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## Local Government Efforts in the Protection of Women and Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Yanti Shantini,<sup>1</sup> Elly Malihah<sup>2</sup>, and Siti Nurbayani<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 has changed most routines for the global population. Central and regional governments need to synergize policies to prevent further spread. Therefore, government and other agencies as well as other elements of the community are important factors in the implementation of working programs for disaster management. This study investigates the efforts of the local government and society in protecting women and children during the COVID-19 pandemic in West Java Province. In this case, the units involved include Development Planning Agency at Sub-National Level, Women's Empowerment, Child Protection and Family Planning Office, and various community organizations that focus on women's empowerment and child protection. The approach used in this study was qualitative with critical research endeavoring to understand the particular context and interactions. This brief study of the institution in the West Java Area in the provincial and district offices was conducted within one week. The results of the study showed that there are no specific policies set by the government concerning the handling of COVID-19 for women and children by the three local government institutions mentioned above. Policies created by the local government are still general in nature. There have been several strategic steps taken by government agencies regarding the protection of children and women. Government funds have been reallocated to help stop the transmission of the virus by disseminating information to the public via television, video conferencing, and other media. These programs should also be implemented asynchronously to maintain their continuity in the future. Non-governmental organizations have the flexibility to implement protection programs for children and women according to the problems and needs in the community. During the pandemic period, innovative programs for gender mainstreaming, women's empowerment, and child protection can be conducted by changing the format of existing programs to follow social-distancing health protocols but still maintain the sustainability of the programs for the long term.

*Keywords:* Child Protection, Governmental Policies, COVID-19, Gender Mainstreaming, Women's Empowerment

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has changed most routines for the majority of the global population (Widiawaty et al., 2022). The transmission and spread of disease in many countries needs to be controlled according to the

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advice proposed by WHO—isolating suspected cases and practicing social distancing as fundamental strategies to restrain the increase in cases (Marques et al., 2020). The government carries out measurable orders to prevent the virus from spreading, decrease its economic impact, and reduce complications for its citizens. Therefore, all policies from both the central and local governments must be studied in depth to ensure that they are effective in solving problems and not making the situation worse (Nurbayani & Dede, 2022). Major policies related to COVID-19 must be discussed within the central government, and local governments must communicate and discuss them with ministries and the COVID-19 task force (Agustino, 2021).

Policy responses must be immediate, and they must account for women's concerns (OECD, 2020). Key sectors at particular risk of collapse or reduced efficiency in the wake of COVID-19 include food systems, income, social protection, health care services for women and children, and services and access to clean water and sanitation (Akseer et al., 2020). Women are vulnerable to COVID-19 since they play the main role in the care economy. Also, the pandemic situation has changed the regulation of health services and might intensify the unmet needs of women for reproductive health care. The pandemic has increased the unemployment rate not only in the formal job sector but also in informal labor that women often participate in. Due to the Working from Home (WFH) regulation, women are more likely to face a double burden to balance their productivity and domestic work. Further, during the pandemic, domestic violence against women has increased, yet government responsiveness in handling the reports has slowed down (Chairani, 2020). This study argues that it is critical to have immediate access to measurements of how women and children have been affected by COVID-19.

Moreover, stakeholders must begin to prioritize data from primary sources, and the numbers currently and repeatedly being cited as fact must begin to be rigorously checked (Pratt & Frost, 2020). The central government and local governments need to work together to prevent further spread of COVID-19. Law Number 6 Year 2018 concerning Health Quarantine can be a reference and guideline for the central and local governments (Widjaja, 2020). The policy-implementing units should be in synergy while handling the COVID-19 pandemic. This study investigates the efforts of local governments in providing protection to women and children during the COVID-19 pandemic in West Java Province. The units involved include Development Planning Agency at Sub-National Level, Women's Empowerment, Child Protection and Family Planning Office (DP3AKB), and the Child Protection Agency.

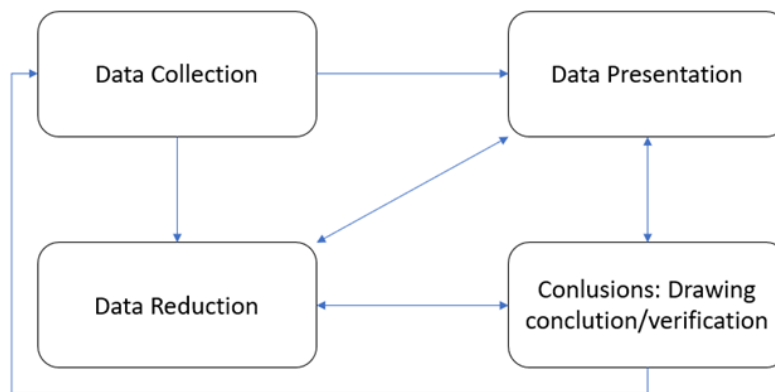
## Research Method

The approach used in this study is qualitative and includes critical research that endeavors to understand particular contexts and interactions. This study was conducted for one week on units in the West Java Region. The researchers searched for data holistically, with a focus on units authorized to handle women's empowerment and child protection in West Java. Critical research means taking a picture of classified phenomena to understand the phenomena and their meanings with the aim of criticizing, changing, and empowering. It endeavors to learn, understand, and change society. This type of research is usually used to reveal the dynamics of power in a socio-economic context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Nurbayani et al., 2022a). The targets of this study are West Java Office units whose duties are related to the empowerment and protection of children, including Development Planning Agency at Sub-National Level and the Women's Empowerment DP3AKB. Other sources for this study are from non-governmental organizations that focus on handling children's problems, including the West Java Province Child Protection Agency. The choice of the units of the service and non-governmental organizations is based on the relevance of their functions in providing policies, guidance, and services to women and children in West Java Province.

Data collection was carried out through offline and online interviews which were conducted by trusted sources in each service unit and non-governmental organization.

Secondary data collection was carried out through literature studies of policies that have been set by the government regarding women's empowerment and child protection. The process of research data analysis was inductive. Researchers collected data to build concepts from observations and from understandings obtained from the field, interviews, and documents. Data analysis was carried out by collecting data, which was then sorted and reduced to draw a conclusion (Rijali, 2019). Our research process is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Research Process**



## Results and Discussion

### *Women's and Children's Concerns during the Pandemic in West Java Province*

Changes to the policies under the regulation of the governor, mayor, and regent regarding gender-responsive handling of COVID-19 have not been specifically enacted. Any changes remain in the form of notes that are not specifically for handling COVID-19. Furthermore, the Child Protection Agency seeks only to provide advocacy and invite the government to revise policies. Operational technical policies related to gender mainstreaming as a follow-up to regional regulations in handling COVID-19 have not yet been written or are still in the form of general policies for COVID-19. Regarding the technical policy of the DP3AKB, there was a change in the planning documents for the Regional Medium-Term Development Plan and the Regional Development Work Plan during the pandemic, expanding priority programs from nine to ten. The additional program concerns the handling of COVID-19. Under normal conditions these changes are usually made in the first semester or one year earlier. However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the government to adjust the document quickly. Accommodation for handling COVID's effects upon women and children in the Draft General Policy and Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget/Priorities and Temporary Budget Ceilings is carried out by refocusing the budget so that it is aligned with programs and changing targets during the pandemic. Since March 2020, almost 100% of the budget for the Office of Women's Empowerment at DP3AKB has been relocated to handle and prevent COVID-19 (Interview data, September 2020).

During the pandemic, there were differences in the implementation of programs in government and non-government work units that were focused on women and children. Government agencies— BP3AKB, and Women's Empowerment and Child Protection—have formed a special task force to handle COVID-19. There was no specific training related to gender mainstreaming or gender-responsive budget planning. However, the Child Protection Agency is trying to coordinate with activists in districts and cities to present COVID-19 education in a form that is easy for the public to understand and accept, especially children. They are making efforts to educate the public regarding the prevention and dangers of COVID-19 through various media, such as television, video conferencing, and other media. Institutions

involved in handling COVID-19 and new adaptations include the Child Protection Agency and the community (Table 1), which report ongoing problems that need to be addressed. All parties help educate the public about the prevention and dangers of COVID-19 and support the distribution of social assistance to the community (Interview data, September 2020). Non-government programs, such as the Child Protection Agency, are directed by community leaders and activists who were selected to contribute to handling COVID-19 in the community. Their vision and mission are focused on protecting children, women, and families, and the most pressing problem is helping mothers to foster children's study at home during a pandemic.

**Table 1. Institutions Addressing the Needs of Women and Children during COVID-19**

<b>Institution</b>
Motivators for Family Resilience (Motekar)
The Committee for Acceleration of Priority Infrastructure Delivery (KPIP)
Aisyiyah – an Islamic non-governmental organization in Indonesia dedicated to women's empowerment and charitable work
Sekolah Tinggi Kesejahteraan Sosial (STKS, The Government College for Social Prosperity)
Universitas Padjadjaran (UNPAD, a public-research university in West Java)
Village Mobilization Apparatus and other-related parties from non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

Disaggregated data related to COVID-19, such as the number of men and women affected by the virus, has been concentrated in the Center for Information and Coordination of COVID-19 of West Java (Pikobar, 2020; Kusumawardani et al., 2021). If it was obtained independently, the disaggregated data would be very difficult to obtain, because all parties focus on handling and preventing COVID-19 as a whole. Also, family clusters are often taciturn in communicating cases related to COVID-19. The Agency for Child Protection acknowledges the emergence of data about new and unusual problems, yet the data cannot be presented to the public, because there was a misuse of data by other parties and the agency is now more alert regarding that possibility. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, national data showed an increase in cases of violence against children and women of around 50%. These conflicts stem from broken relationships between parents and children and familial economic problems caused by the pandemic (Kandedes, 2020). In general, the West Javan provincial government has not implemented special policies related to the protection of women and children, in response to this increase in violence. The policies remain the same as before the pandemic.

*The Role of Local Government Work Units and NGOs in Implementing Programs for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

The Development Planning Agency at the Sub-National Level of West Java Province is in charge of the functions of supporting government affairs in the planning sector. This includes planning, controlling, and evaluating regional development, government, and human development, economic and natural resources, as well as infrastructure and territory, which are under the authority of the province. It must also carry out de-concentration tasks and assistance tasks within its field of duty based on the provisions of the legislation (Sedubun, 2020). The West Java Provincial Development Agency stated that there were no special activities or social assistance for women/children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Input for policy revisions and input from the Child-friendly Regency/City has also been received by the Development Planning Agency at Sub-National Level, yet those do not address COVID-19 problems specifically. Development Planning Agency at Sub-National Level acts as the coordinator of the existing agencies. The nine Regional Mid-Term Development Planning priorities have now

become ten priorities. This change started at the beginning of the pandemic, and it has been written in the Regional Development Work Plan and the Revised Regional Mid-Term Development Planning. When the pandemic occurred, all targets and budgeting were refocused in March 2020. All activities/programs have been adapted to the conditions of the pandemic, but in their implementation, they need to be coordinated with the related agencies. Development Planning Agency at Sub-National Level has encouraged the community and community leaders, such as the Village Mobilization Apparatus, Motekar, The Committee for Acceleration of Priority Infrastructure Delivery, and Aisyiyah to assist in information dissemination regarding COVID-19 policies and in distributing materials to the community.

The Agency for Women's Empowerment, Child Protection and Family Planning Service (BP3AKB) has the main task of carrying out government affairs in the areas of women's empowerment, child protection, population control, and family planning. These tasks include improving the quality of life of women and families, fulfilling children's rights, and protecting women and children. The Agency for Women's Empowerment, Child Protection and Family Planning Service is under the authority of the province until the Governor's Secretariat is formed as a representative of the central government (Nurbayani et al., 2022b). As an agency playing a role in the handling of children and women, they follow policies made by the provincial government regarding the handling of COVID-19, but special policies for handling women and children during the COVID-19 pandemic are quite difficult to impose due to the sudden change in conditions. Furthermore, all efforts to handle and prevent COVID-19 are aimed at the entire community, rather than women and children in particular, because the policies are still general/global. Families are often not open with officials regarding cases of COVID-19; thus, it is very difficult to get accurate data. Meanwhile, disaggregated data regarding women affected by layoffs and the health of children with disabilities are obtained from Motekar (Family Resilience Motivator). This data is later given to the Institution for Woman Empowerment and Child Protection. Regional Mid-Term Development Planning cannot be changed suddenly, because changes must be made one year in advance. However, the revised Regional Mid-Term Development Planning was one effort to handle COVID-19. The previous programs are still ongoing, but the focus, which is the handling of COVID-19, is new. Programs that have been imposed that are aligned with the current pandemic conditions include instructions for making masks, which are delivered online. Apart from that, social assistance is sorted out by the case, because it overlaps with the social assistance given by various government institutions.

Community education, especially in the prevention and handling of COVID-19, is carried out by various institutions in the community. The budget for the prevention and handling of COVID-19 in West Java makes accommodations for social assistance and quota assistance. The provision of assistance is coordinated with various agencies, such as the Department of Education, the Department of Social Service, and others. The routine fostering program is no longer allowed unless the cases are related to COVID-19. The involvement of units in the community such as Motekar, The Committee for Acceleration of Priority Infrastructure Delivery, and universities is very helpful in handling COVID-19 in the field. The stability of the previous programs will be maintained through program innovations and optimization with stakeholders and partnerships. The implementation of policies related to gender mainstreaming, women's empowerment, and child protection during the pandemic is accomplished through various institutions and community organizations such as village officials, NGOs, The Integrated Service Center for The Empowerment of Women and Child Protection, Sukabumi Youth Forum (Forbumi), and others. The public is also educated about efforts to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 through strict health protocols. Efforts to overcome the spread of COVID-19 in family clusters have also been included in the official policy. The universities and

CSRs foster education about COVID-19 prevention in the community through health packages, which contain masks, hand sanitizers, and other protective items.

The Child Protection Agency is consistently active in fighting for and promoting children's rights in Indonesia through case-handling and assistance, advocacy, publication, monitoring, and periodic evaluation. Child Protection Agency also has regional partners spread across provinces, regencies, and cities throughout Indonesia. Some issues that are of particular concern are violence, exploitation, trafficking, kidnapping, neglect, sexual abuse, infant detention, struggles for custody, children in conflict with the law, birth certificates, civil rights, rights to health and education, children on the margins, child victims of disasters, and children who need other special protection (Nurbayani, 2015; Nurbayani et al., 2022c). Child protection institutions as a form of non-governmental organization continue to provide services to the community and to advocate for the prevention of and response to child protection cases. In a pandemic situation, there are additional tasks related to the prevention of COVID-19, such as advocating for the provision of Personal Protective Equipment for disaster victims, teaching parenting skills to victims of layoffs, helping child victims, and responding to the difficulties of long-distance learning faced by children.

The governmental policies regarding the handling of children during the COVID-19 pandemic have not been explained in detail, since the policies are still largely general, and not specifically targeted to the needs of women and children (Singha & Kanna, 2022; Sunil, 2022). Currently, the West Java government is revising the Regulation of Regionals on Child Protection and the Regulation of Governor for Adoption of Children to include the handling of COVID-19, but what the future holds remains unknown. Significantly, the government did not conduct special training regarding the new policies. Despite this, services are provided continuously to the community in West Java through coordination with activists and representatives in the regency/city to deal with children's problems during the pandemic. Without information and assistance from the government, the Agency of Child Protection addresses children's needs according to its capabilities. There are many difficulties during the pandemic period, including cases of violence, the need for assistance during post-mortem, and maintaining the wellbeing of children during various examination processes which were constrained by health protocols such as social distancing. Concerning cases occurring during the pandemic, the sexual abuse of children has remained an important issue. New issues that arose during the pandemic included bullying through social media, especially among junior and senior high school children, and addiction to cell phones among children in early childhood education and elementary school. Finally, another relevant issue is that with long-distance learning there is no learning contract between parents and children.

## Conclusion

The results of the study of DP3AKB show that there is no specific governmental policy regarding the handling of COVID-19 for women and children. Policies made by local governments are still general. Apart from that, it is difficult to sort out data related to the problems of women and children at this time, because all parties are focused on handling and preventing the spread of COVID-19. The budgets for agencies dealing with women's and children's needs were also reallocated to programs that focus on handling COVID-19. Innovations in PUG programs, empowerment of women, and child protection are still carried out during the pandemic to maintain the sustainability of the programs for the long term. The involvement of community leaders is very helpful in educating the public about the dangers and prevention of COVID-19. Coordination between government institutions is very much needed to provide institutional synergy during the pandemic, but it has unfortunately not been focused on gender mainstreaming, women's empowerment, and child protection.

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