Young Sasak Mothers—“Tidak Manja Lagi”:
Transitioning from Single Daughter to Young Married Mother in Lombok, Eastern Indonesia

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To date, early marriage and early childbearing in Indonesia have received limited academic attention and the actual experiences and identities of young mothers have attracted even less enquiry.1 There is a rich and expanding body of work on Indonesian youth, yet those young people who marry while still in adolescence have escaped the attention of researchers seeking to map the experiences, identities, and positions of youth across the archipelago.2 This chapter seeks to advance the limited ethnographic work on early motherhood by presenting the perspectives of young mothers in Lombok on what it means to be both “young” and a “mother”. In doing so it also advances the scope of research on early motherhood in non-western contexts, balancing the predominantly western-based perspectives on the subject. By exploring how young women experience their transitions into motherhood, this work extends our understanding of young people and their social worlds in Indonesia.3 Young mothers occupy social worlds that are shaped around their parenting roles and identities, which are in turn heavily influenced by family constellations and obligations. These social worlds differ from those inhabited by many Indonesian youth, which include schools and popular sites for the consumption of Indonesian modernity, such as malls, night spots, trendy food outlets, and peer groups (see Nilan, this volume).

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1 This is with the exception of a few notable works including commentary on historical and political debates over early motherhood in Indonesia by Blackburn (2004), and Blackburn and Bessell (1997), demographic work on age of marriage by Jones and Gubhaju (2008), as well as a comparative study of early marriage and motherhood between Nepal and Indonesia by Choe, Thapa and Achmad (2001).

2 For recent scholarship on Indonesian youth, see the edited works of Manderson and Liamputtong (2002), Robinson and Utomo (2003) and Parker and Bennett (2008).

3 This research was conducted as part a larger project on the experiences of adolescents in Indonesia, the Ambivalent Adolescents Project (henceforth AA1), Chief Investigators Lynette Parker, Linda Rae Bennett, Pamela Nilan and Kathryn Robinson. This larger project involved extensive ethnographic research by collaborators, as well as a school-based survey of 3565 Indonesian youth across nine sites, which I will refer to as the AA1 survey.
There is an overarching assumption in research and policy on early motherhood that there is a “right time” and “right framework” in which women should become mothers, and these are culturally and historically specific (Holgate, Evans, and Yuen 2006, 20). This chapter teases out how, in the cultural milieu of Lombok, dominant understandings of womanhood and motherhood support rather than deter young women from marrying and becoming mothers during adolescence. Despite the persistent increases in women’s participation in formal education and paid labor, the continuing preference for marriage and motherhood among Indonesian women has also been observed to be stronger than for women in other Southeast Asian nations (Jones 2004).

While this chapter focuses on a case study of early motherhood in the eastern Indonesian province of Nusa Tengara Barat (NTB), and the island of Lombok in particular, the persistence of early marriage and adolescent motherhood is normative among Indonesian women from poor backgrounds throughout the archipelago. Analysis of the 2007 Indonesian Demographic Health Survey (IDHS) confirms that the prevalence of teenage motherhood among women aged 15 to 19 years was 50% in a sample of 845 women, and that the prevalence of teenage motherhood among adult women was 60% in a sample of 29,959 older women (Desriani 2011). This indicated a 10% reduction in the prevalence of teenage motherhood over a decade, but also highlighted that early marriage and adolescent childbearing in Indonesia are not rare. Furthermore, as the IDHS does not include women under 15 years of age, rates of early marriage and adolescent motherhood may well be underrepresented. Analysis of IDHS data also provides insight into the determinants of adolescent motherhood and its strong association with poverty in Indonesia. Low educational attainment among young married women is directly associated with higher levels of adolescent childbearing, with young women who have not completed primary school being three times more likely to become mothers during their teens (Nasril and Samosir 2011). Both young women’s and their husband’s employment status also had a statistically significant relationship with early motherhood, with young women being three times more likely to become pregnant during adolescence if they were unemployed, and 2.5 times more likely to become pregnant if their husbands were unemployed (ibid). Place of residence is also significant in encouraging early motherhood, with young women living in rural areas being 1.4 times more likely to experience teenage pregnancy than their urban peers (Prasetya and Dasvarma 2011).4

4 These findings in Indonesia are consistent with previous international studies that have focused on early motherhood in poorly developed settings, and iterate the widely accepted understanding that low formal education for girls, limited employment opportunities, and