



THE VULNERABLE INDONESIAN FEMALE MIGRANT WORKERS: In Search of Solutions

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July, 2003



THE WORLD BANK



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Paper prepared for

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Executive Summary

The number of Indonesians working abroad has increased dramatically over the last two decades. Surprisingly, the total number of female migrants exceeds that of men. In 2002, 76% of 480.393 overseas workers were women. 94% of these women worked as domestic helpers in Middle Eastern, East Asian and Southeast Asian countries.

Recorded remittances in 2001 amounted to US\$ 2 billion and the unrecorded amount was assumed to be even higher. In the same year, foreign currency acquired from the agriculture sector was US\$ 3.5 billion and mining (non-oil and gas) was US\$ 5.6 billion.

Becoming a female migrant worker (FMW) is regarded as a panacea for many poor rural families. These people leave their homes and families due to the lack of job opportunities in their villages. Salaries abroad are too tempting and are usually higher than what they can get in big cities such as Jakarta. Success stories of FMW returnees who purchase new houses, vehicles, and electronic equipment give those in the village an incentive to want to travel as well without thinking about the risks. Gaps in the system make requirements easy to fulfill. The women only know that they have to be at least 18 years old, healthy, know how to read, and can pay part of the placement fees.

FMWs have to deal with risks at each stage of the migration cycle (pre-departure, placement, post-placement). They are subject to threats in their own villages, in the destination countries, and even on the way back home. They are usually recruited by brokers in the village who take them to recruitment agencies (PJTKI). After passing preliminary screenings and medical tests, PJTKI put them in a holding shelter (for 2 weeks-9 months). They wait until the counterpart of the recruitment agency abroad finds employers for them. In the meantime, FMWs get training while the PJTKI prepares their legal documents. Once a placement is identified, they travel to the destination country on a 2-year contract, then come back to Indonesia. Throughout the cycle the FMWs are abused by people who are supposed to protect them.



Domestic helpers are the most vulnerable, economically, physically, psychologically, and in many cases have to deal with sexual abuse.

- » Pre departure stage: they face extortion by brokers and recruitment agencies, locked up in the holding shelter by the recruitment agencies, live in unhealthy conditions (e.g. overcapacity shelters, insufficient sleeping facilities, not enough healthy food), sexual abuse, and document falsification.
- » Placement stage: they face extortion by agencies in receiving countries and employers (e.g. withholding salary, salary deduction, underpaid), contract terminated, work overload (more than 10 hours a day), not allowed to communicate with the family in Indonesia or other FMWs, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse.
- » Post-placement stage: they face extortion at the Arrival Terminal in Soekarno Hatta airport and on the way home by the drivers. They are forced to change their foreign currency to rupiah under the market price. At home, their money/remittances are used by their families/husbands to pay debt.

Most of these women have only an elementary school education and have no access to reliable information because of the absence of formal media at the village level. As a result, the *sponsor* (broker/middle man) takes advantage of the situation and becomes the only source of information for them. The responsibility of the recruiting agency in giving appropriate training is hardly controlled. Insufficient pre-departure training and orientation has caused FMWs to be subjected to verbal abuse by their employers for not having the skills and/or understanding what is demanded of them during the initial months of employments. It seems to get better 3-4 months into the job when they start comprehending the local language.

FMWs are easy targets for those looking for easy profit. Unfortunately, support and protection provided by the government is very limited. The majority of issues covered by the regulation deal with managerial and operational aspects focused on the relationship between the recruiting agencies and governmental institutions. Chances to exploit FMWs are available since recruiting agencies have too much authority in the placement process. The limited law enforcement is compounded by the limited sanctions on those breaking the law. The most serious sanction for recruiting agencies is the cancellation of their licenses. What's even worse is that the Indonesian government has not made any international agreements with the receiving countries focusing on protection of domestic helpers, especially in main destination countries such as Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.

Despite the fact that having many FMWs support both the micro and macro economic situation in the country, the Indonesian government does not provide enough services and support mechanisms. The social insurance scheme, as stated in the regulation, is very poor. The compensation amount is too small and the submission process is too difficult for FMWs/their families.

Indonesian embassies/consulates play an important role in providing support and services in host countries but NGOs complain on how they solve problems. There is a critical need to improve their capacity to be able to handle the cases submitted to them.

Based on the study findings, there are some preliminary ideas on what could be done to support FMWs. First of all, empower them by utilizing former FMWs as resource people for training; establish community-based learning programs; and supporting the establishment of FMWs' unions/associations. *Second*, provide accessible and simple information based on FMW's needs. Their limited educational background should be underscored as an entry point to select the content of information and the type of media needs. *Thirdly*, improve support services at all stages which includes: reforming the registration mechanism; providing accessible low interest credit for recruitment/placement fees; ensuring that there is a transparent and accountable workers' insurance system, an earmarked protection fund, and a functional complaint resolution mechanism within the Indonesian embassies. Another idea/recommendation is to assist the FMWs and their families in managing their remittances and putting them into good use. A fifth suggestion would be to revise the rules and regulations by establishing a national legislation, enforcing the rules and regulations, and establishing bilateral agreements with host countries. Finally, there is a need to build coordination and cooperation among stakeholders to apply pressure towards changing policies and improving services.