



## Promoting Marriage Readiness: Communication Strategies of Islamic Religious Counselors in Preventing Early Marriage

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**Abstrack:** Early marriage remains a significant social issue in Indonesia as it is closely related to educational, health, economic, cultural aspects, as well as individuals' lack of readiness to build a household. This condition is also found in Blangkejeren District, thus requiring continuous preventive efforts through an educational approach. This study aims to analyze the roles, as well as the communication strategies and methods, of Islamic religious counselors in providing education on the prevention of early marriage at the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) in Blangkejeren District. This research employs Everett M. Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory using a descriptive qualitative method. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, with informants selected purposively. The findings reveal that Islamic religious counselors play roles as educators, motivators, counselors, mediators, and agents of social change in raising public awareness regarding the importance of delaying the age of marriage. The communication strategies applied include persuasive-religious approaches, direct engagement with adolescents and parents, participatory and collaborative approaches, as well as the utilization of social media and digital platforms. Meanwhile, the communication methods used consist of one-way communication, two-way communication, and verbal, written, and digital communication. The findings of this study highlight that the effectiveness of early marriage prevention education is determined by the counselors' ability to adapt messages to the socio-cultural context of the community and to actively involve various stakeholders in the process.

**Keywords:** Communication, Islamic Religious Counselors, Education, Prevention, Early Marriage.

**Abstrak:** Pernikahan usia dini masih menjadi persoalan sosial yang signifikan di Indonesia karena berkaitan dengan aspek pendidikan, kesehatan, ekonomi, budaya, dan rendahnya kesiapan individu dalam membangun rumah tangga. Kondisi ini juga masih ditemukan di Kecamatan Blangkejeren, sehingga memerlukan upaya pencegahan yang berkelanjutan melalui pendekatan edukatif. Penelitian ini juga bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran serta strategi dan metode komunikasi penyuluh agama islam dalam memberikan edukasi pencegahan pernikahan usia dini di kantor urusan agama kecamatan

Blangkejeren. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori difusi inovasi Everett M. Rogers dengan metode deskriptif kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi, dengan informan yang dipilih secara purposive sampling. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penyuluh agama Islam berperan sebagai edukator, motivator, konselor, mediator, dan agen perubahan sosial dalam membangun kesadaran masyarakat mengenai pentingnya pendewasaan usia perkawinan. Strategi komunikasi yang digunakan meliputi pendekatan persuasif-religius, pendekatan langsung kepada remaja dan orang tua, pendekatan partisipatif-kolaboratif, serta pemanfaatan media sosial dan digital. Adapun metode komunikasi yang diterapkan meliputi komunikasi satu arah, komunikasi dua arah serta komunikasi lisan, tertulis, dan digital. Temuan penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa efektivitas edukasi pencegahan pernikahan usia dini ditentukan oleh kemampuan penyuluh dalam menyesuaikan pesan dengan kondisi sosial budaya masyarakat serta melibatkan berbagai pihak secara aktif.

**Kata Kunci:** Komunikasi, Penyuluh Agama Islam, Edukasi, Pencegahan, Pernikahan Usia Dini.

## Introduction

Early marriage refers to a marriage that occurs before a child reaches the age of 18 (Hukum et al., 2021). According to Article 7(1), Chapter II of the Indonesian Marriage Law, marriage is permitted only when both the man and the woman have reached the age of 19 years. In contrast, Islamic law does not explicitly prescribe a minimum age for marriage as stipulated in Indonesia's positive legal system. Instead, it emphasizes marital readiness through the concepts of *bulugh* (biological maturity) and *rushd* (intellectual maturity and the capacity to assume responsibility). Thus, an individual is considered eligible for marriage not merely upon reaching a certain age but upon demonstrating sufficient physical, psychological, and social readiness (Pemikiran et al., 2021).

Although Islam does not establish a fixed minimum age for marriage, its emphasis on comprehensive readiness suggests that marriage should ideally take place only after an individual has attained full maturity (Syalis & Nurwati, 2020). This principle is further reinforced by Indonesian law, which establishes a minimum legal age for marriage as a means of protecting individuals from the potential harms associated with child marriage. Under Indonesian law, women between the ages of 20 and 25 are not categorized as entering early marriage. Nevertheless, early marriage remains a significant social issue in Indonesia (Yulita et al., 2024; Kurnia & Rokhanawati, 2023). A study conducted by the National Population and Family Planning Board (BKKBN) in 2014 found that approximately 46%—equivalent to around 2.5 million marriages annually—involved brides aged between 15 and 19 years. Furthermore, 5% of these marriages involved girls younger than 15 years of age (Salmah, 2016). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2023

report further estimated that approximately 25.53 million girls in Indonesia had married before reaching the age of 18. This places Indonesia among the countries with the highest number of child marriages in the world, ranking fourth after India, Bangladesh, and China (Pencegahannya, 2025). These figures demonstrate that early marriage is not merely an individual issue but a multidimensional social problem closely linked to educational attainment, economic hardship, cultural norms, and public understanding of marital readiness.

From a health perspective, early marriage has serious adverse consequences for those involved. Adolescent girls often have underdeveloped reproductive organs and have not yet reached full physical maturity, increasing the risks associated with pregnancy and childbirth (Vega et al., 2024). These risks include maternal complications, infant congenital abnormalities, and a higher likelihood of maternal mortality. In addition, the cervix of adolescent girls is still physiologically immature, making pregnancy and childbirth more hazardous (Sekarayu et al., 2021). Beyond its health implications, early marriage also has profound social and economic consequences. Peer influence often encourages adolescents to marry at a young age, particularly in communities where early marriage is common. Economic hardship further exacerbates this phenomenon, as many adolescents discontinue their education because their families cannot afford school-related expenses. As a result, they leave school and enter marriage prematurely (Khaerani, 2019).

At the national level, the prevalence of early marriage in Indonesia has shown a declining trend in recent years. Data published by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) through *Tempo.co* (2025) indicate that the child marriage rate declined from approximately 6.9% to 5.9% in 2024. This trend suggests that prevention initiatives have begun to yield positive results. However, the decline has not been evenly distributed across the country. Provinces such as Papua and West Nusa Tenggara continue to report relatively high child marriage rates, ranging from 14% to 15%, highlighting substantial regional disparities (Tempo.co, 2025). To provide a clearer overview, the trend of early marriage in Indonesia is presented in the following figure.

Figure 1. Trend of Early Marriage in Indonesia, 2015–2024



Source: *Tempo.co* (2025), based on data from the Central Statistics Agency.

Based on the figure above, the incidence of early marriage in Indonesia has gradually declined over the years. Nevertheless, fluctuations remain evident during certain periods, indicating that prevention efforts have not been implemented uniformly across all regions. Therefore, although the national trend shows a decline, it is important to examine how the phenomenon of early marriage manifests at the local level.

Efforts to prevent early marriage cannot be undertaken in isolation but require a continuous educational approach that is responsive to the characteristics of local communities. One effective approach is through the involvement of Islamic religious counselors. In Islamic teachings, religious counseling is defined as a planned effort to convey Islamic values to the community through methods that are appropriate to the characteristics of the target audience, with the objective of encouraging positive behavioral change and promoting well-being in both this world and the hereafter (Ilham, 2018).

An Islamic religious counselor is an individual who possesses knowledge and expertise in Islamic teachings and is responsible for disseminating religious knowledge, providing religious instruction, and offering guidance to Muslim communities (Keagamaan et al., 2023). Institutionally, the primary functions of Islamic religious counselors include informative and educational roles, consultative services, and advocacy (Kusnandar, 2020). They serve not only as communicators but also as agents of social change within society (Syaefulloh, 2024; Oktavia et al., 2018). Their role is particularly significant because they interact directly with community members through various religious and social activities. Through intensive communication and community engagement, these responsibilities are carried out institutionally through the Offices of Religious Affairs (*Kantor Urusan Agama* [KUA]) at the sub-district level, particularly in matters related to marriage and family. In addition to administering marriage registration, the KUA also functions as a center for education through counseling and guidance programs, making it an essential institution in preventing early marriage.

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory, introduced by Everett M. Rogers, explains that the dissemination of new ideas within society requires the involvement of specific actors serving as change agents. Rogers also emphasizes the importance of change agents and communication channels in accelerating the diffusion process (Malik et al., 2022). In the context of this study, Islamic religious counselors act as change agents by disseminating innovations in the form of educational programs aimed at preventing early marriage.

Blangkejeren Sub-district is one of the regions in Aceh where community life continues to be strongly influenced by religious values and customary traditions. Nevertheless, the practice of early marriage remains prevalent and is shaped by various factors, including economic conditions, educational attainment, and the community's understanding of religious teachings. According to data obtained from the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) of Blangkejeren Sub-district, a total of 15 cases of early marriage were

recorded between 2019 and 2024. Specifically, one case was reported in 2019, increasing to five cases in 2020, followed by three cases in 2021, two cases in 2022, three cases in 2023, and one case in 2024. These data indicate that early marriage continues to occur despite annual fluctuations in the number of cases. This persistence suggests that early marriage remains a social phenomenon requiring sustained attention and continuous preventive efforts. Consequently, Blangkejeren Sub-district provides a relevant setting for examining the roles, challenges, communication strategies, and communication methods employed by Islamic religious counselors in delivering educational programs to prevent early marriage, particularly through the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA).

Previous studies have examined the phenomenon of early marriage from various perspectives. Several studies have highlighted discrepancies between legal regulations governing the minimum age of marriage and actual practices within communities. Despite the existence of legal provisions and preventive measures, underage marriages continue to occur in Blangkejeren Sub-district due to the limited effectiveness of relevant institutions and the persistence of marriages conducted outside official legal procedures (Rahmatillah & Nurlina, 2018). Other studies have reported that students generally possess limited understanding of the negative educational and legal consequences of early marriage, despite its relatively high prevalence. Furthermore, research evaluating the effectiveness of educational and counseling programs as preventive measures against early marriage remains limited (Teuku & Arafah, 2024).

However, previous studies have primarily focused on legal regulations, causal factors, and the consequences of early marriage, while paying relatively little attention to the communication practices of Islamic religious counselors in delivering preventive education at the sub-district level. Therefore, the present study, entitled "Communication of Islamic Religious Counselors in Providing Educational Programs for the Prevention of Early Marriage at the Office of Religious Affairs of Blangkejeren Sub-district," seeks to address this research gap by examining how Islamic religious counselors implement communication in delivering educational programs aimed at preventing early marriage through the Office of Religious Affairs.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the role of Islamic religious counselors in educating communities to prevent early marriage. Specifically, the study focuses on the roles and challenges encountered by Islamic religious counselors in implementing early marriage prevention programs, as well as the communication strategies and methods they employ in delivering preventive education. It is expected that the findings of this study will provide a clearer and more systematic understanding of the communication practices of Islamic religious counselors in the context of early marriage prevention while serving as a reference for strengthening future educational and community guidance programs.

## **Method**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research method. This approach was used to describe and explain the phenomenon in a detailed and systematic manner based on the empirical evidence obtained throughout the research process (Fatimah et al., 2023). The primary participants in this study were Islamic religious counselors assigned to the Office of Religious Affairs of Blangkejeren Sub-district. The research was conducted at the Office of Religious Affairs of Blangkejeren Sub-district, Gayo Lues Regency, Aceh Province. Determining the research site constituted an essential stage of the study, as it enabled the researcher to obtain the data required to achieve the research objectives. The KUA of Blangkejeren employs several Islamic religious counselors responsible for providing religious guidance and counseling services to the local community. According to administrative records from the KUA, six Islamic religious counselors were actively engaged in conducting community counseling activities during the study period.

The informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. According to Sugiyono, purposive sampling is a sampling technique in which participants are selected based on specific characteristics or criteria relevant to the research objectives, thereby ensuring that they can provide information capable of addressing the research questions (UMMA, 2022).

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted by directly monitoring counseling activities at the Office of Religious Affairs of Blangkejeren Sub-district, with particular attention given to the delivery of educational materials, communication methods, and the use of communication media. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Islamic religious counselors as the primary informants to obtain in-depth information regarding their communication strategies, educational content, and the challenges encountered in implementing early marriage prevention programs. Documentation served as supporting data and included photographs of counseling activities, program documents, records of early marriage cases, and other archival materials relevant to the study.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Rijali, 2018). During the data reduction stage, the collected data were selected, categorized, and focused according to their relevance to the research objectives. The reduced data were subsequently organized and presented systematically in a descriptive narrative. The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions based on the patterns and findings that emerged from the analysis.

## Results and Discussion

### Results

#### The Roles and Challenges of Islamic Religious Counselors in the Prevention of Early Marriage

This study employed in-depth interviews with five informants who were considered to possess relevant knowledge and experience regarding counseling activities on early marriage prevention at the Office of Religious Affairs (Kantor Urusan Agama [KUA]) of Blangkejeren Sub-district. The informants consisted of five Islamic religious counselors who were actively involved in conducting community guidance and counseling programs. Based on data obtained from the Office of Religious Affairs of Blangkejeren Sub-district, a number of early marriage cases have been recorded over the past several years.

Table 1. Early Marriage Data in Blangkejeren Sub-district

| No.   | Year | Number of Early Marriage Cases |
|-------|------|--------------------------------|
| 1     | 2019 | 1                              |
| 2     | 2020 | 5                              |
| 3     | 2021 | 3                              |
| 4     | 2022 | 2                              |
| 5     | 2023 | 3                              |
| 6     | 2024 | 1                              |
| Total |      | 15 cases                       |

Source: Research findings.

Table 1 indicates that cases of early marriage have continued to occur in Blangkejeren Sub-district over the past several years. These findings suggest that early marriage remains a persistent social phenomenon requiring serious attention from multiple stakeholders. Consequently, Islamic religious counselors play a crucial role in educating the community about the importance of preventing early marriage and promoting greater awareness of marriage readiness.

Although the administrative records of the Office of Religious Affairs of Blangkejeren Sub-district reported only a very small number of early marriages in 2024, in-depth field investigations revealed a different reality. A considerable discrepancy exists between the official administrative data and the actual social conditions within the community. Information collected from community leaders and Islamic religious counselors in Blangkejeren identified at least seven couples who entered into early marriages without registering their unions through the official procedures of the Office of Religious Affairs, commonly referred to as unregistered (*under-the-table*) marriages. The details of these couples are presented in the following table.

Table 2. Data on Unregistered Early Marriages in Blangkejeren Sub-district

| No. | Wife's Initial (Age) | Place of Origin     | Husband's Initial (Age) | Place of Origin               | Year of Marriage |
|-----|----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|
| 1   | M (16 years)         | Kutelintang Village | Z (18 years)            | Padang Village, Terangun      | 2025             |
| 2   | R (13 years)         | Kutelintang Village | I (18 years)            | Kutelintang Village           | 2025             |
| 3   | S (17 years)         | Kutelintang Village | A (17 years)            | Kendawi Village, Dabun Gelang | 2025             |
| 4   | F (15 years)         | Kutelintang Village | A (17 years)            | Penampaan Uken Village        | 2025             |
| 5   | L (14 years)         | Kutelintang Village | S (16 years)            | Jawa Village, Blangkejeren    | 2023             |
| 6   | S (16 years)         | Kutelintang Village | S (17 years)            | Blang Bengkik                 | 2023             |
| 7   | A (15 years)         | Kutelintang Village | L (17 years)            | Terangun                      | 2022             |

Source: Research findings.

The data presented in Table 2 indicate that the practice of early marriage in Blangkejeren remains a serious concern, involving children as young as 13 and 14 years of age. Legally, these couples do not meet the minimum marriage age requirement of 19 years as stipulated in Law No. 16 of 2019. In most cases, these marriages remain unregistered because families choose to avoid legal procedures that they perceive as complicated, particularly the requirement to obtain a marriage dispensation from the Religious Court.

This situation is further confirmed by an interview with Informant 2, who stated:

"Many cases in the villages never reach the KUA office. People prefer informal or village marriages because the couples have not yet reached the legal minimum age. As a result, our official records appear relatively low, even though such cases continue to occur in the community." (Informant 2, personal interview, April 23, 2026).

These findings provide important evidence that the communication strategies currently employed by Islamic religious counselors face substantial challenges. Preventive efforts cannot rely solely on administrative approaches targeting couples who voluntarily report to the Office of Religious Affairs. Instead, counselors need to adopt a more proactive outreach strategy by directly engaging with villages and local communities where early marriages

are often concealed from official government records.

Based on the interview findings, Islamic religious counselors play a pivotal role in implementing educational programs aimed at preventing early marriage within the community. Their responsibilities extend beyond disseminating religious teachings to encompass social guidance, family education, counseling services, and efforts to raise public awareness regarding the importance of marriage readiness.

"Islamic religious counselors provide understanding because marriage is not merely about being religiously lawful; it also requires mental, economic, and social preparedness. Counselors also serve as educators, motivators, and mediators when cases require a persuasive approach to the community." (Informant 1, personal interview, February 10, 2026).

The statement of Informant 1 indicates that Islamic religious counselors are perceived not only as transmitters of religious values but also as mentors who help community members understand that marriage is a social institution requiring multidimensional preparedness. Marriage should not be based solely on religious legitimacy but must also be supported by psychological maturity, economic stability, and the capacity to fulfill social responsibilities within the family. Accordingly, Islamic religious counselors perform educational functions by providing knowledge, motivational functions by encouraging adolescents to prepare for a better future, and mediating functions by assisting families in resolving issues that may lead to early marriage.

"Counselors act as agents of change in preventing early marriage through educational approaches, reproductive health education, and premarital counseling within the community." (Informant 2, personal interview, February 10, 2026).

This statement demonstrates that the role of Islamic religious counselors in preventing early marriage is broader and more systematic, as it extends beyond delivering moral and religious messages to include reproductive health education, psychological preparedness, and premarital counseling. Reproductive health education constitutes an essential component of early marriage prevention because many adolescents and parents lack adequate knowledge of the biological and health risks associated with marriage and pregnancy at an immature age. Likewise, premarital guidance and counseling reflect the counselors' responsibility to equip individuals with comprehensive knowledge regarding family responsibilities. These findings suggest that Islamic religious counselors do not merely intervene after problems arise but also implement preventive measures through structured educational and counseling programs.

Furthermore, interviews with Informant 3 revealed that educational efforts to prevent early marriage are implemented continuously through youth development programs beginning at school age.

"Our role is to organize regular educational and mentoring activities, starting from elementary school students up to the age of

13 and continuing through senior high school. These activities are not limited to religious guidance but also cover economic, social, and other life-related issues." (Informant 3, personal interview, March 11, 2026).

This statement indicates that Islamic religious counselors prioritize preventive interventions by instilling awareness from an early age. Educational programs targeting school-aged children reflect the understanding that preventing early marriage must begin before adolescents enter a stage in which they are more vulnerable to making premature life decisions. Moreover, the counseling programs adopt a holistic approach, equipping adolescents with broader knowledge concerning their future, education, and family life.

The findings also demonstrate that Islamic religious counselors play a strategic role in preventing early marriage through direct engagement with adolescents, who constitute the group most vulnerable to this practice.

"Our role is to provide continuous and intensive guidance to adolescents, for example by conducting educational and counseling programs in schools." (Informant 4, personal interview, March 11, 2026).

This statement suggests that schools provide an effective setting for Islamic religious counselors to educate young people about the importance of postponing marriage until they have achieved sufficient maturity in terms of age, psychological readiness, and future aspirations. Through school-based counseling, adolescents are encouraged to recognize the value of education, career aspirations, and the social risks associated with early marriage. These findings underscore that the counselors' educational efforts are directed not only toward the general public but also specifically toward young people as the primary target group for early marriage prevention.

In addition, Islamic religious counselors play an important role in improving public understanding of the legal and administrative aspects of marriage.

"The role of counselors in educating people about early marriage prevention is to explain to communities and schools the negative consequences of early marriage, as well as the legal regulations concerning the minimum age for registered marriage." (Informant 5, personal interview, March 11, 2026).

The statement of Informant 5 indicates that the role of Islamic religious counselors extends beyond conveying moral and religious values to include legal education concerning the minimum legal age for marriage and the importance of official marriage registration. Such knowledge is essential because many community members continue to believe that a marriage is valid solely on religious grounds, without considering the legal and administrative consequences that may affect the protection of women's and children's rights.

On the other hand, the findings also reveal that educational efforts to prevent early marriage encounter a number of significant challenges. One of the primary obstacles is the persistence of cultural values and community beliefs that continue to regard early marriage as a solution to both moral and economic problems.

"People still believe that early marriage is a way to avoid *zina* (unlawful sexual relations). There is even a tradition known as *naik*, commonly understood as elopement, which has become a normal practice in the Blangkejeren community." (Informant 2, personal interview, March 12, 2026).

"Many people are still conditioned to believe that marrying at a young age is a blessing and a source of fortune." (Informant 1, personal interview, March 12, 2026).

The statements of these two informants indicate that culture functions not merely as a social habit but as an embedded value system that shapes and regulates community behavior. Within the Blangkejeren community, the tradition of *naik* further reinforces the influence of these cultural values. *Naik* (elopement marriage) refers to the practice in which a young man takes a young woman to the residence of the village *Imem* (religious leader) with the intention of making her his wife (Chalid & Kasbi, 2021). This practice has become a social mechanism that indirectly legitimizes early marriage because, once a *naik* incident occurs, families and community members tend to arrange the marriage immediately without considering the legal minimum age or the couple's psychological and economic readiness. Consequently, *naik* serves as an immediate solution to social pressures, such as preserving family honor and avoiding public shame. Furthermore, the widespread belief that early marriage represents a "blessing" demonstrates that the practice has undergone a process of value internalization within the community. In other words, the community not only accepts but also justifies and perpetuates early marriage as a socially desirable practice. This cultural context presents a considerable challenge for Islamic religious counselors, as their educational efforts must confront deeply rooted cultural norms that exert a profound influence on community behavior. In addition to cultural factors, economic conditions also constitute a major factor contributing to early marriage. Limited household financial resources often lead parents to marry off their children at an early age as a means of reducing the family's economic burden.

"Because of financial hardship, some parents encourage their children to marry early so that they are no longer financially dependent on the family." (Informant 1, personal interview, March 12, 2026).

This statement suggests that early marriage is frequently perceived as a practical strategy for alleviating household economic pressures. Economic conditions represent a fundamental aspect of family life, and financial

hardship has consistently been identified as a major determinant of early marriage (Sardi, 2016). Parents often decide to marry off their children because they are unable to meet the family's economic needs and view marriage as a means of reducing the number of dependents within the household.

Furthermore, low levels of community literacy present an additional obstacle to educational initiatives, as many parents and adolescents remain reluctant to accept new information regarding the importance of delaying marriage until reaching an appropriate level of maturity. This challenge is further exacerbated by the influence of social media, which is often inadequately supervised by parents.

"Social media exposure is largely uncontrolled, and many parents lack sufficient technological knowledge, making it difficult for them to supervise their children's use of social media." (Informant 2, personal interview, March 12, 2026).

The statement of Informant 2 indicates that limited parental digital literacy weakens parental supervision, allowing adolescents to access and be influenced by various forms of social media content. Social media plays a substantial role in shaping adolescents' attitudes and behavior. Without adequate supervision and digital literacy, social media may encourage risky social interactions that increase the likelihood of early marriage. Therefore, the combination of unsupervised social media use and limited parental capacity to monitor adolescents significantly contributes to the persistence of early marriage within the community.

Additional challenges were identified in the technical implementation of educational activities, particularly difficulties in coordinating counseling schedules with schools and community members, as well as the limited responsiveness of some adolescents to the guidance provided.

"It is difficult to coordinate schedules with schools or community members, and sometimes our advice is simply ignored." (Informant 5, personal interview, March 12, 2026).

This statement suggests that the effectiveness of counseling programs depends not only on the quality of the educational content but also on the level of community participation and receptiveness. The tendency of some individuals to disregard educational messages reflects limited awareness of the importance of preventing early marriage. Consequently, both technical constraints and low community responsiveness significantly hinder the effectiveness of the counseling programs implemented by Islamic religious counselors.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings are consistent with Everett M. Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory, particularly the concept of the change agent. According to Rogers, change agents are individuals or groups responsible for introducing new ideas or innovations to society with the

objective of promoting behavioral change. Similarly, Ilham (2018) argues that religious counselors function as agents of change by serving as catalysts for positive transformation across various dimensions of community life (Ilham, 2018). In the context of this study, Islamic religious counselors perform this role by introducing and promoting the idea that marriage should be postponed until individuals have attained sufficient physical, psychological, social, and economic maturity.

In the context of this study, Islamic religious counselors can be regarded as change agents who introduce a social innovation in the form of a new understanding that marriage should take place only when individuals have attained adequate maturity in terms of age and overall readiness. This innovation is disseminated through various communication channels, including religious counseling, community guidance, premarital counseling, and public outreach programs. However, as explained by Rogers, the diffusion of innovation often encounters resistance when new ideas conflict with deeply rooted cultural values, traditions, and long-established social practices. Accordingly, the barriers identified in this study—including cultural norms, economic constraints, low literacy levels, the influence of social media, and weak inter-institutional collaboration—can be understood as forms of social resistance to the innovations introduced by Islamic religious counselors.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Islamic religious counselors occupy a highly strategic position in implementing educational programs aimed at preventing early marriage. Their role extends beyond disseminating religious knowledge to serving as catalysts for social change within the community. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this role is strongly influenced by the socio-cultural context, the community's willingness to accept new information, and the counselors' ability to establish persuasive, context-sensitive, and sustainable communication. Therefore, effective efforts to prevent early marriage require the active involvement of multiple stakeholders to ensure that the social innovations promoted by Islamic religious counselors are widely accepted and successfully implemented throughout the community.

## **Discussion**

### **Communication Strategies and Methods of Islamic Religious Counselors in Providing Education for the Prevention of Early Marriage**

Effective communication strategies and methods are fundamental to the success of educational programs aimed at preventing early marriage. The effectiveness of these programs depends not only on the substance of the messages conveyed but also on the counselors' ability to adapt their communication approaches to the socio-cultural characteristics of the target audience. Based on the interview findings, Islamic religious counselors employ a variety of communication strategies and methods to increase public awareness of the importance of marriage readiness and to discourage early marriage. These approaches include interpersonal communication, group counseling, school-based educational activities, community outreach, and

collaboration with relevant stakeholders. The findings further indicate that the Office of Religious Affairs (*Kantor Urusan Agama* [KUA]) implements several communication strategies in preventing early marriage, including:

*Persuasive and Religious Approach*

The interview data indicate that one of the dominant communication strategies employed by Islamic religious counselors in providing education on early marriage prevention is a persuasive and religious approach. This strategy involves delivering messages in a gentle, non-judgmental manner while reinforcing them with Islamic values, thereby making them more acceptable to both adolescents and the wider community.

"We adopt a persuasive and religious approach by conveying Islamic teachings in simple and relevant language so that our messages do not sound preachy." (Informant 1, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

"We use persuasive communication by encouraging young people not to rush into marriage before they are mentally, financially, and age-wise prepared." (Informant 4, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

In practice, this strategy primarily employs one-way communication. The most frequently used communication methods include sermons (*ceramah*), religious counseling sessions, and direct public outreach. These methods are implemented in various settings, such as *majelis ta'lim* (Islamic study circles), schools, community gatherings, and other religious forums.

"The communication methods we use include sermons and direct counseling sessions in *majelis ta'lim*, schools, and community activities." (Informant 1, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

"To prevent early marriage, we conduct direct outreach and educational programs in schools as well as within the community." (Informant 2, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

The interview accounts suggest that the persuasive-religious approach relies not only on the substance of the message but also on the manner in which it is delivered through sermons and public outreach activities. This one-way communication method plays an important role in providing broad initial awareness, while its persuasive nature enables the message to be accepted more readily without generating resistance, particularly among adolescents.

*Direct Engagement with Adolescents, Parents, and the Community*

Another communication strategy emerging from the interviews is direct engagement with the primary target groups, including adolescents, parents, and the broader community. Islamic religious counselors do not focus solely on adolescents as the group most vulnerable to early marriage but also involve families and the surrounding social environment that influence marriage-

related decisions.

"We directly engage with the community, particularly adolescents and other target groups. However, we do not focus only on young people; we also approach their parents." (Informant 3, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

Similarly, Informant 2 explained that this communication strategy is implemented through "public outreach, premarital courses, family counseling, and direct educational sessions" (Informant 2, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

In practice, this strategy combines both one-way and two-way communication.

"We also use dialogue and discussion methods. These are particularly important for adolescents because they allow them to express their opinions and concerns." (Informant 1, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

Likewise, Informant 2 stated:

"We also conduct informal dialogues to listen to the problems experienced by adolescents." (Informant 2, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

The interview data indicate that Islamic religious counselors recognize that early marriage is influenced not only by adolescents themselves but also by family members and the surrounding social environment. Therefore, directly engaging parents and community members is essential to ensure that educational efforts extend beyond increasing adolescents' knowledge to building broader social support for delaying marriage. This approach is particularly effective because it integrates one-way communication for disseminating basic information with two-way communication through dialogue, allowing adolescents and community members to participate actively by sharing their experiences and concerns. The combination of these communication methods significantly enhances understanding while fostering emotional rapport between counselors and the community, thereby increasing the acceptance and implementation of educational messages.

#### *Participatory and Collaborative Approach*

The interviews also demonstrate that Islamic religious counselors adopt participatory and collaborative approaches in implementing educational programs to prevent early marriage. This strategy involves the active participation of various community stakeholders, including community leaders, parents, adolescents, and village officials, thereby ensuring that educational activities are not conducted solely through one-way communication. The involvement of multiple stakeholders reflects the counselors' efforts to establish open communication and encourage active community participation in preventing early marriage.

"When we provide education, we do not speak only to adolescents. We also involve parents and community leaders so that they understand the issue and actively participate in preventing early marriage, rather than merely listening to advice." (Informant 1, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

Similarly, Informant 3 explained:

"We also collaborate with village authorities and local government officials so that our educational messages are more readily accepted by the community. When village officials provide support, community members tend to be more open and willing to participate." (Informant 3, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

The interview narratives indicate that Islamic religious counselors do not perform their roles individually but instead employ communication patterns emphasizing cooperation and community engagement. The participation of parents, community leaders, adolescents, and village officials demonstrates that preventing early marriage is regarded as a shared responsibility. Consequently, participatory and collaborative approaches constitute important communication strategies for strengthening message acceptance, increasing community participation, and enhancing the effectiveness of educational programs aimed at preventing early marriage. This strategy relies predominantly on two-way communication, enabling community members to participate actively so that educational messages are not only received but also understood, supported, and collectively implemented. Consequently, this approach contributes substantially to increasing community participation and improving the effectiveness of early marriage prevention efforts.

#### *Utilization of Social Media and Digital Platforms*

The interviews further demonstrate that Islamic religious counselors utilize social media and digital platforms as part of their communication strategy. This approach is intended to align educational efforts with the communication patterns of adolescents, who are increasingly active in digital environments.

"We have begun implementing digital strategies, including podcasts and social media, to reach adolescents who are more active on digital platforms." (Informant 1, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

Similarly, Informant 2 stated:

"We also utilize social media as part of our communication strategy." (Informant 2, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

In practice, this strategy is supported by multiple communication methods, including oral, written, and digital communication.

"We communicate orally by contacting or calling the adolescents and community members we mentor, while written communication is used to send invitations to educational activities." (Informant 3, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

In addition, Informant 1 highlighted the use of "educational videos and digital content" (Informant 1, personal interview, March 13, 2026).

The interview data suggest that the use of social media and digital platforms is not implemented as a standalone strategy but is reinforced through complementary communication methods. Oral and written communication facilitate direct interaction and administrative coordination, whereas digital communication serves as the primary medium for reaching adolescents more effectively and on a broader scale. Consequently, communication between Islamic religious counselors and the community extends beyond face-to-face interactions into digital environments. This integrated communication approach enhances the reach, effectiveness, and sustainability of educational initiatives while adapting to technological developments and contemporary communication patterns.

The communication strategies discussed above can be interpreted through Everett M. Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory, which explains that new ideas and values are adopted through communication processes within a social system. In the context of this study, Islamic religious counselors function as change agents who introduce the social innovation that marriage should take place only when individuals have attained adequate psychological, economic, social, and reproductive health readiness. The persuasive and religious approach, direct engagement with adolescents and parents, participatory collaboration, and the utilization of social media demonstrate deliberate efforts to adapt communication to the social characteristics of the community, thereby facilitating the acceptance of this innovation. Likewise, the communication methods employed—including sermons, discussions, dialogue, counseling, and digital communication—illustrate the use of multiple communication channels in the diffusion process. From the perspective of Rogers' theory, these communication strategies and methods represent mechanisms for disseminating social innovation aimed at gradually transforming public attitudes and behaviors regarding early marriage.

## **Conclusion**

This study concludes that Islamic religious counselors play a pivotal role in implementing educational programs aimed at preventing early marriage in Blangkejeren Sub-district. Their role extends beyond disseminating religious teachings to serving as educators, motivators, counselors, and agents of social change who promote a comprehensive understanding that marriage should be entered into only after individuals have attained adequate maturity in terms of age, psychological readiness, economic stability, social responsibility, and reproductive health. Through counseling, mentoring,

community outreach, and educational activities, Islamic religious counselors contribute to raising awareness among adolescents, parents, and the wider community regarding the risks associated with early marriage and the importance of marriage preparedness.

The study also demonstrates that the effectiveness of these educational efforts is supported by the implementation of diverse communication strategies and methods tailored to the socio-cultural characteristics of the community. These strategies include persuasive and religious communication, direct engagement with adolescents and parents, participatory and collaborative approaches, and the utilization of social media and digital platforms. These strategies are complemented by one-way and two-way communication, as well as oral, written, and digital communication methods, enabling educational messages to be delivered in a flexible, contextual, and accessible manner.

Despite these efforts, the implementation of early marriage prevention education continues to face substantial challenges. Deeply rooted cultural values, economic hardship, limited public literacy, the influence of social media, and insufficient collaboration among families, communities, and relevant institutions remain significant barriers to behavioral change. These challenges indicate that early marriage is not merely an individual decision but a complex social phenomenon shaped by broader cultural, economic, and institutional factors.

From a theoretical perspective, this study supports Everett M. Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory by demonstrating that Islamic religious counselors function as change agents who disseminate the social innovation of delaying marriage until individuals are adequately prepared for family life. The effectiveness of this innovation depends not only on the communication strategies adopted by the counselors but also on the willingness of the community to embrace new ideas and on the active collaboration of multiple stakeholders. Therefore, strengthening inter-institutional partnerships and promoting sustained community participation are essential to enhancing the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of early marriage prevention programs.

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