

Indonesian Labour Migration: Identifying the Women

Sylvia Yazid

*Department of International Relations, FISIP, Parahyangan Catholic
University*

ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with two main issues, Indonesian women working abroad in the informal sector, mostly as domestic workers and the potentials of other women stakeholders in addressing issues faced by women migrant workers. This paper is written based on the assumption that an identification of potential women at various levels and institutions may contribute to the search for solutions for the problems faced by the women migrant workers and that women should be seen as active actors that may contribute to the problem solving. The identification in this paper has been able to identify the existence of a number of prominent women migrant workers advocates, argue for their existence in various parts within the labour migration system to guarantee a protected migration for women labour, and suggest for the widening of the scope and activism of these women migrant workers advocates, in line with their movements across institutions.

Keywords: *women migrant workers, policy advocacy, labour migration activism*

Tulisan ini mencermati dua isu utama, perempuan Indonesia yang bekerja di luar negeri pada sektor informal, sebagian besar sebagai pekerja domestik dan potensi pemangku kepentingan perempuan lainnya dalam menyelesaikan permasalahan yang dihadapi oleh buruh migran perempuan. Tulisan ini ditulis berdasarkan asumsi bahwa identifikasi potensi yang dimiliki perempuan yang berada di level dan institusi yang berbeda akan memberikan kontribusi bagi upaya mencari solusi permasalahan yang dihadapi buruh migran perempuan dan bahwa perempuan selayaknya dipandang sebagai aktor aktif yang dapat berkontribusi bagi penyelesaian masalah. Upaya identifikasi yang dilakukan telah mampu mengidentifikasi keberadaan sejumlah advokat buruh migran perempuan utama, menunjukkan pentingnya keberadaan mereka di berbagai bagian dalam sistem migrasi tenaga kerja untuk menjamin migrasi yang terlindungi dari tenaga kerja perempuan, dan menyarankan diperluasnya cakupan dan aktivisme advokat buruh migran perempuan ini, sejalan dengan perpindahan mereka antar institusi.

Kata kunci: *buruh migran perempuan, advokasi kebijakan, aktivisme migrasi tenaga kerja*

This paper is concerned with two main issues. The first issue is that of Indonesian women working abroad in the informal sector, mostly as domestic workers. According to the data from National Authority for the Placement and Protection of Indonesia Overseas Workers or Badan Nasional Penempatan dan Perlindungan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia (BNP2TKI) (2013b) for the year 2006-2012, out of the total 3,998,592 workers placed abroad, 3,048,267 are women. There is no official record available on the exact number of those working as domestic workers but the data from BNP2TKI (2013a) also shows that house maid and care taker, jobs generally taken by women, are among the top three jobs for Indonesians working abroad. The temporary, contract-based and informal nature of these women's work has differentiated them from other migrant workers. Moreover, the fact that they work in isolation in households, considered a private sphere, makes them vulnerable to abuse. Unfortunately, these conditions are not adequately recognized in most labour legislation and policies, whether in sending or receiving countries (Hugo 1992) and the priority for Indonesian government, particularly the Ministry of Manpower has long been the absorption of work force rather than protection of the workers.

According to the International Labour Organization (2013), as for 2013, out of the approximately 175 million migrants around the world, half of them are workers and almost half of the migrant workers are women. It is also noted that around 15% of the workers have irregular status. A significant number of studies have made this feminization of labour migration as the focus or at least a major element of their discussions. However, in those studies, women have been portrayed mainly as the "victims" of mal-practices of labour migration process. This paper departs from the notion that it is important to go beyond seeing women as "passive actors" within the context of labour migration. Thus the second issue of concern is the potential of other women stakeholders - such as the successful ex-migrants, the activists, the politicians, the parliamentarians, and many others - in addressing issues faced by women migrant workers.

Labour Migration of Indonesian Women, How It Began

Labour mobility in Asia can be traced back in history to the colonial era in the early 19th century when labour was moved from one place to another to work on construction projects and in plantations and mines. This earlier form of migration was less restricted than today and migrants tended to move permanently which led to settlement in the destination areas (Kaur 2006, 2).

During the post-independence era of economic development, earlier bodies of research on Asian labour migration focused more on internal migration which mainly involves labour migration from rural to urban areas. In the 1970s, labour migration from Indonesia has been individual through unofficial channels, mainly to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. The labour migrations to Saudi Arabia were conducted under pilgrimage (haj) scheme, while the ones to Malaysia were more random with people crossing the borders without proper documents (BNP2TKI 2011).

In the 1980s, the government of Indonesia decided to start developing its overseas labour contract programme by regulating it through government's regulation and involving the private sector (BNP2TKI 2011). Since then, Indonesia has set and included targets for sending workers overseas in its five-year economic development plans. Despite the limited and unreliable records on labour migration, particularly of the undocumented type, a general indication of the trend for Indonesian workers' placement overseas can be found in the gender categorized data presented in Table 1. Migration of Indonesian workers has also reached various corners of the world with the biggest numbers are concentrated in two regions, Asia Pacific and the Middle East.

Table 1 Placement of Indonesian Workers Overseas 1994-2012

Year	Sex		
	Male	Female	Total
1994	42,833	132,354	175,187
1995	39,102	81,784	120,886
1996	228,337	288,832	517,169
1997	39,309	195,944	235,253
1998	90,452	321,157	411,609
1999	124,828	302,791	427,619
2000	137,949	297,273	435,222
2001	55,206	239,942	295,148
2002	116,786	363,607	480,393
2003	80,041	213,824	293,865
2004	84,075	296,615	380,690
2005	149,265	325,045	474,310
2006	138,040	541,960	680,000
2007	152,030	544,716	696,746
2008	148,545	496,186	644,731
2009	103,126	529,046	632,172
2010	124,601	451,202	575,803
2011	205,054	376,027	581,081
2012	78,929	109,130	188,059

Source: BNP2TKI (2013b).

Substantial attention toward feminization of labour migration has been due to factors such as the rapid increase in the number of women working outside their countries, the micro and macro economic significance and the problematic nature of their work overseas, particularly those in informal sector.¹ While unpaid salary and undocumented² status may apply to both male migrants who work in

¹Discussion on the problems commonly faced by Indonesian women migrant workers at every stage of their migration process, i.e.: pre-departure, during employment, and post-employment abroad can be found in Yazid (2010).

² Various terms are used to refer to migrant workers whose migration is problematic. The more common terms used by academics and activists are undocumented or irregular migrants. The term illegal migrants is commonly used by the government, particularly that of receiving country. Different terms are used due to the varied views about what causes the migration problems and how it affects the migrants' status. Those against the use of the term "illegal migrants" argue that these workers are not illegal as human beings. At a certain point in their migration, they may not hold the proper documents required but

plantations, building sites, or factories and female migrants who work as domestic workers, the condition is often worsened for domestic workers by abuses and confinement.

Existing body of literature on the topic of temporary labour migration from Asian countries has comprehensively and continuously documented how problematic the migration process is, particularly for women (Jones 2000, Chin 2002, Komnas Perempuan & Solidaritas Perempuan 2002 & 2003, HRW 2004, Hugo 2005, Pigay 2005, Anggraeni 2006, Kaur 2007, Yazid 2010). As asserted by Young (2006, 21) and Chant (1992, 204), compared to men, migrant women have more limited access to jobs because most of those who migrate are unskilled or semi-skilled. This has limited their choice of work to low-status and poorly paid employment in the informal and service sectors.

In most cases, they are forced to do 3Ds (dirty, degrading and dangerous) work on temporary and short-term contracts. For the reason that this part of the story is quite well –covered, I choose not to do further elaboration on the problematic migration of women workers. I believe that if the aim is to formulate policies which are more pro-women migrant workers, there is also a need to identify the existence and potentials of other women involved in the labour migration process to maximize their contribution to the improvement of protection of the women migrant workers.

Identifying the Women in the Labour Migration from Indonesia: Who is on the Steering Wheel?

The focus on identifying the position of the women and what they have done and might be able to do is inspired by the work of Cynthia Enloe (2000), *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. This work basically argues that if we want to understand international politics more comprehensively, we need to be more concern about women's varied experiences (Enloe 2000, xiv). In the case of women trafficking, for example, she argues that to have better understanding of the international system as a whole, we should pose questions such as "why it is women who are being trafficked; who is profiting; who is turning a blind eye to these abuses" (Enloe 2000, xiii).

In this case of temporary labour migration of women from Indonesia, I would like to assume that questions such as why they migrate; what kind

in many cases it is not the workers' fault. A possible case is that a domestic worker had to run away from her abusive employer but since her passport is held by the employer or the agent, she becomes undocumented.

of abuses they are experiencing and why they are abused are quite well covered in existing literature. Thus, this paper is aimed to portray Indonesian women in a way which Enloe (2000, 15) call “beyond the global victim”. The assumption is that moving on from an incessant discussion on how women are victims by starting to identify other women with their different experiences within the labour migration process may contribute significantly to a better understanding of the issue and probably the quest of improving the protection of women migrant workers.

On the topic of “domestic servants”, Enloe (2000, 184) pointed out how international debt politics which was infamous at the end of the 1990s have pressured the indebted governments to adopt policies which cut social-service budget in order to increase their ability to pay loans. These policies affect men and women differently and in many cases women as the “manager” of the households are the ones who are more disadvantaged. Furthermore, in this condition when jobs are scarce, women are also expected to take the wage generator role, a role traditionally played by men in Asian cultures. Thus, to end this disadvantaging condition for women or at least to prevent it from getting worse, women need to actively exist within the policy making, implementation and monitoring process.

A work by Yazid (2013) has discussed the efforts made by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in influencing domestic and foreign policies on the placement and protection of Indonesian workers abroad. This work shows how activism to push for a policy instrument which provides better protection for Indonesian workers, particularly women, has existed for a significant period of time. Reform in Indonesia obviously triggered changes in the involvement of NGOs in the policy making and implementation process. The work also highlights how domestic policy making process tend to be more open toward the involvement of non-governmental stakeholders. On the other hand, the foreign policy making process tend to be more closed.

One of the findings from her research that requires further research rose from the expressions from migrant workers advocates that they have high hopes from women public figures in the parliaments, government bodies and other public institutions. However, at the same time they also expressed their disappointment on those particular public figures who they think are not putting enough efforts into promoting the protection of Indonesian migrant workers. Thus, it is timely and important to conduct a research which aims to identify who are those women occupying the strategic positions and what are the potentials that they have in influencing the policies on women migrant workers.

The following section is an initial attempt to identify the prominent women within the migration process and to understand what they have done and might be able to do to improve the protection of Indonesian women migrant workers. The main sources of information for this section are personal communication with the person discussed, their curriculum vitae and articles and documents available in the mass media and public internet domains.

The Successful Ex-Women Migrant Worker

An example of a well-planned labour migration is of Nuryati Solapari, an ex-women migrant worker turned university lecturer and migrant workers motivator (BNP2TKI 2010). Nuryati left to work as a babysitter in Saudi Arabia in 1998 with the aim of saving for her university funding. In 2001 she came back and applied in a bachelor programme. She then continued in a graduate programme and eventually became a lecturer in the university where she obtained her bachelor degree. Nuryati has received a number of awards from the governments of Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. She has also been invited to various events to share her stories in which she has been promoting safe migration and arguing that migration should be done smartly and with the purpose of beyond merely fulfilling daily needs, more to invest in a better future (Ruang Hati 2011).

Unfortunately, Nuryati's coverage is still limited. If there can be more ex-women migrant workers like her who has the capability to actually share their experiences in various communities, this will assist the information dissemination efforts which the government has been lacking of. Her intellectual capability and rich information from on the field experience as a migrant domestic worker herself combined with the ability to speak in the language of the potential women migrant workers might become a perfect formula for providing adequate information to Indonesian women before they actually decide to migrate. This is useful to balance the information about how working abroad can bring great wealth, which in many cases are often misleading because it is not coupled with information on the risks that can emerge from working abroad and how to do a safe migration.

The Active Activist

Anis Hidayah is the executive director of Migrant CARE, a non-governmental organization which focuses on the issue of migrant workers. She started her activism in Solidaritas Perempuan, a women organization which was the first organization to take up the issue of

migrant workers in the 1990s. She then, with four other migrant workers activists, established Migrant CARE. By leading an NGO with national, regional and international reputation, Hidayah gets to do a range of activities from policy advocacies to street demonstration.³As an individual, Anis has conducted various activities at the national, regional and

international levels such as participating and presenting in conferences, trainings and workshops; doing research; organizing and participating in actions; participating in meetings of UN's bodies, councils and commissions; participating in the ASEAN's assemblies; and writing books on the issues related to migrant workers. For her work on the issue of migrant workers, she has received Human Rights Defender Award called Alison Des Forges Award for Extra Ordinary Activism from Human Rights Watch in New York in 2011.

The explanation above shows how being the leader of an NGO, Hidayah has been able to do more practical activities which may fulfill the immediate needs of the migrant workers. With the non-governmental status of her organization, she can conduct activities which are usually not touched by the bureaucracy. She can also have closer relationship with the migrant workers who tend to avoid dealing with the "authorities". This allows her to get information which might not be obtainable through official channels or mechanism. With her and her institution's regional and international reputation, she has been able to scale up the issue of Indonesian women migrant workers to higher levels and attract attention, concern and expectedly actions from wider audience. The challenge for a prominent figure like her is something common within other civil society movements. The activism tend to be dependent on certain figures, who obviously have limitation on what they can do as an individual.

³Migrant CARE has been advocating policies particularly on the ratification of ICRMW, revision of Law No. 39/2004, and bill on domestic workers; continuously conducted monitoring of the conditions of Indonesian migrant workers in a number of receiving countries; and actively involved in regional and international advocacies through ASEAN, ILO and UN mechanism. Inside the country, it has conducted capacity building activities for migrant workers and their families and provided legal assistances for migrant workers. In receiving countries, Migrant CARE has developed its country representative in Malaysia and presented the demand for protection of Indonesian women domestic workers in front of receiving countries' decision makers. The organization is also part of a number of national, regional and international networks. Migrant CARE is also known for its street activism such as conducting demonstration in front of the state palace or the embassies of receiving countries and for providing a shelter for migrant workers who need to stay in Jakarta to deal with their cases.

The “Moved On” Activist

Salma Safitri Rahayaan, or Fifi, is another well-known activist on the issue of women migrant workers during her time as Solidaritas Perempuan’s Chair of National Executive Body. She became a member of SP in 1998 and through SP she also became members and founders of a number of regional and international organizations.⁴ She was also involved in the Lobby to the CEDAW

Committee at the 39th Session of CEDAW in UN. In 2008, Fifi left Jakarta and moved to Malang.⁵ Nevertheless, she continues to conduct research and give trainings on gender, law and migrant workers issues. In fact, she is still assisting SP in analyzing the revision draft of Law No. 39/2004. This shows how even when an activist is no longer holding a position in his/her former organization, they tend to maintain their attachment to the issue and support actions intended to promote the protection of Indonesian migrant workers abroad. This is also evident with a number of other senior activists who have moved to other positions.

Fifi’s case should not be seen as a loss for the activism in Jakarta. She is actually potential to become “a bridge” between the centre and the origin areas. There have been concerns that there is a gap between the activisms in Jakarta which usually concentrate on policy advocacy and the activisms in the origin areas which focuses more on case advocacy. By being closer to the origin areas, she may bring the policy related knowledge from the centre to the origin areas and channel the voices from the origin areas to the centre as material for policy inputs.

The “Senior” Activist

Tati Krisnawaty was in SP from 1990 to 2001. She was the founder and also took the positions of Secretary General, Executive Director and Board Executive. She then became the commissioner of Komnas Perempuan (the National Commission on Violence against Women) where she continued to take the issue of women migrant workers as one

⁴Namely, Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW), Coordinator Action Research on AIDS and Mobility –Asia (CARAM Asia), and Rural and Indigenous Women Task Force – Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). In 2000 she became the founder of a number of organizations such as Consortium for Defense of Indonesian Migrant Workers (KOPBUMI) an umbrella organization for NGOs advocating for the passing of Law No. 39/2004 and Women’s Movement for Migrant Rights (GPPBM).

⁵She is still a member of SP.

of her concerns. After finishing her office in Komnas Perempuan, Tati continued to conduct activities related to the issue of women migrant workers.

In 2012, she was chosen by the President of Indonesia to be one of the members of a taskforce for the legal assistance and protection of Indonesians and Indonesian migrant workers who get death penalty. Despite the criticisms toward this task force for being slow and ineffective, her appointment as a member shows how her reputation allows her to be involved in a body strategically formed by the government.

Besides showing how activists are most likely to be consistent in promoting the issue of women migrant workers, Krisnawaty's experience also highlights how there is more opportunity for the involvement of non-state entities in the government's initiatives in Indonesia recently, a change brought by the process of democratization in a reforming Indonesia. Ideally, this should be an opening to push for a more protective policy on women migrant workers with the input from non-state entities.

The Activists Turned Parliamentarians

Nursyahbani Katjasungkana and Eva Kusuma Sundari are the examples of former migrant workers activists who became parliamentarians.⁶ Although these two women were in a commission on law, human rights and security, which might not directly deal with the issue of migrant workers, they frequently made comments on issues related to women migrant workers. This is acknowledged by most migrant workers activists and they often rely on them in channeling their voices into the parliament. These women senior activists turned parliamentarians are potential in channeling the voices of migrant workers advocates into the parliamentary process which are known for its exclusive, if not closed, characteristic. It is expected that these former women activists can maintain the issue of women migrant workers in the policy agenda and safeguard the process to produce policies which actually protect women migrant workers.

Obviously, there are various opinions on the actions of these activists turned parliamentarians. Some are appreciated as consistent with the promotion of migrant workers' rights, while some are seen as distancing from the issue as they get busier with their responsibility in the parliament and they have to act in accordance to their party's agenda.

⁶Katjasungkana for 2004-2009 and Sundari for 2004-2009 and 2009-2014.

The Celebrities Turned Parliamentarians

Rieke Diah Pitaloka is widely known in Indonesia as an actress who played in a television series as “Oneng”, a simple but determinant housewife. In 2009 she became a member of the parliament from PDI-P and assigned to Komisi IX, a commission focusing on the issues of health and labour. As a parliament member she has taken part in pushing for the ratification of the 1990 International Convention on The Protection of The Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families and the revision of UU no.39 tahun 2004 on the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Workers Abroad.

There are a number of parliament members under this criteria of public figure turned parliamentarians. As someone from “inside” the policy making process, she has the opportunity to influence the policy making and implementation process. At the same time, as a public figure, she also has the potential to create and direct public opinion on the issue. In terms of coverage, it can be assumed that these public figures have bigger chance to gain public attention because the mass media love to cover their activities. Thus, putting the issue of women migrant workers under the spotlight. The existing debate focuses more on whether they actually have comprehensive understanding on the issue to be able to speak to the public and provide me correct and relevant information and arguments.

As mentioned earlier, the above cases are results of an initial attempt to identify the publicly known women actors on the issue of Indonesian women migrant workers. The list can go longer to include women with various backgrounds, working and/or conducting activism at different points within the migration system. To this point, however, it can already be argued that their position within the system determines the scale and scope of their influence. Their previous activities and reputation also assist them in furthering their efforts to promote the protection of Indonesian women migrant workers abroad. It is also apparent that to single out one particular actor who has the biggest influence is difficult because each of the actors identified above is influential within a certain limited area of work, activism, issues and/or influence.

Conclusion

This paper departed from the assumption that an identification of potential women at various levels and institutions may contribute to the search for solutions for the problems faced by the women migrant workers. It is also assumed that women should be seen not merely as

victims but also as active actors that may contribute to the problem solving. The identification is preliminary, covering limited prominent names and limited depth of information. Nevertheless, it can already be concluded that first these women migrant workers advocates exist and they are able to do important actions which contribute to the efforts to promote women migrant workers rights. Secondly, before answering the question of who is on the steering wheel, it needs to be realized that the wheel is not the only part needed to be operated to make the vehicle move.

By this means, the existence of women is needed in various parts within the labour migration system to guarantee a protected migration for women labour. Thirdly, there is a “migration” of these women from one area of concern to another and from one institution to another. Rather than seeing this as a loss for the area or institution being left, it will be more productive to look into how this movement can be used as a way to widen the scope and impact of the activism.

Thus, further research is needed in the direction of identifying who are the prominent women figures, where they work, and what kind of potentials they have in an effort to coordinate actions. The research can assist in determining how these women can maximize their contribution to the promotion of women migrant workers rights. It is also important to frame the research using policy analysis to determine the women’s strategic position vis a vis the policy making, implementation and evaluation.

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