The phenomena of child marriage—marriage under the age of 18—have become international concerns in recent years. Ending of child marriage is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), that is target 5.3, to be achieved by 2030 in which Indonesia has adopted and committed. The cases of child marriage in Indonesia occur in girls and are relatively high but vary between provinces. Nationally, according to the 2013 Basic Health Research (Riskesdas), 26% of women under 18 years were married (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia 2013:203). In 2015, the prevalence of child marriage was 23% among women aged 20-24 years old who were or had been married (Badan Pusat Statistik 2017). There were 20 provinces with higher prevalence than the national’s. The provinces with the highest prevalence were West Sulawesi (34.22%), South Kalimantan (33.68%), Central Kalimantan (33.56%), West Kalimantan (32.21%), and Central Sulawesi (31.91%) (Badan Pusat Statistik 2017). Child marriage has harmful impacts such as add to poverty, school dropout, divorce at a young age, higher risk to maternal and infant mortality, stress out doing a new role as a husband/wife and parent, and domestic violence (Djamilah et al. 2016). Given those facts, efforts to prevent child marriage continue to be endeavoured by various international agencies, government, and non-government organizations in Indonesia.

The advocacy to end child marriage in Indonesia faces uphill struggles. The practice of child marriage is rooted in a wider structural problem such as poverty and gender inequality interlocking with society’s views on marriage, sexuality, and morality according to religions and traditions. In regard to this, the practice of child marriage must be understood within the various and competing fields such as Islamic norms on marriage, moralities surrounding premarital sex, society’s views on gender as well as children and parenting roles that are not all in favor of girls. The views on child marriage, how child marriage is practised, its regulations and enforcement are diverse.
and often contradictory between actors and institutions, however, it is girls who suffer the most from the practice of child marriage. Therefore, efforts to end child marriage should go hand in hand with the transformation towards a gender just society. This excerpt discusses the practice of child marriage, its politics, negotiations, and struggles to end child marriage based on studies done by the Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP), Universitas Indonesia, in the period of 2014-2018.

The practices of child marriage

Why do girls marry under the age of 18? A survey in Sukabumi and West Lombok among youth aged 15-24 (N=1157) found that 15.4% of female respondents were married before the age of 18 in which 12.2% were married before 16 years. Of the total of all married female respondents, 89.1% of respondents said that marriage was the choice they made themselves (Hidayana et al. 2016). Therefore, it is the girls’ decision to get married, yet it is important to understand the reasons behind this decision.

The prominent reason stated by the respondents (48%) is to avoid zina (premarital sex) and premarital pregnancy that are strictly prohibited in Islam. The burden to avoid premarital sex and pregnancy is more on girls than boys. Premarital sex and pregnancy are taboo and a disgrace not only to the girl but also to her whole family. In West Lombok, a girl who is seen dating with a boy outside her home is called cabe-cabeian or an ‘easy girl’ or ‘bad girl’ (Benedicta et al. 2017). It is undesirable to date for a long time. After dating for a while, a teenage girl possibly will be kidnapped by her boyfriend or merariq—a Sasak’s custom of eloping before marriage. Cases of girls willing to take part in merariq and getting married at a young age are common in West Lombok. Informants in our study said that teenage couples were in love and wanted to make their relationship permissible (halal). All the more, for girls who already had premarital pregnancy, marriage was required to make up the family’s disgrace (Pakasi et al. 2018). In this case, accepting marriage is a resort to avoiding shame and saving the family’s honor.

Another reason to marry is fears of losing their boyfriend who might be their soul mate (jodoh) and becoming an old spinster. The beliefs that everyone has a jodoh and rejecting one’s jodoh can result
in difficulties in finding jodoh in the future underpin girls’ decision to get married. The fear of becoming an old spinster (perawan tua) is found among girls and parents in Sukabumi, Rembang, and West Lombok. Being a spinster is a shame and is mocked by neighbors, therefore, they would prefer to marry at a young age rather than become a spinster (Hidayana et al. 2016).

The circumstances of why girls opt to marry were unfortunate. Child marriage occurred to ease the family’s financial burden as stated by 42% respondents aged 15-24 of the survey in Sukabumi and West Lombok (Hidayana et al. 2016). In addition, the limited options for girls for their future, making marriage and having a family an attractive option, especially when there is a man proposing. All in all, the practices of child marriage are encouraged and sustained by notions of sexual morality, decent girls, and marriageability that put girls in a problematic position as the object of family’s shame, blame, virtue, and honor.

Politics and negotiation of child marriage

According to Indonesian Marriage Law No. 1/1974, the age for marriage is 16 for women and 19 for men. Given that context, a girl who marries at the age of 17 or younger is legal in Indonesia. The law also states in article 6 paragraph 2, if married before the age of 21 years one must get permission from both parents. From what we found in West Lombok, parents support child marriage with the reason to avoid zina and they apply for a marriage dispensation from the religious court. It is not hard to get the marriage dispensation. The judges usually asked the groom about his capacity to be a breadwinner and the dispensation will be given if the groom has proof of income (Benedicta et al. 2017). Elsewhere, an NGO worker told us that some judges at the religious court would issue a marriage dispensation if the parents give him/her Rp500.000,00. In Sukabumi, an official from the office of religious affairs (KUA) said that as long as parents obtain the marriage dispensation and other administrative requirements, KUA will marry off the girl since even though it is unwanted, it is allowed by the law (Pakasi et al. 2018).

To avoid the hassle of the marriage dispensation process, parents falsified the age of the bride to meet KUA requirements as found in Sukabumi (Benedicta et al. 2017). Another popular course is to
have a *siri* marriage—religious marriage according to Islam, that is not to be registered at KUA. Religious figures often facilitate this type of marriage since marriage is seen as an observance in Islam (Benedicta et al. 2017; Pakasi et al. 2018). Moreover, in Rembang religious figures serve as matchmakers (*dandan*) for young girls (Benedicta et al. 2017). Young girls in boarding schools are the targets of matchmaking practices by *dandan* and parents. In realities, the practice of child marriage negotiates the law as it is occurred in dealing with various concerns such as sexual morality according to Islamic norms, family’s economic pressures, and girls’ marriageability. Underlying these concerns are gender norms that are unjust towards girls.

*Struggles to end child marriage*

The advocacy of the elimination of child marriage has been done at the village, district to the national level by various organizations and alliances throughout the country. At the national level, advocacy is done by international donors, NGOs, the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, and the Coordinating Minister of Human Development and Culture has pushed Jokowi to issue a government regulation in lieu of law (Perppu). Jokowi vowed to issue a decree to prohibit child marriage in April 2018 (Harsono 2018). However, until the end of 2018, the promised has not been fulfilled.

Why is issuing a policy against child marriage intricate in Indonesia? An attempt to have a judicial review for the minimum age of marriage in the Marriage Law No. 1/1974 failed in 2017. The justice refused the judicial review with a reason to prevent young people to be promiscuous (Mazrieva 2018). Marrying off a child is still seen as a solution to deal with the ‘danger’ of premarital sex. Just recently in December 2018, the Constitutional Court orders a revision of minimum age for women to marry.

While the court order may have paved the way to buttress efforts to end child marriage, issuing a Perppu is still a long and bumpy road. An official from the ministry of law and human rights said that perppu can only be issued in an emergency (*darurat*/*genting*) situation faced by the whole country, whereas many still perceive that raising the age of marriage to prevent child marriage is not an emergency situation. In 2019, supporting end child marriage is not
strategic considering it will be a year of politics. A national policy to raise the age of marriage possibly can generate controversies about sexual morality that will be against by conservative groups.

At the provincial and district level, there are some initiatives to end child marriage. In West Nusa Tenggara, there is GAMAK—an anti-child marriage movement initiated by the governor supported by district government offices and non-government organizations. Some villages have *awig-awig*, a village regulation to prevent child marriage, and they have succeeded in reducing cases. It was not merely because of *awig-awig* cases of child marriage can be reduced. Villagers can marry off their children outside the village to avoid *awig-awig* and village officials. The efforts to end child marriage included empowering youth, especially girls about their rights to education and sexual and reproductive health, opening up dialogues between parents, men, and religious figures about children, parenting roles, and that boys and girls have the same right to education and aspirations for the future, providing free open schools and learning packages for the dropouts, and initiating incubator businesses for the youth to have alternatives outside getting married. In some villages in Sukabumi, Rembang, and West Lombok, women tended to be more supportive than men to the idea that marriage is not a solution for teenagers to avoid *zina*. The district women empowerment and child protection office, health office, and family planning office actively facilitated the interventions to end child marriage while the office of religious affairs seemed to be reluctant (Pakasi et al. 2018). The conflicting norms about sexual morality, gender, and marriageability make efforts to end child marriage full of twists and turns. In this regard, changes in society’s norms to be just for the girls are the hardest struggle in ending child marriage.

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