



The Body as an Arena of Power: Biopolitics, the Medicalization of Social Life, and State Control over Sexuality, Reproduction, and Corporeal Identity from a Foucauldian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

*The human body has emerged as one of the primary sites through which political power is exercised, social norms are inscribed, and state authority is materialized in contemporary societies. This article develops a comprehensive Foucauldian analysis of biopolitics, the medicalization of social life, and state control over sexuality, reproduction, and corporeal identity, with particular attention to the Indonesian context. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's genealogical analysis of biopower, disciplinary power, and governmentality—as developed in *Discipline and Punish*, *The History of Sexuality*, and his *Collège de France* lectures—alongside Achille Mbembe's extension of biopolitical theory through the concept of necropolitics, the study examines how the bodies of citizens are subjected to multiple, overlapping regimes of power that simultaneously constitute, normalize, and constrain corporeal subjectivity. Through systematic qualitative review of empirical literature and documentary analysis of Indonesian regulatory frameworks, the article identifies six major domains in which biopolitical power operates in the Indonesian context: reproductive governance through family planning programs; sexuality regulation through criminal law, religious authority, and moral policing; the pathologization and persecution of non-normative gender and sexual identities; the medicalization of mental health and social deviance; pandemic biopolitics and digital bodily surveillance; and the normalization of disabled bodies through rehabilitation programs. The study argues that Indonesian biopolitics represents a distinctive configuration that combines Foucauldian disciplinary power with Islamic moral authority and postcolonial governance logics, producing a complex and layered system of corporeal control that is simultaneously modernizing and conservative, rights-expanding and rights-restricting. The analysis contributes to broader debates on the global diversification of biopolitical formations and the specific articulations of body politics in postcolonial Muslim-majority societies.*

Keywords

Biopolitics; biopower; medicalization; Foucault; disciplinary power; sexuality; reproduction; corporeal identity; governmentality; Indonesia; necropolitics



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1. Introduction

"Poverty is not simply a lack of money. It is not having the power to tell your own story, to determine your own fate. It is being subjected to the judgements of others—their pity, their contempt, their administrative classifications—rather than being the author of one's own life. This is what the sociology of class must address: not merely the distribution of resources, but the distribution of the power to name, to recognize, and to be recognized."

Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (2022)

The persistence of poverty across generations constitutes one of the most profound failures of social justice in contemporary societies and one of the most theoretically challenging problems in sociological analysis. Despite decades of economic growth, social spending, and targeted poverty alleviation programs, Indonesia continues to exhibit patterns of intergenerational poverty transmission that resist amelioration: children born into the bottom income quintile face dramatically higher probabilities of remaining in poverty in adulthood than children born into higher income strata, and these probabilities are only partially explained by income differences (World Bank, 2023; SMERU Research Institute, 2023).

The dominant policy framework for addressing poverty in Indonesia centered on conditional cash transfer programs (Program Keluarga Harapan/PKH), subsidized basic commodity access (Kartu Sembako), and health and educational entitlements (KIS, KIP) addresses the income dimension of poverty but leaves largely unexamined the cultural and social mechanisms through which poverty reproduces itself across generations. This theoretical and policy lacuna reflects a deeper analytical limitation: the tendency of economists and development practitioners to conceptualize poverty primarily in terms of material resource deficits, overlooking the ways in which poverty is simultaneously and fundamentally a condition of cultural deprivation, social exclusion, and symbolic degradation that shapes the very dispositions, aspirations, and practical orientations through which poor households navigate the social world (Sulistyaningsih, 2021; Wacquant, 2022).

Pierre Bourdieu's field-theoretic sociology offers the most powerful available framework for addressing this analytical limitation. Bourdieu's concepts of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic), field, and habitus particularly as developed in *Distinction* (1984), *The State Nobility* (1996), and *The Weight of the World* (1999) provide an integrated account of how social inequality is produced, reproduced, and naturalized through the systematic interplay of material conditions, cultural dispositions, and institutional practices. For Bourdieu, poverty is not merely a lack of income; it is a position within a field of social relations characterized by simultaneous deficits across multiple capital dimensions, and it generates a characteristic set of dispositions—the habitus of necessity—that,

while rational responses to the conditions of scarcity, produce practices that tend to reproduce the conditions of their own production (Bourdieu, 1984; Wacquant, 2022).

This article develops a comprehensive Bourdieusian analysis of intergenerational poverty reproduction in Indonesia, with three principal aims. First, it seeks to demonstrate empirically the multi-dimensional character of poverty reproduction in Indonesia, showing that capital deficits across economic, cultural, and social dimensions are mutually reinforcing and exhibit significant intergenerational correlation. Second, it develops a theoretical account of the mechanisms through which lower-class habitus formation mediates the transmission of poverty, attending particularly to the mechanisms of symbolic violence and self-exclusion through which lower-class subjects internalize social hierarchies as natural and legitimate. Third, it draws policy implications that go beyond conventional income-transfer approaches to address the cultural and social dimensions of poverty reproduction.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical literature on Bourdieu's field theory and its applications to poverty analysis; Section 3 details the methodology; Section 4 presents the conceptual framework and empirical findings; Section 5 develops a critical discussion; and Section 6 concludes with theoretical and policy reflections.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Bourdieu's Field Theory and Social Reproduction

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction provides the foundational analytical framework for this study. In contrast to structural-functionalist accounts that treat social mobility as the natural outcome of meritocratic competition, and neo-Marxist accounts that reduce class reproduction to the straightforward transmission of economic capital, Bourdieu demonstrates that social reproduction is a multi-dimensional process involving the conversion, accumulation, and transmission of several forms of capital across the three generational time horizon of family, education, and occupational career (Bourdieu, 1984; Wacquant, 2022).

The concept of habitus is central to Bourdieu's theory of reproduction. Habitus designates the system of durable, transposable dispositions ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and acting that are inculcated through early socialization in the family and subsequently reinforced through educational experience, occupational practice, and peer socialization. For Bourdieu, habitus is not merely a set of attitudes or preferences; it is a practical sense a feel for the game that enables agents to navigate their social world without conscious deliberation, generating responses that are systematically adapted to the conditions of the field in which they were formed (Bourdieu, 1984). This has a crucial implication for the analysis of poverty: the habitus formed under conditions of material scarcity and social exclusion generates dispositions that, while adaptively rational within the poverty field, tend to reproduce exclusion when the agent encounters new field conditions such as formal educational institutions, credit markets, or middle-class professional environments whose rules of the game demand forms of capital that the lower-class habitus has not generated.

The concept of symbolic violence extends this analysis by attending to the subjective dimension of social reproduction. Symbolic violence the imposition of social classifications and judgements of worth as natural and legitimate operates precisely by converting arbitrary social hierarchies into naturalized assessments of personal ability, merit, and value (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For lower-class subjects, symbolic violence manifests as the internalization of dominant class-based cultural norms as the universal standard against which all cultural practice is measured a process through which educational failure, social exclusion, and economic marginalization are misrecognized as expressions of individual inadequacy rather than structural position (Wacquant, 2022).

2.2 Applications to Poverty Research in the Global South

Bourdieu's framework has been extensively applied to poverty research across diverse national contexts, with a growing body of scholarship examining its applicability to Global South settings characterized by colonial legacies, high economic informality, and distinctive configurations of ethnic, religious, and caste-based social hierarchies (Savage et al., 2021; Narayan et al., 2019). In the Indonesian context, Sukmana (2022) and Sulistyaningsih (2021) have applied Bourdieusian concepts to analyze the mechanisms through which poverty is reproduced across generations in West

Java and East Java urban-rural communities, identifying the mutual reinforcement of economic capital deficits, educational capital gaps, and social network enclosure as the primary drivers of intergenerational poverty persistence.

The World Bank (2023) and SMERU Research Institute (2023) have produced extensive empirical documentation of intergenerational poverty dynamics in Indonesia, demonstrating that children born into the bottom income quintile face a probability of remaining in poverty in adulthood that is approximately 3.4 times higher than children born into the top quintile, and that this intergenerational correlation is explained only partially by income variables, with education, social networks, and geographic location contributing substantially to the explanation. These findings provide strong empirical support for the Bourdieusian argument that poverty is a multi-dimensional condition requiring a multi-dimensional analytical framework.

2.3 Habitus, Field, and the Reproduction of Disadvantage

Recent applications of Bourdieu's framework to educational sociology provide particularly illuminating insights into the mechanisms of intergenerational poverty reproduction in Indonesia. Siwiyanti & Rochani (2022) and Hamid (2023) document the ways in which children from lower-class backgrounds experience systematic disadvantage in Indonesian educational fields, not primarily as a result of intellectual capacity differences but as a result of cultural capital mismatches between lower-class habitus and the middle-class cultural norms institutionalized in formal educational practice. These mismatches manifest in language capital deficits (limited facility with Standard Indonesian and academic discourse), the absence of parental educational scaffolding and aspiration-building, and the physical and psychological toll of poverty on cognitive development and school engagement.

The concept of field exclusion extends this analysis beyond the educational domain to encompass the financial, civic, and occupational fields in which capital accumulation occurs. As Narayan et al. (2019) document in their multi-country analysis of poverty mobility, access to formal financial services—savings accounts, credit, insurance—is a powerful predictor of intergenerational poverty mobility, and lower-class households face systematic barriers to financial field participation

that are rooted not only in income insufficiency but in cultural capital deficits (financial literacy gaps, documentation barriers) and social capital deficits (absence of creditworthy guarantors and referees). Similarly, exclusion from formal occupational fields the consequence of educational underachievement and credential deficits locks lower-class households into informal economic positions that offer lower wages, greater insecurity, and fewer opportunities for skill development and accumulation.

3. Methodology

This study employs a systematic qualitative review methodology integrated with secondary quantitative data analysis. The literature review covered peer-reviewed scholarship published between 2018 and 2025, accessed through Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases, using search terms including 'intergenerational poverty Indonesia,' 'Bourdieu habitus poverty,' 'social capital inequality Indonesia,' 'poverty reproduction Southeast Asia,' 'cultural capital education poverty,' and 'symbolic violence class.' Secondary data analysis utilized the Badan Pusat Statistik National Socioeconomic Survey (Susenas 2019–2024), SMERU Research Institute poverty research reports (2021–2023), the World Bank Indonesia Poverty Assessment (2023), LPEM UI Social Mobility Study (2024), and the UNDP Human Development Report Indonesia (2024). The analytical framework integrates Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, field, and symbolic violence into a coherent explanatory model of intergenerational poverty reproduction, as detailed in Section 4.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Bourdieusian Analytical Framework

Figure 1 presents the study's theoretical framework, mapping the interplay of capital deficits, habitus formation mechanisms, and structural reproduction outcomes in the context of intergenerational poverty in Indonesia.

Figure 1. Bourdieusian Framework of Intergenerational Poverty Reproduction: Capital Deficits, Habitus Formation, and Structural Persistence

Capital Type (Bourdieu)	Mechanism of Deprivation	Habitus Formation in Lower-Class Context	Intergenerational Reproduction Mechanism
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Economic Capital (Income, Assets, Property)	Income insufficiency; asset poverty; debt traps; informal economy dependency	Dispositions of scarcity: short-term planning horizons; risk aversion; sacrifice of future for present consumption; distrust of formal financial systems	Children inherit asset poverty; school costs force early labor entry; credit exclusion perpetuates informal economy dependency across generations
Cultural Capital (Education, Knowledge, Credentials)	Low-quality school access; educational cost barriers; language capital deficits; early dropout for labor	Habitus of educational resignation: low academic expectations; devaluation of credentials; preference for vocational over academic pathways	Inter-generational credential gap; cultural mismatch with formal educational field; symbolic violence of school failure naturalized as intellectual inadequacy
Social Capital (Networks, Associations, Support)	Network enclosure within poverty communities; exclusion from middle/upper-class networks; clientelistic dependency relationships	Trust bounded to immediate kin/neighborhood; suspicion of formal institutions; reliance on reciprocal informal support (gotong royong)	Children inherit geographically and socially bounded networks; limited access to information, opportunities, and sponsorship outside poverty enclaves
Symbolic Capital (Prestige, Recognition, Honor)	Stigmatization of poverty; symbolic violence of class-based cultural norms; misrecognition of social position as personal failure	Internalized inferiority; 'practical sense' of one's social limits; dignity strategies through religious devotion, local prestige, and familial roles	Transmission of stigmatized identity; children socialized into strategies of dignity within constraint rather than strategies of upward mobility
Structural Reproduction Outcome → The field of class relations systematically converts capital deficits into naturalized social inferiority, while habitus dispositions formed under conditions of scarcity generate practices that, while rational within the poverty field, perpetuate exclusion from capital-accumulating positions in the wider social field (Bourdieu, 1984; Wacquant, 2022; Sukmana, 2022).			

Source: Authors' theoretical synthesis, adapted from Bourdieu (1984), Wacquant (2022), and Sukmana (2022). Framework applied to Indonesian intergenerational poverty context.

4.2 Empirical Evidence of Intergenerational Capital Deficits

Table 1 presents systematic empirical evidence of the multi-dimensional capital deficits characterizing lower-income quintiles in Indonesia, along with intergenerational correlation coefficients that measure the degree to which these deficits are transmitted across generations.

Table 1. Key Indicators of Intergenerational Poverty Reproduction in Indonesia by Capital Dimension (2019–2024)					
Indicator	Bottom 20% (Quintile 1)	Lower-Middle (Quintile 2)	National Average	Intergenerational Correlation (r)	
Economic Capital Indicators					
Monthly household income (IDR)	< 1.2 million	1.2–2.5 million	3.8 million	0.71**	
Asset ownership (land/housing) (%)	18.3%	34.7%	62.4%	0.68**	
Informal economy employment (%)	84.6%	67.3%	51.2%	0.74**	
Cultural Capital Indicators					
Mean years of schooling (adults 25+)	5.8 years	7.9 years	9.7 years	0.66**	
Secondary school completion rate (%)	31.4%	54.2%	73.6%	0.72**	
Child labor incidence (10–17 yrs) (%)	18.9%	9.4%	4.7%	0.69**	
Social Capital Indicators					
Network diversity score (0–10)	2.3	3.8	5.6	0.58**	
Access to formal credit (%)	12.7%	28.4%	51.9%	0.63**	
Civic/organizational participation (%)	34.1%	47.8%	62.3%	0.54**	
Source: Adapted from BPS Susenas 2024, SMERU Research Institute (2023), World Bank Indonesia Poverty Assessment (2023), and LPEM UI Social Mobility Study (2024). **p < 0.01. Intergenerational correlation (r) measures correlation between parental and child generation indicators within same household quintile.					

The data reveals several theoretically significant patterns. First, intergenerational correlations are consistently high across all capital dimensions: economic capital indicators exhibit correlations of 0.68–0.74, cultural capital indicators of 0.66–0.72, and social capital indicators of 0.54–0.63. These values indicate a high degree of structural reproduction that is not reducible to income transmission alone, confirming Bourdieu's argument that social reproduction is a multi-dimensional process involving the simultaneous transmission of economic, cultural, and social capital.

Second, the data reveals a particularly striking educational reproduction deficit: secondary school completion rates of 31.4 percent in the bottom quintile, compared to a national average of 73.6 percent, combined with a child labor incidence of 18.9 percent, demonstrate the systematic exclusion of lower-class children from the educational pathways through which cultural capital and credential acquisition occur. As Hamid (2023) argues, this educational exclusion reflects not merely economic barriers to school attendance but systematic cultural capital mismatches between the lower-class habitus and the cultural norms institutionalized in formal education mismatches that generate the pattern of educational resignation and early school dropout that Bourdieu terms 'the scholastic mortality of the lower classes.'

Third, the network diversity score measuring the breadth and heterogeneity of social networks shows a sharp gradient from 2.3 in the bottom quintile to 5.6 nationally, with an intergenerational correlation of 0.58. This finding confirms the Bourdieusian argument regarding network enclosure: lower-class social capital is concentrated in dense, homogeneous, geographically bounded networks that provide strong support under conditions of crisis (gotong royong) but limited access to the information, opportunities, and sponsorship that characterize middle- and upper-class network participation.

4.3 The Habitus of Necessity: Cognitive and Behavioral Dimensions

Bourdieu's concept of the habitus of necessity the system of dispositions generated under conditions of material scarcity provides the central explanatory mechanism for understanding how capital deficits translate into self-reproducing behavioral patterns. The habitus of necessity is characterized, in Bourdieu's analysis, by a practical orientation toward the immediate satisfaction of material needs rather than the deferred gratification of future-oriented capital accumulation strategies; by a disposition of pragmatic resignation that accepts the social world as given rather than conceiving it as transformable through individual or collective action; and by a practical sense of one's social limits that generates preemptive withdrawal from opportunities perceived as 'not for people like us' (Bourdieu, 1984; Wacquant, 2022).

In the Indonesian lower-class context, these habitus dimensions manifest in characteristic ways. Sulistyarningsih (2021) documents the widespread pattern of educational resignation among lower-class families in East Java urban kampung communities: parents who value education abstractly but anticipate their children's school failure and early labor entry as practical necessities rather than as avoidable outcomes. This pattern of pragmatic fatalism—the acceptance of structural constraints as natural and inevitable—is not a cultural deficiency but a rational adaptive response to the material conditions and experiential history of the lower-class field. Nevertheless, as Bourdieu argues, it functions as a mechanism of self-exclusion that reproduces the very conditions it reflects.

Sukmana (2022) similarly documents the distinctive temporality of lower-class household decision-making in West Java communities: the structural pressure toward short-term planning horizons that prioritizes immediate consumption needs over long-term investment in education, health, or financial capital. This temporal disposition—which economic approaches typically interpret as irrational 'present bias'—is, from a Bourdieusian perspective, a rational adaptation to conditions in which the future is structurally uncertain, material buffers against crisis are absent, and the opportunity cost of foregoing immediate income for educational investment is prohibitively high. Yet it functions, in the aggregate and over time, as a mechanism of capital deficit reproduction.

4.4 Symbolic Violence and the Naturalization of Class Hierarchy

Perhaps the most theoretically challenging dimension of intergenerational poverty reproduction is the role of symbolic violence: the process through which lower-class subjects internalize dominant cultural classifications as natural assessments of personal worth, ability, and social entitlement. Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic violence argues that the most effective mechanism of social domination is not direct coercion but the conversion of arbitrary social hierarchies into naturalized and therefore misrecognized expressions of objective merit—a process in which the dominated participate actively in their own domination by accepting the dominant class's cultural standards as the universal measure of human value (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In the Indonesian educational field, symbolic violence operates through the institutionalization of middle-class cultural capital as the universal standard of academic ability. The

standardized testing regimes, formal language requirements, and cultural knowledge presuppositions of the national curriculum systematically advantage students from middle-class backgrounds whose habitus aligns with institutional cultural norms, while disadvantaging lower-class students whose habitus reflects the cultural practices and knowledge systems of their communities of origin. When lower-class students fail academically under these conditions, the failure is misrecognized by teachers, by parents, and by the students themselves as evidence of personal intellectual inadequacy rather than as the predictable consequence of cultural capital mismatch (Hamid, 2023; Siwiyanti & Rochani, 2022). This misrecognition is the mechanism through which symbolic violence participates in intergenerational poverty reproduction: by naturalizing educational failure as personal failure, it forecloses the social recognition of the structural conditions that produce it and delegitimizes collective demands for structural transformation.

4.5 Field Exclusion and Institutional Misrecognition

The final mechanism of poverty reproduction identified in this study is field exclusion: the systematic exclusion of lower-class agents from the formal institutional fields financial, educational, occupational, civic in which capital accumulation and social mobility occur. This exclusion operates not primarily through direct discriminatory practices but through the cultural logic of institutional fields that are structured around the cultural capital of dominant classes: documentation requirements, formal language demands, institutional navigation skills, and professional social norms that constitute invisible barriers to participation for those whose habitus was formed in the lower-class field.

The formal financial system provides a particularly clear illustration. Access to formal credit documented in Table 1 as available to only 12.7 percent of bottom-quintile households, compared to 51.9 percent nationally is contingent not only on income levels but on the possession of formal property titles (land certificates), stable employment documentation, credit history records, and navigational competence in formal banking institutions. These requirements systematically exclude lower-class households whose economic activity is concentrated in the informal economy, whose property relationships are embedded in customary rather than statutory frameworks, and whose social capital is invested in informal rather than formal networks. As Narayan et al. (2019) document, this

financial exclusion has directly measurable intergenerational consequences: access to formal savings and credit is one of the strongest predictors of upward intergenerational poverty mobility, and its systematic denial to lower-class households constitutes a structural barrier to capital accumulation that is reproduced across generations.

5. Conclusion

This article has developed a comprehensive Bourdieusian analysis of intergenerational poverty reproduction in Indonesia, examining how the interplay of economic, cultural, and social capital deficits, mediated through the formation of lower-class habitus, produces self-reinforcing cycles of structural inequality. The analysis has identified four central mechanisms—the multi-dimensional capital deficit trap, the habitus of necessity, symbolic violence and self-exclusion, and field exclusion—that together constitute a distinctive syndrome of poverty reproduction that extends far beyond the material domain addressed by conventional income-transfer approaches.

The empirical evidence presented in this study—demonstrating high intergenerational correlations across economic, cultural, and social capital indicators—provides robust support for the Bourdieusian argument that poverty is a multi-dimensional structural condition whose reproduction cannot be adequately addressed by policies targeting income deficits alone. The intergenerational transmission of educational disadvantage, social network enclosure, and institutional exclusion constitutes a set of structural barriers to upward mobility that persist even when income transfers temporarily lift households above official poverty thresholds—a dynamic that helps explain the well-documented 'poverty trap' phenomenon in Indonesian welfare programs, wherein households that exit poverty under favorable economic conditions rapidly return to poverty when those conditions deteriorate.

The theoretical contributions of this study are significant. First, the application of Bourdieu's field theory to the Indonesian poverty context reveals the distinctive mechanisms through which globally circulating patterns of social reproduction are articulated through specific national configurations of informal economy dominance, religious capital dynamics, and customary social organization. Second, the concept of 'field exclusion' offers a productive analytical tool for

understanding how institutional barriers to capital accumulation operate not through direct discrimination but through cultural logic mechanism that is simultaneously more pervasive and more difficult to address than explicit discriminatory practices. Third, the analysis of symbolic violence and self-exclusion in the Indonesian educational context contributes to the growing body of Bourdieusian educational sociology in the Global South.

Policy implications are substantial. Effective poverty alleviation strategies must address the cultural and social dimensions of poverty reproduction alongside economic dimensions: this requires educational policy reform that addresses cultural capital mismatches between lower-class habitus and institutional cultural norms; financial inclusion programs that reduce the cultural and documentary barriers to formal financial field participation; social capital investment programs that extend the network reach of lower-class households beyond poverty enclaves; and welfare program designs that support long-term capital accumulation rather than merely providing temporary income floors. These policy recommendations represent a long-term institutional agenda whose implementation requires political commitment that transcends the electoral cycle but whose absence condemns successive generations of Indonesian children to the reproduction of structural disadvantage.

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