

THE ROLE OF CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS IN PREVENTING CHILD MARRIAGE: UNDERSTANDING SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

Child marriage is a social issue involving norms, families, institutions, and local actors. This study aims to analyze the role of the customary institution in preventing child marriage in Lambara Village, Sigi Regency, and to understand how responsibility for prevention is understood among the customary institution and other local actors. Using an interpretive qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews with five key informants—a customary leader, a religious leader, a community leader, a village official, and a hamlet head—in November 2025 and analyzed thematically. The findings show that the customary institution contributes to prevention by communicating customary rules, providing advice, and imposing sanctions. However, these practices do not establish that a systematic, coordinated monitoring mechanism is already in place. Informants emphasize different aspects of prevention, including religious guidance, parental supervision, support from the Village Government and Community Protection Unit (Linmas), and formal instruments such as a Village Regulation. The findings suggest that shared responsibility requires more than a division of roles; it depends on coordination among local actors and the alignment of customary rules, authority, monitoring, and action. Thus, the role of the customary institution is both normative and relational, as its preventive efforts are shaped by its relationships with other local actors and sources of authority.

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INTRODUCTION

Child marriage remains a concern in efforts to protect children and promote social development in Indonesia. Although the practice has shown a declining trend, it has not yet been fully eliminated. Data from Statistics Indonesia indicate that in 2025, the proportion of women aged 20–24 who had ever been married or lived with a partner before the age of 18 was 4.56 percent. The figure also varied by place of residence, reaching 8.11 percent in rural areas and 2.48 percent in urban areas (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2026). This condition indicates that child marriage remains an issue that needs to be understood within the social and institutional contexts in which the practice occurs.

The issue of child marriage cannot be explained solely by the presence or absence of regulations concerning the legal minimum age of marriage. Research in Indonesia has shown that decisions concerning child marriage are associated with various structural, social, economic, and cultural factors. Rumble et al. (2018), for example, demonstrate that child marriage practices in Indonesia are influenced by socioeconomic characteristics as well as cultural norms, gender relations, and customary practices that vary across regions. Thus, formal policies concerning the minimum age of marriage operate within social environments characterized by values, expectations, and practices that may influence the decisions of families and children.

This social dimension becomes increasingly important because child marriage is not necessarily understood in the same way by all members of a community. A study by Wibowo et al. (2021) in Indonesia demonstrates differences in perceptions of child marriage between adolescents and adults. These findings indicate that understandings of child marriage are shaped not only by knowledge of formal regulations but also by social norms, family perceptions, and local cultural contexts. Therefore, prevention efforts need to consider how child marriage is understood by the various groups within the social environment of children and their families.

From a broader perspective, child marriage is also an issue shaped by factors operating at multiple levels. Kok et al. (2023), through research conducted in Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia, demonstrate that child

marriage is associated with interactions among individual, social, material, and institutional factors. In the Indonesian context, the study shows how norms concerning adolescent girls' sexuality, pregnancy outside marriage, religion, and socioeconomic conditions may interact in shaping acceptance of child marriage. These findings suggest that prevention efforts should not be directed solely at individuals but should also take into account families, communities, and institutional environments that shape decisions concerning marriage.

These findings are consistent with the development of approaches to child marriage prevention that increasingly position communities as an important component of intervention. A systematic review by Greene et al. (2024) shows that interventions aimed at changing social norms related to child marriage involve multiple social levels, including families, community groups, and institutions. However, the review also indicates that evidence concerning the direct relationship between changes in social norms and changes in child marriage behavior remains limited. This suggests that community involvement is important, but how different local actors perform their roles in the prevention process still needs to be understood within its specific context.

In the context of Indonesian policy, the need to involve multiple actors is also reflected in the National Strategy for the Prevention of Child Marriage. The strategy identifies the strengthening of regulations and institutions, as well as enhanced stakeholder coordination, as components of the prevention strategy. Its implementation is also directed toward creating an enabling environment for prevention through the involvement of families, schools, social organizations, and community institutions at the village level (Kementerian PPN/Bappenas, 2020). Thus, preventing child marriage at the local level is not merely a matter of implementing regulations but also concerns how various actors within the community perform their respective functions and interact with one another.

This context is particularly relevant in Lambara Village, Tanambulava District, Sigi Regency. In this village, the customary institution holds an important position in community social life and plays a role in maintaining customary values and rules. In relation to the prevention of child marriage, the customary institution undertakes various forms of action, including providing advice concerning the consequences of child marriage, communicating customary rules, and imposing sanctions for certain violations. However, local actors have highlighted the need for more coordinated monitoring involving the Village Government and Linmas. The preliminary study underlying this research found that the customary institution already had rules and sanction mechanisms related to the prevention of child marriage.

However, in practice, the role of the customary institution in Lambara Village does not operate in isolation. Efforts to prevent child marriage at the village level involve a complex set of local actors—including the Village Government, religious leaders, village security personnel, and family units. Each actor possesses a different basis of authority, perspective, and scope of action in addressing issues concerning adolescents and child marriage.

This diversity indicates that the prevention of child marriage at the local level constitutes a dynamic arena. The customary institution has its own norms and sanction mechanisms, yet their effectiveness and continuity depend greatly on how these roles interact and intersect with formal and religious authorities within the village. Therefore, understanding the role of the customary institution comprehensively requires more than examining its functions in isolation; it must instead be situated within the framework of relationships and shared responsibilities among local actors.

It is at this point that this study places shared responsibility as its analytical focus. The presence of multiple actors with different norms and forms of authority does not necessarily indicate conflict; rather, it reflects how social responsibility is negotiated in everyday practice. By positioning the customary institution as the primary focus while examining its relationships with other local actors, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the governance of child marriage prevention at the community level.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aims to analyze the role of the customary institution in preventing child marriage in Lambara Village within the context of shared responsibility at the local level. Specifically, the study addresses two questions: (1) What is the role of the customary institution in preventing child marriage in Lambara Village? and (2) How is responsibility for preventing child marriage understood and enacted by the customary institution through its engagement with other local actors?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretive orientation to understand the role of the customary institution in preventing child marriage based on the experiences and perspectives of local actors in Lambara Village, Tanambulava District, Sigi Regency (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was chosen because the study does not seek to quantitatively measure the effectiveness of the customary institution, but rather to explore in depth how its role is enacted and how

responsibility for prevention is understood and negotiated within the local social context.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement, authority, and knowledge of community social life and efforts to prevent child marriage in Lambara Village. The study involved five informants representing five key local roles: a customary leader, a religious leader, a community leader, a village official, and a hamlet head. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted in stages in November 2025. Interview information was documented in interview notes, and summaries were prepared from those notes for analysis. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing the perspectives provided by the five informants across these different local roles.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which provides a flexible approach to identifying patterns and themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis began with reading the interview summaries in their entirety and comparing the informants' responses in relation to the research questions. Edward III's implementation theory initially provided a framework for examining the role of the customary institution in preventing child marriage. However, comparison across the interviews revealed that informants understood prevention through different areas of responsibility and emphasized different forms of involvement by other local actors. For example, the need for cooperation in monitoring, religious guidance, and parental supervision emerged as distinct concerns across the informants' accounts. These recurring patterns informed the development of the themes presented in the findings, particularly the ways in which responsibility for preventing child marriage was understood and enacted through the customary institution's engagement with other local actors. Comparing the five informants' perspectives also enabled the study to examine similarities and differences in how prevention responsibilities were understood across different local roles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Customary Rules, Advice, and Sanctions in Prevention

The findings show that the customary institution contributes to child marriage prevention in Lambara Village through customary rules, advice, and sanctions. However, these practices do not, by themselves, ensure coordinated monitoring of adolescents. The findings therefore distinguish the customary institution's existing preventive activities from the broader cooperation that informants consider necessary.

The Customary Leader explained:

"In terms of regulations, although the customary institution has already established customary rules, anyone who violates them will be subject to a sanction of one goat. However, there are still many adolescents who go out after midnight because there is no cooperation between the customary institution and the Village Government in maintaining and monitoring them. In the future, cooperation with the Village Government is needed so that Linmas can assist in maintaining and monitoring adolescents in Lambara Village."

This account illustrates both the presence and the perceived limits of customary authority. The sanction of one goat indicates that customary rules provide a basis for responding to violations, while concerns about adolescents' nighttime activities point to limitations in monitoring. The Customary Leader's call for cooperation with the Village Government and the involvement of Linmas further suggests that imposing customary sanctions and monitoring adolescents are related but distinct activities.

The preventive role of the customary institution was also recognized by the Community Leader, who stated:

"The customary institution always advises people about the consequences of child marriage and communicates regulations in accordance with customary norms and applicable rules. If a violation occurs, customary sanctions are imposed. With these rules in place, parents pay more attention to their adolescent children so that they do not wander around outside at night, and in this way child marriage can also be prevented."

Similarly, the Village Official stated:

"The customary institution has carried out its duties by explaining the consequences and dangers of child marriage. Hopefully, child marriage can be prevented in the future through the involvement of parents in supervising their children."

These accounts indicate that the customary institution's preventive role extends beyond rules and sanctions to include advice and the perceived influence of customary practices on parental attention. However, informants' statements about parental supervision express their expectations of prevention rather than establish that a systematic monitoring mechanism involving parents and other local actors is already in place.

The relationship between customary rules and other sources of authority can be understood through the perspective of legal pluralism. Griffiths (1986) describes legal pluralism as a condition in which multiple legal orders or normative mechanisms coexist within a social space. From this perspective, social regulation is

not confined to state law but also involves norms and mechanisms embedded in community life. Pradhani (2021) similarly explains that customary law is dynamic and interacts with national law and other institutions. These perspectives are relevant to Lambara because the customary institution exercises its role alongside village government structures, religious norms, and family responsibilities.

The interviews illustrate this interaction through the different responsibilities emphasized by local actors. While the Customary Leader stressed cooperation with the Village Government and Linmas, the Religious Leader highlighted the importance of religious guidance, including in situations involving customary violations or pregnancies among adolescents outside marriage. These accounts suggest that prevention is understood through distinct but potentially complementary responsibilities: customary rules and sanctions provide one basis for action, while religious guidance and parental supervision represent other forms of responsibility. Legal pluralism thus provides a way to understand the customary institution's role in relation to other sources of norms and authority, rather than treating it as a self-contained system.

This interpretation is consistent with Hanifah et al. (2026), who examine child marriage in South Kalimantan and show how Islamic, customary, and state norms intersect as families, religious leaders, and community members negotiate the meaning of marriage and readiness for marriage. Both studies highlight the relevance of multiple normative systems to understanding child marriage at the community level, although their analytical emphases differ. Whereas Hanifah et al. focus on how communities navigate child marriage within a plural normative environment, the present study examines the customary institution's contribution to prevention and its relationship with other local actors. The Lambara case therefore illustrates how legal pluralism is reflected not only in the coexistence of norms but also in the relationships among actors who have responsibilities relevant to prevention.

Overall, legal pluralism helps explain the normative context in which the customary institution operates in Lambara Village. The institution contributes through rules, advice, and sanctions, while its preventive role intersects with religious guidance, family supervision, and village government structures. The findings suggest that understanding this role requires attention not only to the coexistence of different norms but also to how the responsibilities associated with them relate to one another in local prevention practices.

Different Actors and Differentiated Understandings of Responsibility

In addition to the customary institution, the interviews indicate that child marriage prevention in Lambara Village involves several local actors whose responsibilities are understood differently. The Religious Leader explained:

"As far as I know, the customary institution should cooperate with religious leaders to guide the community, especially young people, in preventing child marriage. However, when someone violates customary rules or is found to be pregnant outside marriage while still underage, religious leaders are not involved in resolving the problem. Religious leaders should be involved so that they can provide guidance and advice based on religious law and teachings."

This account highlights a perceived gap between the customary institution's existing practices and the involvement expected of religious leaders. While the Religious Leader emphasizes religious guidance, the Village Official highlights parental supervision, and the Customary Leader associates prevention with customary rules, sanctions, and cooperation with the Village Government and Linmas. The Community Leader, meanwhile, emphasizes advice and communicating customary rules. These accounts suggest that local actors share a concern about preventing child marriage but identify different responsibilities and approaches. The interviews do not establish that these responsibilities have been integrated into a coordinated prevention mechanism.

This distribution of responsibilities can be examined through Elinor Ostrom's (2010) perspective on polycentric governance. Polycentric governance involves multiple centers of decision-making or action with distinct areas of authority that may interact and cooperate in addressing shared problems. From this perspective, the involvement of several actors does not necessarily indicate fragmented governance. Rather, attention must be given to how their respective roles relate to one another and whether their actions are connected in practice.

In Lambara Village, the customary institution contributes through customary rules, advice, and sanctions; the Village Government is associated with institutional support and formal authority; and Linmas is identified by the Customary Leader as a potential partner in monitoring adolescents. Religious leaders are expected to provide religious guidance, while parents are regarded as important to adolescent supervision. These roles illustrate the distribution of responsibility across several local actors. However, informants' calls for greater cooperation indicate that the relationships among these roles remain an important concern. The findings thus

reveal multiple centers of responsibility without establishing that they already operate through an integrated mechanism.

This interpretation is consistent with Morrison et al. (2023), who emphasize the interdependence of multiple actors and decision-making spaces in polycentric governance. The existence of multiple actors does not automatically produce integrated governance; the relationships and coordination among them also matter. The Lambara case illustrates this distinction because informants identify several potential contributions to prevention, yet their accounts do not establish a shared working mechanism that consistently connects these contributions. Polycentric governance therefore helps explain how responsibility is distributed, while drawing attention to the relationships needed to connect different areas of action.

A complementary perspective is provided by Ansell and Gash's (2008) framework of collaborative governance, which emphasizes processes such as dialogue, trust-building, commitment, and the development of shared understanding. Whereas polycentric governance helps explain the distribution of responsibility across multiple actors, collaborative governance draws attention to how actors develop a common basis for collective action. A shared objective alone does not demonstrate that collaboration has been achieved; actors must also develop sufficient understanding of the problem, their respective roles, and how their actions can work together.

In Lambara, the interviews suggest that actors broadly share the objective of preventing child marriage but prioritize different interventions according to their understanding of the problem. The Customary Leader emphasizes monitoring and cooperation with the Village Government and Linmas; the Religious Leader calls for religious guidance and advice; and the Village Official highlights parental supervision. Other informants propose formal village regulations and rules governing adolescents' nighttime activities. These differences do not necessarily indicate conflicting objectives. Rather, they suggest that a common concern is interpreted through different areas of responsibility, leading actors to emphasize different forms of intervention.

This distinction is important because the approaches identified by informants imply different requirements for action. Monitoring calls for cooperation and institutional support, religious guidance requires the involvement of religious leaders, and parental supervision places emphasis on family responsibilities. Proposals for formal regulations, in turn, reflect a perceived need for a clearer regulatory basis. The analytical challenge is therefore not simply to identify the actors involved, but to understand how their different approaches could be connected through clearer responsibilities and coordinated action.

These findings can be compared with Billillah and Herawati's (2026) study of collaborative governance in preventing child marriage in Jepara Regency. Their study discusses collaboration through socialization, counseling concerning marriage dispensations, and inter-agency coordination, while also identifying challenges associated with incidental coordination and limited regulatory support specifically addressing child marriage. The comparison highlights the importance of coordination and institutional support, although the two cases differ in their governance settings. Billillah and Herawati examine collaborative processes at the regency level involving formal institutions such as the Religious Court and DP3AP2KB, whereas the present study focuses on relationships among actors at the village level, including the customary institution, Village Government, religious leaders, community leaders, hamlet heads, Linmas, and families.

In Lambara, the need to strengthen connections among actors emerges primarily through informants' accounts of what should be done, rather than through evidence of an established collaborative process. The interviews identify possible areas of cooperation, including monitoring, religious guidance, parental supervision, and formal village instruments, but do not establish that these elements have been brought together through a shared plan or formal collaborative forum. Accordingly, the findings are best understood as evidence of differentiated understandings of responsibility and expressed needs for coordination, rather than as proof that local actors have either achieved or entirely failed to achieve collaboration.

Overall, polycentric and collaborative governance illuminate complementary dimensions of child marriage prevention in Lambara Village. Polycentric governance helps explain the distribution of responsibility across actors with different areas of involvement, while collaborative governance highlights the importance of developing shared understandings and connecting their actions. The customary institution remains an important actor, but its contribution must be understood in relation to religious guidance, family supervision, village governance, and other preventive efforts. The findings therefore point to the importance of clarifying how existing responsibilities can complement one another in practice.

From Proposed Prevention Instruments to Coordinated Action

In addition to emphasizing cooperation among local actors, several informants identified a need for stronger village-level regulations and mechanisms. The Community Leader stated:

"There are still cases of underage children becoming pregnant outside marriage due to promiscuous behavior. In the future, a Village Regulation should be established so that it can serve as a basis for making decisions and taking action."

This statement reflects the perceived need for a formal instrument to provide a basis for action at the village level. The Hamlet Head placed greater emphasis on regulating adolescents' nighttime activities:

"There are still children who become pregnant outside marriage because the customary institution has not established rules regarding the hours when adolescents or young people can go out, especially those who often walk around late at night. In the future, to prevent child marriage, the customary institution should establish rules regarding the hours during which adolescents are allowed to be outside the home, for example after midnight. If male or female adolescents are found outside after that time, a fine should be imposed."

The Hamlet Head's statement reflects the view that specific restrictions on adolescents' nighttime activities, accompanied by sanctions, could strengthen prevention efforts. However, these proposals must be distinguished from the authors' recommendations. The interviews establish that the informants expressed these views, but they do not establish that the proposed measures have been formally adopted or demonstrated to be effective. Any consideration of such measures would require assessment of their legal basis, proportionality, and implications for children's rights and protection.

The proposals can be examined through Ansell and Gash's (2008) framework of collaborative governance, particularly its emphasis on institutional design. Institutional design concerns the rules and arrangements that shape participation, interaction, and decision-making within collaborative processes. From this perspective, cooperation depends not only on actors' willingness to work together but also on arrangements that clarify responsibilities and provide a basis for joint action. In Lambara Village, informants' proposals point to different perceived needs: cooperation between the customary institution and the Village Government, support from Linmas for monitoring, greater involvement of religious leaders, and formal village instruments. However, the interviews do not establish that these elements have been integrated into a common framework for action. The findings therefore indicate a perceived need for institutional arrangements that connect existing responsibilities, rather than evidence that a coordinated mechanism is already operating.

The proposal for a Village Regulation is particularly relevant because it reflects an effort to connect customary norms and practices with formal village governance. Nevertheless, establishing a Village Regulation would not automatically legitimize every restriction or sanction proposed by informants. Article 69(2) of Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages, as cited in the study, stipulates that village regulations must not

conflict with the public interest or higher-level legislation. Proposals concerning adolescents' nighttime activities and sanctions would therefore need to be assessed against applicable legal requirements and child protection principles. The Child Protection Law, including Law No. 35 of 2014 amending Law No. 23 of 2002, is also relevant when considering children's rights and protection. Any village-level arrangements should consequently be evaluated not only in terms of their intended preventive purpose but also in terms of their legal basis and implications for children.

These findings can be compared with Kertati et al. (2023), who examine collaboration between local governments and stakeholders in preventing and controlling child marriage in Central Java. Their study highlights the need for collaboration between government and various stakeholders because child marriage extends beyond the family level, while also noting that existing collaborative efforts need to be strengthened. The Lambara case adds a village-level perspective in which the need for stronger connections emerges through informants' proposed actions and concerns. Unlike evidence of an established collaborative mechanism, these accounts identify potential areas for cooperation without demonstrating that a particular arrangement has been implemented or is effective.

Taken together, the findings clarify the position of the customary institution within broader prevention efforts. The institution contributes through customary norms, advice, and sanctions, but the interviews do not support treating it as the sole implementer of child marriage prevention. Its role is situated within a wider set of responsibilities involving village governance, religious guidance, family supervision, and community monitoring. The central issue is how these responsibilities can be connected through appropriate arrangements while ensuring that any measures considered are consistent with applicable regulations and child protection principles.

Overall, the findings reveal both normative and institutional dimensions of child marriage prevention in Lambara Village. The informants' proposals for formal village regulations and restrictions on adolescents' nighttime activities reflect their views about possible ways to strengthen prevention, not established recommendations of this study. The findings do not demonstrate that these proposals have been adopted or that they would be effective. Rather, they highlight the need to consider how local actors' responsibilities might be coordinated through appropriate institutional arrangements, with due regard for legal requirements and children's rights.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the customary institution contributes to child marriage prevention in Lambara Village through communicating customary rules, providing advice and guidance, and imposing sanctions for violations. However, the findings do not establish that systematic, coordinated monitoring is already in place. Instead, the interviews indicate a need for stronger cooperation between the customary institution and the Village Government, including potential support from Linmas. The customary institution's contribution must therefore be understood within a broader network of local actors and sources of authority.

The findings also reveal that local actors share a concern about preventing child marriage but emphasize different responsibilities. The customary leader highlights monitoring and cooperation, the religious leader emphasizes religious guidance, the village official stresses parental supervision, and other informants identify the need for formal regulations. These differences suggest that, although several actors recognize their potential contributions, their responsibilities and proposed actions are not yet demonstrated to be connected through a shared prevention mechanism.

Practically, the findings point to the potential value of regular communication among the customary institution, the Village Government, religious leaders, families, and Linmas to clarify responsibilities and discuss appropriate responses to concerns about adolescents' safety and child marriage risks. Relevant actors could consider developing shared procedures and assessing whether a Village Regulation could provide an appropriate formal basis for coordination. Any proposed measures, including restrictions or sanctions, should be evaluated for consistency with applicable regulations and child protection principles. These are implications drawn from the findings, not interventions whose effectiveness has been tested by this study.

Overall, strengthening child marriage prevention in Lambara Village requires more than distributing responsibilities among multiple actors; it requires appropriate ways to connect their contributions while respecting children's rights. Further research could examine how coordination mechanisms are developed and implemented in practice and how they operate within the local legal and social context.

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