

## Young Women's Agency and the Social Navigation of Divorce from Child Marriage in West Java, Central Java, and West Lombok, Indonesia\*

Diana Teresa Pakasi\*\*

*Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia*

Irwan Martua Hidayana

*Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia*

Anke van der Kwaak

*KIT Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

Gabriella Devi Benedicta

*Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia*

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### Abstract

Child marriage remains prevalent in several regions of Indonesia, largely because of the strong adherence to interpretations of Islamic law that allow underage marriage. This practice often leads to early divorce, significantly affecting young couples, children, and families. This study examines the repercussions of child marriage divorce in Indonesia, with a particular focus on the agency of young women during their life transitions following divorce. We argue that young women assert their agency by navigating their aspirations against Islamic sexual morality and traditional marital norms. From 2017 to 2020, across the three Indonesian provinces, our qualitative research revealed that marriage and divorce were deeply embedded in communal practices. In these contexts, cultural and religious norms rather than formal legal systems dictate the understanding and practices of marriage and divorce. By examining various marital and divorce practices, this study highlights the resilience and agency of young Indonesian women as they navigated their lives after divorce. This shows how they challenge traditional norms and advocate independence, offering insights into their struggles and triumphs in the face of societal expectations.

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### Key words

Child marriage, divorce, agency, social navigation, gender norms

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\* This research was supported by the Universitas Indonesia PUTI Q3 Grant NKB-2069/UN2.RSTI/HKP.05.00/2020 and Koninklink Institute voor de Tropen contract number C-085/2017 KIT project number 2300083.17.

The authors would like to thank to all study participants and Ni Nyoman Sri Natih, Fatimah Azzahro, and Reni Kartikawati for doing the data collection.

\*\* Corresponding author

## Introduction

Child marriage is such a harmful practice that its elimination has been included in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5.3). Despite economic growth offering women alternatives to marriage in Indonesia, child marriage remains widespread (Jones, 2001; Nobles & Bутtenheim, 2008). The 2018 National Economic Survey reported that 11.2% of women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18, with 20 provinces exceeding the national average (BPS, Bappenas, UNICEF, & PUSKAPA, 2020).

Efforts to eradicate child marriage in Indonesia commenced in the twentieth century, notably with the onset of the New Order Era post-1965. The issue of marriage age became a significant concern, clashing with the vision of modern Indonesia, as child marriage was viewed as a barrier to girls' education and their entitlement to a stable and healthy marriage (Blackburn & Bessell, 1997). The 1974 Marriage Law set the minimum marital age at 16 years for girls and 19 years for boys, with parental consent also required for those who wanted to marry under the age of 21 years. In 2019, Amendment of Marriage Law Number 16 raised the minimum marriage age to 19 years. However, the persistence of social factors, such as poverty and incomplete education, increases the risk of child marriage. Girls from poor households in rural areas who have not completed their primary or secondary education face a higher risk of marrying before the age of 18 (Rumble, Peterman, Irdiana, Triyana, & Minnick, 2018). Cultural norms include gender expectations and entrenched practices (Buttenheim & Nobles, 2009; Malhotra, 1997). Without significant social intervention, child marriage continues to circumvent legal restrictions, with local authorities sometimes facilitating underage marriages to align themselves with community norms (Grijns & Horii, 2018).

Marriages before the age of 18 are significantly more likely to result in divorce, with higher divorce rates observed in regions where child marriages are common (Platt, 2017). Women married in their teens are notably more likely to divorce within 15 years than those who marry later (Dahl, 2010). Although the repercussions of divorce following child marriage have been studied globally, the specifics within the Indonesian context are less understood.

## Literature Review

Marriage practices in Indonesia are complex, reflecting the vast diversity of norms and arrangements across more than 300 ethnic groups in the country.

Arranged and early marriages of girls, including child marriages, are prevalent practices in Indonesian society. Child marriage persists in several regions, largely because of strong adherence to interpretations of Islamic law that permits underage marriage (Cammack, Young, & Heaton 1996; Jones, 2001).

Furthermore, in Indonesia, marriage and divorce transcend legal formalities and are deeply rooted in communal traditions. These practices are not always governed by state laws and regulations but can be informally established and potentially dissolved by local Islamic religious figures, such as *kyai*, *ustaz*, or *ulama* (Platt, 2017). Additionally, the annulment of a child's marriage often involves negotiations and arrangements by the child's parents or relatives, sometimes with the assistance of village bureaucrats (Grijns & Horii, 2018), highlighting the communal nature of these matters in Indonesian society.

Divorce practices are complex phenomena, particularly in the context of child marriages. In Indonesia, the boundaries between marriage and divorce are often blurred, because the definition of marriage is contested (Brickell & Platt, 2015). A myriad of marital and divorce practices exist beyond an officiated and legally registered marriage through the Office of Religious Affairs. Previous studies have demonstrated various marital practices and dissolution of marriages (Aisyah & Parker, 2014; Brickell & Platt, 2015) negotiated in everyday life, that challenge both legal and traditional Islamic marital norms in Indonesia (Nisa, 2018). This complexity highlights the flexibility of the marital institution; marriage is not a formal, fixed event but consists of fluid practices. People may enter or exit marriages multiple times in their lives, indicating ambivalent forms of marriage and marital dissolution (Brickell & Platt, 2015). In environments in which union formation is ambiguous, distinguishing between formal and informal divorce separation becomes challenging (Clark & Brauner-Otto, 2015).

Considering the complexity of marital dissolution, this article focuses on young women's varied experiences of divorce, highlighting how they exercise their agency in navigating life after a child marriage. Young women face divorce, which is often confusing and leads to an uncertain future; yet, they enact agency instead of passivity. We argue that young women exercise agency by navigating their aspirations, which contrasts Islamic sexual morality and traditional marital norms. Despite being stigmatized by the community, these young women demonstrated their ability to become independent through work, socialization, dating, or re-marrying, reflecting their resilience and capacity to shape their own lives.

## The Child Marriage Divorce Situation in Indonesia

Child marriages often include *siri* (secret) marriages (Wibowo, Ratnaningsih, Goodwin, Ulum, & Minnick, 2021) and polygamous marriages (Grijns & Horii, 2018). *Siri* marriages are Muslim unions conducted without official state recognition (Nisa, 2018). Frequently conducted under religious or cultural laws, child marriages usually avoid formal registration, resulting in many women lacking marriage certificates. This absence of official documentation hinders access to critical services, such as maternal healthcare, owing to bureaucratic barriers and the social stigma associated with having children outside of legally recognized marriages (Cameron, Suarez, & Wiczekiewicz, 2020).

In Indonesia, strong social norms emphasizing the preservation of girls' virginity can render child marriage a socially acceptable practice. Child marriage is sometimes employed to prevent premarital sex (*zīnah* in Islam) or to restore the family reputation following premarital teenage pregnancy (Kok et al., 2023). Additionally, there are cases in which young people choose child marriage as an exercise of agency, either to avoid *zīnah* or to escape the stigma associated with remaining unmarried. However, such marriages are often dissolved with relative ease (Kok et al., 2023).

During the early 2000s, Indonesia experienced a 12% increase in divorce rates over a span of six years from 2003 to 2009 (Heaton & Cammack, 2011). Data from the Indonesian Statistical Agency from 2013 to 2015 revealed a significant increase in reported cases of *talaqs* (divorces initiated by husbands according to Islamic law), with 324,277 cases in 2013; 344,237 in 2014; and 347,256 in 2015 (BPS, 2017). This trend persisted, with 374,516 cases in 2017 and 408,202 cases in 2018, indicating a 9% increase within just one year (BPS, 2019). Recent studies on divorce in Indonesia have highlighted a particularly high increase in divorce rates among rural women who marry early and urban women who postpone marriage (Widyastari, Isarabhakdi, Vapattanawong, & Völker, 2020). Divorce among rural women is common, as early marriages among rural teenagers often come with the mutual understanding that spouses can divorce and return to their families if the marriage fails (Heaton & Cammack, 2011). In urban areas, higher divorce rates among women who marry later may be attributed to urban women's decreasing dependence on their spouses due to growing economic independence, aspirations for self-fulfillment, and the value placed on individual choices (Widyastari et al., 2020). Further studies have indicated that lower-income and less-educated couples are more accepting of dissolution for reasons such as domestic violence and

financial neglect. In contrast, educated middle-class urban couples experience a more prolonged and complicated divorce process, with educated women focusing on financial independence and the resolve to exit unhappy marriages (Rinaldo, Nisa, & Nurmila, 2023). This shows the varied experiences and trajectories of divorce in Indonesia, which are deeply influenced by socioeconomic background.

Data analysis from 2013 to 2015 revealed that women who married before the age of 18 years had higher divorce rates than those who married later (Judiasih, Rubiati, Yuanitasari, Salim, & Safira, 2020). Further analysis of the Indonesia Family Life Survey from 1993, 1997, 2000, 2007, and 2014 confirmed that marriages involving young women under 18 years of age are more likely to end in divorce (Cameron, Contreras Suarez, & Wieczkiewicz, 2023). This evidence supports previous research suggesting that child marriages are often followed by higher divorce rates (Heaton & Cammack, 2011; Kartikawati, 2016; Marcoes & Simorok, 2016; Platt, 2017).

A study by Marcoes and Simorok (2016), conducted in five provinces, found that divorce in child marriages often results from unequal gender relations, which disproportionately disadvantage girls and the economic pressures young couples face. Cameron et al. (2020) highlighted that young women who marry early tend to be less involved in household decision-making. Furthermore, Kusumaningrum (2015) and Watoni (2010) suggested that child marriages frequently lead to divorce because of partners' lack of preparedness to handle complex marital issues.

This research seeks to deepen the understanding of life after divorce among those who have experienced child marriages. It addresses a gap in earlier studies, which primarily viewed divorce following child marriage as having a disproportionately negative impact on women. This research makes several significant academic contributions to the field of gender studies and feminist theory, particularly in its examination of life after divorce for those who have experienced child marriage. By focusing on life after divorce, rather than only on the conditions leading to or the effects of divorce, this research provides empirical data on the outcomes of divorce following child marriage. This shifts the narrative from a singular focus on negatives to an exploration of resilience and adaptation, expanding the scholarly understanding of how affected individuals manage and transform their lives after divorce. This study also challenges the predominant view in earlier research that primarily portrays women as disproportionately victimized by divorce following child marriage. Unlike previous research that portrayed women in these settings as oppressed victims in need of saving, this study recognizes them as empowered individuals with agency. This perspective is supported by feminist

scholars such as Abu-Lughod (2002) and Mahmood (2005), who emphasize the importance of acknowledging women's agency as a means to effectively empower them and challenge patriarchal structures. Highlighting these women's agency offers a counternarrative that emphasizes their capacity to actively shape their own post-divorce realities. This reconceptualization enriches the feminist dialog about agency within oppressive structures.

This study is particularly important in patriarchal and Islamic societies. It critically examines how cultural, religious, and social frameworks shape the perceptions and realities of divorced women. This research underscores the need to understand these contextual factors when discussing gender and empowerment, thus providing a nuanced view that avoids oversimplification. Finally, by documenting the strategies that women employ to navigate life after child marriage and divorce, this study offers insights into policies and interventions. These findings could be crucial for non-governmental organizations and governments seeking to support divorced women especially young ones in patriarchal and Islamic contexts. Understanding women's agency and capacities can lead to more effective and empowering support structures.

### **Conceptualizing Young Women's Agency and Social Navigation**

Addressing women's agency in the context of a patriarchal society has been a topic of debate in theorizing agency. To what extent do women exercise agency in contexts that compel submission to patriarchal power structures built upon cultural and religious norms? Previous studies have shown that Indonesian women living in a patriarchal social structure still express various forms of agency. Robinson (2009) points out the diverse forms of women's agency that are in accordance with the gendered order in Indonesia. In Lombok, young women enacted agency within a society dominated by two important ideologies: Islam and local *adat* (cultural customs) (Bennett, 2005).

Rinaldo (2014) explained how Muslim women in Indonesia, despite living in a patriarchal religious society, assert their agency. She introduces "pious critical agency" as the capacity to critically engage with religious texts and actively advocate for women's rights (Rinaldo, 2014, p.825). Similarly, Aisyah and Parker (2014) noted that Indonesian women experiencing domestic violence exercise agency in their marital relationships. These researchers contend that Indonesian women navigate patriarchal societies by asserting moral righteousness and challenging male authority in marriage. We agree with Rinaldo, Aisyah, and Parker that Islam and

women's agencies are not inherently at odds. Instead, Islamic religious norms can empower young women to make independent choices, positioning them as agents of their own lives, rather than merely victims of patriarchy.

In the broader context of Islamic society, we echo Mahmood's (2005) perspective that agency should not only be understood as the capacity to resist patriarchal norms but also as the diverse ways individuals engage with, transgress, and embody social norms. Mahmood challenges the liberal feminist interpretation of agency, which often equates agency to resistance against oppressive power structures, particularly in the Islamic context. She critiques this perspective for failing to fully capture the experiences of women deeply embedded in nonliberal patriarchal religious traditions. Instead, Mahmood suggests redefining agency as the capacity for action shaped by specific subordinative relationships. Her work examines the agency of pious Muslim women in Cairo, arguing that their religious practices exhibit a form of agency overlooked by liberal feminist theory (Mahmood, 2009). Mahmood's insights have significantly influenced views on Muslim women's subjectivity, recognizing them as agents shaped by, but not confined to, religious frameworks (Sehlikoglu, 2018). This shift in perspective opens up broader inquiries into human agency within feminist and anthropological theories, beyond simple binaries of oppression and resistance.

The concept of subjectivity, which is foundational to understanding agency, has been critically examined in poststructuralist theories. These theories challenge the universalism of "man," as conceptualized in the practice theories of scholars like Bourdieu, Giddens, Sahlins, Sewell, and Ortner (Ortner, 2005). Ortner discussed agency as essential for understanding how individuals interact with the world, are influenced by, and influence their environments. She emphasizes that agency is not an inherent will but is shaped within a cultural matrix of subjective experiences, emotions, thoughts, and meanings. She explored agency through personal feelings, desires, anxieties, and broader cultural contexts, examining how it manifests amid challenges such as pain, fear, or confusion and the ways individuals navigate these states (Ortner, 2006). Ortner's approach to agency aligns with Mahmood's, suggesting that agency transcends the simple dichotomies of oppression and resistance, and is deeply influenced by the specific social, cultural, and historical contexts of individuals.

We draw on Mahmood and Ortner's conceptualization of agency as the capacity to strategically navigate social structures and power dynamics to achieve objectives, even though individuals act under conditions of unequal power. Agency entails the negotiation, resistance, or accommodation of prevailing norms and ex-

pectations to achieve desired outcomes. It is not solely oppositional or liberatory but can assume various forms depending on the context. Mahmood and Ortner's idea of strategic agency provides a nuanced perspective on how individuals interact with social structures and exert agency within specific cultural settings, recognizing it as a construct shaped by discursive traditions within power frameworks. Similarly, Ahearn (2001) proposes that recognizing the various manifestations of agency within a particular sociocultural context is more insightful than simply framing agency as free will or resistance.

To understand how young women exercise agency within the context of the Islamic discursive tradition, we drew upon the concept of social navigation. Utas (2005) defined agency as a tactical process involving social navigation during action execution. Drawing on Vigh (2003), he discusses how individuals who demonstrate agency skillfully maneuver through challenging social and political landscapes. Vigh posits that social navigation serves as an analytical framework for understanding how people pragmatically engage with evolving social conditions (Vigh, 2010), especially in navigating difficult circumstances within restrictive structures (Vigh, 2009). This concept aids scholars in exploring the interplay among agency, social structure, and change (Vigh, 2009). We employ the concept of social navigation to highlight young women's agentic capabilities in managing life transitions. Specifically, life after divorce presents a multifaceted challenge for young women in Indonesia, requiring them to negotiate their paths in light of both the available opportunities and the constraints of Islamic moral frameworks.

## Methods

This article presents the findings of a study conducted between 2017 and 2020 in three Indonesian regions: Sukabumi Regency in West Java, Rembang Regency in Central Java, and West Lombok Regency in West Nusa Tenggara. These areas were selected as intervention sites for the "Yes I Do" program, which was supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 2016 and 2020. The program's goals were to reduce instances of child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and female genital mutilation/cutting. This study aimed to provide insights that could inform the implementation of the Yes I Do program's interventions.

Each of the selected sites had high rates of marriages under the age of 18 and displayed unique geographical and socioeconomic characteristics. In Sukabumi, the focus was on the village of Cisolok, which is known for its coastal landscape and tourism. Menoro Village in Rembang, characterized by its rural environment,



**Table 1. Characteristics of Study Participants**

Age	Sex	Registered	Unregistered
15-18	Female	6	1
	Male	-	-
19-24	Female	13	8
	Male	2	3
Total		21	12

and Kediri Induk Village in West Lombok, an urban area, were also included. The selection of these villages was guided by consultations with local non-governmental organizations involved in the Yes I Do program, particularly those handling cases of child marriage divorce.

We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 33 individuals (28 young women and five young men) across the three villages. All participants were married before the age of 19 and were subsequently divorced. Table 1 outlines the participants' characteristics including sex, age, and registration of the divorce. Notably, there were no male participants in the younger age group (15–18 years), reflecting a higher prevalence of child marriage among girls. Registered divorces outnumbered unregistered ones (21 to 12) primarily because those with registered divorces were more forthcoming in discussing their experiences; thus, they were more likely to participate in our study.

Our participant pool was relatively small, largely due to the mobility of young women under the age of 24 who are divorced, many of whom migrate to cities or abroad for work or remarry and move to other villages. The participants were selected based on recommendations from the community and female leaders.

In addition to individual interviews, we organized six focus group discussions with young men and women aged 18–24 from each village. We also interviewed religious court judges, representatives of the Office of Religious Affairs and various other religious and community leaders. All interviews and discussions were transcribed and analyzed thematically using NVivo software.

## Results and Discussion

### Child Marriage and Divorce in Sukabumi, Rembang and West Lombok Sukabumi.

Two forms of child marriage exist in Sukabumi: first, siri marriage (a religious but unregistered marriage), and second, an official marriage registered at the Office of Religious Affairs, often involving the falsification of the bride's age, and less frequently, the groom's age, to meet the requirements of the Marriage Act. In siri marriages, couples do not officially register their unions at the Office of Religious Affairs; however, their marriage is considered legitimate under Islamic law. Typically, in these cases, the bride is under the age of 18 and her parents opt for marriage in accordance with Islamic norms. Sometimes, once the couple reaches the minimum age for marriage as stipulated by the Marriage Act, they proceed to register their marriage officially. Child marriages formally registered at the Office of Religious Affairs usually involve altering the bride's age (and occasionally the groom's age) to adhere to the requirements of the Marriage Act. The decision to opt for either a siri or an officially registered marriage lies with the parents.

Some child marriages occur for economic reasons. Families from lower economic backgrounds view their daughters' marriages as a solution to financial hardships, often seeking a partner with greater financial stability for their daughter and encouraging her to marry him. Additionally, child marriages can result from premarital pregnancies, with parents arranging marriages to prevent family disgrace. During a focus group discussion with young men aged 18–24 years in Cisolok village, a young man who had experienced child marriage and subsequent divorce shared,

Child marriage often stems from parental neglect, as their children engage in spontaneous relationships and become pregnant. In some situations, owing to financial constraints, they are unable to complete their education, leading their parents to arrange marriages for their daughters.

As some child marriages are siri, their divorces often go unrecorded by the Office of Religious Affairs. Only divorces from marriages previously registered with the Office of Religious Affairs, whether child marriages or not, are documented in the religious court. In these instances, the couple either files a divorce lawsuit or reports the talaq to the religious court. Table 2 presents the divorce cases recorded in the Sukabumi Regency Religious Court, indicating that divorce law-

**Table 2. Divorce Cases in Sukabumi Regency from 2012 to 2016, reports received by the Cibaḍak Religious Court, Sukabumi Regency**

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
<i>Talaqs</i>	151	148	172	182	180
Divorce lawsuits	614	647	763	793	981
Total	765	795	935	975	1,161

suits filed by wives significantly outnumbered talaqs initiated by husbands. A divorce lawsuit is a legal action initiated by the wife, while talaq represents the husband’s right to end the marriage by simply telling his wife, “I divorce you.”

In Sukabumi, there are three forms of divorce that follow child marriage: divorces legally registered at the Office of Religious Affairs, unregistered divorces, and divorces documented only by village officials. Most individuals avoid religious courts for divorce proceedings, except for those with a higher socioeconomic status, who seek a divorce certificate through registration. Typically, only those with officially registered marriages pursue formal divorce registration.

A husband can initiate an unregistered divorce verbally by pronouncing talaq to his wife, either face-to-face or via text message (SMS), and such divorces are considered valid under Islamic law. This was the experience of an 18-year-old girl who was married at the age of 14 and then divorced by her husband over the phone. Additionally, an unregistered divorce may occur when a husband abandons his wife and children, cuts off all contact, or disappears. These unregistered divorces leave young women and their children in a state of uncertainty and lack legal documents to confirm the end of the marriage. A 21-year-old man from Cisolak village, who had gone through a divorce, shared, “After the divorce, I have never again communicated with my ex-wife; I also avoid discussing the children.”

For a registered divorce and to obtain a divorce certificate, one must file for a divorce at the religious court. The court mandates that the applicant attend at least three divorce hearings. Applicants must also pay fees related to their distance from the court, with costs ranging from Rp 381,000 (approximately US\$27) to Rp 591,000 (approximately US\$42), excluding transportation. Given these expenses, some have opted to have village officials issue divorce letters instead.

## **Rembang.**

While most marriages in Menoro Village are legal and registered, siri marriage is

also practiced in cases of child marriage. Some parents opt to marry their underage daughters to alleviate their family's economic burden and secure a better life for them. Matchmaking practices in Menoro Village are often facilitated by *dandan*, matchmaker known for their reputation and extensive networks (Benedicta et al., 2017). A *dandan* can be either a woman or man, a neighbor, or a prominent religious figure (*kyai*). Some parents and families seek a *dandan*'s assistance to find a suitable match for their child or family member, while some *dandans* take the initiative to identify potential brides deemed "marriage material, usually girls who have reached puberty, dropped out of elementary or junior high school, or have not pursued further education.

Similar to Sukabumi, parents in this area often arrange their children's marriages in response to premarital pregnancies or to prevent premarital sex, prioritizing the family's honor over the girl's age. Typically, girls married under such circumstances drop out of school. Moreover, some married girls remain unemployed because job opportunities for women beyond farming are scarce in the village. In addition, their husbands may not have permitted them to work outside of their homes.

The prospect of becoming an old, unmarried woman is daunting for young women and their families. Commonly, women aged 23 years or older who are out of school, unemployed, and single are labeled spinsters. A young divorce is often considered preferable to bearing the stigma of spinsterhood. This perspective was shared by a young woman during a focus group discussion with women aged 18–24 in Menoro Village:

It is better to be a young divorce than an old spinster. This means that at least someone desires you. Here it is quite easy to find divorcees compared to spinsters. Being a spinster raises questions like why someone did not marry her so that she became an old spinster.

In Rembang, divorce can be legally registered in the religious court, occur through an unregistered (or *siri*) marriage, or occur informally, such as when one spouse leaves. The Rembang Regency Religious Court reported 1,404 approved divorce cases in 2019, including *talaq* divorces initiated by husbands and divorce lawsuits filed by wives (Larasati & Nurhadi, 2021). Some female participants in our study reported filing for divorce after their husbands abandoned them for months without any communication.

The marriage registrar officer, or *mudin*, plays a crucial role in assisting the people of Menoro in registering marriages and divorces. Those seeking a divorce must provide the necessary documentation for the *mudin* to process their case in the Rembang Religious Court. The cost of the trial process, including two to three

hearings, transportation to the court, and the mudin's service fees, averages around Rp 1.5 million (approximately US\$100) (Benedicta et al., 2017). The number of hearings depends on whether both parties agree to divorce; disagreements or absences can lead to additional hearings.

Filing for a divorce is emotionally taxing, exhausting, and costly, making family support crucial. Most parents initially encouraged reconciliation, especially when their children are involved. However, if reconciliation is impossible, parents often support their child's divorce decisions.

### **West Lombok.**

Child marriage in West Nusa Tenggara is closely linked to the tradition of *merariq* (Bennett, 2014; Colquhoun & Nilan, 2020), a local custom of eloping in which a woman elopes with her boyfriend to his or his relatives' home. Typically, the woman is aware of the plan to elope. However, there are instances in which women are unaware until their partners arrive, leaving them unable to refuse. A woman was considered to have eloped if she did not return home after midnight or the following day. The boy's family reports the *merariq* to village officials, who then inform the villagers and discuss the marriage with the girl's parents. There are two forms of marriage: *merariq*, based on mutual agreement, and *melaik*, in which the girl is taken without her consent. Furthermore, child marriage is reinforced by the strong religious principle that sex outside of marriage (*zina*) must be avoided, making marriage post *merariq* an anticipated solution. The parents we interviewed expressed a preference for marrying their daughters rather than allowing them to date boys despite acknowledging the dilemma that young couples may not be mature enough to marry.

Two forms of child marriage were practiced in Kediri Induk Village: those registered at the Office of Religious Affairs and *siri* marriages. If the bride was under the age of 16 or the groom is under 19, the girl's or boy's parents obtained a letter of dispensation for marriage from the religious court. In many child marriage cases, parents did not apply for a dispensation; instead, they just married their children through an unregistered *siri* marriage. The community viewed *siri* marriage as legitimate, as it was performed in accordance with Islamic norms.

Child marriage had adverse economic, social, and psychological effects on young couples. At times, they struggled to make ends meet as they did not have any income. In this situation, they rely on their parents to meet their daily needs. A 22-year-old female participant from Kediri Village said that her husband was only

a gardener whose wage was very low:

Sometimes he gives me money, sometimes he does not. He gave me only 2,000 rupiah (15 cents). What can I buy with 2,000? My father usually gave me 35,000 or 30,000 when I went back home.

In some instances, young couples encountered relationship issues stemming from the husband's jealousy, such as when he demands that his wife stay at home or restricts her mobile phone use. Several young women reported having a mobile phone but were prohibited from using it by their husbands because of fear of contact with other men, which could incite jealousy. Some said that marriage limited their self-expression and social interactions. For example, a 22-year-old female participant from Kediri Village shared that her husband never allowed her to use her mobile phone or go out with friends, while he enjoyed full freedom and seldom stayed at home. This imbalance led to frequent arguments and, ultimately, the dissolution of their marriage.

Commonly, newlyweds live with the groom's family, where communal living sometimes led to conflicts. Parental interference in a couple's disputes often exacerbated problems, and in some cases, parents even encourage their sons to divorce. A 21-year-old female participant from Kediri Village recounted her ex-husband saying, "My mother told me to divorce you," to which she responded, "Okay fine, if you think your parents are more important than me."

Divorces from child marriages often went unregistered because verbal divorce is considered sufficient under Islamic teachings. The young individuals we interviewed described how a marriage could end with the husband declaring, "I talaq you," "I am divorcing you," or "I am sending you home to your parents." We also encountered instances of talaq pronounced over the phone or indirectly through a friend of the husband.

While previous studies have highlighted that child marriages, particularly those conducted as religious or Islamic (*siri*) marriages, often leave women without a marriage certificate, thereby restricting their access to essential public services (Cameron et al., 2020; Prameswari & Agustin, 2018), our study also identified the issue of verbal divorces or talaqs. These are prevalent and result in uncertain marital and family statuses for women and children. The absence of divorce certificates meant that husbands were not held accountable for supporting their children. In response, the local government and Office of Religious Affairs have been assisting individuals in obtaining legal divorce documentation, as observed by Sukabumi and Rembang.

Our findings from Sukabumi, Rembang, and West Lombok also align with previous Indonesian studies, indicating that child marriage is often driven by a combination of factors. These include economic hardship, where marriage transfers financial responsibility from the girl's family to her husband; the desire to prevent premarital sex or pregnancy; and the stigma associated with remaining unmarried (Djubaedah, 2019; Kok et al., 2023). Despite these common motivators, our study delves into the varied practices of child marriage and divorce, reflecting the experiences of young women across different regions. We observed how local customs and norms regarding women's sexuality, along with differing interpretations of Islam, shape marriage and divorce practices. In all examined sites, siri marriages and talaqs—unregistered verbal divorces initiated by husbands—are common. These practices are considered valid marriages and divorces according to their interpretation of Islamic law but often have detrimental effects on women and children.

### Lives After Divorce for Young Women

In Rembang, child marriages often result from parental matchmaking. Our research found that divorce allowed young women to heal from the trauma of child marriage and achieve greater happiness. Girls in arranged marriages experienced feelings of constraint, stress, and fear, as they were required to stay home and needed their husband's permission to socialize or work.

Despite enjoying newfound freedom after divorce, young women faced societal stigma. In Rembang, young female divorcees, labeled *rondo enom* (young divorcees), were stereotyped as seductive because of their attire and makeup, which were more pronounced than those of unmarried girls. However, an 18-year-old woman from Menoro Village expressed that she felt no shame for being divorced, stating, "There is nothing wrong with being a divorcee; it is not a sin."

For young women in Rembang, life after divorce signified a new beginning, allowing them the opportunity to explore new romantic relationships. During a focus group discussion with young women aged 18–24 in Menoro Village, one participant shared, "When we were married, we never wore makeup, but after getting divorced, we enjoy dressing up and wearing makeup. We have also become more active on Facebook to connect with friends." The young female divorcees interviewed reported having greater freedom in selecting their dating partners, unlike some unmarried girls for whom dating is taboo and often restricted by their parents.

Similar to Rembang, it is common for individuals in West Lombok to return to their parental homes after divorce. Parents, especially mothers, frequently welcome their children and grandchildren, providing not only economic support but also moral guidance and assistance in caring for their grandchildren. A 24-year-old female participant from Kediri village recounted her mother's advice following her divorce: "Stop overthinking. Focus on your mother and your child. How can you become happy again? Find a job. Now, who will support you? Who will look after the child?" Mothers play a crucial role in offering support and comfort to those who have recently been divorced.

After a divorce, young women face considerable societal stigma and economic difficulties. This study shows that societal views, especially the labeling of young divorcees as "rondo enom" in Rembang and "*bebalu*" in West Lombok, complicate their attempts to create new identities and relationships. Despite these challenges, women remain undeterred. They navigated these social landscapes drawing strength from family ties, particularly maternal support and community networks. This reflects Vigh's (2003) observation that individuals who demonstrate agency maneuver adeptly through evolving and challenging social and political environments.

Additionally, as most child marriages in the area originate in merariq, young female divorcees discover that life after divorce provides them with greater freedom. Social media platforms have become a popular means for young people to socialize freely. A 22-year-old female participant from Kediri Village shared,

Facebook has provided an opportunity for us to reconnect with people who were once part of our lives. My current husband was a friend from middle school. We reconnected through Facebook after many years of no contact, and eventually, we got married.

Living with parents offers young women the opportunity to reconnect with friends. A 24-year-old described how friendships helped her move past her divorce, stating, "I share with others and use social media. Now, there is someone new in my life, so I am no longer sad." However, adapting to the new identity of a young divorced person can pose challenges. One mother shared that her daughter faced depression after her divorce and encouraged her to start fresh, while reminding her of her duties toward her child. The family, particularly the mother, plays a crucial role in offering support and comfort to recently divorced individuals.

In Kediri Induk Village, young divorced women encounter societal stigma. Known as *bebalu* (meaning "young divorcee" in the Sasak language), they are often unjustly accused of flirting with other women's husbands during community



social events. Additionally, rumors about the early termination of their marriages abound. Despite these challenges, some young women boldly face the stigma and rumors head-on. A 25-year-old participant expressed her disregard for the rumors, confident that her decision to divorce was the right one for her. She said,

Yes, many people speak badly about me. Sometimes they malign us. But I don't care; let them talk. The experiences and domestic conflicts are mine alone. So, in my view, this is the right decision, my decision is right.

In Sukabumi, female divorcees with children emphasize that their primary goal was to find employment to support their children. However, because of child marriage, these young women had to leave school early, which limited their job prospects. Living with their parents was not financially viable because their earnings were insufficient to support both their parents and children. With limited skills, the only option for earning a higher income was to leave their children behind and work as factory laborers in other cities or as migrant workers abroad. Unlike the other two areas, which rely on a traditional agricultural economy, the modernization and expansion of the market economy in Sukabumi have compelled people to find jobs that pay, placing additional pressure on divorcees to secure sufficient income to care for their children.

Similar to their counterparts in the other two areas, young women in Sukabumi faced stress and anxiety because of societal stigma. They were often labeled *janda herang* (beautiful young divorcees), a term that suggests that young divorcees are seen as both alluring and dangerous, leading to restrictions on their behavior and mobility. A religious and community leader in Cisolok shared the following:

It is an embarrassing term, it is used to make fun of people. *Jabe*, *janda herang* meaning beautiful divorcee. If she (the divorcee) goes out in the evening, even if she does nothing, she's seen negatively. She's considered a disruptor of other families. That's the problem she has to face, if she's a divorcee and she goes out, visits her siblings, or works. The community suspects her. She's made fun of by friends or men, as *jabe*.

Amid the village's surveillance and control over sexuality, some young women opted for time to heal from their divorce and the associated stigma through self-isolation. Eventually, according to some participants, they began to socialize again by joining Quran recitation groups or women's groups within their

communities. In some cases, young divorcees chose to remarry or reconcile with their former husbands. A 24-year-old female participant from Cisolok village stated, “Many divorcees participate in the community’s social activities, look for jobs elsewhere, or remarry individuals from other villages.” Reflecting on her experience, a 22-year-old woman from Cisolok village expressed, “Life was better after the talaq; I regained my freedom. I’m relieved because, during my marriage, my husband paid me little attention.”

Through the participants’ narratives, we observed how young women navigate societal norms and personal healing processes after divorce amid the scrutiny and regulatory norms surrounding women’s sexuality in the village, where women are judged and constrained. The diverse choices of young divorcees, whether to remarry or reconcile with their former husbands, reflect the varied ways in which women envision their future post divorce. These decisions are deeply personal and shaped by individual circumstances, societal expectations, and the presence of supportive networks. The findings show how young women’s agency navigates within power structures, which, in this study, are the traditional norms of sexuality and marriage. Young women were able to realize feelings of freedom, happiness, and autonomy after getting divorced.

Echoing Ortner (2005), this study shows that divorce serves as a means of asserting agency in response to oppressive social norms and marital constraints. Despite facing stigma and societal expectations, these young women actively navigated their post divorce lives to challenge traditional gender roles and assert their autonomy in shaping their own destinies.

This finding resonates with Mahmood’s (2005) finding that power structures shape people in unforeseen ways. This study demonstrates that young women’s agency emerges amid challenges such as pain, fear, and confusion and highlights the strategies young women employ to cope with these conditions. This provides further insight into how young women negotiate agency within the framework of societal expectations and religious norms. Young women who embrace divorce may navigate their agency by reinterpreting religious teachings to justify their decisions.

We also observed that the ideas of individual freedom and autonomy were not stated as reasons for young women seeking divorce; rather, they were the result of their social navigation. Social navigation may not be politically motivated, but it is socially situated (Vigh, 2010). In this study, social navigation by young women encompassed both immediate survival and the drawing of trajectories into their imagined futures to become reliable providers for their children, be independent of

their parents, and have a new partner. The findings highlight various social, economic, and cultural factors that shape post divorce trajectories, ranging from familial support to societal stigma and economic constraints. Through social navigation, young women strategically navigate these complex social terrains, seek support from their family and community, challenge oppressive norms, and pursue opportunities for personal and economic empowerment.

Although divorce is one of the most traumatic incidents in life (Bevino & Sharkin, 2003), it can bring about personal growth and optimism when exploring new challenges that they did not have before (Thomas & Ryan, 2008). In this study, young women demonstrated their ability to navigate challenges during the transitional period after divorce. Participants from Sukabumi, Rembang, and West Lombok demonstrated their capacity to adapt to immediate and changing circumstances. They endeavored to develop independence despite socioeconomic structures not being in their favor. All participants came from lower-income families, and the findings of this study align with those of Rinaldo et al. (2023), who indicate that lower-income and less-educated couples are more accepting of dissolution for reasons such as financial neglect.

Their experiences also show how they navigate the stigma and taboos surrounding women's sexuality. Supporting previous studies suggesting that divorced women in Indonesia and elsewhere are often stigmatized and marginalized (Konstam, Karwin, Curran, Lyons, & Celen-Demirtas, 2016; Newton-Levinson, Winskell, Abdela, Rubardt, & Stephenson, 2014; Parker, 2016), our study also found that under the social forces that stigmatize and constrain young women, they could still move toward the virtues and codes of the Islamic moral framework. Young women assert that stigma does not matter in their lives as long as it is responsible for their children and themselves, as obligated by Islam. They use Islamic narratives to make sense of their actions. This shows how engagement with religion provides knowledge and enables individuals to create a future within a moral framework and potential (Montgomery, 2016) and how young women are capable rather than victims in need of saving under the oppressive system (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2005).

Young women showed agency in making their own decisions when they married as children. In Indonesia, child marriage often occurs to mend the family's honor in cases of premarital pregnancy, avoid premarital sex, and conform to taboos on rejecting a marriage proposal, leaving little space for girls to decide for themselves (Benedicta et al., 2021). Therefore, after divorce from child marriage, with the support of their families, particularly their mothers and friends, they can

extend their options: having new activities outside their home with peers, broadening their friendships, building a new romance, and getting a job that boosts their self-esteem. These young women can reclaim their capacities, strengths, dreams, and hopes for the future.

## Conclusion

This study explored the complex interactions between societal norms, personal agency, and challenges faced by young female divorcees in Rembang, West Lombok, and Sukabumi. This illustrates that, while divorce is a traumatic event, it also presents a critical opportunity for personal growth and the reassertion of autonomy for young women previously trapped in the oppressive practice of child marriage. The choices these women make—whether to remarry or reconcile with their former husbands—are heavily influenced by their immediate social environment and reflect their unique aspirations for the future. These decisions, although highly personal, are formed within the broader context of individual experiences and societal norms, showcasing women’s resilience and agency within traditional Islamic frameworks governing sexuality and marriage. Thus, divorce becomes a gateway to self-discovery and empowerment, challenging established gender roles and societal expectations.

These young women actively shape their futures by leveraging support from their families and communities to expand their social networks, explore new romantic relationships, and pursue job opportunities that boost their self-esteem. This study resonates with Ortner’s (2005) perspective that agency is molded within a cultural framework of subjective experiences, which, in this case, involves forming new emotions, thoughts, and meanings about life after divorce. Many participants reported experiencing a new sense of freedom, happiness, and autonomy after divorce. Moreover, it highlights how young women defy the traditional notion of passive victimhood by making strategic life choices. This aligns with Vigh’s (2010) notion that social navigation, although not inherently political, is deeply embedded in social contexts. Despite the uncertainty of their futures, these young women display optimism for new possibilities, the ability to adapt to changing situations, and the development of independence, even within restrictive socio-economic structures. Vigh’s concept of social navigation further enriches our understanding of agency by illustrating how agency is exercised in an oppressive, uncertain, and evolving context.

Despite gaining freedom and autonomy, young women in Indonesia face sig-

nificant societal stigma and economic challenges following divorce. This study highlights how they manage this stigma, which is oppressive yet navigated with dignity, through the Islamic moral framework, thus enabling them to reinterpret their experiences and actions. This approach aligns with Mahmood's conceptualizations of agency (2005, 2009), illustrating that these women have the capacity to act beyond religious constraints.

In conclusion, these findings demonstrate young women's ability to reclaim and transform their lives after divorce. By exercising agency, they garner support from their families and communities, engage in new activities, expand their social networks, and explore employment opportunities that enhance their self-esteem. Despite societal and economic structures imposing constraints, these young women exercise their agency to build hopeful and vibrant futures. This study contributes to a broader understanding of young women's agency and potential for transformation within the context of societal norms and religious values.

Economically, while divorce opens the door to personal development, it also highlights the need for structural support to address the limited job opportunities and financial instability faced by these women, which are exacerbated by their early departure from education due to marriage. This study emphasizes the importance of supporting women's autonomy and equipping them with tools to navigate life after divorce effectively. This can guide legal, social, and economic policies to aid survivors of child marriages in advancing toward economic independence and changing the stigma associated with divorced women in conservative settings. This study advocates a nuanced understanding of the socioeconomic structures that shape the post-divorce trajectories of young women, emphasizing the crucial role of supportive familial and community networks in facilitating their social navigation and economic empowerment.

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*Biographical Note:* **Diana Teresa Pakasi** is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Universitas Indonesia and chair of the Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies at Universitas Indonesia.

*Biographical Note:* **Irwan Martua Hidayana** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology and a senior research fellow at the Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies at Universitas Indonesia.

*Biographical Note:* **Anke van der Kwaak** is a senior health researcher, advisor, and lecturer at KIT Royal Tropical Institute in the Netherland.

*Biographical Note:* **Gabriella Devi Benedicta** is a research associate at the Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies, Universitas, Indonesia.

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Received: September 13, 2023

Revised: March 14, 2024

Accepted: April 24, 2024

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