

Legal Pluralism and Cultural Legitimacy: Reframing Sasak Customary Law to Prevent Child Marriage in Lombok

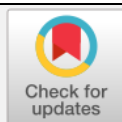
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ABSTRACT

Child marriage remains a deeply rooted socio-cultural issue in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, where traditional customs, religious authority, and economic hardship intersect. This study investigates how Sasak customary law (*awiq-awiq*) and the roles of local religious figures, *Kyai* and *Tuan Guru*, contribute to both the persistence and potential transformation of early marriage practices. Using a qualitative approach involving interviews, participant observation, and document analysis across three regencies, Central Lombok, West Lombok, and East Lombok, the research finds that cultural traditions such as *merarik kodeq* (a customary elopement practice) are still widely accepted as mechanisms to preserve family honor and reduce economic burden. Although national legal frameworks, specifically Law No. 16 of 2019 on Marriage and West Nusa Tenggara Regional Regulation No. 5 of 2021 on the Prevention of Child Marriage, set a minimum legal age of 19, implementation remains weak due to widespread use of religious court dispensations and cultural resistance. Findings show that while some customary and religious leaders continue to legitimize child marriage, an increasing number have begun to reinterpret *awiq-awiq* in line with contemporary health, educational, and religious considerations. Village-level forums (*musyawarah desa*) are emerging as strategic spaces for negotiating alignment between formal legal norms and local wisdom. This study develops a culturally embedded integration model that emphasizes participatory governance, moral legitimacy, and the co-production of legal norms. It offers empirical insight into the resilience of early marriage in culturally entrenched settings. It contributes a conceptual model for rethinking legal pluralism as a framework for reform through collaboration, not confrontation. These findings expand current scholarship by repositioning customary and

religious authority as key agents in adaptive and community-driven legal transformation.

Keywords: *Child Marriage; Customary Law; Legal Pluralism; Religious Authority*

1. Introduction

Child marriage remains a persistent and complex issue in many parts of the world, particularly in developing countries, where it produces far-reaching social, economic, and health consequences. The practice is especially prevalent in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, where limited access to education, financial insecurity, and entrenched gender norms intersect to sustain early unions. Despite growing legal and policy attention, most notably through Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, which calls for eliminating child, early, and forced marriage, progress has been slow and uneven (Fatusi et al., 2021).

This study investigates how culturally embedded normative systems can be mobilized to support state-led efforts in preventing child marriage, using the Sasak community in Lombok as an empirical case. It applies the framework of legal pluralism to examine the interaction between customary and formal legal systems and how such interaction can be constructively harnessed for child protection.

In Indonesia, West Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Barat or NTB) is one of the provinces with the highest rates of child marriage. On the island of Lombok, which is home to the Sasak ethnic majority, early marriage is closely associated with school dropout, intergenerational poverty, and adverse health outcomes. Research consistently shows that child marriage is closely linked to poverty, limited access to education, and inadequate healthcare services (Kok et al., 2022). While national policies prohibit marriage under the age of 19, enforcement often encounters resistance due to longstanding cultural practices that legitimize early unions. This study focuses on the Sasak customary legal system known as *awiq-awiq*. It examines how it might be reconciled with national child protection policies to enable a more culturally grounded and socially acceptable approach.

Awiq-awiq refers to a customary legal code that governs various aspects of communal life, including land management, inheritance, dispute resolution, and marriage. It is maintained through local consensus and enforced by community leaders (Farha, 2023). Although *awiq-awiq* functions as a stabilizing force in Sasak society, it often exists in tension with national legal frameworks. Its provisions, in particular, do not align with regulations concerning children's rights and the legal minimum age for marriage (Sekine & Hodgkin, 2017). This legal disjunction contributes to ineffective policy implementation, especially in rural areas where state presence is minimal and customary norms dominate.

One particularly relevant practice is *merarik kodeq*, a culturally sanctioned form of elopement that often leads to early marriage. In this tradition, a young girl is symbolically taken from her home to the boy's family, creating strong social pressure to formalize the union. Although it may appear consensual, the practice frequently occurs in contexts where girls have limited agency to determine their futures (Susanti et al., 2021). The legitimacy of such practices is reinforced by highly respected figures such as *Kyai* (Islamic scholars) and *Tuan Guru* (religious leaders with both spiritual and customary authority), who play a central role in maintaining

community norms. These leaders represent both a challenge and a strategic opportunity for intervention, as their support can facilitate the cultural adaptation of legal standards (Lee-Rife et al., 2012).

Economic factors also sustain child marriage in the region. In contexts where poverty constrains household options, families often view early marriage as a pragmatic solution to reduce financial burden by transferring responsibility to the husband's family (Kalamar et al., 2016). Similar dynamics have been documented in West Africa and South Asia, where early marriage is a coping strategy for economic hardship and familial insecurity (Kalamar et al., 2016; Paul, 2020). However, such arrangements tend to deepen long-term vulnerability. Girls who marry early are more likely to drop out of school, face reproductive health complications, and experience continued cycles of poverty (Fan & Koski, 2022).

The health consequences are particularly severe. Young brides are at increased risk of complications from early pregnancies, including maternal mortality and infant health issues (Groot et al., 2018). In NTB, these risks are exacerbated by poor access to reproductive health services and psychosocial support. Young brides are also more vulnerable to intimate partner violence and emotional distress, especially in communities where child marriage is normalized and perpetuated by cultural traditions (Mourtada et al., 2017).

Although the NTB government has introduced public awareness campaigns and social welfare programs to reduce child marriage, these efforts have yielded limited success. The perceived cultural disconnect between national policies and local practices is a major reason. In many Sasak communities, marriage is still regarded as a way to preserve family honor and ensure a daughter's social and economic security. Early marriage is framed as a protective strategy against social and economic vulnerability (Nasrullah et al., 2014). Similar perceptions have been reported in conflict-affected settings, where early marriage is seen as a strategy to mitigate insecurity and social risk (Hamad et al., 2021). Policy interventions that ignore the authority of customary leaders often lack legitimacy and fail to bring about meaningful change in behavior (Hudson et al., 2019).

The following research question guides this study: How can Sasak customary law and local leadership be aligned with state child protection policies to reduce the incidence of child marriage in Lombok? It argues that legal pluralism is not merely a source of normative conflict but can serve as a site of innovation, where the legitimacy of tradition is harnessed to support statutory protections.

While prior research has addressed structural drivers of child marriage, few studies have examined how policy design can integrate community-based normative systems and the influence of religious authority figures. Through closely examining the interaction between *awiq-awiq* and national child protection laws, as well as the shifting positions of *Kyai* and *Tuan Guru* in interpreting marriage norms, this study develops a grounded approach to policy integration that draws on locally recognized moral and customary authority. Rather than positioning legal reform in opposition to tradition, the findings illustrate how reinterpretations of customary norms, when led by trusted community figures, can create culturally acceptable pathways to delay early marriage and strengthen legal protection for girls.

2. Conceptual Framework

Understanding the persistence of child marriage in Lombok requires moving beyond simplistic explanations grounded solely in poverty or education. It demands a conceptual lens for how formal legal institutions interact with deeply rooted customary norms. This study adopts a framework grounded in *legal pluralism*, enriched by concepts of *cultural legitimacy*,

religious authority, and adaptive governance, to analyze how customary and state legal systems may be strategically aligned to address child marriage in the Sasak community.

Legal pluralism refers to the coexistence and interaction of multiple legal systems within a single social arena (Griffiths, 1986). It challenges the assumption of legal centralism, the idea that only state law governs society, by recognizing the normative authority of non-state systems such as customary law, religious law, and community-based dispute mechanisms. In many postcolonial contexts, including Indonesia, state law is often layered upon or competes with older customary orders, creating a legal landscape that is fragmented, negotiated, and overlapping (Merry, 1988; Von Benda-Beckmann et al., 2009).

In the Sasak context of Lombok, customary law is codified in a body of regulations known as *awiq-awiq*. These rules govern key aspects of social life, including marriage, inheritance, conflict resolution, and land tenure. *Awiq-awiq* holds regulatory and symbolic power: it reflects and reinforces community values and social cohesion. However, the normative content of *awiq-awiq* is not static. It is shaped, interpreted, and enforced by local elites, particularly *Kyai* and *Tuan Guru*, religious authorities who command both spiritual and customary legitimacy.

The existence of *merarik kodeq* (a Sasak elopement tradition often involving minors) further illustrates the embeddedness of marriage practices in customary expectations. While sometimes framed as consensual, *merarik kodeq* operates within social norms that constrain young women's agency and often override statutory protections. These practices do not simply exist in parallel with state law; they may actively undermine or reinterpret it. As such, child marriage in Lombok does not persist despite regulation, but partly through a fragmented normative order in which custom and law interact.

Rather than viewing this legal pluralism as a barrier to reform, this study considers it a strategic opportunity. Existing scholarship suggests that interventions that engage, rather than bypass, customary systems tend to have greater legitimacy and durability (Lund, 2006; Meinen-Dick & Pradhan, 2002). In particular, engaging customary leaders and institutions as co-governors, rather than subjects of reform, can facilitate policy acceptance and norm transformation. This is especially relevant in family, marriage, and morality, where state authority is often perceived as foreign or ungrounded.

The second key concept in this framework is *cultural legitimacy*. Unlike formal legitimacy, which derives from codified authority, cultural legitimacy rests on the perception that rules or norms are appropriate, morally coherent, and socially acceptable within a particular cultural setting (Hudson et al., 2019). In many customary communities, including Sasak villages in Lombok, legal legitimacy is derived not from national law but from religious teaching, community consensus, and historical continuity. Policies that ignore or override these sources of legitimacy often provoke resistance or superficial compliance.

Religious actors such as *Kyai* and *Tuan Guru* are strategically positioned in this legitimacy structure. They are often seen as moral guardians, cultural educators, and intermediaries between divine law (*syariah*) and local practice. Their influence extends beyond religious matters to everyday decisions about family, gender, and education. As such, they can reinterpret customary practices such as child marriage and endorse reform in ways that resonate culturally and spiritually. Previous studies have shown that including religious leaders in social reform can significantly improve community acceptance of policy interventions (Lee-Rife et al., 2012; Saimon et al., 2021).

However, religious authority is not monolithic. It can both sustain and challenge the status quo. While some *Tuan Guru* continue to legitimize early marriage based on cultural protectionism or moral purity, others are increasingly open to reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) in light

of contemporary health, legal, and educational considerations. This study recognizes this internal diversity and treats religious authority not as a fixed institution but as a contested terrain of legitimacy.

The third dimension of this framework is *adaptive governance*. In plural legal contexts, governance is often decentralized, negotiated, and hybrid. Rather than a top-down implementation of state rules, effective interventions involve a dialogic process that reinterprets law through culturally resonant frames (Tamanaha et al., 2012). In this sense, integration between *awiq-awiq* and national marriage law is not merely legal but discursive: it requires the co-production of legitimacy through narrative, pedagogy, and participatory negotiation.

This has important implications for child marriage prevention. Instead of framing early marriage solely as a legal violation, successful approaches may recast it as a communal concern related to girls' education, family well-being, and religious responsibility. For instance, the reinterpretation of *awiq-awiq* to include provisions for age verification, parental consent protocols, or community education campaigns may help embed statutory protections within the moral universe of Sasak society. Such reinterpretation must come from within, through the involvement of customary and religious leaders seen as custodians of identity and morality.

Finally, this framework recognizes the potential tension between universal child rights discourse and cultural particularism. International frameworks emphasize protection, consent, and age thresholds, while local norms may prioritize honor, kinship, and social responsibility. This study does not seek to resolve this tension through cultural relativism or normative imposition. It asks: *How can communities be supported in reframing their traditions to protect children within culturally legitimate structures better?*

This conceptual framework informs the design and interpretation of the study in several ways. First, it guides the selection of actors and institutions for investigation, emphasizing the normative role of *awiq-awiq*, *Kyai*, and *Tuan Guru* in shaping marriage practices. Second, it provides a lens for analyzing tensions and complementarities between customary and state legal systems. Finally, it offers criteria for evaluating the potential of culturally embedded strategies to reform child marriage practices, focusing on legal compliance, social legitimacy, and normative resonance within the community.

3. Research Methodology

Given the persistently high rate of child marriage in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), as reported by both Statistics Indonesia (*Badan Pusat Statistik* – BPS) and the NTB High Religious Court, this study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the sociocultural and governance dimensions of the practice. In 2023, the NTB Religious Court recorded 723 applications for underage marriage dispensations, while BPS data showed a child marriage rate of 16.23 percent, nearly double the national average (*Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Barat*, 2024). These conditions position NTB as a critical case for analyzing the intersection of legal norms, cultural traditions, and governance responses.

The research is guided by a conceptual framework that draws on legal pluralism, cultural legitimacy, and adaptive governance. This framework supports a multidimensional analysis of how local customs, religious authority, and state policies interact in shaping child marriage practices.

The study employs multiple qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, document analysis, and a literature review. Fieldwork was conducted from August to December 2023 in Central Lombok, West Lombok, and East Lombok, regencies selected purposively due to their high prevalence of child marriage and the active presence of

customary institutions (*awiq-awiq*) and religious leadership. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to represent key stakeholder groups, including religious leaders (*Kyai* and *Tuan Guru*), parents, affected adolescents, community elders, village officials, and women's rights advocates.

Semi-structured interviews explored perceptions of marriage norms, the tensions between legal and cultural legitimacy, and the role of religious and customary institutions in either sustaining or challenging child marriage. Particular attention was paid to the tradition of *merarik kodeq* and its influence on marital decisions involving minors. The interviews also addressed early marriage's psychological and educational consequences, capturing the lived experiences of young brides and their families.

Participant observation was conducted during village meetings, religious events, and informal gatherings to understand how child marriage is discussed, reinforced, or contested in everyday life. Document analysis was carried out in parallel, examining local regulations, marriage dispensation records, community decrees (*awiq-awiq*), and reports issued by local authorities and religious councils. These documents were used to triangulate interview data and contextualize shifts in community norms or gaps in policy implementation.

A targeted literature review informed both the contextual framing and analytical interpretation of the findings. Studies on child marriage, religious authority, and legal pluralism in Indonesia and other postcolonial settings were used to situate the local data within broader scholarly debates (Duru et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2021; Kombat et al., 2023; Palupi et al., 2019). The review also supported the analysis of cultural logics surrounding marriage, particularly concerning identity, morality, and gendered expectations.

Data analysis followed the model proposed by Miles and Huberman, comprising three interrelated stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts, field notes, and document excerpts were coded iteratively using inductive and deductive techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Key themes such as normative authority, institutional tension, psychological impacts, and strategies for policy integration were identified, refined, and cross-referenced with the conceptual framework and relevant literature to strengthen analytical depth and theoretical alignment (Duru et al., 2021; Lebni et al., 2020).

Ethical protocols were rigorously observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with additional approval from parents or guardians for interviews involving minors. Participant identities were anonymized to ensure confidentiality, and special care was taken to approach the subject matter with cultural sensitivity and emotional caution. The study also reflects on the researcher's positionality and acknowledges the inherent limitations of qualitative methods in producing generalizable findings.

Despite these limitations, this multi-site, in-depth approach offers meaningful insights into the embeddedness of child marriage within a context of legal pluralism and cultural tradition. It underscores the importance of engaging, rather than bypassing, customary and religious structures when developing community-based interventions. Future research may build on these findings using mixed-methods or comparative approaches to evaluate the broader applicability of culturally grounded models of child protection.

4. Results and Discussion

West Nusa Tenggara is one of the thirty-four provinces in the Republic of Indonesia, located between the islands of Bali to the west and East Nusa Tenggara to the east. The Sasak people are the predominant ethnic group in Lombok and are known for their rich cultural traditions and customary practices. On the island, certain elements of Sasak local wisdom continue to play

a vital role in maintaining the coexistence of traditional and modern values. These traditions should be preserved, nurtured, and balanced by both the government and local communities as the custodians of cultural heritage. One such example is *awiq-awiq*, a set of customary regulations the Sasak community practices. However, local customs that no longer reflect contemporary realities or contradict national legal frameworks should be adjusted to remain consistent with applicable laws. This process allows customary norms to be harmonized with state policy to support administrative and developmental objectives.

Addressing the issue of early marriage through the lens of local wisdom requires a nuanced understanding and cultural sensitivity. A case in point is *merarik kodeq*, a form of culturally sanctioned elopement that often results in child marriage. This practice directly conflicts with national legal instruments, including Law No. 1 of 1974 (as amended by Law No. 16 of 2019 on Marriage) and West Nusa Tenggara Regional Regulation No. 5 of 2021 on the Prevention of Child Marriage. These regulations stipulate that prospective spouses must be at least 19 years old. This section examines the socio-cultural dimensions of child marriage in the Sasak community, with a particular focus on how traditional norms interact with formal legal frameworks. The analysis uses qualitative data to explore early marriage's cultural and economic drivers. It evaluates how community-based strategies can reconcile customary practices with legal protections for children. **Figure 1** presents the key factors reinforcing Sasak customary values in efforts to reduce the incidence of child marriage on Lombok Island.

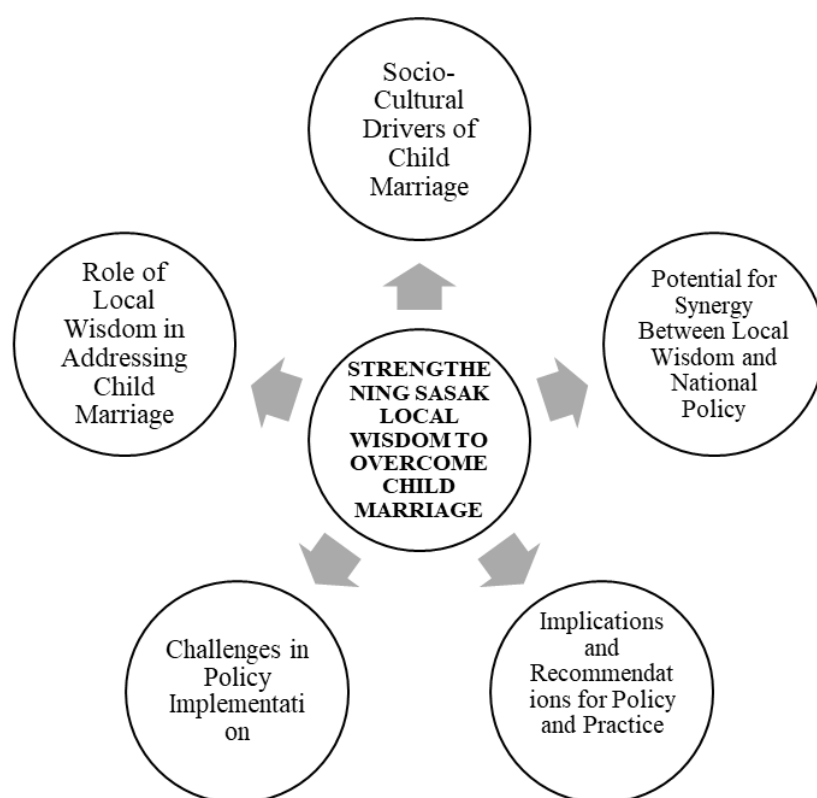


Figure 1. Factors that reinforce Sasak customary values in addressing child marriage on Lombok Island, West Nusa Tenggara

4.1. Socio-Cultural Drivers of Child Marriage

The high prevalence of child marriage in Lombok's Sasak community is deeply rooted in socio-cultural norms that emphasize family honor and social cohesion. In particular, the

tradition of *merarik kodeq*, a customary form of elopement, is often culturally sanctioned as a way to preserve familial dignity, especially in cases where pre-marital relationships are suspected or feared. Interviews reveal that this practice is still widely regarded as a socially acceptable response to potential disgrace, and marriage is often seen as restoring order and legitimacy. These findings corroborate earlier research by Rahyono, emphasizing the role of family reputation in perpetuating early marriage (Rahyono, 2017). Community leaders and village officials frequently justify early marriage based on moral protection, thus reinforcing a cycle of normative acceptance (Nasrullah et al., 2014).

These sociocultural patterns are further reflected in demographic trends. **Table 1** presents the proportion of ever-married women aged 15–49 who gave birth to their first child before age 20 (MPK20), based on three years of data from the Central Statistics Agency of NTB. The figures show consistently high levels of early childbirth across multiple districts, notably in Central Lombok, East Lombok, and West Lombok, indicating that early marriage remains structurally embedded in several parts of the province.

Table 1. Proportion of Ever-Married Women Aged 15–49 Who Gave Birth to Their First Child Under 20 Years of Age (MPK20)

Province/Regency or City	2021	2022	2023
West Nusa Tenggara	0.308	0.304	0.333
Mataram City	0.277	0.273	0.325
Bima City	0.166	0.152	0.204
West Sumbawa Regency	0.201	0.203	0.226
Sumbawa Regency	0.217	0.212	0.175
North Lombok Regency	0.302	0.379	0.354
East Lombok Regency	0.333	0.303	0.365
Central Lombok Regency	0.376	0.379	0.444
West Lombok Regency	0.376	0.356	0.375
Dompu Regency	0.254	0.234	0.223
Bima Regency	0.200	0.254	0.208

Source: (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Barat, 2024)

These numbers reveal more than statistical trends; they mirror community norms that support early marriage as a practical and moral solution to social concerns. For instance, Central Lombok recorded an MPK20 rate of 44.4% in 2023, the highest among all districts. Qualitative interviews in this region consistently highlighted how local elders and parents view early marriage as a culturally embedded strategy to prevent pre-marital transgressions, protect household honor, and maintain traditional values.

The data also reveal an economic dimension: marriage is seen not only as a cultural duty but also as an economic necessity for many low-income families. Marrying off daughters early reduces household financial burdens and transfers the responsibility of care and livelihood to the husband's family. This aligns with findings from previous studies, which observed similar economic motivations in other socioeconomically disadvantaged communities (Ferdousi, 2014; Wahyuningtyas, 2023). Thus, in the Sasak context, child marriage persists at the intersection of moral duty and material survival, making it both a cultural and structural phenomenon.

4.2. Role of Local Wisdom in Addressing Child Marriage

Local wisdom, embodied in the traditional *awiq-awiq* customary laws, functions as a respected normative system within the Sasak community. These customary regulations govern a wide range of social behaviors and communal responsibilities, including matters of marriage, conflict resolution, and moral conduct. While *awiq-awiq* has historically played a stabilizing role in community governance, its current formulation is often inadequate for addressing contemporary challenges such as child marriage. This aligns with Farha's analysis, which underscores the structural limitations of customary law in confronting evolving social issues (Farha, 2023).

A notable tension exists between *awiq-awiq* and national legal frameworks, particularly Indonesian Marriage Law No. 16/2019, which mandates a minimum marriage age of 19. This legal standard frequently conflicts with local practices, creating friction between statutory norms and cultural tradition (Awaludin & Firmansyah, 2023). In some cases, *awiq-awiq* is used to justify early unions, especially through mechanisms like *merarik kodeq*, thus weakening the enforcement and legitimacy of state law at the community level.

However, findings from this study indicate a growing awareness among Sasak customary and religious leaders of the need to reinterpret *awiq-awiq* in light of contemporary health and legal standards. Influential figures such as *Kyai* and *Tuan Guru* possess the cultural authority to facilitate this normative shift. Their roles as moral educators and community gatekeepers position them as critical agents in bridging traditional values with national legal imperatives.

This potential is supported by Lee-Rife et al., who emphasize the importance of engaging local influencers in reshaping social norms (Lee-Rife et al., 2012). In the Sasak context, the reinterpretation of *awiq-awiq*, when guided by religious and ethical reasoning, may enable communities to adopt delayed marriage practices without perceiving them as external impositions. Framing education, reproductive health, and women's rights within the language of cultural continuity and religious responsibility could create a more locally legitimate pathway toward child protection.

Thus, rather than dismissing *awiq-awiq* as incompatible with national law, this study argues for its constructive rearticulation. By involving culturally legitimate actors and embedding reform within local idioms of morality and well-being, adapting customary norms may offer a sustainable and socially accepted means of addressing child marriage.

4.3. Challenges in Policy Implementation

Implementing Regional Regulation No. 5/2021, which aims to reduce child marriage in West Nusa Tenggara, encounters substantial resistance rooted in cultural identity and governance limitations. Interviews with community members and local officials indicate that the regulation is widely perceived as an externally imposed directive, with little accommodation for local traditions such as *awiq-awiq* and *merarik kodeq*. This perception aligns with Hudson et al., who argue that policy failure often stems from a lack of cultural legitimacy and contextual adaptation (Hudson et al., 2019).

Field data also highlight that many community leaders remain ambivalent or silent about the regulation, fearing social backlash if they openly support changes that contradict deeply held customs. This mirrors findings from Nilsén et al., who observed that even well-designed legal reforms are likely to be resisted if they are not supported by culturally legitimate actors within the community (Nilsén et al., 2013).

Geographical remoteness further complicates policy enforcement. Respondents from inland Lombok villages described limited access to legal education and government monitoring,

allowing traditional norms to dominate local practice. These accounts support Evans et al.'s contention that logistical and infrastructural gaps in rural areas weaken the reach of formal governance, especially in settings where customary law remains strong (Evans et al., 2013).

A concrete manifestation of this resistance is the widespread use of marriage dispensation requests through religious courts. While legal on paper, these mechanisms are frequently used to circumvent the statutory marriage age of 19, effectively neutralizing the intent of the national law. Several interviewees, including village heads and religious officials, acknowledged this workaround as a "socially accepted solution" to resolve early relationships or family pressure cases. This practice supports Oliver et al.'s finding that policy loopholes are often exploited when enforcement lacks local cultural anchoring (Oliver et al., 2014).

These findings collectively demonstrate that policy implementation is unlikely to result in lasting behavioral change when disconnected from the lived social fabric. As this study's respondents emphasize, statutory law must be adapted through community dialogue, not merely imposed from above. Policies that do not engage the interpretive role of local leaders and normative frameworks risk being seen as alien interventions rather than tools for protection. Therefore, bridging the gap between regulation and tradition requires a participatory governance model that centers cultural resonance as much as legal precision.

4.4. Potential for Synergy Between Local Wisdom and National Policy

Findings from this study point to a significant opportunity for bridging the gap between customary systems and state-led child protection policies through collaborative governance. Rather than viewing *awiq-awiq* and national marriage laws as inherently antagonistic, several community leaders interviewed, particularly *Kyai* and *Tuan Guru*, emphasized the possibility of aligning these normative systems under a shared moral vision. This reflects a broader shift in attitude, where tradition is not rejected but reinterpreted to accommodate changing social realities.

The Sasak case supports that effective governance in culturally embedded contexts depends on dialogic, participatory engagement. Respondents highlighted examples of community meetings (*musyawarah desa*) where discussions about marriage age, education, and religious responsibility have begun to gain traction. These spaces offer a platform for state actors and local leaders to co-construct messages that resonate with legal imperatives and cultural legitimacy. This is consistent with the participatory governance principles described by Osborne and Gaebler, emphasizing decentralized collaboration as a pathway to more adaptive and inclusive policy outcomes (Sanrego & Muhammad, 2013).

Respondents repeatedly cited religious leaders, particularly *Tuan Guru*, as the most trusted figures for guiding behavioral change. When these leaders invoke Islamic principles emphasising education, personal maturity, and family preparedness, their messages carry far greater weight than formal legal edicts. This finding aligns with Kassegne et al., who argue that policy reform in culturally diverse societies is most effective when channeled through existing moral authorities (Kassegne et al., 2023).

At the institutional level, partnerships between local schools, religious boarding institutions (*pondok pesantren*), and women's advocacy groups were described as promising entry points for reinforcing delayed marriage norms. Respondents from civil society organizations noted that resistance tends to diminish when information about reproductive health and marriage law is delivered through familiar and respected community channels. This echoes findings by Saimon et al., who document the success of faith-based and school-centered interventions in shifting attitudes toward early marriage (Saimon et al., 2021).

Crucially, integrating national child protection policy with local wisdom must be seen not as the assimilation of one system into another, but as the construction of a new normative space where legal, religious, and cultural logics can coexist. This study finds that such synergy is possible and emerging through small-scale, community-led efforts. With the proper support, these initiatives could form the foundation of a more culturally resonant and sustainable strategy for reducing child marriage in Lombok.

4.5. Culturally Anchored Pathways Toward Child Marriage Reform

Findings from this study illustrate that efforts to address child marriage in West Nusa Tenggara cannot rely solely on formal legal enforcement. While policies such as Regional Regulation No. 5/2021 articulate clear intentions to raise the marriage age and protect adolescents, they often fail to resonate with community members who continue to draw legitimacy from customary law (*awiq-awiq*) and religious authority. Interviews with Sasak elders, *Kyai*, and *Tuan Guru* reveal that while there is increasing concern about the risks of early marriage, a strong desire remains to preserve cultural integrity and autonomy in decision-making. This tension underscores a critical challenge: policy tools alone are insufficient if they are not translated into locally meaningful terms.

One key insight from the field is the possibility of initiating change within the customary and religious structures. Some community leaders expressed interest in revisiting the interpretations of *awiq-awiq*, especially in light of growing awareness about maternal health risks, school discontinuation, and psychological trauma among young brides. Rather than abolishing customary law, respondents emphasized the importance of *reinterpretation*, aligning local norms with broader moral and legal goals. The potential for figures such as *Tuan Guru* to act as norm entrepreneurs is especially salient. As moral authorities with theological and customary credibility, they are uniquely positioned to advocate for delayed marriage through religious reasoning and culturally rooted values.

Institutionally, the study finds that the interface between village governance and district-level implementation remains fragmented. While some village officials support policy enforcement, others rely on social compromise and discretionary interpretations of custom. This fragmentation is evident in the use of marriage dispensation requests, which continue to function as a socially acceptable route to formalizing underage unions. Participants suggested that instead of imposing blanket prohibitions, the government should support culturally sensitive dialogue forums (*musyawarah desa*, for instance) where legal, religious, and customary actors can co-produce guidelines that reflect statutory mandates and local values.

Beyond normative reform, economic insecurity remains a structural driver of child marriage. For many families, marrying off a daughter is seen as a rational decision to reduce economic burden or safeguard family honor when girls are perceived to be at social risk. These realities suggest that child marriage prevention cannot be separated from broader livelihood interventions. Community members identified the need for accessible vocational programs, adolescent-focused economic initiatives, and scholarships for rural girls as key enablers of alternatives to early marriage. When presented with concrete and culturally acceptable options, families are more likely to postpone marriage without feeling they are betraying their traditions.

Efforts to reduce child marriage in NTB must be rooted in the lived cultural logics of the Sasak community. Legal frameworks are necessary but insufficient; transformation must also come from within the normative systems that continue to guide everyday life. This requires trust, long-term engagement, and the political courage to pursue dialogic reform rather than

regulatory coercion. When child protection is framed not as a disruption of custom but as an extension of communal care and religious obligation, sustainable change becomes more possible and legitimate.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Sasak customary norms, particularly *awiq-awiq* and cultural practices such as *merarik kodeq*, play a dual role in both sustaining and potentially transforming child marriage practices on Lombok Island. While these traditions have long governed aspects of community life, they frequently exist in normative tension with national legal instruments, including Law No. 16 of 2019 on Marriage and West Nusa Tenggara Regional Regulation No. 5 of 2021 on the Prevention of Child Marriage. The legitimization of early marriage through moral narratives centered on family honor, gender propriety, and economic survival highlights the limitations of formal legal approaches in socially embedded contexts.

However, these same customary structures also offer pathways for reform. Religious and customary leaders, especially *Kyai* and *Tuan Guru*, possess cultural legitimacy and moral influence that position them to reinterpret tradition in ways that align with contemporary ethical concerns. Fieldwork reveals that many of these figures are not resistant to reform but instead seek ways to integrate legal standards into locally meaningful frameworks. Their involvement indicates the potential for a culturally grounded reinterpretation of *awiq-awiq*, where legal protections are internalized within, rather than externally imposed upon, traditional systems.

The study contributes to scholarly debates on legal pluralism and culturally integrated governance by illustrating how social norms can be reshaped from within through negotiation, rather than through top-down enforcement. Community-based strategies can foster more legitimate and enduring outcomes when legal reforms are connected to shared values around education, health, and family well-being.

For policymakers and practitioners, the implication is clear: effective strategies to prevent child marriage must address its structural drivers while also engaging with the normative systems that shape everyday life. Reform is more likely to succeed when it is not framed as rejecting tradition, but as an ethical and cultural evolution. In regions like Lombok, where state and custom operate side by side, legitimacy is not achieved through coercion, but through respectful and culturally responsive collaboration.

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