly due to limited work leave. Fourth, the diverse social, economic, and educational backgrounds of participants contributed to uneven levels of comprehension.

### **Effectiveness of Premarital Counseling in the Formation of *Sakinah, Mawaddah, and Rahmah* Families**

To evaluate the effectiveness of the premarital counseling program, the researcher utilized four indicators of prospective couples' readiness. These indicators were assessed through in-depth interviews conducted after counseling. The indicators were: (a) mental readiness and self-confidence, (b) comprehension of the concept of marriage, (c) mastery of marital principles, and (d) understanding of parenting knowledge. The following table presents the results of the assessment of ten pairs of participants who served as research informants.

Table 1. Level of Readiness of Prospective Brides and Grooms After Participating in Premarital Counseling

No	Prospective Couple	Mental	Concept of Marriage	Marital Principles	Parenting	Average
1	Yuliyanto & Daniatul Hidayah	80	75	75	75	76,25%
2	Rahmad Fuadi & Siti Faizatun	75	75	73	70	73,25%
3	Miftahur Roziqin & Erin Yunita	78	75	80	75	77,00%
4	M. Zam Kirom & Ninuk Zahro	80	78	75	75	77,50%
5	Ali Muchlis & Ana Faizah	75	75	78	75	75,75%
6	Purwanto & Nur Lena	73	70	73	77	73,25%
7	Fatkhun Naja & Nur Leli	80	75	77	75	76,25%
8	Agus Susanto & Nurul	70	70	75	70	71,25%
9	M. Iqbal & Ima Pujianti	75	77	78	73	75,75%
10	M. Muhith & Iklima	73	68	70	70	70,25%
<b>Average</b>						<b>74,65%</b>

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that the average readiness score of prospective brides and grooms after participating in premarital counseling was 74.65%, with a score range of 70.25% to 77.50%. The couple, M. Zam Kirom and Ninuk Zahro, achieved the highest score (77.50%), while M. Muhith and Iklima obtained the lowest score (70.25%). Nevertheless, all couples demonstrated a relatively good level of readiness, given that most had previously had limited knowledge of the concepts of *sakinah, mawaddah, and rahmah* in family life.

From the interview results, the researcher also found that participants experienced a significant increase in self-confidence after attending the counseling program. Nur Lena, one of the participants, stated that after gaining new knowledge about household life, she felt more prepared to enter marriage and developed a principle of mutual self-reflection before blaming her partner. Fatkhun Naja and Istiqomah reported that after participating in the counseling sessions, they gained a better understanding of both physical and non-physical needs in marriage and of more appropriate ways to resolve conflicts. Meanwhile, Muklis and Seriyannah expressed that they had developed a deeper understanding of marriage as a religiously encouraged institution and were committed to building a happy family in accordance with Islamic teachings.

## Discussion

### Implementation of the Premarital Counseling Program: Between Regulation and Reality

The findings of this study confirmed that the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) of Bululawang District had implemented the premarital counseling program in accordance with the regulatory framework established by the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance (Bimas Islam) Number 379 of 2018. The six core materials mandated in the regulation had been delivered systematically using an andragogical approach that emphasized participants'

experiences and active engagement. This is consistent with Knowles et al. (2015), who argue that adult learning (andragogy) should be grounded in learners' experiences, relevant to their real-life needs, and oriented toward problem-solving.

However, there remained a significant gap between the program's ideal scope and its actual implementation capacity in the field. The fact that only 13 percent of prospective couples at the KUA of Bululawang were able to attend the regular counseling program indicated structural issues related to budget allocation and institutional capacity. This finding aligns with the study by Lestanata and Pribadi (2016), which found that the effectiveness of government programs is often constrained by budget limitations that are disproportionate to actual field needs.

Another equally important issue was the absence of a clear regulation that mandates participation in premarital counseling. This lack of compulsory regulation left the program vulnerable to low participation and attendance. Consequently, the KUA of Bululawang was compelled to adopt informal strategies that lacked a strong legal basis. This situation differs from experiences in several other Muslim-majority countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore, where participation in premarital courses is a mandatory legal prerequisite before a marriage can be solemnized. This condition provides an important lesson: the effectiveness of premarital counseling programs depends heavily on a binding, comprehensive regulatory framework.

### **Key Factors in Premarital Counseling**

The analysis of factors influencing the effectiveness of premarital counseling at the KUA of Bululawang revealed several noteworthy findings. Using the effectiveness framework developed by Lubis (in Muhlis, 2015), which encompasses three approaches—resource approach, process approach, and goals approach—this study found that the effectiveness of premarital counseling at the KUA of Bululawang was stronger in the process and goals dimensions, while remaining weak in the resource dimension.

From a process perspective, the quality of material delivery by competent, certified facilitators emerged as a key factor in the program's effectiveness. The andragogical methods employed, which actively engaged participants through games, role-play, group discussions, and case studies, successfully transformed participants' perceptions of premarital counseling from a monotonous activity into an engaging and meaningful learning experience. This finding is consistent with Uno (2011), who identified that well-organized learning materials, effective communication, facilitator enthusiasm, and positive attitudes toward participants constitute key indicators of program effectiveness in educational implementation.

From the goals perspective, the premarital counseling program at the KUA of Bululawang was proven to successfully enhance the knowledge and psychological readiness of prospective brides and grooms regarding married life. The average readiness score of 74.65% obtained from ten participant couples indicated that the program had achieved its minimum objectives. Participants who previously lacked adequate understanding of spousal rights and obligations, conflict management, reproductive health, and parenting patterns demonstrated significant improvement in all four aspects after attending the counseling sessions.

### **Contribution of Premarital Counseling to the Internalization of *Sakinah, Mawaddah, and Rahmah* Values**

The most important finding of this study was that premarital counseling not only succeeded in enhancing participants' cognitive knowledge but also contributed to the internalization of the values of *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* among prospective brides and grooms. The concept of *sakinah*—which etymologically derives from the word *sakan*, meaning tranquility and stability—cannot be realized merely through the transfer of knowledge, but rather requires a profound transformation of attitudes and commitment from each partner.

The participatory learning methods implemented in the premarital counseling program at the KUA of Bululawang, particularly through role-play, paired discussions, and exercises in formulating family life principles, proved effective in helping participants not only understand the concepts of *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* in a theoretical sense but also recognize their relevance to real-life situations they would encounter. As stated by Kusmidi (2018), a *sakinah* family is not merely one that is free from problems, but rather one that can confront and resolve every challenge through the foundation of faith, togetherness, and sincere affection.

The dimension of *mawaddah*, which refers to sincere and passionate love between husband and wife, and the dimension of *rahmah*, which reflects gentle and compassionate affection, function as two complementary pillars in the establishment of a harmonious household. Premarital counseling plays an important role in raising awareness among prospective couples that these two dimensions must be continuously nurtured and developed, rather than being assumed to emerge automatically after marriage. Ismatullah (2015), in his study on the concepts of *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* in the Qur'an, emphasized that these three concepts are interrelated and form an integral unity within the Islamic family system.

### **The Urgency of Policy Reform in Premarital Counseling**

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that the effectiveness of the premarital counseling program is still constrained by several structural issues that require more serious policy intervention. First, the government needs to urgently issue a regulation that explicitly mandates all prospective brides and grooms to participate in premarital counseling as an administrative prerequisite for marriage. Such a mandatory regulation would not only expand the program's coverage but also ensure that every couple entering marriage possesses adequate foundational knowledge.

Second, the government should substantially increase funding for premarital counseling programs. With only 13 percent of prospective couples able to attend the regular program at the KUA of Bululawang, it is clear that the available funding is insufficient to reach all intended beneficiaries. Investment in premarital counseling is essentially a long-term investment in strengthening family resilience and reducing divorce rates, which have broader negative implications for various aspects of social life, including child welfare.

Third, integrating digital technology into premarital counseling programs is necessary to expand outreach without proportionally increasing costs. Online-based premarital counseling may serve as an effective alternative for prospective couples facing limitations in terms of time or distance. Riyadi (2013) noted that innovation in counseling methods and media is essential to adapt services to the evolving needs of society in the modern era.

Fourth, there is a need for a structured and continuous monitoring and evaluation system to assess the long-term impact of premarital counseling programs. At present, effectiveness is only

measured in the short term through pre-test and post-test assessments. Long-term impact evaluations, such as surveys of couples who have been married for one, two, or five years, are essential to provide stronger empirical evidence on the contribution of premarital counseling to reducing divorce rates and improving family quality.

### **Comparison with Previous Studies**

The findings of this study demonstrate several points of similarity and divergence when compared to previous research. Sundani (2017), in her study at the Medan Petisah Office of Religious Affairs (KUA), found that premarital counseling was effective in improving the psychological readiness of prospective brides and grooms. This finding is consistent with the results of the present study. However, the difference lies in the research context: Sundani's study was conducted in an urban setting with better access to resources, whereas the present study was conducted in a semi-rural setting with more limited resources.

Muhlis (2015), who examined premarital counseling at the KUA of Tompobulu, emphasized that effective management serves as a key predictor of program success. This aligns with the findings of the present study, which indicate that facilitator quality and the organization of learning materials are crucial determinants of program effectiveness. Meanwhile, Novala (as cited in previous research reviewed in Robbani's thesis, 2024), who focused on the relevance of premarital counseling to marital harmony, reported more optimistic outcomes, likely due to differences in research methodology and demographic context.

In terms of scholarly contribution, this study provides three main innovations. First, it develops a measurement instrument for assessing the readiness of prospective couples across four dimensions: mental readiness/self-confidence, understanding of the concept of marriage, mastery of marital principles, and parenting knowledge, which can be replicated in similar studies in different contexts. Second, it offers a more in-depth analysis of the gap between the ideal capacity and the actual implementation capacity of premarital counseling programs, particularly in the context of budget limitations. Third, it integrates perspectives from Islamic law, family psychology, and public policy into a single holistic analytical framework.

### **Conclusion**

This study concluded that the premarital counseling program implemented at the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) of Bululawang District, Malang Regency, had been carried out in accordance with the regulatory framework set out in the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance (Bimas Islam) Number 379 of 2018. The program comprised six core materials delivered by five certified facilitators using participatory and interactive andragogical methods. The factors supporting the program's effectiveness included the availability of comprehensive counseling modules, the quality and competence of facilitators, and adequate facilities and infrastructure. Conversely, limited budget allocation—reaching only 13% of prospective couples—the absence of mandatory participation regulations, and the low level of enthusiasm among some participants constituted the main challenges to be addressed. Overall, the premarital counseling program at the KUA of Bululawang proved effective in improving the knowledge and psychological readiness of prospective brides and grooms regarding the concepts of *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah*, as reflected in the average participant readiness score of 74.65%. The program successfully performed three key functions for participants: a preventive function in mitigating potential marital problems, a preservative function in strengthening

understanding and foundational knowledge, and a developmental function in enhancing each couple's potential. Moving forward, it is necessary to strengthen regulations that mandate participation in premarital counseling, significantly increase budget allocations, integrate digital technology to expand program reach, and develop a structured long-term monitoring and evaluation system. These measures are essential to ensure the meaningful contribution of premarital counseling to reducing divorce rates and improving the quality of Muslim families in Indonesia.

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