Belonging on Hold: Indonesian Temporary Migrants' Everyday Politics in Australia

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Abstract

This article examines the lived experiences of Indonesian temporary migrants in Australia by situating their mobility within a broader conceptual framework of temporary migration and stratified citizenship. While policy narratives often frame temporary migration as a "triple win" for sending states, receiving countries, and migrants themselves, this paper argues that such frameworks obscure the structural inequalities embedded within migration regimes. Drawing on critical literature and grounded in qualitative narratives, the article highlights how temporary migrants occupy an ambivalent space—economically needed yet politically excluded. It engages with theories of neoliberal migration governance and critiques the responsibilities of migrants who are expected to bear the burden of legal and social precarity. The analysis advances the concept of stratified citizenship to understand how migrants' rights, access to services, and sense of belonging are fragmented and conditional. Focusing on Indonesian migrants' everyday negotiations, the article calls for a reimagining of migration governance that centres political inclusion, dignity, and transnational state responsibility. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates in migration studies, citizenship theory, and international relations by foregrounding voices that are often silenced within dominant policy discourses.

Keywords: *Stratified Citizenship; Temporary Migration; Political Exclusion; Neoliberalism; Migrant Agency.*

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas pengalaman hidup para migran sementara asal Indonesia di Australia dengan menggunakan kerangka konseptual tentang migrasi sementara dan kewargaan yang berlapis (stratified citizenship). Dalam berbagai wacana kebijakan, migrasi sementara sering digambarkan sebagai solusi "tiga pihak yang diuntungkan" (triple win)—menguntungkan negara pengirim melalui remitansi, negara penerima melalui pemenuhan tenaga kerja, dan migran itu sendiri melalui peningkatan pendapatan. Namun, artikel ini berargumen bahwa kerangka semacam itu menutupi ketimpangan struktural yang dihadapi para migran. Dengan mengacu pada literatur kritis dan berdasarkan narasi kualitatif, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa migran sementara berada dalam posisi yang tidak pasti: mereka dibutuhkan secara ekonomi tetapi tidak diakui secara politik. Rezim migrasi neoliberal membebankan tanggung jawab ketidakpastian hukum dan sosial kepada individu migran, alih-alih kepada negara. Konsep kewargaan berlapis digunakan untuk memahami bagaimana hak, akses terhadap layanan, dan rasa memiliki para migran bersifat terbatas dan bersyarat. Melalui cerita kehidupan sehari-hari para migran Indonesia, artikel ini mendorong perumusan ulang tata kelola migrasi yang lebih inklusif, manusiawi, dan menekankan tanggung jawab negara—baik pengirim maupun penerima—dalam menjamin hak dan martabat para migran. Artikel ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap kajian migrasi, teori kewargaan, dan hubungan internasional, dengan mengangkat suara-suara yang selama ini kurang terdengar dalam diskursus kebijakan.

Kata Kunci : *Kewargaan Berlapis; Migrasi Temporer; Eksklusi Politik; Neoliberalisme; Agensi Migran.*

Introduction

The decision to "leave Indonesia" has become part of the social imagination of the younger generation. In recent years, the allure of a more promising life abroad has surfaced not only in policy discourse but also within the everyday vernacular of social media. Phrases such as *#KaburAjaDulu* (roughly translated as "just escape first") encapsulate a growing euphoria surrounding temporary migration as a response to economic strain, political instability, and career stagnation. For many Indonesians, temporary migration is not solely a survival strategy—it has become a form of agency and resistance against the narrowing of domestic opportunities (Prasetya 2025; Puspadini 2025; CNN Indonesia 2025). Yet, behind this romanticised view of migration lies a far more complex reality.

The experience of an Indonesian temporary migrant in Australia—who left her professional job in Jakarta to join her spouse and build a new life in Perth—exemplifies broader patterns shared by many temporary migrants across different Australian cities. One of the Indonesian temporary migrants interviewed for this study—Dita (a pseudonym), a former marketing executive from Jakarta who moved to Australia on a spouse visa—encountered significant barriers to securing full-time work, faced indirect discrimination due to her temporary visa status, and struggled to adapt to an employment system that privileges local networks and Australian qualifications. "If it weren't for my mentor," she recalled, "I'd probably still be stuck in casual work." Her story is not an exception, but emblematic of the structural dynamics encountered by many Indonesian temporary migrants, where aspirations for a better life often clash with the political, social, and administrative limitations imposed by host countries.

This article draws, in part, on qualitative data I collected while working as a research assistant on Juliet Pietsch's study, which culminated in the publication *Temporary Migrants from Southeast Asia in Australia: Lost Opportunities* (2022). While Pietsch's work is grounded in the capabilities approach inspired by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum to examine the limitations of political voice among Southeast Asian migrants, this article shifts the analytical lens toward the specific experiences of Indonesian migrants. Using the concept of stratified citizenship, it explores how temporary migration regimes in developed countries such as Australia produce hierarchies of belonging, where migrants are economically essential, yet institutionally excluded from rights and formal recognition.

By positioning Indonesia as the sending state, this article also raises questions about the extent to which the Indonesian government bears responsibility in addressing these disparities. The absence of state support for citizens living under precarious legal and social conditions invites a critical inquiry: Is Indonesia merely an exporter of labour, or should it be understood as a guarantor of its citizens' rights beyond its borders?

In doing so, this article contributes to the development of transnational migration frameworks within the field of International Relations by placing migrant narratives at the centre of analysis and critically evaluating the role of sending states in a global context. This approach is not only theoretical but also political—it calls for greater state accountability in ensuring that the decision to leave home is not simply an act of desperation, but a legitimate pursuit of a life marked by dignity and possibility.

This article foregrounds the everyday politics of Indonesian temporary migrants in Australia by drawing on in-depth qualitative narratives and a critical reading of migration governance. The study adopts a qualitative approach with an exploratory strategy to understand the lived experiences and vulnerability dynamics faced by Indonesian migrants in Australia. Data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted in 2021 with sixteen Indonesian participants residing across various Australian cities. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and reflected a diverse range of ages, educational backgrounds, visa statuses—including student, partner, bridging, and work visas, as well as permanent residency and citizenship—and settlement locations. Interviews were conducted both online and offline using a narrative approach to explore participants' subjective perceptions of legal status, access to essential services, and patterns of social and political participation. In line with research ethics, all names used in this article are pseudonyms to ensure participant confidentiality.

Rethinking Temporary Migration

Temporary migration has emerged as one of the most significant patterns of human mobility in the 21st century. Driven by global economic inequalities, demographic shifts, and the changing demands of labour markets, temporary migration schemes have been actively promoted by both sending and receiving countries. These schemes are often presented as practical and efficient solutions to short-term economic needs, providing workers with opportunities for income generation while allowing destination countries to fill labour shortages without the obligations of long-term integration. At the surface, this system appears to offer mutual benefits. However, a growing body of scholarship has raised critical questions about the assumptions, structures, and outcomes of temporary migration programs.

Temporary migrants are individuals who relocate to another country for a finite period under specific legal arrangements, most commonly for employment or study (Triandafyllidou 2022). They differ from permanent migrants in that their stay is contractually and legally limited, and they often have no guaranteed pathway to permanent residency or citizenship. These limitations are not merely administrative but reflect deeper political and economic rationales. Temporary migrants occupy a unique position within the global labour force: they are simultaneously mobile and precarious, essential and excluded, welcomed and surveilled.

Early scholarship on migration tended to focus on permanent settlement and assimilation, particularly in the context of post-war movements in the Global North. Temporary migration was often treated as a peripheral concern or as a stepping stone to permanent migration (Veracini 2013). However, from the late 1990s onwards, scholars began to recognise temporary migration as a distinct and enduring form of mobility. This recognition coincided with the expansion of guest worker programs, international student flows, and circular migration schemes. The rise of these temporary pathways prompted scholars to interrogate the underlying logic and consequences of such arrangements.

One strand of the literature critiques the economic instrumentalisation of temporary migrants. Scholars such as Ruhs and Martin (2008) argue that many temporary migration programs are designed to extract economic value from migrants without offering them the full rights and protections afforded to citizens or even permanent residents. These programs often prioritise employer flexibility and state control over worker security and autonomy. The result is a system in which migrants are expected to contribute productively to the host economy while remaining legally and socially marginal.

This critique is echoed in the work of organisations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), which has documented cases of exploitation, wage theft, and unsafe working conditions among temporary migrants across various sectors and countries. Despite the presence of legal protections on paper, enforcement is often weak, and temporary migrants may be reluctant to report abuses for fear of losing their jobs or visas. Scholars have thus pointed to the structural vulnerabilities embedded within temporary migration regimes—vulnerabilities that are not accidental but constitutive of how these programs function.

Another important thread in the literature examines the governance of temporary migration as a manifestation of neoliberal rationalities. Scholars like Pietsch (2020) and Carney (2007) highlight how states, under neoliberal pressures, have increasingly shifted the responsibility for risk and welfare onto individual migrants. In this framework, migrants are seen as entrepreneurs of their own labour power, expected to manage the costs of migration, including debt, dislocation, and deskilling, in exchange for the potential benefits of higher wages or international experience. This neoliberal governance model frames mobility as a personal investment rather than a collective right or social process.

Such arrangements also have significant implications for the notion of development. Temporary migration is frequently promoted within the migration–development nexus as a "win-win" strategy. Scholars like Agunias and Newland (2007) refer to it as a "triple win": benefiting countries of origin through remittances, countries of destination through labour supply, and migrants through income gains. However, critical scholars have pointed out that this framework often overlooks the uneven distribution of benefits and burdens. While remittances can alleviate poverty and fund education or healthcare in sending communities, they do not compensate for the lack of political rights, social protections, or long-term stability that many temporary migrants face (Rung 2023).

The idea that temporary migration fosters development is further complicated by the lived realities of migrants. Empirical studies have shown that many temporary migrants experience downward mobility, especially when their skills are not recognised or transferable in the host country (Krifors 2020; Turnbull et al. 2023). Moreover, the temporariness of their status often prevents them from accessing services, forming stable social networks, or planning for the future (Tazreiter 2019; Söhn and Prekodravac 2021). These constraints can have long-term impacts on their well-being, career trajectories, and sense of belonging.

The temporariness itself is not merely a legal status but a social and political condition. Scholars such as Anderson (2010) and Lewis et al. (2015) have explored how temporariness is enacted and reproduced through immigration controls, employment contracts, housing arrangements, and everyday interactions. They argue that temporariness is not a neutral descriptor but a technique of governance that structures the experiences and possibilities of migrant life. It creates a condition of permanent temporariness in which migrants are always in transit, never fully settled, and often excluded from meaningful participation in the societies they inhabit.

Importantly, the literature also attends to the agency of temporary migrants. While the structural constraints are significant, migrants are not passive subjects. Studies by Bauder (2011) and others highlight how temporary migrants navigate, resist, and subvert the limitations imposed upon them. Through informal networks, community organising, and legal advocacy, they carve out spaces of autonomy and solidarity. These practices challenge the notion that temporary migrants are merely transient workers, underscoring their role as social and political actors.

The scholarship on temporary migration also intersects with feminist and critical race perspectives. Feminist scholars have drawn attention to the gendered dimensions of temporary migration, particularly in sectors such as domestic work, caregiving, and hospitality. These fields are often dominated by women, many of whom migrate alone and face specific vulnerabilities related to their legal status, working conditions, and social isolation. Critical race theorists, meanwhile, have analysed how racial hierarchies shape the selection, treatment, and perception of temporary migrants. They argue that race and ethnicity are central to how deservingness and belonging are constructed in migration regimes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought renewed attention to the conditions of temporary migrants. As borders closed and economies contracted, many temporary migrants found themselves without work, income, or the ability to return home. Their exclusion from government relief programs in many countries revealed the precariousness of their position. At the same time, the pandemic highlighted their essential contributions, particularly in sectors like agriculture, healthcare, and logistics (Rung 2023). This paradox—being essential but excluded—has reignited debates about the ethics and sustainability of temporary migration systems.

In sum, the conceptual terrain of temporary migration is shaped by a tension between mobility and marginality, agency and exclusion, economic contribution and political invisibility. The literature reveals that temporary migration is not just a labour market tool but a complex social and political arrangement with far-reaching implications for rights, identity, and belonging. It challenges scholars and policymakers alike to rethink the assumptions that underpin current migration systems and to consider how alternative frameworks might better uphold the dignity and aspirations of migrants.

As the phenomenon of temporary migration continues to grow, there is a pressing need for more nuanced, intersectional, and empirically grounded research. Such work must grapple with the diversity of migrant experiences while also interrogating the broader structures that shape them. Only by doing so can we move beyond the utilitarian logic of the "triple win" and toward a more just and inclusive understanding of human mobility.

Stratified Citizenship in the Context of Temporary Migration

Building upon the conceptual foundations of temporary migration, it is critical to explore how these mobility regimes reproduce differentiated forms of belonging through what scholars have described as stratified citizenship. The notion of stratified citizenship challenges the conventional understanding of citizenship as a binary status—either possessed or not—by revealing its layered and hierarchical manifestations in practice. Within the context of temporary migration, this concept becomes particularly salient as migrants often occupy precarious legal positions, simultaneously included in economic systems while excluded from political participation and social security. This section elaborates on the theoretical and empirical scholarship surrounding stratified citizenship, demonstrating its relevance in the lived experiences of temporary migrants.

Stratified citizenship draws from a broader critique of liberal citizenship theory. Classical liberal thought posits citizenship as a formal legal status that guarantees equal rights and obligations among members of a political community. However, critical scholars such as Aihwa Ong (1999), Bridget Anderson (2010), and Yasemin Soysal (1994) have challenged this normative assumption by illustrating how citizenship is increasingly decoupled from national identity and democratic inclusion. In neoliberal and globalised regimes, citizenship is no longer a uniform legal category but a spectrum of differentiated statuses determined by economic utility, mobility capital, and migration policy frameworks (Anderson 2010; Ong 2006; Sayosal 1994).

Anderson's (2010) work on migration and citizenship, for instance, illustrates how state policies actively produce internal hierarchies among migrants. Temporary migrants are often subject to conditions that render them second-class residents: they are expected to contribute to the economy without demanding full inclusion or rights. This aligns with Ong's concept of "flexible citizenship," where the value of individuals is calculated based on their ability to move capital, skills, or labour across borders. In such a configuration, citizenship becomes not a right but a reward, granted to those who meet neoliberal criteria of productivity and self-sufficiency (Ong 1999).

In practice, stratified citizenship is institutionalised through migration categories that impose differentiated rights based on visa status. Temporary migrants—such as those on student visas, seasonal worker schemes, or employer-sponsored permits—are typically excluded from political rights, long-term residency pathways, and social entitlements such as public housing, welfare, and healthcare (Krifors 2020; Rung 2023). These exclusions are not incidental; they are embedded within legal frameworks that prioritise flexibility and control over inclusion and equality.

This stratification operates on both vertical and horizontal levels. Vertically, temporary migrants are positioned lower in the citizenship hierarchy compared to permanent residents and naturalised citizens (Cheng et al. 2021). While horizontally, distinctions emerge even within the temporary migrant category, based on factors such as country of origin, occupation, and visa type. Migrants from low-income countries employed in low-skilled sectors often face stricter restrictions and surveillance than their counterparts from wealthier nations in skilled occupations. As Anderson (2010) observes, this system results in the uneven distribution of legality and legitimacy, reinforcing global inequalities through the very structure of migration governance.

Importantly, the concept of stratified citizenship goes beyond mere legal status to include experiences of recognition, belonging, and political voice. Migrants occupying temporary and conditional statuses often experience a sense of liminality—they are present in the host society but not of it (Krifors 2020). While they may participate in the labour market, contribute to the economy, and engage socially with citizens, their exclusion from democratic processes and lack of institutional recognition fundamentally shape their lived experiences of marginalisation.

This form of exclusion is often rationalized through the logic of temporariness. Host states argue that, since temporary migrants are "not here to stay," there is little obligation to extend rights or provide representation. Yet in reality, many temporary migrants end up residing in host countries for extended periods—sometimes years or even decades—due to visa extensions, ambiguous pathways to permanent residency, or bureaucratic delays. This contradiction, between the constructed temporariness and the actual long-term presence of migrants, underscores the political nature of stratified citizenship. It functions as a mechanism for managing inclusion without assuming responsibility.

Stratified citizenship also intersects with race, class, and gender in intricate ways. Racialised migrants are often disproportionately concentrated in the lower tiers of the citizenship hierarchy, while white or Western migrants are more likely to benefit from expedited or preferential migration channels (Lim 2021; de Noronha 2022). Gendered expectations around care work, domestic labour, and family responsibilities further shape the pathways available to women migrants, who often face compounded exclusions as both temporary workers and as caregivers operating outside formal recognition.

Stratified citizenship has far-reaching implications that extend beyond the host state. Sending states play an active role in this hierarchical system by shaping emigration policies and, in many cases, neglecting to safeguard the rights of their nationals abroad (Cheng et al. 2021). In some cases, sending states reinforce neoliberal norms by framing migration as a patriotic economic contribution through remittances, rather than addressing the rights and vulnerabilities of their overseas populations. This complicity reinforces a transnational system of stratified belonging, wherein citizenship and protection are fragmented across multiple jurisdictions.

Recent scholarship has sought to theorise stratified citizenship as a transnational condition, rather than a fixed status within a single polity. As Bosniak (2001) contends, it is essential to examine how citizenship is enacted across borders through legal frameworks, economic structures, and social imaginaries. This perspective emphasizes that migrants often navigate their position not only within the host state but also in relation to their home country and broader global power dynamics. Consequently, the stratification of citizenship becomes part of a global project, underpinned by intersecting policies and ideologies that determine who is considered a legitimate subject of rights.

This re-conceptualisation has profound implications for understanding agency and resistance among temporary migrants. Instead of solely perceiving them as passive victims of exclusion, scholars like McNevin (2011) suggest that temporary migrants actively engage in everyday acts of citizenship—claiming space, fostering community, advocating for rights, and navigating legal ambiguities. These practices challenge the notion that citizenship is exclusively conferred from above, highlighting its performative and negotiated nature.

In essence, stratified citizenship provides a powerful framework for analysing the systemic exclusions faced by temporary migrants. It reveals how legal categories, economic imperatives, and political ideologies converge to produce differentiated forms of membership and belonging. By connecting this analysis to the broader context of temporary migration, we can better appreciate how mobility regimes operate not only through borders but also through gradations of rights, recognition, and access. In doing so, we shift the focus from individual adaptation to structural critique, foregrounding the political dynamics that underlie the condition of being a temporary migrant in a world of unequal citizenship.

A View from Temporary Migration

Across all sixteen interviews, Indonesian temporary migrants expressed a keen awareness of their conditional belonging in Australia. This sense of precarity was not abstract, but deeply rooted in their everyday experiences—navigating restrictive visa regimes, negotiating uneven access to essential services, and carrying the emotional labour of adapting to a system where full inclusion remained persistently out of reach.

It often begins with a decision that is both deliberate and uncertain—a calculated risk to leave behind a stable career, supportive family, or familiar rhythms in Indonesia in exchange for the possibilities promised by temporary migration to Australia. Some come with student visas, others through partner sponsorships, and many through regional or skilled labour schemes. What binds them is not the type of visa, but the shared experience of attempting to build a life within structural constraints that recognise their labour while withholding full belonging.

Dita, interviewed in 2021 as part of this study, had previously worked in a professional role in Jakarta before relocating to Perth to join her spouse. She described the emotional and practical adjustments involved in resettlement: "Since the first day I moved here, I told myself that I need to start over. I'm fine with it, although I have to admit it wasn't easy." Her account highlights the challenges of entering the Australian labour market under a bridging visa, particularly the difficulty in accessing full-time employment without permanent residency or Australian credentials. As she noted, "Recruitment is skill-based, but you need someone to open your way". These narratives are not isolated cases but reflect broader structural patterns in which Indonesian migrants navigate forms of stratified citizenship, wherein rights and entitlements are unevenly distributed based on legal status.

These stories are not anomalies—they are part of a broader pattern in which Indonesian migrants confront what scholars have termed *stratified citizenship*, a system in which rights and entitlements are allocated in tiers. Another respondent, Handi, a male migrant working as a farm labourer in regional Western Australia and interviewed in 2021, shared a similar sentiment: "I can work like a citizen, but I'll never be treated as one". Holding a skilled regional visa, he was required to reside in remote areas, where labour was in demand, yet he experienced exclusion. He recalled: "People in the outback seem to hate migrants, but they need people like us."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, these tensions became more pronounced. Border closures and lockdowns created new forms of exclusion for those already on the margins of legal status. Putri—a woman on a bridging visa caring for her stepson with a disability—reflected on the anxiety she felt about starting a family without legal certainty: "I want to have children, but I don't think I would want to have a baby if my status is not clear yet." Handi, who is an agricultural worker on a regional visa, recalled being separated from his wife for years due to border restrictions: "I was planning to bring my wife here, but the border closed right after I arrived. I can't leave, and she can't come in."

The uncertainty faced by these migrants was not only legal or logistical—it was psychological. Fitri, waiting for her partner visa to be approved, shared her frustration: "Sometimes I'm just curious. I log in to the immigration website, but it only says: '20 months to go.' No updates. No contact person. Just waiting." Despite these constraints, most respondents rejected the role of passive victims. Their strategies to navigate systemic precarity included joining mentorship programs, enrolling in vocational training, and creating informal livelihood opportunities.

Yet, the underlying precarity of their position remained. "Australian people are friendly," Siti, a woman with a permanent resident visa, observed, "but there will always be gaps. They're nice, but they could be much nicer to Australians." This tension surfaced most sharply in regional areas, where visibility as a non-white, non-English-speaking body often marked them as permanent outsiders. This marginality extended to political life. While most respondents felt they should not vote in elections, particularly at the federal level, several voiced support for migrant representation in parliament. "It doesn't have to be an Indonesian," said one respondent, "as long as they understand us." The desire was not for symbolic inclusion but for structural change: someone who could speak to the frustrations of visa limbo, to the asymmetry between economic contribution and political rights, to the subtle but persistent forms of racialised exclusion.

Migrants also questioned the logic of rights distribution. "We've been here for years, pay taxes, raise children—but still can't vote," Siti said. Fitri added: "We're not asking for much. Just to be able to talk to someone when things get stuck. When your life is paused for years, it changes how you plan. It changes how you dream." Not all experiences were marked by exclusion. Some respondents found community among fellow migrants or through faith-based organisations. Others described their rural workplaces as diverse and collegial, though often segregated along racial lines. Yet, even in positive accounts, the spectre of exclusion lingered. "You're accepted professionally," said Dita, "but not necessarily socially."

There was a deep sense among participants that survival itself constituted a form of success. "Being able to survive as a migrant in Australia," Dita reflected, "is more than enough." And while many did not express overt political demands, their narratives offered sharp insights into the failures of migration governance, the arbitrariness of border regimes, and the human cost of bureaucratic delay.

These are not stories of failure. They are stories of perseverance under constraint, of making do while waiting for something more secure, more just. In the quiet tenacity of submitting one CV a day, of cooking for neighbours, of volunteering at local mosques and schools, Indonesian migrants in Australia demonstrate how life, even in suspension, continues to be lived with dignity.

Living the Borders of Belonging

The narratives of Indonesian migrants in Australia reveal the complex intersection between aspiration and structural exclusion that defines the experience of temporary migration. While mainstream discourses continue to frame migration as an opportunity for betterment—economically, socially, and personally—the stories told by Indonesian temporary migrants reveal a much more layered reality. Temporary migration is not simply a logistical stage on the way to permanence; rather, it is a condition in itself, defined by instability, uncertainty, and institutional distance. Within this condition, aspirations often clash with systems of control, and belonging is simultaneously desired and denied.

For many Indonesian migrants, the journey to Australia begins with the pursuit of a better future, whether through education, marriage, or employment. The decision to migrate is often underpinned by a rational calculation: to gain international experience, accumulate savings, or join a spouse abroad. Yet, once in Australia, the realities of temporary visa regimes quickly become apparent. Migrants describe visa statuses that are both enabling and disabling: they allow entry and conditional residence, but they also restrict participation, limit access to services, and cast migrants into a perpetual state of waiting. This temporal uncertainty is central to their lived experience and speaks directly to the concept of stratified citizenship. In these accounts, migrants find themselves not at the margins of citizenship but within a deliberately structured hierarchy of inclusion.

Several narratives highlight how institutional frameworks assign different values to migrant lives depending on visa category. Those on student visas, for instance, are permitted to study and work a limited number of hours, but they are excluded from many forms of state support. They are

simultaneously customers (in the context of university fees) and temporary labourers (in the context of casual work), yet rarely recognised as residents with needs beyond the economic. Similarly, migrants on partner visas or bridging visas face extended periods of limbo, where their ability to make long-term decisions, such as having children or purchasing a home, is constrained by the absence of legal certainty. This constant temporariness generates a structural vulnerability that extends beyond the legal sphere and into the emotional and psychological dimensions of everyday life.

One migrant, for example, describes her decision to forgo casual work in order to focus on securing a full-time job aligned with her skills and aspirations. Despite holding a degree and extensive work experience in Indonesia, she was unable to access equivalent employment opportunities in Australia due to her visa status and limited Australian work experience. She eventually found an opportunity through a mentoring program, but noted that without such support, she may have remained in precarious casual employment indefinitely. Her account reveals how access to decent work is not only shaped by skills or motivation, but by the structural barriers embedded within the migration regime itself. The temporary migrant, in this case, is not only economically exploited but also politically excluded and socially isolated.

Another respondent reflected on the implications of living on a spouse visa while being the primary caregiver for a child with disability. Her contribution to the household and to society is significant and emotionally demanding, yet her visa status offers little in terms of recognition or support. The absence of a clear pathway to permanence creates anxiety about the future, not just for herself but for the child under her care. Without access to representation or meaningful participation in political processes, her voice remains marginal, despite the centrality of her labour to the well-being of others. Her story highlights how stratified citizenship is not merely about formal rights, but about the lived realities of dignity, autonomy, and relational belonging.

These narratives also draw attention to how migrants internalise the logic of conditionality imposed upon them. Several participants expressed ambivalence about the idea of voting rights, even at the local level. They reasoned that without full knowledge of Australian political structures or sufficient time spent in the country, it would be inappropriate to participate. This self-exclusion reflects a broader discourse that ties political legitimacy to cultural fluency and permanence, effectively naturalising the idea that only certain residents are entitled to shape the public sphere. However, these same migrants also expressed a strong desire for representation—someone who could speak on their behalf, understand their concerns, and help them navigate the bureaucratic complexities of migration. The

contradiction here is telling: migrants may not seek direct political participation, but they recognise the need for political voice (Robertson 2021). This distinction reveals the extent to which formal exclusion can be internalised, even as it remains deeply felt.

Social integration, too, is marked by ambivalence. Many migrants report positive encounters with Australian residents and value the cultural diversity of cities like Perth and Brisbane. Yet, they also note subtle forms of discrimination, particularly in the labour market and in public spaces. Language, skin colour, and accents become markers of difference, and often, of suspicion. In regional areas, these differences are amplified by a lack of exposure and deep-seated assumptions about who belongs. Migrants speak of being seen as outsiders, not because they reject Australian values, but because they are not read as embodying them. This perception is not only social but institutional, manifesting in the limited mobility offered by temporary visas and the bureaucratic opacity of immigration processes.

Crucially, the lived experience of temporary migrants is not defined solely by passivity or victimhood. These individuals navigate complex systems, build support networks, and make strategic decisions to enhance their future prospects. They participate in community events, engage in informal economies, and support each other through shared experiences of precarity. Some dream of establishing organisations to help future migrants, drawing from their own struggles to create pathways for others. This form of agency is not captured by conventional metrics of integration or development, but it constitutes a meaningful response to structural exclusion. It also challenges the notion that migrants are merely economic actors, reminding us that they are political subjects navigating systems of power.

The concept of stratified citizenship allows us to make sense of these dynamics not as isolated cases, but as systemic outcomes of migration policy. It reveals how state frameworks construct hierarchies of belonging that determine access to rights, resources, and recognition. Temporary migrants are not incomplete citizens on their way to fullness; they are situated in a deliberate regime of conditionality that serves the interests of states while limiting the horizons of individuals. This regime is justified through discourses of merit, responsibility, and economic efficiency, but it rests on the assumption that some lives are more entitled to security and voice than others.

Importantly, these hierarchies are not confined to receiving states. The absence of support from sending countries like Indonesia further entrenches the vulnerability of migrants. Several participants noted the lack of institutional guidance from the Indonesian government, even in cases of extended legal limbo or urgent need. This absence is not simply a failure of service delivery; it reflects a broader orientation in which labour migration is seen as a private decision rather than a shared resposibility.

The migrant becomes a symbol of national success through remittances and global mobility, but not as a rights-bearing citizen deserving of protection abroad.

In this context, migration is both an act of hope and a site of struggle. The decision to migrate reflects a refusal to accept limited futures at home, but the experience of migration often exposes the limits of individual agency in the face of structural barriers. These narratives compel us to reconsider the categories through which we understand mobility, belonging, and rights (Löffler 2021). Temporary migration is not a neutral category; it is a political condition that reflects and reproduces global inequalities. To study it seriously is to confront the ways in which modern states manage borders, value human lives, and distribute recognition.

The experiences of Indonesian migrants thus serve not only as empirical data but as critical interventions into the conceptual frameworks of migration studies. They expose the gaps between policy narratives and lived realities, between economic contribution and political exclusion, between mobility and belonging. By centring these voices, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how stratified citizenship operates within the everyday, and how migrants navigate, resist, and survive its constraints.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the experience of Indonesian temporary migrants in Australia cannot be adequately understood through economic or demographic lenses alone. Instead, it must be situated within a broader conceptual framework that accounts for how migration regimes create and sustain hierarchies of belonging. Temporary migrants are economically vital yet structurally excluded, positioned within a system of stratified citizenship that grants conditional inclusion while denying full rights, recognition, and political participation. The narratives presented here reveal how institutional precarity intersects with personal aspiration and how migrants navigate this tension with resilience, strategy, and agency, even as their status remains liminal.

By drawing attention to the embodied and lived experiences of Indonesian temporary migrants, this article contributes to critical scholarship on transnational migration and global citizenship. It challenges the romanticised notion of migration as an individual pathway to success, and instead centres the structural constraints imposed by neoliberal policy logics and limited state accountability, both in sending and receiving countries. In doing so, it calls for a rethinking of migration governance that places human dignity, rights, and representation at its core, ensuring that mobility is not achieved at the cost of marginalisation.

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