

# Eastern Indonesian Women on the Move: Domestic Work in Global Cities<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstrak

*Terpacu oleh krisis moneter di Indonesia, sejumlah perempuan merantau menjadi pembantu rumah tangga di negeri orang. Pendapatan yang relatif tinggi sebagai pembantu (Tenaga Kerja Wanita/TKW) di negara asing selain tentunya menopang pendapatan keluarga, juga membantu neraca perdagangan negara. TKW secara umum mencerminkan hubungan berbagai lintasan hirarkis antarkelas, lokalitas/suku bangsa dan gender. Studi lapangan tentang mobilitas TKW yang berasal dari Nusa Tenggara Timur ini menunjukkan bahwa menjadi TKW merupakan salah satu strategi mobilitas perempuan dalam menempatkan diri pada alur hubungan kekuasaan. Dengan menggunakan studi kasus, studi ini bermaksud mengungkap dan memahami lebih jauh keadaan dan proses mobilitas TKW.*

*Terminologi lokal 'langgar laut' dipakai sebagai konsep analitik untuk mendalami perpindahan fisik dan metaforik yang dialami dan dipilih para perempuan untuk mencapai jaringan hubungan sosial yang diinginkannya.*

## Introduction: the pursuit, me near i pengalaman

Domestic service in Indonesia as a source of work for many unskilled young women has a long history since the colonial period (Elmhirst 1999:245; Robinson 2000:257). More recently, globalisation has contributed to the process of transnational migration of domestic workers. The revolution in transport and communi-

cations has been one of key elements of globalised linkages (Reid 1996:12). This has enabled women from different countries to cross state boundaries and find domestic work in more affluent households. The domestic work reflects an intersection of hierarchical relationships of class, gender and race.

An increasing number of Indonesian women have travelled from rural areas to engage in domestic job in global cities, such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Since the early 1990's, the number of Indonesian women working abroad has increased to meet the rising demand for domestic helpers in Asia Pacific countries (Hugo 2000:96). In 1995, nearly 42,000 Indonesian women went abroad as do-

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mestic workers in Asia Pacific countries. By 1999 the annual number departed had more than tripled, reaching 155,879 (see Figure 1). Between 1992 and 1998 total remittances increased from US\$264 million to US\$ 1,252 million, equivalent to an increase from slightly less than 1 percent to 2.6 percent of total exports (Hugo 2000:122-123). By 1999 the total of the previous five years foreign exchange earnings from the official channel of remittances by overseas migrant worker reached US\$4 billion (*Bisnis Indonesia* 1999).

The state regional apparatus of administration actively supports the recruitment drive for overseas domestic workers. Remittances from workers have increasing significance to both the government and the families of individual workers (Heyzer 1994:44; Momsen 1999:8). Following the 1997-1998 Indonesian Crisis, more

than one million Indonesian contract workers migrated overseas and three quarters of them were women working as maids abroad (ILO 1999). Hugo (2000:109) points out that during the Crisis, overseas migration of women was used as a strategy to cope with the lowering of the family's real income.

Domestic work in the urban households of the global cities is a lure. It is low skilled with relatively low barriers to entry, and its provision of housing as a live-in worker, makes it attractive to many young women (Cox 1989:135; Tam 1999:264). The work also allows 'migrant women to acculturate to the city and learn new ways of living'<sup>1</sup> (Sotelo 2001:48). The increasing demand for domestic help in the Asia Pacific region encourages more Indonesian women to consider transnational migration.

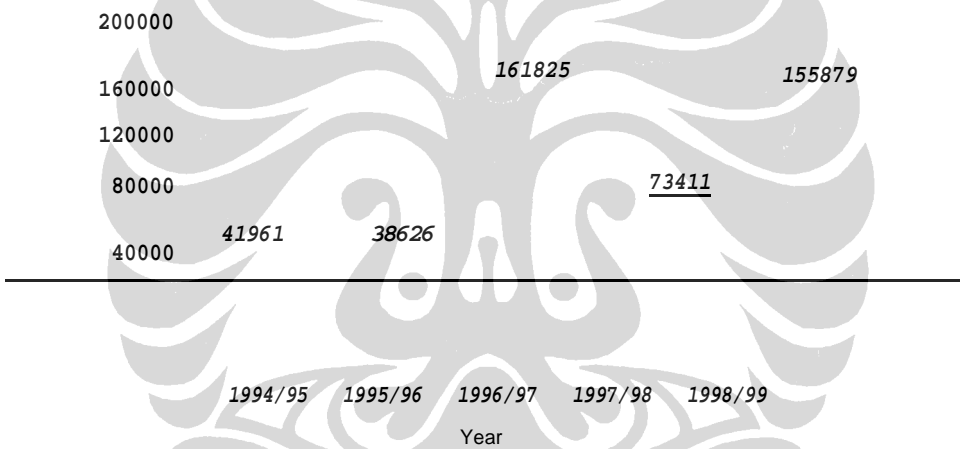


Figure 1:  
Domestic workers to the Asia Pacific Region-Selected  
Years. Source: Business News 2000

Most research on domestic work has documented problematic relations between employees and employers (Meldrum 2000:3). It has therefore, neglected the importance of agency in a young woman's transnational movement. Other recent research has highlighted how migrant domestic workers have been subordinated not only by their employers but also by their urban host society (Momsen 1999:1). Robinson (2000) has studied Indonesian women working as domestics in the Middle East, pointing to the inadequacy of binary frameworks in understanding the complexities of this transnational movement. The framework of the employee-employer relation is characterised by the employer's superior class position, reinforced by race and gender, while an employee is cast as a victim. Power in this way is simplistically conceived as a single dimension, rather than a complex multi dimension (Constable 1997:9).

In this paper, I focus on the conditions under which domestic workers from East Nusa Tenggara experience transnational movement and their struggles for subjectivity in their social relations (McDonald 1999:1). I unpack domestic workers' migration, drawing on an increasing number of studies such as those by Constable (1997) and Romero (1992), whose approach argues against an essentialist view of domestic worker-employer relations. More specifically, I am concerned with two issues: how do domestic workers experience different spaces of transnational movement and changing social relations; and how do domestic workers' strategies with regard to their shifting subject positions affect their satisfaction in attaining their specified goals in the overseas contract work.

### **Sojourning: Netti's map of travel as a migrant worker**

Eastern Indonesian women's sojourning<sup>2</sup> as overseas domestic workers are likely to have a variety of reasons. These reasons can be unpacked into a three key spatial scales, although they may overlap. At a personal or household level, the appeal of travelling and working abroad—apart from the money—was the opportunity to escape from family constraints and live in a different community overseas for an extended period. Some simply wished to experience different spaces and places, 'memperluas cakrawala' or to expand their horizons. At a regional and national level, some others found it difficult to find suitable employment in East Nusa Tenggara labour market that would guarantee a reasonable income. At a globalised scale, some women are influenced by contemporary economic and cultural effects of globalisation and are attracted to join the globalised labour market. This transnational movement allows a young woman to spread her wings and at the same time to be viewed as 'a heroine' in exile for the benefit of the whole family, as my case study later shows. Resisting the romantic view of this type of transnational movement as detailed by Groves and Chang (1999), this paper examines the material conditions and experience of spaces at different stages in the journey of individual domestic workers.

I take a cue from Netti's personal map, which tells stories of her personal struggles and triumphs (see Figure 2). I employ the unusual cartographic vision, using subjective map with a variety of graphic grids and geometries of experience and feelings (Huffman 1997). I use

<sup>2</sup> Reid (1996) uses the term to mean temporary migration, implying an assumption of the 'impropriety' of the temporary movement so the journey is undertaken with a plan to return.



Figure 2: A map of Netti's travel abroad.

this graphic to structure my representations of the women's transnational migration. The typical journey of a domestic working abroad follows several distinctive phases: leaving home; in-transit; working abroad; and returning home. But first I discuss the domestic workers' profile to provide a context for the discussion.

#### Soujourners: domestic workers

The transnational movement of Eastern Indonesian domestic workers is examined by analysing each stage of the journey. I draw upon the experiences of 15 returned domestic workers who were informally interviewed in East Nusa Tenggara between 1999 and 2000. Their ages at the time of interview were between 20 to 29 years. As 13 of the 15 women went to Hong Kong, more stories relate to the group going to Hong Kong. I entered their net-

work through 'snowballing' connections. My association with the Society of the Divine Word (a Catholic Religious Order, SVD) led me to be introduced to a woman known as a 'ringleader'—an ex-domestic worker who had become a recruiter. I became acquainted with her group of friends. They accepted me in their circle as a fellow traveller, *pernah merantau*. As we exchanged our stories and autobiography, we shared our experience of living overseas (Mckay 2001). Our common experience as women travellers, sometimes struggling alone to make sense of our new circle of relations, becomes the bond of our engagements.

This group of informants were all single and aged in their twenties, and previously had no particular skills or job experiences. The social and economic backgrounds of the informants were middle-to-low income families with a pre-

dominantly farming background. All were unemployed, therefore financially dependent on their families before migrating. All, except one, attended secondary school and two of them studied at the tertiary level. The secondary level of education of my informants is higher than those of women studied by Heyzer and Wee (1994), in which only 30 per cent of the Indonesian domestic workers finished high schooling while the majority finished primary schooling. Nevertheless Heyzer and Wee (1994:46) confirms that among those who completed high school to migrate, many were rural women, reflecting the scarcity of rural employment. My informants started their overseas travel when aged between 17 and 23 years old, which is inside the 15-25 age group bracket of rural women in Heyzer and Wee's (1994) findings. Except for one Muslim woman of Ende who worked for one year in Singapore and thus did not complete her contract, all had at least two years experience as domestic workers abroad. Two women completed four-years of service and two others were on holiday and would be returning for the second term of their contracts.

Transnational movement to be a domestic worker reveals a personal physical and metaphorical journey in struggles for subjectivity in changing spaces as illustrated in Netti's sketch. Netti's map can be viewed as one mode of cartography which resists the mainstream cartography of objectivity and strives to make women's space visible (Huffman 1997). However, as Domosh (1997) and others remind us to go beyond understanding the individual experiences, and thus it is necessary to examine the conditions under which these processes are produced.

When I analyse Netti's map within the local historical context it reveals the terms in which this type of transnational movement is being constructed and performed. In this way

the analysis of the informants' experience at different stages of the journey provides a link which enables me to see a broader phenomena of transnational migration for the local women. Netti's map contains four clear stages of sojourning, from leaving home followed by in-transit in Java and working abroad to returning back home again.

Theorising domestic contract migration in terms of these stages of movement allows me to examine how this transnational movement as a part of globalisation provides an opportunity for renegotiating gender identities. The following discussion of these typical stages aims to highlight conditions and experience of space, and it begins by considering the departure from the family home

### **Leaving home**

Commonly, departure was the first hurdle. It involved one of the most difficult decisions about travelling overseas as it was often the young women's first journey away from home. Their attachment to home was related to a particular phase in their life cycle and, to some extent, their specific subject position in a lower status hierarchy in the family as an unmarried daughter. Among a range of experiences during the departure stage, a common thread ran through the beginning of women's travel experiences—an uneasiness regarding their departure, as evidenced in discussing the stories of individual women.

Netti's map illustrates these processes of changing spaces and relations (Figure 2), linking her personal memories, sentiments and feelings. In essence, the drawing established a view from the inside, which also depicted conflicting thoughts, mapped significant events, and attached a sense of place.

The stage of leaving home in Netti's map reflects a strong feeling of attachment to her

family's house 'rumahku' in the backdrop of her movement. A woman is depicted in front of the pier. She is about to take a new step, to cross the threshold of the sea, where it ends at the port, dermaga—a significant place separating land and ocean (see Figure 3). The image of a rather unsure step toward an unfamiliar territory is confirmed by Graham's (1999) study on Flores which pinpoints the importance of sea as a threshold. Sea is a source of reference in relation to others—it forges connections with outsiders (Graham 1999:72). Netti's illustrative feeling of leaving the family home to enter new circuits of relations was filled with mixed emotions. There was a concern about community attitudes questioning the bona fide

of her occupation, an excitement of a new space, and an anxiety about securing a better economic future.

### Motivation

Generally, earning good income to help the family was the main motivation given by most informants—a finding that has parallels with many similar studies on overseas domestic workers (Momsen 1999; ILO 1998). Within this broad generalisation of motivation nestled a rich variety of individual reasons. For instance, Netti, a 27 years old single woman from a large family of eight lived in her family home. Her father owned a piece of land—less than a half a hectare—for a subsistence garden and her

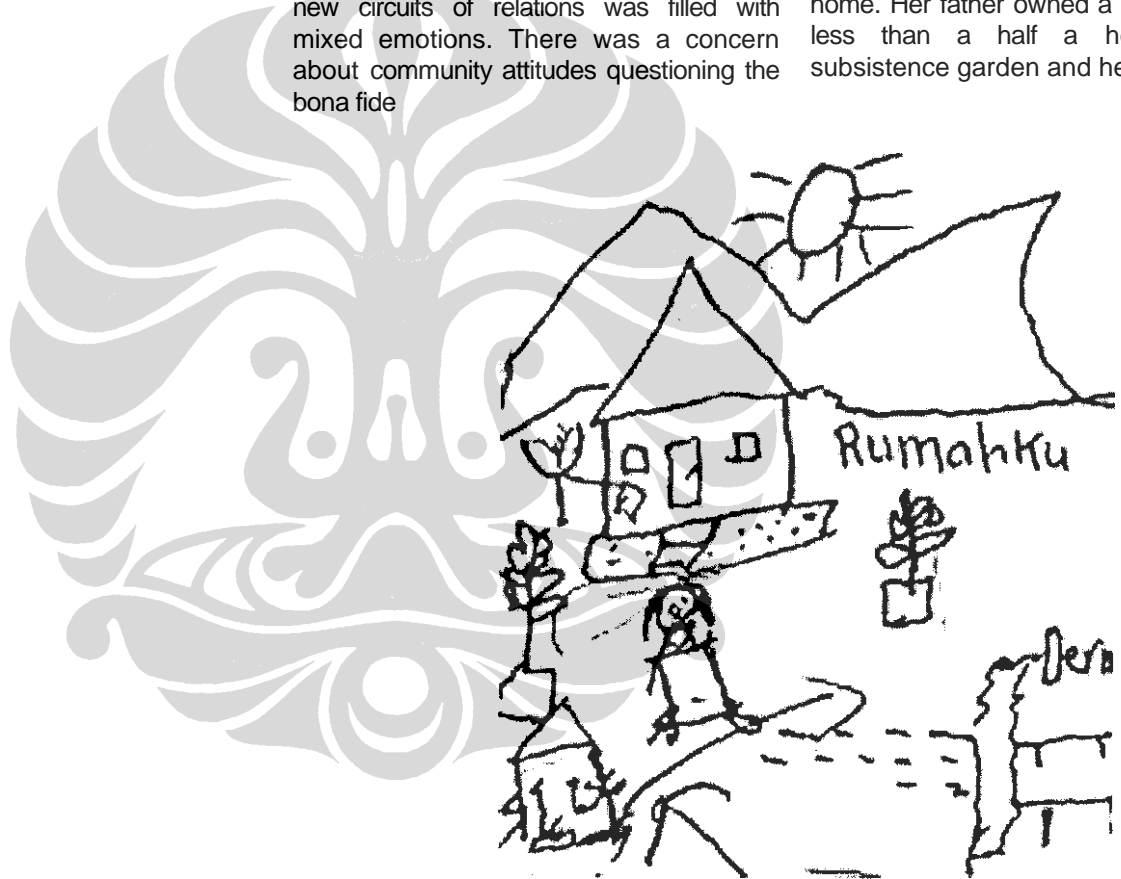


Figure 3: Home -  
Subsection from Netti's map

mother was a housewife. Netti, like many high school graduates, had been attracted to a more secure public service job. However, she did not succeed in securing any local government job after leaving school. Despite her initial uneasiness about leaving home she wanted to assist rebuilding her family home which was ruined by an earth quake in 1992. When I met Netti in 1999 she had achieved her economic goal. Her home had been completely renovated and had become one of the most imposing dwellings in the area. It was reconstructed using bricks and it had proper roof tiles rather than the common thatched roof and also shiny floor tiles—an unmistakable sign of wealth and prosperity.

Susana was an attractive 24 year old daughter of a farming family with five girls. She could not find a local job either. However when talking to her further, she also revealed a hidden desire to decide her own life path. Beneath her conviction of 'the divine provision' of her migration abroad, '*sudah jalan dari Tuhan,*' she also wanted to decide her future. Susana and the rest of the informants indicated varied and deeper personal reasons for their travel.

Travelling abroad to be a domestic worker provides a personal space by, at least temporarily, creating a distance from the family (Barbie et.al. 1999:175). Agnes, for instance, was disillusioned with her boyfriend and sought solace abroad, away from family and friends. Once her relationship with her boyfriend was severed, she avoided meeting people in the local community in case they questioned her about her failed marriage plans. When told by a friend about an opportunity to become a domestic worker, she needed no further encouragement. For Agnes, working overseas was one way of obtaining space and privacy.

Women were also motivated to move from their rural households to urban households abroad because it gave them opportunity to become 'modern' or 'to learn a new way of liv-

ing' among others by gaining familiarity with the urban life style and latest appliances (Momsen 1999:5; see also Elmhirst 1999; Sotelo 2001:48). Liana and Mariana for instance, expressed their personal desire to experience spaces beyond their homes and family, to learn new skills and to meet new people (*mencari pengalaman di luar negeri*). They were bored of being unemployed and broke so they travelled together to spread their wings and to widen their perspectives, '*memperluas cakrawala*'. This impression differs from that reported by Heyzer and Wee (1994:49), in which East Javanese domestic workers (mainly in the Middle East) considered that providing for the family in addition to making a pilgrimage to Mecca was the most important motive. While the expression used by the Eastern Indonesian women often pointed to economic factors such as renovating the family home or financing sibling education as a primary motivation, when unpacking their stories further, I found that it was rare that one factor predominated. There were a set of factors closely interconnected, as their stories indicated, triggering their journey which was seen 'as a secular pilgrimage or even a rite of passage' to gain training and savings (Momsen 1999:301). Different stages in the life cycle and the cultural context of areas of origin as well as different ways of engaging with the women in the research process may explain the different representations of motivation between East Javanese and Eastern Indonesian women. Motivation of leaving home can precede or follow a recruitment stage, when women formally register their interest which requires the family's consent to sail to Java for transit, before flying abroad.

### **Recruitment**

Most young women in my study learnt about opportunities to work abroad from official radio announcements or from the head of

the village who urged women of the region to apply as part of a local government initiative representing a formal recruitment process. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, notably Thailand, three basic types of recruitment have been identified: (1) formal recruitment through authorised agents; (2) informal recruitment through unlicensed agents in which a migrant pays the migration fees directly at the time of migration; and (3) 'debt bondage' of informal recruitment in which a migrant works off the migration fees after arriving at a destination country (Sobieszcyk 2000:397). The experience of the returned migrant workers whom I interviewed do not neatly fall within one category of this framework as the process of recruitment was often a mixture of both formal and informal networks.

Recruitment in Indonesia has been a source of disputes among vested interests, notably the Ministry of Manpower and the licensed employment agencies, each with their recruitment networks. Political transformation after the New Order period has enabled certain improvements and transparencies in the transnational migration process. Presidential Decisions, Keppres No.29/1999 and Keppres No.49/2000 were passed to create a new Institution, Badan Koordinasi Penempatan TKI (a Coordinating Body for Overseas Migrant Placement). The new body is aimed at integrating the efforts of nine separate institutions/ministries—Manpower, Internal Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Health, Education, Religion, Defence, Police, and Central Bank. The new institution's task is to assist with the recruitment and work placement of overseas migrant workers and provide services which cut costs and protect the workers (*Bisnis Indonesia* 1999, Direktorat Jendral Binapenta2000).

Heyzer and Wee (1994) explain how the recruitment network spans from the importing countries to Indonesia, permeating down to the

villages simultaneously linking them to global cities. The field workers employed by agencies in turn employ assistants to work as brokers, which included returned migrants, market traders or well-known figures in town (Heyzer and Wee 1994:474-8). In parts of Flores, many local women were likely to have known a friend or a relative who had worked as a maid overseas. These returned migrants in turn recruited relatives, friends, acquaintances, and neighbours. Social capital in a form of networks of other migrants comprising friends and relatives was significant in securing an overseas job, and, in turn in assisting the migrant worker settling in the job at the destination (Hugo 1999:28; Hugo 2000:108).

Undertaking a contract job abroad through a formal recruitment through the state's instrumentality is notoriously bureaucratic, lengthy and costly (Hugo 2000:123). The informal process however is more effective as many migrants moved because they had relatives or friends who were involved in migration (Hugo 1999:28). Invariably, the group of my informants were careful to avoid unknown calo or middlemen and chose to pass through an informal network which, in turn, converged into the authorised system. The social and economic networks of the individual women to some extent determined the outcome of the job hunting. By using a personal connection, the employment agency was able to recruit workers committed to the job. This embeddedness of individuals in social networks generates trust and in turn creates an efficient economic transaction (Granovetter 1985:490).

The women used both informal and formal channels to apply for jobs. Indeed, it is difficult to separate the economic and social factors determining the employment of these women. Networks of personal contacts do not fit the neat theoretical divisions between economic and social factors and yet it was through



this network that individuals often heard about and obtained jobs (Hanson and Pratt 1995:7). The boundaries between formal and informal recruitment were blurred, as evident from the women's experience of the recruitment process.

#### Family/clan's consent

When a woman is ready to formally apply for a domestic job abroad, she has to provide a formal letter of consent from her family. This consent precedes further processing of the necessary legal documents, such as health and security clearances, passport and visa. Most parents (in practice the father) in Flores from my experience were reluctant to give permission for their daughters to work abroad. Because an important aspect of a father's role is guardianship of his daughter's virtue, he has to accept responsibility for consequences of her job as a domestic worker in a foreign country.

Locally, the profession suffered an unfortunate association with the 'TKW' acronym. TKW is an Indonesian acronym for *Tenaga Kerja Wanita* referring to overseas female migrants and particularly those working in domestic service. In some local dialects of Flores (Nage, Keo and Lio) *teka* (c.f., the pronunciation of TK) means to sell, so the community tended to associate TKW with prostitution. A community leader in Ende who has organised many social and economic projects commented that as a father he would never give his daughter his consent for this job and he claimed to know of many cases where daughters simply escaped, *lari* to do the job.

The parents' reluctance also stemmed from the community's negative perception resulting from media representations of this type of job which is linked with physical and sexual abuses. The Indonesian media reported that between 1997 and 1998 *Solidaritas Perempuan* (Women's Solidarity)—an NGO observing the plight of domestic workers—recorded

180 deaths, 180 abuses, and 442 missing persons among overseas migrant workers (*Merdeka* 1998). More recently the media reported a case of 20 migrant women aged between 19 and 27 being allegedly held captive by a Malaysian syndicate in a three-storey building on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur and forced to become 'sex slaves' (*Jakarta Post* 2000). There were also cases of 20 women aged between 14 and 20 years who admitted forging their ages in passports to work abroad. They were reported to have been physically abused, in addition to one woman who was reported to have been raped in Sarawak, Malaysia (*Kompas* 2000). Given these media representations of the job, it was not surprising that parents were reluctant to allow their daughters to become transnational domestic workers.

The ways daughters obtained consent to travel show the women's agency within the intra-household dynamic, by promising to contribute to the household income. Some parents were able to see beyond the media reports detailing the horror and hazards of working overseas when confronted with the women they knew who had come home economically much better off. However, *calo* were also known to be aggressively looking for workers in rural areas, meeting the women's parents to ask for their consent and promising to send money to the family at home, in some cases up to Rp600,000 per month (A\$150), in addition to the worker's monthly salary (*Kompas* 2000). Mostly for the first timers, the family's consent was given unwillingly, indicating the first step of a daughter's struggle for an increasing autonomy.

On occasions, the crucially important piece of paper showing family consent had been forged to enable young women to escape from their family home. Some women who forged papers were brought back to their home villages after the family had tracked them down in

Java. The requirement of a consent to travel for women in general and daughters in particular was evidence of their continued subordinate position in the family.

Most workers destined for overseas went by ship to transit locations in Java. The tension of separation from their kin commenced at the ports of departure. Many embarked on their first ever journey outside Flores. Netti recalled how she sailed for the first time in 1994 on board on a PELNI ship Kelimutu to Surabaya. On the ship the women started building a network of friends and a support system, learning about what to expect in Java and how to survive abroad if they successfully negotiated the next stage of their transnational movement.

### **In-transit: dormitory and training**

Once women arrived in Java, they were taken to dormitories located in different cities, where hundreds of potential migrants waited for placement overseas. As Netti and others recalled, the living conditions in these dormitories provided by employment agencies were overcrowded. Netti had to deal with her own confusion as well as the low morale of those who had been waiting for some months for a placement overseas.

This in-transit period is also a time when the women were subjected to a series of examinations, including medical check-ups and a character investigation through criminal records held by the police. In addition, the women were supposed to undergo intensive training that accustomed them to domestic tasks, such as cooking, cleaning and simple sewing. This course was also supposed to include practical work in an urban middle class home and the acquisition of minimal language skills (basic English conversation). There was no fixed training period because it depended on how quickly the domestic worker could be

placed in employment. Often the women were videoed, so that potential employers could appraise their physical appearance. Then the game of waiting started, with the women hoping an overseas employer would select them.

### **On-the job training: agent and temporary employer**

While they were in-transit, the agent sent the women for on-the-job-training. In these homes they were supposed to learn how to use modern household appliances, such as a washing machine, rice cooker and gas stove, which were unavailable in their home towns or villages. This stage of the journey attracted most complaints from women because of the uncertainty of the period in transit and the difficulties of being away from home for the first time. This is the beginning of a struggle for subjectivity. Being away from home provides a space for self reflection and self reliance. Some women, as Netti's moment of doubt evidently showed, began to reconsider their intention of going abroad during this stressful phase of the journey, and a few tried to escape.

The lower pay for on-the-job training in Indonesia was considered better than waiting a lengthy period in an agency's shelter as it was considered one move forward to their final destination of an overseas contract job.<sup>3</sup> Surviving during the period in-transit involves a series of strategic alliances with the agency and employer to attain the goal of working abroad,

The significant role of the employment agency in Netti's ultimate journey is depicted : in her sketch as a huge male head representing the 'boss' of the company or FT di Surabaya, as shown in Figure 4. The 'boss' overwhelm-

<sup>3</sup> Some of **my informants** were paid Rp 100,000 per month in 1997 during on-the-job-training in Surabaya, which was only 5 per cent of the promised salaries in Hong Kong (HK\$ 2,500).



Figure 4: The dormitory—subsection from Netli's map

ing physical presence was obvious from the deliberately enlarge scaled figure in the picture. The remote and unequal relationship between Netli and the boss was graphically inscribed in the head set distantly apart from the inner circle of the women.

Many of the women were away from their families for the first time, and felt exposed without the protection of their male kinfolk. One of them, Miriam, was subject to sexual harassment by her employer while she was undergoing on-(he)-job training. Yet she managed to maintain control over the situation, *masih berani*, because she had yet to reach the destination of her transnational movement.

Depending on a woman's perspective, a man's sexual advance may be viewed either as an opportunity or a threat. Obviously Miriam did not enjoy her employer's sexual advances. Paradoxically her tears, symbolically a sign of helplessness, were strategically used to escape her employer's harassments. Miriam's strategy

can be conceptualised as a subject shifting positions, who was aware that her race, class and gender identity may be held against her. Miriam was aware to the multiplicities within herself and invest in as many dimensions of roles and positions to gain her advantage (Ferguson 1993:161).

Being away from home and family for the first time provided a space for Miriam to experiment and rely on her own resourcefulness. Clearly, an ideal of feminine characteristics of docility and obedience *tunduk dan patuh*, traditionally accepted in her place of origin, in this case lost its intensity with distance. Therefore this journey offered Miriam a kind of free-floating and fluid choice of subject positions. Given the isolation of the individualised work situations, it was unlikely that she had adequate support networks and access to information (ILO: 1998). So a woman in this situation has to learn to avoid risky situations and to rely on and be able to defend herself.

**Working abroad: knowing how to conduct oneself, *tahu membawa diri***

The culmination of the transnational movement involved working in the houses of their foreign employers. Distance from home allowed this group of women the opportunity to transform themselves both physically and metaphorically. The physical transformation was not unbounded as their employers not only decided on their work routines but also asserted control over their physical presentation.

Most domestic workers in my study were conscious of the constraints imposed by employers and the expectation to work hard. They learnt this through the informal networks of friends and ex-workers even before arrival. As they were paid good money for their domestic services, indeed they were ready to work hard. Netti recollected her arrival, her hair was cut short; no lipstick, make-up or nail polish was used. She described her first day working

abroad as being prepared for war—'*siap berjuang*' which literally means ready for the battle (see Figure 5). This metaphor of battle field for the job reflects the state officials' perspective that migrant women are economic soldiers deployed to battle against the country's economic crisis (Chin 1997:366).

In Susana's case she believed that she owed her job to 'good looks and overall presentation', *penampilan pribadi*. She believed that her fair clean skin and bright face were the reasons that attracted her employer to select her from among photographs and videos of potential domestic workers. Susana expressed openly in front of some returned migrants that had she been dark skinned with black curly hair—a typical attribute of Floresnese—no employer would have given her a position. This opinion was widely accepted by the other ex-migrants, which reflects the uneasy ethnic and regional boundaries reproduced in the state and



Figure 5: Employer's Home - Subsection from Netti's map

regional relations. Susana attributed her success of dealing with her employer to an awareness of knowing how to conduct oneself in front of the employer, or *tahu membawa diri* as she called it, which was important in her daily conduct. Physical/facial appearance and personal control over emotional outbursts was part of performing a role as a strong, calm and collected woman. The women also perceive that familiarity with urban life style in turn was seen as tantamount to becoming 'modernised' (Momsen 1999:5; Elmhirst 1999). Their experience and degree of satisfaction in their work vary enormously, depending on the variety of subject positions they choose to inhabit.

### Networks of relations

'Smile is my weapon'. A domestic worker often replaced the employer's role in the household as a carer and the nurturer. Netti, like other domestic workers, was trusted with running the household, taking care of children and elderly parents. She was responsible for shopping for daily food supplies and deciding on the family's menu. The work was constructed also on the basis of emotional relation. Netti substituted for the mother's role, and undertook all of the associated domestic tasks. This gendered substitution of labour occurred between two women—the employer and the employee—within the daily life of the family (Gregson 1994:230; Yeoh 1999a:278). Netti expressed satisfaction at being in charge as an autonomous subject, in a way not normally acknowledged in her own home in Flores. Although these are still domestic responsibilities, the meanings attached to her tasks performed as an autonomous subject and the social relations with her employers were different from those at home (Laurie 1999:86).

As noted, Rollins (1985) and others have regarded the relationship between female em-

ployers and female domestic workers as exploitative because the employer overcomes their gender disadvantage by benefitting from the employee's class and ethnic inequalities (Rollins 1985:185; see also Gregson 1994:58). Yet I found the experience of Netti and her counterparts did not necessarily reflect a fully exploitative relationship. Thus, the single dimensional framework of relations of power between employer and foreign employee is not sufficient to understand the domestic workers' transnational movement (Romero 1992; Constable 1997), because there are multi-layer interactions simultaneously enacted and performed by both sides. Clearly, cases of physical abuse and exploitation which are regularly reported by the Indonesian media were but one part of the relationship which received exposure. Unlike those victims, Netti negotiated her roles and work and drew considerable benefit from the relationship with her employer.

During Netti's contract she successfully created a workable relationship with her employers, and was treated well. Obviously, her success in attending to the everyday needs of the employers' family made her indispensable. Thus she was offered more money to extend her contract, which suggested that she was able to exercise some power in the relationship with her employer. Indeed, Netti had consciously ingratiated herself into the family.

Like other foreign domestic workers, Netti and her fellow domestic workers performing identities other than as domestics including in her words, *hura-hum*, letting one's hair down. This leisure activity is concentrated in Victoria Park in Central district, Hong Kong, and is an important part of the women's transnational movement, as Constable (1997) has stated:

After working alone in the employer's home all week, on Sunday in **Central** foreign workers gain strength in numbers. They reestablish and ex-

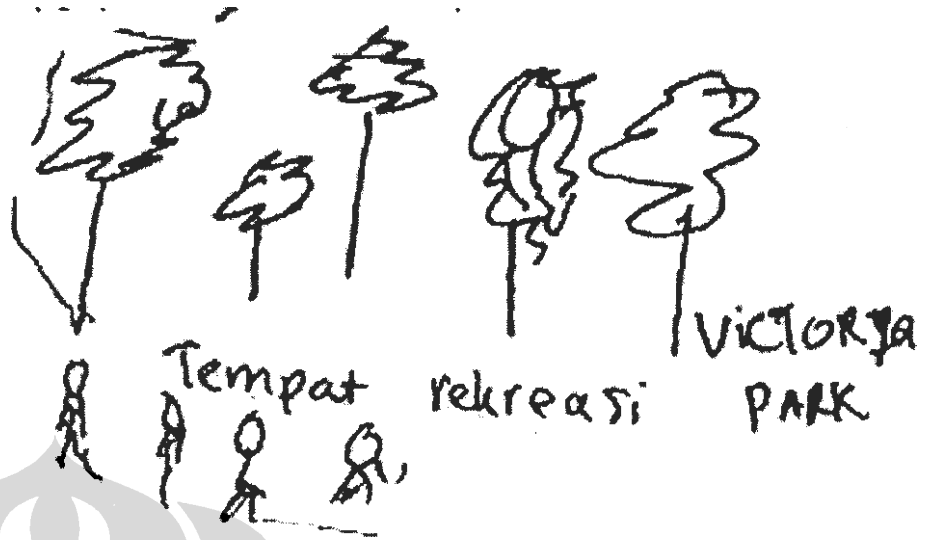


Figure 6: Victoria Park -  
Subsection from Netti's map

press other facets of their identity, if only for a few hours. As they share news from home, they are no longer 'DH' [domestic helpers] but wives, mothers, aunts, sisters, townmates, and schoolmates (Constable 1997:169).

Enacting other subject positions and identities abroad is a part of the new found space of the domestic workers' subject becoming. On Sundays they go to church and they also played roles as consumers as they shopped and posed for photographs, which significantly changed 'the lacklustre image of the humble maids' into a more glamorous image of femininity, 'decked out in all their finery' (Constable 1997:168). These regular meetings were seen as one of the highlights of being abroad. In this role, Netti appeared to be a happy sojourner. I saw Netti's enlarged photograph taken in Victoria Park, which was displayed prominently in her home.

### Returning home

The full circle of the women's journey ends where it starts, at home. Sojourning as a domestic worker has changed Netti's relations with the family, community and region. In the local context of the binary of centre/margin, Eastern Indonesia is associated with a notion of a margin, resulting from the state and colonial constructions of space of political and economic power. The women's travel as domestic workers abroad represent making a step closer to the subjective and imagined centre and thus, transcending a margin. The women's sense of achievement such as the mobility stories of Susana and Netti indicates their de-centring space. Netti's travel abroad for example, represents her moving between different fractals of centre/margin (Mckay 1999:277). As Mckay (1999) argues, this kind of binary structure of power can be conceptualised as fragmented further into a smaller and smaller centre/margin

being split by women's experiences. In this way, women such as Netti who travelled abroad, had crossed the marginality of the region, physically at the centre of the global cities, yet became marginal in their roles as domestics, while at the same time they occupied a central position in the family income generating activities. The women displayed shifting subjectivities, as more autonomous subjects in their family and community relations.

Netti was valued for her sacrifice working abroad and bringing the needed extra income. So Netti's was temporarily placed at the centre of her family relations. Home then was where she could have time out and did almost as she would pleased. And, as a recently returned worker commented, it was where she could sleep as much as she wanted. After working hard and remitting three-quarters of her earnings as some of my informants admitted, she was in a better position in the family to negotiate her behaviour. For example the family put up with their daughters' clothings, physical appearances and habits. The amount of remittance is much more than that of Chin (1997:365) who estimates that Indonesian domestic workers sent between one-third and one-half of their monthly salary to their families. The economic benefit to the family was undoubtedly immense

in addition to promoting the government's export of labour. Not surprisingly the pressure to the domestic workers to return to work abroad comes from many directions.

### Concluding remarks

The transnational movement of Eastern Indonesian women to be domestics suggest that this is one of the options available to them to actively play the politics of location, to negotiate their position and thus to achieve their personal goals. The women's experience expands from the familiar to the less familiar and larger scale social system of international connections (Thrift 1993). The concrete, contradictory, and complex conditions of domestics' transnational movement demonstrate the struggle for subjectivity in a range of relations. Rather than following the model of the employer exploiting single global immigrant workers (Chang 2000), I suggest that we need to consider the women's experiences that show their resistances as they contest relations in every step of their transnational movement. More research is required on Indonesian domestics to address the inadequacy of simply totalising the women's domestic work under a binary cultural and economic opposition.

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