

REDEFINITION OF THE EXISTENCE OF MIGRANT WOMEN THE CASE OF RETURN MIGRANT IN GODONG, GROBOGAN, CENTRAL JAVA

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ABSTRAK

Tenaga kerja wanita (TKW) sudah banyak memberikan jasa bagi keluarga, lingkungan, dan negara. Namun, pengalaman para TKW, baik secara fisik maupun batin, belum disadari secara lengkap. Para tenaga kerja wanita itu meninggalkan keluarga, budaya, status, dan eksistensi mereka sebagai anak dan/atau sebagai ibu untuk bekerja di lingkungan baru dengan budaya yang sebelumnya belum mereka kenal. Para tenaga kerja wanita itu membantu keluarga dengan mengirimkan sejumlah uang yang dimanfaatkan keluarga untuk berbagai keperluan yang dapat meningkatkan tingkat kualitas kehidupan keluarga. Namun, jarang yang menyadari bahwa para wanita itu berada dalam suatu dimensi peralihan budaya. Mereka belum sepenuhnya bisa beradaptasi dengan budaya baru di tempat kerja dan, sebaliknya, merasa ada keterasingan dengan status dan eksistensi mereka di tempat asal beserta budaya yang mereka tinggalkan.

Kata Kunci : eksistensi, pengalaman batin, wanita, keterasingan, keuangan, status.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the summary of a research entitled *Poverty, Migration, and the Loss of Womanhood: The Life-History in Story of Poor Women from Central Java in Malaysia*. This research used qualitative approach and showed several points related with migrant women or woman laborers (TKW), such as: social changes, role shifting, values shifting, and evaluation on the relationships between migrant women with their husbands, children, and parents. The data were taken in Indonesia and Malaysia in two years time in order to observe various changes which happened to migrant women. The extended data were obtained when the topic of this research also became the

theme of my dissertation, so that this study went on for two years more. This short paper cannot possibly summarize all the research results and the cases, so this paper only focuses on the redefinition of migrant women towards their families, societies, and their existence connected with access and control on remittance, their position in society, *liminalitas*, evaluation on their relationships with children, husbands and parents, and also the empowerment of migrant women through comics.

Research on Women migrant workers focusing on Law, Economy, and Sexual Harassment has been substantially conducted. Report in the form of media reportage dealing

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with this issue have been widely exposed (Utomo, 1990). Yet, Research on what underlie their decision to be migrant workers, how they feel about it, and their shifting roles in their households and community has not been done so far.

The migration of women to foreign countries is a kind of a contemporary phenomenon that have been happening since the economic and political relations between Indonesia and other countries have been established. Since then, the number of migration of woman laborers (TKW) has increased apparently. In 1983/1984 the number of migrant women was still lower than that of men, but at the end of 1990-s the number of woman laborers abroad was far more dynamic than that of men. In 1990-s more Indonesian women migrated to Asia Pacific, Europe, and America. This number was tripled than that of men. Women also sometimes took an illegal way to get jobs in Malaysia and Singapore (Massey, 1993; Adi, 1996).

The women migration has involved the problems on how women determine their choices to migrate to certain areas crossing culture and country borderline. As a result, there are social, economic, psychological, and political consequences. When women migrate far from their villages, certainly they have to face a number of consequences. The status and position of unmarried women who decide to be TKW will change and shift from the status of depending on their parents to independent women. Moreover, for married women (75% from the total migrants), they have to leave their children and husbands in order to get higher income. This can make changes in their family lives, life pattern, working pattern, and also their roles (Abdullah, 1997).

The existence of women has been assumed to shift basically in different relations. When women leave their villages to migrate to other countries, there happens situation that needs deeper discussion. First, women working abroad do not change their status. They still become servants who take care all household

works. This migration also has implication on power. The position of parents and men have evaluated in connection with bargaining position with women who get higher income.

Second, when women leave their villages, they will encounter principal conflict on the disorientation from local minded into global minded. Women who had been educated with local orientation to live in families and societies have been exposed into different social reality. This has made them confused. They might feel the *liminal*, situation, that is, they feel standing in two different worlds, as if they are not here, but they are not there, either (Turner, 1974; Sairin, 1999). They will directly face new situations, values, and way of life. Meanwhile, they cannot leave their old values. This *liminal* condition can happen to them.

Third, redefinition of the existence of women on their relationships with families including relationships between husband and wife, (migrant) mother and children, parents and (migrant) daughter will happen.

The mobility of women as workers spreading in many countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Arab, and Hong Kong has given new experiences for them; so, they may become "other figures". Because of that, study and new definition about the women existence and the comprehension on social, cultural, economic, and political contexts on those "other figures" need to done. The understanding on them will be meaningful if their voices are listened involving how their view of themselves, their hopes, and their ambitions in relation with the changing of their existence.

Based on the above phenomena, there are several problems that will be discussed. First, do their new status as 'money maker' influence their bargaining position in families and societies in various access and control? Second, how is the implication of the changing of orientation from local to global towards the redefinition of the existence of women? Do these global experiences influence the way they position themselves in social relation which is more equal in term of gender equity?

Third, how do women consider social disorientation when they live abroad especially when they do not fulfill their status and role as “mother” or “daughter”? Fourth, what is the most appropriate way to empower them as migrant women? Considering the characteristics of migrant women, it is necessary to create a model to make them aware of their existence before they go abroad.

The understanding of aspects around women migration, social changes, and aspiration is very important. Some researches on women workers have been conducted based on various aspects. Most researches talk about sexual abuse, violence, deceit by brokers, up to the economic achievement. Mantra et al. (1998), for example, reports in his findings that the supporting factors of migration is the infertile natural surroundings, low income, and potential of life improvement through migration to Malaysia or the Middle East countries.

The research conducted by Jones (2000) also emphasizes on the general situation faced by migrants, such as recruitment system, legal or illegal TKW sending, problems faced by migrants (such as contract system), social security, and health and safety. Meanwhile the parts talking about migrant women are limited to the widespread of violence experienced by migrant women, contract system, TKW trading in Malaysia, and law actions done and agreed by Indonesia and Malaysia.

The study on migrant women who have become “strangers” in their home village society is important, because such women undergo ambiguous situation, which Victor Turner calls “*liminal* phase”, that is a stage in which they are not here and not there either (Turner, 1974; Sairin, 1999). In this *liminal* phase, women laborers (TKW) who have just been back to their home village from abroad seem to stand in between two worlds. In one side, they face a situation of the village society that they have long left, in the other side they have absorbed values and new experience from the foreign countries which cannot be

implemented right away in their home society. In this situation, the women seem to undergo “being different” from the other women. That also happens to women laborers when they leave their home town to migrate overseas. They live in a strange moment and stand in a strange “gate”. Culturally they are not able to completely leave their values, and life style of their home village, but, at the same time, they have to quickly interact with the new situation, values, and experience. This situation surely affects women both physically and psychologically.

The migrant women can be regarded as a community who are undergoing *liminal* phases. It started when they are in the structure of *pre-liminal* phase or a period prior to their departure when they are already long socialized and cultured with the norms and values in their village. Then, they do the migration and get new experience and values which they bring home so that they feel the “anti structure” of being “not here and not there either” (*liminal* phase). Finally, they reconstruct the experience and values, form an identity, and get back into stability (*post-liminal*).

The knowledge on women in their *liminal* phase and their “being different” will be more meaningful when accompanied by the knowledge on what is actually in their mind, what they feel, and what they want in this phase. Related to that, the aspiration concept (Cantril, 1965, Hurlock, 1974; Poerwandari, 1990) is relevant to be implemented in the attempt to understand the profile of migrant women. The women, who are “not here and not there”, can therefore be thoroughly understood based on their individuals, their family, and community. It is crucial, indeed, to hear how and what the aspiration of migrant women is. This will become the basis of the redefinition of women existence within the rural society. Women will redefine themselves and their family, and the society will redefine women and their community.

The research was conducted in two locations of the migrant women’s home villages, they are Bugel and Sumberagung villages in

Grobogan Regency in Central Java (Indonesia). The choice was based on the facts that these villages had the most women migrating to Malaysia, Singapore, and Saudi Arabia. During the research a visit to the target area in Malaysia was also conducted. In this research, Malaysia was chosen because this country has significant similarities to the women's home country, as they share cultural and linguistic group, that is Malay. In short, the migrant women from the two villages in Indonesia were visited when they were in the target regions in Malaysia. This was conducted in order to get a closer look on the "daily life" of migrant women abroad.

The data was collected through the following steps : observation, close interview, life history and documentation. The observation was conducted in Bugel village and the migrant region in Malaysia to evaluate and study the influence of Malay culture on women's experience and expression and some conflicts on cultural backgrounds existing within the life of the Indonesian women. Identification of the women as the subjects of the research was also done, covering their rights in the family in the home village and their existence in Malaysia.

To reveal their real life and journey, some interviews with the migrant women in Malaysia and some TKW who have been home to their village in Grobogan, Central Java (Indonesia) were conducted. These two aspects, their life and journey, were especially used to evaluate the pattern of each stage in the historical (macro) changes related to their aspiration, desire, and ambition within their life. Besides these were important to find out how the women defined themselves while talking about their past, current, and future life.

Life time history was used to reconstruct the past systematically and objectively through the collecting, evaluating, interpreting, and concluding of the data. Past Life reconstruction was done based on the existing facts both in the home villages and the target region, both with the women workers and with their family in the home village. It was expected that this

method would reveal how the women workers reconstructed their life history, their life in the past as wife, mother, and child, and their view upon their future. The life history method was in fact very useful to reconstruct not only the past life, but also the current and future life.

Various kinds of documents that the women had were very important in this research. These documents were collected and studied using women's perspectives. These documents include the personal documents such as personal letters, photographs, and diaries. As an addition, some articles or souvenirs sent to their home villages were also studied because their image as articles from abroad represent culture and status.

The collected data were analyzed using various techniques both textual and contextual, domain and context analysis. The results of the analysis were presented in the form of narrative using various ways such as the deep reflective description about the women's experience and the daily description about every happening in the life and journey of the women.

Thematic analysis was conducted by organizing the data based on relevant themes according to the focus of the research. This analysis was used to identify the expressions, elaboration, or explanation, which were profound and specific so that a clear picture on the research subjects covering their life experience, personality traits, views on their selves and life, and the situation and condition influencing their expectations and desire could be given.

This analysis was conducted by confirming the data found in the field with the answers given by the subjects using some existing theories, so that it can be seen whether there are some similarities between the existing theories of gender concepts or whether there are some deconstruction of the concept and theories and thus reconstruct other concepts leading to a redefinition or new concepts. This was done by evaluating the relation between the data and the external contexts, such as the values and world view related to the women's family and community.

This analysis was conducted by looking at the meanings borne in each datum collected. The meanings can be in terms of their relation to both external and internal contexts

ACCESS AND CONTROL ON REMITTANCE OF MIGRANT WOMEN AND POSITION IN FAMILY AND SOCIETY

Economically, migrant women are money-makers and the pillar of family's economy, but socially their position is still the same with the existed social construction. It means, socially, men are still considered as family leaders and moneymakers, too, while women only have role in domestic fields such as household works or pre-social things such as taking care children as children do not form culture yet. This has tended to associate women with family lives and children caring; so, there is distinction on the roles of men and women. The former has public role, while the latter has domestic role.

The existence of migrant women in families has not been improving socially in bargaining position. This has been proved by pseudo social appreciation that they get. It means that migrant women are only seen if they have money, but they are not involved in making any decisions with the reason that they are never at home. However, when the decisions are about money or fund, they are the first ones who are needed. The relationship with husband is also mien redefinition. It means during the absence of women at home, household works are done by husbands, but when the wives go back home even only for a while, those works are given to the wives again.

In several cases that have been found, the position of women in families and societies is not very important, and their voices are never listened in making decisions. Even though they earn money by working abroad, most of them do not have autonomy and control on the remittance they send to their families. From twenty subjects of the research, only one person can control the use of remittance.

Their existence in societies generally is only needed when their villages/ kampongs need fund to develop their villages. When this research was conducted in Sumberagung, all funds to build a *musholla* (small mosque) came from migrant women. For families whose daughters or wives become TKW, they must donate materials until the *musholla* finished to be built, but for families who do not have women going abroad, they must work to build it. However, none of the migrant women was involved in deciding the building of the *musholla*. They do not need to speak, involve in making decisions, involve in social matters because all of these belong to men's field. Based on this assumption, they cannot control their donation for the *musholla*. They have economic power, but they do not have access and control on it.

One interesting thing is that this new *musholla* does not improve the people's religious life there. Most Sumberagung people are Moslem, but they see the *musholla* only as an Islamic symbol. They are proud of giving names to this *musholla* "musholla TKW or *musholla* Arab" instead of improving their Islamic lives by praying together in the new *musholla*.

The physical effect is clear when we see the houses of the migrant families. The floor used to be land and the wall used to be bamboo. Now, they have become permanent wall with ceramics floor and also filled with electronic products. Many of them also save money by buying rice fields, land, and motorcycle or car. Non-physically, migrant women and their families are very proud of having experiences living abroad.

LIMINALITAS OF MIGRANT WOMEN

Liminalitas happen to all migrant women who became the subjects of this study. They feel *liminal* "not to be here, and not to be there either". This can be seen in the use of language. In Indonesia they use Malaysian language, while in Malaysia they use Indonesian and Malay. This has represented their identity is

liminal. Because of this, to make redefinition of their existence is still “*gamang*” (unstable). Representation of their identity in term of life pattern, life style, and the use of foreign products also become the important sign of this *liminalitas* and social changes in their lives. *Liminalitas* is not only in language use, but also in lifestyle, eating style and customs. They feel *liminal* when they go hometown. They think their villages are “dirty, wet, and quiet”. Even, their houses are now said to be “*gubug yang tidak akan mempan untuk membakar teras*” (a hut that cannot be used to fire *teras*). They used to be comfortable places for them. They do not like living in village any more because they must go to a river to take a bath and wash. This is very different from when they live abroad. Besides the feeling of freedom has motivated them to return abroad. They said living in village is difficult because they cannot freely have jokes with men and wear mini clothes. This implies that there is deconstruction of basic value on “simple village girls/women” (*keluguan gadis desa*). Their diet (eating style) is also *liminal*. They cannot eat meals ala village because they prefer fast food such as bread since during living abroad they used to eat “expensive foods” such as fruits, fish and others. Now eggs are said as undelicious food. They eat it only when they do not have money. Their customs and habits also changed. Before going abroad, it was common for them to work in rice fields every day, but now they think this activity gives burden to their lives. This *liminalitas* happen for three to six months.

This *liminal* condition do not only happen when they return to their villages, but also when they work abroad. The way of thinking, behaving and expressing something is ambiguous/unstable. This is because they lack of education and understanding about the destination countries. Moreover, the laborer agencies (PJTKI) that send them do not give socialization about this. They tend to ignore the condition of the destination countries. They think that these countries have the same culture, language and customs. In fact, it is

totally different. As a consequence, a lot of miscommunication happens.

Migrant women often do not know their duties and rights properly. This has been worse since patriarchy culture is still hold in their environments, so that women do not dare to speak up their rights. In this case, society holds the assumption that “a servant must always obey whatever the owner of the house/boss asks.” So, that is why woman laborers always accept any unfairness which happen to them. Often they are threatened to be sent to jail. They do not know about salary, taking a leave, and insurance. In Penang, when she was asked about insurance, a very young servant answered, “insurance is hard working, never protest, and must be in order.”

EVALUATION ON RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MIGRANT WOMEN AND THEIR HUSBANDS, PARENTS, AND CHILDREN

The separation of living places has brought several changes in the gender and marriage relations such as permissive (the attitude of always giving permissions) in marriage relation. This has caused evaluation on the relationship between migrant women and husbands. The Permissiveness in marriage can be seen from the losing of conventional values of marriage (e.g. wives should be good and loyal. They must not protest, demand or speak their voices up). Now migrant women dare to act these. Another example of permissiveness is that society can accept children who are born without marriage. The concept of “*anak haram*” which used to be very embarrassing can be accepted now.

The migration to to foreign countries also has caused evaluation on the relationship between migrant women and their children. Because of the very far distance for years, their relations are broken up. The traditions such as giving birth, marriage and others related with the process of children growing has been decreasing, and it has been replaced by money instead of the presence of mother (migrant women).

In addition to that, there is evaluation on the relationship between migrant women and their parents. They seem to be able to control their parent's cycle of life because of the capital they get from abroad. On the very important day such as *Idul Fitri*, they do not ask apology directly to their parents, but they send letters and "*Lebaran card*" from the countries where they work. They also dare to give advices to their parents by letters and sometimes their letters convey threats. Parents cannot control their daughter anymore because of economic interest. Parents used to be able to ask their children—even those who already get married—to gather on important occasions in their families, but it cannot be done anymore thought only once a year on *Idul Fitri* day. Letters and cards have replaced the presence of their children. The meaning of "*sungkeman*" has been getting old-fashioned/fade. The choice of sending cards containing poems and letters for their parents has represented their identity. This is the result of imitating from the metropolitan life where they live. This has showed deconstruction on basic concept and new redefinition on the relationship between parents and children. Remittance as a tool to control their parent's cycle of life sometimes potentially creates conflicts among the migrant women's big families.

Migrant women still view their role and status as mother and wife as it has been socially constructed. They feel guilty when they failed to play these role and status. However, they eliminate their guilty feeling by holding opinion that with money they can guarantee to carry out their family lives; so, they keep sending money as the substitution of their absence at home/families.

EMPOWERMENT FOR MIGRANT THROUGH COMICS

The empowerment for migrant women basically has been done since they have been in legal base camps held by the government and in qualified PJTKI (the Indonesian laborers

agencies). Unfortunately, the training materials of the empowerment are just about household works training which will be done abroad. It has not involved yet how migrant women understand their existence, who they are, and their rights and duties as workers and as women. Another hindrance is that the training material is usually monotonous, classical, and text book so that it is boring. Moreover, they have low educational background and lack of experiences so they are lazy to read the textbooks since they are not accustomed to reading.

This study has resulted a model of picture stories or comics containing the rights and duties of woman laborers including their rights as woman. Various problem and the solutions has been visualized in these comics with the hope that they can easily understand it. By socialization of this model, it is expected that women are able to empower themselves and are ready to face and solve problems abroad since they have seen it through pictures. In addition to comics, there are caricatures and role-play so that the training will not be boring or monotonous. Thus, using this model, migrant women will be easily understand the materials of the training.

CONCLUSION

The income earned by migrant women (woman laborers) in fact does not automatically improve their bargaining position in gender relation that is equal in family and society. This results from the appreciation given by society and family to migrant women is pseudo social appreciation. Because of this, redefinition of migrant women is also pseudo redefinition. The pattern of adaptation done by migrant husbands is the pattern a kind of pseudo adaptation as well in relation with various roles in family works. Migration to foreign countries also has caused evaluation on the relationships between migrant women and their husbands, children, and parents. This could happen because they have come to liminal condition.

An important suggestion can be proposed to the government, Laborer Department, and PJTKI (the laborer agencies) is that it is necessary to deconstruct the concept and understanding of migrant women. If it can be done, the understanding will be comprehensive. Women are viewed as figures who have full aspiration, hopes, and ambition both as workers and as women.

It is recommended that the empowerment for migrant women can be done through the changing of training materials. The materials should include the concepts of gender equity, self-comprehension, self-empowerment, and the concept that can create power and awareness to understand oneself. Various training on rights and duties of migrant laborers and the condition of the destination countries are really needed.

To achieve these purposes, one model suggested is making the training materials not in the form of textbooks, but comics. By pictures, migrant women will be much easier in understanding the materials. At least, they have ever seen the similar condition/problems they may face from the comics. Thus, they are strongly advised to be able to help themselves since in abroad usually expecting help from others will result in other problems.

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