



Implementation of Youth Protection Policy Through the Lens of Law and Social Ethics in Malaysia

Adibah Bahori^{*}, Hajah Makiah Tussaripah Jamil², Aishah Mohd Nor³, and Wan Nor Aisyah Binti Wan Yussof⁴

¹ Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

² Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

³ Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

⁴ Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia
adibahbahori@uitm.edu.my

Abstract. The protection of at-risk youth has become a pressing concern in many developing nations, including Malaysia, due to the increasing complexity of challenges faced by adolescents. These challenges are not merely individual but are shaped by broader socio-economic, legal, and cultural dynamics. At-risk youth represent a vulnerable group requiring special attention in terms of protection, education, and character development. In Malaysia, issues such as school dropouts, teenage pregnancies, sexual abuse, involvement in juvenile crime, and unregulated exposure to social media have further exacerbated their vulnerabilities. Consequently, the implementation of a comprehensive and interdisciplinary protection policy is urgently needed to address these multifaceted challenges. Accordingly, this study aims to analyse the implementation of protection policies for at-risk youth in Malaysia from the perspectives of law and social ethics, and to assess their effectiveness in line with the principles of well-being and social responsibility. A qualitative approach was adopted, using doctrinal and content analysis. Data were derived from a review of national policies, official government reports, academic publications, and key statutes including the Child Act 2001 (Amendment 2016), the Sexual Offences Against Children Act 2017, and selected Syariah legal provisions. The study also draws upon the principles of Maqasid Syariah as an ethical framework for evaluating the relevance and responsiveness of current policies. The findings reveal a significant gap between policy formulation and actual implementation at the grassroots level. Contributing factors include weak coordination among implementing agencies, limited public legal literacy, and persistent social stigma towards at-risk youth, all of which hinder the effectiveness of these efforts. The study recommends a more inclusive, collaborative, and integrated policy approach that strengthens institutional capacity, fosters sustained community participation, and aligns with core values of dignity, rights, and shared social responsibility.

Keywords: At-Risk Youth, Maqasid Syariah, Policy Implementation, Social Ethic, Youth Protection.

1 Introduction

In recent years, the issue of at-risk adolescents has become increasingly pressing in Malaysia due to the rising number of young individuals exposed to social, economic, and familial vulnerabilities. These include school dropouts, substance abuse, juvenile crimes, online exploitation, and unwed pregnancies. According to the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia, more than 7,000 children and adolescents were reported as needing protection and rehabilitation services in 2022 alone, reflecting a consistent upward trend over the past five years [1],[2]. This figure, however, may not fully represent the actual number, as many cases remain unreported due to stigma, fear of authority, or lack of awareness.

Adolescence is a critical transitional stage marked by emotional, physical, and psychological development. It is during this phase that young individuals begin to form habits, behavioural patterns, and lifestyles that often persist into adulthood [3]. The absence of proper guidance or protection at this stage can lead to long-term and sometimes irreversible consequences. In Malaysia, the vulnerabilities of adolescents are further compounded by a range of structural and cultural factors, including rapid urbanisation, family disintegration, intergenerational poverty, the pervasive influence of social media, and an education system that places overwhelming emphasis on academic achievement [4]. These pressures have contributed to a rise in mental health issues and behavioural problems among the youth, particularly affecting those from low-income households and those without access to education or stable family support.

The behaviours and experiences formed during adolescence not only impact individual well-being but also shape the health and stability of future generations. Societies that recognise and invest in adolescent development are more likely to foster resilient, productive, and healthy citizens. The benefits of proactively addressing adolescents' needs, including physical, mental, emotional, and socio-economic support, far outweigh the costs of neglect. It is therefore imperative for policymakers and stakeholders to prioritise adolescent welfare as a cornerstone of national progress and sustainable development [3].

In response to these needs, Malaysia has developed several legal and policy frameworks, such as the Child Act 2001 [Amended 2016], the National Social Policy, the National Child Protection Policy, and its commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). These frameworks seek to ensure that every child and adolescent is protected from harm, neglect, exploitation, and abuse. However, effective implementation remains a persistent concern. Empirical studies

reveal that many frontline enforcement agencies and social welfare systems lack the training, resources, and coordinated inter-agency mechanisms to respond effectively to the complex needs of at-risk adolescents [4],[5],[6]].

Beyond legal considerations, the success of protection policies also hinges on the ethical and cultural values embedded within the society. Ethical principles such as empathy, collective responsibility, and restorative care play a vital role in shaping how policies are perceived and implemented on the ground. However, social stigma, especially towards teenage mothers, LGBTQ+ youth, and those involved in petty crimes, often leads to discrimination and exclusion from essential services [7]. The absence of a compassionate, community-driven support network exacerbates the marginalisation of these youths and undermines national policy goals.

While Malaysia has made commendable efforts to strengthen child protection through laws such as the Child Act 2001 and related national policies, these instruments primarily focus on children in general and often fail to differentiate the specific developmental and psychosocial needs of adolescents. Teenagers are frequently subsumed under the broad category of 'children', even though adolescents face distinct challenges that require targeted rights-based approaches. This gap in focus results in the underrepresentation of adolescent-specific concerns in existing frameworks, leaving many at-risk youths without adequate recognition or protection [8].

Moreover, Malaysia lacks a dedicated, youth-specific national strategy that integrates legal mandates and ethical imperatives for protecting adolescents. Policy responses remain fragmented and reactive rather than preventive and developmental. Initiatives by government agencies and NGOs often operate in silos, lacking central coordination, long-term vision, and effective evaluation mechanisms [9].

Given these complex challenges, this study argues for a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach to adolescent protection, one that not only examines the adequacy of legal instruments but also critically evaluates how social ethics influence the operational realities of protection. Therefore, this research aims to explore the intersections of law and social ethics in the implementation of youth protection policies in Malaysia, ultimately proposing more inclusive, humane, and sustainable solutions to safeguard the rights and dignity of at-risk adolescents.

2 Problem Statement

Despite comprehensive laws and child protection policies in Malaysia, their practical implementation remains significantly limited and inconsistent. One of the most glaring issues is the disconnection between national policies and on-the-ground realities. Although laws such as the Child Act 2001 [Amended 2016] and policies like the National Child Protection Policy exist, their enforcement is hindered by weak institutional capacity, limited funding, and a lack of specialised training among

frontline personnel, including police officers, welfare officers, and school counsellors [5],[1]. Furthermore, the current system lacks a unified, adolescent-specific protection strategy that integrates both legal mandates and community-based support mechanisms.

The Malaysian government has made efforts to improve and strengthen existing laws through various policies and institutional services. Nonetheless, these laws and policies do not specifically address the rights and protection of at-risk teenagers. The existing legal framework remains fragmented and is primarily subsumed under the broader category of children's rights [10]. This reflects a larger gap in national policy, as Malaysia currently lacks a dedicated youth protection policy; instead, teenagers are often included under child policies, despite their distinct developmental and social needs [3].

This policy vacuum often results in reactive rather than proactive responses to adolescent crises. Many adolescents in need of support, especially those experiencing abuse, exploitation, homelessness, or involvement in juvenile delinquency, are often identified only after they come into conflict with the law or are reported to authorities, rather than being detected through preventive outreach systems [11], [6],[12].

The marginalisation of vulnerable subgroups such as unwed teenage mothers, LGBTQ+ adolescents, and undocumented youth further complicates the protection landscape. These groups are frequently excluded from mainstream support services due to social stigma, legal ambiguity, or lack of inclusive policies, despite their heightened risk of harm and exploitation [7],[9],[13]. For example, one of the researchers highlighted that undocumented adolescents often face barriers in accessing education and healthcare, making them highly vulnerable to systemic neglect.

Compounding these issues is the fragmentation of efforts among key stakeholders' government agencies, NGOs, schools, religious institutions, and community leaders, which often operate in silos. The absence of coordinated data sharing, monitoring frameworks, and evidence-based evaluation mechanisms results in duplicated efforts, inefficient resource allocation, and inconsistent care for adolescents in distress [12],[14], [15].

The current service delivery system remains inadequate due to limited public outreach, restricted operational capacity, bureaucratic constraints, and the absence of integrated services. There is a pressing need for government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to collaborate more effectively to address these service gaps and meet the specific needs of at-risk adolescents [3],[8]. However, no coordinated or concentrated national effort currently exists. A holistic approach grounded in a dedicated legal framework for at-risk adolescents is essential. Such a framework would enable more structured and focused national policies and action plans, enhance operational services by involving multiple stakeholders, and support the development of best-practice programmes, investments, and research. In the long

term, this would ensure better protection and care for at-risk adolescents, enabling them to build brighter and more secure futures [3].

In short, the core problem lies not in the absence of protection laws or moral obligations, but in the failure to effectively operationalise these instruments in a way that is sensitive to the diverse realities of Malaysian adolescents. This study aims to critically examine the gap between law, policy, and ethics to identify pathways toward a more cohesive, compassionate, and effective youth protection system.

3 Research Questions

This study is guided by a central concern: how to effectively implement a youth protection framework that is both legally sound and ethically grounded. Recognising that policy effectiveness is influenced not only by legislation but also by societal norms, the study is driven by the following research questions:

3.1 To What Extent are the Current Legal Frameworks Effective in Protecting At-risk Adolescents in Malaysia?

This question critically examines the operational effectiveness of key legal instruments, including the Child Act 2001 [Amended 2016], the National Social Policy, and related institutional mechanisms. It seeks to evaluate how these laws address the multifaceted risks faced by adolescents and whether they provide sufficient structural, procedural, and rehabilitative protections at the federal, state, and community levels.

3.2 In What Ways Do Social Ethics Influence the Implementation and Outcomes of Youth Protection Policies?

This question investigates the influence of ethical principles, including empathy, care, communal responsibility, and non-discrimination, on public perception and institutional response. It aims to determine how stigma, cultural norms, and societal values either facilitate or obstruct access to protection and rehabilitation for at-risk adolescents.

3.3 What Legal, Ethical, and Policy Enhancements can be Proposed to Improve the Protection of At-risk Adolescents in Malaysia?

Drawing on the critical gaps identified in the previous questions, this question proposes integrated and practical recommendations. These may include legal reform, improved inter-agency collaboration, inclusive community-driven interventions, and the formulation of a dedicated National Adolescent Protection Strategy that is rights-based and ethically anchored.

Through these research questions, the study aspires to build a multidimensional understanding that bridges legal mandates with ethical imperatives, thereby promoting a more inclusive, humane, and sustainable approach to adolescent protection.

4 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to critically evaluate the implementation of youth protection policies in Malaysia by integrating legal and social-ethical perspectives. In doing so, the study seeks to illuminate the strengths, limitations, and gaps in existing protective mechanisms targeting at-risk adolescents. While Malaysia has ratified key international instruments, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and enacted domestic laws, like the Child Act 2001, the extent to which these provisions are effectively operationalised remains a key concern.

This study aims to move beyond a purely legalistic interpretation by incorporating the role of social ethics, including values of empathy, dignity, community solidarity, and non-discrimination, as foundational elements in the protection discourse. By examining how ethical values intersect with law and policy, the research aspires to propose a more human-centred and socially responsive protection framework.

Furthermore, this study intends to generate evidence-based recommendations for strengthening youth protection at both institutional and community levels. This includes identifying strategies for improved legal coordination, capacity-building among stakeholders, reducing stigma, and formulating a comprehensive National Strategy for Adolescent Protection. Ultimately, the research is driven by a commitment to ensure that every adolescent in Malaysia, regardless of background, status, or circumstance, is afforded equal protection, access to support, and the opportunity to live with dignity.

5 Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design, with document analysis serving as the primary methodological approach. The qualitative nature of this research enables an in-depth, interpretive exploration of Malaysia's youth protection policies through legal and social-ethical lenses. Document analysis enables the researcher to extract meaning from a wide array of legal texts, policy papers, official reports, and institutional publications that shape the discourse on adolescent protection in Malaysia [16],[14].

The data corpus includes key statutory instruments such as the *Child Act 2001* [Amendment 2016], the *Sexual Offences Against Children Act 2017*, and relevant provisions from Syariah Criminal Offences Enactments at the state level. These Syariah laws contain sections related explicitly to offences such as *khalwat*, *zina*, and

out-of-wedlock pregnancy, which are often applied to cases involving Muslim adolescents. For instance, under the *Syariah Criminal Offences [Selangor] Enactment 1995*, Sections 23 to 25 provide the legal basis for prosecuting moral and sexual misconduct among Muslims, including minors [17]. These laws are significant in understanding how religious norms intersect with legal frameworks in determining the treatment and rehabilitation of at-risk youth, particularly young women [12].

In addition, the research examined national-level policy documents, including the *National Social Policy*, the *National Child Protection Policy*, and the *National Adolescent Health Plan of Action 2015-2020* [18]. These documents reflect Malaysia's commitment to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* and reveal the structural intentions of the state to protect children from harm, neglect, and exploitation. However, the effectiveness of these policies often hinges on their implementation and public reception [15].

Furthermore, the analysis includes institutional data derived from annual reports issued by the *Department of Social Welfare (JKM)*, as well as selected reports and programme documentation from *Pusat Perlindungan Wanita Baitul Ehsan* in Selangor. According to official statements by the *Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS)*, the Baitul Ehsan centre has successfully provided structured rehabilitation to over 250 women and female adolescents between 2020 and 2023. These individuals were placed at the centre as part of alternative sentencing for Syariah offences, including *khalwat*, *zina*, and pregnancy out of wedlock [17]. The rehabilitation programmes at Baitul Ehsan integrate *Maqasid Syariah* principles by focusing on spiritual recovery (preservation of religion), emotional well-being (preservation of life and intellect), and skill-building initiatives (preservation of dignity and property) [9]. This model provides a restorative, non-punitive pathway for vulnerable youth while fulfilling both the spiritual and developmental dimensions of protection.

The data also includes publications by international organisations and civil society bodies, such as the *2021 UNICEF Situation Analysis of Children in Malaysia* and the *2022 SUHAKAM Child Rights Report*. These documents offer complementary insights into systemic weaknesses, public perceptions, and international expectations regarding youth protection mechanisms in Malaysia [14], [15].

All documents selected for this study were published within the last decade, with a particular emphasis on those from the previous five years (2019–2024) to ensure relevance and currency. A thematic content analysis was conducted, involving manual coding and categorisation of recurring issues into three major thematic domains: legal effectiveness, social and ethical influences, and systemic implementation gaps. This process enabled the triangulation of findings, bridging legal mandates, ethical imperatives, and institutional realities on the ground [16].

By integrating various sources, from formal legal texts to institutional practices such as those at Baitul Ehsan, this study presents a holistic overview of how youth

protection in Malaysia is both envisioned and experienced. The methodological choice thus strengthens the study's analytical rigour and highlights the significance of combining doctrinal analysis with grounded ethical and social perspectives.

6 Findings

This study revealed three major dimensions that influence the implementation and impact of youth protection policies in Malaysia: the legal framework, social and ethical considerations, and critical policy-practice gaps. Each of these dimensions is elaborated below.

6.1 Legal Perspective

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is a key international instrument that protects the rights of all children, including at-risk teenagers. It upholds their rights to survival, development, protection, and participation. Article 3 establishes the core principle of the CRC, the "best interests of the child", as the primary consideration in all matters concerning children. Article 18(1) places the primary responsibility for a child's upbringing on parents. However, when a child's best interests are at risk, the State is obligated to intervene and provide necessary protection and support. The CRC also requires the State to ensure that all institutions and services for children meet proper standards and are regularly monitored [3].

Malaysia's primary legal mechanism for protecting children and adolescents is the Child Act 2001, which was significantly amended in 2016 to enhance child welfare provisions. The Act establishes specialised mechanisms, including the Juvenile Court, the provision of care orders, supervision, and institutional placement, for children in need of protection or rehabilitation. It also emphasises restorative justice principles, providing alternatives to punitive measures for juvenile offenders. In parallel, Malaysia's ratification of the CRC reaffirms its commitment to international human rights standards concerning child protection.

Despite the strong legal foundation, implementation challenges persist. One major issue is the overlapping jurisdiction between civil and Syariah legal systems, which complicates coordinated responses for Muslim adolescents in cases involving family law, moral offences, or sexual misconduct. Furthermore, enforcement remains inconsistent due to a lack of specialised training among police officers, welfare caseworkers, and judicial personnel. Many stakeholders continue to lack a trauma-informed, child-sensitive approach when dealing with cases of abuse, neglect, or juvenile delinquency [14], [12].

In addition to the existing statutory provisions under the Child Act 2001 and the CRC, several Syariah-based legal mechanisms also offer alternative sentencing models that reflect restorative justice principles. Notably, institutions such as Pusat Perlindungan Wanita Baitul Ehsan in Selangor, administered under the Jabatan

Agama Islam Selangor (JAIS), provide structured rehabilitation for female Syariah offenders. These include young women involved in *khalwat*, *zina*, or those facing consequences of unwed pregnancies, who would otherwise be subjected to imprisonment or fines under the Syariah Criminal Offences (Selangor) Enactment 1995.

The placement of these offenders in protective shelters represents an alternative sentencing initiative that aims to balance punitive deterrence with rehabilitative care. Programs at Baitul Ehsan are designed in alignment with Maqasid Syariah, particularly 1) *Hifz al-Din* (preservation of religion) through spiritual reformation programs including daily religious classes and counselling, 2) *Hifz al-Nafs* (preservation of life) by providing safe shelter and basic health care, and 3) *Hifz al-'Ird* (preservation of dignity) by offering skills training, psychosocial support, and career reintegration planning to avoid repeat offences or social ostracisation.

According to publicly available records and stakeholder interviews, as of 2022, Baitul Ehsan has accommodated over 250 women since its establishment [17],[19]. Preliminary data suggest that most participants did not relapse into repeat Syariah offences within one year of discharge, pointing to its potential success in reducing recidivism and promoting moral recovery.

Such initiatives underscore the importance of integrating Syariah-based compassionate justice with statutory legal structures, providing courts and enforcement bodies with more context-sensitive sentencing alternatives for youth involved in morality-related offences. However, the lack of formal recognition of these centres within the judicial sentencing process limits their scalability and legal institutionalisation.

In addition to civil legislation, Syariah criminal laws enforced at the state level significantly shape the moral regulation of Muslim adolescents in Malaysia. For instance, the *Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997* and equivalent enactments in states such as Selangor and Kelantan include provisions that criminalise acts like *zina* (illicit sexual intercourse), *khalwat* (proximity), and *consumption of alcohol*. These provisions frequently intersect with the experiences of at-risk youth, particularly young women involved in cases of unwanted pregnancy, sexual misconduct, or social vulnerability. While these laws intend to uphold public morality and Islamic values, their implementation often lacks a restorative or rehabilitative lens.

In response to these challenges, some states have begun adopting alternative sentencing models for Syariah offences. A notable example is the establishment of *Pusat Perlindungan Wanita Baitul Ehsan* in Selangor, which functions as a rehabilitation centre for Muslim women offenders under Syariah law. This facility offers spiritual guidance, psychosocial support, and vocational training to female adolescents involved in offences such as *khalwat*, *zina*, or giving birth out of wedlock. Such initiatives represent a progressive shift towards protection-oriented

interventions, aligning with the objectives of *maqasid syariah* by safeguarding dignity (*hifz al-'ird*), religion (*hifz al-din*), and progeny (*hifz al-nasl*). However, the availability and standardisation of such alternatives vary across states, and there is still a lack of comprehensive policy integration at the national level.

Baitul Ehsan offers teenage girls the opportunity to complete their formal education by providing tuition classes and preparing them for national examinations, including PMR, SPM, and STPM [8]. The rehabilitation centre has reported positive outcomes; a survey indicated that 70% of the residents demonstrated self-improvement, presumably due to the centre's practical intervention approach. However, the admission of teenagers via Shariah Court orders remains uncommon. As a result, despite substantial resources made available by the Selangor Islamic Religious Council (MAIS), Baitul Ehsan remains underutilised, with approximately half of its capacity vacant. Furthermore, the maximum stay at the centre is limited to six months, raising concerns about the extent of knowledge and personal development the girls can attain within such a brief period [3].

6.2 Social Ethics Perspective

Social attitudes and prevailing cultural norms have a profound impact on the implementation of protective interventions. The study found that adolescents deemed 'problematic', particularly unwed teenage mothers, school dropouts, or juvenile offenders, are often judged harshly by both the public and service providers. This moralistic lens fosters exclusion, discourages help-seeking behaviours, and perpetuates the cycle of marginalisation [7].

In contrast, ethical frameworks grounded in empathy, dignity, and social responsibility are shown to enhance reintegration outcomes. Successful community-based initiatives such as school-based peer mentoring, family intervention programs, and faith-based counselling demonstrate that inclusive, non-stigmatising environments significantly improve psychosocial well-being and promote second chances.

Parental care and guidance also play a critical role in shaping adolescent well-being. Research shows that adolescents whose parents are actively involved and who provide consistent emotional and mental support, encouragement, and guidance tend to exhibit better mental health outcomes [3]. Positive family interactions, such as emotional support during stressful situations, are particularly beneficial in helping adolescents navigate challenges and reduce the likelihood of engaging in harmful or delinquent behaviour. Parents should always remain responsible and supportive of their underage children, regardless of the mistakes they may have made. Disowning children or denying them their rights due to past transgressions is counterproductive and may lead to feelings of rejection and isolation. This emotional estrangement increases adolescents' vulnerability to harmful influences and potentially criminal activities [3].

The roles of educators, local religious leaders, and NGOs are particularly crucial in shaping narratives of acceptance, rather than punishment.

6.3 Policy Gaps

While Malaysia has developed a range of child- and youth-related policies, this study identified a persistent gap between the ideals articulated in national frameworks and their actual execution at the ground level. Fragmentation among service providers remains a key barrier. Government ministries, state-level welfare offices, schools, NGOs, and community groups often operate in silos with minimal coordination. This leads to duplicated services, inefficient resource allocation, and inconsistent care standards.

Additionally, the absence of a unified National Strategy specifically addressing at-risk adolescents contributes to policy ambiguity. There is no dedicated mechanism to monitor outcomes, track vulnerable adolescents across institutional touchpoints, or integrate data between agencies. Most interventions are reactive, triggered only after a crisis has occurred, rather than preventive. There is also a lack of standard operating procedures (SOPs) that incorporate both legal mandates and ethical principles in decision-making processes.

These findings highlight the urgent need for a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder, and ethically informed approach to youth protection. Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires not only legal reform but also a transformation in institutional culture, community attitudes, and governance structures.

Table 1. Policy Dimensions, Challenges, And Recommendations

Dimensions	Current Challenges	Recommended Improvements
Legal Framework	Fragmented enforcement; outdated provisions	National Adolescent Protection Strategy; legal reform
Social Ethics	Moral stigma; lack of empathy-based programs	Community-based education; empathy-focused curriculum
Policy Implementation	Siloed agency operations; poor coordination; no SOPs	Inter-agency data integration; centralised monitoring system

Table 1 summarises the key dimensions identified in this study, the current challenges faced under each, and the proposed improvements. It reflects the multidimensional nature of youth protection, where legal, ethical, and operational elements must be addressed concurrently. By visualising these dimensions side-by-side, this table facilitates a clearer understanding of systemic gaps and offers a roadmap for integrated, evidence-based, and value-driven reforms.

Institutional Best Practices. While Malaysia continues to face structural challenges in implementing adolescent protection policies, several ASEAN countries have demonstrated promising models of institutional coordination and community-based responses that could inform future reforms.

Thailand, for example, has developed the *Child Protection Act B.E. 2546 (2003)*, which establishes a comprehensive child protection committee at both national and provincial levels. This multi-tiered governance structure ensures effective coordination between ministries, local authorities, and community-based networks. In addition, Thailand actively involves civil society actors, including Buddhist monks, teachers, and health workers, in identifying and referring at-risk youth for early intervention. The existence of a centralised *Child Protection Information System (CPIS)* enables real-time data sharing across agencies, significantly improving case monitoring and outcome tracking [20].

Similarly, Indonesia has implemented the *Child Protection Law No. 35 of 2014*, which mandates a decentralised, rights-based protection mechanism supported by local governments. The country has established *Integrated Service Centers for the Empowerment of Women and Children (P2TP2A)* at the district level, offering one-stop services for counselling, legal aid, and rehabilitation. The integration of faith-based NGOs and Islamic scholars in policy dialogues has helped tailor protection approaches in culturally sensitive ways while ensuring inclusivity for marginalised groups, such as children of poor migrant workers and victims of early marriage [21].

Some countries adopt child-focused welfare approaches that are not encumbered by religious or moralistic stigmas. As such, offering protection and support to adolescents, regardless of the circumstances that lead to their vulnerability, is not perceived as condoning misconduct. This clarity in approach enables more proactive, compassionate, and consistent service delivery for at-risk youth. [3].

In comparison, Malaysia's policy framework, while legally robust, lacks such institutional coherence and localised service delivery systems. The absence of real-time data integration among organisations such as the Department of Social Welfare, schools, religious institutions, and NGOs creates serious gaps in case management and continuity of care. Moreover, without a dedicated, inter-agency task force or regional coordination mechanism, efforts to reach at-risk youth remain fragmented and reactive.

Therefore, adopting a *hybrid model* inspired by Thailand and Indonesia could help address the fragmented nature of youth protection in Malaysia. This includes establishing provincial-level coordination units, strengthening community-based support networks, and creating an interoperable child protection information system. Such adaptations would not only enhance service delivery but also align Malaysia's child protection efforts with international good practices, ultimately fostering a more resilient and inclusive safety net for at-risk adolescents.

7 Conclusion

The current state of adolescent protection in Malaysia reveals a dual need: refining legal structures and internalising ethical responsibility within society. While this study has outlined the strengths and limitations of existing legal instruments and policy mechanisms, it also underscores the pressing need to reframe adolescent protection not merely as an institutional function but as a collective moral obligation that encompasses the family, community, and state.

Moving forward, greater emphasis must be placed on co-creating policies with relevant stakeholders, particularly by incorporating the voices and lived experiences of young people. This participatory approach is essential to ensure the relevance, inclusivity, and sustainability of future protection strategies. Collaborative governance involving both state and non-state actors, including educators, healthcare professionals, Syariah scholars, counsellors, and youth advocates, should form the backbone of adolescent protection efforts in Malaysia.

Policymakers are also encouraged to institutionalise mechanisms for periodic review and reform of legal provisions to remain responsive to emerging social realities such as online sexual exploitation, cyberbullying, adolescent mental health crises, and statelessness. Concurrently, grassroots initiatives must be supported to foster empathetic, values-based ecosystems that can provide support before legal intervention becomes necessary.

Successful community-based rehabilitation models such as *Baitul Ehsan Women's Shelter* in Selangor should be scaled up to provide restorative alternatives to incarceration for Syariah offenders, particularly young women involved in offences such as *khalwat*, *zina*, and unwed pregnancies. These models reflect a shift from punishment to protection and recovery, in line with the spirit of *maqasid syariah*.

Moreover, national efforts should be channelled into investing in adolescent mental health services, developing peer-led outreach and intervention programs, and integrating social ethics education into the national curriculum. Ethical literacy will empower adolescents not only to understand their rights and responsibilities but also to become proactive contributors to a more caring society.

Lastly, a well-crafted and targeted national communication strategy is required to deconstruct harmful societal narratives and reduce pervasive stigma toward at-risk youth. Changing public attitudes is essential for ensuring policy impact and sustainable reintegration. This can be achieved through education and awareness initiatives.

In conclusion, the way forward is to transform the protective environment for adolescents into one that is not only structurally sound but also compassionately engaged. Bridging legal mandates with moral sensibility will ensure that Malaysia's future generations are not only protected but also nurtured to thrive with dignity, resilience, and purpose.

8 Policy Recommendations

To ensure the meaningful protection of at-risk adolescents in Malaysia, the following recommendations are proposed based on the study's findings:

8.1 Establish a National Adolescent Protection Strategy (NAPS)

A comprehensive, adolescent-specific policy must be developed at the national level. NAPS should integrate legal protections, psychosocial support mechanisms, and ethical imperatives such as dignity, empathy, and inclusion. This strategy must align with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Maqasid Syariah.

8.2 Form a Multi-Agency Youth Protection Council

This council should include representatives from key ministries (Women, Education, Health, Home Affairs), state religious departments, NGOs, and community leaders. It should oversee inter-agency coordination, streamline services, monitor compliance, and standardise procedures.

8.3 Capacity Building and Sensitisation Training

Frontline personnel such as police officers, welfare caseworkers, school counselors, and religious officers must undergo trauma-informed and child-sensitive training. Training should include legal literacy, ethical engagement, and handling of cases involving vulnerable adolescent groups.

8.4 Community-Based and Culturally Sensitive Interventions

Promote school-based mentoring, youth clubs, and peer support networks. Religious institutions and civil society groups should be mobilised to deliver non-judgmental support rooted in shared cultural and spiritual values.

8.5 Integrate Social Ethics into Educational Curricula

Embed principles such as empathy, respect, care, and social responsibility into the school curriculum and teacher training modules. This will foster a culture of acceptance and reduce stigmatisation of vulnerable groups from an early age.

8.6 Legal Reform and Data Integration

Amend outdated legal provisions that do not account for current youth realities, particularly those affecting stateless adolescents and victims of online exploitation. A centralised, secure database should be established to track cases, coordinate responses, and ensure follow-up care.

8.7 Restorative Approach

The restorative approach encourages accountability by helping youth understand their mistakes and take steps to repair the harm they cause. Offering second chances and support systems allows them to make better choices and grow into responsible individuals.

8.8 Strengthening Parental Responsibilities

Imposing parental responsibilities is crucial to safeguarding the well-being of children and youth, as ensuring their best interests is a core objective of Islamic law (*Maqasid al-Shariah*). Parents must be made legally and socially accountable for the upbringing, protection, and development of their children. Existing initiatives, such as the Parenting Modules developed by LPPKN, should be expanded and enforced more widely across all communities in Malaysia. While changing ingrained attitudes takes time, continuous, culturally sensitive interventions can gradually shift behaviours. A holistic parental policy that legally upholds shared parental duties and prioritises the welfare (*maslahah*) of the child, even amidst parental conflict or divorce, offers a more effective and sustainable framework.

8.9 Establishing a Multi-disciplinary Research Centre

This research centre focuses on socio-legal issues affecting adolescents to generate comprehensive, evidence-based solutions that address their complex legal, social, and developmental needs. Together, these recommendations aim to transform the current fragmented system into a coherent, rights-based, and ethically grounded protection ecosystem that addresses both structural and moral dimensions of youth well-being. The alignment between these dimensions is crucial to ensuring that youth protection in Malaysia transcends mere compliance and moves towards compassionate, inclusive, and culturally sensitive implementation.

9 Limitations and Future Research

This study, while comprehensive in its review of legal and ethical perspectives, is subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study relies

primarily on document analysis and secondary data, without incorporating direct fieldwork, interviews, or surveys with affected adolescents or practitioners. As a result, the findings may not fully capture lived experiences or contextual challenges faced by stakeholders at the grassroots level.

Secondly, the research is qualitative, which limits the generalisability of its conclusions. While the thematic approach provides valuable insights into systemic challenges, it does not measure the prevalence or statistical correlation of issues across different regions or demographic groups.

Thirdly, the analysis is confined to national-level policies and selected legal statutes. State-level variations, particularly in the application of Syariah law, were not examined in depth. Future research should consider comparative studies between states in Malaysia, or between Malaysia and neighbouring ASEAN countries.

Future research could also adopt a mixed-methods design combining policy analysis with interviews, focus groups, and quantitative surveys. Longitudinal studies tracking the outcomes of at-risk adolescents engaged in protection programs would yield essential data on program efficacy and resilience-building.

Ultimately, addressing the evolving challenges of adolescent protection in Malaysia requires ongoing research, adaptive policymaking, and an openness to cross-disciplinary collaborations involving legal scholars, social workers, educators, and ethicists.

10 Implications for Policy Makers

This study presents key insights with direct applicability to policy design, institutional reform, and national development goals. The intersection between legal frameworks and social ethics provides a foundation for enhancing youth protection mechanisms in Malaysia. To this end, the following implications are critical for policymakers and institutional stakeholders:

10.1 Translating Findings into Policy Design

The study underscores the urgent need for a National Adolescent Protection Strategy (NAPS) that consolidates fragmented efforts across ministries, departments, and NGOs. This strategy should include: 1) Clear role demarcation among federal, state, and local actors, 2) integration of *maqasid syariah* principles (e.g. *hifz al-nafs*, *hifz al-'ird*) into child protection laws, especially in cases involving Syariah offenders, and 3) institutionalisation of accessible services through community-based rehabilitation programs like Baitul Ehsan as alternatives to incarceration under Syariah criminal law.

Further, the findings on stigma and exclusion call for a national stigma-reduction policy, supported by public education and awareness campaigns that promote dignity

and empathy for adolescents, especially unwed mothers, school dropouts, and undocumented youth.

10.2 Proposed Policy Impact Evaluation Framework

To assess the effectiveness of current and future youth protection policies, this study proposes a three-tier Policy Impact Evaluation Framework (PIEF):

Table 2. Policy Impact Evaluation Framework (PIEF)

Tier	Evaluation Focus	Indicators
Input	Legal & ethical alignment	Number of policies harmonised with Maqasid & CRC
Process	Institutional delivery & training	% of trained welfare officers; SOP implementation
Outcome	Adolescent well-being & protection rates	Recidivism rates; access to rehabilitation services

This framework enables government agencies to measure both technical compliance and human-centred outcomes, ensuring that policy impact is not only structural but also transformative.

10.3 Enhancing Applied Value to Government Stakeholders

The study’s findings and recommendations align with the objectives of multiple national blueprints including the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, Pelan Tindakan Kanak-Kanak Negara, and the National Social Policy. The proposed strategy enhances: 1) policy coherence across civil and Syariah institutions, 2) evidence-based planning via data-informed recommendations, and 3) cost-effectiveness by reducing overdependence on punitive institutions and promoting rehabilitative models.

Moreover, integrating ethical principles reinforces Malaysia’s aspiration to become a compassionate society (*rahmatan lil-‘alamin*) through inclusive and restorative policymaking.

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