



PERCEPTIONS OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS FIGURES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROLE OF EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING AMBASSADORS IN PREMARITAL EDUCATION AS AN EFFORT TO PREVENT STUNTING

Herawati Harahap^{1*}, Guslaini Permata Intan Pan Harahap¹, Nila Handayani¹, Rika Apripan¹, Dewi Arjuna Putri Pan¹, Rosmainun¹, Fahrizal Alwi², Wiwi Wardani Tanjung¹

¹Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Kesehatan Sentral, Jl. Tandang Mulia Harahap No.1, Silandit, Padangsidempuan Selatan, Padang Sidempuan, Sumatera Utara 22733, Indonesia

²Institut Kesehatan Deli Husada Deli Tua, Jl. Besar Delitua No.77, Deli Tua Timur, Deli Tua, Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara 20355, Indonesia

*herawatiharahap90@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Stunting remains a public health problem in Padangsidempuan City, with a prevalence reaching 30.3%. Stunting prevention needs to begin premarital by improving literacy among prospective brides and grooms. Islamic religious leaders are trusted figures in the community and have the potential to act as ambassadors for exclusive breastfeeding in premarital education. This study aims to explore the perceptions of Islamic religious leaders regarding the development of their role as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors in premarital education as an effort to prevent stunting in Padangsidempuan City. The study used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. Six informants were purposively selected, consisting of Islamic religious leaders involved in premarital counseling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide and analyzed thematically. The analysis yielded five themes: 1) religious leaders' understanding of stunting and exclusive breastfeeding; 2) perceptions of developing their role as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors; 3) readiness and capacity building needs; and 4) expectations for model development. Religious leaders demonstrated positive perceptions and expressed a willingness to act as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors, with support from training, modules, educational media, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and cross-sector collaboration. Islamic religious leaders have significant potential to be empowered as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors in premarital education. Developing a model supported by capacity building and cross-sector collaboration is expected to improve literacy among prospective brides and grooms and contribute to stunting prevention in Padangsidempuan City.

Keywords: exclusive breastfeeding; islamic religious figures; perception; premarital education; stunting

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INTRODUCTION

The incidence of stunting in Padangsidempuan City, based on the 2024 Indonesian Nutritional Status Survey, is still at 30.3%, indicating that stunting prevention efforts need to be strengthened. Stunting is a health problem that has long-term impacts on child development and the quality of human resources (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025; Amran et al., 2025; Hariani et al., 2023). Prevention efforts need to begin during the premarital period, because at this stage, prospective brides and grooms prepare for nutritional health, reproduction, and understanding the role of the family in the first 1,000 days of life (Sumardilah et al., 2022 & Siregar et al., 2025). Prospective brides and grooms need education related to reproductive health, maternal nutrition, and stunting (Tarsikah, 2020 & Simanjuntak and Wahyudi, 2021). However, the literacy of prospective brides regarding the importance of exclusive breastfeeding and the risk of stunting is still low, so a more comprehensive and easily accepted educational approach is needed (Napitupulu et al, 2025 & Noeroel et al., 2025).

Islamic religious leaders play a strategic role in premarital guidance and the dissemination of family values (Nadhrach et al., 2025 & Ismail Dan Sulaiman, 2023). As trusted figures, they are able to influence the behavior and decision-making of young couples (Hamidiyanti et al., 2018). This potential makes religious leaders highly relevant to be empowered as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors in premarital education (Siregar et al., 2025). However, there is no systematic model for integrating the role of religious leaders in stunting prevention efforts, thus making this research urgent. The objectives of this study were to develop a role model for Islamic religious leaders as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors, increase their capacity through modules and training, and evaluate their impact on increasing literacy among prospective brides and grooms about exclusive breastfeeding and stunting. The method used was a mixed methods-based action research, through the stages of needs identification, module development and validation, training of religious leaders, implementation of premarital education, and quantitative and qualitative evaluation.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore the perceptions of Islamic religious leaders regarding the development of their role as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors in premarital education as a stunting prevention effort in Padangsidempuan City. The study was conducted in Padangsidempuan City from June to July 2026. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, including Islamic religious leaders who actively provide religious guidance and are involved in premarital guidance activities. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation until no new information was found, and a total of six participants were recruited.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the research objectives. Interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, then transcribed verbatim and supplemented with field notes. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke: understanding the data through repeated readings, generating initial codes, grouping codes into categories, developing themes, reviewing and naming themes, and compiling a research report. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. The study obtained ethical approval from the Health Research Ethics Committee before data collection was carried out. This study was approved by the Health Research Ethics Committee of the Deli Husada Deli Tua Institute of Health, Indonesia, with Ethics Approval Number: 2463/KEP-IKDH.DT/IV/2026.

RESULT

Table 1.
Respondent characteristics

Respondent characteristics	f	%
Age		
30 - 45	3	50
46 - 55	3	50
Gender		
Male	3	50
Female	3	50
Education		
Bachelor	5	83,3
Magister	1	16,6

Table 2.

Theme Matrix: Perceptions of Islamic Religious Leaders on the Development of Their Role as Exclusive Breastfeeding Ambassadors in Premarital Education as a Stunting Prevention Effort

Theme 1: Understanding of Islamic Religious Leaders on Stunting and Exclusive Breastfeeding	
Knowledge of Stunting	Definition Causes Impacts Prevention
Knowledge of Exclusive Breastfeeding	Definition Benefits Timing
The relationship between exclusive breastfeeding and stunting	The role of exclusive breastfeeding in preventing stunting.
Theme 2: Religious leaders' perceptions of developing their role as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors	
Views on the Role of Religious Leaders	Responsibilities The Role of Da'wah in Health
Acceptance of the Role of Ambassadors	Compliance with Islamic Values Commitment
Premarital Education	The Importance of Premarital Education Educational Goals
Theme 3: Readiness and Development Needs	
Readiness to Become an Ambassador	Readiness Benefits Relevance
Need for Capacity Building	Training Modules Educational Media
Implementation Mechanism	Material Delivery Method Integration with Premarital Guidance
Theme 4: Expectations for model development	
Form of expected role model	Role model Educational media
Program sustainability	Monitoring Evaluation
Program impact	Improving Literacy of Prospective Brides Success of Exclusive Breastfeeding Stunting Prevention

Theme 1: Religious Leaders' Understanding of Stunting and Exclusive Breastfeeding

This theme describes the understanding of Islamic religious leaders regarding stunting and exclusive breastfeeding, including knowledge about stunting, exclusive breastfeeding, and the relationship between exclusive breastfeeding and stunting prevention, which serves as the basis for education for prospective brides and grooms. As stated by the following participant:

Knowledge of Stunting

"What is stunting? As it is included in President Prabowo's Astaprotas, it is a disruption of child growth and development due to malnutrition, chronic malnutrition, and recurrent infections."

"Of course, this is visible in the child's disproportionate posture, short stature, and unhealthy posture."

Knowledge of Exclusive Breastfeeding

"What is exclusive breastfeeding? Exclusive breastfeeding for six months."

"Breastfeeding for six months without any additional food or drink."

The Relationship Between Exclusive Breastfeeding and Stunting

"Of course, there is a close relationship because the baby's teeth are closely related, especially during those six months. If they are not given exclusive breastfeeding, their teeth can fail to grow properly."

Theme 2: Perceptions of the Role of Exclusive Breastfeeding Ambassadors

Religious leaders view the role of exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors as aligned with Islamic responsibilities and values. Premarital education is considered crucial for increasing the understanding of prospective brides and grooms as an effort to prevent stunting. Participant statements are as follows:

Views on the Role of Religious Leaders

"Religious leaders must convey information and influence the community, and their influence will be heard by the community."

"Religious leaders are the driving force behind stunting prevention, so they must convey this to the community."

Acceptance of the Role of Ambassadors

"In Islam, the Prophet Muhammad was also breastfed by Halimatussakdiah. And Allah also commanded that babies be nursed until they are two years old, so religious teachers must convey this to the community."

"In my opinion, religious leaders, especially religious instructors at the Religious Affairs Office (KUA), must accept the role of being what you call breastfeeding ambassadors, but don't call them that, haha."

Premarital Education

"It should be conveyed before marriage, and even when you are a bride and groom, it should still be conveyed to them."

Theme 3: Readiness and Capacity Development Needs

The readiness of religious leaders to act as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors is supported by their willingness, perceived benefits, and the relevance of their role in premarital education. Developing this role requires training, modules, educational media, mentoring, and an implementation mechanism integrated with premarital guidance.

Readiness to Become Ambassadors

"In my opinion, religious leaders, especially religious instructors at the Religious Affairs Office (KUA), must accept the opportunity to become what you call breastfeeding ambassadors, but don't call them that, haha."

"Because religious leaders are the driving force behind stunting prevention, so they must be willing."

"They do play a significant role in that. We hope these religious leaders will participate and be relevant to Islam."

The Need for Capacity Building

"Special training on exclusive breastfeeding and stunting prevention is essential. Of course, a curriculum is needed. What kind of material is needed for religious leaders?"

"So what is it called? What are the basic materials related to exclusive breastfeeding?"

Implementation Mechanism

"There must be material, whether it aligns with Islamic principles or contradicts them. There must be integration."

"This will be conveyed through religious studies, pre-marital counseling, sermons, and religious study groups."

Theme 4: Expectations for Model Development

Expectations for model development include the development of role models, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and educational media that are easy to implement, supported by ongoing monitoring and evaluation, and able to improve literacy among prospective brides and grooms, the success of exclusive breastfeeding, and stunting prevention. As stated by the following participants:

Expected Model Form

"There will be material that we will provide to prospective brides and grooms during premarital counseling."

"Yes, there must be something like a book or media that we will use to explain breastfeeding and stunting."

Program Sustainability

"Monitoring and evaluation of this activity, right?"

Program Impact

"Prospective brides and grooms will gain more knowledge about stunting prevention."

"Like in Islam, they will breastfeed until the age of 2 years and provide breast milk for six months without any additional food."

"Yes, religious leaders can be advocates for stunting prevention."

DISCUSSION

Research findings indicate that religious leaders have a good understanding of stunting and exclusive breastfeeding. Stunting is a growth and development disorder in children caused by chronic malnutrition, characterized by height that is not appropriate for age (Mangngi, 2026). Exclusive breastfeeding is the provision of breast milk without any additional food or drink for 6 months (Wijaya, 2019). Religious leaders understand that exclusive breastfeeding, which is the provision of breast milk for the first six months of life without any additional food or drink, plays a crucial role in meeting infants' nutritional needs, thus supporting optimal growth and development. This understanding aligns with various studies that indicate exclusive breastfeeding is an effective specific nutritional intervention in supporting infant growth and reducing the risk of stunting (Mahmuda et al., 2023). Furthermore, religious leaders believe there is a close relationship between exclusive breastfeeding and stunting prevention. They believe that infants who are not exclusively breastfed are at risk of growth disorders due to inadequate nutritional needs in the first six months of life. Therefore, empowering religious leaders through training and providing educational media is necessary so that they can convey accurate information and support stunting prevention efforts in the community.

Religious leaders view developing the role of exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors as a positive and relevant step in stunting prevention efforts. Religious leaders have a moral responsibility to guide the community not only in religious matters but also in building healthy families. Public trust in religious leaders is crucial in conveying health messages, including the importance of exclusive breastfeeding (Subqi et al., 2021 & Nashrilah et al., 2022). Da'wah (Islamic outreach) can be combined with health education as long as the material aligns with Islamic values and is supported by accurate information. Da'wah itself plays a crucial role in raising public awareness about stunting. Da'wah essentially provides teaching and guidance on the path from wrong to right (Yusfarani et al., 2023).

The idea of religious leaders as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors is considered consistent with Islamic teachings, which emphasize the importance of maintaining maternal and child health. The involvement of religious leaders can raise awareness among prospective brides and grooms about the importance of exclusive breastfeeding as a stunting prevention measure. Religious leaders committed to participating in the program if they received adequate training, modules, and support. Furthermore, religious leaders believed that education about exclusive breastfeeding should be provided premarital, as prospective brides and grooms are an ideal target for developing knowledge, attitudes, and readiness for parenthood before pregnancy and childcare (Napitupulu et al., 2025).

Most participants expressed their willingness to serve as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors in premarital education as a stunting prevention effort. The role of religious leaders was seen as beneficial in increasing prospective brides and grooms' understanding of the importance of exclusive breastfeeding before entering family life (Napitupulu et al., 2025). Furthermore, developing the role of religious leaders was deemed relevant given their role as community guides, not only conveying religious values but also supporting the creation of healthy, quality families in accordance with Islamic teachings (Kholis et al., 2024).

Despite their readiness to fulfill this role, religious leaders expressed the need for capacity building through structured training on exclusive breastfeeding and stunting prevention. The availability of modules, educational media such as posters and leaflets, and mentoring from health workers were also seen as crucial for increasing confidence in delivering material to prospective brides and grooms. The implementation of education should be integrated into premarital guidance at the KUA with systematic materials, communicative and interactive delivery methods, so that health messages can be well received and support the success of stunting prevention efforts (Amelia et al., 2025 & Lusiana et al., 2023).

The role model for religious leaders as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors can be systematically developed, easily implemented, and tailored to the needs of premarital guidance at the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA). The model is expected to be equipped with standard operating procedures (SOPs), simple, engaging, and easy-to-understand educational modules or media to assist religious leaders in conveying exclusive breastfeeding material to prospective brides and grooms (Azmi et al., 2026). Furthermore, the material provided is expected to combine health aspects and Islamic values for greater public acceptance. Regular monitoring and evaluation will ensure program implementation is aligned with established objectives (Noorliyana, 2025). The development of this model is expected to increase literacy among prospective brides and grooms regarding the importance of exclusive breastfeeding, strengthen couples' readiness to support exclusive breastfeeding practices after having children, and contribute to stunting prevention efforts in Padangsidempuan City through collaboration between religious leaders, KUA, and health workers.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Islamic religious leaders have a positive perception of developing the role of exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors in premarital education as a stunting prevention effort. Religious leaders understand the importance of exclusive breastfeeding in supporting child growth and development and believe that providing education from the premarital period is an appropriate strategy to increase the readiness of prospective brides and grooms to build healthy families. This role is also seen as aligned with Islamic values and the function of religious leaders as community guides. However, implementing this role requires capacity building through training, provision of modules, educational media, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and cross-sectoral support and collaboration, particularly with the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA), Community Health Centers (Puskesmas), the Health Office, and universities. Therefore, developing a role model for religious leaders as exclusive breastfeeding ambassadors is expected to be a viable innovation in premarital education to improve literacy among prospective brides and grooms, support the success of exclusive breastfeeding, and contribute to stunting prevention in Padangsidempuan City.

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