

Optimising Strategic Communications: Addressing the Complexity of Child Marriage in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Child marriage has been a pressing concern throughout years, primarily in developing countries where poverty becomes a structural issue and education remains deprived. In Indonesia, the enforcement of child marriage is recurrently associated with deep-rooted societal stigma (Kusumaningrum, Agastya, & Adhi, 2023). Marriage is often perceived as an ultimate resolution, ostensibly to escape family's impecuniousness and society's slander of teenagers' committing adultery.

Although the protection for children against underage marriage is encompassed within international treaties and domestic law, the case is protracted. Children's access to education becomes grandiose, because their fulfillment of basic human rights is even unmet. Hence, this report scrutinises the pivotality of strategic communications implemented by relevant institutions to untangle the intricacy of child marriage in Indonesia.

According to the Central Statistics Agency (Statistics Indonesia or BPS) (2024), the prevalence of child marriage in Indonesia has gradually decreased over the past decade. Nonetheless, the practice persists in rural areas where societal stigma is inextricably tied to cultural and religious beliefs. West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) province has become the focal point as in 2024, women aged 20-24 who were married before the age of 18 reached 14.96%, the highest in Indonesia. This occurrence has been exacerbated by deep-rooted patriarchal tradition 'Merariq Kodeq' where a young girl is kidnaped by a male with the intention of being forced to marry. In the most recent case in 2025, a 14 years old girl was forced to marry a 16 years old boy after committing Merariq. Although the girl returned home safe, the parents forced a marriage in order to avoid public slander (Apriaman, 2025).

It is noteworthy that in 1990, Indonesia ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)—an international treaty initiated in 1989 under the United Nations (UN). Thus, Indonesia has agreed to comply the treaty's substance, including the caveat against child marriage, by implementing the principles into legal and judicial practice. As one significant occurrence, on account of this ratification, Indonesia's parliament revised its minimum legal age for marriage from 16 to 19 years old in 2019 within the Marriage Act. Moreover, referring to the Law on Crimes of Sexual Violence, an enforcement to child marriage is legally considered as sexual violence (Apriaman, 2025).

Theoretically, a State Party's practice of compliance is inseparable from domestic political circumstance. The legislative and judicial may have their own interpretation of one international treaty, and execute it based on the state-society relations (Simmons, 2009). As it recently occurred in NTB, the prohibition against underage marriage conflicted with local customary values. Although the Prevention of Child Marriage is encompassed within NTB Regional Regulation No.5/2021, the parents believed the marriage had to be carried out to preserve dignity. The legal aid agency 'Apik' intervened to protect the children, yet it was rejected by the child's relatives owing to their conviction of traditional values (Apriaman, 2025).

To be effectively adhered to, the implementation of legal statutes must be accompanied with adequate strategic communications in forms of advocacy. When a campaign's objective collides with community's shared values, public refusal ensues. It is imperative for an advocate to comprehensively understand a community's tradition before proposing policies. By creating a genuine connection with a belief system, advocates can enhance prospects to be accepted by a community alongside the sociopolitical environment (Coombs & Holladay, 2017). Hence, this report suggests relevant institutions

such as Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection (Kemen PPPA) in conjunction with legal aid agencies to accentuate proximity with local communities as the fundament of child marriage-ban policy. This sense of proximity shall be delivered through the institutions' narrative in order to convince the communities that prohibition against child marriage is not schemed to impertinent cultural tradition, but to protect children and society from the perils of unprepared marriage. To portray this comity and to build a long-term engagement, advocates must involve the community in the preliminary groundwork. Be that as it may, the policy is crafted to be complied with and applied by the local communities, thus their amenability is vital.

This report conducts Catalytic Model expounded by Coombs and Holladay (2017) as the conceptual framework to pursue the campaign's objective by influencing and adapting to the sociopolitical environment of the targeted audiences, as can be seen in Figure 1. Accordingly, this report can effectively elaborate the most adequate communications strategy to curtail child marriage in local communities with customary value-motives such as NTB province.

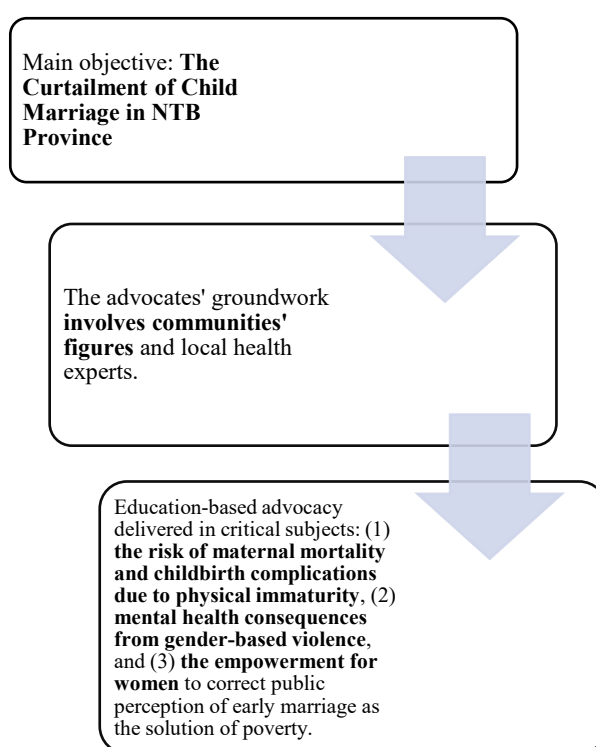


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of Catalytic.

Keywords: *Child marriage, Strategic communication, Advocacy, Public policy*

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