Exploring Intersection of Migration and Urban Space in Jakarta

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Abstract

Cerita mengenai migrasi cenderung menjadi peristiwa penting dalam kehidupan manusia. Di Indonesia, pengalaman para pekerja migran, lebih spesifiknya, perempuan yang bekerja di luar negeri sebagai asisten rumah tangga (atau yang dikenal sebagai TKW: Tenaga Kerja Wanita), terus menjadi perbincangan dan bahkan berhasil masuk ke dalam budaya pop orang Indonesia. Dalam tesis ini, peneliti memaparkan observasi singkat terhadap diskusi mengenai buruh migran di Indonesia dan menyarankan cara-cara baru untuk meneliti tentang migrasi dan kehidupan perkotaan. Secara khusus, dengan terfokus pada persinggungan dua hal tersebut, dan terkait dengan pengalaman TKW kembali ke negara asal, penulis mengusulkan sebuah pendekatan yang mempertimbangkan 4 hal, yaitu: detil-detil dalam kehidupan keseharian mereka, pemikiran-pemikiran mereka, keterkaitan mereka dengan aspek formal dan informal dalam hal kependudukan di perkotaan. Pada akhirnya, dengan menggunakan Jakarta sebagai kota studi kasus, dimana para migran kembali pulang, dipengaruhi oleh kehidupan kota dan berubah karenanya, penulis menyarankan penelitian yang memusatkan perempuan migran sebagai pendongeng dan tokoh utama dalam kita memahami perubahan yang terjadi pada kehidupan perkotaan, sosial dan budaya di Indonesia dan secara lebih luas, Asia Tenggara.

Key words: *labour migration, Jakarta, women, urban, return migration*

Labour Migration in Indonesia: The Internal and External Discourse

The stories of migrant workers are no longer new sensational ones that are unfamiliar to those in and outside Southeast Asia. In fact, Southeast Asian migrant workers are becoming one of the most well-researched groups of people. Nonetheless, the majority of the research on Indonesian migrant women to date has recounted stories of abuse, victimization and manipulation[1]. Many studies have discussed and reported on unfair and unjust treatment towards the workers by employers, brokers, and government agencies. It is a relief that some of them have successfully advocated for, contributed to, and resulted in tangible and significant policy changes as well. One may disagree in terms of the degree of changes that have been made thus far, for instance, the importance of *buruh migran* and particularly TKW in policy agenda and public interest, but it is clear that over the last few years, the public has become well aware of the issue with active on-going engagement on the part of civil society, government agencies and academia.

In 2013, 6 million migrant workers sent home approximately Rp 120 trillion in 2013 ("RI migrant workers' remittances amounted to Rp 88.6t in 2013," *The Jakarta Post,* 13 Jan 2014). The

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[1] For instance, see Anggraeni, 2006; David, F*., ASEAN, & International Organization for Migration*, 2007; Farbenblum, Taylor-Nicholson, & Paoletti, 2013; Kaur, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2011; SBS Radio 2014.

economic contribution of the migrant workers has strengthened the need for their existence in the Indonesian economy, and operates as a source for continued service to their country, community and family and reason for resilience and endurance. As a result, the proposed solutions for overseas-bound migrant worker issues are not about bringing the whole machinery to a halt, but rather the Indonesian government and civil society have proposed and implemented protection mechanisms in Indonesian domestic policies. As of late, the discussion on labour migrants has also overlapped with the migrants within Indonesian borders, for instance Indonesian girls trafficked for sex work and asylum-seekers and refugees stranded in Indonesia on their journey to Australia.

In fact, I suggest that there is very little difference or variance amongst the discourse on labour migration within and outside Indonesia. In somewhat of a cyclical fashion, the domestic one that focuses on the workers' sufferings and difficulties has been picked up on by international researchers, and visa versa, and echoed by local and international media. The reality that the majority of these women workers are employed as domestic workers or in types of jobs with limited skill sets, income and mobility potentials, this dominance of the "victim narrative" may be indeed applicable to most situations. It also appears that such stories have carved out a sizable space with popularity and support from the Indonesians whereby pity gets evoked almost instantly from the general public when it comes to TKW.

Notwithstanding the gravity of the problems that many of these workers face, as extreme as being sentenced to capital punishment by foreign government, the narrative around migrant workers' experience has been singular both at home and abroad without much contestation. In addition, migrant women's experiences have been couched within the economic development narrative thereby marking these women workers' bodies as an extension of mechanization and industrial progress. Such endeavor has made these women workers a variety of migrant labour symbolizing modernity and progress in one of the fastest-growing economies in the world and ultimately, coupled with the victim and suffering narrative, a subject of migration management.

Thus, rather than continuing with the stories of victimization and marginalization of migrant women, I argue for disruption in a singular voice in migration research in this region. By moving away from the notion of migrant women as passive, vulnerable subjects in phenomena they have no or little control over, I argue instead for a research direction that allows a holistic understanding of migration experiences and as a result, multiplicity of the narratives to come through. I also suggest that this approach can only be effective when we let migrant women speak for themselves and base the research on the accounts of these women. More broadly, I suggest that what may appear to be mundane details of the migrant women's life before, during and after their migration experience can

help us learn about the transformation of labour migration, women's roles, cities, and Southeast Asian societies.

Migrant Women in Urban Space: Exploring Intersectionality

The overwhelming majority of Indonesian migrant women reside in urban areas of Southeast Asia during their employment overseas. In understanding these women's experience, I would like to begin by establishing migrant women workers as significant actors and agents who reconstitute their daily lives as well as the economics and politics of cities (Glick Schuller & Çağlar, 2011). To achieve this, I conceptualize "city" as an entity and space of dynamic interaction that the migrant women live in, transform, and are influenced by, and bring in the notion of citizenship as a means for them to (re-)claim their active role in their own lives and identity vis-à-vis the political, economic, social, and cultural space they are interacting with. In that sense, "city" as the centre of economic activity and prosperity, not only symbolizes a site of opportunity and advantage, but also signifies that of a complete reordering and unsettling of migrant women's surroundings and environment. As Glick Schuller & Çağlar (2011) point out, most of migration studies scholarship has focused on looking at migration *to* cities, as opposed to migration *and* cities. But by making migration and city as equal units of analysis with capabilities to influence and interact with one another, it enables an examination of migrant women's participation in economic and social processes in the city and encourages the recognition of the women as "rights-bearing citizens" (Appadurai & Holston, 1999) belonging to the city. "City," as a more immediate cultural, political and economic entity than a nation-state, comes to represent migrant women's state as a whole.

In addition, migrant women's narratives can show how the "city" can be conceptualized as a site of various social projections and practices. In their provision of labour, these women workers highlight their role in Indonesian economic growth and wrestle with capitalism as a prolifically cultural and psychological concept that permeates all aspects of these women's lives. In this sense, "city," infused with personal and emotional interpretations of capitalism, expands beyond its official, legal boundaries and even its national borders. Deleuze & Guattari consider humans – for example, the migrant women in my research – to be an active part of the capitalist machine and involved in "social production" and "desire production," faced with the task of decoding and deterritorializing the "flows" (1983). I see Deleuze & Guattari's conceptualization as a way to frame the migrant women's life, living and working in a place constantly engaged in the production of social relations, class, and hierarchies as well as those activities designed to meet basic needs.

Expanding on the concept of urban citizenship will be beneficial here. Metaphorically the notion of citizenship may conjure up an image of mysterious gift put in a colourful box. However, in actuality, instead of enjoying the "rights" explained to and afforded as a citizen, experience of citizenship tends to be a constant effort to re-assert, re-claim, re-justify and re-place identity. Thus, rather than an official, formal notion of citizenship – an identifier denoting an individual's association with a nation-state – I treat citizenship as a concept and construct shaped and formed by everyday experience of migrant women and view it as a transportable, mobile component of migrant women's identity that is influenced by their experience in social, psychological, political, economic and cultural arenas.

Migrant women's experience clearly demonstrates that modernity has used "two linked concepts of association – citizenship and nationality – to establish the meaning of full membership in society" (Holston & Appadurai, 1999, p. 1) and shows modernity or progress narrative in conflict with a migrant women workers' lives. I argue that this points to selectiveness and exclusion that inherently exists and practiced in "citizenship" as a concept and a set of experience.

Holston & Appadurai (1999) have also pointed out that "…those excluded from the circle of citizens, their rallies against the hypocrisies of [their state's] ideology of universal equality and respect have expanded democracies everywhere" (p.1). To strengthen this, I also connect the concepts of "formal" and "informal" (Roy, 2005; Appadurai, 2002) as these women workers' access to assistance from "formal" and "informal" sectors could inform our understanding of migrants' rights understood by state and their boundaries and operation. For instance, Appadurai (2002) offers that a takeover of the informal could be part of the state's effort to contract out services in a neo-liberal fashion or activist take over or ownership of resistance to the inefficiency of state.

The Indonesian case indicates that state has supported (or has not hindered) the informal sector's effort to protect the migrant women in need, as the women have formed organizations to support themselves with financial, logistical, and advocacy support (Anggraeni, 2005), and the Singaporean case demonstrates informality operating within confines of state (Yeoh & Annadhurai, 2008). These organizations of the informal work through the rhetoric that highlights women's active involvement to fill the void left by the formal, leading to explosive growth of non-governmental organizations in the issues of human rights (Appadurai, 2002). As James Scott (1976) points out, this type of "resistance by subjugated populations often has its basis… in a 'moral economy' under siege" (Cited in Ong 1987, p. 180).

In her investigation of spatiality and urban citizenship in China, Li Zhang (2002) suggests that increased spatial mobility and deepening marketization contributed to formation of new

meanings of urban belonging and struggles over citizenship rights, while using the term urban citizenship in socialist China as the site of an enduring spatial politics and regime exhibiting social hierarchies. Harald Bauder (2008), by extending Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of capital as the reproduction of social order, suggests that citizenship is a strategically produced form of capital, which manifests itself in formal (legal and institutional) as well as informal (practiced and cultural) aspects, and often channel migrants into the secondary labour market or the informal economy.

These two suggestions come together in Aihwa Ong's (2006) idea of "global assemblages" in "mutation in citizenship," which treats migrant citizenship to be defined not by conventional geography but by the site of political mobilizations and claims, as well as emergence of "mobile and excluded populations articulat[ing] rights and claims in universalizing terms of neoliberal criteria or human rights" (p.500). Ong argues that in Asia, "citizenship rights and benefits [have become] contingent upon individual market performance…instead of all citizens enjoying a unified *bundle* of citizenship rights, we have a shifting political landscape in which heterogeneous populations *claim* diverse rights and benefits associated with citizenship" (emphasis added, p.500). I believe that, fundamentally, understanding notions of citizenship will help explore various sites and claims speaking to what it means to be a migrant woman in Southeast Asia.

Migrant Women Returnees' Experience

In my research of migration in Southeast Asia, I seek to bring to the forefront the Southeast Asian women's own experiences of migration, and to feel that I am in the company of researchers who also understand the importance of doing so. I am referring to the work of feminist geographers such as Rachel Silvey, Geraldine Pratt, and Brenda Yeoh – all interested in Southeast Asian women's migration experiences – that attempts to bring the focus back to specificity in women's migration experiences and investigated political meanings of power relations in women's work (Silvey, 2003; Pratt, 1997; Yeoh & Annadhurai, 2008). These feminist geographers have also discussed the linkages between gender politics in identity construction and production of migration and place, conceptualizing them as part of broader political, economic, and cultural processes (Silvey, 2003; Glick Schuller & Çağlar, 2011). In my view, they have also brought empathy and compassion to their research and narrative. I also see these efforts as consistent with the concept of migration that my work centres around. With an attempt to bring out a series of scenes from an Indonesian migrant woman's life representing, reflecting and refracting the new urban generation and Southeast Asia in cultural shift, the importance of social context for shaping knowledge is built into my conceptualization of migration as an interactive and fluid notion.

To bring about a more holistic understanding of migration, there is a need to focus on a couple of areas overlooked by the research to date: In terms of pattern, urban-to-urban or interurban migration has not been sufficiently examined and in terms of type of migrants, the experience of returnees. As mentioned earlier, the majority of Indonesian migrant workers work in an urban area. Nonetheless, upon their return to Indonesia, not all of them go back to their places of origin, which for many Indonesian migrant women, would be small villages. Given the priority of families in the Indonesian society and culture, the question then becomes as to why these women have not returned to their villages where strong, existing network of support will welcome them and instead settled into urban areas. Exploring this question will thus allow a deeper examination of changes in the urban areas where migrant returnees now claim, occupy and make their own.

To tackle this question, migration should be conceptualized as a transformative, enduring process that takes place before, during, and after the move. Migration affects a migrant woman's entire being and shuffles her identities and changes her perceptions, priorities, and prejudices, more research needs to be done to understand how such changes flows out to her communities, both old and new. As urban areas of Southeast Asia rapidly changes, migrant women's narratives and especially those of returnees will expose migration as temporal, spatial, all-encompassing experience and phenomenon, and a physical move that means and involves repositioning oneself in historical, political, social, economic, cultural and spiritual terms.

To speak in more concrete terms, I have found that one of the most easily identified urban-to-urban migrant returnees are former international students who worked overseas after graduation and then returned to Indonesia. Because of their adaptability and familiarity with the culture in receiving communities, many do well in their employment and their overseas work experience often leads to gainful employment at home.[2] However, this story is not echoed by all returnees. Efendi *et al* (2013) have found that Indonesian nurses who worked in Japan had trouble getting a new job after returning home. Prusinski (2014) has also observed that many migrant Indonesian women workers were not trained well for the jobs offered to them, and had to develop skills on their own while working overseas, which go "unacknowledged and unappreciated upon their return." Here another set of research questions arises: how can such variance in experiences be explained, and given their experiences overseas, what decisions these returnees faced after returning home?

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2 This is based on a number of informal interviews I conducted between May and June 2014 with Indonesian migrant returnee women in their early 30's, who all have overseas education credentials and are successful in their current employment. I wish to keep their names anonymous as the nature of our conversations were informal.

Jakarta – A Site of Urban Transformation in Indonesia

I would now like to briefly discuss in more concrete terms how Jakarta would be positioned in this research. Jakarta in its nature is a city of (internal) migrants. Reflecting the diversity of the nation, one can find in Jakarta Indonesians from every corner of the archipelago with different cultural backgrounds. As a nation's capital, Jakarta also offers a wide range and a large number of employment opportunities. Jakarta therefore can serve as a research site with an access to migrant women from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. For instance, these migrant women's mental, conceptual map of Jakarta will be different from the physical, geographical map of the city and reveal how the city as a space has come to be claimed, appropriated, and configured. If migrants tend to claim particular spaces within cities, their role as the force of modernity and progress, and their knowledge-seeking, knowledge enabling activities in Jakarta would show such urban, social, cultural transformation in the Indonesian or Global South context.

In my informal conversations with some migrant women returnees living in Jakarta, I heard on a numerous occasions that they "missed Jakarta." After spending time with them, it became clear to me that the "Jakarta" they spoke about was not the city itself with geographical boundaries, but the experience, expectation, and in some sense, rights that the city offers. On a methodological note, as our conversations were able to continue and thrive through the words (stories) and objects (pictures), I believe that the narrative approach was effective in revealing more about Jakarta as a space and a dynamic identity and about the migrant women themselves as well.

Some of the key questions that I have posed to migrant women returnees in Jakarta were regarding their relationship with the city concern their visibility in the communities. In other words, do the women feel that their migration experience adds to the conspicuousness of migrants upon return? More specifically, what objects, symbols, or public display make migrants visible in cities, and where do migrant returnees find their place in the landscape of Jakarta known for its swift and dramatic changes? Do they become significant actors in their own political, social and cultural life? I suggest that in Jakarta as a major site of capitalistic experiments in Southeast Asia, these women's experiences reflect the dynamic changes the city is undergoing in their decisions on employment, place of residence, and old and new relationships (family, friends, and significant others). Their words will indicate how the experience of migration has played a key role in their lives, and continues to serve as a basis in the decision-making process in their life in the city.

In particular, these questions are being asked while problematizing the notion of "disempowerment" and "oppression," given that the majority of migrant returnees were employed in the manufacturing and service sector as a low-skilled worker amidst what has been noted as feminization of labour in Southeast Asia. In light of this, the view of the migrant women returnees

in Jakarta will help consider several factors in urban transformation: systematization of patriarchy, mechanization of women's economic participation and exercising of social and cultural rights as an urban citizen. Simply put, the details of the migrant women returnee's life in Jakarta, where many call a place of opportunities, will reveal the role of women in this fast-changing society.

Epilogue[3]

It is a hot summer of 2007, and just past noon. It's too hot to be roaming around the streets. I am in the car being driven through the red light district in the city of Surabaya, one of the biggest of its kind in Southeast Asia. In this port town, I can smell the seawater even through the air-conditioned breeze inside this heavily tinted, unmarked SUV, a property of a local Consulate. Everything outside is golden brown under the scorching sun and hazy sky. As we keep on driving, I notice each brothel has a Guinness Beer sign. Skinny girls in skimpy clothes, looking tired from the previous night's work, walk into the doors right underneath the conspicuous signs shining in black and gold.

After a few minutes, we seem to be in a residential area. The car stops at a house under big tropical trees and in comforting shadow. I can finally open my eyes and come to my senses. We walk into a house and see a number of women moving about, minding their own business. A plump, capable-looking lady – she looks like she owns the place – emerges in colourful clothing, wearing sandals. Through the translator we ask about this place: a shelter for girls rescued from prostitution. She speaks loudly about her past as a pimp and her conversion into a crusader for girls trafficked into prostitution.

I busily write things down in my notebook. Her speech is going into my report – one of the "deliverables" in my contract as a researcher – and I can't miss a word. No one else is taking notes but me. I am trying my hardest to fulfill the role given to me, just like I've had to every single day of my life to prove to others that I'm a good fit. I've learned how to perform a well-liked, hard-working person at four elementary schools, two middle schools, two high schools, and two universities located in nine different cities in two different countries. My most recent endeavour is to be what people call a model immigrant who must find and carve out a path that others will look up to. I bring my drifting mind back to the task, as *Ibu*'s words come to an end with an emphasis on how she wanted to help people after a long career as a self-confessed "victimizer."

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3 I include this short essay as an example of exploring migration issues from an autoethnographical approach as well as an attempt to provide a test case for grounding migration research in Southeast Asia on narratives. I thank Dr. Bob Kull for his insightful comments on its first draft and Dr. Patricia O'Riley for her advice on participatory, inclusive research practice in working with women co-researchers. For further reading on autoethnography, see Bochner, A. P. (2001). Narrative's virtues. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *7*(2), 131–157; Chap 7. Ethnographic Poetics and Narratives of the Self. In Denzin, N. K. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications. 199-230; Ellis, C. "I Hate My Voice": Coming to Terms with Minor Bodily Stigmas. *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Autumn, 1998), pp. 517-537.

I flip through my notebook before closing it. I am keenly aware that it is filled with the words of the winners, whose voices have reached the listener and recorder. I recall the faces of the bureaucrats, academics, and activists I have met so far. Their brash, confident assertions will be recycled in a report penned for even more entities with power and authority, and I recognize that I am very much part of the process in the way of participation and facilitation. With my fingers, I trace the words I have written in the notebook and feel their groove. The notebook has gained volume from my work here in Indonesia for the last couple of months. I am not sure if I am thrilled by how much I have managed to write down, although I could be.

Suddenly I notice and feel an intense stare from a dark corner of the room. I look up, searching for the source. My eyes meet a set of eyes, those of a girl, whose small body mostly hides behind the wall. Her eyes quizzically inspect me. Even when my eyes fall back to the notebook, I can sense hers fixated on me.

Ibu says a few more words of courtesy and gratitude, and everyone gets up from their seat without asking any questions or carrying on the conversation further. We are ready to see the rest of the shelter. The transition feels natural and even liberating. I gather my things and put them into a bag. The girl is still there, watching and observing.

I ask the staffer at the shelter sitting next to me, "Who is that girl over there behind the wall?" The staffer doesn't give me her name. "Oh, she just had a baby and she has AIDS." "How old is she?" "About sixteen I think."

The sun has shifted a bit, and I can see her better now with more light in the room. She looks well into her late twenties. The life she has had probably made her age quicker. I look around the room and realize we are the only ones who look about the same age. I wonder what she thought of me when she saw me. An Asian girl about the same age as her, arriving in a business suit and fancy car, busily writing things down, speaking English, with a bunch of *bule*.

I start to wonder what kind of choices her life has offered her. I become curious about those moments in our lives – episodes and occasions that have shaped who we are today. She must have had her dreams too, when her father told her she was going to a big city to work. He must have said she was going to enjoy a city life, get to have the things that she wanted, and make cool new friends.

But did *she* want to leave her family, her town and her friends? And what is her reality now and where would she be off to next?

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