

# Indonesian Female Labor Migrants: Experiences Working Overseas (A Case Study Among Returned Migrants in West Java)

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*Abstract. Since the 1980's there has been a growing phenomenon in Indonesia of women moving out to work overseas. The main destination countries of this movement is Saudi Arabia, but some other countries in the Middle East, such as Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar have also become important destinations in recent years. There are strong economic factors influencing labor migration such as dearth of job opportunities in the areas of their origin. However, the phenomenon in Indonesia has other important dimensions. The majority of Indonesian female labor migrants to Saudi Arabia work as domestic workers. Many of them had had as well as good experiences working overseas in terms of how employers treated them. This paper is an elaboration on Indonesian female migrant workers' experiences working in Saudi Arabia based on a study among returned migrants in their places of origin in Indramayu and Cianjur districts in West Java. West Java is known as one of Indonesian provinces where many international female labor migrants to the Middle East come from. The many cases of mistreatment and bad working experiences among Indonesian returned female migrants in the study area do not seem to deter a number of them to work in Saudi Arabia. Some returned female migrants in the study area believe that what they would experience during their work overseas depended on their fate.*

**Keywords:** *Female migrant workers; returned female migrants; domestic workers; mistreatment; bad working condition; Indonesia; Saudi Arabia.*

## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of people moving out of the country to work overseas has been growing in Indonesia since the 1980's (Hugo, 1992: 181; Raharto, 2001: 10; Spaan, 1994: 105). The number of people who

became migrant workers in foreign countries has been increasing substantially from year to year. In 2000 it was estimated that there were as many as 2.5 million Indonesian migrant workers overseas, which is about 3 (three) percent of the total workforce in Indonesia (Hugo, 2000: 2). At the national level, the economic and social impact of this movement is limited, but it is of major significance at the local level in terms of economic contribution and in absorbing labor surpluses in the regions where the migrants originated. The principal destinations of this movement currently are countries experiencing significant labor shortages, notably several Middle Eastern countries, Malaysia and Singapore.

Labor migration can be regarded as a response to inequalities between the source and destination countries caused by a difference in level of socio-economic development (Goss and Linqvist, 1995: 317). However, the phenomenon in Indonesia also has other important dimensions. For example, in the case of labor migration to Saudi Arabia, going on the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca is an important factor that influences this movement. In addition, much of Indonesian labor migration involves recruiters (*calo*) or middlemen, who facilitate the migration process. Recruiters are the main source of information regarding administrative requirements and processes, places of registration for overseas employment, migration cost and job opportunities overseas. Some recruiters also provide funds that can be borrowed by prospective labor migrants to pay for their migration cost that can be repaid (with interest) after the migrants have settled in their overseas job. Therefore, they play an important role in influencing people to become labor migrants.

In the past, the involvement of women in international labor migration in Indonesia was neglected since female migration was considered as something 'associational', occurring purely as a passive addition to the real decision making by males. However, during the last decade, the number of female international labor migrants from Indonesia increased substantially. For example, among workers deployed in the period 1989-1994, 442,310 were female and 209,962 male. Between 1994-1999, 2,042,206 female workers and 880,266 male workers were sent abroad (Hugo, 2000: 5). The data indicate the increasing importance of female involvement in international labor migration.

The economic crisis in Indonesia in 1997 also enhanced the importance of international female migrant workers compared to male ones. In 1995-1996, there were 48 male migrants to every 100 female migrants. The ratio decreased between 1997-1998 (after the crisis) to 20 male migrants to every 100 female migrants. The total number of international labor migrants deployed from Indonesia increased from 120,896 in the period 1995-1996 to

235,275 in 1997-1998 (Hugo, 2000: Table 1). A field study in Indramayu, West Java (Romdiati et al., 1998: 23) found that the crisis in this area had prompted many locals to use international migration as a coping strategy. It seems this is the reason why there is an increase in the number of women involved in international migration.

Official international female migration workers in Indonesia has been dominated by the outflow of those who are employed as domestic workers in Saudi Arabia (Cremer, 1988:76; Raharto, 1996: 114). The sex ratio of this movement between 1994 -1999 was 8.3, indicating domination of women (PPK-LIPI, forthcoming). Most of these female migrants came from West Java, one of the most important regions of origin of international female labor migrants from Indonesia. While there are strong economic factors (limited job opportunities and land holdings in villages of origin; the prospect of highly paid jobs in the Middle East) influencing labor migration out from these regions, the existence of good transportation network and middlemen or *calo* have sustained this movement. The good transportation network linking the villages of origin and big cities where the recruitment companies are located, facilitates the prospective female labor migrants and the middlemen to apply for overseas jobs through recruitment companies licensed to send them abroad.

This paper will examine Indonesian female migrant workers' experiences working in the Middle East based on a study among returned female migrants in their places of origin in Indramayu and Cianjur districts in West Java. The movement of female migrants to work overseas started to become an important phenomenon in Indonesia since the 1980's but their involvement in this movement varies. The Indonesian government encouraged the sending of international labor migrants to work overseas to increase foreign exchange earnings and to relieve local pressure on job opportunities (Cremer, 1988: 74; Hugo, 1992: 181; 1995: 287). Therefore, since 1988 the policy of sending international migrant workers from Indonesia to work overseas was explicitly endorsed in the Main Guidelines of State Policy.

The involvement of Indonesian women to work as domestic workers in the Middle East has attracted considerable controversy, especially among religious and women's groups (Hugo, 1992: 182; 1995: 289). While there are success stories, it is clear that these women workers are exposed to considerable risks of exploitation and discrimination, not only on the basis of race and class but also gender since domestic workers are outside the protection of labor legislation, both in Indonesia as well as in Saudi Arabia as

destination country. However, despite their bad experiences, the flow of international female labor migrants to work in Saudi Arabia continues.

In several of Indonesia's ethnic groups, women have traditionally had a significant role in the generation of household income, through productive work both within and outside the household (Williams, 1990: 50). This is also the case in Sundanese society, which is the major ethnic group in the study area. In emergency situations Sundanese women even take over their husbands' role as breadwinner (Garna, 1980: 36; Suhamihardja, 1980: 210). However, this does not mean that women are free to make independent decisions regarding their work and migration. Family is still an important unit in decision-making. The activities of each family member is determined by the whole family as a decision making unit (Suhamihardja, 1980: 207). Female labor migration in this society, therefore, can be explained based on the household strategy approach. This approach recognizes that the tasks associated with running a household (reproduction) are as crucial as wage-earning opportunities in explaining the gender differential in migration flow. Thus female migration experiences are determined partly by intra-household resources and the household decision-making structure (Hugo, 1992).

However, migration seems to be inter-related with the decision-making power of women within the family. On the one hand, the increasing number of women involved in international labor migration in Indonesia has increased their economic contribution to the family and enhanced her status within the family. This has led to an increase in women's decision-making power in migration. On the other hand, the women's greater power to decide to migrate means that more women are able to make independent decisions regarding their migration. This phenomenon can also be seen as a reflection of enormous economic and social changes, the increased scale, complexity and significance of the social mobility of women in Indonesia. As a result, women seem to have more courage to take the risks of migrating as independent migrants to work overseas. Cases of mistreatment reported in the media and also the experiences of some of the workers abroad do not discourage them from seeking or returning to overseas employment.

The two study areas are located on the main roads linking the cities of Bandung and Bogor (Cianjur), and Jakarta and Central Java (Indramayu). Many buses follow the routes from the study areas to Jakarta where most overseas employment agencies are located. Three villages in Indramayu district and three villages in Cianjur district were selected. These villages are known as the largest originating migrant workers areas.

The study was conducted from August to December 1999. Various methods of data collection were used, including interviews through questionnaires and in-depth interviews, with recently returned migrant workers. The total number of returned migrant workers interviewed (with questionnaire) was 146 (133 females and 13 males). Information collected from returned migrants include their characteristics, recruitment processes, preparation and departure processes and experiences as international migrant workers. There were difficulties in finding recently returned migrants workers as they are spread out in their original villages. Thus the returned migrant workers had to be located by combing selected villages. Even though the sub districts and villages chosen are indeed the main sources of Indonesian migrant workers, the majority of them were still working overseas. Apart from this, the interviews were also limited to migrant workers who had been home for less than one year, so the information obtained was relatively 'new'. Apart from interviews through questionnaires, in-depth interviews with 10 returned female migrants, other key informants including, among others, village heads, manpower recruiters and district government officers were also questioned.

## 2. The Role of Recruiters or Middlemen

In Indonesia, there are basically two general ways by which workers can register for overseas employment. One is to directly contact a labor recruiting company (known as *Perusahaan Jasa Tenaga Kerja Indonesia-PJTKI*), the other is through recruiters or middlemen or *calo*, in local terms, in the study area, called *sponsor*. Between these two ways, it seemed that the *sponsor* had a larger role than the labor recruiting company. The smaller role of the PJTKI in recruiting labor migrants is partly because the sub-agents are generally located only in cities far away from the villages of prospective labor migrants. The official recruitment system also includes some steps involving PJTKI and the Department of Manpower. This system is considered as far too time consuming, expensive and cumbersome because it involves traveling long distances to obtain appropriate permissions and training. Moreover, the system is infested with corrupt and exploitative practices (Hugo, 1998: 2).

There are several layers of recruiters or middlemen in the recruitment process. They operate between places of origin and recruiting companies in the city that have official licenses to send migrant labor overseas. Generally, one recruiting company has business relations with a number of recruiters known locally as *sponsor dalam* who also endeavor to establish connections with local middlemen who in the study areas are called *sponsor daerah*. In

practice, the *sponsor daerah* usually plays a significant role in recruiting and selecting women migrant workers to be employed domestically because they live close to the villages of the prospective labor migrants. In building up these business networks, however, cooperation between sponsors (*dalam* and *daerah*) must also be extended to different labor recruiting companies (PJTKI) in order to connect the prospective labor migrants to the PJTKI as soon as possible, which leads to financial benefits for the *sponsors*. The *sponsors* generally recruit as many prospective laborers as possible, as the more applicants they can get the larger the money they can take as recruitment fee from PJTKI, as well as from the prospective migrants.

The major role of middlemen in the labor migrants' recruitment process in the study areas is shown by the data, that about 69 percent of the returned female migrants had their first contact with a *sponsor daerah* (Table 2), or two and half times more than those who go directly to the labor recruiting companies. Some 43 percent of the respondents used the services of a *sponsor* in the recruitment process because they did not know of any other way to apply for overseas employment. Generally, the *sponsor* is somebody who is well known by the applicant, in both geographical and social terms, though *sponsor* doing business in the study area were not only those who lived in the study area, but also those who came from nearby places. Therefore, utilizing *sponsor* to find overseas employment gives a sense of assurance and security to the prospective migrants. However, the involvement of several layers of middlemen makes the migration process longer and more commercial. There was also the high possibility that the female labor migrants were exposed to exploitation long before their departure, due to their ignorance of important information regarding qualifications and other requirements to work overseas.

### **3. Profile of Indonesian Female Labor Migrants Working in the Middle East**

The Indonesian government requires that women who intend to work in the Middle East must be aged 30 years and over and be literate and able to carry out basic household tasks such as cooking and sewing. They also must receive training in Arab culture and language. In addition to these personal qualifications, the women must also have a letter of permission from their husbands or parents (for single women). The recruiting company must have an official license to send migrant workers overseas and must have a representative in the Middle East.

The majority of returned female migrants interviewed in the study area in West Java were between 20-35 years old, with low educational qualification and skills. Among 133 returned female migrants from the Middle East interviewed, 75 per cent were between 20-35 years old and about 67 per cent even below 30 years old (Table 1). Another study on female migrants in the Middle East also found that more than a third of them were aged less than 30 years (Adi, 1986). The finding in the study in West Java indicated that most women did not fulfill the minimum age of 30 years to work as household workers in the Middle East. Of the prerequisites, generally returned female migrants only knew about the age requirement to become an Indonesian migrant worker. Yet, when asked what the age requirement was, the answers varied. There were those who answered 20 years and above and there were those who said 25 years and older. In practice, there were respondents who were under the age of 20, yet could still depart. In some cases, the *sponsor* has manipulated the data in the travel documents, especially with respect to the age of the applicant in order to satisfy the minimum age requirement of employers. Findings show that those working overseas for the first time in the Middle East were younger in age (15 years).

Table 1  
DISTRIBUTION OF RETURNED FEMALE MIGRANTS  
BY AGE AND EDUCATION

Age and educational categories	Percentage	Number of cases
<b>Age groups:</b>		
<20	12	16
20-24	28	37
24-29	27	36
30-34	20	27
>35	13	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>Educational level:</b>		
No schooling	2	3
Not completed primary school	27	36
Completed primary school	64	85
Secondary school and above	7	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>133</b>

Source: PPK-LIP study in Indramayu and Cianjur Districts, West Java, 1999.

On average, the majority of returned female migrants had only completed primary school and have never attended special training related to their job overseas. Only a very small number has completed secondary school

or higher. A small number of them could even not write, read and speak Indonesian fluently, but only the local dialect (Sundanese). Low educational qualification and inability to communicate in the national language imply that their ability to understand information concerning overseas employment and related aspects is limited. It is apparent they had difficulty in understanding the contents of work contracts that specify their rights and duties (Tirtosudarmo and Romdiati, 1998). In this case, the recruiters or 'sponsors' play an important role. In recruiting the prospective international labor migrants, the 'sponsor' often uses 'pick-up the ball', which means that they visit the villages to inform potential international labor migrants about existing job opportunities overseas and thus recruit candidates. A large proportion of the returned female migrants in the study area explained that the 'sponsor' was their main source of information regarding working overseas.

The information required by prospective migrant workers before departure covers, among others, information concerning the types of letters or administrative conditions required, the travel costs, the travel process from point of departure to destination country, types of work will be undertaken in the destination country, the wages they will receive and the working conditions in the receiving country. The information concerning the types of letters or administrative conditions required is extremely important for female migrant workers. Yet, in reality, not all of the returned migrants understood what types of letter were required as prerequisites for registry. Generally they were only able to mention two types of prerequisites for registry, namely, their identity card and parents'/husband's permission (Table 2). One factor contributing to the lack of understanding on registry prerequisites is the existence of 'sponsors'. The existence of 'sponsor' means that prospective migrant workers do not need to pay attention to administrative requirements because these will be handled by the 'sponsor' (69 per cent, see Table 3). The implication of all administrative requirements being handled by 'sponsor' is that the prospective migrant workers must pay a large amount for their services.



**Table 2**  
**PROPORTION OF RETURNED FEMALE MIGRANTS IN THE STUDY AREA**  
**WHO KNOW ADMINISTRATIVE REQUIREMENTS**  
**IN LABOR RECRUITMENT PROCESS**

Administrative Requirements	Percentage	Number of cases
Identity card	100	133
Marriage certificate	53	70
Parents'/husband's permission	60	80
Training skill certificate	34	45
Age limitation	90	119
Educational level	48	64
Special skills	36	48

*Note* : \* Percentage of total returned female migrants interviewed in the study.  
*Source*: PPK-LIPI study in Indramayu and Cianjur Districts, West Java, 1999.

**Table 3**  
**DISTRIBUTION OF RETURNED FEMALE MIGRANTS BY**  
**CONTACT TO WORK OVERSEAS**

Contact	Percentage	Number of cases
'Sponsors'/ <i>Kalo</i>	69	92
Village Head	1	1
Department of Manpower	1	1
PJTKI	28	38
Other	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>133</b>

*Source*: PPK-LIPI study in Indramayu and Cianjur Districts, West Java, 1999.

Based on in-depth interviews, all returned migrants interviewed using the qualitative method said that they did not know the typical costs incurred by migration. The majority of respondents also stated that their source of information concerning travel costs came from *sponsor*. There were variations as to the total cost paid by female migrant workers. This indicates that each *sponsor* provides different information concerning the travel costs, because the distance from a prospective migrant worker's home village to the registration office and waiting compound differs. The amount of money taken from migrant workers from their wages overseas by *sponsor* for services rendered also differs. Apparently the amount paid depends on who is the *PJTKI*, who is their *sponsor* and, how close their relationship is with the *sponsor*. The closer the relationship between the respondent and the *sponsor* the smaller the amount of money spent. Therefore, the funds paid by the respondent only represent the amount of money they have spent. It does not indicate that the respondents knew the actual migration cost for working

overseas. Such limited information on the legal costs of international labor migration has put them in a vulnerable position, susceptible to financial fraud from middlemen or *sponsor*. In the case of some prospective female migrant workers, the situation is even worse since they have to borrow the money for migration cost from the *sponsor* and to pay back after obtaining work overseas. There were a number of migrants who were able to borrow from their families and obtained assistance from relatives. Apart from this, there were also those who went to the extent of selling or pawning their valuables such as jewelry in the hope they would be able to recover them after they had received their overseas salaries.

The majority of respondents obtained information concerning the working conditions and the amount of their wages in the destination country from the recruiting company (*PJTKI*). Although the standard wage of household workers, especially in Saudi Arabia, is 600 Real (Saudi Arabia's currency), the prospective migrant worker has never learned this from the calo. The information is only obtained after the prospective migrant worker has arrived at the *PJTKI*.

Most returned female migrants said they had received pre-departure training run by *PJTKI* and a number of others received training run by the Labor Force Office. The respondents gave varying answers concerning the length of this training and the amount of material provided. Yet, generally, the training ran for 1 – 2.5 months. Almost 70 percent had received language training (Table 4), even though it was for a very short time. They received practical, training to help them in their day-to-day communication with their future employer and his or her family. The language training provided was mainly Arabic. A large proportion of the respondents said that the Arabic language training was extremely useful and necessary in their positions in Saudi Arabia. Yet, unfortunately, they felt that the training was too short and the instruction material was still not sufficient enough to communicate in the workplace. Some of them obtained English language training, yet the instruction material was also not enough and not too useful for those working in Saudi Arabia as household workers, because the everyday language there is Arabic.

**Table 4**  
**PROPORTION OF RETURNED FEMALE MIGRANTS IN THE STUDY AREA WHO RECEIVED ANY TRAINING BEFORE WORKING IN ARAB SAUDI**

Type of training	Percentage	Number of cases
Language training	70	93
Training in using modern household utensils	43	57
Child care training	59	78
Training on knowledge on legal protection	6	8
Never receive any training	27	36

*Note* : \* Percentage of total returned female migrants interviewed in the study.

*Source*: PPK-LIP study in Indramayu and Cianjur Districts, West Java, 1999.

Training in the use of modern kitchen equipment, modern household equipment and ways of taking care of children was also given to the prospective migrant workers who would be employed as domestic or household workers. However, according to the respondents, the training provided was not completely in accordance with what was needed in the overseas workplace because the equipment used was sometimes different. For example, a number of respondents mentioned that ways of cleaning the floor were not taught in training, but apparently there are instruments (floor cleaners and carpet cleaners) that must be used. Generally, the floors of Saudi Arabian houses are covered with carpets, so vacuum cleaners are needed. The experience of respondents who received training in childcare was that they were taught how to take care of babies. But in practice they had to serve older, school age children.

As prospective migrant workers, they must master forms of communication to use with their employers, employers' families, their social environment and local officers, that is, the local language. Generally, the respondents admitted they could understand Arabic, yet when asked whether they were fluent in Arabic, there were various types of answers. Only about 43 percent could understand and talk in Arabic fluently (Table 5). Generally, they were ones who had lived in Saudi Arabia for a long time and had worked there several times. Apart from this, they had also been in an Islamic school (*Madrasah*), which provided lessons in Arabic, before departing. Almost 50 percent of the respondents were not fluent in Arabic and around 8 percent of them said that they could not speak Arabic at all.

Table 5  
DISTRIBUTION OF RETURNED FEMALE MIGRANTS IN THE STUDY AREA  
BY ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE IN ARABIC

Ability to communicate in Arabic	Percentage	Number of cases
Understand Arabic and speak fluently	43	57
Understand Arabic but could not speak fluently	17	23
Understand and speak a little Arabic	32	43
Do not understand and speak Arabic	8	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>133</b>

Note : \* Percentage of total returned female migrants interviewed in the study.

Source: PPK-LIPI study in Indramayu and Cianjur Districts, West Java, 1999.

It is apparent that the low educational qualification and skills of Indonesian female migrant workers in the Middle East affect their work performance and work experience. The long recruitment process involving several layers of recruiters and lack of knowledge about almost everything they need to know about working overseas have exposed them to exploitation, right from the start. The false data on information sponsors have entered into the documents of the prospective female labor migrants also affect their work performance and cause them problems after employers find their actual qualifications to be not as expected. Therefore, it is not surprising that many female migrant workers in the Middle East are maltreated.

#### 4. Work Experiences of Household Workers In Saudi Arabia

The majority of returned female migrant workers interviewed in the study had worked as household workers in Saudi Arabia (128 out of 133 respondents), some had worked as baby-sitters. Therefore the analysis is based on returned female migrants' experiences working as household workers in Saudi Arabia. Interviews with returned female migrants in the study area revealed that many of them had had as well as good experiences working overseas in terms of how their employers treated them. Furthermore, this study also examines their working conditions, their salary, legal protection and social relations with employers as well as with the rest of the Indonesian community in Saudi Arabia.

#### 4.1 Working conditions

This analysis on working conditions will mainly be based on the work load and working hours for women working as household workers in Saudi Arabia. The study found that a large number of them landed in a home where they were the only household worker. They had to serve all family members and sometimes a household consists of an extended family or more than one family. As the only worker in their employer's house, the worker has to do all household jobs and frequently without any help from family members. Even in cases where the housewives do not work outside the home, it is rare for them to help the worker with the household work. It is not surprising to find, therefore, a household worker conducting more than one job at a time. For example, she has to cook while carrying the master's young child. One female returned migrant respondent said she once complained to her employer about the heavy work she had to do and the employer answered: 'You have to do all the work because I bought you at a high price'.

A small number of female workers did not have such heavy workloads since there were other household workers in the house. In their cases, the employer gave them all certain duties such as only washing or cleaning the house. One female return migrant said: 'I worked quite comfortably, not as other household workers. My duty was only sweeping the rooms, which are not too wide. There were other workers who cleaned the windows and an Indian male worker doing heavy cleaning jobs'.

Since most female household workers had to carry such heavy workloads, they had very long working hours. They began to work in the morning, at about six o'clock, and stopped working at night, indeed in the middle of the night. This is worsened by the Arabic habit of normally having dinner late at night. The worker prepares dinner and waits until the master's family finishes and then cleans up the dishes. This condition shows that most employers did not comply with the working agreement that specify the working hours as eight hours per day. The long working hours gave household workers a very short time to rest. They normally had about six to eight hours rest and sleep; indeed in the holy month they had even less rest as they had to prepare the early morning meals for the family. A respondent explained that she only had four hours sleep every night during the holy month.

Before leaving and working abroad, the majority of respondents did not have any information on the working conditions they would face. They only knew that they would work as a household workers and be responsible for household tasks. They also knew that they would have to work eight hours

a day, as specified in the work contract. However, they were not informed that in many circumstances they may have to work more than the agreed times. Facing the conditions, the household workers had no choice but to obey the employer because they were in a subordinate position.

Besides heavy workloads and long working hours, about 25 per cent of household workers in Saudi Arabia also faced difficulties in their jobs because of lack of ability to speak Arabic. This is closely related to the limited language training they had had before leaving for Saudi Arabia, indeed some of them even did not have any language training before they left. Therefore, during the first three months working as household workers they faced difficulties in communicating with their employer and used 'sign language'. Communicating with employer's children was said to be one of the effective ways for the workers to learn Arabic.

## 4.2 Salary and Other Benefits

In terms of salary, in 1999, returned female migrants who worked as household workers in Saudi Arabia received 600 Real per month while males who worked as drivers were paid 800 Real per month. This amount of salary is valid for the contract period of mainly two years. The employer usually offers an increase in salary if he wants to extend the contract with the worker. Most of the workers already know the amount of their salary from *PJTKI*.

There is no other financial reward the workers will receive other than their salary as stipulated in the work contract. However, at the end of the Holy month celebration (*Jed Mubarak*) or at the end of their work contract period, many employers usually give presents to their workers, even though it is only a small gift. It is unlikely that the employers (especially males), will give such expensive gift if there is nothing behind the gift (such as sexual harassment). As stated by one returned female migrant, 'Even though they are rich, it is impossible for them to give us expensive gifts or a lot of money as a gift if they are not expecting 'something from us'. In several cases, workers were often invited by their employers to go on a holiday with the entire family.

Almost all returned female migrants received their salary directly from their employers. However, they did not always receive their salary every month, but mostly every five to seven or eight months. Indeed many of them received their salary every ten months or once a year. Many returned migrants did not ask for the salary every month because they did not want to keep the

cash themselves. This was because they were worried they would lose the money and therefore they let the employers keep it. However, there were some cases where the employers had difficulty paying for so many months of the worker's salary in one aggregate amount (e.g. one year's salary). Usually the workers ask for payment when they wish to send money to their families in their hometowns. On the other hand, many returned migrants did not receive their salary monthly because their employers did not pay them. According to one returned migrant, she was not paid monthly because her employer did not have enough money to pay for the household workers' salary. When she asked for her salary, the employer said that he did not have the money to pay her and because he had 'bought' her, it was up to him whether he wanted to pay or not to pay her salary.

As explained by many returned migrants, it seems that among Arab families, it is a prestige and increased social status if they can hire foreign household workers. This causes many families to employ household workers from foreign countries, including from Indonesia, although they are not able to pay them every month. For some families, it seems that they only have enough money to pay the fee for the household workers' arrival, but they cannot afford to pay their monthly salary. In addition, as explained by some female return migrant respondents, they have some feeling that some employers still believe they have 'bought' the household worker like a slave, even though the employers did not use this term, which leads them not to care about their salary. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that many returned migrants did not receive the proper amount of their salary.

There are some variations in the health care that female household workers received from their employers. On the one hand, there were some cases where the employers paid for medical expenses when the household workers got sick. On the other hand, there were also many cases where the household workers did not get any support from their employers to cover their medical expenses. In this case, it was common for the employers to deduct the medical expenses they had incurred from their workers' salaries.

The opportunity to go on the *hajj* pilgrimage was one of several reasons expressed by returned female migrants to decide to work in Saudi Arabia (Table 6). In the work agreement, it is also stated that after the worker has worked for two years, at the end of the work contract period, the employers have to fund their pilgrimage. However, many employers did not comply with the agreement, in which case the workers went on the *hajj* on their own expenses. One out of ten returned female migrants in an in-depth interview said that she spent two month salary to pay for the pilgrimage. In

fact, many of the workers did not strictly demand the fulfillment of their rights as long as they had the opportunity to go on the *haj*. They reasoned it would not have been possible for them to go on the *haj* if they have not come to work in Saudi Arabia. However, many returned migrants did not go on the *haj* when they worked in Saudi Arabia, since they preferred to bring the money back home.

Table 6  
PROPORTION OF RETURNED FEMALE MIGRANT IN THE STUDY AREA  
BY EXPERIENCE WORKING OVERSEAS

Experience	Percentage *	Number of cases
<b>Positive experience:</b>		
Increased work experience	23	31
Increased skill	14	19
Earn big Salary	35	47
Opportunity to go on the <i>haj</i> pilgrimage	34	45
Opportunity to other countries.	9	12
Finding someone to marry	1	1
<b>Negative experience:</b>		
Maltreatment from the employer	14	19
The employer did not pay the salary	6	8
Limited social contact with outside society	10	13
Bad working conditions	4	5
No legal protection	2	3

Note : \* Percentage of total returned female migrants interviewed in the study.

Source: PPK-LIPI study in Indramayu and Cianjur Districts, West Java, 1999.

### 4.3 Legal Protection

During their stay in Saudi Arabia, the migrant workers enjoyed little legal protection, since the local labor legislation does not apply to domestic workers (Hugo, 1992: 183). This condition was worsened by the workers' limited knowledge of legal protection and the legal institutions they could consult on problems related to their work, such as employers' mistreatment and their social life. Even though Indonesian recruiters have representatives in Saudi Arabia, to whom the workers can lodge complaints,



After arriving in her employer's house the worker's passport is usually kept by the employer in order to prevent her from running out and moving to another family. The worker is instead given an *ighomah* as an identity card. However, in many cases the *ighomah* is also kept by the employer. As a consequence, the worker does not have any identity card, putting her at constant risk of being arrested by the police. Any household worker running out on her employer without carrying any identity card will be considered an illegal in-migrant. She will be arrested by the police and threatened with deportation. She will be sent to jail and must wait for a long time before she can go home.

In some cases, especially in Riyadh, a household worker who runs out on her employer will be helped by other migrant workers, especially those from Indonesia. However, some Indonesian migrants who helped workers on the run had exploited them, forcing them to become illegal prostitutes and to serve Arabic men. They had no choice and were forced to take the job because they did not want to be arrested and sent home. As long as they did the work, they would be protected and could live in Saudi Arabia, even though they had to hide in villages in the mountains to avoid police arrest since they were staying as illegal in-migrants.

It seems that the migrant workers who run out on their employers and look for protection at the Indonesia Embassy do not receive much help. One report suggested that the Indonesian Consulate in Jeddah is receiving requests for shelter from an average of 75 female workers a day (Hugo 1992: 181). They are those workers who run away from their employers' house because of mistreatment. They are usually accommodated at the Indonesian Consulate while waiting for the completion of the administrative process for repatriation which often takes more than one month. Since they have to wait a long time, many Indonesian migrant workers prefer to be arrested by the police, since when they run away from their employers' house they do not have any legal document (their legal documents being kept by their employers). After being jailed for about one week to one month, they are deported and returned home. About 82 per cent of the returned female migrants stated that they did not have any contact with the Indonesian Embassy during their working period in Saudi Arabia. Among those who did contact the Embassy, only 14 per cent stated that the Embassy was able to help them in solving their problems.

#### 4.4 Social relations

Interviews with many returned migrants showed that social relations between employers and house workers varied. Some employers treated the house workers very well and considered them as their own family. However, as explained by some female returned migrant respondents, some treated the workers as slaves, who had to do all the household work. During their time working as household workers, most returned migrants did not have any relationship with other people, except with the employer and his/her family. They spent almost all the time inside the house, without any social contact with people outside the house. If they did, they met other household servants when the employers held a party at their house or they were invited by the employers to attend such party at another family's house.

The study found that many returned migrants who worked as household workers in Saudi Arabia were often the objects of their employer's anger, especially the wives. It usually happened because the lady was jealous of her workers. Many returned migrants said if they expressed any kindness to their male employers they would receive the lady's anger. Many respondents interviewed in the study mentioned that the household workers were also often threatened by sexual harassment, indeed rape, by the male employers or other adult male family members. Therefore, they had to be very careful when they were at home with only the adult male family members, and in order to avoid sexual harassment they would not face adult male family members. Sexual harassment, rape attempt and other kinds of mistreatment were experienced by some of the returned female migrants interviewed in the study. Some of them stated they had to be brave and to have great courage to work as household workers in Saudi Arabia.

#### 5. Why Do They Still Want To Work As Household Workers In The Middle East?

In spite of the mistreatment stories, about 52 per cent of returned female migrants interviewed in the study stated they wished to work in Saudi Arabia again. Several of them stated they wished to work overseas again but not in Saudi Arabia. This was because of the high salary that they earned while working overseas, as stated by more than 60 per cent of the returned female migrants (Table 7). The wages received by female household workers in 1999 was about 600 Real (equivalent to approximately US \$200). It is quite high by Indonesian standards. Another reason, although this was

stated by only a small number of the respondents, was related to the greater access to job opportunities in the host country compared to Indonesia and their village in particular. This indicates that the economic reason is still the main factor influencing the movement of labor migrants. The opportunity to make the pilgrimage to Mecca while in Saudi Arabia is another important motivation influencing their decision to migrate. This finding is also supported by other studies (Kantor Menteri Negara Kependudukan and Lingkungan Hidup and Pusat Penelitian Kependudukan Universitas Gadjah Mada 1986: 303; Mantra and Kasnawi, 1986). Among those who did not wish to work overseas again, the common reason was because lack of permission from their family, both their husband and parents. Very long working hours and heavy workload were also the reasons mentioned by respondents who did not wish to work overseas again.

**Table 7**  
**DISTRIBUTION OF RETURNED FEMALE MIGRANTS IN THE STUDY**  
**AREA BY REASON TO WORK IN SAUDI ARABIA**

Reason to work in Saudi Arabia	Percentage	Number of cases
High salary	64	85
Opened employment opportunity	12	16
Relative already works in Saudi Arabia	1	1
To look for experience	5	7
Other reasons	18	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>133</b>

*Note* : \* Percentage of total returned female migrants interviewed in the study.

*Source*: PPK-LJPI study in Indramayu and Cianjur Districts, West Java, 1999.

The income earned by female workers in Saudi Arabia has a significant impact on the economic life of the families they left behind. The highest proportion of returned migrants sent money back to their home village three to five times during their contract abroad (two years) and the rest sent money one or two times, six to ten times or more than twelve times during the same period of time. The family spent the money to fulfill various needs, such as the daily needs, building a house, buying agricultural land, the children's education and as capital for running a business. Of all forms of the usage of the money, the largest proportion was for fulfilling the daily needs and building a house. This finding shows that most of them spent the money for consumptive needs. Only a small proportion spent their money on productive needs, such as buying agricultural land or running a business.

In the rural environment where they live, the comparative prosperity of families whose one or more members had worked or were working overseas were easily discoverable. For instance, their houses looked more opulent than those of families none of whose members was or had been a migrant worker. The houses of the families of migrant workers have cement walls and ceramic floor while the rest of their communities are still living in traditional dwellings mainly made of wood and bamboo. Another impact of international labor is that it has created certain job opportunities, mainly in the construction business in their places of origin. This is because of the increased demand to build houses among migrants' and returned migrants' families.

The many cases of mistreatment and bad working experiences among Indonesian returned female migrants do not seem to deter a number of them to work in Saudi Arabia again. Some returned female migrants in the study area believe that what they will experience during their work overseas depends on their fate. Therefore, even though many of their friends had bad experiences, they tend to think it will not happen to them. An example of this willingness to take the risk of misfortune is the story of Mrs. M, one of the returned migrant workers interviewed in the study:

*Mrs. M was almost raped by her employer the first time she worked as household worker in Saudi Arabia. She was married with two children and she had left her husband and children in her home village. At the time of the study, she was preparing her travel to work as household worker in Saudi Arabia for the second time. She said: 'I believe that God will protect me, and it will not happen again to me'. Her husband also permitted her to go back to work in Saudi Arabia.*

Even though economic need was the most important reason for women's decision to return to work in Saudi Arabia, migration seems to broaden their views and increase their decision making power in the family. About 70 per cent of women interviewed in the study stated that they made an independent decision regarding their work and movement to Saudi Arabia (Table 8). The rest explained that there were also other family members involved in the decision regarding their migration to work in Saudi Arabia. It is also becoming customary for many young women in the study area in Indramayu and Cianjur (West Java) to go to Saudi Arabia to work as household workers. Indeed it is considered unusual for young women not to have any experience working in the Middle East. This is perhaps an indication that changes are taking place in the social values among young women in the study area. More and more young women now make the decision to work overseas independently and have the courage to take risk to migrate as independent migrants.

**Table 8**  
**DISTRIBUTION OF RETURNED FEMALE MIGRANTS IN THE STUDY AREA**  
**BY PERSON MAKING MIGRATION DECISIONS TO WORK IN SAUDI ARABIA**

Person making migration decision	Percentage	Number of cases
The women themselves	70	93
The women and their husbands	7	9
The women and their parents	1	1
Husbands	10	13
Parents/other relatives	12	16
Others	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>133</b>

*Note:* \* Percentage of total returned female migrants interviewed in the study.

*Source:* PPK-IJPI study in Indramayu and Cianjur Districts, West Java, 1999.

## 6. Conclusion

The outbound movement of Indonesians taking up overseas jobs is being fuelled by the high demand for manpower in neighboring as well as more distant countries, such as countries in the Middle East. But while the number of Indonesians becoming migrant workers abroad is increasing their educational and skill profile remains low. For example, the majority of males are working as laborers in the plantation and construction sectors in Malaysia and Singapore. Female labor migrants are dominant among those who work as household workers in Saudi Arabia.

Besides the impact on the economic life of their families, there are some problems faced by female labor migrants in their working place overseas as well as in the process of migration. The deployment of female labor migrants to work in Saudi Arabia, as well as other forms of international labor migration from Indonesia involve recruiting companies and several layers of recruiters or middlemen, known among West Java female labor migrants as 'sponsors'. Generally, migrant workers leave the entire recruitment and selection process to the 'sponsors', since they are very poorly informed about all aspects of the migration process as well as working conditions in Saudi Arabia. The poor knowledge of female migrants about all aspects of the migration process is also related to their low educational level and ability to read or write. Therefore it is difficult for them to understand any information even though it is available in written form, such as requirements

for working overseas and government regulations regarding the deployment of migrant workers overseas.

To some extent, the lack of information for female migrant workers regarding what is required of them to work overseas and what they need to do before leaving for overseas is due, not only to the lack of effective information programs, but also to:

- the fact that the official process is far too convoluted and complex, involving several stages and requiring much time.
- the centralized system, with migrant workers having to travel considerable distances to go through registration, preparation and training processes, often involves considerable costs, not only for the travel, but also the long waiting period at the transit point.

This means that it is difficult for migrant workers to fully understand what is involved and therefore easier for them to be misled and exploited. Therefore, the procedure needs to be improved and simplified by reducing the number of steps involved in registration, the development of 'one-stop shops' and decentralization of the registration system.

One of the most controversial and disturbing aspects of the current movement of labor migration out of Indonesia relates to abuse and exploitation in the destination country. While it is evident among all types of migrants going to each of the main destinations, it is far and away most prevalent among females going to Saudi Arabia. Between January 1984 and February 1986, around 3,600 Indonesian migrants reported serious problems to the Indonesian embassy. In 1984, the Indonesian Embassy in Riyadh received 657 complaints from female workers, but only a few were resolved. These complaints included cases of rape, sexual harassment, battery, onerous work, unpaid wages, work not in accordance with contract, hard to please employers, employee unjustly accused by employer, expelled/dismissed by employer and frequently illness (RDCMD-YTKI, 1986, XXVIII: 52-59).

It is apparent that a major challenge facing Indonesian officials in this area is to put in place protective mechanisms to help overcome this problem. The study found that most migrant workers had no knowledge at all of what strategies they could adopt in the destination country if they found themselves in a situation where they were being exploited (e.g. poor working conditions, long working hours, etc.) or abused (physically or sexually). It is clear that women taking up such jobs need to be provided with information regarding various strategies they can use when confronted with these issues.

Reports of problems of female labor migrants working as household workers in Saudi Arabia covering mistreatment, sexual harassment and physical attack have given rise to considerable controversy in Indonesia. There is an opinion that export of female labor to work as household workers in Saudi Arabia should be banned. But there is also an opinion that it can continue since it has an economic impact on the life of the female workers and their families. In 1985, the Influential Islamic Muhammadiyah organization urged the government to stop sending female workers. The Indonesian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia compared the deployment of Indonesian female household workers in Saudi Arabia to slavery (Cremer, 1988: 81). A woman Islamic religious leader interviewed in Bethan study (1993) stated:

*"It is better to stop the deployment of female workers (to Saudi Arabia). It is ruining our nation's image. Because the profiles of Indonesian women are quite similar, and many Indonesian women going to work in Saudi Arabia are young and beautiful, it is quite often that any woman visiting Saudi Arabia is considered by local people as household workers, including me, when I visited that country."*

It is interesting to note that in 1980 the sending of domestic servants (of both sexes) to the Middle East was banned (RDCMD-YTKI, 1986: 172) but the ban was lifted in 1982. As explained by one returned female migrants in the study area, in 1996 it was once again banned, even though only for a few months, following the case of one Indonesian household worker who was sentenced to death for murdering her employer in Saudi Arabia. However, it seems that the deployment of female household workers to Saudi Arabia will continue. It is difficult to stop deployment of female labor to the Middle East since it will create a large stream of illegal migrants. There is a history of illegal labor movement from Indonesia to Saudi Arabia. There were practices of sending international labor migrants (especially women) to the Middle East on *haj* (pilgrimage) visas (Hugo, 1992: 181). This practice is still continuing until now, even though it has not been much exposed.

Besides the controversy, the deployment of Indonesian domestic workers in Saudi Arabia has caused migration itself seems to have an influence on social values related to women's attitude toward working abroad and has increased women's decision-making power within the family. The changes in these social values have increased the scale and complexity of female international migration. Therefore there is a need to clarify this complex two-way relationship between changing social values and changing pattern, level and types of Indonesian international female labor migration. The unraveling of this interrelationship is not only to strengthen the theories

on female migration but also to provide more insight and guidance to policy makers and planners in Indonesia.

It is likely that the flow of Indonesian female labor migration to the Middle East (especially to Saudi Arabia) will continue for some time in the future. To many Indonesian females returned migrants in the study area, working as household workers in Saudi Arabia is a better alternative to unemployment in their home villages. At the household level, employment in the far away country is not only considered as a strategy for the household's survival but also a way to improve the quality of life of the family.

Besides strong economic factors influencing this movement, good transportation networks and the existence of middlemen also facilitate and promote this movement. Although the *calo* do not provide proper information regarding overseas employment, they play an important role in allowing women in the study areas the opportunity to find work overseas since for most prospective labor migrants the *calo* is the only source of information other than their friends and relatives who have experience working abroad. This places the prospective female labor migrants in a very weak position and under undue influence of the *sponsor* and they easily become victims of exploitation even before they leave the country.

In destination countries, many female labor migrants have had as well as good experiences working overseas in terms of how the employers treated them. However, the many cases of mistreatment and bad working experiences among Indonesian returned female migrants in the study area do not seem to deter a number of them to work in Saudi Arabia. This could be an indication of changes in social values and increasing women's power in migration decision-making. Among them there is also an inclination toward 'fatalism'. Therefore their (bad) experiences working in Saudi Arabia have little influence on their decision to go back to work in that country. Since cases of mistreatment, exploitation and harassment are still continuing, a more active role of the Indonesian government authorities is needed to improve protection of Indonesian female labor migrants. In the future it is important for the Indonesian government to end the deployment of international female labor migrants for household work and instead to promote deployment of semi-skilled workers.



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