



## RELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY AND CHILD MARRIAGE: THE ROLE OF TRANSNATIONAL FAITH BASED INSTITUTIONS

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### Abstract

Child marriage persists as a multifaceted global violation of human rights, intricately linked to structural inequality, gender-based violence, and entrenched socio-cultural norms. This study critically interrogates the role of transnational faith-based institutions as normative actors within the architecture of global governance, with particular emphasis on their strategic deployment of religious diplomacy in contesting and shaping international discourses on child protection. Through a rigorously designed Systematic Literature Review (SLR) in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 framework, the research systematically screened and synthesized 1,656 peer-reviewed articles sourced from the Scopus database. Employing qualitative content and cross-institutional comparative analysis, the study elucidates the differential diplomatic engagements of the Holy See, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the World Council of Churches (WCC). The findings demonstrate that the Holy See advances a formalized moral diplomacy grounded in doctrinal conservatism; the WCC mobilizes progressive theological reinterpretations and grassroots advocacy rooted in gender justice; while the OIC remains institutionally constrained by intra-organizational heterogeneity and legal pluralism. Variations in efficacy are attributable to theological adaptability, normative coherence, representational authority, and alignment with global child rights regimes such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). The study affirms that religious institutions function as norm entrepreneurs with significant capacity to influence the trajectory of global moral norms. It calls for the institutionalization of inclusive, rights-affirming religious diplomacy that bridges theological tradition with universal human rights, thereby fostering a robust, multilateral response to the persistence of child marriage.

**Keywords:** *Religious Diplomacy, Child Marriage, International Norms, Faith Based Institutions, Child Protection*

### Abstrak

Pernikahan anak tetap menjadi pelanggaran hak asasi manusia yang kompleks dan multidimensional, erat kaitannya dengan ketimpangan struktural, kekerasan berbasis gender, serta norma sosial-budaya yang mengakar. Studi ini secara kritis menelaah peran lembaga keagamaan transnasional sebagai aktor normatif dalam lanskap tata kelola global, dengan fokus pada strategi diplomasi agama yang digunakan dalam membentuk dan mempengaruhi wacana internasional mengenai perlindungan anak. Melalui pendekatan Systematic Literature Review (SLR) yang dirancang secara ketat dan berlandaskan pedoman PRISMA 2020, penelitian ini menyaring dan mensintesis secara sistematis 1.656 artikel ilmiah dari basis data Scopus. Dengan memadukan analisis konten kualitatif dan perbandingan lintas institusi, studi ini mengungkap konfigurasi diplomasi yang berbeda dari Vatikan, Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), dan



World Council of Churches (WCC). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Vatikan mengedepankan diplomasi moral formal berbasis doktrin konservatif; WCC menggalang reinterpretasi teologis progresif dan advokasi akar rumput berbasis keadilan gender; sementara OIC menghadapi kendala institusional akibat pluralitas hukum dan heterogenitas politik internal. Perbedaan efektivitas ketiga aktor tersebut ditentukan oleh fleksibilitas teologis, koherensi normatif, otoritas representasional, serta keterpautan dengan rezim perlindungan anak internasional seperti Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) dan Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Studi ini menegaskan bahwa institusi keagamaan berperan sebagai norm entrepreneurs yang memiliki kapasitas signifikan dalam memengaruhi arah normatif global. Ditekankan pula urgensi institusionalisasi diplomasi agama yang inklusif dan berorientasi pada hak asasi manusia universal guna membangun respons multilateral yang tangguh terhadap praktik pernikahan anak.

**Kata Kunci:** *Diplomasi Agama, Pernikahan Anak, Norma Internasional, Lembaga Berbasis Agama, Perlindungan Anak*

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## **A. Introduction**

Child marriage remains a serious global issue with far-reaching implications for health, education, and the fulfillment of human rights. UNICEF data (Unicef, 2023) shows that more than 640 million women worldwide are married before the age of 18, with high prevalence in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. This practice not only limits girls' opportunities to obtain an education, but also increases the risk of early pregnancy, gender-based violence, and structural poverty (United Nations Population Fund, 2022). At the national level, Indonesia still faces significant challenges despite efforts to raise the minimum age of marriage to 19 for women in 2019. A survey by BPS and UNICEF (2022) noted that the prevalence of child marriage in Indonesia is still around 9.23%, which means that nearly 1 in 10 girls experience early marriage. This phenomenon highlights the urgency of in-depth research on the factors that perpetuate child marriage, including the role of religion and religious institutions in normalizing or opposing the practice.

Religion has an ambivalent position on the issue of child marriage. On the one hand, religious norms are often used to legitimize child marriage, both through textual interpretations and inherited social practices (Parsons et al., 2021). On the other hand, global religious institutions are increasingly taking an active role in campaigns for child protection and gender justice. The Holy See, for example, with the moral authority of the Catholic Church, is involved in international forums discussing family and child protection. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) faces internal complexities due to the diversity of interpretations of Sharia law in its member countries, so its position on this issue is often inconsistent (Alkhazim, 2022). Meanwhile, the World Council of Churches (WCC) promotes global campaigns related to gender justice and child protection as part of its ecumenical agenda (I. Phiri & Werner, 2022). The existence of



these institutions shows that religious diplomacy not only plays a moral voice role but also functions as norm entrepreneurs in directing the global discourse on children's rights. Studies on religious diplomacy emphasize that religious institutions are not only spiritual actors but also transnational actors that play a role in the global political arena. According to Haynes (2021), religious diplomacy is an important instrument in shaping cross-border normative discourse, especially when moral and ethical issues are in the spotlight. In the context of norm entrepreneurship, Finnemore and Sikkink (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) assert that non-state actors, including religious institutions, have the capacity to introduce new norms, advocate for them, and ensure their internalization in the global order.

Recent research shows that the role of religious organizations in human rights issues is becoming increasingly significant, for example, the Holy See in articulating family values in international forums (Moyn, 2022), or the OIC facing the challenge of harmonizing Sharia law with the framework of children's rights (Alkhazim, 2022). The World Council of Churches (WCC) is also active in campaigns for gender equality and child protection, demonstrating that religious diplomacy operates at both the normative advocacy and policy levels (I. Phiri & Werner, 2022). This concept is closely related to children's rights frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly target 5.3 to end child marriage (Unicef, 2023). Thus, the theories of religious diplomacy and norm entrepreneurship provide an analytical foundation for understanding how religious institutions influence the formation of international norms related to child marriage.

A number of previous studies have made important contributions to understanding this issue, albeit with a limited focus. Parsons et al. (Parsons et al., 2021) emphasize the global economic impact of child marriage, but do not examine how religious actors influence the normative discourse behind policy. Beshir (2020) examines the OIC's position in the human rights regime, but does not specifically link it to the practice of child marriage. Moyn (Moyn, 2022) highlights the role of the Holy See in global politics, but focuses on human rights in general. Meanwhile, Phiri and Werner (I. Phiri & Werner, 2022) review the WCC in its gender equality campaign, but do not compare it with other religious actors. On the other hand, Alkhazim (Alkhazim, 2022) highlights the OIC's internal dilemma in addressing child marriage, pointing to political and theological complexities that need to be analyzed further.

Furthermore, a number of previous studies have also confirmed that transnational religious organizations can be important agents in shaping international policy, particularly on humanitarian issues (Haynes, 2021; Mandaville, 2022). However, the literature on religious diplomacy has focused more on issues of peace, conflict resolution, or interfaith dialogue, while the role of religious institutions in the issue of child marriage has rarely been explored comparatively. This is despite the fact that child marriage is closely related to cultural constructs, religious interpretations, and moral legitimacy. This gap shows that there has been no comparative study that systematically examines the religious diplomacy strategies of the Holy See, OIC, and WCC on the issue of child

marriage.

Furthermore, many studies on child marriage have been conducted, as evidenced by the author's search results on the Scopus website, which yielded 34,517 articles with the keywords “Child AND Marriage” from various fields of study. After filtering the results based on the criteria of publication year 2015-2025, English, open access, in the socio-political field, and journal articles, the author obtained 1,656 articles, which the author then analyzed using Vosviewer, producing Figure 1, as follows:

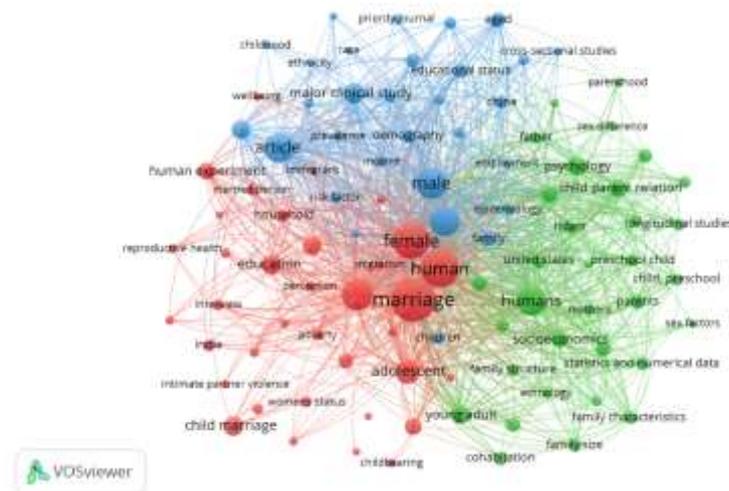


Figure 1. Network Visualization

Source: Proceed by Author using Vosviewer, 2025

This figure shows that although child marriage has been extensively researched, social and political sciences still tend to view it primarily as a medical, social, and psychological issue, with little consideration given to the role of transnational actors, particularly religious institutions. This can be seen from three major clusters. The red cluster represents the relationship between child marriage and issues of education, poverty, women's status, and intimate partner violence, emphasizing structural and social dimensions. The blue cluster focuses on demographic and health aspects, with keywords such as male, major clinical study, educational status, and cross-sectional studies, indicating the dominance of epidemiological studies. Meanwhile, the green cluster relates to family and psychological issues, with keywords such as family, child-parent relations, cohabitation, and socioeconomics. This research gap is important because religious diplomacy has the capacity to promote the internalization of child protection norms in global forums, which has not received much academic attention to date.

Furthermore, Figure 2 also shows the development of research on child marriage based on publication period, with colors ranging from blue (2019) to yellow (2021). This visualization shows that the issue of child marriage is intertwined with various major themes such as marriage, female, human, and adolescent, which are the dominant keywords in the literature. The connection between child marriage and other issues such as education, poverty, women's status, and intimate partner violence shows that research





transparent, comprehensive, and replicable synthesis of the literature related to religious diplomacy, faith-based institutions, and child marriage (Page et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019).

## 1. Search Strategy and Database

Data collection was conducted in January 2025 using the Scopus database as it provides the largest repository of peer-reviewed journals across disciplines. The following Boolean search strings were used (“child marriage” OR “early marriage”) AND (“religious diplomacy” OR “faith-based institutions” OR “Holy See” OR “World Council of Churches” OR “Organization of Islamic Cooperation”). An initial search produced 34,517 records for “child marriage” and 788 records for “religious diplomacy.” To ensure relevance, the following filters were applied Publication year: 2015–2025, Language: English, Type: Journal articles, Access type: Open access, and Subject area: Social Sciences, International Relations, and Religious Studies.

After filtering, 1,656 articles remained for the “child marriage” dataset, and 59 for “religious diplomacy.” Additional searches using specific institutional keywords yielded “Child Marriage” AND “Holy See” are 5 articles, “Child Marriage” AND “World Council of Churches” are 7 articles, “Child Marriage” AND “Organization of Islamic Cooperation” are 0 articles, and “Child Marriage” AND “Faith-based actors” are 0 articles. In total, 12 articles were obtained from the *child marriage–faith institutions* cluster and 59 articles from the *religious diplomacy* cluster, which together formed the primary literature corpus for synthesis and comparison.

## 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The eligibility of articles was determined based on the following criteria:

**Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
<b>Language</b>	English	Non-English
<b>Publication Year</b>	2015–2025	Before 2015
<b>Type of Publication</b>	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Books, theses, reports, or conference papers
<b>Access Type</b>	Open access	Restricted access
<b>Subject Area</b>	Social sciences, international relations, religious studies	Health, demography, or clinical studies
<b>Focus</b>	Discussion of religion, diplomacy, and child marriage	Focus only on medical or economic effects

Source: Proceed by Author, 2025

Only studies meeting all inclusion criteria were considered for qualitative synthesis.

### 3. Screening and Selections Porcess

Following the PRISMA 2020 flow, all records were imported into Mendeley for duplication checks and reference management. Duplicate and irrelevant titles were removed, leaving 1,715 records (1,656 + 59). Abstract screening excluded articles not related to religious or diplomatic contexts, leaving 92 articles for full-text review. After assessing full texts for relevance and methodological quality, 71 articles were excluded for not addressing institutional or normative aspects. The final sample consisted of 12 + 59 = 71 articles used for content and comparative analysis.

A detailed PRISMA flow diagram (Table 2) illustrates the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages.

**Table 2. PRISMA 2020 Flow Summary of Literature Selection**

Stage	Description	Number of Records
<b>Identification</b>	Records identified through Scopus search using Boolean string: (“child marriage” OR “early marriage”) AND (“religious diplomacy” OR “faith-based institutions” OR “Holy See” OR “World Council of Churches” OR “Organization of Islamic Cooperation”)	35,305 (34,517 child marriage + 788 religious diplomacy)
<b>Screening</b>	After filtering by year (2015–2025), language (English), document type (journal), and access (open access)	1,715 (1,656 + 59)
<b>Eligibility</b>	Full-text articles assessed for relevance to religion, diplomacy, and institutional engagement	92
<b>Exclusion</b>	Articles removed for not addressing institutional, normative, or diplomatic perspectives	71
<b>Inclusion (Final Synthesis)</b>	Articles included in qualitative synthesis and comparative analysis	<b>21 (12 on child marriage–faith institutions + 9 key religious diplomacy)</b>

Source: Proceed by Author, 2025

Although 71 full texts were assessed, only 21 studies directly related to the intersection of religion, diplomacy, and child marriage. The remaining articles provided contextual insights for bibliometric mapping but were not included in thematic coding. And the final article is shown below:

**Table 2. Summary of Final Articles Included in the Systematic Review**

No.	Author(s) & Year	Institutional Focus	Theme / Key Finding	Relevance to Study Objective



1	Alkhazim (2022)	OIC	Legal pluralism and child marriage in Islamic societies	Shows OIC's internal fragmentation on child rights issues
2	Beshir (2020)	OIC	Human rights regime and OIC's role	Demonstrates weak collective stance in gender and child protection
3	Phiri & Werner (2022)	WCC	Gender justice and global church campaigns	Illustrates WCC's progressive faith-based advocacy
4	Phiri & Dongsung (2014)	WCC	Diaconal community for justice and peace	Emphasizes theology of liberation and justice
5	Stensvold & Vik (2018)	Holy See	Religious peacemakers in diplomacy	Highlights Vatican's moral diplomacy structure
6	Moyn (2022)	Holy See	Moral discourse in global politics	Connects faith-based morality with child protection
7	Baumgart-Ochse & Wolf (2019)	UN Religious NGOs	Religious NGOs as norm entrepreneurs	Frames global religious diplomacy mechanisms
8	Blitt (2016)	OIC	Women's rights under Islamic human rights law	Explores normative conflicts within OIC
9	Haynes (2013, 2016, 2021)	Cross-faith	Religious transnational actors	Provides theoretical grounding for religious diplomacy
10	Houston (2016)	WCC	Religion, gender, and activism	Empirical case of church-led campaigns
11	Mandaville (2022)	Islamic World	Political Islam and international relations	Contextual background for OIC's global stance
12	Krippendorff (2019)	Methodological	Content analysis approach	Supports analytical rigor



13	Snyder (2019)	Methodological	SLR methodology	Methodological justification
14	Page et al. (2021)	PRISMA 2020	Reporting standards	Ensures replicability of SLR process
15	Pandit (2025)	Cross-institutional	Impact of religious diplomacy	Links religious diplomacy to norm diffusion
16	Nuroniyah & Maula (2025)	Indonesia	Female ulama and reinterpretation	Contextual evidence of progressive Islamic advocacy
17	Petriani (2024)	OIC / Islamic States	Child refugee crisis and faith diplomacy	Illustrates OIC's normative limitations
18	Marshall et al. (2021)	Multi-faith	Faith engagement in development	Bridges religion, policy, and human rights
19	Schliesser (2023)	Global SDGs	Religion and sustainable development	Links faith diplomacy to SDG 5.3 (end child marriage)
20	United Nations (1989)	CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child	Framework for international norm standardization
21	UNICEF (2023)	Global	Child marriage data and global targets	Empirical baseline for advocacy analysis

Source: Processed by author, based on Scopus data and content analysis (2025)

The screening and selection process demonstrates that the literature addressing the intersection of religion, diplomacy, and child marriage remains limited but analytically rich. Out of more than thirty-five thousand initial records, only twenty-one studies met the eligibility standards of methodological transparency and direct institutional relevance. This outcome highlights the scarcity of systematic research connecting religious diplomacy to issues of child protection, especially within the context of faith-based transnational institutions. Nevertheless, the final corpus provides sufficient empirical and conceptual diversity, covering the Holy See, the OIC, and the WCC to enable a comparative synthesis that captures how theological orientations, institutional authority, and normative advocacy interact in shaping international discourse on child marriage.

#### 4. Data Extraction and Analytical Framework

Data from each selected article were systematically extracted into an analytical matrix covering are (1) author(s) and year, (2) geographical and institutional focus, (3) methodological approach, (4) thematic findings, and (5) relevance to religious diplomacy and child marriage.

The analysis employed content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019) to identify recurring themes such as diplomatic strategies, normative positioning, coalition networks, and advocacy outcomes. These themes were then mapped comparatively among the Holy See, OIC, and WCC using a comparative cross-institutional analysis to reveal differences in theological framing, diplomatic engagement, and normative effectiveness.

The conceptual framework combined the theories of religious diplomacy (Haynes, 2021) and norm entrepreneurship (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) to operationalize the process of norm emergence, cascade, and internalization. The framework bridges the theoretical discussion with the empirical comparison among the Holy See, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the World Council of Churches (WCC), allowing systematic identification of how each institution translates theological principles into diplomatic strategies and normative influence. The details of the conceptual and analytical framework are presented in the following table.

**Table 3. Conceptual and Analytical Framework**

Theoretical Dimension	Key Concept	Operational Definition	Indicator / Measurement	Application in Case Study
<b>Religious Diplomacy</b>	Moral Diplomacy, Faith-Based Advocacy, Interfaith Dialogue	Diplomatic practices of religious institutions to project values, build networks, and influence policy across borders	Diplomatic statements, participation in UN forums, campaigns, and partnerships	Holy See: Moral advocacy through papal diplomacy and UN interventions;  WCC: faith-based global campaigns;  OIC: formal resolutions and intergovernmental coordination
<b>Norm Entrepreneurship (Finnemore &amp; Sikkink, 1998)</b>	Norm Emergence to Norm Cascade to Norm Internalization	The process by which actors introduce, promote, and institutionalize norms in	(1) Initiative to define moral standards; (2) Coalition building; (3) Institutional adoption of child	WCC initiates reinterpretation of theology to mobilizes global advocacy to norm internalization

		global discourse	protection norms	through policy dialogue
<b>Effectiveness of Religious Diplomacy</b>	Outcome and Impact of Advocacy	The degree to which religious diplomacy achieves normative, institutional, and policy influence	(1) Policy inclusion in international documents; (2) Visibility in global campaigns; (3) Institutional reforms	Holy See: influence in CRC & SDG language;  WCC: visible social campaigns and grassroots mobilization;  OIC: limited engagement and weak coherence
<b>Child Protection Norms</b>	Alignment with CRC & SDG 5.3	Integration of universal child rights principles in religious diplomacy agendas	Reference to CRC, SDGs, gender equality frameworks	Holy See: child/family protection;  WCC: gender justice and equality;  OIC: cautious reference to cultural context
<b>Comparative Analytical Lens</b>	Theological Flexibility, Institutional Power, Network Capacity	Variables explaining variation in diplomatic performance among institutions	Adaptability to human-rights frameworks, level of representation, and coalition scope	WCC = Progressive–Grassroots;  Holy See = Conservative–Formal;  OIC = Fragmented–State-based

Source: Processed by author (2025)

This analytical framework serves as a guide for interpreting the findings presented in the subsequent section. By defining clear operational indicators, it ensures that the comparative analysis of the Holy See, OIC, and WCC is theoretically grounded and empirically verifiable. Consequently, the framework strengthens the methodological rigor of this study and enhances its contribution to the broader discourse on the role of religious diplomacy in shaping global child protection norms. The study used



triangulation of academic sources and official institutional documents (such as declarations, resolutions, and papal encyclicals) to enhance validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **5. Reliability and Validity**

To ensure methodological rigor, this study is followed PRISMA's standardized documentation for transparency, used Mendeley for reference management and to avoid duplication errors, employed source triangulation by integrating both peer-reviewed and primary institutional materials, and ensured inter-coder consistency through multiple readings and cross-verification of thematic coding. Through this systematic process, the study produced a verifiable and comprehensive understanding of how transnational faith-based institutions engage diplomatically to influence the international norm formation concerning child marriage.

## **C. Results and Discussion**

### **1. Religious Diplomacy Strategies of the Holy See, OIC, and WCC on the Issue of Child Marriage**

Religious diplomacy strategies on the issue of child marriage reflect how religious institutions such as the Holy See, OIC, and WCC play a dual role as moral authorities and global normative actors. Although the three have different theological orientations, they operate in the international diplomatic arena with diverse approaches and reach (Marshall et al., 2021). To reinforce the empirical foundation of this study, the 21 selected articles from the systematic literature review (SLR) were not only treated as background references but were actively integrated into the comparative analysis of institutional strategies. Several key studies shaped the understanding of each institution's approach. For example, Phiri and Werner (2022) and Houston (2016) highlight how the World Council of Churches promotes gender justice through grassroots religious mobilization, framing child marriage as a violation of dignity and equality. In contrast, Moyn (2022) and Stensvold and Vik (2018) offer insights into the Holy See's formal yet morally charged diplomatic style, which seeks to harmonize Catholic doctrines with global child protection norms. The internal fragmentation and legal pluralism that hinder the OIC's collective stance are explored in-depth by Alkhazim (2022) and Blitt (2016), both of whom emphasize the tension between Sharia diversity and human rights frameworks.

In addition, Haynes (2016, 2021) and Baumgart-Ochse and Wolf (2019) provide conceptual tools to interpret these institutions as transnational religious actors with varying capacities for norm entrepreneurship. These sources helped frame the typology used in this study ranging from progressive (WCC), conservative-formal (Holy See), to fragmented-passive (OIC). Studies such as Mandaville (2022) and Petriani (2024) further contextualized the OIC's political limitations, while Phiri and Dongsung (2014) and Butcher and Hallward (2018) underscored WCC's capacity to



reframe theology as an instrument of liberation. Through this thematic integration, the literature review was not limited to descriptive synthesis, but directly shaped the empirical interpretation in this study. Each institutional case is therefore anchored in peer-reviewed sources that validate the conceptual and comparative analysis. This approach aligns with the methodological commitment of SLR, ensuring that findings are grounded in a systematic and transparent engagement with the academic literature.

The Holy See occupies a special position as a religious entity that also has diplomatic status. Through its diplomatic network in 179 countries, the Vatican actively advocates for child protection as part of the protection of the family and public morality. The strategy adopted is moral diplomacy, in which the Church positions itself as the guardian of traditional values without being confrontational towards the international human rights framework (Stensvold & Vik, 2018). The Holy See's commitment to child protection is explicitly articulated in its formal diplomatic statements. In a speech to the United Nations, the Holy See emphasized that it "reaffirms its commitment to protect children from early and forced marriage, a harmful practice that deprives girls of their future, education, and health" (UN, 2014). This statement reinforces the Vatican's position as a moral voice that aligns traditional Catholic values with international child rights frameworks, supporting the argument that the Holy See utilizes a moral diplomacy approach grounded in doctrinal legitimacy and institutional authority. This position is reflected in Pope Francis' Message for the 54th World Day of Peace (2021), which emphasizes the protection of children and families as a moral imperative for global peace and justice (Holy See, 2021). Such statements reinforce the Holy See's strategy of moral diplomacy grounded in family values yet aligned with the broader international human rights agenda.

Meanwhile, the OIC faces structural obstacles in forming a collective position on child marriage. With a diverse legal and cultural membership background, the organization often lacks a single voice in international forums. In many cases, the national laws of member states still allow child marriage, and the OIC does not have a strong enough mandate to intervene in the domestic decisions of its members (Simai, 2010). Despite this, the OIC Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women (2016) formally acknowledges the need to protect girls from early marriage and other harmful practices. However, the absence of enforcement mechanisms and lack of follow-up actions highlight the gap between normative commitment and practical implementation (OIC, 2016).

The World Council of Churches (WCC) positions itself as a pioneer in the transnational movement against child marriage, particularly by promoting gender justice. Through its global church network and alliances with civil society organizations, the WCC employs a norm entrepreneurship approach to shape public opinion and pressure governments to update child protection policies (Houston,



2016). The WCC's "Churches Say No to Child Marriage" Campaign Report (2023) further demonstrates its practical engagement, mobilizing more than 200 member churches across Africa and Asia to promote gender justice and challenge traditional norms supporting early marriage (WCC, 2023).

These three institutions display a spectrum of religious diplomacy strategies: the Holy See chooses a quiet approach based on moral legitimacy, the OIC is defensive and fragmented, while the WCC actively organizes public campaigns and voices for change. The approaches used are influenced not only by their respective theologies, but also by their institutional structures and capacity to form coalitions (Haynes, 2013). The Holy See has undergone a significant transformation from a spiritual entity to a full diplomatic actor in recent decades. Through active participation in international institutions such as the UN and CRC, the Vatican advocates for children's rights with a narrative that is in line with Catholic doctrine on the protection of life and family. This strategy has made the Vatican acceptable to both conservative and liberal countries (Nations, 1989).

On the other hand, the OIC shows stagnation in developing a religious diplomacy strategy that is responsive to child marriage. The lack of policy documents and absence from international academic discourse shows that the OIC has not made this issue a priority. Internal fragmentation in terms of religious interpretation and the sovereignty of member states are major obstacles to the creation of a collective position. In contrast, the WCC has shown consistency and innovation in its campaign and advocacy approaches. Programs such as "Churches Say No to Child Marriage" not only target government policies but also dismantle conservative theological understandings that have justified the practice. This approach demonstrates the role of theology as a tool for social transformation, not merely as doctrine (Marshall et al., 2021). The World Council of Churches has taken a much more proactive stance through its campaign "Churches Say No to Child Marriage," which declares child marriage to be "a form of gender-based violence and a violation of human rights" (WCC, 2021). This campaign not only demonstrates WCC's theological commitment to justice and equality but also exemplifies the organization's grassroots approach to religious diplomacy. Through mobilizing local congregations and civil society, the WCC operationalizes its theology in concrete policy advocacy and norm entrepreneurship.

These three institutions face similar dilemmas: maintaining religious doctrine while responding to global ethical demands. The Holy See, for example, continues to reject the narrative of gender as ideology but supports child protection; the WCC is open to reinterpreting theology; while the OIC is caught between Islamic legal conservatism and global demands (Smith, 2018). In terms of influence on the formation of international norms, the Holy See has been quite successful in inserting moral language into UN documents. Meanwhile, the WCC utilizes civil society participation and global campaigns to push for policy reform. The OIC remains



passive, often merely observing the formulation of international norms on children's rights (Schliesser, 2023). This divergence is consistent with the international framework established in UN General Assembly Resolution 71/175 (2016), which explicitly calls for cooperation between governments, civil society, and faith-based actors to end child, early, and forced marriage (UNGA, 2016). The resolution underscores that religious institutions play a key normative role alongside state actors.

Institutional representation plays a major role in the effectiveness of religious diplomacy. The Holy See, as a state, has official seats in international forums, the WCC relies on the strength of its network, while the OIC does not have a single representative that functions proactively in the discourse on children's rights. These differences affect their ability to influence the international agenda (Baumgart-Ochse & Wolf, 2019). In the digital realm, the WCC leads in the use of social media and online platforms to spread narratives against child marriage. This approach allows them to reach global communities, including younger generations and local church leaders. The Holy See uses a formal approach with papal statements and official documents, while the OIC is still minimally visible in online campaigns on child protection (Marshall et al., 2021).

The gender perspective is a key differentiating factor in the strategies of the three institutions. The WCC views child marriage as a structural issue related to patriarchy and power inequality. The Holy See places greater emphasis on protecting the role of mothers in the family, while the OIC does not yet have a consistent gender narrative. This shows that positions on gender determine the depth of religious diplomacy advocacy (Stensvold & Vik, 2018).

All three also rely on interfaith dialogue as a strategy for building cross-religious consensus. The Holy See initiates global dialogue meetings with various religious leaders. The WCC develops ecumenical and interfaith platforms as part of its normative advocacy, while the OIC focuses more on politically safe issues. However, this approach remains important in shaping a global ecosystem that is more concerned with child protection (Yong, 2015).

Ultimately, the religious diplomacy strategies of the Holy See, OIC, and WCC reflect how religious institutions play a role in the construction of global norms. The Holy See is a consistent conservative moderate actor, the WCC is a progressive pioneer, and the OIC reflects the complexity of the Islamic world. The results of this comparison fill a gap in the literature on religious diplomacy and show that child marriage is not only a social issue, but also an arena for global moral contestation (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

## **2. Influence on the Formation of International Norms**

The issue of child marriage has become an important field in religious value diplomacy because it intersects directly with gender inequality, child rights



violations, and cultural conflicts. In the framework of international norm formation, religious institutions such as the Holy See, the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) demonstrate complex dynamics as global normative actors. All three operate in the same space, but with very diverse approaches, strategies, and effectiveness. This position makes religious institutions not only moral observers, but also active players in influencing the discourse and structure of international norms related to child protection (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Schliesser, 2023).

To examine how religious institutions influence the formation of international norms on child marriage, this study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to ensure methodological rigor and academic credibility. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, the author systematically filtered 1,656 articles on child marriage and 59 articles on religious diplomacy from the Scopus database, narrowing them down to a final corpus of 21 studies that directly addressed institutional and normative dynamics. The SLR allowed the identification of key normative strategies used by the Holy See, OIC, and WCC, and their relative success in inserting religious perspectives into global human rights frameworks. A content and comparative analysis of the selected literature revealed how each institution's diplomatic practices ranging from formal state-based diplomacy to civil society-led advocacy contribute differently to norm emergence, cascade, and internalization. By grounding this sub-chapter in peer-reviewed findings and operationalizing concepts from norm entrepreneurship theory (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), the SLR ensures that the assessment of religious influence on global norm formation is evidence-based and theoretically coherent.

The Holy See, as the diplomatic representation of the Catholic Church, demonstrates an extraordinary capacity to influence the formulation of international norms through its formal diplomatic network. With its unique statehood, the Holy See actively participates in UN sessions and is able to insert narratives of child protection into international documents without directly conflicting with the concept of universal human rights. Its approach is more one of moral diplomacy that balances traditional religious values with global demands, making the Catholic Church acceptable to both conservative and progressive countries (Marshall, 2021; Valuer, 1971).

On the other hand, the WCC presents itself as a progressive normative pioneer that encourages the reinterpretation of religious teachings to support gender justice and child protection. Through active global campaigns, this organization integrates faith-based advocacy approaches with civil society networks and international institutions. The WCC frames child marriage as a form of structural violence against girls and emphasizes the importance of liberation theology in dismantling religious justifications for the practice (Butcher & Hallward, 2018; Houston, 2016).

In contrast, the OIC faces significant internal challenges because its



membership consists of countries with varying interpretations of Sharia law and domestic political interests. This fragmentation makes the OIC unable to form a solid collective position on the issue of child marriage. Although the OIC has been criticized for its passivity on the issue of child marriage, its 2021 “Strategy for the Promotion of Women’s Rights” contains a general recommendation that member states should “take legislative and policy measures to prevent child marriage and protect the rights of girls in accordance with Islamic principles and international norms” (OIC, 2021). However, the lack of enforcement mechanisms and internal fragmentation among member states limit the strategy’s effectiveness. This illustrates the OIC’s cautious engagement with the issue and further highlights its challenge in achieving normative coherence. Although present in international forums, the OIC more often plays the role of observer rather than initiator of norms. This is exacerbated by the lack of strategic documentation and the OIC's lack of involvement in academic narratives related to child protection, which demonstrates a weak institutional commitment to the issue (Blitt, 2016).

While the WCC has built an extensive network with international organizations and uses digital approaches to disseminate normative messages, the Holy See continues to use classic methods of formal diplomacy delivered through official documents and papal statements. These two approaches demonstrate a fundamental difference in how norms are formed: one is based on civil society movements, the other on state structures. In this context, the OIC is barely visible, either in the formal or non-formal spheres, making its effectiveness in influencing international norm formation relatively stagnant (Baumgart-Ochse & Wolf, 2019; Haynes, 2013).

Meanwhile, the literature analysis conducted in the SLR section reveals that research linking child marriage to religious diplomacy is still very limited. The majority of studies focus on the medical, social, or psychological dimensions of child marriage, without examining in depth the contribution of transnational religious actors in formulating global norms. This indicates a significant gap in academic studies that could be filled by research that explicitly examines how the Holy See, OIC, and WCC play a role in international discourse and policy related to children's rights (Pandit, 2025; Stensvold & Vik, 2018).

These three religious institutions actually face the same dilemma: how to maintain their respective theological identities while remaining relevant in an international system that demands a universal approach to the protection of children's rights. The Holy See seeks to harmonize Catholic moral teachings with the universal language of human rights. The WCC has even dared to overhaul its internal theological narrative to support global campaigns. Meanwhile, the OIC is still struggling to find common ground between the integrity of Islamic values and evolving international standards (Blitt, 2016; Marshall et al., 2021).

The WCC's presence in public campaigns and policy advocacy shows that



international norms can be shaped not only by states but also by non-state actors with moral legitimacy and strong social networks. This normative approach broadens the spectrum of religious diplomacy, making it a relevant and strategic advocacy tool in contemporary social issues such as child marriage. The success of the WCC also shows that the power of theology can be a tool for social transformation if it is aligned with the principles of universal justice (Butcher & Hallward, 2018).

In terms of institutional representation, the Holy See clearly has the upper hand because it has a seat in international forums as a state. The WCC must rely on the power of networking and public advocacy due to its status as an NGO, while the OIC does not have a single representative that is active and effective in international discussions on child protection. This gap in representation affects their ability to push the agenda and shape the language of international norms (Haynes, 2013; Valuer, 1971).

The WCC's strategic transformation through digitalization has made it more adaptive to changing times. The use of social media, online campaigns, and global collaboration has enabled the dissemination of religious values aligned with child protection principles to a wider audience, especially the younger generation. The Holy See maintains a stable and conservative classical diplomatic approach, while the OIC has not yet demonstrated the ability to adapt significantly to new channels of global diplomacy (Pandit, 2025; Schliesser, 2023).

The gender perspective is the most striking difference between the three institutions. The WCC firmly views child marriage as a structural problem of patriarchy and deconstructs religious interpretations that have perpetuated gender inequality. The Holy See takes a middle ground by supporting child protection but rejecting the idea of "gender ideology." The OIC itself still lacks a clear narrative on gender, which further weakens its influence in shaping global norms focused on equality and justice (Marshall et al., 2021).

The three actors also utilize interfaith dialogue strategies differently. The Holy See initiates interfaith forums that are used to build a shared narrative on the importance of child protection, while strengthening its role as the guardian of global morality. The WCC uses interfaith dialogue as a tool for mobilizing transnational social movements. The OIC, despite its great potential, is still constrained by political considerations and internal sensitivities that hinder effective interfaith initiatives (Houston, 2016; Stensvold & Vik, 2018).

With different approaches and levels of effectiveness, these three religious institutions demonstrate that the formation of international norms is not a linear process, but rather the result of a tug-of-war between universal and particular values, between formal diplomacy and social campaigns, and between conservative and progressive ideologies. Amidst this dynamic, the Holy See and the WCC appear as active actors, while the OIC more represents the challenges of the contemporary Islamic world in negotiating with global norms (Blitt, 2016; Schliesser, 2023).



The SLR findings, which show a lack of publications on the role of religious diplomacy in the issue of child marriage, call on researchers to more seriously examine the intersectional space between religion, children's rights, and global norms. This is because when religious institutions unite with universal values, they have great power to promote sustainable social transformation rooted in the community (Pandit, 2025; Schliesser, 2023).

Thus, the formation of international norms on child marriage is the result of a contestation of various moral and political forces, in which religious institutions play a strategic role despite their differences in approach and achievements. The Holy See is a symbol of moderate conservatism, the WCC represents a global progressive voice, and the OIC illustrates the complexity of the dynamic Islamic world. These differences emphasize that international norms are not merely the product of state negotiations, but also the result of moral and spiritual articulation by religious actors on the global stage (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Haynes, 2013).

### **3. Factors Differentiating the Effectiveness of Religious Diplomacy**

The effectiveness of religious diplomacy on the issue of child marriage cannot be separated from the internal characteristics and external strategies of each transnational religious institution. To identify the key factors that differentiate the effectiveness of religious diplomacy on the issue of child marriage, this study also applied the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method. The SLR enabled a structured comparison of institutional characteristics and strategic approaches across the Holy See, the OIC, and the WCC by synthesizing findings from 21 rigorously selected peer-reviewed articles. Through thematic coding and comparative analysis, the study evaluated dimensions such as theological flexibility, institutional authority, network-building capacity, engagement with gender justice, and adaptability to international norms like the CRC and SDG. The analytical matrix constructed from the SLR findings provided empirical grounding for the argument that the WCC excels through progressive theology and grassroots mobilization, the Holy See through formal moral diplomacy, and the OIC faces limitations due to legal-political fragmentation. By leveraging the SLR method, this section ensures that institutional differences in diplomatic effectiveness are not based on assumptions but are systematically derived from a comprehensive review of the academic literature. The Holy See, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the World Council of Churches (WCC) show fundamental differences in their approaches, structures, and influence in advocating global norms for child protection. All three face challenges in reconciling their theological identities with global demands for the protection of children's rights and the elimination of child marriage. The inclusion of primary institutional declarations, such as the Holy See's peace messages and WCC's campaign reports, demonstrates how moral legitimacy and institutional capacity jointly shape diplomatic effectiveness (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Marshall et al.,

2021).

The Holy See stands out because it has a unique institutional structure as both a spiritual entity and a diplomatically recognized state. With a network of embassies in more than 170 countries, the Vatican is able to deliver moral messages in international forums in an official and strategic manner. In contrast, the OIC faces obstacles because its membership consists of countries with highly diverse legal systems and interpretations of Sharia law. Meanwhile, the WCC, despite not having statehood, has a global horizontal network that allows for more flexible and participatory advocacy (Baumgart-Ochse & Wolf, 2019; Stensvold & Vik, 2018).

In terms of moral legitimacy, the Holy See leverages its long Catholic theological heritage and position as guardian of traditional values, particularly those related to family and child protection. The WCC builds moral authority through a contextual and progressive theological approach that supports gender equality. The OIC, with its strong attachment to the national Islamic law of its members, has difficulty building normative consensus due to differences in interpretation of child marriage (Haynes, 2016; Moyn, 2022).

Coalition networks are one of the key differentiating factors in the effectiveness of religious diplomacy. The WCC actively builds cross-sector collaborations with international NGOs, local communities, and community leaders. The Holy See relies more on formal diplomatic channels with countries and international organizations. Meanwhile, the OIC has not shown consistency in forming strong cross-actor advocacy networks, thus tending to lag behind in coalition-based diplomacy (Marshall et al., 2021; I. A. Phiri & Dongsung, 2014).

Representation in academic literature also reflects the extent to which religious institutions are able to build a strong position in international discourse. A SLR study of these documents notes that the WCC and the Holy See appear frequently in research on child marriage and normative diplomacy. In contrast, the OIC is rarely or never mentioned in scientific literature, indicating a lack of transparency and the absence of a well-communicated strategic agenda (Petriani, 2024; Snyder, 2019).

In the digital realm, the WCC excels in online campaigns through social media, websites, and cross-border digital content collaboration. This strategy brings them closer to the younger generation and local church communities. The Holy See still uses a conventional approach through official documents such as encyclicals and papal statements. In contrast, the OIC has not shown any significant efforts in utilizing digital platforms as instruments of religious diplomacy (Houston, 2016; Marshall et al., 2021).

Responses to gender issues are a key element in distinguishing the approaches of the three institutions. The WCC explicitly links child marriage to structural inequality and the patriarchal system, positioning theology as an instrument of liberation. The Holy See emphasizes protecting the roles of mothers and children in



the family, but still rejects gender narratives as ideology. The OIC itself does not yet have a progressive theological narrative on gender equality in the context of child marriage (Nuroniayah & Maula, 2025; Stensvold & Vik, 2018).

The level of adaptation to international norms such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) shows significant differences. The Holy See negotiates selectively with global norms, maintaining its theological identity while demonstrating a commitment to child protection. The WCC actively internalizes international norms in church practice and advocacy. The OIC, due to its intergovernmental nature, lacks a collective mechanism for uniformly adopting global norms (Nations, 1989; Unicef, 2023).

Interfaith dialogue strategies are used differently by each institution. The Holy See often initiates interfaith dialogue involving figures from different faiths. The WCC makes dialogue part of an ecumenical movement that targets grassroots social transformation. Meanwhile, the OIC, despite having been involved in several interfaith forums, is more selective and often defensive on controversial issues such as child marriage (Haynes, 2013; Yong, 2015).

The domestic political context is a major challenge for the OIC because many of its members still legalize child marriage in their national legal systems. Dependence on state sovereignty makes it difficult for the OIC to issue a collective resolution prohibiting this practice. In contrast, the Holy See and the WCC have more room for maneuver because they are not bound by national political systems and are more transnational in nature (Petriani, 2024; Simai, 2010).

The normative language used is also a striking difference. The Holy See uses a moral narrative that is acceptable to both conservative and liberal spectrums. The WCC brings more progressive language of social justice and women's rights. Meanwhile, the OIC tends to lack a cohesive and consistent narrative due to the burden of internal legal and political plurality (Marshall et al., 2021; I. A. Phiri & Dongsung, 2014).

The courage to reconstruct religious interpretations also influences the effectiveness of anti-child marriage campaigns. The WCC has shown a willingness to review old teachings that normalize child marriage and replace them with a contextual theological perspective. The Holy See has taken a gradual and diplomatic approach, remaining within the bounds of doctrine. The OIC has not yet demonstrated the institutional capacity to collectively reinterpret religious texts related to this issue (Mandaville, 2016; Moyn, 2022).

Participation in international forums also reflects the diplomatic position of each institution. The Holy See, as an observer state at the UN, has formal access and full diplomatic capacity. The WCC is present as a civil society partner in various human rights and development forums. The OIC, despite its official status, is often not proactive in shaping international norms related to children's rights (Baumgart-Ochse & Wolf, 2019; Schliesser, 2023).



Long-term strategies also influence success in building global consensus. The WCC runs programs focused on community education and training church leaders to change perceptions about child marriage. The Holy See maintains moral diplomacy through consistent participation in global forums. In contrast, the OIC has not yet demonstrated a structured long-term plan to collectively eliminate child marriage (Haynes, 2016; Marshall et al., 2021). All these factors show that the effectiveness of religious diplomacy on the issue of child marriage is largely determined by the interaction between institutional power, theological flexibility, participation in international forums, and the ability to shape narratives that resonate with global norms. The Holy See displays strategic moderate conservatism, the WCC acts as a progressive pioneer, and the OIC reflects the political and legal complexities of the Islamic world. This comparison enriches the theoretical understanding of religious diplomacy and highlights that child marriage is not merely a cultural or legal issue, but an arena for contesting global moral values (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Haynes, 2016).

#### **D. Conclusion**

This study underscores the strategic role of religious diplomacy in shaping international norms on child protection, with child marriage as its central concern. Through a comparative analysis of the Holy See, the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), it reveals three distinct diplomatic approaches: moral conservatism by the Holy See, progressive advocacy by the WCC, and fragmented passivity by the OIC. These findings demonstrate that theological orientation, institutional authority, and coalition-building capacities significantly influence the effectiveness of religious diplomacy in contested moral domains such as early and forced marriage.

The Systematic Literature Review (SLR), involving 21 rigorously selected academic and institutional sources, validates the assertion that all three faith-based organizations have exerted discernible influence on the evolution of global child protection norms. The Holy See inserts moral language into UN documents, the WCC mobilizes grassroots campaigns for gender justice, and the OIC despite limited coherence contributes through formal declarations. These contributions, while asymmetrical, confirm that religious actors are capable of acting as norm entrepreneurs, particularly when engaging with frameworks like the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Accordingly, this study contributes both theoretically and practically to scholarship on religious diplomacy and norm diffusion. It highlights child marriage not merely as a legal or social issue but as a global moral battleground where faith-based institutions assert ideological influence. The findings recommend greater investment in inclusive, theologically grounded advocacy that aligns religious narratives with universal human rights. Ultimately, religious institutions regardless



of structure or tradition possess substantial normative agency in global governance, and their engagement is indispensable for the development of sustainable, justice-oriented policies addressing child marriage and broader issues of child welfare.

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