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Belas for the Prevention of Child Marriage among Sasak Community, West Lombok

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Cover Page Footnote

We would like to extend our gratitude to the research informants, the Sasak community in West Lombok, and the local government authorities at the hamlet, village, and district levels in West Lombok. Additionally, we express our appreciation to the National Yes I Do Alliance and West Lombok Regency for their support. Special thanks to the KIT Royal Tropical Institute and our colleagues at the Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies, LPPSP FISIP UI, for their invaluable assistance throughout the entire data collection process, which has culminated in the completion of this writing.

Belas for the Prevention of Child Marriage among Sasak Community, West Lombok

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Abstract

This paper aims to evaluate the compatibility of the *belas* mechanism, which separates prospective brides still considered children (*merariq kodeq*), in West Lombok Regency with the provisions of Child Protection Law No. 35/2014. While prior research in various countries has primarily focused on interventions and child marriage prevention programs, this study takes a different approach by examining the intricate relationship between children (those under 18 years of age) and the broader social system. To comprehensively explore this relationship, our team adopts Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model, which encompasses various stages of a child's life. This model considers individual biology, interactions with diverse actors, environmental factors, and cultural and structural influences. Our study's findings reveal that the current implementation of the *belas* mechanism does not adequately align with the principles of child protection. This inadequacy is particularly evident in terms of the psychological well-being and vulnerability of girls who become victims of child marriage, especially in unique situations involving girls who experience unwanted pregnancies. To conduct our research, we employed qualitative methodologies, including participant observation and in-depth interviews. These methods allowed us to engage with primary subjects, five girls aged 14–18 years, as well as key stakeholders such as representatives from children's forums, village child protection commissions, religious leaders, parents, teachers, and others.

Keywords: the *belas* mechanism, *merariq kodeq* (child marriage), prevention of child marriage, child protection, socio-ecological models.

Abstrak

Tulisan ini melihat sejauh mana mekanisme *belas* (memisahkan calon mempelai laki-laki dan perempuan) yang dipraktikkan di Kabupaten Lombok Barat, dalam mencegah perkawinan anak (*merariq kodeq*), memenuhi prinsip-prinsip perlindungan anak berdasarkan Undang-Undang No. 35 Tahun 2014. Berbeda dengan studi terdahulu yang hanya fokus pada intervensi untuk mencegah perkawinan anak, studi ini melihat keterhubungan antara anak (mereka yang berusia di bawah 18 tahun) dengan sistem sosial yang lebih luas. Tim penulis menggunakan model sosio-ekologis dari

Brofenbrenner yang mempertimbangkan berbagai aspek dalam kehidupan anak, termasuk kondisi biologis anak, interaksi antara anak dengan berbagai aktor, lingkungan, serta faktor budaya dan struktural. Kami menemukan bahwa implementasi mekanisme *belas* belum menerapkan prinsip-prinsip perlindungan anak. Hal ini terkait dengan tidak diperhatikannya kondisi psikologis dan kerentanan anak perempuan yang menikah muda, serta situasi khusus yang mereka alami, misalnya kehamilan tidak diinginkan. Data dikumpulkan secara kualitatif melalui partisipan observasi dan wawancara mendalam kepada anak perempuan usia 14 – 18 tahun, perwakilan forum anak, komisi perlindungan anak desa, tokoh agama, orang tua, guru, dan lainnya.

Kata Kunci: mekanisme *belas*, *merariq kodeq*-perkawinan anak, pencegahan perkawinan anak, perlindungan anak, model sosio-ekologis.

INTRODUCTION

In Lombok, the Sasak community traditionally practices *merariq selarian* or elopement through the *merariq* mechanism. Elopement, referred to as such within the Sasak community (Dahlan et al., 1996 as cited in Kartikawati, 2016), has long been a prevalent means of implementing the *merariq* mechanism and remains a current practice. Initially, *belas* or separation occurred when either or both families disapproved of a relationship between a woman and a man, leading to an incomplete *merariq* process (Kartikawati, 2022). However, in contemporary times, the *belas* mechanism has extended beyond its traditional role, encompassing the separation of child brides and grooms, particularly those below 18 years old.

The current use of the *belas* mechanism reflects efforts to combat child marriage in West Nusa Tenggara, one of the seven Indonesian provinces with the highest number of child marriage cases (Plan Indonesia, 2022)¹. This initiative is part of the *Yes I Do* Alliance's advocacy work. Overseen by the West Lombok Village Child Protection Group (KPAD) as part of the *Yes I Do* alliance's² advocacy work, this program collaborates with local governments. The efforts align with the *Anti-Merariq Kodeq* Movement (GAMAK), the West Lombok Regent's Regulation, and the West

¹ Based on data from the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of West Nusa Tenggara, there was an increase in the number of child marriage dispensation from a total of 332 cases in 2019 to 805 cases (242.5%) in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic (DP3AP2KB NTB 2020). For Lombok Island, child marriage cases increased by 139 (2019) to 334 cases (2020). Mataram City has 8 cases, West Lombok-North Lombok 135 cases, Central Lombok 148 cases, and East Lombok 43 cases.

² The *Yes I Do* alliance consists of Rutgers WPF Indonesia, Plan International Indonesia, the Child and Youth Protection Agency (LPAR), the Association for the Improvement of Small Business (PUPUK), and the Indonesian Family Planning Association (PKBI).

Nusa Tenggara Provincial Law for the Prevention of Child Marriage.

This essay delves into the *belas* (separation) mechanism in *selarian* (elopement) within West Lombok Regency. The research aims to determine whether *belas* has evolved into a comprehensive system of child protection, aligning with Law No. 35/2014, where a child is considered the "subject" rather than the "object" of the program. Specifically, this paper focuses on the reintroduction of the *belas* mechanism through the *Yes I Do* Program and examines its impact on children who have undergone the *belas* process.

To date, numerous studies have been conducted to evaluate child marriage intervention programs. Sophia Chae and Thoai D. Ngô (2017) conducted a review of twenty-two peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed studies to assess and identify their approaches in measuring effectiveness in preventing child marriage. The authors identified four commonly used approaches in child marriage intervention programs (Chae and Ngô, 2017). The first approach is empowerment³, followed by the economic approach⁴, the schooling approach⁵, and the community approach⁶. Empowerment stands out as the most frequently employed approach in child marriage intervention programs, with 14 interventions using it, followed by economic (10 interventions), schooling (7 interventions), and community (6 interventions). Some interventions use a single approach, while others employ multiple approaches simultaneously.

A systematic review conducted in 2016 evaluated eleven high-quality interventions in low- and middle-income countries. The findings revealed that economic interventions, such as cash transfers or subsidies for school-associated costs, significantly reduced the rate of child marriage and raised the age at which marriages occurred. These findings differ from those of Chae and

³ Empowerment, which focuses on providing information, skills, and support structures for girls to advocate for their needs and improve their status and well-being.

⁴ The economic approach, which provides cash transfers to families and offsets the cost of raising girls, mainly targets the families' economy to discourage them from marrying off their girls..

⁵ The schooling approach, which provides incentives to keep girls in school or to bring out-of-school girls back to school. The economic approach, which provides cash transfers to families and offsets the cost of raising girls, mainly targets the families' economy to discourage them from marrying off their girls.

⁶ The community approach, which involves not only parents and family members of the girls, but also the community as a whole. Intervention programs using this approach target community attitudes towards child marriage and the negative consequences of this practice.

Ngô (2017), who suggested that economic approaches were less successful in preventing child marriage. Interestingly, Kalamar and colleagues (2016) also discovered that interventions with multiple components, aiming to address child marriage alongside issues like HIV, sexual and reproductive health, and empowerment, had little to no statistically significant impact on child marriage rates.

This comparison of literature studies highlights the challenges faced by intervention programs in preventing child marriage. Some prior studies only examined one aspect of child marriage prevention programs, such as economic empowerment or community-based interventions. Previous research that explored program interventions from various angles relied solely on meta-research using secondary data, as seen in Chae and Ngô (2017). Unlike prior research that primarily relied on meta-research utilizing secondary data, as seen in Chae and Ngô (2017), our article takes a different approach. We evaluate the implementation of the *Yes I Do* intervention program for preventing child marriage, specifically through the *belas* (separation) mechanism. Distinguishing itself, our study examines all aspects of children's lives using Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model theory.

SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL: AN APPROACH TO CHILD PROTECTION

This article employs Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1994) socio-ecological model theory to analyze the child protection aspects of the *belas* intervention within the context of the *Yes I Do* program. Child protection, as defined by Child Protection Law Number 35 of 2014, encompasses "all activities to guarantee and protect children and their rights so that they can live, grow, develop, and participate optimally in accordance with human dignity and receive protection from violence and discrimination."

By applying Bronfenbrenner's (1994) socio-ecological model, this article examines child marriage and the *belas* practice through various layers of the system, beginning with the individual (the child) and extending to the social and physical environment in which the children are situated. Bronfenbrenner's model outlines five system layers that significantly influence children's development: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

The microsystem encompasses the child's immediate surroundings, such as family, peers, school, and neighborhood, where direct interactions with social agents occur. The mesosystem represents the interconnections between different microsystems, illustrating the relationship between family and school or family and peers. Further, the exosystem includes larger social systems that indirectly impact a child's development, such as education, health, child protection systems, and the community environment. The macrosystem constitutes the outermost layer of a child's environment, including state ideology, government, traditions, religion, law, customs, and culture. These macrosystem subsystems significantly influence children's character development. The chronosystem denotes the sociohistorical conditions of child development, encompassing changes in parenting approaches, socio-economic status, and societal structure.

Through the application of the socio-ecological theory model, this article scrutinizes the evolution of the *belas* practice as a mechanism for preventing child marriage (*merariq kodeq*) through elopement (*selarian*). It also evaluates whether this practice aligns with the principles of child protection based on Law No. 35/2014. Additionally, the article considers the alteration of the maturity threshold for child marriage and/or the social maturity criteria for a child to transition into adulthood and marry beyond their biological age. This complex assessment within the *belas* mechanism interacts with cultural features and broader societal structures, as detailed in Bronfenbrenner's (1994) socio-ecological model, particularly within the macrosystem and chronosystem.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach, involving in-depth interviews with five girls aged 14 to 18 years old who have undergone the *belas* mechanism and subsequently remarried. In the process of identifying these primary subjects, a total of five girls were interviewed. Among them, three girls were interviewed with the assistance of the Village Child Protection Group (KPAD) serving as gatekeepers, all of whom had experienced the *belas* mechanism. Furthermore, interviews with the remaining two girls were facilitated through a snowball approach. Importantly the final participant, who had also experienced *belas* (separation), was included through this method. These interviews were conducted in

person and typically lasted one to two hours each. They took place either at the residences of KPAD members or at the participants' homes. Throughout the interview process, great care was taken to ensure the participants' comfort, guided by the principles of 'do no harm' and flexible interview scheduling, in accordance with the agreements made with each primary subject.

To strengthen data triangulation, interviews⁷ were conducted with a diverse range of informants, including representatives of the Village Children's Forum (FAD), Village Child Protection Group (KPAD), parents/guardians of children, traditional and religious leaders (Tuan Guru), community leaders (village leaders and hamlet heads), youth leaders, teacher representatives, and members of the District Working Group (DWG). A total of 10 informants were interviewed to provide multiple perspectives on the research. Additionally, the researcher conducted participant observations by visiting West Lombok Regency in March 2020. Follow-up interviews were conducted online in April, May, and December 2021 to further enrich the data.

This research underwent ethical review by the Ethics Commission of the Atmajaya Unika Research Institute, ensuring adherence to principles that protect the primary research subjects, especially the girls who were married and had experienced *belas*.

TYPES OF *MERARIQ* IN WEST LOMBOK

The child's life stage is influenced by various systems, including the macrosystem and the chronosystem (socio-historical), as outlined in Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model theory. In this section, we explore the necessity for child marriage prevention interventions to encompass the historical dimensions of marriage culture and traditions observed in Lombok, along with their evolution and transformations over time. Specifically, our discussion centers on the diverse types of marriages (*merariq*) prevalent in Lombok and the shifts in their significance within the contemporary context of the Sasak community.

⁷ Subjects or informants were interviewed about the practice of child marriage which still occurs (*merariq kodeq*), customary and cultural values seen from '*pakem merariq*', the '*belas*' mechanism in '*pakem merariq*', and how the '*belas*' mechanism is implemented as a program, and what policies on preventing child marriage have been implemented as a form of child protection system, including the challenges of the intervention programs that have been carried out.

In Sasak culture, the term *merariq* refers to marriage. Broadly speaking, there are three types of marriage forms in Lombok. The first type is *merariq-selarian*, which involves taking a woman away from her family secretly, usually at night, to stay with the man's family (Sudirman & Bahri, 2014:445). The second variety, known as *tadong*, denotes a marriage that is postponed until one or both parties have reached legal adulthood. The third type is *melakoq/ngendeng*. This type of union can be found in other areas of Indonesian society, where the man and his family must first obtain permission from the woman's family before marrying one of their daughters. The man's proposal to marry the woman is then interpreted as a promise to maintain a marriage between this couple, witnessed by both families.

According to an interview with the head of the in West Lombok, the *merariq* (marriage) process is considered sacred. Previous research on *merariq* has revealed that in the Sasak community, marriage is regarded as both social and religious event governed by the broader cultural principle of Sasak, known as *Adat Basandi Syara, Syara' Basandi Kitabullah*, which combines customary and religious (Islamic) laws (Kartikawati, 2016). This culturally guided form of marriage is referred to as *pakem merariq*⁸. Thus, marriage is perceived as both a transition in social status and a fulfillment of religious obligations.

In this study, the term *merariq* specifically refers to *merariq-selarian*. As mentioned earlier, *melariq-selarian* is a type of marriage deeply ingrained in the traditions of the Sasak indigenous people of Lombok, passed down through generations. Through interviews with traditional figures in West Lombok, two distinct perspectives on *melariq-selarian* emerged. The first perspective considers *melariq-selarian* as a “genuine” or “authentic” ancestral ritual of the Sasak community that predates the arrival of Balinese and Dutch colonials. The other perspective views *melariq-selarian* as an “imported cultural product.” According to this viewpoint, *melariq-selarian* is not part of Sasak ancestral customs but has evolved over time to align with the principles of Islam, the predominant religion among the Sasak population⁹. In the past, when a man pursued

⁸ *Pakem Merariq* is a rule of marital agreement, whether written or unwritten (Document Notes from *Pakem Merariq* based on Sasak Customary Law by Raden M.Rais (Sasak Paer Bat. Assembly 2018).

⁹ This opinion is also supported by some Sasak people who are mainly spearheaded by religious leaders. In 1955, in West Lombok, there was a religious figure called Tuan Guru Haji (TGH)

merariq-selarian, he would do so in the company of a male relative, and the woman would be placed in a relative's home to prevent premarital sex.

In our research, our focus centers on *merariq-selarian* involving underage couples. In Lombok, child marriage is referred to as *merariq kodeq* (refer to Figure 1), where *kodeq* signifies the child's age. The *Merariq* custom strictly forbids the involvement of underage individuals in *selarian* or elopement. Violating this custom can lead to customary sanctions, particularly when considering the fundamental Sasak marriage principles known as *paut* and *patut*. As explained by Pak Syukron, a community leader, *paut* relates to physical suitability (with age being a common indicator), while *patut* concerns the mental readiness of a prospective bride. Due to this customary law, many cases of *merariq kodeq* in the area have occurred suddenly and secretly, involving the abduction of young girls from their family's residence with the intention of marrying without parental approval.

In this paper, we shift our focus to the reintroduction of the *belas* ritual by the *Yes I Do* Program. This process is overseen by KPAD and FAD and involves a wide range of stakeholders, including not only the children's parents but also village governments (the village heads) and traditional and religious leaders. Before delving into our analysis of the use of *belas* in the *Yes I Do* initiative's efforts to combat child marriage, we aim to provide readers with the socio-historical context of the *belas* ritual in Lombok. The following section discusses the *belas* ritual and its evolving practices. Initially, we explore the *belas* ritual within its social, cultural, and historical contexts. Afterward, we delve into the use of *belas* as a mechanism for intervening in child marriage under the *Yes I Do* program.

Saleh Hambali who abolished 'elopement' as a ritual 'gunine' because it is considered a manifestation Hinduism Bali and according to him is not in accordance with the teachings of Islam (Interview of West Lombok Traditional Figures, December 17, 2021).

Figure 1: The process of Ijab Qabul (Islamic marriage) (left) and nyongkolan (traditional wedding reception) (right) conducted by child couples in West Lombok.



Source: The *Yes I Do* Research Team from the Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies, LPPSP FISIP UI

BELAS CUSTOM: PAST AND PRESENT

This section emphasizes the socio-ecological theory's primary focus on the exosystem layer, which includes the larger social system indirectly affecting child development. This involves aspects like the child protection system and community environment. This section also delves further into how various actors are involved and play a crucial role in the compassion process, particularly in the context of preventing child marriage through the *belas* custom.

In the Sasak community of Lombok, the term *belas* has two distinct meanings: firstly, it describes when families reject a marriage, and secondly, it denotes the emotional closeness between family members or close friends. In this paper, our focus is solely on *belas* as a form of marriage separation. Historically, Sasak nobility utilized *belas* to separate couples who had married through the *merariq-selarian* (elopement) mechanism. In the past, noble marriages were rejected if the bride-to-be came from the ordinary Sasak community (*jajar karang*) or if it involved an interfaith marriage, such as between a Sasak person (Muslim) and a Balinese person (Hindu). *belas* was considered essential to separate nobles from those of different socio-cultural, class, and religious backgrounds. Failure to carry out *belas* successfully was believed to lead to social conflicts not only between the two families but also between the regions from which the couple originated. According to Ahmad, one of the youth leaders, "in the past, it could even cause

wars between villages" if one of the families disagreed with the *belas* process.

In the present context, the *belas* process is typically initiated when the bride's family reports to the head of the hamlet (*kepala dusun* or *kadus*) their disapproval of the marriage. The *kadus* then informs the head of the hamlet and the traditional leaders (*pengemban adat*) in the groom's village regarding the rejected proposal. A representative from the bride's family is also present to provide a reason for the refusal. This makes the *belas* process a private affair where both families can communicate and discuss the separation of the marriage.

However, with the increasing prevalence of child marriages (*merariq kodeq*), the *Yes I Do* initiative has repurposed the *belas* ritual. In this project, *belas* is primarily intended for underage couples, diverging from its historical use by Sasak nobles to separate marriages based on socio-cultural and religious differences. This aligns with the *pakem merariq* principles we explained earlier, which require the bride-to-be to be physically and mentally fit for marriage. However, many younger generations of Sasak people no longer understand these principles and procedures, leading to the new issue of *merariq kodeq*. In interviews with an eighteen-year-old girl who was already married, she described *merariq* as a "custom" in which women are stolen or taken away. The informant only knew that if a woman's partner took her away for marriage (*merariq-selarian*), she had to stay married even if she was under 18 years old. The informant did not know that this could not be done, as it violated the *merariq* standard (*paut* and *patut*), so a *belas* (separation) process was necessary.

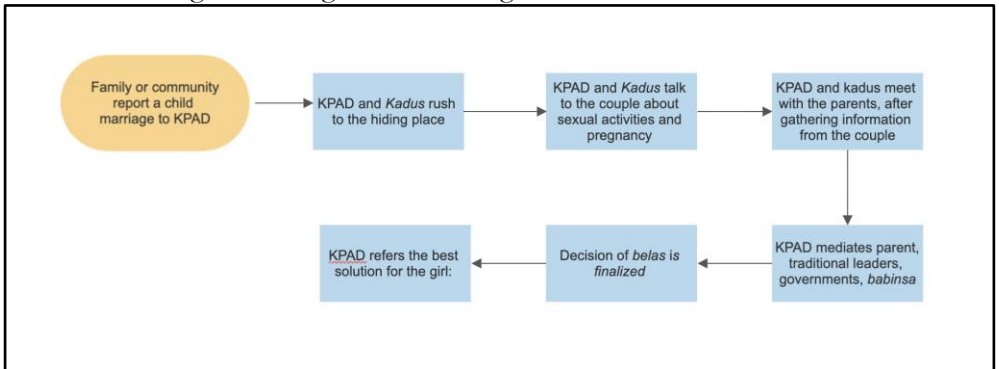
In the *Yes I Do* programs¹⁰, the *belas* ritual involves various parties considered to have strategic roles in preventing child marriage. According to our interview with Santi from KPAD, traditionally, the *belas* mechanism was shrouded in secrecy, with very few individuals being privy to its workings. The groom's family would return the daughter as if nothing had happened. However, today's *belas* process is attended by a diverse range of stakeholders, including brides-to-be, families, regional leaders, KPAD representatives, traditional leaders (*tuan guru*), *Babinsa*, village midwives, BPD, separated children's school teachers, and relevant

¹⁰ Upon witnessing a *belas* process carried out by KPAD in the *Yes I Do* programme, we observed a significant difference in comparison to the *belas* process that was traditionally considered a private matter among the noble families in Lombok.

agencies such as DP2KBP3A¹¹. All of these parties collaborate to prevent child marriages. This multifaceted approach represents a significant departure from the past and underscores the seriousness with which the issue of child marriage is now being addressed in Lombok.

The reintroduction of *belas* as a means of preventing child marriages in the *Yes I Do* program has led to a more complex process involving numerous actors and institutions, as well as an extension of the stages. Among the actors involved, KPAD plays a pivotal role by receiving reports of child marriages from families and communities and facilitating mediation between the couples and their parents. However, such mediation is not a one-time event and can last for an extended period, depending on both the girl and her family's willingness to separate, given the potential consequences of the *belas*. Following the *belas* ritual, the mediation stage offers a critical opportunity and space for the couple and their parents to make the best decision possible.

Figure 2: Diagram of the stages of the *belas* mechanism



Source: The Research Team from the Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies, LPPSP

The duration of the *belas* process, as illustrated in Figure 2, can range from a few days to a full month. However, KPAD believes that a swift separation process would be more effective in mitigating the negative effects of *belas* on both the couple and society. Additionally, if the couple remains hidden for an extended period, their families and the community may suspect them of

¹¹ Family Planning, Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Office.

engaging in premarital sex. Unwanted pregnancy is a significant concern for the girl's family, especially considering the social stigma associated with child marriage (*merariq* kodeq). Therefore, it is crucial for KPAD to promptly locate the girl and boy's hiding place to prevent teenage pregnancy.

The following section will delve into the impacts of the *belas* mechanism on preventing child marriage, examining its effects on children, families, and facilitators. Analyzing the adverse consequences of adopting *belas* as a means of preventing child marriage will provide readers with a better understanding of the importance of a child protection perspective in intervening in or preventing child marriage cases.

THE IMPACTS OF *BELAS* ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, FACILITATORS, AND THE COMMUNITY

To explain the impact of *belas* on children, families, facilitators, and communities, we turn to the next layers in socio-ecological system theory known as the microsystem (the child's immediate environment) and mesosystem (the connections between different microsystems)¹².

The reintroduction of the *belas* mechanism in Lombok as part of the *Yes I Do* program's intervention projects on child marriage involves multiple parties. This approach has successfully raised community awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage. The *Yes I Do* program has effectively established a community surveillance system to monitor and prevent child marriage in local neighborhoods by reviving the historically "local" practice of separating culturally forbidden marriages due to religious or social differences. However, this approach has unintended consequences not only for the bride and groom but also for their parents, closest family members, the involved parties, and the community as a whole. A young female figure involved in KPAD emphasized the need for comprehensive observation to assess the impact of *belas* on children. She highlighted the importance of providing support to the couple after the *belas*

¹² The microsystem comprises the child's immediate environment, including the family, peers, school, and neighborhood, where the child interacts directly with social agents. The mesosystem represents the connections between different microsystems, such as the relationship between family and school or family and peers.

process, as they may not be mature enough to fully comprehend the situation and could be vulnerable to secondary victimization or multiple victimization¹³.

Youth leaders and community activists have also drawn our attention to the mental and psychological trauma affecting children. Another unintended consequence of reintroducing *belas* in modern child marriage intervention programs is the potential for social stigma and limited access to formal education, especially for girls. Some reasons why children are hesitant to return to school after experiencing *belas* include the fear of being bullied and ridiculed by their classmates. Since the community is aware of their attempted marriage, children tend to avoid participating in community activities such as going to the mosque or mushalla with their friends.

Parents, similar to their children, are affected by *belas*. They often have to clarify and respond to questions from their extended family, who might not always have the same views about child marriage. This can be especially challenging when the couple's extended families believe that marriage is preferable to *belas*, even if they are children. Some adults, such as parents and grandparents, still hold onto sexist myths that girls who experience *belas* will have difficulty finding a future mate, leaving these girls to become "old virgins" (or *mosot* in Sasak terms). Due to this belief, many parents have begun to reconsider whether *belas* is the best solution for child marriage cases.

Apart from the children and families, KPAD members and hamlet leaders engaged in the *belas* process might experience negative impacts from society. For instance, KPAD members often face bullying, condescending sneers from the community, and threats of violence, leading to traumatic experiences. Many KPAD members are children themselves, and they have not received counseling or consultations to address the trauma resulting from threats of violence in their roles in preventing child marriage through the *belas* process. While some children in the *belas* taskforce may have undergone special training to enhance their advocacy skills, they still face the risk of social stigmatization.

¹³ Secondary victimization or multiple victimization here is the child, after being separated, will experience a tendency to be negatively assessed (stigma) by his environment (schoolmates and community).

"...some FAD members no longer wish to be involved in the *belas* mechanism due to the trauma they have experienced. They were frightened because similar incidents had occurred previously. After the *belas* process was conducted, male family members sent us (KPAD) and the other participants in the *belas* mediation machetes, as they were determined to proceed with their *merariq*. Presently, the only secure environment where they can share their experiences is among KPAD members, and they have not received additional support" (SA, April 29, 2021).

Figure 3. Mediation process for girl (left) and men (right) brides-to-be at the *belas* mechanism by KPAD and Kadus in West Lombok



Source: The *Yes I Do* Research Team from Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies LPPSP FISIP UI

The incorporation of the *belas* custom into the child marriage intervention projects of the *Yes I Do* initiative in Lombok has revealed a problematic consequence related to the social dynamics among local village governments. For instance, West Lombok Regent Regulation No. 30 Year 2018 explicitly prohibits the local government's involvement in child marriage processes. It outlines severe penalties, including imprisonment, for any head of the hamlet found facilitating child marriage. Additionally, this regulation mandates that regional leaders, such as village heads (*kades*) and hamlet heads (*kadus*), oversee the *belas* process. However, both *kades* and *kadus* cannot attend *merariq* *kodeq* ceremonies without being accused of supporting child marriage. As community leaders, they find themselves in a dilemma where they risk being labeled as unsupportive of Sasak community affairs if they decline wedding invitations, even when child marriage is

involved. Below is an excerpt from an interview with a KPAD member who also serves as a kadus in West Lombok.

"...those who do not grasp the consequences of child marriage and the significance of *pakem merariq* may view me as neglecting my responsibilities as a kadus, which include presiding over weddings for citizens seeking to marry. This becomes particularly evident in cases of *merariq* kodeq where the girl is pregnant. The village government would bear the responsibility if we decline to officiate the marriage, and we would be held accountable for it" (RD, March 14, 2020).

In both 2019 and 2020, KPAD and DP2KBP3A joined a collaborative initiative aimed at protecting children who had experienced *belas* and mitigating its negative effects. To achieve this, they established a safe haven called "rumah aman" with the goal of preventing the recurrence of *merariq-selarian* (elopement) or the stigmatization of these children as "unwanted" brides. Serving as an alternative space for recuperation and rehabilitation post-*belas*, *rumah aman* offers a critical opportunity for children to regain composure and prepare themselves mentally before rejoining their families, schools, and communities. During an interview on May 20, 2021, Asri, who had experienced *belas*, shared that she chose to stay at *rumah aman* to calm down and mentally prepare herself to reintegrate into her neighborhood upon returning home.

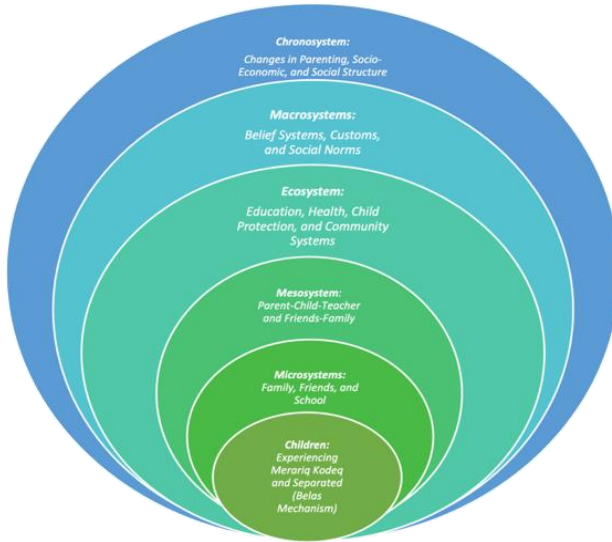
Despite the efforts made by KPAD and DP2KBP3A to mitigate the negative impact of *belas* on children, not all areas in Lombok have the necessary facilities to establish *rumah aman*. Some KPAD members have attempted to help children continue their education, both formally and informally (known locally as Paket A, B, or C), by providing them with transfer letters to enroll in different schools to avoid bullying. However, not all KPAD members possess the same capacity to address the educational needs of these children. Therefore, the reintroduction of *belas* as a mechanism to prevent child marriage still faces significant challenges in terms of structural and institutional capacities, as viewed from a child protection perspective.

ANALYSIS THE *BELAS* IMPLICATION IN CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS

The utilization of the *belas* custom, aimed at preventing the adverse effects of child marriage, has fallen short in addressing the imperative of shielding children from social stigmatization within a child protection framework. Our contention lies in the observed risk associated with the utilization of *belas* in the child marriage prevention initiatives of *Yes I Do*—specifically, the potential vulnerability of children to secondary victimization. Many contemporary child marriage programs primarily respond to the high prevalence of child marriage cases. In such cases, the emphasis on reducing the number of child marriages may lead to a predominant reliance on a highly rational approach, potentially neglecting the overall well-being of children, families, and communities. The unintended consequences of incorporating *belas* into *Yes I Do*'s child marriage prevention programs serve as compelling illustration of this phenomenon. Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model (1994) offers a valuable framework for reevaluating the incorporation of *belas* in *Yes I Do* initiatives, taking into account the imperative to protect children who have experienced separation.

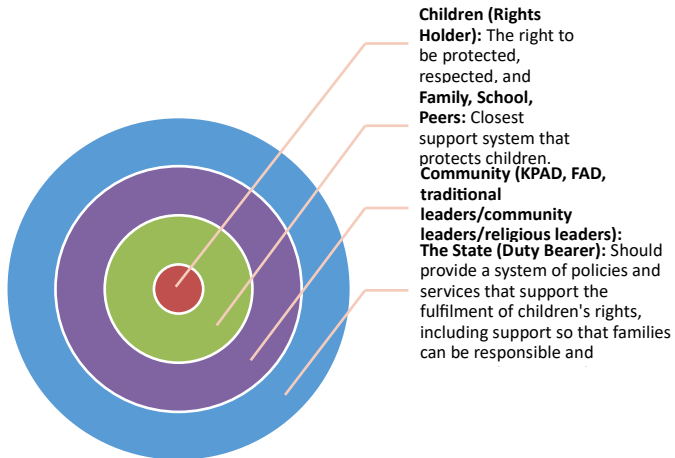
Bronfenbrenner's (1994) socio-ecological model provides a more comprehensive understanding of human development by examining the entire ecological system in which growth and development occur. In the context of our examination of child marriage and the protection of children undergoing marriage separation, this article employs the socio-ecological model to investigate the intricate interplay between personal and environmental factors (refer to Figure 4).

Figure 4a. Graphs of the Role of Actors in the *Belas* Mechanisms of Adaptation of Socio-Ecological Models



Source: Bronfenbrenner 1994 adopted by authors

Figure 4b. Graphs of the Role of Actors in the *Belas* Mechanisms of Adaptation of Socio-Ecological Models



Source: Bronfenbrenner 1994 adopted by authors

CHILDREN AS SUBJECTS: EXPERIENCING *MERARIQ KODEQ* AND SEPARATION (*BELAS* MECHANISM)

During the *belas* separation process, it is paramount to prioritize the safety and well-being of children, especially in cases of child marriage. Children, being more susceptible to secondary victimization than adults, make it crucial to carefully consider personal factors such as age, education, and a history of violence (Fergusson & Horwood, 2003:130). In an interview, a young girl named Asri shared her experience, revealing that she had little awareness of the *belas* process and felt shocked when the decision to separate was made. She stated, "I wasn't aware of the *belas* process, and neither were my parents, so when the decisions were made [to separate], I was shocked" (AS, May 20, 2021). This narrative highlights the necessity of involving children comprehensively in the *belas* process, given the complexity and the potential for children to experience shame, fear, and discomfort. Providing a thorough explanation of the entire process to children can better equip them to cope with the consequences of separation. Additionally, parents, as the primary advocates for their children, should be educated to support their children's needs and well-being.

In cases of successful separation (*belas*) of children, it is crucial for KPAD to provide immediate support and transport the girl to the UPT PPA¹⁴. Parties involved in advocacy, facilitation, and mediation must prioritize the child's needs and well-being by establishing open communication and actively listening to their thoughts and feelings regarding *merariq kodeq* and the *belas* process. The child's best interests should be the primary consideration in the final decision regarding *belas*, and every effort should be made to prevent unnecessary trauma. Involving children from the beginning of the *belas* process through to the decision-making stage is essential to ensure that their best interests are consistently addressed and that avoidable trauma is avoided.

¹⁴ Regional Technical Implementation Unit for the Protection of Women and Children (UPT PPA), which is a provider of protection services for women and children who experience problems of violence, discrimination, exceptional protection, and other problems including in the case of teen in the prevention of child marriage.

MICROSYSTEMS: FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND SCHOOL

At the microsystem level, we explore how the family, friends, and school environments influence children's behavior and experiences, particularly in shaping their attitudes toward early marriage. We strongly believe that the prevention of child marriage should commence within the family, where parents create a supportive and nurturing environment that caters to their children's needs. Parents should also monitor their children's social circles and be aware of any peers entering into early marriages. In this way, parents can actively contribute in the prevention of child marriage by educating their children about its adverse effects on their physical, emotional, social, and economic well-being. Schools and teachers play a significant role in the delivery of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education. Additionally, they can facilitate youth-led advocacy on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Establishing peer-support groups within schools can further provide a safe space for children seeking information on healthy sexual relationships. Therefore, *belas* should only be employed as a last resort to prevent child marriage.

In situations where avoiding *belas* is not possible, it is crucial for KPAD and kadus to provide parents with comprehensive information about the entire process. As illustrated by Asri's experience, both she and her parents were not only disappointed by the decision that prevented her from getting married but also by the lack of information regarding the *belas* process¹⁵. This lack of information hindered their ability to mitigate the social and psychological repercussions of the *belas* they endured. As Asri recounted, various individuals from different service agencies and uniformed personnel suddenly arrived at her house for mediation, and she wished they had informed her parents beforehand so they could collaboratively find a solution. Consequently, it is vital for parents to be well-informed about what to expect after their children have undergone *belas*. Parents serve as their children's primary source of emotional support and can play a pivotal role in expediting their recovery and shielding them from further trauma. Nevertheless, the integration of *belas* into the *Yes I Do* program may inadvertently turn *belas* into public events and ceremonial affairs,

¹⁵ Based on interviews with the parents of the child, the *belas* mechanism case caused a conflict between the mediator parties, namely (KPAD and *Kadus*) and the parents of the children who were separated.

potentially compromising the integrity of children and parents and exposing them to unwanted social stigmatization.

MESOSYSTEM: PARENT-CHILD-TEACHER AND FRIENDS-FAMILY

At the mesosystem level, we explore the interactions between actors and institutions within the microsystem, such as the dynamics between parents and teachers or the relationships between children's friends and their families. When the *belas* process lacks clear delineation of the roles and responsibilities of parents and teachers in preventing child marriage, a child protection-oriented approach suggests that parents and teachers should collaborate to educate children about the adverse consequences of early marriage. Parents can advocate for their children's access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education within the school curriculum and support the school's efforts to provide long-term access to sexual education and youth sexual and reproductive health services. Establishing a foundation of trust and respect between parents and their children's friends can also facilitate open communication and awareness of the child's social life. In situations where a child resists separation and insists on marrying, parents and KPAD could enlist the assistance of teachers or some of the child's friends to persuade them to continue their education and refrain from early marriage.

ECOSYSTEM: EDUCATION, HEALTH, CHILD PROTECTION, AND COMMUNITY SYSTEMS

At the ecosystem level, social systems can indirectly influence children's development through interactions with microsystem actors such as the education system, health system, child protection system, and community environment. The introduction of the SETARA module to students, as part of the *Yes I Do* initiative, represents a collaborative effort among several community social organizations (CSOs) aimed at preventing child marriage. The government should also ensure that youth-friendly services, such as the Youth Health and Care Service (PKPR) program, are easily

accessible for healthcare services. Both the SETARA¹⁶ module and youth-friendly health services can serve as valuable resources for children and young people to gain a better understanding of the impacts of child marriage. The emphasis on "youth-friendly" signifies that these services will not stigmatize those seeking access to them.

It is important to note that within Sasak culture, the *belas* process may not be a customary of traditional marriage practices. Instead, traditional marriage requirements in Sasak culture often involve adherence to principles known as *paut* and "*patut*." Consequently, many individuals within the Sasak community may not be familiar with the *belas* process as part of their marriage traditions. To ensure the safety and well-being of children, it is essential to provide education and training to those involved in the *belas* process, with a focus on children's rights and needs. Enhancing individuals with awareness to respect the rights of children could be an effective way to create a safer and more secure environment for them. Additionally, teachers must protect children from bullying by their peers following separation. Community leaders and village midwives can also play a crucial role in preventing child marriage and educating the community about the negative consequences of child marriage and teenage pregnancy. Community police officers, known as Babinkamtibnas, could also receive training to support the *belas* process and promote child protection.

MACROSYSTEMS: BELIEF SYSTEMS, CUSTOMS, AND SOCIAL NORMS

The macrosystem stage encompasses cultural values, customs, and laws that shape interactions within other systems. Persistent issues within the framework of the *belas* mechanism highlight the need for increased community awareness¹⁷ and understanding of child protection. From the perspective of the child protection system, the KPAD requires support in educating communities, particularly those in non-intervention areas, about child marriage prevention.

¹⁶ The SETARA (Semangat Dunia Remaja) module, one of the program's interventions in providing comprehensive sexuality education to middle and high school students, assisted by the program by inserting appropriate subjects such as biology, physical education (Penjaskes), guidance and counselling.

¹⁷ The challenges in question are related to the belief system in the Sasak community, especially in parents who still believe in the myth that the *belas* will cause difficulty with mates and old virgins (*mosol*), as explained on the impact of the *belas* mechanism.

Differences in values and social norms between intervention and non-intervention areas can impact understanding and knowledge of child marriage prevention. For example, in some districts, a lack of socialization of the Marriage Revision Law and the West Nusa Tenggara Regional Regulation on child marriage prevention has resulted in disparities in community understanding and knowledge of child marriage prevention. Santi, a youth leader and women's rights activist, has brought attention to the significant challenge of community beliefs that child marriage prevention is unnecessary and irrelevant in their area. This belief undermines the value of child protection and perpetuates harmful practices that endanger children.

While the *belas* mechanism aims to prevent child marriage, it may not adequately address situations where a girl is already pregnant before the *merariq* process. The West Lombok KPAD recognizes the practical difficulties of dealing with such cases, as couples are frequently pressured to marry due to social stigma. Education, parenting skills training, and birth control programs can all be effective ways of supporting girls in these situations. Nonetheless, KPAD's ability to step in and help out when the *belas* mechanism breaks down is still rather constrained. Some girl informants, youth leaders, and women activists have raised doubts about the *belas* mechanism's efficacy in promoting child protection, claiming that it focuses too narrowly on the problem of child marriage rather than on the broader issues of child protection. Although the *Yes I Do* Program and KPAD work to prevent child marriage, ensuring child protection remains a challenge because the *belas* mechanism has limitations and may not adequately address the child's psychological well-being.

CHRONOSYSTEM: CHANGES IN PARENTING, SOCIO-ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The chronosystem is the final stage of ecological systems theory, accounting for the time dimension of a child's growth and development environment. Changes in parenting, socioeconomic status, and social structures in the Sasak community of West Lombok can have significant and rapid consequences on children's lives, especially since they are the most vulnerable members of society (Kartikawati 2022). The traditional meaning of child marriage in

relation to the *pakem merariq* has evolved due to changes in social structure, the economy, and family parenting.

In the past, children were prepared for domestic life based on biological and social factors, such as developing skills like weaving, cooking, and domestic work for girls, and contributing to the family's livelihood for boys. However, recent changes have prioritized chronological age, as evident in the Child Protection Act's category of children under 18 years old. Unfortunately, this shift from traditional values to legal standards has led to a misunderstanding of the philosophical meaning of child marriage prevention from the perspective of child protection, which is rooted in the traditional Sasak marriage process (*pakem merariq*). Traditional leaders admit that a lack of cultural understanding is a major issue in the community, particularly in the marriage process.

"This is a case of a girl who intended to get married three times, got separated three times, and ultimately succeeded. When asked about her reasons for wanting to get married, it was revealed that she was facing economic difficulties and had become the main breadwinner of the family. Her desire to continue her education was challenged due to these circumstances, and the unsupportive environment around her house only strengthened her desire to get married" (Susan, April 13, 2020).

In the past, children were educated about the significance of Sasak traditional values and how to build a domestic life. However, a shift in parental roles, with a greater emphasis on providing for the family's economic needs, has resulted in children frequently leaving school to work and sometimes even opting for marriage. In these instances, the role of primary caregiver often falls to the grandmother, and as a result, children miss out on crucial emotional support and educational opportunities from their parents. Consequently, children may seek affection from their partners and become involved in relationships, which can ultimately lead to child marriage. Changes in the economy and parenting also contribute to the high rates of child marriage in Lombok due to *merariq-selarian*. Representatives from the Village Children's Forum in West Lombok noted that economic problems are one of the reasons some children choose to get married.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and analysis of the *belas* mechanism as an effort to prevent child marriage from a child protection perspective in West Lombok, it is evident that the meaning and process of *belas* have evolved in practice. While KPAD plays a central role as the primary facilitator of the *belas* mechanism in collaboration with various stakeholders, the integration of child protection principles into the unique and complex situations faced by children experiencing *merariq kodeq* and subsequent separation has not been fully realized. Here are four key findings that illustrate how child protection principles have not been fully integrated into the ongoing *belas* mechanism process:

1. The Child Itself (Rights Holder): Although the child is the primary subject and central figure in the *belas* process, the various parties involved, including advocates, facilitators, and mediators, have not consistently engaged with children as holistic individuals. The final decisions within the *belas* process have not consistently taken into full consideration the best interests of the child. Consequently, instances persist where children experience trauma following the completion of the *belas* mechanism.

2. Families, Schools, and Peers: Close relationships within the family, peer group, and school environment play a pivotal role in shaping a child's behavior and life experiences, especially when children decide to engage in *merariq kodeq*. Therefore, efforts within the *belas* mechanism should also consider the child's background, particularly their position within their immediate environment. This consideration can help mitigate any negative impacts the children might face. Unfortunately, the current *belas* mechanisms have yet to fully acknowledge this context in their implementation.

3. Communities (KPAD, FAD, Traditional Leaders/Community Leaders/Religious Leaders): In the broader societal context, even though these entities do not engage directly with the child, they can significantly influence development through interactions with other stakeholders within the communities. Therefore, community leaders, traditional figures, and religious leaders should shape environment that proactively affects children. In the context of child marriage (*merariq kodeq*), efforts to minimize the impact of *belas* on children must also extend to the community, preventing them from stigmatizing children and families attempting

to pursue *belas*. Unfortunately, in some cases, children and families continue to face stigma from their communities.

4. The State (Duty Bearer): In this context, the government bears the responsibility of establishing regulations that prioritize the best interests of the child, particularly concerning child marriage (*merariq* kodeq). However, despite policies in place that set age limits for child marriage, the implementation phase often fails to recognize children as the primary subjects who will be directly affected. Current policies, particularly in Lombok, have not provided full support for respecting children's rights, including support for families to assume responsibility and communities to actively participate in safeguarding children from the consequences of child marriage and the *belas* mechanisms.

To address the challenges and reduce the negative impacts of the *belas* mechanism on children, families, and the actors directly involved, a multi-pronged approach is recommended. First, the *belas* mechanism must prioritize the child as a rights holder, actively involving them in child marriage prevention and viewing *belas* as a preventive measure. Second, strengthening support systems is crucial, with families, schools, and peers recognized as the primary protective network for children who may experience *belas*. Third, community involvement, including organizations like KPAD, FAD, and community leaders, is essential in protecting children from negative impacts of *belas* and ensuring a proper understanding of Sasak traditional values. Lastly, the government, as a duty bearer, should establish policies and services that support children's rights within the *belas* mechanism, including child-friendly safe houses 'rumah aman', psychological support, and assistance for families, while engaging the community in protecting children from child marriage and the consequences of *belas*.

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