

# As The World Turns: Men Left Behind Due to The International Migration in Indonesia

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# As the World Turns: Men Left Behind Due to the International Migration in Indonesia

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Studies of women's migration have generally focused on two important elements, namely their economic contributions and their experiences as migrant workers (particularly the abuses that occur during migration and employment). Few studies have focused on men, particularly those who are left behind by migrant workers (80 percent of whom are women). This article explores the social processes experienced by men as a consequence of women's mobility and ability to work abroad. It shows that the labour migration of women challenges the patriarchal structures and concepts of their communities and their cultures. As the idea of a "male breadwinner" is eroded, fundamental transformations occur in their status and their social ordering. Through its examination of the male perspective, this article emphasises the need to understand migration as part of a broader social transformation, and that men also require protection as such transformation occurs.

**Key words:** *International migration, male studies, female labour, family, the left behind.*

## Introduction

The complex issue of Indonesian migrant labour has been discussed in various forums, seminars and publications; while NGOs have worked incessantly to advocate the rights and dignity of migrant workers. Special focus has gone to the various issues and consequences of migration experienced by women labourers, who are proportionally much more numerous than men (Hugo, 2002). Of the approximately 2.7 million Indonesian workers abroad—a



figure that includes illegal migrants as well as unofficial migrants (i.e. those who do not follow proper procedures)—as many as 82 percent are women (*Berita Nasional*, July 11, 2006). Most of Indonesia's migrant workers are spread across the Asia-Pacific, Middle East, and the United States, being involved in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations; up to 90 percent of migrant female workers are employed as domestic servants.

Various studies have shown women's vulnerability as migrant workers, including their lack of sufficient documentation, legal and institutional protection, and appropriate state commitment (Tyner, 1994; United Nations Population Fund, 2006; Leavey et al., 2007; Simmons, Menjivar & Téllez, 2015; Freedman, 2016). When women do not receive their rights as professional workers, they are more prone to workplace violence, arbitrary termination, and other harmful experiences—fraud, confinement, torture, rape, or even death (Kalyanamitra, 2005). In 2006, for example, more than 300 women migrant workers were killed.

In 2004, Indonesia's migrant workers contributed no less than USD 425 million to the national economy (Kalyanamitra, 2005: 4). As such, although women migrant workers have yet to have their rights fully protected, the government has worked in conjunction with NGOs and labour agencies to show its concern for and commitment to them. Questions of improving the treatment of women migrant workers abroad, as well as protecting migrant workers in general, have received wide attention amongst academics and activists. However, many pertinent issues seem to have fallen by the wayside, including the fates of the men who are left behind during the process of international migration.

### Men Left Behind in Literature

Migration research rarely concerns itself with those left behind, instead focusing on the economic consequences of involvement in migration (Hugo, 2002; Lindquist, 2010). One of few studies to consider those left behind was that of Biao (2007), who examined the parents, wives, and children of migrant workers and found that these people squalor in poverty even when family members seek money abroad. In Wuhan, China, Hu et al. similarly found that, when children are left behind by migrant parents, they tend to experience psychological and social difficulties (Hu, 2014). Children of migrant workers tend to suffer when migrant families are separated (Lu, 2012), experiencing a deep sense of loneliness (Hong & Fuller, 2019), and are vulnerable to anxiety, depression (He et al., 2012; Cheng & Sun, 2015), or other deleterious conditions (Jacka, 2014).

More broadly, as shown by Toyota et al., there is a tendency in the Asia-Pacific region for migration to occur in cycles. Furthermore, Toyota et al. argue that for migrant workers' families often practice their mobility in nearby cities when workers are abroad (Toyota et al., 2007). Those left behind tend to experience difficulty when workers travel abroad. At the



same time, as shown by Jingzhong, migrants do not necessarily live in joy and prosperity. Working in the luxurious skyscrapers of the city does not guarantee joy. Indeed, they produce new victims, people who must remain in the village and take care of their families (Jingzhong, 2011). Interestingly, Chang et al. show that, as migration occurs, more time is needed for agriculture and other domestic activities, and thus those left behind face heavier burdens (Chang et al., 2011).

In the context of migrant labour, parents and children are always left behind, as they are unable to accompany migrants. Such groups, particularly children, have drawn the attention of researchers (Bryant, 2005; Nguyen et al., 2007; Yeoh & Lam, 2007). However, the men who are left behind by their wives have received less attention. A review of the literature has found studies from the Philippines (Cortes, 2015) and Vietnam that discuss the men who are left behind (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011). Elmhirst (2007), meanwhile, clearly showed how—in the politico-cultural complexity of masculinity and femininity in Indonesia—women's economic empowerment has created conflict (Elmhirst, 2007).

Within such a cultural context as Indonesia, it is necessary to discuss the men who are left behind. Existing studies have focused on economic dimensions, concerning themselves little with the cultural dimensions, particularly the deep gender biases of social relations and discourses.

## Method

This article was produced through a review of the literature and secondary data, focusing on Indonesia as one of the largest contributors of migrant labour in the world (Hugo, 2002). Since the 1997 Southeast Asian economic crisis, Indonesia has sent millions of migrant workers around the world, primarily to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia (Lindquist, 2010). According to the latest data from the National Agency for the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Workers (Badan Nasional Penempatan dan Perlindungan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia, BNP2TKI), in 2016 Indonesia had some 6.5 million migrant workers stationed in 142 countries worldwide (Wulan, 2010b). The vast majority of these workers—80 percent of them—have been women, and most of them are employed as domestic workers (Lindquist, 2010: 118).

To complement the literature review, in-depth interviews were conducted with the husbands of migrant workers in Banyumas Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. This regency is among the largest exporters of migrant labour in Indonesia. Observations were conducted in migrant workers' villages of origin, enabling the researcher to obtain a clear understanding of the consequences of international labour migration on local communities.



## Findings

Hidden behind the dark tale of Indonesia's female workers abroad is another factor that has rarely been discussed and fought for: the fate of the men who are left behind by their wives or daughters. Men who are left behind, be they fathers or husbands, are closely involved in migration process, including the decision to migrate, the preparation and departure process, the employment process, and the return. These men are not only left behind, but must take on women's roles in both the domestic and public domains. More importantly, they must accept the consequences when women workers return to their villages of origin (or even accept their death). The complex consequences experienced by men are in desperate need of attention and even policy action. There are at least five important points experienced by men, as husbands or fathers, after women travel abroad for work.

First, men experience a process of domestication, carrying out activities that are culturally attributed to women. Men must take care of the children, even babies, and focus on their children's food, clothing, education, and health. In some cases, men complain about taking on this task, which they consider a burden or even inappropriate. One man who was left by his migrant wife wrote:

"Now I live everyday life without my wife. Our two children are still small, and I still have to work. For some men, bathing and feeding the children is something that is very annoying. It's like tearing a man from his honour..." (Racheedus, 2009).

A similar experience was had by Karto (age 57), who works as a pedicab driver. He has two daughters, aged 28 and 17. The eldest is married and lives with her husband, while the second attends a vocational school in Banyumas. For the past ten years, his wife has worked in Saudi Arabia, and the family has lost communication with her. Despite having contacted the Banyumas Social Affairs Office and the Banyumas Labour Office, he has yet to ascertain his wife's fate. Karto has raised his daughters on his own, without the help of others. He has been responsible for feeding them, treating them when they are ill, and acquiring their everyday needs.

There are, of course, cases where men ask their adult daughters, aunts, or even mothers to take over the responsibility of raising the children. Nevertheless, men do not shed the burden of responsibility, as they are still responsible for attending to children who are left behind by their migrant worker mothers. Husbands are responsible not only for their children, but also responsible for representing their wives in social activities, including rotating credit activities and ceremonies. Men, thus, not only carry the burden of their wives' domestic tasks, but also their social duties.





Second, men experience psychological trauma when their wives find employment abroad. When left behind by their wives or daughters, men (as husbands and fathers) experience significant burdens. When this occurs without their permission, it is only intensified. The man who are left behind may become involved in extramarital affairs, or experience psychological disturbances. Many try to commit suicide; some successfully. In Lampung, Siswoko (age 27) raped an 11-year-old child, having been psychologically disturbed after his wife left to work in Malaysia (Patroli, February 13, 2010). Another man, Budi Santoso (age 23), climbed an 80-meter tall cellular phone tower in Banyuwangi to commit suicide, citing the fact that he had received no news from his wife since she had travelled to Saudi Arabia three years previously. Similar cases can be found in various sources of migrant labour. For many village men, travelling abroad means going to another world, one that is unimaginable and beyond their reach. This is exacerbated when the person left behind receives no news for several years. Suta bin Darim (42 years), for example, spent twelve years without any news from his wife, who was working in Saudi Arabia (Situmorang, 2008). Such traumatic experiences need to be understood more deeply, and male trauma victims require special handling.

The story of Didik can help explain the trauma of a child who has been left behind. The oldest of three children, Didik was born in Banyumas 24 years ago. After junior high school, he continued to vocational school, but did not finish; although he tried taking an equivalency course, he was thrown out after he falsified a signature. Five years ago, Didik was charged with theft. At the time, his mother was working in Saudi Arabia. Didik told us of the loneliness and emptiness that he felt when his mother was not by his side. As the eldest child, he needed someone who could help him develop his own identity. He was often unable to communicate with his mother, as Saudi employers—unlike those in Hong Kong and other parts of Asia—rarely allowed workers to communicate with their families or take holidays. This was exacerbated by his father's tendency to remain silent and act permissively. Didik blamed this for his deviant behavior. After his mother returned home and opened her own shop, Didik found great happiness. He was able to communicate with her, and to create his own sense of self.

Third, men become victims when they must help women deal with the consequences of working abroad. When women experience violence or other disadvantages, men must help them deal with it. For instance, women who return home after experiencing rape require the significant support of their husbands; every year, more than a hundred women experience rape in foreign countries (Kalyanamitra, 2005: 8). In other cases, women come home in a state of illness or physical disability due to acts of violence by their employers. When Modesta (25 years), from West Nusa Tenggara, worked in the village of Ampang Baru, Malaysia, she was slapped and beaten with rattan or wooden sticks almost every day. Her right ear was damaged, swollen, and red-black due to the persecution they experienced (Vivanews, July 1, 2009). Husbands are also expected to help take care of and raise the



children born of rape, or of their wives' infidelity. Some lose their wives, or spend years without any news.

Restuadhi (2016), in her study of migrant workers in Banyumas, found that the husbands of migrant workers in Banyumas Regency have several means of dealing with their sexual desires: (a) Controlling their libidinal urges by occupying themselves with routine work or other activities; (b) Abstaining from having sexual intercourse with women who are not their wives for fear of future punishment or hurting their wives; (c) masturbating and/or watching pornography; (d) travelling to prostitution districts with the other husbands of migrant workers, but drinking instead of hiring a sex worker; or (e) having extramarital sexual relations, either with a sex worker or with another woman.

Fourth, men experience de-legitimacy as the generally recognized breadwinners. With their very existence, women migrant workers stimulate public awareness that women can serve as reliable breadwinners. In many cases, women are even able to support their families when men cannot. In some communities, such as in Indramayu (West Java) and Purwodadi (Central Java), women are regarded as primary breadwinners, as they are more accepted by the international job market. The lack of demand for men in the international labour market (due to most demand being for domestic workers) has affected their positioning. When women workers return to their home villages, having found economic success overseas, their influence extends to social and political life. While living abroad, women also acquire various forms of intellectual and social capital, allowing them to take traditionally male roles as village chief, writers, or important community figures (Wulan, 2010a).

In Kadupura, Indramayu, Kustini found a shift in divorce practices (Wulan 2010a). In the local terminology, three types of divorce are recognised: *talak bikeneun*, *talak padukeunen* and *talak jualen*. A *talak bikeneun* is a declaration of divorce by a husband, either explicit or implicit, direct or indirect (i.e. through media). It may or may not be witnessed by parents, kin, village elites. In such a divorce, the wife has no space to object, and there is no legally valid divorce certificate. A *talakpadukeunen* may be declared by a husband (*cerai talak*) or wife (*cerai gugat*), either orally or in writing. It involves formal processes at the Religious court, and occurs after familial approaches fail. Although there is a formal divorce certificate, the process is expensive and lengthy, often involving multiple hearings. In *talakjualen*, meanwhile, the wife demands a divorce, either orally or in writing, after meeting specific criteria (returning her bride price, etc.). It may or may not be witnessed by parents, kin, village elites, and there is no legally valid divorce certificate.

Amongst migrant workers, there has been a tendency to understand divorce differently. Today, even though women have no space to object to a *talak bikeneun*, their economic standing prepares them to live as divorcées. In *talak padukeunen*, meanwhile, it become



more common for women to file for divorce than men. *Talak jualeun*, meanwhile, is a relatively new phenomenon, having first been recorded only after migrant labour became widespread. There has been a shift from husbands demanding divorce to women demanding divorce. Often, when women decide to become migrant workers, they assert their ability to independently choose what is best for them. Such independence gives them the ability to demand a divorce, even if they must pay for it. Although *talak jualeun* may be perceived as deviant, it still has the potential to become widespread as long as migrant labour exists. This can be seen in Sukabumi Regency, where divorces are predominantly sought by women.

Fifth, patriarchal structures have been deconstructed since migrant labour became common. In many Javanese villages where the practice is common, social and cultural transformations follow the return of successful women migrant workers. The remittances sent or brought home by migrant workers help improve their households' socio-economic status. Women have a higher status, which is necessary for them to shed the shackles of patriarchal structures. Women become the subjects of decision making in various social transactions. In the village of Purwodadi, Central Java, for example, a woman was elected as the village chief. Although she herself had not been a migrant worker, she had benefited from the influence of such workers on the political arena. Patriarchal structures in the community are weakened, having broad implications for many aspects of rural life.

## Discussion

Labour migration, particularly women's involvement in it, has contributed to the negation of men's special position in Indonesia's patriarchal society. At the individual level, the men who are left behind must reconceptualize their identity and their culture. At the family level, the men who are left behind must take over women's traditional roles as children-carers and homemakers. Men receive remittances from their wives, with which they pay their household expenses or fund other ventures; some, however, may use this money for deviant purposes owing to the trauma of being left behind by their wives. At the community level, meanwhile, various villages have experienced shifts in their social structures as a result of labour migration. The men who are left behind not only lose their special economic position, because their wives earn more money, but also their social capital, because they take over domestic affairs. After returning from abroad, women occupy a more strategic position within the social hierarchy, and may even become community leaders.

When power shifts from men to women, it does not only create new structures in village life, thereby affecting how women are positioned socially, but also creates a new cultural awareness. Women may leave the house, give commands, lead their villages, make decisions, and create new cultures (Maternowska et al., 2010; Ahmed, 2013; Lianos and Psiridis, 2014). Migration further influences how children view their parents, with traditionally male





attributes<sup>8</sup> such as firmness, decision-making, control, and leadership being connected with women. At the same time, men must accept the negative consequences of international migration, up to and including the children their wives conceive with other men—be they born abroad or in Indonesia. When they are positioned subordinately, men are conditioned to accept these children.

When men's position as breadwinners is challenged as women gain economic power, values are redefined—mostly by women. Men are expected to accept these new values as well as their new positions. At the same time, men are no longer the centers of their families, this position having been taken over by women. Men become economically and socially dependent on women. At the same time, men's status within their community is defined by women, who play a structuring role in their communities. In Java, men are traditionally called by their names while women are called the "wives". In migrant communities, where men are defined by women, men are identified not by name but as the "husbands" of particular women. Women have the power to structure the hierarchy of their communities and construct their values.

## Conclusion

The patriarchal structure has been deconstructed in the areas whence migrant women workers come. Obtaining employment abroad, these women become significant economic forces through their remittances, which enable them to not only improve their household finances but also their hometowns' economies. Upon their return to their hometowns, these migrant workers—equipped with significant economic resources, social networks, and intellectual capacity by their experiences abroad—help transform how women are perceived, accepted, and positioned within their communities. At the same time, men are subordinated, with their roles being defined by women. When migrant women are abroad, men are the ones who handle domestic chores and are responsible for childrearing; this becomes habitualized as migration continues.

Women's involvement as migrant workers in foreign countries, as well as the substantial shifts in the roles of men it stimulates, requires careful consideration. Social transformations can bring about unexpected results, confirming the importance of careful<sup>7</sup> calculation in each stage of the process. Labour migration significantly influences not only women themselves, but also their husbands and their general communities. A careful analysis of the implications of this social process in various fields and at various levels will allow the formulation of a more humane policy. It is therefore necessary to expand the perspectives through which the problem is seen. This study has utilized the male perspective to provide another lesson; examining the perspectives of families, communities, or states, therefore, can produce a richer intellectual understanding.



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