



THE COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE APPROACH TO PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING CHILD MARRIAGE IN BONDOWOSO REGENCY

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Abstract

The increase of the legal marriage age to 19 triggered a surge in marriage dispensations in Bondowoso Regency (1,045 rulings in 2020). However, a significant 41.89 % decline occurred in 2023 and 2024 after the implementation of a collaborative policy that required psychological and medical assessments. The effectiveness of this reduction in dispensations demonstrates the success of collaborative governance, but it also highlights the need to integrate traditional religious leaders and other local actors into an inclusive collaboration model to deconstruct cultural norms and reinforce holistic prevention of child marriage. This study is crucial for examining contextual collaboration through a Collaborative Governance approach in Bondowoso Regency to curb child marriage. It explores the collaborative roles of local government, religious leaders, and community figures in preventing and addressing child marriage. Grounded in qualitative phenomenology, the research focuses on two villages each from five subdistricts of Bondowoso (Maesan, Wringin, Sumberwringin, Tapen, and Curahdami). Data were collected through initial-mapping FGDs, in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, and then analyzed using an interactive model. The study's findings are as follows: 1) Implementation of the Marriage Dispensation Policy and Its Impact on Child Marriage Rates in Bondowoso Regency; 2) Persistence of Child Marriage Practices Following the Reduction in Dispensations in Bondowoso Regency; 3) A Collaborative Governance Model for the Prevention and Handling of Child Marriage; 4) Optimization of Best Practices in Child Marriage Prevention; and 5) Supporting Factors for the Persistence of Child Marriage in Bondowoso. Efforts to reduce child marriage in Bondowoso require the integration of formal policy, cultural approaches, and socio-economic empowerment. Inclusive multi-stakeholder collaboration is key to bridging the gap between regulation and social practice.

Keywords: *Child Marriage, Collaborative Governance, Management, Prevention,*

Abstrak

Peningkatan batas usia perkawinan menjadi 19 tahun memicu lonjakan dispensasi kawin di Kabupaten Bondowoso (1.045 putusan, 2020), Namun terjadi penurunan signifikan 41,89% (2023 dan 2024) setelah implementasi kebijakan kolaboratif yang mensyaratkan asesmen psikologis dan medis. Efektivitas penurunan dispensasi membuktikan keberhasilan collaborative governance, namun memerlukan integrasi pemuka agama tradisional dan aktor lokal dalam model kolaborasi inklusif guna mendekonstruksi norma budaya dan memperkuat pencegahan perkawinan anak secara holistik. Penelitian ini krusial untuk mengkaji kolaborasi kontekstual melalui pendekatan Collaborative Governance di Kabupaten Bondowoso guna menekan perkawinan anak, dengan mengeksplorasi peran kolaboratif pemerintah daerah, pemuka agama, dan tokoh masyarakat dalam pencegahan-penanganan perkawinan anak. Penelitian ini berbasis fenomenologi kualitatif ini mengambil lokus utama masing-masing dua desa dari lima kecamatan Bondowoso (Maesan, Wringin, Sumberwringin, Tapen, dan Curahdami), mengumpulkan data melalui FGD pemetaan awal, wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi, kemudian menganalisisnya dengan model interaktif. Berdasarkan penelitian yang telah dilakukan maka diperoleh hasil sebagai berikut; 1) Implementasi Kebijakan Dispensasi Perkawinan dan Dampaknya terhadap Angka Perkawinan Anak di Kabupaten Bondowoso; 2) Persistensi Praktik Perkawinan Anak Pasca-Penurunan Dispensasi di Kabupaten Bondowoso; 3) Model Collaborative Governance dalam Pencegahan dan Penanganan Perkawinan Anak; 4) Optimalisasi Praktik Baik Pencegahan Perkawinan Anak; dan 5) Faktor Pendukung Persistensi Perkawinan Anak di Bondowoso. Upaya penurunan perkawinan anak di Bondowoso memerlukan integrasi kebijakan formal, pendekatan budaya, dan pemberdayaan sosio-ekonomi. Kolaborasi multipihak yang inklusif menjadi kunci mengatasi kesenjangan antara regulasi dan praktik sosial.

Kata Kunci : *Collaborative Governance, Pencegahan, Penanganan, Perkawinan Anak*

A. Introduction

The Indonesian government raised the minimum legal age for women's marriage to 19 through Law No. 16/2019, following an extensive judicial review. This policy change precipitated a substantial impact in Bondowoso Regency, as evidenced by a surge in marriage dispensation requests at the Bondowoso Religious Court—from 267 rulings in 2019 to 1.045 rulings in 2020 (Bondowoso Religious Court data). This phenomenon reflects persistent social resistance to the new regulation.

Although dispensation requests modestly declined to 786 rulings in 2021 and 716 in 2022, the figures remained high, signaling the need for systematic intervention. In 2023, the Bondowoso Regency government responded by

establishing a strategic partnership with the Religious Court, rigorously enforcing Supreme Court Regulation (PERMA) No. 5/2019 on marriage dispensation procedures. Under this policy, applications must be accompanied by psychological assessments and health examinations before recommendation letters can be issued by Dinas Sosial, Pemberdayaan Perempuan, Perlindungan Anak dan Keluarga Berencana (Dinsos P3AKB) Bondowoso and Dinas Kesehatan Bondowoso (Interview with Dinsos P3AKB Bondowoso).

As a result, dispensation approvals dropped sharply by 41.9 percent to 416 rulings in 2023, and further declined to 219 filings in 2024 (Bondowoso Religious Court data). This synergy was reinforced by a circular from the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Bondowoso, which prohibited religious counselors from conducting unregistered (sirri) marriages.

Multistakeholder support emerged through the “Power to You(th)” programme and a declaration to halt child marriage in four programme-assisted villages, involving village governments and religious leaders. Nevertheless, the practice of sirri marriage among minors persists as a form of cultural resistance. Its root cause lies in distortions of local tradition: the customary bhekalan (betrothal) ceremony is often converted into an unregistered nikah sirri by non-formal religious figures, driven by concerns over “zina” (fornication) or the practice of adhus-sok (cohabitation before formal marriage). Communities regard sirri nikah as religiously valid despite its illegality under state law.

The systemic consequences of sirri marriage are severe: wives lose legal protection, children face obstacles in obtaining birth certificates, and women experience heightened economic vulnerability. Although the Bondowoso Religious Court has closed legal loopholes by rejecting isbat (post-facto legalization) requests for underage marriages, sirri unions remain difficult to detect. To date, collaborative efforts have not adequately engaged traditional religious leaders, who are pivotal actors in perpetuating sirri marriages; their influence remains dominant within Bondowoso’s social structure. Surveys indicate that some couples applying for dispensation admit to having already undergone a sirri marriage during the bhekalan process.

A collaborative governance approach must therefore incorporate local religious authorities and community networks to transform prevailing perceptions. The observed reduction in dispensation approvals demonstrates the efficacy of institutional collaboration under Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model of collaborative governance, which is more inclusive and integrates government bodies, formal and non-formal religious institutions, and customary leaders within a single, locally grounded intervention framework.

This study is critical for comprehensively examining context-specific collaborative strategies, focusing on how the Collaborative Governance approach in Bondowoso Regency has influenced the reduction of child marriage rates. It will assess the roles and impacts of collaboration among local government,

religious leaders, and community figures in the prevention and handling of child marriages in Bondowoso Regency.

B. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative, phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of stakeholders' lived experiences. It is conducted in five sub-districts of Bondowoso Regency Maesan and Wringin (the Power to You(th) assisted areas), as well as Sumberwringin, Tapen, and Curahdami (areas with high rates of child marriage) with two villages selected per sub-district. Data collection took place over one semester (six months), from July to December 2024.

Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews with key informants, direct observation, and document review. The fieldwork began with a focus group discussion (FGD) involving policymakers, religious and community leaders, and youth forum representatives to establish an initial mapping of local dynamics. All collected data were analyzed using the interactive Miles–Huberman–Saldana model, encompassing three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Research Findings

Following data collection via FGDs, in-depth interviews, observations, and document review, the study yielded the following key findings:

a. Formal Collaboration Succeeds in Reducing Dispensations but Unregistered (Sirri) Marriages Persist

A structured collaboration among the Regency Government, the Religious Court, and technical agencies (Dinsos P3AKB, Dinas Kesehatan, dan Dinas Pendidikan) achieved a 41.89% reduction in marriage dispensation approvals in 2023. This success was driven by integrated policy enforcement namely PERMA No. 5/2019 and Regency Regulation No. 153/2021 which mandate psychological and health recommendations as prerequisites for dispensation.

The collaborative process began with a multi-stakeholder FGD to draft an MoU and cooperation agreement, involving the Religious Court, Ministry of Religious Affairs, formal religious leaders, and community figures. Nonetheless, child sirri marriages continued to occur in 25 percent of cases (psychological assessment data), underscoring that formal collaboration has yet to penetrate the socio-cultural contexts where sirri practices endure.

The root of the problem lies in the non-involvement of non-formal religious leaders (mudin/village ustadz) in this policy. This cultural actor is the main actor in the sirri contract in the bhekalan tradition (an engagement turning into a sirri marriage), with religious justification to anticipate

"adultery" and adhussok (a couple's habit of staying overnight). The implication is that formal collaboration fails to reach the socio-cultural space where sirri practices persist.

b. Divergent Religious Interpretations and Suboptimal Village-Level Enforcement Hamper Collaboration

Two structural barriers undermine collaborative governance. First, a polarization among religious authorities conservative clerics justify sirri marriage as a moral safeguard (against zina or premarital pregnancy), while progressive leaders reject it on child-protection grounds has prevented a unified religious decree and led to inconsistent faith-based education.

Second, weak enforcement at the village level allows clandestine sirri unions to evade detection by local officials. Village communities often remain unaware of Law No. 12/2022 on Sexual Violence, which classifies child marriage as a form of sexual violence. To strengthen sub-district and village involvement, to optimize the involvement of the village/sub-district government with the sub-district, one of the administrative requirements is to use a certificate from the village/sub-district head and from the sub-district.

c. "Collaboration Triangle" Model at Village Level with Local Champions Proven Effective

Villages that being pilot project of Power to You(th) program (participating in program interventions) demonstrated the efficacy of a "governance-village collaboration triangle," comprising: (1) village government as regulator and facilitator (socialization through religious events such as Maulid Nabi); (2) progressive religious figures as value-reinterpretation agents (the Office of Religious Affairs and pro-reform clerics banning sirri ceremonies); and (3) local communities (Forum Anak Desa/Tim Penggerak PKK Desa) as "pelopor dan pelapor" (school-based campaigns targeting at-risk youth). This synergy led to concrete outcomes, including public declarations to defer marriage until the ideal age and a marked decline in child marriages achievements credited to the FAD and Dinsos P3AKB partnership. Key success factors include (a) empowering local change agents, (b) incentives for innovative villages, and (c) integrating legal and cultural approaches. The Power to You(th) programme in Maesan and Wringin, which engaged local champions, exemplifies the model's sustainability.

d. Cultural and Religious Barriers to Policy Implementation

Field data confirm that varying religious interpretations and village cultural norms significantly obstruct child-marriage prevention policies. Many village-level clerics endorse sirri marriage as a remedy against zina and to preserve family honor, citing the religious validity of an unregistered contract (as outlined by Dr. Imam Nakhei during FGDs). Conversely,

progressive religious leaders highlight the absence of age restrictions in religious texts and emphasize child protection, resulting in inconsistent faith-based messaging.

Some villages, the traditional proposal ceremony (khitbah) abruptly transitions into a sirri nikah without any preparatory education for minor brides and grooms, leaving them unaware of the psychological, health, and social consequences. These findings indicate that without an inclusive religious outreach strategy—equipping mudins and non-formal clergy—the socio-cultural arenas where sirri unions flourish will remain beyond the reach of formal policy.

e. Economic Pressures and “Married by Accident” (MBA) as Drivers of Child Marriage

Health Office data as of September 2024 reveal that 37 percent of prospective brides receiving prenatal care were classified as “Married by Accident” (MBA) girls compelled to wed due to premarital pregnancy. FGDs with religious and community leaders highlighted how economic hardship exacerbates this trend: low-income families view sirri marriage as a means to relieve financial burden and provide “security” for their daughters. In practice, MBA cases prompt subsequent dispensation applications following sirri ceremonies, and families’ economic motivations drive underage marriages for perceived financial stability.

This phenomenon not only infringes on children’s rights to education and a safe upbringing but also heightens risks of school dropout, stunting, and early divorce. These findings underscore the necessity of integrating economic interventions such as comprehensive poverty alleviation and family-empowerment programmes into child-marriage prevention strategies.

2. Discussion

a. Implementation of Marriage Dispensation Policy and Its Impact on Child Marriage Rates in Bondowoso Regency

The implementation of the marriage dispensation policy in Bondowoso Regency has adhered strictly to formal procedures. The tightening of regulations following the amendment to Law No. 16/2019, which raised the minimum marriage age, succeeded in significantly reducing dispensation applications. This decrease reflects government efforts to strengthen child protection through regulatory means. However, the decline in formal dispensations has not translated into a substantive reduction in overall child marriages. Rural cultural norms continue to drive unregistered unions, which evade official records. Stakeholders emphasize the role of village marriage officiants (mudin), whose capacity to handle unregistered marriages is limited. Dispensation applications typically originate from couples under duress parental coercion, premarital

pregnancy, or long-term relationships whereas couples without such pressures opt to wait until they reach the legal age.

Efforts to curb child marriage are supported by the Marriage Guidance (Bimwin) programme conducted by the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA), which aims to enhance prospective spouses' understanding of lawful and healthy marriages. Through collaboration, dispensation approvals fell by 41.89% in 2023. Theoretically, this approach aligns with Structural-Functionalist Theory (Macionis, 2013), wherein the state maintains social order through regulation. Preventive initiatives school-based education, strengthening Child-Friendly Schools, cross-agency collaboration, and youth-forum participation reflect Sen's (1999) Development Theory, which emphasizes improving children's quality of life.

Nevertheless, child marriage persists because local cultural norms frequently override formal law (Cultural Relativism Theory, Ferraro & Andreatta, 2012). Structural Social Theory further explains community resistance when policies conflict with entrenched social norms. From a child-rights perspective, unregistered marriages risk depriving children of education, reproductive-health care, and protection from violence. Field data show that 25 percent of dispensation applicants had already entered an unregistered marriage, violating the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Consequently, a collaborative approach involving religious and community leaders (Ansell & Gash, 2008) is essential to reshape cultural perceptions and bolster regulatory acceptance.

b. Persistence of Child Marriage Practices Despite Reduced Dispensations

The drop in dispensation approvals has not substantively curtailed child marriage practices. Rural communities still perceive unregistered marriages as a means to circumvent bureaucratic hurdles. Community leaders identify social norms and economic pressures as primary drivers. Religious authorities are divided: conservatives justify sirri marriages to preserve "family honor," while progressives oppose them on child-protection grounds. Cultural

Relativism Theory elucidates why local norms often supersede state law, and Structural-Functionalist Theory interprets child marriage as a defense mechanism preserving traditional social order. However, such practices violate children's rights to education and protection (UNICEF, 2001). Feminist Theory (Hooks, 1984) highlights how patriarchal systems limit girls' socio-economic participation, and Developmental Psychology Theory (Piaget, 1972) warns of minors' mental and physical unpreparedness for marriage, which can lead to stunting and reproductive-health issues.

These findings underscore the need to intensify holistic, collaborative-governance interventions particularly engaging religious leaders to shift

public perceptions and educate communities about the risks of child marriage.

c. The Collaborative Governance Model for Preventing and Addressing Child Marriage

Collaborative Governance Theory (Ansell & Gash, 2008) emphasizes multi-stakeholder collaboration government, religious authorities, civil society to address complex issues such as child marriage. In Bondowoso, this model remains nascent. While the government has enhanced cross-sectoral synergy, the roles of religious and community leaders are not yet optimized. The approach should prioritize:

1. Formal participation mechanisms for religious and community leaders in outreach activities;
2. Progressive reinterpretation of religious teachings;
3. Integration of socio-economic factors (e.g., empowering low-income families);
4. Programme transparency and accountability through regular monitoring.

Effective collaboration must respect cultural relativism and build community trust, especially in areas resistant to formal policies. Local governments should craft policies and educational services, while religious and community figures serve as bridges to the grassroots, emphasizing religious arguments for marriage postponement. TP PKK shows significant potential in providing guidance, though implementation varies by village (e.g., Jetis Village PKK focuses on risk education, whereas Summersalak Village PKK fosters supportive environments for adolescents).

Multisector collaboration in Bondowoso has been strengthened by strategic programmes and partnerships. First, the Power to You(th) programme implemented with YGSI, Tanoker, and PC Fatayat NU Bondowoso has established a participatory youth-mentoring network through workshops and community activities, empowering adolescents as change agents against child marriage. Second, the Regional Action Plan (RAD) for Child Marriage Prevention developed with the East Java Child Protection Agency (LPA) and LPKIP ensures local policies are grounded in evidence-based best practices. Third, youth forums collaborating with Dinsos P3AKB conduct arts-based outreach (theatre, music, street performances) to effectively communicate risks and rights. Fourth, the establishment of 155 “Pusat Pembelajaran Keluarga (Puspaga)” based in pesantrens and communities has expanded access to family counselling and parenting education in remote villages. Finally, drafting a regional by-law on child marriage prevention with direct youth involvement not only amplifies children’s voices but also legitimizes regulations through their participation. Collectively, these initiatives embody the principles of

Collaborative Governance coordination, capacity building of local actors, and open communication to achieve sustainable social change.

d. Optimizing Best Practices in Child Marriage Prevention

Proven best practices should be scaled and expanded. First, family and school education programmes grounded in Social Learning Theory must be enhanced by involving teachers, parents, and youth forums in interactive curricula. Second, economic empowerment initiatives such as “Sekoper PKH” should be extended to additional villages to reduce families’ reliance on child marriage as a poverty-alleviation strategy. Third, the success of community mentoring under the Power to You(th) pilot resulting in youth declarations against child marriage can be replicated in other villages as a community-based model. Fourth, local regulations (Peraturan Desa-Perdes) on child protection and the Women-and-Child-Friendly Village (Desa Ramah Perempuan Peduli Anak-DRPPA) initiatives must be accelerated so that every village enacts legal frameworks safeguarding children’s rights. Fifth, academic collaborations with 12 local universities should be leveraged to evaluate and refine field interventions. To ensure sustainability, programme evaluation and monitoring aligned with Sustainable Development Theory (Sen, 1999) must be conducted regularly, programme scope expanded, and reproductive-health education integrated into schools based on Critical Pedagogy Theory (Freire, 1970).

e. Supporting Factors for the Persistence of Child Marriage in Bondowoso

Child marriage endures due to interrelated factors. First, socio-cultural pressures concerning “family honor” and the stigma of “late maidenhood” reinforce norms that girls should marry early (Cultural Relativism Theory). Second, economic hardship compels families 37% of brides at prenatal check-ups were pregnant before marriage to view marriage as financial security. Third, limited legal awareness means many families remain uninformed of children’s rights and the legal ramifications of underage marriage. Fourth, fourthly, it is difficult to collect data on child marriages by child’s age. Fifth, social-network influences lead families to conform to prevailing community practices (Social Network Theory, Bourdieu, 1986).

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic solution: intensive children’s-rights education, strengthened economic support for families, progressive law enforcement, and engagement of religious leaders to deconstruct norms justifying child marriage. Reducing child marriage in Bondowoso demands an integration of formal policies, cultural approaches, and socio-economic empowerment. Inclusive, multi-stakeholder collaboration is key to bridging the gap between regulation and social practice.

D. Conclusion

This study examined the application of a collaborative governance approach in the prevention and handling of child marriage practices. The synergy and partnerships established among the local government, vertical agencies, community organizations, youth groups, the private sector, media outlets, and academic institutions (via universities) have underpinned the optimization of intervention programmes in Bondowoso Regency. The observed reduction in marriage dispensation approvals, together with the documented performance outcomes in preventing and addressing child marriage, indicate that government and society have acted in a truly synergistic and collaborative manner. This collective commitment has strengthened efforts to prevent child marriage and thus contributes to realizing a high-quality “golden generation” in Bondowoso Regency.

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