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Research Report

No Longer a ‘Damsel in Distress’: Indonesian Migrant Returnee Women Living in Jakarta

Kilim Park

Abstract. *Stories and images of Indonesian women working overseas as domestic and factory workers, or in so-called low-skilled occupations, are becoming increasingly familiar. The majority of the stories are distressing and heartbreaking, dominated by tragic accounts that continue to strengthen discursive constructions of migrant women’s vulnerability. In this paper I want to put a different spin on the current discourse of TKW (Tenaga Kerja Wanita, Female Migrant Workers) in Indonesia. More specifically, I discuss a group of former TKW who have now returned to Indonesia after their employment overseas. When the identity of these women are extracted, and framed in a single dimension and when the memory of migrant workers is thus collective as opposed to individual, how can we truly consider the femininity and gender of an Indonesian migrant woman? In order to add more dimensions to this story, I take a group of women returnees who are disrupting narratives that push women into the so-called margins: migrant worker returnee turned activists who advocate on behalf of migrant women workers both at home and overseas. I argue these migrant returnees turned activists display a different brand of collective consciousness than one might expect from TKW, and instead occupy a place of innovation and transformation that confounds and subverts the gender-specific conceptualization of migrant women.*

Vulnerable, Always: Migrant Women’s Existence

In Lola Amaria’s 2010 film, *Minggu Pagi di Victoria Park*, just before the closing scenes, Sekar, the protagonist’s troubled sister and an Indonesian migrant worker¹ in Hong Kong, attempts to kill herself. Titi Rajo Bintang’s acting is superb in these scenes in which it is hard not to feel the uncontrollable flow of emotions. In the dilapidated, beige bathroom of an old Hong Kong apartment, as the water pours down from the shower, Sekar holds on to her body tightly, everything is dripping wet. She is on the ground, wearing skimpy clothing and holding a knife because she cannot take it any more. It

¹ In Indonesia, there are three terms that indicate Indonesian migrant workers. TKI (*Tenaga Kerja Indonesia*) is one that appears in official documents and the media, and gets used most often. Its variation TKW (*Tenaga Kerja Wanita*) refers to the female workers. *Buruh Migran Indonesia* (BMI) is a term that is being taken up in the activist community.

had become too much. It was not only the loss of innocence and crushing of her dreams, she could not see the end and life was becoming impossible. Sekar, her posture resembling a European damsel in distress from a 19th century painting, finally collapses on her sister after dropping the knife on the floor. The movie has a rather happy ending, as Sekar who looks healed pledges she will come back to Hong Kong to work, but this scene of emotional climax makes it clear what is the perceived fate of TKW in Indonesia.

In fact, stories and images of Indonesian women working overseas as domestic and factory workers, or in so-called low-skilled occupations, are becoming increasingly familiar, and the majority of the stories are distressing and heart-breaking, dominated by tragic accounts that continue to strengthen discursive constructions of migrant women's vulnerability. However, in this paper I want to put a different spin on the current discourse of TKW in Indonesia by showing how migrant returnees living in Jakarta,

are defying and challenging this external, collective construct summed up with the word *kasihan*.² More specifically, I highlight the work of former Indonesian migrant women workers who have finished their work overseas and then become activists for migrant rights in their home country.

At the outset, this article stems from a month-long preliminary field research in 2015 and on-going fieldwork in 2016 conducted in preparation for my doctoral dissertation, where I have interviewed four migrant returnees living in Jakarta and its outskirts. It is ethnographic in nature, tracing the lives of female migrant workers as returnees by considering the linkages of power and subject formation. My approach is also historical, drawing from oral history, in that narratives and stories are considered as 'archives' of primary source material. Therefore, the storyteller's articulation of her own experience grounds this article.

Tracing Portrayals of Migrant Worker Women: *Kasihan*

I would like to first discuss how the Indonesian mass media portrays migrant workers and how these representations influence the formation of image and identity among migrant returnee women and Indonesian women at large. Pic-



Poster of *Minggu Pagi di Victoria Park*. (2010). Accessed Jan 25, 2016. id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berkas:Minggu_Pagi_di_Victoria_Park.jpg

² In Bahasa *kasihan*, means pity, or poor thing.

tures of migrant women workers traveling overseas most often show them traveling in groups. Commonly they wear the same clothes, or uniforms, with a big sign on their chest and back indicating to which group they belong. The moment they put on such a uniform the conflation of selfhood begins. The system does not allow the women to interpret the laws and regulations on their own terms. The complexity of the system of migrant infrastructure (Xiang & Lindquist 2014) does not allow easy access. In the Indonesian case official measures (Government Regulation No. 4 of 1970) have allowed private sector brokers to control much of the infrastructure of labour migration (International Organization for Migration 2010). Coupled with post-Suharto economic reforms and the Asian economic crisis of 1997, these measures created a demand for international labour migration. Brokers sprang up everywhere in the country to recruit migrant workers and handle their documentation (Lindquist 2012). As a result, these women are collectively labeled as 'migrant women,' and as such, their identity is flattened and they lose a degree of autonomy and self-direction. In addition, Indonesia's intricate labour migration system, which requires visits to multiple ministries to obtain numerous papers to make one a 'legal' worker, effectively 'processes' these women as export commodities.

Strangely their travels are in a way an extension of colonial migration in Southeast Asia. Europeans came to Southeast Asia in search of wealth and power and ultimately to distinguish themselves from those in the homeland (Stoler 1995). We see snippets of this in *Buru Quartet* where Pramoedya depicts the lives of Europeans living in the Dutch East Indies (Pramoedya 1996a 1996b, 1996c, 1997). In colonial times, housemaids at home were not distinguished by their uniforms per se. A *baboe* meant a dark skinned native woman wearing crisp *kebaya*, barefeet, and carrying a European baby in her hands. It was their entire being dictated by the environment they were in that fashioned the *baboe* identity. When domestic work became operationalized as a state economic project in 1969 in the form of a government placement program (International Organization for Migration 2010), this occupation needed to be mobilized and distinguished by clothing. Thus the clothing worn by domestic workers became a status and class indicator that restricted people's mobility by routing them in certain directions. No aesthetic sensation in their being was allowed, and the tone was completely subdued.

The discourse in Indonesia about the reasons to go abroad as migrant workers gives us a glimpse into the imagination of wealth and privilege, and economic gain for the family dominates the story: to become 'rich' is to build a house back home, to pay for a younger sibling's education, to help the family buy livestock and land. Thus, the desire to become 'rich' is not an individual one, but a collective one to fulfill their family's dream. In *Minggu Pagi di Victoria Park*, Sekar becomes a migrant worker to help out her family financially, which appears to be the most commonly cited reason as to why Indonesian women become migrant workers, as with my interviewees. For further discussions on why Indonesian women choose to go overseas as migrant workers, see Dewi Angraeni's *Dream-*

seekers (2006), and Human Rights Watch's "Help Wanted," (2004).

Furthermore, within this economic development discourse, these women are not perceived as skilled workers with overseas work experience. Curiously enough, despite their tangible economic contributions in the form of remittances and international work experience, there is no consideration of tapping into this skilled population for development of the domestic labour force. The recent offering of a suite of entrepreneurship training provided by the government and private sector³ has proven to be a mixed bag. While the trainers continue to publish success stories, the trainees talk about the difficulties involved in sustaining the business. Many also point to nepotism and corruption in filling the quota in local areas and criticize the accessibility and effectiveness of the programs.⁴ The structure of the training does take advantage of the skills and experience of the participants but is built on general assumptions and stereotypes of women from small villages.

The media also shows workers coming back injured and damaged.⁵ The employers' physical and mental abuse is visible and the scars, often permanent, serve as a reminder of these women's experiences. Their bodies serve as, to borrow James Young's (1994) term, a 'counter-monument' to their dreams. The bodies of women who have repeatedly suffered physical and emotional trauma come back carrying stories of helplessness and vulnerability. They embody a perception of Indonesian women's role, as a disposable, readily replaceable labour supply. As Jenny Edkins (2003) argues, trauma is seen as a betrayal by the state. Trauma that occurs as a result of these workers' participation in economic development activity promoted by the state, prompts questions about the state's failure to protect them. These injured and damaged bodies enable migrants' rights discussions to gain ground and keep the memories of betrayal fresh, providing a reminder of the betrayal and reasons not to place further trust in the state.

These observations left me feeling troubled upon encountering the context surrounding the notion of migrant women, where the identity of these women are extracted, and framed in a single dimension. To be a TKI or more specifically, TKW is to be a person in trouble, who is not in charge of one's

³ In March 2015, the National Body for Placement and Protection of Indonesian Workers (BNP2TKI) announced plans to provide entrepreneurship training to 15,000 former migrant workers, (www.bn timer 2tki.go.id/read/9982/BNP2TKI-Akan-Latih-15.000-TKI-Purna-Jadi-Wirauaha-Baru) and in December 2015, Bank Mandiri also offered free training to 6,000 (finance.detik.com/read/2015/12/14/114537/3094993/5/8000-lebih-tki-dapat-pelatihan-wirauaha-gratis).

⁴ I obtained this information from conversations I had with a number of migrant rights activists in Jakarta in August 2014.

⁵ See the International Organization for Migration's report on Labour Migration from Indonesia (2010). See also the photo documentary project by Steve McCurry and ILO (www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/features/WCMS_329960/lang--en/index.htm). A prominent Indonesian magazine, *Tempo*'s section on migrant workers is titled *TKI bermasalah* (troubled migrant workers).

life. Migrant workers are assumed to be already harmed and carrying a stigma. In the discourse, it is difficult to find a space of exception for these women, let alone to claim it. Rather than acknowledging multiplicity in the lived experiences of ‘migrant workers,’ these representations strip away their individual agencies. Then how can we truly consider the complexity found in femininity and gender of Indonesian migrant woman?

Disrupting *Kasih*: Migrant Workers Turned Activists

In order to build more dimensions to this story, I take a group of women returnees who are disrupting the forces that push women into the so called margins. They are former migrant workers themselves, migrant worker returnees-turned-activists who advocate on behalf of migrant women workers both at home and overseas.

In the summer of 2014, I met with a number of migrant rights NGOs in Jakarta where I asked for help out of desperation and worry. Where could I find migrant returnee women in Jakarta to interview? The response was: ‘Yes I can help you find them,’ ‘You can talk to me’ or ‘She’s downstairs at her desk.’ In fact, there are many migrant returnee women who are now living and working in Jakarta as activists. They know what migrants go through both overseas and at home. They operate in a tightly knit network of national and local organizations that support one another and are involved in running numerous programs to help migrants before they leave and after they return.

Many of these activists are from other parts of Indonesia but have decided to settle in Jakarta in order to make use of urban networks to effectively lobby the government. They are consulted, their presence is visible, and in fact, many migrant workers and their families who experience difficulties overseas would choose to contact activists over Indonesian diplomatic missions, the Ministry of Manpower, or the national agency for migrant workers.⁶ Benny Hari Juliawan’s (2014) recent piece in *Inside Indonesia* titled, “Back with a Vengeance,” highlights the role these migrant workers turned activists play in Indonesia’s vibrant civil society.

Despite being disappointed by a lack of regulations and coordination among ministries, many of these activists continue to work with government agencies and provide assistance at their request. They tend to focus on putting in place more detailed regulatory measures and guidelines to protect workers and regulate migratory movements. From the perspective of power relations, implementation of these government programs unfold in what Foucault called a ‘fragment of the real,’ a life that contains strategies, tactics, practices, and in turn, impacts institutions and behaviours (Li 2007). Therefore, both the state and activists operate within, perceive and acknowledge the presence of state institutions that direct, govern and conduct, while noting that the creativity emerging

⁶The Ministry of Manpower, *Kementerian Ketenagakerjaan (Kemennaker)* was previously known as Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration, *Kementerian Tenaga Kerja dan Transmigrasi (Kemennakertrans)*. The full translation of BNP2TKI (*Badan Nasional Penempatan dan Perlindungan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia*) is National Body for Placement and Protection of Indonesian Workers.

out of the circumstances surrounding migrant workers as another articulation of power relations. As with Tania Li's (2007) interpretation, this bond which has formed around a 'problem' exists in the mechanics and technicalities governing the life of migrant workers, and the behaviours of activists clearly display their knowledge and skill by not creating animosity with the state. Activists, as ordinary citizens, place themselves as consumers of programs and developers of practices, who can navigate systems of power confidently and clandestinely as official and unofficial consultants to government agencies. This corresponds to the hidden forces that John Pemberton (1994) and Benedict Anderson (1998) noted in their works on Indonesian bureaucracy, and the ways in which Pramoedya (1996a, 1996b, 1997) showed in his work on strong-willed Javanese women holding significant decision-making power over both the ordinary and significant life events of all family members.

In thinking about the lives of these migrant worker-turned activists, female gender performativity is not manifested in a singular way. First, their ways of nurturing are not necessarily bound by the spirit of *kodrat wanita*, the God-given nature as a supportive wife and sacrificing mother promulgated by the New Order regime (Hellwig 2001; Wieringa 2003). As part of the nation-building process, the Indonesian government tried to instill in the Indonesian women so-called traditional values to support the concept, 'unity in diversity' which remains the national motto. Rather than acknowledging various gender roles and manifestations of femininity in different cultures and ethnic groups, the New Order essentialized womanhood and *kodrat wanita* turned women's behavior into a reverent matter (Hellwig 2011)⁷. In reaction, the activists defiantly and subversively call on the Indonesian state to respond to its failure to protect and provide the workers. For instance, many of these activists regularly participate in protests related to advocating migrant workers' rights and more broadly, labour issues in general. Two of my interviewees in their fifties spoke fondly of the time when they actively participated in what locals call 'demo.' One interviewee, while adding her old age and health issues make it difficult to attend as often as she wants, talked about feelings of solidarity and camaraderie felt at these gatherings, and even added that she met her then boyfriend and now husband at a May Day rally at *Bundaran Hi* in Jakarta. If *kodrat wanita* attempted to define 'nurturing' as a female responsibility to a family unit carried out inaudibly in the background, these activists expand and complicate it further with vociferous demands and opinions.

The migrant worker turned activists, instinctively pick up these tensions, and start to occupy what were previously gender-specific, male-specific post-colonial spaces in social make-up, and hierarchical power structures. These activists are experts and key players in the decision-making process. No one utters, *kasihan*, while seeing them speak at protests, meetings, conferences and other public events. One of my interviewees is regularly consulted by a number

⁷ For broader discussions on this, see Suryakusuma (2004) and Sears (1996). Brenner's (1998) work comments on the New Order's imagination of a household as a site of consumption within the framework of *kodrat wanita*.

of central government departments dealing with migrant workers' issues, and is in charge of coordinating initiatives designed to improve the government's communication with migrant workers abroad. She comments that her experience as a migrant worker is what makes her credible at meetings with officials. Following Rudolf Mrazek's reading of Simmel (2009), the activists have found a way to become audible even to themselves by exaggerating their personal identities as migrant worker returnees. Their work as activists require the experience of vulnerability and victimhood to be recalled as part of their identity and put on display, and shared with others, while unraveling it analytically and assertively in order to prevent the very experience they had from happening to others. Albeit being weak and helpless before, their present defies femininity packaged in one-dimensional stereotype as a state-assigned notion and as a defined element within the social structure.

These migrant returnees-turned-activists display a different brand of collective consciousness that one might expect from TKW. The women activists, manifest multiple identities and gender roles, and occupy a place of innovation and transformation. They stand visibly against masculine control over their bodily and aesthetic sensations. Nonetheless, the new political and social space they occupy does not represent binary oppositions in gender relations. Instead, as I have tried to argue, it confounds and subverts the gender-specific conceptualization of migrant women.

Conclusion

With contradictory constructions in gender subjectivities of TKW, there is an indication that popular consciousness has impacted the discursive construction of TKW to some degree. Such construction has flattened the existence of migrant women workers to an image of permanent vulnerability and has temporally restricted their identity by placing it in moments of abuse. However, I suggest that migrant women workers' identity should be placed on a time continuum that does not start when abuse begins overseas and does not stop when they are no longer 'migrant workers.' This allows these women to add multiple and contradictory layers to the popular notion of TKW and actively challenge the singular construction of gender. In other words, the word 'migrant' is used here as a placeholder and a 'password' (Mrazek 2009) to continue the discussion in understanding labour and gender in contemporary Indonesian society.

Compared to what Diane Wolf (1992) observed in her study of Javanese women in the 1980s, Indonesian women no longer see their contribution to the economic gain of their own families and in broad terms, their state, as insignificant. Instead, armed with the recognition of their economic, social and political power, migrant returnee women have begun to work the system in a savvy and defiant manner as demonstrated by the large number of former TKW who have become migrant rights activists. They will not call themselves *kasihan*, nor damsels in distress.

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