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Strengthening the Role of Implementers of the Minimum Age Restriction Policy to Prevent Child Marriage Through Group Counseling in Karimunjawa

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Abstract

The implementation of the minimum age for marriage in the Karimunjawa Islands has not complied with Law No. 16 of 2019, as underage marriage remains high. This issue arises from the policy's non-acceptance by its implementers, who view the policy as ineffective due to its overlap with marriage dispensation laws and its contradiction with local cultural values, which are permissive towards underage marriage. To address this, group counseling sessions were conducted alongside the establishment of a Joint Forum to Prevent Child Marriage. These initiatives aimed to increase awareness and foster collaborative efforts. Using the Participatory Action Research (PAR) method, encompassing assessment, program planning, implementation, and evaluation, significant improvements were observed in understanding, acceptance, and compliance with the policy. Furthermore, the program successfully facilitated the development of collaborative governance to support the prevention of child marriage in Karimunjawa.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Group Counseling, Collaborative Governance

Introduction

In addition to maintaining the integrity of marriage, the policy aims to prevent the negative impacts of underage marriage, such as school dropouts, exposure to violence, poverty, and high maternal and infant mortality rates (Anshor, 2016)(Yasak & Dewi, 2015)(Sulaiman, 2012)5/5/25 2:26:00 PM. However, despite research demonstrating these negative consequences, underage marriages still occur in various regions. Data shows that the number of underage marriages granted through marriage

dispensations reached 13,251 in 2018, and by the end of 2019, the figure nearly doubled to 23,126(Rissita, 2021). This surge occurred during the amendment of the minimum marriage age for females from 16 to 19 years, as stipulated in Law No. 16 of 2019, Article 7 paragraph (1).

In Central Java, a similar increase in underage marriages has been observed. One of the regencies contributing to this high number is Jepara. Even more concerning is the situation in Karimunjawa, a subdistrict located approximately 45 miles north of the regency center, where many underage marriages are conducted without official registration. One of the main factors contributing to the high prevalence of underage marriages in Karimunjawa is the deeply rooted societal value that "the sooner a girl is married, the more pride she brings to the family; conversely, the longer it takes, the more shame it brings." As a result, many parents arrange marriages for their children to prevent zina (illicit sexual relationships).

The above situation illustrates the tension between state law, represented by the minimum marriage age policy, and adat law (customary law), which holds significant influence in the community. In practice, policy implementers, such as KUA (Office of Religious Affairs) officials, often align with community desires by facilitating unregistered (sirri) marriages, even when the couple is underage. Some officials also assist in processing marriage dispensations in exchange for payment. This indicates that non-compliance with regulations occurs not only among the community but also among policy implementers.

Given the complexity of these issues, a comprehensive approach is needed, involving all stakeholders in the policy implementation process, which is known as collaborative governance. However, this paper will focus on providing support to the implementers of the minimum marriage age policy, as their role is crucial in determining whether the policy is effectively enforced.

Method

The primary principle guiding the process of this community service is based on a key statement by Mao Tse Tung:

> *"Carefully consider ideas from the people, which are often fragmented and unsystematic. Study these ideas together with them until they become more systematic. Unite with the people. Examine and re-explain their ideas until they truly understand that these ideas belong to them. Translate these ideas into actions and test their validity through these actions. Repeat this process*

consistently to ensure that the ideas become more accurate, important, and valuable over time. This is how People's Knowledge is built."(Khan et al., 2008)

The above principle was translated by the research team into operational steps in the field using relevant data collection and analysis methods. Accordingly, the research framework employed several strategies. These strategies include: first, Problem Identification or Assessment. The initial step taken by the research team was to map out the problems in collaboration with key figures involved in implementing the minimum age marriage policy.

The results from the research team's assessment were then used as a guide or discussion material with the assisted community to identify the core and main problems. In addition to problem mapping, this phase also involved: 1) Social, economic, and cultural analysis to identify the needs, potential, opportunities, and challenges, as well as a stakeholder analysis to determine the relevant actors; and 2) Strength analysis to recognize the strengths possessed by the community. During this step, the research team identified factors that could be developed by exploring the available opportunities.

Second, Program Planning. After identifying the needs, challenges, strengths, and opportunities, the next step was to collaboratively design a program with the assisted community. Based on the needs analysis, a draft logical framework was prepared as an initial reference. This draft was discussed further with a team involving relevant stakeholders to formulate and determine the goals, intermediate objectives (purpose), outputs, and activity plans.

The implementation of the minimum age marriage policy in the Karimunjawa Islands has not been carried out in accordance with the mandate of Marriage Law No. 16 of 2019, as indicated by the persistently high rate of underage marriages. This issue persists due to the lack of acceptance from both the community and the policy implementers, a phenomenon described by PytlikZillig as policy non-acceptance (PytlikZillig et al., 2018). Based on the initial social mapping, it was found that the causes of policy non-acceptance among implementers include: 1) the belief that the policy is ineffective in addressing the issue of high underage marriage rates, as it overlaps with other policies, such as the marriage dispensation, which provides a legal alternative for underage individuals; 2) the implementers' refusal to accept the policy, based on the perception that it does not align with the community's desires, values, and cultural norms prevailing in Karimunjawa.

Table 1: Program Narrative Summary

Goal	Reduction in the Underage Marriage Rate
Purpose	Effective Implementation of the Minimum Age Marriage Policy in the Karimunjawa Islands
Output	Community members and policy implementers gain understanding, acceptance, and willingness to implement the Minimum Age Marriage Policy in the Karimunjawa Islands
Activities (Input)	Establishment of a Joint Forum to Prevent Child Marriage

The program and planned activities identified include the initiation of a forum to prevent child and underage marriage. The aim of this initiative is to ensure that the implementation of the Minimum Age Marriage Policy in the Karimunjawa Islands aligns with the mandate of Marriage Law No. 16 of 2019, demonstrated by the acceptance and compliance of both the community and policy implementers. The expectation for implementers is that they should not direct the community to pursue marriage dispensation when underage marriage requests are made. Instead, they must firmly reject such requests(Kirby, 2002). Additionally, implementers are expected to raise awareness within the community through socialization and coordination efforts via official forums or existing community institutions, such as jam'iyyah tahlil (prayer groups), Bahtsul Masail forums (Islamic discussions), PKK activities (Family Welfare Movement), and similar platforms. It is also hoped that the village government in Kemojan will initiate a village regulation prohibiting underage marriage. Schools are also expected to incorporate early marriage prevention topics into their curriculum. All these efforts aim to prevent underage marriage, which can lead to negative consequences such as sexual violence against young girls and the birth of children raised in suboptimal parenting conditions. Such conditions pose a threat to the nation's future, as a prosperous Indonesia relies on a generation of high-quality youth. In this context, collaborative governance becomes indispensable (Rafferty, 2013).

The key stakeholders involved intensively in this mentoring process include: the mentoring team, policy implementers from the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Jepara, the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) in Karimunjawa, and the village governments across the Karimunjawa Islands, which have established positive relationships with the mentors. Additionally, the community—primarily fishermen—and madrasah (Islamic schools) are part of the assisted community in this mentoring initiative.

Theoretical Framework

The successful implementation of public policies depends on their acceptance by both communities and implementers, as policies often interact with entrenched cultural and social systems. Recent studies (PytlikZillig et al., 2018) emphasize the importance of policy acceptance, particularly in areas where cultural norms conflict with national regulations. In the context of Law No. 16 of 2019 on the minimum marriage age, the resistance observed in Karimunjawa underscores these challenges, where local customs favor early marriage despite legal prohibitions. The role of implementers, such as officials at the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA), aligns with contemporary discussions of street-level bureaucracy (Thomann, 2020), highlighting how their discretion and engagement with the community can either facilitate or hinder policy outcomes. Collaborative approaches that engage diverse stakeholders are increasingly recognized as critical for overcoming these challenges.

Collaborative governance has gained prominence in recent years as a method for integrating multiple stakeholders into the policy-making and implementation process. Ansell and Torfing (Torfing & Ansell, 2020) highlight that such approaches are particularly effective in addressing complex social issues like child marriage. In Karimunjawa, the establishment of a joint forum for child marriage prevention exemplifies this approach, fostering dialogue among religious leaders, community members, and youth. Concurrently, group counseling has emerged as an evidence-based intervention to facilitate community-wide behavioral change (Doornbosch et al., 2024b). This method provides a structured yet adaptable framework for participants to critically examine cultural norms, understand the broader impacts of child marriage, and collaboratively develop actionable solutions.

Recent advancements in theories of social change emphasize the role of participatory methods in driving transformative outcomes (Sue et al., 2022). In Karimunjawa, group counseling acted as a catalyst for challenging traditional norms and promoting alternative perspectives on child marriage. By integrating empirical data, religious narratives, and culturally sensitive discussions, the sessions empowered participants to critically evaluate entrenched beliefs. Moreover, the application of Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation" (Arnstein, 2019) illustrates how communities transitioned from passive recipients to active collaborators in policy implementation. This transition was facilitated through the formation of peer support

networks and collaborative forums, which not only enhanced policy effectiveness but also fostered sustained commitment to preventing child marriage.

Through a synthesis of recent theoretical advancements, this study situates the importance of integrating collaborative governance and group counseling as dynamic tools for addressing socio-cultural challenges. The findings align with the growing consensus that participatory methods not only improve policy compliance but also create pathways for lasting social transformation in complex and culturally diverse contexts.

Discussion

Planning Stage

Before the mentoring program began, the mentoring team held a coordination meeting on December 15th in the Meeting Room of the Faculty of Da'wah and Islamic Communication at IAIN Kudus, from 09:00 to 11:45 WIB. The meeting was attended by the following team members: Dr. Siti Malaiha Dewi, S.Sos., M.Si. (Team Leader), Moh. Anwar Yasfin, M.Pd., Ahmad Nafi', M.Pd., Jarwani Linda Listik, and Hisyam Rifki.

The main agenda of the initial meeting was to prepare for the FGD (Focus Group Discussion) to establish the Joint Forum to Prevent Child Marriage(Maina, 2020). The discussion emphasized the importance of collaborative governance as the core strategy to implement the minimum age marriage policy effectively. The mentoring team agreed that the FGD would serve as a critical entry point for engaging stakeholders and ensuring consensus on preventing child marriage. The expectation is that local government leaders in Karimunjawa, the KUA (Office of Religious Affairs), religious figures, and community leaders would commit to supporting the implementation of the policy. Additionally, the meeting addressed the division of responsibilities within the mentoring team. Each member was assigned specific roles, such as contacting resource persons and coordinating with key figures involved in the policy implementation. The team decided to coordinate with the Head of Religious Guidance (Bimas) at the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Jepara, the Head of the KUA in Karimunjawa, and youth leaders in Karimunjawa to strengthen the program's foundation. A second coordination meeting was held on December 26, 2022, at 09:00 WIB in the Meeting Room of the Faculty of Da'wah and Islamic Communication at IAIN Kudus. The meeting was attended by Dr. Siti Malaiha Dewi, S.Sos., M.Si. as the Chairperson, along with team members Moh. Anwar Yasfin, M.Pd., Ahmad Nafi', M.Pd., Jarwani Linda Listik, and Hisyam Rifki.

The second meeting focused on finalizing the preparations for the FGD to establish the Joint Forum to Prevent Child Marriage. The team determined the resource persons, moderators, and the schedule and venue for the program's implementation. This step ensured that all stakeholders involved were aligned, facilitating the effective implementation of the minimum age marriage policy through collaborative governance in the Karimunjawa Islands (Boyden et al., 2013).

Activity Implementation Stage

First, Coordination with the Head of KUA Karimunjawa. To prepare for the FGD (Focus Group Discussion) to establish the Joint Forum to Prevent Child Marriage in Karimunjawa, the mentoring team—comprising Dr. Siti Malaiha Dewi, S.Sos., M.Si., Ahmad Nafi', M.Pd., and Moh. Anwar Yasfin, M.Pd.—held a coordination meeting on December 16th with the Head of KUA Karimunjawa, who also serves as the Head of KUA Kedung. The meeting took place at the KUA office in Kedung, starting with a request for permission to conduct the FGD and recommendations for invitees.

During the discussion, Mr. Shodiqin expressed strong support for the establishment of the forum, emphasizing the urgent need to prevent child marriages, given the high number of such cases in Karimunjawa. He explained that child marriage practices in Karimunjawa occur in two forms: sirri marriages (unregistered marriages conducted without the involvement of the KUA) and official marriages through marriage dispensation from the Religious Court in Jepara Regency. Despite the long journey from Karimunjawa to the mainland in Jepara, many families still pursue the dispensation process. According to Mr. Shodiqin, most dispensation requests arise from cases where the couple has engaged in sexual relations or the girl is already pregnant before marriage.

Second, Coordination with the Head of Islamic Guidance (Bimas) at the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Jepara. The second coordination meeting took place on December 21, 2022, at 11:00 WIB. The mentoring team—comprising Dr. Siti Malaiha Dewi, S.Sos., M.Si., Ahmad Nafi', M.Pd., and Moh. Anwar Yasfin, M.Pd.—met with H. Badrudin, S.Ag., the Head of Islamic Guidance (Bimas) at the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Jepara.

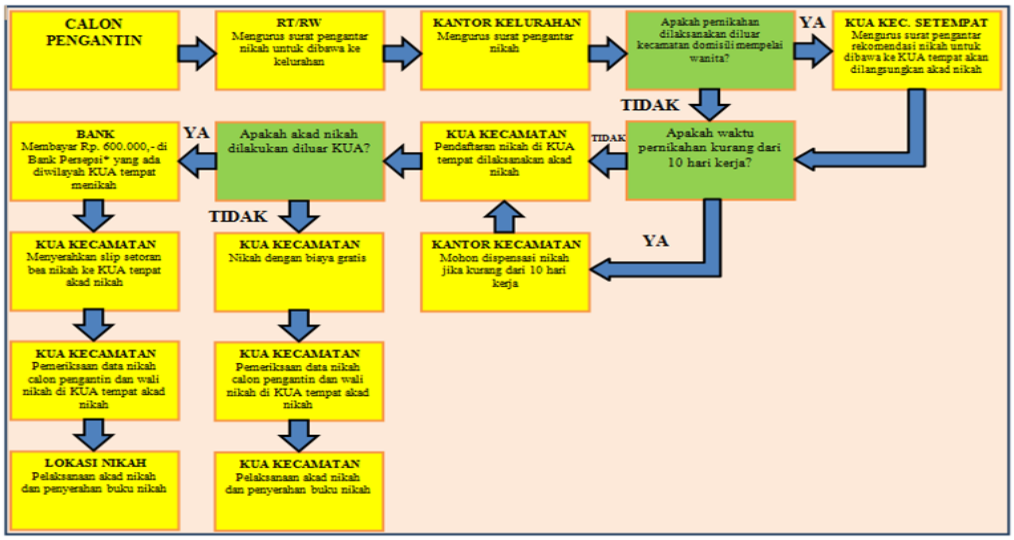
The discussion began with an overview of the challenges in implementing child marriage prevention policies and the reasons for their limited enforcement.

H. Badrudin explained that the legal framework for marriage in Indonesia is regulated by Marriage Law No. 1 of 1974, as amended by Law No. 16 of 2019, which outlines the requirements, procedures, and processes for marriage.

He emphasized that marriage in Indonesia must adhere to both state law and religious law to be considered valid, with the marriage officially registered by a marriage registrar (as outlined in Article 2, paragraphs (1) and (2) of Marriage Law No. 1 of 1974). For Muslims, a marriage (an-nikah) is valid only if performed in accordance with Islamic law. To support the application of Islamic law, the government issued the Compilation of Islamic Law (KHI) in 1991. The KHI consolidates principles from the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Maliki schools of thought into a codified legal text written in legislative language(Subeitan, 2022).

Regarding marriage registration, the process follows the Minister of Religious Affairs Regulation No. 20 of 2019 on Marriage Registration. The stages of the registration process include: a) Registration of marriage intention; b) Verification of marriage intention; c) Announcement of marriage intention; d) Marriage registration; and e) Issuance of a marriage book. However, not all applications for marriage are accepted. One common reason for rejection is when the prospective couple does not meet the minimum age requirement stipulated by the Marriage Law. In such cases, parents can request a marriage dispensation from the court. Article 7, paragraph (2) of the Marriage Law states: "In the event of a deviation from the age requirement specified in paragraph (1), the parents of the male and/or female party may request a dispensation from the court on the grounds of urgent necessity, accompanied by sufficient supporting evidence." The technical procedures for processing marriage dispensations are governed by Supreme Court Regulation No. 5 of 2019 on Guidelines for Adjudicating Marriage Dispensation Cases (Zulaiha & Mutaqin, 2021).

Figure 1: Marriage Service Flow



Source: bimasIslam.kemenag.go.id

The figure above illustrates two key aspects: 1) the marriage service flow, and 2) the marriage service implementers. The implementers in the context of this study refer to the Head of the KUA (Office of Religious Affairs) along with its staff and assistant penghulu (marriage officiants) in each village. The assistant penghulu in question are the heads of community welfare affairs (commonly referred to as modin) in each village. The role of modin is not explicitly shown in the marriage service flow above, as this is a specific policy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag) in Jepara. The policy aims to ensure that document verification is more accurate, given that modin—who have a deeper understanding of local residents and their families—are better positioned to handle these matters at the village or hamlet level.

Based on the above, it is clear that modin plays a crucial role in marriage administration and serves as the frontline liaison with the community. Other institutions involved in the marriage process include the neighborhood leaders (RT/RW), hamlet heads, village heads, and the Religious Court of Jepara Regency, especially when marriages require dispensation (Ageng'o, 2009).

Third, Coordination with HZ, a Youth Leader in Karimunjawa. The third coordination meeting was held with HZ, a prominent youth leader in Karimunjawa and an awardee of the Central Java Youth Pioneer Award for his contributions to advancing education in Karimunjawa. The mentoring team—comprising Dr. Siti Malaiha Dewi, S.Sos., M.Si., Ahmad Nafi', M.Pd., and Moh. Anwar Yasfin, M.Pd.—met with HZ on

December 24, 2022, at 13:00 WIB. During the discussion, HZ revealed that many cases of underage marriage are unregistered with the KUA. He explained that most underage marriages occur due to premarital pregnancies, prompting families to apply for marriage dispensation. HZ expressed strong support for the formation of the Joint Forum to Prevent Child Marriage in Karimunjawa, recognizing the importance of addressing these issues collectively.

Another motive for underage marriage is parental pride. Some parents feel a sense of pride when their children marry at a young age. Additionally, economic factors play a significant role (Furstenberg Jr, 2010). Parents often view marrying off their children as a way to reduce the family's financial burden. Another reason for underage marriage comes from the children themselves. Many voluntarily choose to marry, even if it means dropping out of school, as they have lost interest in learning. These children have internalized the belief, instilled by their parents, that starting a family is the most important goal in life. For them, education holds little value and is merely seen as a way to pass time until someone proposes marriage. This mindset has been passed down from generation to generation, becoming a socially accepted norm (Nelson et al., 2014).

Following coordination with various stakeholders, raising public awareness and fostering acceptance of the Minimum Age Marriage Policy require collective efforts (Svanemyr et al., 2015). Such efforts should involve implementers and all community members, including prospective brides and grooms, parents, youth, religious leaders, and community figures. One effective step is to organize a Joint Declaration to Reject Child Marriage and establish the Joint Forum to Prevent Child Marriage. Through these collaborative actions, the community can work together to prevent underage marriage and ensure greater compliance with the policy.

Preventing Child Marriage Through Group Counseling

Group counseling emerged as an essential strategy in addressing the entrenched socio-cultural and institutional barriers to implementing the minimum marriage age policy in Karimunjawa. These sessions were designed to engage community members, religious leaders, and policy implementers in meaningful discussions about the importance of preventing child marriage. Given the cultural sensitivity surrounding child marriage, counseling provided a platform to address misconceptions and foster collective understanding. The counseling approach focused on exploring the adverse consequences of child marriage and its misalignment with the objectives of national policies, such as Law No. 16 of 2019. By involving stakeholders at multiple levels, group counseling aimed to build a shared commitment to protecting children's rights and

ensuring compliance with state regulations. Participants were encouraged to share personal experiences and cultural values, fostering an environment of mutual respect and learning. This interactive format allowed facilitators to address resistance to the policy in a non-confrontational manner. The sessions sought to transform perceptions of child marriage from a cultural norm to a challenge threatening community well-being (Kuteesa et al., 2024).

A primary goal of group counseling was to enhance participants' understanding of the negative implications of child marriage, including higher risks of maternal and infant mortality, reduced educational opportunities, and the perpetuation of poverty cycles. Participants were introduced to real-life examples and statistical data illustrating these consequences, emphasizing that child marriage is not merely a personal issue but also a broader societal and national concern. The sessions also addressed misconceptions about the perceived benefits of early marriage, such as reducing family burdens or enhancing social status. Through guided discussions, participants learned that delaying marriage provides opportunities for better preparation in terms of education, mental maturity, and financial stability. Counseling also highlighted that adhering to the minimum marriage age policy contributes to creating a healthier and more prosperous community. This evidence-based approach encouraged participants to critically evaluate long-held beliefs, laying the foundation for meaningful behavioral change.

The counseling sessions were carefully structured to foster a collaborative atmosphere where participants felt safe to express their opinions without fear of judgment. Facilitators employed interactive methods such as ice-breaking activities, role-playing, and group discussions to achieve this goal. These methods effectively broke down barriers and encouraged active participation, even among those initially resistant to the policy. Each session began with a brief overview of objectives, followed by presentations on specific topics related to child marriage. Participants were then divided into smaller groups to discuss how these issues applied to their local context. This structure allowed for deeper engagement and provided opportunities for participants to reflect on their roles in perpetuating or preventing child marriage. By the end of each session, groups presented their insights and recommendations, fostering a sense of ownership and collective responsibility (Doornbosch et al., 2024a).

Religious leaders played a crucial role in the group counseling process, given their significant influence in Karimunjawa. Recognizing this, facilitators actively involved religious leaders in designing and implementing the sessions. Religious perspectives were integrated into the discussions, focusing on how Islamic teachings

align with principles of child protection and well-being. Religious leaders were encouraged to share scriptural interpretations supporting the delay of marriage for young individuals. This approach helped counter the argument that preventing child marriage contradicts religious values, a common justification among community members. By aligning policy objectives with religious principles, the counseling sessions enhanced the initiative's credibility and acceptance among participants.

Parents, as primary decision-makers in their children's lives, were another critical target group for the counseling sessions. Many parents in Karimunjawa believe that marrying off their daughters at a young age reduces family shame and preserves their honor. To challenge this belief, facilitators presented data and narratives highlighting the physical, psychological, and socio-economic risks associated with early marriage. Parents were also introduced to success stories of individuals who delayed marriage and pursued education or careers, demonstrating alternative pathways to family honor and community respect. Through guided discussions, parents were encouraged to envision brighter futures for their children, emphasizing the long-term benefits of delaying marriage. This shift in perspective marked a significant step toward reducing social pressure to arrange early marriages for children (Tufford & Lee, 2019)

Youth were also a key focus of the group counseling sessions, as they are directly affected by marriage decisions. Many young people in Karimunjawa internalize societal expectations that prioritize marriage over education or personal development. During the sessions, facilitators worked to empower youth by emphasizing their rights to education, self-development, and informed decision-making. Activities included role-playing scenarios where participants practiced negotiating with parents and community leaders to delay marriage. Peer discussions were facilitated to allow young participants to share their aspirations and challenges, creating a supportive network. By the end of the sessions, many young participants expressed greater confidence in advocating for their futures and resisting societal pressures to marry early.

To ensure the long-term impact of the counseling sessions, facilitators emphasized building support networks within the community. Participants were encouraged to form peer groups to continue the conversations initiated during the sessions. These groups served as platforms for sharing knowledge, addressing challenges, and reinforcing positive behaviors. For example, some parents formed support groups to collectively advocate against child marriage, while youth groups worked to raise awareness among their peers. Religious leaders and community figures also committed to incorporating anti-child marriage messages into regular activities such as sermons, prayer groups, and community meetings. This network-based

approach ensured that the lessons from the counseling sessions extended beyond the immediate participants (Baraie et al., 2024).

The sessions also emphasized the critical role of policy implementers, particularly KUA officials, in enforcing the minimum marriage age policy. Implementers were encouraged to use their positions to advocate for policy compliance and discourage the use of marriage dispensations. During the sessions, KUA officials shared their experiences and challenges in addressing child marriage cases, fostering mutual understanding with community members. Practical strategies were discussed, including improving coordination with local leaders and religious figures to identify and address cases of underage marriage more effectively. This collaborative approach strengthened the relationship between policy implementers and the community, facilitating more effective enforcement of regulations.

An innovative aspect of the counseling sessions was the use of culturally relevant storytelling to convey key messages. Facilitators shared stories that resonated with the local community, using familiar characters and scenarios to illustrate the dangers of child marriage. Participants were also invited to share their own stories, creating a dialogue that was both personal and impactful. This method proved highly effective in breaking down resistance, as it allowed participants to relate the discussed issues to their own lives. Storytelling also helped bridge generational gaps, enabling parents and youth to better understand each other's perspectives.

The counseling sessions encountered challenges, including resistance from a minority of participants deeply attached to traditional norms. Some initially questioned the relevance of the policy, arguing it was misaligned with their cultural values. To address this, facilitators focused on highlighting shared community goals, such as child protection and societal well-being. Participants were reminded that cultural practices are dynamic and can evolve to meet contemporary needs. This approach helped reduce resistance and fostered a more open mindset among participants (Sue et al., 2022).

Evaluations of the group counseling initiative revealed significant progress in changing attitudes and behaviors. Surveys conducted before and after the sessions indicated increased awareness of the risks associated with child marriage and greater acceptance of the minimum marriage age policy. Many participants reported feeling more confident in discussing the issue with their families and communities. Implementers expressed a renewed commitment to enforcing the policy and collaborating with stakeholders to prevent child marriage. These findings underscore the effectiveness of group counseling as a tool for addressing complex socio-cultural issues.

Despite its successes, the counseling initiative highlighted the need for sustained efforts to maintain momentum. Facilitators recommended integrating child marriage prevention topics into regular community activities such as school programs, religious events, and village meetings. Continuous training for policy implementers was also suggested to equip them with skills to address emerging challenges. Additionally, it was proposed that counseling sessions be expanded to include more remote areas of Karimunjawa, where access to information and resources is limited. These follow-up actions are critical for ensuring the initiative's long-term success (Idziak et al., 2018).

The group counseling initiative demonstrated the importance of aligning policy enforcement with community values. By engaging stakeholders in open dialogue and collaborative problem-solving, the sessions fostered a sense of shared responsibility for preventing child marriage. This participatory approach not only increased policy acceptance but also empowered participants to become active agents of change. The lessons learned from this initiative offer a model for addressing other culturally sensitive issues, both in Karimunjawa and beyond.

Conclusion

The implementation of the minimum marriage age policy in Karimunjawa faces significant challenges, primarily due to the lack of acceptance by the community and policy implementers. This resistance stems from overlapping regulations on marriage dispensation and local cultural values that are permissive toward child marriage. Through a collaborative governance approach and group counseling, the program has succeeded in enhancing understanding, acceptance, and compliance with the policy. Group counseling serves as a strategic method to facilitate dialogue on the negative impacts of child marriage, educate the community, and build collective awareness. Counseling sessions not only provide a safe space for participants to discuss cultural norms and personal experiences but also equip policy implementers, such as Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) officials, religious leaders, and community leaders, with tools to address social and cultural barriers more effectively. Activities such as group discussions, simulations, and the inclusion of religious narratives in counseling further strengthen public understanding of the importance of delaying marriage and support policy implementation aligned with the principles of child rights protection. Additionally, the establishment of a joint forum to prevent child marriage bolsters local support networks, integrating the roles of youth, parents, and local institutions in this initiative. While initial results indicate positive changes, sustained efforts through additional training, integration of this topic into community activities, and expansion to

remote areas are essential to amplify long-term impact. Group counseling and cross-stakeholder collaboration demonstrate that participatory approaches rooted in local cultural contexts can be key to addressing child marriage comprehensively in Indonesia.

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