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Transforming Student Consciousness Through Participatory Film: A YPAR Study on Child Marriage Prevention in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and participatory filmmaking can facilitate the negotiation of meaning and the development of critical awareness among student activists engaged in child marriage prevention. Drawing on Paulo Freire's concept of praxis, the study explores how 80 student activists from the Gender and Child Studies Center (PSGA) negotiated theoretical knowledge concerning gender, sexuality, family relations, and child marriage through the production of two films, Melesat and Tinta yang Mengering (Ink That Dries). The study employed a qualitative YPAR approach involving repeated dialogue, script development, participatory film production, observation, reflection, interviews with three activists, and post-screening reflective responses from approximately 500 eighth- and ninth-grade students at Al Maarif 01 Singosari, Malang. The findings indicate that the filmmaking process created opportunities for activists to reinterpret prevention concepts through their situated understanding of adolescent realities. In particular, discussions concerning family conflict, emotional deprivation, sexual vulnerability, and gendered consequences became incorporated into the film narratives through negotiation between researchers and activists. Interviews with three activists further illustrate emerging changes in their approaches to judgment, communication, gender responsibility, and their roles as advocates. The post-screening reflections of the adolescent audience indicate that the films provided a space for engaging with sensitive issues through narrative reflection rather than exclusively didactic instruction. The study argues that participatory filmmaking can function as a praxis-oriented pedagogical process in which young people contribute to knowledge production, negotiate social meanings, and develop emerging agency. Rather than demonstrating causal behavioral change, the findings highlight the potential of YPAR-based participatory media to connect theoretical knowledge with young people's situated experiences and to create spaces for critical reflection in child marriage prevention.

Kata Kunci: YPAR; Paulo Freire; Kesadaran Kritis; Film Partisipatif; Perkawinan Anak

Studi ini menganalisis peran *Youth Participatory Action Research* (YPAR) dan produksi film partisipatif dalam membangun kesadaran kritis aktivis mahasiswa mengenai pencegahan pernikahan anak. Berlandaskan konsep praksis Paulo Freire, penelitian kualitatif ini mengeksplorasi proses 80 aktivis Pusat Studi Gender dan Anak (PSGA) dalam menghubungkan pengetahuan teoretis tentang gender, seksualitas, dan keluarga dengan realitas remaja melalui produksi film *Melesat* dan *Tinta yang Mengering*. Data dikumpulkan melalui dialog iteratif, penyusunan naskah, proses produksi film, observasi, refleksi, wawancara mendalam dengan tiga aktivis, serta respons pascapemutaran dari sekitar 500 siswa SMP Al Maarif 01 Singosari, Malang. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa proses produksi film mendorong para aktivis untuk menafsirkan kembali konsep pencegahan pernikahan anak melalui narasi yang mengangkat konflik keluarga, kerentanan seksual, dan ketimpangan gender. Wawancara juga menunjukkan perubahan dalam cara aktivis memahami masalah, berkomunikasi, dan menjalankan peran advokasi. Sementara itu, respons siswa mengindikasikan bahwa film partisipatif dapat membuka ruang diskusi tentang isu sensitif melalui pendekatan naratif, bukan semata-mata penyampaian pesan secara didaktis. Studi ini menegaskan bahwa produksi film partisipatif dapat menjadi praktik pedagogis yang menghubungkan teori dengan pengalaman nyata, sekaligus membuka ruang bagi kaum muda untuk membangun pemahaman kritis dan mengembankan agensi dalam upaya pencegahan pernikahan anak.

Introduction

Child marriage remains a persistent challenge to the realization of fundamental human rights in many parts of the world. In Indonesia, the practice continues to generate serious social, educational, health, and gender-related consequences. According to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Indonesia is among the countries with high rates of child marriage globally and ranks second in ASEAN after Cambodia (Tambunan et al., 2024). National data have likewise indicated the widespread nature of the problem. Data from the Central Statistics Agency in 2017 showed child marriage rates exceeding 10% in all provinces, with 67% of Indonesian regions categorized as facing a child marriage emergency (Rustiana, n.d.). The consequences extend beyond the act of early marriage itself, encompassing reproductive health risks (Nirwan, 2023), intergenerational barriers to education (Horii, n.d.), and increased vulnerability to domestic violence (Raj, 2010).

The persistence of child marriage is also evident in Malang, where marriage dispensation applications reached 1,009 cases in 2023. While this figure does not by itself establish the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of existing prevention programs, it suggests the need to examine how child marriage prevention messages are communicated and received by communities and adolescents. Conventional socialization may not always address the underlying dimensions of awareness when it relies predominantly on instructional and didactic approaches. Existing studies have largely examined specific dimensions of child marriage, including its contributing factors (Greene et al., 2024), health impacts (Febriyanti Supriadi et al., 2025), and legal dimensions (Kadir et al., 2025). Comparatively less attention has been given to creative and participatory educational approaches that position young people not merely as recipients of prevention messages but as active producers of knowledge and meaning about child marriage. This gap is particularly relevant in contexts where meanings attached to marriage, family relations, gender roles, and adolescent behavior are socially negotiated rather than simply transmitted through formal information.

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy provides a theoretical basis for examining the limitations of predominantly didactic approaches to child marriage prevention. Freire (1970) distinguishes between the "banking" model of education and problem-posing education. In the banking model, knowledge is treated as a transferable object deposited by an authoritative educator into learners who are positioned primarily as recipients. Problem-posing education, by contrast, regards learners as subjects capable of questioning, interpreting, and transforming the realities in which they are situated. This distinction is particularly relevant to child marriage prevention because adolescents are frequently addressed through information concerning legal prohibition, reproductive health, religious norms, or behavioral risks. Although such information is important, an exclusively instructional approach may leave insufficient space for adolescents to examine how family relationships, gender expectations, emotional needs, and social environments shape the meanings and practices surrounding early marriage.

For Freire, education becomes transformative when reflection and action are brought together through dialogue. This process is expressed through conscientização, or critical consciousness, whereby individuals develop the capacity to recognize and problematize the social, cultural, and structural conditions shaping their experiences (Freire, 1970, 1973). Critical consciousness is therefore not equivalent to simply possessing more information; it involves developing the capacity to question realities that may previously have appeared natural, inevitable, or individually determined. In this study, critical consciousness is examined through the ways student activists questioned conventional prevention messages and interpreted child marriage in relation to family conflict, sexual vulnerability, gendered expectations, and unequal consequences for young women and men.

Freirean praxis further connects critical reflection to action. Rather than treating reflection and action as separate stages, praxis describes their continuing dialectical relationship in the effort to understand and transform social reality (Freire, 1970). Within the present study, participatory filmmaking provides a concrete setting in which this relationship can be observed. Activists first encountered and discussed theoretical knowledge concerning child marriage, gender, sexuality, and violence; they then brought these concepts into dialogue with their understanding of adolescent realities, transformed them into narrative forms through script development and filmmaking, and subsequently reflected on the meanings and responses generated by the films. The process therefore moves beyond the simple transmission of prevention messages toward a cycle of reflection, creative action, and further reflection.

Another relevant Freirean concept is codification, through which concrete situations are represented in symbolic forms that can be examined and decoded through dialogue (Freire, 1970). In the context of this study, film functions as a form of codification because complex social realities are transformed into characters, conflicts, dialogue, and visual narratives. Family conflict, emotional deprivation, sexual vulnerability, and the gendered consequences of early marriage can therefore be encountered as represented situations rather than as abstract concepts. Such representation can create a degree of critical distance, enabling participants and audiences to examine familiar social realities as objects of reflection. Film thus becomes not merely an educational product but a medium through which social reality can be "read," questioned, and discussed.

This Freirean orientation is operationalized through Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), which positions young people as active participants in researching and responding to issues affecting their lives rather than merely as research subjects (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Anyon et al., 2018). YPAR shares with Freirean pedagogy an emphasis on dialogue, collective inquiry, situated knowledge, and action. Its participatory orientation challenges conventional research hierarchies in which researchers are positioned as knowledge authorities while young people are treated primarily as objects of research or intervention. Instead, young participants contribute experiential knowledge to identifying problems, interpreting social conditions, developing responses, and reflecting on the consequences of collective action.

This participatory orientation is particularly important for understanding epistemological authority and youth agency. In this study, epistemological authority refers to the recognition of young participants as legitimate interpreters and contributors to knowledge concerning social problems that affect young people. Such authority is not assumed merely because participants are young; rather, it emerges through opportunities to question existing interpretations, contribute alternative perspectives, negotiate meanings, and make decisions about how social realities should be represented. In participatory research, this process can also contribute to agency, understood here as the capacity to interpret social realities and act upon them rather than simply responding to externally defined interventions (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Accordingly, the transformation examined in this study concerns not only what activists know about child marriage but also how they position themselves in relation to the production and communication of that knowledge.

Participatory filmmaking provides a particularly suitable medium for this process because it requires participants to make interpretive and creative decisions. They select which social realities should be represented, construct characters and conflicts, negotiate the emphasis of prevention messages, and determine how sensitive issues can be communicated without reproducing a purely didactic mode of instruction. In this study, these negotiations occurred repeatedly between researchers and student activists during discussions, training, script development, and film production. The

resulting films, *Melesat* (dart forward) and *Tinta yang Mengering* (Ink That Dries), therefore represent a negotiated synthesis between academic knowledge and the activists' situated interpretations of adolescent experiences.

The study was conducted through a community-engaged program involving student activists from the Gender and Child Studies Center (PSGA). The activists participated in preparatory activities concerning child marriage, sexual violence, and psychological readiness for marriage before engaging in script development and participatory film production. During the script-development process, researchers and activists jointly read and discussed the initial scripts, negotiated the emphasis of the prevention messages, and incorporated ideas generated by the activists. One important example was the interpretation of persistent family conflict as a condition that may lead adolescents to seek emotional security or a sense of belonging outside the home. Such meanings subsequently became part of the narrative construction of Melesat. The filmmaking process thus provided an empirical setting in which Freirean problem-posing, codification, dialogue, and praxis could be examined in relation to youth agency and knowledge production.

Accordingly, this study examines three interconnected dimensions of the participatory filmmaking process: (1) how student activists negotiated academic knowledge and situated understandings of adolescent realities in developing film narratives for child marriage prevention; (2) how participation in the filmmaking process was reflected in changes in their critical awareness and agency; and (3) how the resulting films created opportunities for adolescents to reflect on child marriage and related gender vulnerabilities. The primary analytical focus is the student activists and the process through which they participated in meaning-making and creative action. The adolescent audience is examined as the contextual setting in which the resulting films were received and interpreted rather than as a statistically representative population for measuring intervention effectiveness.

The study contributes to the literature by connecting Freirean praxis with YPAR and participatory filmmaking as a youth-centered approach to child marriage prevention. Rather than conceptualizing prevention as the one-directional transmission of information, the study examines how young people can participate in constructing the meanings through which prevention messages become socially and emotionally relevant. It argues that the value of participatory media lies not only in the final film but also in the dialogical process through which young participants negotiate theory, situated experience, empathy, and social responsibility. In this sense, participatory filmmaking provides a potential space for developing critical awareness and youth agency while opening sensitive social issues to further reflection among adolescent audiences.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach within a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) framework. YPAR was used to position student activists not merely as recipients of knowledge about child marriage and sexual violence, but as active participants in identifying problems, interpreting lived realities, negotiating meanings, and developing creative responses. The participatory process extended beyond film production itself and involved repeated dialogue between the researchers and student activists before, during, and after the development of the films.

1. Participants and Case Selection

The study involved 80 student activists affiliated with the Gender and Child Studies Center (PSGA) UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang and approximately 500 eighth- and ninth-grade

students from Al Maarif 01 Singosari, Malang. The 80 student activists were undergraduate students from semesters 3 to 7 who voluntarily participated in a psychological strengthening program addressing sexual violence prevention and related issues of gender and child protection. They were drawn from the broader PSGA student activist network across faculties and participated on a voluntary basis. The group consisted of 60% female and 40% male participants. Because participation was voluntary, the 80 activists were not intended to constitute a statistically representative sample of the broader PSGA student membership.

The participatory process began with a series of preparatory activities, including seminars and discussions on child marriage, forms of violence including sexual violence, and psychological readiness for marriage. These activities provided a shared conceptual foundation while allowing the activists to connect the issues discussed with social realities encountered by adolescents.

The selection of Al Maarif 01 Singosari, Malang, was treated as a case selection rather than a statistical sampling procedure. The research team conducted film-based socialization activities at several locations, with audience sizes varying considerably. Al Maarif 01 Singosari was selected as the primary case context because it involved the largest audience, with approximately 500 students participating, and generated substantial reflective responses following the film screening. Many students expressed increased awareness of the risks and potential consequences of early marriage in their reflections. The approximately 500 students were therefore treated as the audience within the selected case rather than as a statistically representative sample of Indonesian adolescents.

2. Participatory Process and Film Development

The YPAR process involved repeated cycles of dialogue, reflection, action, observation, and reflection rather than a linear sequence of activities. Before the films were produced, researchers and student activists engaged in several discussions to explore the social dimensions of child marriage and to consider how these issues could be represented through film.

A particularly important stage involved the collective reading and discussion of the initial film scripts. The researchers and activists read the draft scripts together and negotiated which issues should receive greater emphasis in the final narratives. The activists were not merely asked to respond to predetermined content; they contributed interpretations derived from their understanding of adolescent experiences and social realities. For example, the idea that persistent conflict within the family may encourage adolescents to seek a sense of peace, acceptance, or emotional security outside the home, including through romantic relationships, emerged from the student activists during the script negotiation process. This contribution subsequently informed the development of the film narratives.

This process illustrates the negotiation between academic knowledge and experiential knowledge within the YPAR framework. Rather than simply translating theoretical concepts into film, the participants and researchers jointly reconsidered how concepts concerning gender, violence, family relations, and child marriage should be represented in ways that were meaningful to adolescents. The resulting scripts therefore reflected a negotiated synthesis between theoretical perspectives and the activists' interpretations of lived social realities.

The action stage involved the collective production of the films *Tinta yang Mengering* and *Melesat*. The student activists participated in the production process, including acting and other creative and technical activities. Their direct involvement provided opportunities to translate the meanings negotiated during the earlier discussions and script development into visual narratives.

During the production process, the researchers used participatory observation and reflective notes to document interactions, collaboration, emotional engagement, and the ways participants

responded to the themes represented in the films. These observations also captured how theoretical concepts were interpreted and transformed during the creative process.

Following production, the films were screened as part of educational and socialization activities in several locations. The screening at Al Maarif 01 Singosari was selected as the primary case context for examining audience reflection because it involved the largest number of participants and generated substantial reflective responses concerning the risks of early marriage.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through participatory observation, researchers' reflective notes, documentation of the discussion and script-development process, and questionnaires or reflection responses associated with the film-screening activities. Particular attention was given to moments in which student activists introduced new interpretations, challenged or modified the initial script, and connected theoretical concepts with social and family experiences.

The qualitative data were analyzed descriptively and interpretively to identify patterns of meaning negotiation, critical reflection, agency, and consciousness transformation throughout the participatory process. The analysis focused primarily on the transformation of the student activists as participants in the YPAR process. Responses from the Al Maarif students were analyzed as contextual evidence of audience reception and reflection rather than as evidence of statistically generalizable behavioral change.

The analysis therefore examined the participatory filmmaking process as a space in which academic knowledge and experiential knowledge were brought into dialogue. Particular attention was given to how the activists moved from receiving information about child marriage and violence toward identifying, problematizing, and representing the social conditions underlying these issues through their own creative narratives.

Result And Discussion

Result

1. Negotiating Gendered Perspectives: From Lived Reality to Film Narrative

The participatory filmmaking process produced two complementary narratives, *Melesat* and *Tinta yang Mengering*, which represent child marriage and adolescent vulnerability from different gendered perspectives. Rather than reproducing a single explanatory narrative, the two films emerged from discussions and negotiations between researchers and student activists concerning how the social realities surrounding child marriage should be represented. The resulting narratives place male and female experiences in dialogue and allow the issue to be examined not simply as an individual decision but as a problem embedded in family relations, gender expectations, violence, and unequal consequences.

The first film, *Melesat*, presents the story primarily from the perspective of a male character who becomes involved in violent behavior. His actions are situated within a family environment marked by violence, while his exposure to pornography forms another element of his social environment. The narrative therefore does not present his behavior solely as an individual moral failure. Instead, it invites the audience to consider how experiences within the family and exposure to problematic forms of sexual content may shape the ways adolescents understand relationships, intimacy, and violence. Importantly, the film does not establish these experiences as deterministic causes of violent behavior; rather, they function as social conditions that the activists considered relevant to understanding the character's trajectory.

The second film, *Tinta yang Mengering*, shifts the perspective to the girl who experiences the consequences of adolescent pregnancy and subsequent marriage. The narrative begins with her mother's discovery, through a pregnancy test, that her daughter is pregnant. The emotional shock

contributes to the mother's death, placing the pregnancy within a broader family tragedy. After being married, the girl faces the continuing burden of raising and providing for her child largely on her own. Her husband subsequently divorces her and continues his education abroad, creating a stark contrast between their post-marriage trajectories. While the young woman becomes responsible for childcare and economic survival, the young man is able to pursue educational and future opportunities elsewhere.

The contrast between the two films is significant because it makes visible the differentiated consequences of adolescent relationships and early marriage for young women and men. *Melesat* draws attention to the social and familial conditions surrounding male vulnerability and violent behavior, whereas *Tinta yang Mengering* foregrounds the gendered burden borne by the young woman after pregnancy and marriage. Taken together, the films complicate explanations that locate child marriage exclusively in individual choice or adolescent misconduct. They instead represent the issue through interconnected family, relational, and gendered conditions.

These narratives were not simply predetermined by the researchers. During the development of the scripts, the researchers and student activists repeatedly read, discussed, and negotiated the initial storylines. The activists contributed interpretations based on their understanding of adolescent experiences and the social realities surrounding them. One particularly important contribution concerned the representation of family conflict. The activists proposed that repeated conflict between parents could create an emotional environment in which adolescents seek a sense of peace, acceptance, or security outside the home. Romantic relationships could consequently appear to adolescents as an alternative source of emotional support. This interpretation informed the narrative construction and helped shift the focus from individual blame toward the relational conditions surrounding adolescent vulnerability.

The script-development process thus became a site of meaning negotiation. Academic discussions concerning child marriage, gender, violence, psychological readiness for marriage, and sexual violence provided conceptual resources, while the activists' experiential and social knowledge challenged the researchers to consider how these concepts should be represented from adolescents' perspectives. Through collective reading and discussion of the scripts, the participants negotiated which experiences should be foregrounded, how characters should be constructed, and how the consequences of early marriage should be communicated without reducing the issue to a moralistic lesson.

The two films can therefore be understood as products of negotiated knowledge rather than straightforward translations of academic theory into educational messages. *Melesat* and *Tinta yang Mengering* translate theoretical concerns into distinct gendered narratives while incorporating interpretations originating from the activists themselves. The filmmaking process consequently functioned as a form of Freirean problem-posing praxis: participants moved between conceptual knowledge, lived realities, dialogue, and creative representation. In this process, the films became not only educational products for adolescent audiences but also material traces of the activists' own engagement with, reinterpretation of, and critical reflection on the problem of child marriage.

2. Adolescents' Reflections on Child Marriage and Its Social Context

The post-screening reflection at Al Maarif 01 Singosari focused on four statements concerning the social and gender dimensions represented in *Melesat* and *Tinta yang Mengering*. The statements addressed the perceived relationship between pornography and risky sexual behavior, the vulnerability of seemingly innocent adolescent girls, the influence of family conflict on adolescent behavior, and the consequences of early marriage for women. Students responded to each statement using a Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." These responses are interpreted as adolescents' perceptions and reflections on the messages represented in the films rather than as evidence of causal relationships or statistically measured changes in behavior.

The first statement concerned the relationship between pornography exposure, risky sexual behavior, and early marriage. The students were asked to respond to the proposition that pornography can trigger risky sexual behavior that may contribute to early marriage. The responses indicated

strong agreement with this proposition. This suggests that the students recognized pornography exposure as a relevant element in the broader context of adolescent vulnerability represented in the films. In *Melesat*, pornography is not presented as an isolated cause of problematic behavior but as part of the protagonist's social and family environment. The finding therefore illustrates how the film encouraged students to consider sexual vulnerability within a wider social context. It should not, however, be interpreted as establishing a direct causal relationship between pornography exposure and risky sexual behavior or early marriage.

The second statement addressed the vulnerability of girls who are perceived as innocent or naïve. Students were asked whether they agreed with the message that an innocent girl could nevertheless become involved in sexual behavior that violates religious and social norms. The high level of agreement suggests that most respondents understood vulnerability as something that cannot be explained solely by an adolescent's character or moral disposition. This interpretation corresponds with the narrative of Tinta yang Mengering, in which the female protagonist's experience is shaped by relationships and circumstances extending beyond individual intention. The film consequently shifts attention from the assumption that "good" or naïve girls are naturally protected from sexual vulnerability toward a broader consideration of the social conditions in which such vulnerability develops.

The third statement concerned the influence of family conflict on adolescent behavior. This theme is particularly important because the underlying interpretation did not originate solely from the researchers or emerge for the first time in the audience questionnaire. It had already appeared during the repeated discussions between the researchers and student activists in the process of developing the film script. While reading and negotiating the initial script, the activists drew on their knowledge of adolescent experiences and proposed that persistent conflict within the family could encourage young people to seek peace, affection, or emotional security outside the home. Romantic relationships could consequently become an alternative source of emotional refuge. This idea was incorporated into Melesat, particularly through the portrayal of a male protagonist whose behavior is situated within a family environment characterized by violence and conflict.

The students' responses following the screening provide a second layer of engagement with this interpretation. Their agreement with the statement concerning family conflict indicates that the issue was also recognized by the adolescent audience as relevant to adolescent behavior. The significance of this convergence is not that the students empirically confirmed family conflict as a causal factor. Rather, it demonstrates that an interpretation generated through dialogue among the activists became embedded in the film narrative and subsequently became an object of reflection for the adolescent audience. The participatory process thus created a movement from lived or experiential knowledge, to negotiated narrative, and finally to audience reflection.

The fourth statement addressed the consequences of early marriage for women. The students were asked whether they agreed that early marriage can result in suffering for women. The strong agreement expressed in the responses corresponds closely with the narrative of *Tinta yang Mengering*. The female protagonist experiences pregnancy, marriage, childcare responsibilities, and economic hardship, while her husband eventually divorces her and continues his education abroad. The contrasting trajectories of the two characters make visible the potentially unequal consequences of early marriage for young women and men. In particular, the film represents how marriage can transfer substantial reproductive, caregiving, and economic responsibilities onto a young woman whose educational and economic resources remain limited.

The four reflective statements therefore reveal a pattern in which adolescents interpreted child marriage not simply as an individual decision but as an issue embedded in interconnected social contexts. Pornography exposure was associated in the students' perceptions with sexual vulnerability; female innocence was understood as insufficient protection against risky circumstances; family conflict was recognized as relevant to adolescent behavior; and early marriage was perceived as carrying particularly serious consequences for women. These responses are important not because they establish the effectiveness of the films through statistical measurement, but because they

demonstrate the kinds of meanings that adolescents engaged with after encountering narratives constructed through the participatory process.

The Al Maarif case is particularly relevant in this regard because it represented the largest audience reached during the film-based socialization activities conducted at several locations. While audience numbers at other locations were considerably smaller, the Al Maarif screening involved approximately 500 eighth- and ninth-grade students and generated substantial opportunities for reflection. Students' responses included expressions of becoming more aware of the risks associated with early marriage. Within the limits of this case, these reflections suggest that participatory film can create a less directly instructional space in which adolescents encounter sensitive issues through characters, conflicts, and consequences rather than through abstract warnings alone.

Taken together, the findings in this section complement the analysis of the activists' participatory process. The meanings represented in the films were not simply transferred from researchers to adolescents. Some of the central interpretations—particularly the relationship between family conflict, emotional deprivation, and adolescents' search for alternative forms of belonging—were first negotiated by the student activists during script development. The subsequent reflections of the adolescent audience demonstrate how these negotiated meanings became available for further interpretation. This sequence illustrates the broader YPAR process in which knowledge moves through dialogue, creative production, and reflection rather than through one-directional instructional delivery.

3. Transforming Activist Consciousness and Agency through Participatory Filmmaking

The interview accounts suggest that participation in the filmmaking process was associated with changes in how the interviewed activists understood adolescents, family dynamics, gender roles, and their own roles as agents of change. Rather than positioning themselves primarily as recipients of theoretical knowledge, the activists described becoming more involved in interpreting social phenomena, negotiating prevention messages, and communicating sensitive issues through creative media. The following accounts illustrate these changes, while not being intended to represent the experiences of all 80 participants.

One indication of this transformation emerged in the account of Informant 1, the director, who described a movement from a judgmental orientation toward a more contextualized understanding of individual behavior:

"Yes, it has changed, at first I liked judging freely. However, with this, I realized that everyone has their own background that makes them develop into individuals with certain character tendencies. Therefore, that is what we should look at and determine how we should behave."

This reflection indicates a shift from interpreting problematic behavior primarily through individual judgment toward considering the social and personal circumstances in which behavior develops. The significance of this change lies in the activist's movement toward a more contextualized and empathetic interpretation of adolescent vulnerability. Through engagement with the characters and situations represented in the film, the activist reconsidered the tendency to judge behavior without first examining its underlying circumstances.

A second dimension concerned the activists' negotiation of how prevention messages should be communicated. Informant 2, the scriptwriter, emphasized the importance of avoiding a conventional moralizing approach:

"The moral messages of religion or law are conveyed implicitly and without being preachy, using language that suits the younger generation... in fact, parts of this script are made to warn parents and teenagers about things that seem trivial but actually become the initial causes of early marriage."

This account demonstrates that the activist was actively involved in negotiating the relationship between the substance of the prevention message and the form through which it would be communicated. Rather than simply transferring legal or religious information into dialogue, the scriptwriting process required participants to consider how adolescents might receive and interpret

the message. The concern about avoiding a "preachy" tone therefore became part of the activists' communicative agency.

The participatory process also generated interpretive concepts for representing adolescent emotional vulnerability. Informant 2 introduced the metaphor of a "love tank" to describe the tension between the desire for emotional connection and the pursuit of future-oriented goals:

"The choice of following the voice of the heart to fill the tank of love by dating, or setting aside those feelings and focusing on keeping busy to pursue the future with dead emotions."

The "love tank" metaphor is significant because it emerged from the activists' own interpretation of adolescent experiences during the participatory process. It enabled the participant to represent adolescent vulnerability in emotional rather than exclusively moral or behavioral terms. The metaphor subsequently contributed to the narrative construction of the film and illustrates how participants' experiential interpretations entered the creative process.

This interpretation was further developed by Informant 3, a member of the production crew, who described the relationship between family dysfunction and adolescents' search for an alternative sense of belonging:

"Mostly yes (an inharmonious family becomes a trigger), because every human being needs a home, if their own home doesn't feel like a home, then normally that person should look for another home, but often that other home is the deepest abyss."

The metaphor of "home" illustrates how the activist interpreted risky adolescent relationships within the context of belonging and emotional security. Importantly, this interpretation had already emerged during the script-development discussions and was incorporated into Melesat. The film therefore reflects not only theoretical concepts introduced by the researchers but also meanings generated by the activists through dialogue and reflection.

A further dimension of consciousness transformation concerned gender responsibility. Informant 1, a male activist and the film's director, described his experience while directing the scene in which Hilda returns home from work while carrying her child:

"When shooting the scene of Hilda coming home from work while holding her child, at that moment I realized that women have a big responsibility in their lives. A woman's obligation as a mother and as a breadwinner is very visible, how strongly a woman bears all these responsibilities. From there I realized that a woman is tired of her role, so we men should not add to their burden but help ease the burden and make her enjoy and be grateful for the life that Allah has given."

This reflection provides a particularly clear illustration of changing gender awareness. The activist's interpretation of the scene moved beyond the technical task of filmmaking toward recognition of the unequal responsibilities represented by the female character. His reflection also involved a reconsideration of male responsibility, particularly the need for men not to add to women's existing burdens. The scene thus became a point at which gender inequality was encountered through visual representation and embodied interpretation rather than solely through abstract theoretical discussion.

The three interviewed activists also reported greater confidence in communicating sensitive issues through their participatory roles in film production. Rather than claiming that self-efficacy increased across all 80 participants, the interview data indicate that these three participants perceived the filmmaking experience as strengthening their confidence in counseling, listening, and communicating with young audiences. Informant 1, for example, described greater confidence in listening and accepting others without immediately judging them. Informant 3 similarly viewed film as a contemporary form of religious outreach:

"It's true because preaching is not always in mosques or study groups or else, it could be that the preaching is through this film, so preaching wrapped in a film that makes people interested in watching it."

This account suggests that participation expanded the activist's understanding of possible forms of advocacy. Film was perceived not simply as a technical product but as a medium through which religious, social, and preventive messages could be communicated in a form considered more accessible to young audiences.

Taken together, the three interview accounts illustrate several dimensions of activist development: a movement from judgment toward contextual understanding, greater awareness of gendered responsibility, increased confidence in communicating sensitive issues, and greater ownership of the messages represented through the films. These accounts are consistent with the Freirean notion of praxis as a process linking reflection and action. However, because the evidence presented here is based on qualitative accounts from three interviewed activists, these findings should be understood as illustrative of participants' experiences rather than as evidence that all 80 activists underwent the same degree of transformation.

The significance of the YPAR process therefore lies not simply in producing two educational films, but in creating a participatory space in which activists could interpret social problems, negotiate meanings, act through creative production, and reflect on their own assumptions and responsibilities. The filmmaking process thus functioned as a praxis-oriented form of capacity building, with the interview accounts providing evidence of emerging consciousness and agency among the participating activists.

Discussion

The findings suggest that participatory filmmaking within a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) framework can function as a form of Freirean praxis by bringing reflection, dialogue, creative action, and subsequent reflection into a single process. Rather than treating film simply as a medium for disseminating information, the study demonstrates how the production process enabled student activists to negotiate the meaning of child marriage prevention and translate theoretical knowledge into narratives grounded in perceived adolescent realities. This process corresponds to Freire's distinction between banking education and problem-posing pedagogy. Instead of merely receiving legal, religious, or psychological information, the activists participated in identifying problems, questioning conventional prevention messages, and deciding how those messages should be represented for younger audiences (Freire, 1970, 1973).

The concept of codification helps explain the role of filmmaking within this process. For Freire, codification enables concrete experiences and social realities to be represented in forms that can subsequently be examined and interpreted through dialogue. In this study, family conflict, emotional deprivation, sexual vulnerability, and the gendered consequences of early marriage were translated into characters, conflicts, and visual narratives in *Melesat* and *Tinta yang Mengering*. The films therefore provided a form through which complex social experiences could be made visible and available for reflection. The notion of "critical distance" is particularly relevant here: viewers encounter social problems through fictional characters and situations, allowing them to consider sensitive issues without being positioned as direct objects of moral instruction. The students' post-screening reflections indicate that these issues became recognizable and discussable within the educational setting, although the available data do not permit the conclusion that the films directly caused a measurable transformation in their consciousness.

The process through which the films were constructed also demonstrates that codification was not imposed by the researchers. Several of the central meanings emerged through repeated dialogue and negotiation with the student activists. The connection between family conflict and adolescents' search for emotional security outside the home is particularly illustrative. During script development, activists proposed that an adolescent whose home environment is characterized by persistent conflict may seek another source of belonging or emotional refuge through romantic relationships. Informant 3's metaphor that "if their own home doesn't feel like a home, then normally that person should look for another home, but often that other home is the deepest abyss" captures this interpretation. Similarly, Informant 2's metaphor of the "love tank" represented the emotional needs that adolescents

may attempt to fulfil through relationships. These concepts subsequently became part of the narrative construction of *Melesat*. The findings therefore suggest that the filmmaking process enabled experiential and situated knowledge held by young participants to enter the production of prevention knowledge.

This finding is significant for understanding YPAR as participatory knowledge production. The activists did not simply illustrate concepts supplied by the researchers; they challenged, reframed, and contextualized them through their own understanding of adolescent experiences. In this respect, the process contributed to the development of what may be termed epistemological authority: the recognition that young participants possess legitimate knowledge for interpreting social problems affecting young people. This interpretation is consistent with participatory research approaches that challenge conventional hierarchies between researchers and researched communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). The evidence, however, should be interpreted cautiously. The present study does not demonstrate that all 80 activists developed the same level of epistemological authority or agency. Rather, the accounts of the three interviewed activists illustrate how such agency could emerge through participation in dialogue, script negotiation, production, and reflection.

The transformation described by the activists was particularly visible in their changing approaches to judgment and communication. Informant 1, for example, reflected on moving from a tendency to judge individuals toward considering the backgrounds and circumstances that shape their behavior. This change can be interpreted through Freire's concept of problem-posing education because the participant moved beyond an immediate judgment of behavior toward questioning the social conditions underlying it. Similarly, Informant 2's insistence that religious and legal messages should be communicated "without being preachy" demonstrates a form of communicative agency. The activists were not rejecting prevention messages; rather, they were negotiating how such messages could be communicated without reproducing the didactic approach that they believed might create resistance among young audiences.

The findings also reveal a gendered dimension of consciousness transformation. The reflection of Informant 1, a male activist, while directing the scene of Hilda returning from work while carrying her child provides evidence of how visual representation can make gendered burdens experientially visible. His recognition of the simultaneous responsibilities of motherhood, paid work, and childcare led him to articulate a corresponding responsibility for men not to add to women's burdens. This represents a shift from viewing gender inequality as an abstract social issue toward recognizing its implications for everyday relationships and responsibilities. The finding is particularly relevant to child-marriage prevention because Tinta yang Mengering represents consequences that are distributed unequally between the female and male characters: the young woman bears pregnancy, childcare, and economic hardship, while the male character eventually continues his education abroad after the marriage ends. The film thus makes visible how the consequences of early marriage can become gendered over time.

The adolescent responses from the Al Maarif case complement these findings from the production process. The reflective statements addressed pornography exposure, female vulnerability, family conflict, and the consequences of early marriage for women. The strong agreement expressed in the available responses suggests that these themes were recognizable to the adolescent audience. Particularly important is the convergence concerning family conflict. An interpretation first generated by student activists during script negotiation subsequently became an issue that adolescent viewers were invited to consider through the film. This sequence illustrates a distinctive feature of the participatory model: meaning does not move simply from researcher to activist and then from activist to audience. Instead, meaning is constructed through dialogue, embodied in narrative, and then opened again to interpretation by another group of young people.

The Al Maarif case should nevertheless be understood contextually rather than as evidence of generalizable effectiveness. The approximately 500 students constituted the audience in the selected case setting rather than a statistically representative sample of Indonesian adolescents. Similarly, the post-screening Likert-scale reflections capture students' perceptions of the messages presented in the

films rather than pre-post changes in awareness or behavior. The evidence therefore supports the more cautious interpretation that participatory films can create a space in which adolescents engage with sensitive issues through narrative reflection. Further research using systematic pre- and post-intervention measures would be required to establish whether such engagement produces measurable changes in knowledge, attitudes, self-efficacy, or behavior.

Taken together, the findings contribute to the understanding of child-marriage prevention by shifting attention from the transmission of preventive information toward the participatory construction of meaning. The study suggests that the value of participatory filmmaking lies not only in the final media product but also in the process through which young participants interpret social realities, negotiate meanings, make creative decisions, and reflect on their own assumptions. In Freirean terms, this process brings reflection and action into dialogue as praxis and creates conditions for the development of critical consciousness (conscientização) through the problematization of lived realities (Freire, 1970, 1973). In this sense, filmmaking can function as a form of codification through which concrete social experiences are represented, examined, and reconsidered through dialogue (Freire, 1970). From a YPAR perspective, the process positions young people as active contributors to knowledge production and social action rather than merely as recipients of intervention, emphasizing situated knowledge, participation, and youth agency (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Anyon et al., 2018). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that participatory media can provide a potential space in which young people negotiate theory with lived experience and develop more critical and reflexive ways of understanding social problems.

The implications are therefore both pedagogical and practical. Prevention initiatives may benefit from moving beyond approaches that focus predominantly on instructing adolescents about the dangers of child marriage and toward participatory forms of communication that allow young people to examine the family, relational, and gendered contexts surrounding the issue. Such approaches should not place responsibility for prevention solely on girls or on individual self-control. The narratives developed in this study instead point toward the importance of addressing family relationships, adolescent emotional needs, sexual-media exposure, and men's responsibility for gendered burdens. Participatory media cannot by itself demonstrate systemic behavioral change, but it can provide a meaningful pedagogical space for problematization, dialogue, and reflection—key conditions for the kind of transformative praxis envisioned by Freire.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that participatory filmmaking within a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) framework can provide a meaningful space for negotiating knowledge, developing emerging agency, and reflecting on the social dimensions of child marriage prevention. Rather than functioning solely as a medium for delivering preventive information, the production of *Melesa*t and *Tinta yang Mengering* involved student activists in repeated processes of dialogue, script negotiation, creative decision-making, action, and reflection. Through this process, theoretical knowledge concerning gender, sexuality, family relations, and child marriage was reinterpreted through the activists' understanding of adolescent realities.

Viewed through Freirean pedagogy, the filmmaking process illustrates how participatory media can create conditions for praxis. The activists did not simply reproduce messages provided by researchers; they contributed interpretations of family conflict, emotional deprivation, sexual vulnerability, and gendered responsibility to the construction of the narratives. The emergence of concepts such as the "love tank" and the metaphor of the home that becomes "the deepest abyss" demonstrates how participants' situated knowledge became part of the films' meaning-making process. The interviews with three activists further indicate emerging changes in how participants understood adolescent behavior, gender responsibility, and their own roles as communicators and advocates. These accounts should be understood as illustrative rather than representative of all 80 activists.

Reflections from approximately 500 students at Al Maarif 01 Singosari further indicate that the films gave adolescents a way to confront sensitive issues through narrative engagement rather than relying solely on didactic instruction. Their responses to the reflective statements show an awareness of the linked concerns portrayed in the films, including family conflict, sexual vulnerability, and the gendered consequences of early marriage. Nevertheless, because the audience data were gathered as contextual reflections after screening rather than through a systematic pre–post design, the results cannot demonstrate causal effects on adolescents' awareness, attitudes, or behavior. Accordingly, the study adds to research on preventing child marriage by moving attention away from transmitting preventive messages and toward the participatory construction of meaning. Its primary contribution is not to prove that film alone changes behavior, but to illustrate how participatory filmmaking can bridge academic knowledge with young people's locally grounded interpretations and create opportunities for reflection for both producers and audiences. In this way, YPAR-based filmmaking provides a praxis-oriented pedagogical model in which young people can take part as knowledge producers, creative contributors, and emerging agents of social change.

Future research should examine the longer-term effects of such participatory media through systematic pre- and post-intervention measures and, where possible, longitudinal designs. Further studies could also compare participatory filmmaking with conventional instructional approaches to determine whether and under what conditions narrative-based and youth-produced media contribute to sustained changes in knowledge, attitudes, self-efficacy, and preventive behavior. Such research would strengthen the empirical basis for integrating participatory media into broader, gender-responsive strategies for preventing child marriage.

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