

---

# Negotiating dominant femininity: Eastern Indonesian migrants and mobile subjectivity

Catharina Purwani Williams, The Australian National University,  
[catharina.williams@anu.edu.au](mailto:catharina.williams@anu.edu.au)

---

## Placing women's mobility

In Indonesia, increasing women's migration<sup>1</sup> reflects the general rise in population mobility which is linked to rising incomes, education and better communication, and transport services. Women's mobility also positively correlates with their participation in the labour market, particularly in the fast-growing sectors of education and health services which provide sources of mass employment (Oey-Gardiner 1997: 135; Manning 1998: 100; 264). For instance, teaching jobs in cities have grown rapidly with an ongoing expansion of national education. Recently more than 42 million students were enrolled in more than 227 thousand institutions employing more than two million teachers nationally (Purwadi and Muljoatmojo 2000: 92). Autonomous travel by women in Indonesia (both temporary movement and migration), unlike for men, has been little examined until recently, as travel is naturalised as a man's discourse. This paper discusses rural-urban migration of contemporary East Nusa Tenggara women travelling by sea to be teachers and nurses in urban centres. The study is a part of a larger project on Eastern Indonesian women's travel in my recently completed PhD thesis (Williams 2003).

Firstly, I will situate women's mobility in the context of both social economic conditions and literature of migration as they apply to the spatial and historical Eastern Indonesia. Discussions of my approach to migration and field research are followed by a conceptualisation of women's migration in terms of its meanings for women. Discussions of East Nusa Tenggara, the province of origin of my informants, uncover several scales of social relations. I then turn to the stories of four women with different intensities of experience of the space of travel. The selected stories highlight how women's mobile subjectivities emerge and are constituted through travel. In Indonesia, women's economic opportunity in cities nevertheless comes into conflict with an image of 'a fulfilled woman', projecting the domesticated quality of a supportive wife and a good mother as the dominant femininity (Wolf 1992: 8). My informants' stories of migration contain these conflicts.

The women's mobility through taking up growing employment as nurses and teachers in urban centres outside the region indicates a process of negotiation of the dominant femininity. Women's strategies to move out of their homes raise an interesting issue about a need to widen the focus of the economic reasons of migration to include the importance of women's politics of location. Women are moving out of the region for much richer reasons, which may not be captured by the economic approaches to migration.

Feminist geographic approaches include variables such as gender, class and race as determinants of women's mobility, and these are shown by an expanding set of theoretical and empirical works on gender and mobility (see for example Bondi and Domosh 1998; Duncan and Gregory 1999b; Laws 1997; Lawson 1998; McDowell and Sharp 1997; McDowell 1999; Pratt 1992; Yeoh and Huang 1999a). Women's mobility in these approaches is connected with a gendered space of home and it also represents a space at the margin of women's daily routines (Yeoh and Huang 1999b). These approaches offer greater potential to understand East Nusa Tenggara women's migration to urban centres. There is little information about contemporary Indonesian women's mobility within these approaches, with the exception of some case studies in migration (see for example Heyzer and Wee 1994; Hugo 2000; Robinson 2000b; Silvey 2000; Silvey 2001; Wolf 1990; Wolf 1992).

Migration research employing broad political and economic frames dominates the work on

people's mobility mainly using Neo-classical economic and macroeconomics of development analysis associated with the 'push-pull' factors of labour movement across regions, implying an unproblematic notion of place (Lawson 1998: 41). As Silvey and Lawson (1999) argue, within this developmentalist perspective, migration is largely assumed to occur for economic reasons, reflecting a Western modernisation trajectory. Women migration from rural to urban areas is assumed as a part of the problem of surplus labour in the rural agricultural sector and the growing demand for labour in industrial sectors in urban areas. Otherwise, women relocate as a part of a broader family movement in search of better economic and social opportunities. The narrow developmentalist focus and increasingly untenable assumption – that origins, destinations, and migrants themselves including their gender, race and class are unproblematic parts of migration – leaves the other reasons for migration unquestioned (Silvey and Lawson 1999: 122-3).

In the context of Indonesia, migrant subjects or women's agency in relation to mobility is under-theorised, as it is often assumed to be a product of their structural class position and the forces of globalisation, thus the women's voice, identity and meanings of mobility are commonly missing in migration research (Silvey and Lawson 1999: 126). My ethnography of women's travel suggests the need for widening the scope of analysis to include the potential multiplicity of identities of the women migrants and the change of subjectivities across spaces. The ways in which migrant subjects are conceptualised require analysis beyond the political economic of migration (Silvey and Lawson 1999; Silvey 2001). In geography, Silvey (2000) was among the first to include women's agency in the research agenda on gender and mobility in Indonesia, incorporating not only determinants of structure in the historiography of locality but also individual action and agency in a theorisation of gender and mobility.

The feminist geography literature offers some insights into understanding the complexities of women's migration in the form of women's ambivalent subject positions in relation to spatial movements (Blunt 1994a; Blunt 1994b). Feminist and post-colonial theorists problematise migrant identities and their ways of negotiating and inhabiting multiple subject positions. Within this wide range of approaches, recent works ascertain the importance of power relations in the constructed differences of gender, ethnicity and class in shaping the experiences of women migrants (Gibson 2001; Kofman and England 1997; McDowell 1999). Following this more nuanced conceptualisation of power, my project explores the specific practices of power through the spatial entangling of migration and its consequential release of power for migrants (Sharp *et al.* 2000). Some work employing critical ethnography on women's mobility shows a theoretical potential to address the complex questions about women's identity and subjectivity in relation to multiple sites (Lawson 2000; Stacey 1997). It also acknowledges that places are interpreted differently between genders, so decisions on mobility are also gendered (Lawson 2000; Silvey and Lawson 1999: 123). My study employs a critical ethnography of contemporary Eastern Indonesian women's migration to highlight the interplay of space, subject, and subjectivity of migrants.

## **The approach**

This research is a part of a larger study on contemporary Eastern Indonesian women's travel through three routes: inter-islands, urban centres and overseas destinations. The six-month field research was conducted between 1998-2000: (1) in the popular migration destinations established by census data, including Makassar (Sulawesi) and Surabaya (Java); (2) the place of origins in parts of East Nusa Tenggara; and (3) while travelling on boats in the region. The reconnaissance trip ascertained the sheer number and thus the focus on women in the caring professions. For this part of the study I conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen informants, seven teachers and eight nurses, and some of their stories are presented here. They are similarly originally from rural or semi rural areas from East Nusa Tenggara with a middle income, mostly farming family background. Initial connection with a few informants generated snowballing engagements with the rest of them. We comfortably used Indonesian language for communication.

Women's migration stories present issues that highlight the mutual constitution of changing spaces and subjectivity, enabling me to tease out the emergence of both a new subjectivity and a different femininity among migrants. I present the contexts of migration

from their home villages and pay attention to women's experiences that reflect ways in which women as subjects understand their migration to work in the feminised caring professions. I argue that women take advantage of 'patriarchal bargains' as active agents moving out of home to achieve personal goals (Kandiyoti 1998; Sharp *et al.* 2003), subverting from within rather than challenging social structures which enables mobile subjectivity. Individuals often simultaneously support some aspects of social order such as patriarchy whilst opposing others. Migrants's spatial entanglements conjure up the 'knotting and weaving of power' (Sharp *et al.* 2000: 24) to convey the complexities of adopting a feminine employment to break free of the confines of gendered expectations at home. I conceptualise these women's experience as a 'repositioning of self' (Pile and Thrift 1995: 201). Rural women who voyage to migrate to urban centres embody both physical and metaphorical movement:

Every voyage can be said to involve a re-siting of boundaries. The travelling self is here both the self that moves physically from one place to another, following 'public routes and beaten tracks' within mapped movement, and the self that embarks on an undetermined journeying practice, having constantly to negotiate between ... a here and a there, and an elsewhere (Minh-ha 1994: 9).

The women move across different spaces, to experiment and negotiate a range of boundaries. These are journeys of migrants to create a liminal, in-between and transient space, where the rules are blurred. Rather than objectify women, viewing them as migrants from peripheral areas and in terms of their particular economic position, I explore the ways women construct and re-construct their identities through the process of mobility (Silvey and Lawson 1999: 124) and their changing network of relations. I have followed the shift of focus of the recent research on women's travel to how subjectivity changes through time and space to capture the fluidity, the ambivalence and depth of the subject (Pile and Thrift 1995: 5).

### **Themes of travel: meanings of boundary crossings**

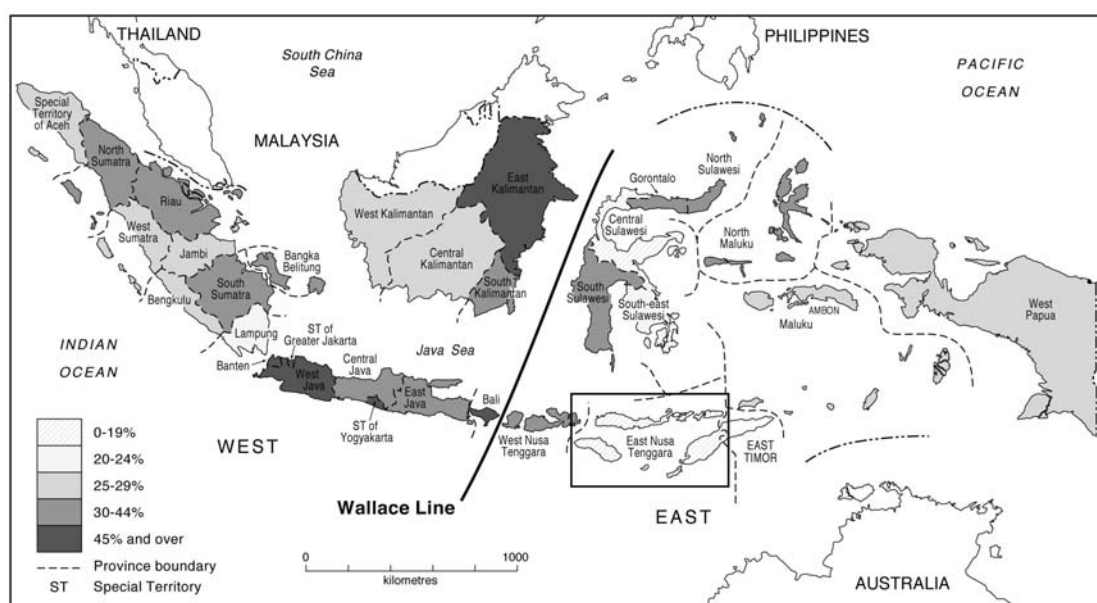
Feminist analysis requires attention to place-based identities and relationships within its spatial and historical contexts (Domosh and Morin 2003: 258). The relational nature and material cultures of the women's everyday lives reveal gender as embodied and discursive (Jacobs and Nash 2003: 265). Here I focus on gendered boundaries of propriety under the dominant femininity that structure the local relations in Eastern Indonesia. Through migration, women slip in and out of boundaries – the propriety frames which historically used to discipline women (Jacobs and Nash 2003: 267). I conceptualise women's travels as practices of negotiating a variety of scales of boundaries and in that way their travels resist or subvert established social processes. As McDowell (1999: 4) argues:

Places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries. These boundaries are both social and spatial – they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded.

Through migration, women slip in and out of boundaries, entering different scales of relations. My informants' stories of travel contain imagery of negotiating a macro scale of boundary, depicting Eastern Indonesian identities from periphery going to the centre of power in Java. This imagery follows the state discourses of social and economic development, in which Eastern Indonesia is associated with lack. A single woman's travel also represents a negotiation of kin and gendered boundary of propriety in decision making at the local scale. Once away, she, rather than her male kin, makes decisions including on mobility. The bodily scale of boundary is also negotiated when a single young woman travels. At home, a daughter's purity is protected by the male kin who control her mobility. These negotiations of boundary of propriety in women's migration are expanded in their stories.

## Eastern Indonesia: place and social relations

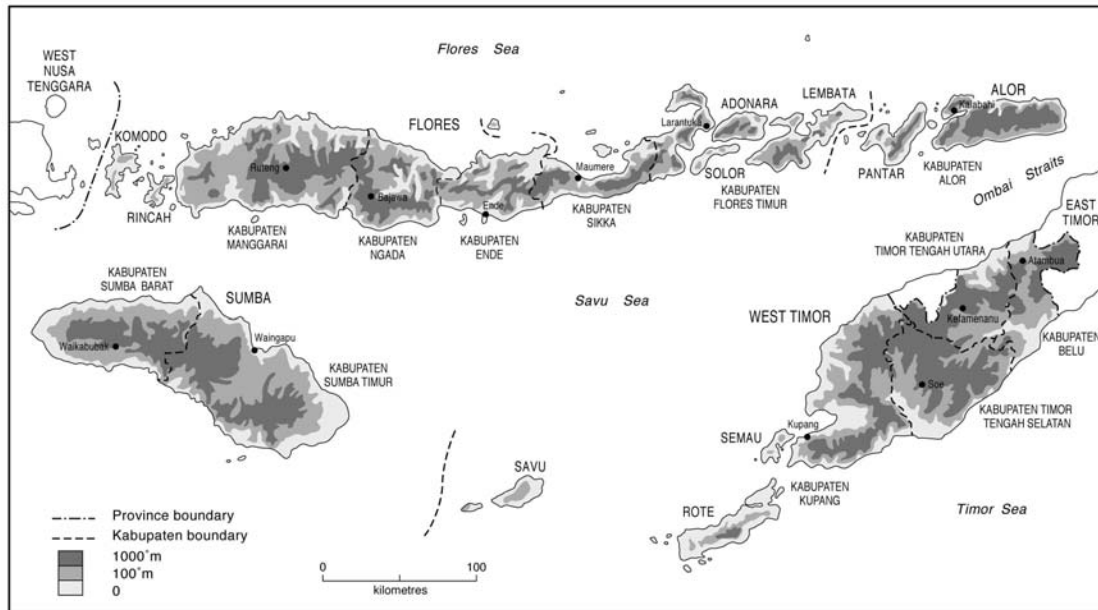
Eastern Indonesia is a diverse region in terms of its physical geography and people. The scattered islands of the region, its hilly and mountainous areas and the dispersed small population occupying small pockets of fertile land has influenced both the traditional settlement patterns and the people's contemporary subsistence lifestyles. Difficulties in transport and communication create a sense of isolation (Jones 1995: 8-14). East Nusa Tenggara province consists of 4.7 million hectares of land supporting 3.9 million inhabitants (Badan Pusat Statistik Propinsi NTT 2001: 37). It is one of the least urbanised provinces in Indonesia with less than 20 percent of the population living in urban areas (see Maps 1 and 2). In the province, 65 percent of the population aged 10 years and over is recorded as economically active in the year 2000. The remaining 35 percent includes students attending school and housewives working at home (Table 1).



Map 1: Percentages of urban population by province, 2000

Activity during the previous week	Numbers	percent
<i>Economically active</i>	1 912 770	65
Worked	1 887 088	64
Looking for work	25 682	1
<i>Not economically active</i>	1 030 357	35
Attending School	469 329	16
House keeping	357 306	12
Others	203 722	7
Total	2 943 127	100

Table 1



Map 2: Topography of East Nusa Tenggara

Some of the economically active women choose to work outside the region, which on one hand conflicts with the domesticated image of a virtuous woman (Williams 2003). By migrating as a teacher or a nurse though, women are able to perform the femininity which is 'socially, historically and geographically constituted' (Laurie *et al.* 1999: 4). During my field research, I noticed how women chose to present their migrations to the city with reasons surrounding their function as professional carers. Teaching and nursing professions fit very nicely with the dominant femininity: that is, nurturing. The elevation of teaching and nursing professions in the local context as a 'divine calling' produces a unique mission that necessitates travel for women as part of their 'vocation'. This connection between women's migration to the city and their practice of caring rests upon the common theme of the dominant femininity. Why do women use this path?

The history of romantic travels within the West – begun in the late eighteenth century and lasting through to the end of the nineteenth century – repeats itself within journeys of contemporary Eastern Indonesian women travelling for *panggilan* or 'vocation'. One of the central goals of romantic travel is to be immersed in cultural difference (Duncan and Gregory 1999a: 8) – and this resonates with the Eastern Indonesian women's wish to travel to urban centres. They too seek an experience of difference from their rural or semi-rural origin, and this curiosity is framed through a romanticising of their motives as being those of caring for others.

The availability of teaching and nursing jobs in the cities facilitates the flow. However, woman's agency is as important as the economic structure in directing a woman towards the feminised occupations (Bozzoli 1991: 96-7). The elevation of these caring professions at the local context has been amplified by the state's ideology manifesting in the dominant femininity. Constraining to their mobility on one hand, the dominant femininity has been reproduced and successfully used by the women as a justification for their migration. My analysis of women migration to urban centres attempts to tease out the emerging and changing constitution of migrant subjects. To do so, I trace the ways they imagine and take up different identities in the liminal space of their travel.

### Caring professions

A professional path as a teacher or a health worker in the context of East Nusa Tenggara commands the community's high respect. Both professions contain a 'sacred' connotation, *pekerjaan mulia*, meaning honourable job. *Ibu guru* is a reverent title for a female teacher, meaning madam teacher. In the villages I visited in the island of Flores, a headmaster is

one among the highest in social status. This is followed, among others, by a *mantri* or a health worker. Thus women's choice of the socially acceptable occupation of carers in contemporary Indonesia under the State *ibu*-ism<sup>ii</sup> becomes a perfect frame for their migration. They can still maintain the gender role of caring and extend it to the public sphere, in schools or hospitals. My field research shows that in their *kampung* (hamlets), not only do people respect women in these sacred professions, but most perceive them as virtuous women, despite their migration.

Language used for these professions shows the significance of the jobs – sacred professions, *pekerjaan mulia*. Some women felt strongly that they were being 'called', *terpanggil* – the way the Catholic religious (priests or nuns) were called to serve God – to take on the responsibilities of caring.<sup>iii</sup> The status of these professions reflects local possession of both knowledge and power.

Next, I present the stories of Detti, Evita, Ima and Bibi because they not only provide the observable material condition of the women's move to the city, but also contain imaginative journeys of identity through practices of femininities and the resulting mobile subjectivity. Through their stories I explore how in the liminal space of travel, women attempt to balance social expectations with their own strategies to be 'oneself,' (*menjadi diri sendiri*) – a repositioning of self to gain autonomy/power and independence.

### **Nursing, caring in public and in private: Detti**

Detti was a single, soft-spoken nurse in her early 30s, who I met through a friend in a hospital in Surabaya (Java). As the youngest in a family of seven children of whom all, except her, had married and left home, Detti was the last in the family's hierarchy. As an unmarried daughter and a youngest sister, she was under the protection and authority of her family. This relationship reflected the hierarchical gender and kinship structure of the local community in the district of Timor Barat. Detti turned her life around starting with her migration to the city. Her justification for leaving the village was that she was *terpanggil* or 'called' to care for others. This line of reasoning was too noble for the family to dismiss. Her decision to independently pursue this profession evidently subverted her typically subordinate relationship within her family.

Detti arrived in Surabaya to study to become a nurse ten years ago. Her most recent trip back to her home in a subdistrict of Kefamenanu in Timor Barat was the first in the past three years. Vaguely, she mentioned some pressures and resentment from the family regarding her rare visits home. The few travels back home were the product of her rational decision, where the cost of transport and other problems associated with going home, including *oleh-oleh*, meaning gifts from travel, was expensive in relation to her income. One weekend I unexpectedly stayed with Detti overnight in her tiny one-bedroom rented house in a small alley in Surabaya. It was six o'clock in the evening and beginning to get dark and torrential rain poured down. The area was severely flooded, so I was stranded there. I offered to buy our dinner in a nearby flooded *warung* (small food stall), and went there by beca (trishaw). Kindly, Detti later invited me to share her single bed in a cramped two by two metre room, which I gratefully accepted. While busy helping her empty the constantly filling buckets of water whooshing from the roof cracks, I shared a piece of Detti's everyday life routine, typical of living in the city by herself.

Detti appears as an independent professional. She expressed a strong intention to break with her mother's life path as a local housewife, as she imagined and preferred different identities. Interestingly, Detti having renegotiated her identities and turned her back on the subject position of 'housewife' in the village, seemed to have located herself within the domestic role as a carer – a motherly figure in the city. She indicated that it was her role to be 'there' in Surabaya and to care not only for the physically sick but also 'to help anyone in need'. Not surprisingly, I witnessed her strong bond with others from the region who often visited her rented house. Her identities as a motherly and capable figure for a small group of young students from East Nusa Tenggara and a professional nurse, were grounded in the local context of living in a *kampung* within Javanese neighbourhoods and working in a city's hospital.

Detti attracted the affection of her community for a few good reasons. She was able to draw on her wide social network. This was an asset for the community. While with her, I observed her reaction to an incident which unfolded before our eyes as she helped an elderly couple from her village of origin. They were on a mission from Timor to find their daughter's boyfriend in Surabaya. The young couple were students there, but the boy had disappeared after the girl confided that she was carrying his baby.

Competently, Detti made arrangements involving the confused family. As the youngest child, she would not usually command such authority in her own family. She took the elderly couple to her rented house, providing them with a place to stay, however crowded, and served them food. The couple were in obvious distress over the state of their daughter's affairs. Their daughter was perceived as 'living in a state of sin' according to their Catholic faith. By extension the parents were 'impure' and were denied holy communion by their local parish priest. Calmly, Detti negotiated some difficult decisions on behalf of the couple. She arranged a party to search for the frightened boy. He was given a 'lesson' and thus suffered bruises, but he agreed to marry the girl. By contacting the right people Detti helped to arrange for a private church marriage for the young couple. According to their local tradition there would be *adat* (customary law) to be taken care of and the young man's family would have to pay a fine in addition to the girl's bridewealth.

The spatiality of Detti's intervention in the negotiation of marriage raises an interesting aspect of power which 'can not be imagined as unidirectional or panoptic-like' (Robinson 2000a: 203). She was caught up between following the social order of local tradition and exercising her judgment at a time of crisis. The practice of her subtle leadership role in the place of migration highlights Detti's agency and the multidimensional aspects of power. As a consequence of the spatial entangling of her migration, new relations of power are established which to some extent enables and permits her power (Sharp *et al.* 2000: 24).

The previous incident also displays the mutual constitution and performativity of both spaces and identities (Blunt 1999: 423; Women and Geography Study Group of the IBG 1997: 196). In the liminal space that she created through her migration, Detti emerged not only as an autonomous capable woman but also as an authoritative figure with the right connections in the community and the local church. Her relocation enabled mobile subjectivity as she moved between various identities. The multiple identities Detti occupies within the main discourse of femininity situate her on a firm footing as an autonomous subject within her circle in the city. She used a simplistic altruistic line to explain her move:

It was my duty to help others. I travelled all the way here, there must be a purpose for this. There is some thing that I have to do, which is actually my 'calling'.

Detti's feminine caring identity in both the informal social group as well as as a nurse in the hospital space, moved her through wider social networks to her advantage. As the story indicates, the private and public spheres of Detti's everyday life created norms and practices that produce and reproduce gendered activities and social relations within them (Martin 1992: 208). Her decision to pursue her profession in the city proves that it was a strategic move. In the cities, Detti occupies wider subject positions than at home as the youngest daughter and female sibling at the lowest family hierarchy who owns very little autonomy/power. The practice of simultaneously reproducing and subverting the dominant femininity in Detti's story may be conceptualised as the entanglements of power (Sharp *et al.* 2000), however contingent, and this is also shared by the following story.

### **Mobility and purity: Evita**

Evita, an outgoing 29 year old married nurse, gained a reputation among her peers in Surabaya as an exemplary nurse, '*perawat teladan*'. Originally from Flores, she was the first child of seven children of a tightly knit family of a *suku* or clan of Sikka. Evita's *langgar laut* (crossing sea) travel started when she was 18 years old, as she voyaged to enter the nursing school in Surabaya. However, her imaginary mobility started with a fantasy when she was barely seven years old and had wanted to go and study in Java:

I had been wanting to be a nurse since I was a little girl. My mum was hospitalised once, when I was about seven years old and I had a direct experience of knowing the nurses who looked after her. They were lovely persons in white uniforms so I was very impressed. Although I didn't know much about a nurse's duties at the time. This left a lasting impression deep in my mind, that I would like to be like those nurses when I grew up. Ever since I could remember I had always wanted to be like them in white uniform and helping sick people...

Later, after completing her education, she secured a permanent job as a nurse in a reputable hospital in Surabaya. Ever since, she has travelled regularly between Surabaya and Flores. Evita's present residence was in a two-floor brick house on the side of a busy road in a central area in Surabaya. Her husband worked in a private company, earning a very good income. The couple lived comfortably, as shown by their house and the modern household appliances in their home, including a big television and stereo set. The lounge room was spacious, painted in off-white colour, three-by-four metres in size. On the wall there were two of her 1998 enlarged wedding photos in fancy frames. The lounge chairs were comfortable, made of carved mahogany wood with crimson velvet upholstery, an interior style commonly found in middle class Javanese houses in urban areas. As we sat comfortably sipping a glass of iced tea which a maid had served us, she told me her story.

Her life, in her own words, was *'penuh badai'* (full of storm) and had its share of torments and troubles. An advantage of being away since such a young age was, *'bisa menjadi diri sendiri'*, to be herself. She was able to resist indirect kin and community pressure to remain at her home village until marriage. However being away from home had consequences for her reputation. She was aware that her mobility to the city defied certain local norms of gendered propriety. Her frequent travels aroused gossip about the possibility of improper relations with men in other places.

Evita's solo travels to and within urban areas created a perception at home that she was *'loose'*. To migrate for work in the city is to be potentially impure, despite her caring profession. This had negatively affected her relationship with a potential spouse. The time of her courtship with her (now) husband was plagued with arguments and his jealousy. He accused her of playing around, on the basis of her mobility. In this sense her mobility was equated with freedom of the road, including sexual freedom. The polarity of purity/impurity of her body in connection with her migration appeared several times throughout her stories.

Evita shared with me her internal tensions dealing with the external perception of her femininity. Her subject position as a daughter and a member of the clan created a dilemma between on one hand, her obedience to stay within propriety boundaries and purity of her body, and on the other hand, her choice of an identity as an autonomous woman. From her comments about her community I found that she was aware of the society's double standard applied to women's purity in relation to her migration, which is not an issue for men. Evita's resistance to the double standard on purity of the body related to her mobility manifested itself in a stance against the fiancé, which resulted in a tense relationship with him. He (now married to her) accused her of having an affair. There have recently been several cases of single Florenese girls who fell pregnant, known as *'losing their virtues'*, after intimate relationships in the city. Evita was particularly hurt at being accused of *hilang kesuciannya*, or losing her virginity/virtue:

I did not defend myself or any effort to that effect, just challenged him [the fiancé] to find another girl whom he was certain that she was a virgin... However he did not want to end the relationship and eventually we got married. At our wedding night he sobbed and asked for forgiveness for once doubting my virginity, as he then knew the truth.

Evita skillfully negotiated among multiple femininities, the dominant and the newly learned ones. Other informants chose to represent their migration in terms of the dominant femininity. When asked to tell their stories, they echoed similar concerns and mostly chose a virtuous representation of rescuing the young, sick or poor. This representation fits with Wilkes' description of the romantic construction of a caring career:



The world was a place in which wrongs could be righted, tears mended, and the proper order restored. These were the points in the narratives when speakers' accounts became quite vivid, and the women spoke with forthright passion and conviction (Wilkes 1995: 242).

As women 'restoring order' how could they be 'out of order' themselves? The nurses and teachers whom I interviewed were similarly passionate in describing their *panggilan* (vocation) rather than referring to it merely as a profession. And this *panggilan* necessitated and justified their migration to urban centres. The romantic form of my informants' description of their *panggilan* was, however, contingent upon the context and sequence of the stories. Behind their migration stories there is a shared theme of how the individual is strategically distancing herself from home and the family to create a space for repositioning self.

Most of my informants nominated an altruistic motive of 'being able to help people' as they moved to take up teaching and nursing. They presented themselves relying on the qualities of the dominant femininity, which also bears the footprints of the state gender ideology. This view drew heavily on the expected behaviour of *tahu menempatkan diri*, or knowing one's place – a woman's place is to nurture. Even though this woman's place is an increasingly unstable and contested space in national debates. Women's politics of location in this way overcomes the social constraints of moving away from home through the patriarchal bargain. Travel opens up wider social networks in which women widen their subject positions and enable them to draw power from within the relations. Women who were teachers or nurses could remain within the boundaries of the gendered propriety and free to travel to explore other identities. As Evita's travel shows, women are able to perform multiple femininities and diverse identities which are mutually constituted through and with spaces. Evita's story shows spatial entanglements in which a migrant subject simultaneously conforming to and subverting the dominant femininity enabling power in changing contexts.

### **Teaching and becoming: Ima**

Many contemporary Eastern Indonesian women choose to work as teachers – one among a range of social roles in urban centres in which women perform their feminine identity. Teaching jobs with security of tenure not only bring a reliable source of income but also local prestige. Women of the region have taken the opportunity of getting a teaching job in the city as a way to access knowledge and different scales of power as the following story indicates.

Ima was a single, friendly teacher in her mid-30s, originally from Palue island near Flores. She travelled to take up her teaching appointment in Makassar in 1991 and has since voyaged between the two places. Her autonomous, independent life style, as a single professional was one aspect of her life she valued most. This dimension of power was possible from a distance – in a liminal space – she created between herself and the family. She was very passionate about her teaching role and viewed it as her life's mission.

Ima enjoyed teaching in a Catholic high school in Makassar. She displayed a personal autonomy in making the decision about her future and remaining single. Distance from family, she commented, was essential to being *mandiri*, or independent. There was less family interference with her private life, or '*keluarga tidak banyak campur tangan*'. Being in this liminal space provided a necessary environment to move between a range of identities and roles. She was able to make a unilateral decision of refusing an arranged marriage and stick by it.<sup>iv</sup> Gentle as Ima might have appeared, she had defied her extended family's wish to get a husband of some social status. In the local context, a single status for a woman was thought of as *tidak laku* or 'nobody wants you' – making a woman's life 'incomplete' thus showing her to be of a lower status. This state ideology of the dominant femininity idealises roles of a supportive wife, a good mother and an impeccable housewife which produces and reproduces a stigmatised identity for a single mature woman which is known as '*perawan tua*', meaning an old maid, as observed in many parts of Indonesia. In Java, Berninghausen and Kerstan (1992) notes a social pressure for single eligible woman to marry:

Once a woman has been accepted into the adult community, her sphere of activities broadens considerably, even if the marriage does not last. Compared with the societal devaluation of women who remain single, divorced or widowed women are stigmatized to a much lesser degree. However, women who live alone for whatever reason are especially subject to suspicion and destructive gossip on the part of others (Berninghausen and Kerstan 1992: 116).

Unavoidably, Ima must have attracted a fair portion of the village's gossip. Ima's physical qualities – an average height, slim, dark skinned with bright eyes, a dainty nose and pleasant smile, with curly black hair which was grown to shoulder length graced her friendly face – in the local context give no reason for remaining single. In her village of origin, Ima had transgressed the boundaries of propriety by remaining single well into her thirties. Daughters are valued among others for their potential of bringing a bridewealth to increase the family's social status. As far as Ima's family was concerned, her case was a lost opportunity for an alliance with a high status family. The extended family was upset, and for a period of time they refused to talk to her.

By distancing herself from the family and making her own decision, she was temporarily being excluded from the kin and family relations. Nevertheless, Ima's decision regarding her single status prevailed. For Ima, her teaching was, on one hand conforming to the dominant femininity in caring for the young, but on the other hand, being single went against that same femininity. The question remains, how does teaching in the city provide her with power to decide her life path?

Throughout her adult life, Ima performed the dominant femininity. However, the physical and emotional distance gained through travel, and its creation of the liminal space, allowed her to go against that very same femininity. By becoming a single professional, she defied her family authority. Being separated from the family provided her with a liminal space to constitute a shifting subjectivity. Her personal desires were important for her. Here, the liminal space of her travel allows a process of becoming.

In presenting and analysing women's migration/travel stories I find, like Lawrence (1994), that the trope of travel 'provides a particularly fertile imaginative field for narrative representations of women's historical and personal agency' (Lawrence 1994: 20). Travel provides a liminal space to manoeuvre around. Another informant, similar to Ima, demonstrated her agency in a desire to travel so as to change trajectories of her everyday life:

I had enough of the monotony of home. Usually women wait at home to be married. But I want to extend my horizon and to be myself and not depend on anyone else.

The women's travel stories highlight the women's agency in accessing the liminal space for themselves. This space mutually constitutes a wider range of identities and shifting roles. In creating the physical and emotional distance, women are able to make their own decisions, instead of relying on kin, parents or a husband.

Travel, as a point of entry to a liminal space, opens up a new space of possibilities and uncertainties, enabling women's shifting subjectivity. The micro politics of women's strategic moves to the city, as Ima's story shows, underlies the economic reason of finding a teaching job in the urban areas. Other women found travelling provided a transient space of exploration of identities. The ship, in particular, became a contested liminal space of gender relations, as the following travel story demonstrates.

### **Contesting relations in liminal space: Bibi**

The physical process of travel itself occurs in a liminal, in-between space with blurred norms, opening to contestation of relations between space and identities. The physical travel on a ship is a moving space in-between, mutually reconstituting changing identities.

Bibiana, or Bibi for short, was a single 27 year old primary school teacher voyaging on a PELNI state owned ship from Surabaya to Waingapu in Sumba island. The three-day journey offered many opportunities for interactions and making new acquaintances. As the voyage progressed, Bibi and her companions were quite jolly, treating the ship as a meeting place. On the ship we occupied the economy class (the cheapest as we shared benches on the lowerdeck), I was on the periphery of this newly formed group of young people, not quite an outsider who watched from the sidelines, but I floated away at times too. We ate our rationed dinners, shared food and did a few other things together, such as filled in crossword puzzles and told each other jokes. Bibi won the admiration of a good looking, tall young man in the group, whom she met on the ship. When Bibi complained of a headache, he instantly fussed over her.

Getting intimate on a ship seemed natural. Being confined in the same space for a lengthy period encouraged people to pass the time by communicating with each other. Depending on the time of the day, the group would split and then came back together, such as at meal times and entertainment/movie time. On the first night, I noticed that Bibiana and the man walked hand-in-hand on the outside deck where the light was dim and there were fewer people. In the confines of the crowded ship, their physical closeness in the liminal space was almost unavoidable.

In this transient and fleeting space of her travel, Bibi initiated moves to closeness and the man responded positively. In the next afternoon, as we sat around in the lower deck getting rather bored, Bibiana cheerfully announced that she needed a hair trim. In no time she produced a pair of scissors from her luggage, and asked the man whom she had been with, to trim her hair. Rather hesitantly he obliged and trimmed her hair. Stroking Bibi's black hair with a comb he took his time brushing and tidying up her hair while we were watching them amusedly. The physical contact of the hair cut gave a further excuse for intimacy and seemed to legitimate the couple to get physically closer in front of other passengers, which was an impropriety had it been at home.

The fleeting quality of this liminal space of the voyage might have given the couple a sense of equality in the relationship. They might have been aware that theirs was a transient intimacy. They separately confided in me and I know that their attraction was mutual. It seems that the voyage offered the couple a liminal space with blurred norms and thus the inward delight of being admired and pursued. The disclosure of their intimate feelings indicates confusions in this contested space, where norms were blurred and new practices were produced. The ship becomes a contested space of relations, reflecting the mutual performativity of the space and our range of identities. Away from the social pressure as a teacher, Bibi did not have to carry out her externally ascribed role of the dominant femininity. Bibi seemed to be free in exploring her multiple identities, here, as a single woman travelling alone.

### **Liminal space: being away and a becoming**

The ways these teachers and nurses described their reasons for choosing the caring occupations are not a new insight. Contingent, micro, every day interactions strongly shape a woman's choice of sets of social roles. At the individual level of choosing a caring occupation, a woman is, to some extent, constrained by the dominant femininity. Their agency is crucial in the decision to pursue caring jobs in the cities, providing a justification for travel. Some informants were acutely aware of the reality of meagre salaries as nurses and teachers, whether working in the government or in private institutions. My informants' travel to urban areas seemingly conformed to the dominant discourse of the gender roles, particularly in choosing their feminine jobs as a nurse or a teacher. However, analysing their travels further shows that the conforming process was a subversion which actually generates power from within. Once gaining mobility, the women are on the path toward new possibilities. The women similarly travel to be able to explore a sense of self. This interpretation resonates with the experiences of other women travellers in different spaces and time. Biographies and interpretation of works of individual women travellers of the West in the nineteenth century confirm that, despite being confined to a woman's place 'which was first and foremost at home', when a woman voyaged, her construction of femininity in its relation to the domestic sphere was altered (Lawrence 1994: x).

Throughout the narratives, there emerged a theme of women's shifting subjectivity in their localised relations. Through the ethnography of travel I have shown tensions resulting from travel, the conflicting perceptions, thoughts and feelings, so as to draw connections between the liminal space of travel, the travelling subject, and identities. My informant's stories of their migration to the city reflect deeper experiences of strategically locating themselves in-between a polarised opposite between conforming and transgressing the dominant femininity. In the local context, similar to the early twentieth century cities in Europe, women's presence in the cities might be seen as a problem because it symbolised the promise of sexual adventure, 'a problem of order' (Wilson 1991: 5-6). In Indonesia, sexual adventure, excessive ambition and assertiveness for women is seen as a deviation (Hatley 1997: 94). Cities represent disorder and ambiguity as far as women's sexuality is concerned, but at the same time they also offer wealth and opportunity, promising liberation (Wilson 1991: 6).

I map women who travel as subjects taking a path along which they can move in the trajectories of power, along the lines of class, gender and race (Ferguson 1999: 160). I conceptualise travel as a liminal space allowing new encounters, and thus it is instrumental in the contestation and creation of identities. By taking new and wider subject positions while travelling, women's subjectivity is likely to shift along with experiences of multiple spaces. My informants' travels to the cities demonstrate the process of change in traveller subject positions and subjectivity. Their stories show how women partly sustained the local status quo of power in order to move beyond local relations into wider social relations. This shift of relations lead me to think of their travel as fitting the notion of liminal space – a transient, fleeting, and ambiguous space – which is full of uncertainties.

I argue that women exploited the fluidity and multiplicity of roles and identities in the liminal space of travel, enabling their mobile subjectivity. Mobile subjectivity, as with mobility, is associated with movement along trajectories of power and resistance, emerging from either proximity or distance and the associated connectedness (Ferguson 1999: 161). To conceptualise subjectivity as mobile is to find a way of imagining a self awareness of identities grounded in bodily lived experiences in the context of events constantly in motion (Jackson and Palmer-Jones 1999: 560; Ferguson 1999: 162). Through their migration women allow a space to manoeuvre within the interplay of the local gender relations and the dominant femininity. Women's mobility in the local context is a part of the dynamic processes of working out both the meanings of place and their own identities. The local culture, as a web of socially negotiated meanings, is embedded in the process of women's travel (Marcus and Fisher 1986; Silvey and Lawson 1999: 1245). Travel allows changes from the status quo of local relations to wider connections and this reflected the women's desire to gain more power through personal autonomy and independence. Gaining control of their own lives might have been the women's primary, if concealed, goal of mobility in the first place, thus exposing the limitation of the economic approach to migration. Unpacking their migration and examining their mobility as spatial entangling beyond the romance of their professions demonstrates that the local notion of *langgar laut* was a significant step in creating a liminal space to enact identities and fulfil personal goals.



### Acknowledgements.

This research was a part of a Ph.D project at the Australian National University, funded by the Australian Postgraduate Research Scholarship. I thank Katherine Gibson, Deirdre McKay, Joanne Sharp and Deborah Thien for their thoughtful comments.

### References

- Ananta, A., Anwar, E. N. and Suzenti, D. (1997), Implication of indonesia's future population, in Jones and Hull (1997), pp. 301-322.
- Badan Pusat Statistik Propinsi NTT (2001), *Nusa Tenggara Timur Dalam Angka*, Biro Pusat Statistik, Kupang.
- Berninghausen, J. and Kerstan, B. (1992), *Forging New Paths, Feminist Social Methodology and Rural Women in Java*, (translated by Barbara A. Reeves), Z Books Ltd, London.
- Blunt, A. (1994a), Reading authorship and authority: reading Mary Kingsley's landscape description, in A. Blunt and G. Rose, eds, *Writing Women and Space*, MAPPINGS: Society/Theory/Space, The Guildford Press, New York, pp. 63-67.
- Blunt, A. (1994b), *Travel, Gender and Imperialism: Mary Kingsley and West Africa*, The Guildford Press, New York.
- Blunt, A. (1999), 'Imperial geographies of home: British domesticity in India, 1886-1925', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geography* 24, 421-440.
- Bondi, L. and Domosh, M. (1998), 'On the contours of public space: A tale of three women', *Antipode* 30(3), 270-289.
- Bozzoli, B. (1991), *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983*, Social History of Africa, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.
- Domosh, M. and Morin, K. (2003), 'Travels with feminist historical geography', *Gender, Place and Culture* 10(3), 257-264.
- Duncan, J. and Gregory, D. (1999a), Introduction, in Duncan and Gregory (1999b), pp. 1-13.
- Duncan, J. and Gregory, D., eds (1999b), *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, Routledge, London.
- Ferguson, K. E. (1999), *The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Gibson, K. (2001), 'Regional subjection and becoming', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 19, 639-667.
- Hatley, B. (1997), Nation, "Tradition," and Constructions of the Feminine in Modern Indonesian Literature, in J. Schiller and B. Martin-Schiller, eds, *Imagining Indonesia: Cultural Politics and Political Culture*, The Center for International Studies, Ohio, pp. 90-121.
- Heyzer, N. and Wee, V. (1994), Domestic workers in transient overseas employment: Who benefits, who profits, in N. Heyzer and G. L. á Nijeholt, eds, *The trade in domestic workers: Causes, mechanisms and Consequences of international migration*, Asian and Pacific Development Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, pp. 31-101.
- Hugo, G. (2000), 'The crisis and international population movement in Indonesia', *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 9(1), 93-129.
- Jackson, C. and Palmer-Jones, R. (1999), 'Rethinking gendered poverty and work', *Development and Change* 30, 557-583.
- Jacobs, J. and Nash, C. (2003), 'Too little, too much: cultural feminist geographies', *Gender, Place and Culture* 10(3), 265-279.
- Jones, G. (1995), Introduction, in G. W. Jones and Y. Raharjo, eds, *People, Land and Sea*, Demography Program, RISS, ANU, Canberra, pp. 1-8.
- Jones, G. W. and Hull, T., eds (1997), *Indonesia Assessment: Population and Human Resources*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.
- Kandiyoti, D. (1998), Gender, power and contestation: 'rethinking bargaining with patriarchy, in C. Jackson and R. Pearson, eds, *Feminist visions of development: gender analysis and policy*, Routledge, London, pp. 135-51.
- Kofman, E. and England, K. (1997), 'Citizenship and international migration: Taking

- account of gender, sexuality and "race." *Environment and Planning A* 29(2), 191-4.
- Laurie, N., Dwyer, C., Holloway, S. and Smith, F., eds (1999), *Geographies of new femininities*, Longman, New York.
- Lawrence, K. R. (1994), *Penelope Voyages: Women and travel in the British literary tradition*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
- Laws, G. (1997), Women's life courses, spatial mobility, and policies, in J. P. Jones III, H. J. Nast and S. M. Roberts, eds, *Thresholds in Feminist Geography: Difference, Methodology, Representation*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Oxford, pp. 47-64.
- Lawson, V. A. (1998), 'Hierarchical households and gendered migration in Latin America: feminist extensions to migration research', *Progress in Human Geography* 22(1), 39-53.
- Lawson, V. A. (2000), 'Arguments within geographies of movement: the theoretical potential of migrants' stories', *Progress in Human Geography* 24(2), 173-189.
- Manning, C. (1998), *Indonesian Labour in Transition: An East Asian success story?*, Cambridge University Press, UK.
- Marcus, G. E. and Fisher, M. (1986), *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Martin, P. Y. (1992), Gender, interaction, and inequality in organisation, in C. L. Ridgeway, ed., *Gender, Interaction, and Inequality*, Springer-Verlag, New York, pp. 208-232.
- McDowell, L. (1999), *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geography*, Polity Press, Minneapolis.
- McDowell, L. and Sharp, J. P., eds (1997), *Space, Gender, Knowledge, Feminist Readings*, Arnold, New York.
- Minh-ha, T. T. (1994), Other than myself/my other self, in G. Robertson, M. Mash, L. Tickner, J. Bird, B. Curtis and T. Putnam, eds, *Travellers' tales: Narratives of home and displacement*, Routledge, London, pp. 9-26.
- Oey-Gardiner, M. (1997), Educational developments, achievements and challenges, in Jones and Hull (1997).
- Pile, S. and Thrift, N., eds (1995), *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation*, Routledge, London.
- Pratt, M. L. (1992), *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London.
- Purwadi, A. and Muljoatmojo, S. (2000), 'Education in Indonesia: Coping with challenges in the third millennium', *Journal of Southeast Asian Education* 1(1), 79-102.
- Robinson, J. (2000a), Power as friendship: spatiality, femininity and 'noisy surveillance', in Sharp et al. (2000).
- Robinson, K. (2000b), Gender, Islam and Nationality: Indonesian Domestic Servants in the Middle East, in K. Adams and S. Dickey, eds, *Home and Hegemony: Domestic Service and Identity Politics in South and Southeast Asia*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, pp. 249-282.
- Sharp, J., Briggs, J., Yacoub, H. and Hamed, N. (2003), 'Doing gender and development: understanding empowerment and local gender relation', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28, 281-295.
- Sharp, J. P., Routledge, P., Philo, C. and Paddison, R., eds (2000), *Entanglements of Power: Geographies of domination/resistance*, Critical geographies, first edn, Routledge, London.
- Silvey, R. and Lawson, V. (1999), 'Placing migrant', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89(1), 121-132.
- Silvey, R. M. (2000), 'Stigmatized Spaces: gender and mobility under crisis in South Sulawesi, Indonesia', *Gender, Place and Culture* 7(2), 143-161.
- Silvey, R. M. (2001), 'Migration under crisis; household safety nets in Indonesia's economic collapse', *Geoforum* 32, 33-45.
- Stacey, J. (1997), Can there be a feminist ethnography?, in L. McDowell and J. P. Sharp, eds, *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings*, Arnold, London, pp. 115-123.
- Suryakusuma, J. I. (1996), The state and sexuality in New Order Indonesia, in L. J. Sears, ed., *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, pp. 92-119.
- Wilkes, J. (1995), The social construction of a caring career, in B. S. Charlotte Burck, ed.,

- Gender, Power and Relationship*, Routledge, London, pp. 232-247.
- Williams, C. P. (2003), *Maiden voyages: Eastern Indonesian women on the move*, PhD thesis, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Department of Geography, The Australian National University.
- Wilson, E. (1991), *The sphinx in the city: urban life, the control of disorder, and women*, Virago, London.
- Wolf, D. L. (1990), 'Daughters, Decisions and Domination: An Empirical and Conceptual Critique of Household Strategies', *Development and Change* 21(1), 43-74.
- Wolf, D. L. (1992), *Factory daughters: gender, household dynamics, and rural industrialization in Java*, University of California Press, Oxford.
- Women and Geography Study Group of the IBG (1997), *Feminist Geographies: Explorations in diversity and difference*, Longman Ltd, London.
- Yeoh, B. S. A. and Huang, S. (1999a), Singapore women and foreign domestic workers: negotiating domestic work and motherhood, in J. H. Momsen, ed., *Gender, migration and domestic service*, Routledge, London, pp. 277-301.
- Yeoh, B. S. A. and Huang, S. (1999b), 'Spaces at the margins: Migrant domestic workers and the development of civil society in Singapore', *Environment and Planning A* 31(7), 1149-67.

---

<sup>i</sup> Permanent mobility or migration in Indonesia is defined as a movement with an intention to change the place of residence or if one stays in a new residence for more than six months (Ananta *et al.* 1997: 315).

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibu* means mother. The state ideology on sexuality and gender 'defines women as appendages and companions to their husbands, as procreators of the nation, as mother and educators of children, as housekeepers, and as member of Indonesian society -- in that order' (Suryakusuma 1996: 101)

<sup>iii</sup> Some specific Catholic terms are frequently used in the Christian dominated areas of East Nusa Tenggara (88 percent according to the Provincial Statistic Office (Badan Pusat Statistik Propinsi NTT 2001)).

<sup>iv</sup> In the past and although increasingly less popular among the young nowadays, parents used to arrange for a daughter's marriage. Berninghausen and Kerstan (1992: 116) point out that choosing a potential spouse is one of the most important issues in Indonesian women's lives. At the same time it also potentially creates one of the most serious conflicts within a family.