



## Evaluating the Impact of Government Policies on Child Marriage Prevention in Rembang Regency

Najichah<sup>1\*</sup>, M. Khoirur Rofiq<sup>2</sup>, Faseeyah Khari<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>Pengajian Tinggi Islam Darul Maarif Pattani, Thailand

\*e-mail correspondence: [najichah@walisongo.ac.id](mailto:najichah@walisongo.ac.id)

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**Abstract:** This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of government policies in preventing child marriage in Rembang Regency, focusing on both preventive and repressive efforts. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing observations and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including the Office of Religious Affairs (*Kantor Urusan Agama, KUA*), the Social Affairs Office (*Dinas Sosial*), and the Religious Court (*Pengadilan Agama*). The findings reveal that government initiatives can be classified into two primary categories: preventive policies, such as the Child-Friendly Village (*Desa Ramah Anak*), the Child Protection Advocacy Team (*Tim Advokasi Perlindungan Anak, KPAD*), and PUSPAGA SAMARA (*Pusat Pembelajaran Keluarga dan Pengembangan Keluarga Sejahtera Samara*), and repressive measures, including the Family Report Book (*Buku Laporan Keluarga*) and GASPOL (*Gerakan Anti Perkawinan Anak*). Despite these efforts, the overall effectiveness remains suboptimal due to challenges such as the lack of synchronization between local regulations and national law, insufficient inter-agency collaboration, limited human resources and budget allocations, a literal interpretation of religious teachings, and entrenched patriarchal cultural norms. The study recommends aligning local regulations with Law No. 16 of 2019, enhancing coordination between relevant agencies, increasing human resource capacity, improving budget allocation, and adopting a culturally contextualized educational approach to tackle child marriage.

**Keywords:** Marriage dispensation; child marriage; government; Rembang Regency.

### Introduction

By its nature, marriage represents a fundamental stage in human life aimed at procreation, fostering affectionate families, ensuring mutual protection, and promoting peace (Al-Ghazali, 2002; Sonafist & Yuningsih, 2023). To achieve these goals, marriage must meet several essential criteria, including physical maturity, mental readiness, financial stability, and adequate knowledge about marital responsibilities (Setyawan et al., 2023). However, in practice, many marriages fail to meet these criteria, resulting in child marriage (Aprillianto et al., 2024; Basir et al., 2025; Nawawi et al., 2022; Shodiq et al., 2025; Subchi et al., 2021).

Child marriage presents a significant risk, as it is associated with numerous challenges within the family unit, including increased risks of pregnancy among minors, vulnerability to domestic conflict, potential domestic violence (KDRT), unpreparedness for parental responsibilities, economic instability, and even divorce (Candra, 2021). Indonesia ranks seventh globally and second in Southeast Asia for the highest rates of child marriage (Retnowulandari et al., 2024). In Central Java Province, the number of child marriages in 2019 was recorded at 3,865 cases, which dramatically increased to 12,972 cases in 2020 (Khoirin, 2021). This issue is also prevalent in Rembang Regency, a region within Central Java. Data from the Rembang Religious Court and the Rembang Social Affairs Office indicate a sharp rise in marriage dispensations from 2018 to 2021, with a noticeable decline from 2022 to 2024.

**Table 1. Marriage Dispensation Data in Rembang Regency (2018–2024)**

No	Year	Number of Cases
1.	2018	39
2.	2019	126
3.	2020	304
4.	2021	337
5.	2022	221
6.	2023	219
7.	2024	177

Source: Rembang Religious Court Data Archives (2018-2024)

Given the high number of marriage dispensations in Rembang Regency, it is crucial to implement intensive support and counseling, particularly for marriages involving dispensations. Efforts to reduce marriage dispensations require collective action from various stakeholders, including policymakers, academics, and social workers.

Following the Constitutional Court's ruling No. 22/PUU-XV/2017, which declared Article 7 of Law No. 1 of 1974 unconstitutional, the Indonesian legislature amended the minimum marriage age by issuing Law No. 16 of 2019. This law set the legal minimum age for marriage at 19 for both men and women. The primary aim of this legislative change is to reduce the incidence of child marriage and create healthier families (Chusnida & Anggriawan, 2022; Najichah, 2022).

To implement Law No. 16 of 2019 effectively, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission, during coordination meetings on the implementation of marriage dispensations, emphasized that preventing child marriage is a shared responsibility among stakeholders, including the central and local governments, the Ministry of Religious Affairs overseeing KUA (Religious Affairs Office), the Social Affairs Office, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, the Religious Court, and other relevant institutions (Suhardi, 2025; Yuni, 2021; Zuhriah & Sukadi, 2022). This research is essential to assess how the Rembang Regency Government has addressed this issue and evaluate the effectiveness of its policies.

Previous studies on child marriage prevention have examined various aspects, including the role of marriage dispensations by Rahmawati & Nuraeni (2021). For instance, research in West Java highlighted that dispensations are often seen as a last resort, giving legal recognition to child marriages and thus contributing to the high incidence of child marriages. Other studies have explored factors influencing child marriage, such as individual, parental, educational, and cultural aspects (Triningtyas & Muhayati, 2017). These studies emphasize the importance of premarital counseling and providing adolescents with information on sexuality, marriage age, and family issues.

Research conducted in Kudus Regency by Supriyadi & Suriyati (2022) demonstrated that local judges' legal culture is critical in preventing child marriages. Therefore, judges must exercise wisdom when making decisions, considering cultural beliefs, legal fairness, and advising petitioners to withdraw marriage dispensation requests. Meanwhile, Kurniawati (2021) and Lubis (2021) investigated the effectiveness of the 2019 Law's changes to the minimum marriage age. They concluded that the law had inadvertently increased the number of marriage dispensations, questioning its efficacy. In contrast, Novitasari (2021) argued that premarital education is crucial in reducing child marriages and strengthening family resilience among millennials in Yogyakarta.

Despite the wealth of existing literature addressing the legal and social aspects of child marriage, few studies have focused on a dualistic approach that examines both preventive and repressive government efforts to reduce marriage dispensations, particularly in Rembang Regency. Furthermore, the involvement of various local government sectors, such as the Office for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (DP3A), KUA, the Religious Court, and village officials in addressing marriage dispensations remains underexplored. This study aims to fill these gaps by evaluating the effectiveness of local policies through qualitative methods, incorporating both family law and positive law perspectives.

## Method

This research employs a qualitative field research design, utilizing a normative-empirical approach. The normative component involves the analysis of legal regulations and policies formulated by the government to mitigate the incidence of marriage dispensations. On the other hand, the empirical aspect examines the ongoing legal events and practices observed in the field (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The research subjects were selected based on the prevalence of child marriage, the high divorce rates, and the policies of key local authorities in Rembang Regency. Specifically, the study focuses on officials from the Rembang Regency Government, including the Social Affairs Office, the Office for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (DP3A), the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Rembang (particularly the Religious Affairs Offices at the sub-district level), and the Rembang Religious Court. These institutions play a significant role in addressing child marriage and divorce prevention efforts.

The primary data for this research were obtained through in-depth interviews and field observations (Dobinson & Johns, 2017). In-depth interviews were conducted with officials from the Rembang Social Affairs Office and the Religious Affairs Office of Sedan Sub-district. These interviews aimed to gather insights on the policies and actions taken by these agencies to prevent child marriage. In addition, field observations were carried out to assess the empirical implementation of child marriage prevention programs. These observations helped to observe the practical aspects of program execution and the challenges faced in the field.

Secondary data, including legal documents, books, and scholarly journals, were also incorporated to provide a broader context and enhance the validity of the findings (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The collected data were then processed and analyzed using a three-step approach: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Susanti & Efendi, 2022). This methodological triangulation ensures the research captures both theoretical and practical dimensions of child marriage prevention efforts in Rembang Regency.

## Results and Discussion

### Preventive Measures for Marriage Dispensation Applicants: Empowering Child-Friendly Villages

Preventive efforts are proactive measures taken to prevent child marriages before they occur (Anam, 2024; Latifiani, 2019; Takdir et al., 2024). The Rembang Regency Government has implemented several key initiatives to reduce child marriages, including the Child-Friendly Village (*Desa Ramah Anak* - DRA). It is a program derived from the Child-Friendly City (KRA), based on research on children's environmental reception by Kevin Lynch. This study found that the best environment for children is strong physical and social communities, clear and firm rules, and opportunities to learn various aspects of life. It also emphasized that children must be protected, safe, comfortable, and free from all forms of violence. As a result, UNESCO collaborated on developing the Child-Friendly City program (Sapsağlam & Eryılmaz, 2024).

The objective of the DRA is to create an environment that offers comprehensive facilities for children's growth and development. The program, which is part of a national initiative, has been implemented across various regencies in Indonesia, with Rembang Regency being one of the committed areas. DRA is mandatory for all villages in Rembang Regency, aiming to meet children's fundamental rights, provide protection, and recognize children as legal subjects, particularly in reducing child marriage rates and preventing violence against children (Mahmuddin et al., 2023; Tobing, 2018).

The program is emphasized in villages because they are the closest level of government to the community. Awareness of the importance of children's protection and fulfilling their rights must be understood and integrated into various community-based village programs. For example, youth organizations, creative economic training for children who cannot continue schooling, village libraries for knowledge access, and skill development programs are among the efforts (D. O. Kurniawati & Marom, 2020).

However, the practical implementation of the Child-Friendly Village program has not been optimal. Research by Dini Oktavia Kurniawati and Aufarul Marom on the implementation of the KLA program in Gunem Village, Pamotan District, Rembang Regency revealed that while the program's design is commendable, its implementation is hindered by issues such as limited human resources, lack of institutional coordination, and insufficient financial support and facilities, leading to less effective execution.

### ***Formation of Child Protection Groups***

The Child Protection Group (KPAD) is a community-based organization established in villages to protect children. KPAD's tasks include socialization, mediation, facilitation, documentation, and advocacy. Socialization aims to educate the community about children's rights and raise awareness of child protection (Mousavi et al., 2013; Salma et al., 2017; Turnip et al., 2022). Mediation involves resolving child-related issues through consensus (restorative justice), assisting children in legal cases, and communicating across governmental levels from village to district and regency to protect children.

Facilitation includes involving children in local decision-making processes, such as planning village development, to position children as full social subjects. Documentation focuses on recording all activities related to children's issues. Advocacy involves pushing for policies and budgeting for child protection, handling complaints, and collaborating with P2TP2A and the LPA for legal case assistance. Rembang Regency has successfully established 30 KPADs across its villages, as mandated by local regulations. These groups serve as a critical part of child protection initiatives at the grassroots level.

### ***PUSPAGA Samara Program***

The Family Learning Center (PUSPAGA) provides counseling and consultation services for families dealing with various child-related issues, including child marriage dispensation applications. PUSPAGA Samara's mission is to provide information, education, and guidance to help create healthy and prosperous families, empower communities, and serve as a referral point for pre-marriage counseling for young individuals (Thahir, 2024). This initiative is a collaboration between the Rembang Social Affairs Office (DINSOS) and the Rembang Religious Court, formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).



**Figure 1. PUSPAGA Samara Program at Rembang Regency**

Source: Documentary of the PUSPAGA Samara Program at Rembang Regency, 2024

The program requires applicants for marriage dispensation who have been rejected by the Religious Affairs Office (KUA) for not meeting the minimum age requirement to receive counseling and education through PUSPAGA Samara. The goal is to reduce or prevent the continuation of the marriage dispensation process by providing comprehensive education on child protection laws, marriage requirements, and the consequences of early marriage.

The PUSPAGA Samara program aims to provide educational content: Understanding Law No. 35 of 2014, jo. Law No. 23 of 2002 on Child Protection, Insights into Law No. 1 of 1974 on Marriage, Knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh Munakahat*), Concepts of a *sakinah, mawaddah, wa rahmah* family, Reproductive health education, Household financial management, and Gender relations and marriage equality.

Counseling is conducted by professionals from the health sector, psychologists, and family facilitators. Participation in these sessions is mandatory for both the applicants and their parents. After receiving the educational material, applicants are given seven days to reconsider their decision.

There are two possible outcomes of the counseling: If successful, the applicants may abandon their intention to pursue the marriage dispensation process, but if they remain resolute, they must submit a commitment letter outlining their responsibilities, such as: pledge to provide financial support, agreement to delay pregnancy (if applicable), commitment to avoiding domestic violence (KDRT), and acknowledgment of responsibility for all consequences arising from the marriage.

### **Repressive Measures for Marriage Dispensation Applicants**

Repressive efforts are necessary when preventive measures fail to adequately address the issue (Azizi et al., 2020). These efforts focus on individuals who have already entered into child marriages with dispensations, offering interventions to mitigate the negative consequences of early marriage. Repressive measures become especially crucial when data reveals that marriages involving child marriage dispensations often lead to emotional instability, psychological immaturity, economic pressures, and other unresolved issues that can culminate in marital breakdowns, usually resulting in divorce (Assagaf, 2023). Given this context, although the Rembang Regency Government has made significant strides in preventive actions, there remains a need for continued intervention to ensure that marriages involving dispensations do not lead to adverse outcomes such as divorce. The government of Rembang has committed to offering educational and counseling support to married couples who have undergone dispensations. Several programs have been initiated to assist these couples, helping them navigate the challenges of early marriage and increase their chances of marital success.

#### ***Family Report Card Program***

The Family Report Card Program is an ongoing support mechanism for couples who have entered marriage through dispensation. The lack of readiness—both psychologically and biologically—along with immature emotional management, economic instability, and limited educational opportunities, makes marriages under dispensation more prone to failure. Such marriages often face difficulties in fostering harmonious, lasting relationships and, in many cases, lead to divorce (Najichah, 2024).

To address these challenges, the Family Report Card program was designed to monitor the development of families formed through child marriages. This initiative aims to provide continuous education and counseling, helping these families navigate the complexities of their relationships and ultimately reduce the risk of divorce (Alfitri, 2020; Hasanudin et al., 2023; Lakoni et al., 2023). The goal is to support the creation of stable, peaceful, and prosperous families, in line with the principles of a harmonious, compassionate, and beneficial family life (*sakinah, mawaddah, warahmah*).

#### ***Gerakan Sekolah Pol Gaspol 12 Tahun (GASPOL) Program***

The Gaspol Program (*Gerakan Sekolah Pol Gaspol 12 Tahun*), which translates to "12-Year School Movement", targets children who have entered into marriage under dispensation, focusing on ensuring that they continue their education. Early marriages, especially those sanctioned through dispensations, often result in the discontinuation of education, primarily due to financial constraints or societal pressures that stigmatize married individuals pursuing further schooling (Anam, 2024; Anzari & Fitri, 2024; Iwan et al., 2024).

The Gaspol program aims to counter these barriers by encouraging and supporting child brides and grooms to complete their education up to the high school level. This initiative helps to ensure that they have the skills and qualifications necessary for future economic independence, thus reducing the likelihood of financial and psychological struggles that can contribute to marital discord and eventual divorce. The program builds resilience by enabling young married individuals to continue their education. It prepares them for a more stable future, fostering the conditions for more successful marriages in the long term.

These repressive interventions are crucial in Rembang Regency's broader strategy to address child marriage and its consequences. By combining educational support, emotional and psychological guidance, and long-term monitoring, these programs aim to provide a safety net for those who, despite preventive measures, find themselves in child marriages under dispensation. The goal is to prevent divorce and empower these young couples, ensuring that they can build healthy, stable, and thriving families.

### **Effectiveness of Government Policy Implementation in Reducing Marriage Dispensation Rates**

Hans Kelsen's theory suggests that the effectiveness of law relates directly to its validity, implying that legal norms or regulations are binding, and society must comply with these rules (Kelsen, 2017). In this context, the effectiveness of a law can be assessed by whether it achieves its intended objectives, such as establishing peace, ensuring justice, and promoting legal certainty within the society (Soekanto, 2008; Utsman, 2014).

Legal effectiveness is closely tied to public understanding and adherence to the law, which must serve the common good without causing harm to society (Subeitan et al., 2022). The legal theory of effectiveness

emphasizes the successful implementation and outcomes of legal measures, which can be analyzed by examining the characteristics and dimensions of the laws.

According to Soekanto (2008), a law is deemed effective when it meets five key criteria: It is systematic and comprehensive, it is harmonized in both horizontal and hierarchical dimensions, the regulations sufficiently address the fields they aim to govern, they comply with established legal prerequisites, and they achieve their intended objectives, such as providing justice and legal certainty.

As proposed by Kelsen (2017), the hierarchy of laws emphasizes the principle of higher laws influencing subordinate regulations. The 2019 Law on Marriage (Law No. 16/2019) is consistent with this legal hierarchy and has been enacted based on higher constitutional authority, including the 1945 Indonesian Constitution and Constitutional Court decisions (Holijah & Manaf, 2019; Maimunah et al., 2021; Wahyudi & Sutrisno, 2022). However, despite these advancements at the national level, local regulations, such as those in Rembang Regency, have yet to align with these updated standards fully.

The local regulation (Regional Regulation) No. 6/2014 on child protection still defines children as individuals under 18. This contradicts the amended Marriage Law, which sets the minimum marriage age at 19 years for both genders. This discrepancy underscores the need for local governments, particularly in Rembang Regency, to update their regulations to reflect national legal changes, thus ensuring a cohesive legal framework that promotes child marriage prevention.

### ***Law Enforcement Factors***

The obligation to reduce the number of marriage dispensations requires coordinated efforts from government institutions, civil society, and communities. In Rembang, the government has engaged various municipal, district, and village stakeholders, alongside private sector actors and community leaders, to combat child marriage (Interview with Abdul Basith, Rembang Social Services, July 2024). Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) like the Indonesian Family Planning Association (PKBI) play a crucial role by conducting outreach activities and providing education on child rights and the risks of early marriage.

Village-level initiatives have been particularly significant. For instance, Menoro Village in Sedan has implemented two necessary regulations: Village regulation (*Peraturan Desa*) No. 9/2018 on Child Protection and Village regulation No. 10/2018 on Preventing Child Marriage. These initiatives reflect a commitment to safeguarding children, but remain outdated in terms of the legal age for marriage, still referencing the previous legal standard of 16 years for girls. This demonstrates the necessity for village regulations to be revised in line with national legislative reforms.

Despite the alignment of the 2019 Marriage Law with national legal standards, there remains a lack of full adoption of this law at the regional level, highlighting a gap in policy integration. Therefore, the Rembang Regency government must immediately revise local ordinances to conform to the 19-year marriage age requirement set forth by national law.

### ***Enforcement Facilities and Resources***

Effective legal enforcement requires adequate facilities and resources. These include trained human resources, organizational structures, proper equipment, and sufficient funding. During observations in Rembang Regency, it was found that enforcement facilities, such as those in the Social Services Department, Religious Court, and Religious Affairs Office (KUA), were generally adequate. However, the lack of funding for public education and outreach on preventing marriage dispensations was a significant limitation, as highlighted by the Head of the KUA in Sedan (Interview, Subchan, Head of the KUA, June 2024). The available funds were mainly limited to operational expenses, without allocations for educational campaigns, which hindered broader public engagement on the issue.

### ***Community Engagement***

A critical aspect of effective legal enforcement is community understanding and compliance with the law. In Rembang, a region steeped in religious traditions, child marriage remains prevalent, partly due to misunderstandings of Islamic teachings and cultural norms. Many families continue to justify early marriage using the historical example of Prophet Muhammad's marriage to Aisha, which is often cited to support the

practice of marrying off underage girls. This misinterpretation of religious texts fuels the persistence of child marriage in rural areas.

Furthermore, the deep-rooted societal belief that women's roles are confined to domestic duties (e.g., "women belong only to the kitchen, bed, and well") and the stigma surrounding unmarried women who are perceived as "older" or "unmarried" (the notion of "better to be a widow than an old maid") perpetuate the desire to marry off young girls (Interview, Subchan, Head of the KUA, June 2024).

Addressing these cultural beliefs requires extensive socialization efforts to educate the public about the updated marriage law and its benefits for children's health and development. This will involve community leaders, religious figures, and educators working together to shift societal attitudes toward early marriage.

### ***Cultural Factors***

Cultural traditions also play a pivotal role in shaping marriage practices in Rembang. As Soekanto explains, cultural norms regulate societal behavior and influence legal practices. In Indonesia, including Rembang, traditional marriage practices often intersect with local customary laws, particularly in rural communities. The persistence of patriarchy and the societal emphasis on early marriage as a rite of passage continue to be influential forces in the region.

The local adage "better to be a widow than an old maid" reflects the deeply ingrained notion that unmarried women face social stigma, contributing to pressures on families to marry off young daughters before they reach the age of 19. In Rembang, this belief is coupled with the fear of social exclusion, further perpetuating child marriage practices.

The effectiveness of the government's policies in preventing child marriage in Rembang Regency faces significant challenges, particularly in aligning local regulations with national laws, the need for broader community education, and overcoming deeply rooted cultural norms. To enhance the effectiveness of these policies, a coordinated, multi-level approach involving legal reforms, educational outreach, and cultural change is essential. As such, the Rembang Regency government must urgently revise local regulations to align with the 2019 Marriage Law and ensure that comprehensive efforts are made to educate the public about the harms of child marriage, fostering a supportive environment for child protection at all levels of society.

### **Conclusion**

This study evaluates the effectiveness of government policies in preventing child marriage in Rembang Regency, focusing on legal, institutional, and societal factors that influence the prevention efforts. The findings indicate that while the Government of Indonesia has made significant strides through the Marriage Law No. 16 of 2019, increasing the legal age for marriage to 19, its implementation remains inconsistent across various local regulations in Rembang Regency. The hierarchical inconsistency in legal norms, such as the lack of revisions at the regional and village levels, has hindered the complete alignment of local policies with national laws, thus affecting their overall effectiveness in reducing child marriages.

Furthermore, the study highlights the crucial role of law enforcement agencies and community-based initiatives. While various government bodies, including the Social Service (*Dinas Sosial* P2PKPA), Religious Affairs (KUA), and the Religious Court, are involved in the prevention efforts, their impact is tempered by limitations in funding, human resources, and coordination, particularly the lack of collaboration with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Despite this, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community groups, such as KPAD, have provided valuable advocacy and educational programs that raise awareness of the dangers of child marriage. However, these initiatives must be scaled and coordinated with local government efforts to achieve a more substantial impact.

Cultural beliefs and traditional practices within Rembang Regency, such as the expectation for girls to marry early, remain deeply embedded in the community and continue to influence marital decisions. These cultural norms, combined with conservative interpretations of religious texts, contribute to the high rates of child marriage. Thus, alongside legal reforms and governmental strategies, effective public awareness campaigns are needed to challenge these practices and shift societal perceptions of child marriage.



This research underscores the importance of policy integration and the need for collaborative efforts across all levels of government, non-governmental organizations, and communities to ensure that the national marriage law is implemented in a way that prevents child marriage and protects the rights of children. Rembang Regency must revise its local policies and regulations, ensuring that they reflect the national legal framework and are correctly enforced to reduce child marriage rates in the region.

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