Foreign Exchange Heroes or Family Builders?
The Life Histories of Three Indonesian Women Migrant Workers

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This thesis titled

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The Life Histories of Three Indonesian Women Migrant Workers

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ABSTRACT

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This study explores the interaction between agency and society. It examines the social processes that have brought about transnational labor migration. It also analyzes the life histories of three female ex-migrants from East Java. Petro dollars have enabled some Middle Eastern countries to undertake modernization, which expanded their middle classes and changed their lifestyles. Meanwhile, Indonesia’s economic growth has slowed down since the end of the oil boom and its labor market did not offer enough job opportunities. Viewing a labor shortage in the Middle East as a chance to solve its economic problems, the government of Indonesia (GOI) encouraged citizens to work overseas but failed to provide them with adequate protection. When many of them suffer from exploitation and abuse, the GOI rationalizes the problems by using the discourse of “foreign exchange heroes.” The study shows that nation-building is an ambivalent project involving the internal struggle over power, resources, and identity. Finally, this research also demonstrates that women migrants are dynamic social actors capable of strategic and independent thinking to achieve prosperity and respect.

Approved: ________________________________

Haley Duschinski

Assistant Professor of Anthropology
For Sony Karsono, Chudori, and Suharti
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

If Indonesia can send 60,000 pilgrims [to Mecca] a year … why don’t we also send 60,000 workers to Saudi Arabia? … If 60 migrant workers earn USD 1 million a year [there], then how much money will 60,000 migrant workers make?
—Udayana Hadibroto, “Kontrak Satu Milyar Mungkinkah Dicapai?” 1978

Please appreciate foreign-exchange heroes.
—Human Capital, March 2006

On November 24, 2009, my husband and I—in a long, tiring journey on China Airlines from the United States to Indonesia—stopped over in Taipei for about three hours. He was on his way to spend the winter break in Surabaya, his home city in Indonesia, while I was heading for Kediri to conduct field research for my master’s thesis. Quite a few people we saw at the transit airport looked and sounded familiar. Standing near us in a check-in line or on a moving walkway, some spoke Indonesian, my national language. Others, sitting next to us at an eatery, enjoying their breakfast of steamy beef noodle soup, shot the breeze in Javanese with an unmistakable accent that revealed that they came from East Java, my home province. The subjects of their casual conversations, on which I eavesdropped, confirmed my guess that they were migrant workers. A few hours afterwards, on board my flight to Jakarta I heard an Indonesian woman say to her travel companion, “Gee, Sis, it looks like the aircraft is carrying regular passengers as well. In the past it was all TKI like us.” The term TKI, short for tenaga

kerja Indonesia, refers to Indonesian migrant workers in general, male and female, while TKW, which stands for tenaga kerja wanita, points to Indonesian women migrant workers. In the midst of these women, my compatriots, I felt at home. At first we greeted one another with a nod and smile. Later, during the five-hour flight, we struck up short conversations. On one occasion, as I was walking out of the lavatory back to my seat, one of the women, who was standing in a queue for the rest room, approached me and asked, “Are you returning home to Java from work in Saudi Arabia?” The veil I was wearing apparently led the lady to surmise that I was a Javanese woman who just completed her stint as a domestic worker in the Middle East.

At the Sukarno-Hatta International Airport, Jakarta, I had a glimpse of what Indonesian migrant workers have to go through on arrival from work overseas. Standing in queue to clear immigration, I saw a white and green overhead neon sign that said, “Welcome Home, Foreign-Exchange Heroes.” Having cleared immigration, my husband and I were greeted by an immigration officer who mistook us for TKI. We must, he said, follow a “special” procedure. We should have some of our bags screened for security purposes before proceeding to the customs inspection. He continued by asking us nonsensical questions. Weary and indignant, my husband exploded, “For God’s sake, we are just students. What we have in the bags are mostly books. Open them all if you want to.” The officer smiled sheepishly and said he waived the customs check. “You are not TKI,” he explained, “not yet.” I thought to myself that if we had been TKIs, the officer would have harassed us, even extorted money from us, on the pretext of enforcing the immigration laws.
Since the end of the oil boom era in the early 1980s, migrant workers have become one of Indonesia’s major contributors of foreign exchange. In 1983, the New Order began exporting migrant workers to the Middle East, hoping to earn USD150 million. As late as 2008, the government of Indonesia (GOI) kept relying on migrant workers in its attempt to save the country from the impact of economic crisis. In fact tourism, small- and medium-scale businesses, and migrant workers formed the three pillars of the contemporary Indonesian economy. The BNP2TKI (National Agency for the Placement and Protection of Overseas Labor) reported that Indonesian migrant workers contributed USD 5.84 billion of foreign exchange in 2007 and USD 6.6 billion in 2008. In 2007, of all Indonesian migrant workers, those in Saudi Arabia were the largest senders of bank-mediated remittances (51%), followed by their counterparts in Malaysia (17%) and Taiwan (8%). Most Indonesian migrant workers were women: 62% in 1983 and 82.8% in 2004.

Making a living abroad, Indonesian women migrant workers have had to suffer considerably. They have gone through many forms of exploitation by recruiting agents, the government, and overseas employers. The social contract between the women migrant workers as citizens and the GOI does not work as it should. On the one hand, most

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5 BNP2TKI, [untitled], accessed June 24, 2009, http://bnp2tki.go.id/content/view/192/89/.
they are expected to help mitigate the effects of the Indonesian economic crisis, which they have done. On the other hand, the government has failed to meet its obligations to them, doing little to protect their rights. Just as other governments in developing countries have often mistreated their migrant workers, the GOI has treated its own migrant workers as just another kind of non-oil export commodity, not as citizens. For example, when Indonesian women migrant workers in Saudi Arabia suffered maltreatment, torture, and rape in 1998 and 2009, it did not provide them with adequate protection and legal aid. The interaction between women migrant workers and the GOI was as unhelpful at home as it was abroad. Popular media regularly carries stories showing that government officials have subjected them to inefficient, confusing, corrupt,


and exploitative treatments\textsuperscript{10}—all while extolling the migrant workers in public as “foreign-exchange heroes” (see figure 1). In

![Figure 1](image.png)

\textbf{Figure 1.} This cartoon challenges the government’s portrayal of Indonesian migrant workers as “foreign exchange heroes.” A woman in black mourns over the loss of her friends or relatives, who die of the physical abuse they suffer while working overseas. Covered with the national flag, each of the coffins carries an inscription that reads “TKI” (Indonesian migrant worker). The woman asks, “Is it true that the deceased here are foreign exchange heroes?”\textsuperscript{11}

1985, for example, Sudomo, then the minister of labor, issued the Ministerial Decree No. 213/85 that required recruiting agencies to have migrant workers sign a written promise not to report their problems to journalists. The decree was intended to maintain a good relationship between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{12} Insisting that there should be a balance between rights and obligations, Sudomo said

\textsuperscript{10} Tagaroa and Sofia, \textit{Buruh Migran}, 85; Bambang Bujono, “Jangan Bicara kepada Wartawan” [Don’t talk to journalists], \textit{Tempo}, July 20, 1985.

\textsuperscript{11} Windyatmoko, \textit{Sekilas Wajah Negriku} [A sketch of my country] (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2007), 12.

\textsuperscript{12} Bujono, “Jangan Bicara.”
Do not talk only about human rights, but please talk also about obligations. The complaints of Indonesian migrant workers about their sufferings are nothing but false pretexts. They were trying to end their contracts without paying the compensation [to their employers]. These troubles concern only female migrant workers. The male workers have no problems (emphasis added). \(^\text{13}\)

Despite the breakdown of the social contract between the citizenry and the state, despite the sacrifices many women migrant workers have had to make at home and abroad, and despite the government’s failure to provide them with effective protection from abuse, more and more Indonesian women have decided to make a living overseas, in Taiwan, Malaysia, and especially Saudi Arabia. They numbered 132, 354 in 1994, 297,273 in 2000, and 543, 859 in 2007. \(^\text{14}\)

What does it mean for Javanese women to be housemaids in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s and at the turn of the twenty-first century? In this thesis, I consider the socio-economic problems that women have faced and the ways in which they have sought to solve them. One solution was for them to work overseas. To cope with what at first sight seem local, personal problems, they have acted transnationally. I explore this issue by examining the life histories of three female migrant workers (Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih) \(^\text{15}\) born in Kediri, East Java, in 1962, 1963, and 1977 respectively. Sarinah and Lestari worked in Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s while Ratih in 2005. Growing up in post-World War II world and New Order Indonesia (1966-98), they have been exposed to

\(^{13}\) Ibid.  
\(^{15}\) Since my informants wish to remain anonymous, I use pseudonyms to refer to them throughout this thesis.
processes that shaped their society and the world, processes whose effects they have enjoyed or had to endure, such as nation-building, economic growth, population explosion, regime change, the green revolution, and the oil boom, as well as the East Asian economic crisis and the globalizations of labor, production, finance, transportation, and telecommunication. Through my analysis, I throw into relief the forms of personal agency that these women have developed and deployed in pursuit of their life goals. I spotlight and analyze the encounter, not only economic but also cultural, between the Indonesian housemaids and their Saudi employers. Aware though I am of the distinction between “what really happened” (which requires reconstruction) and “what is claimed to have happened” (which invites interpretation), I have struggled to pay balanced attention to both phenomena, which I consider indispensable to the project of understanding the interplay between self and society.

Research Objectives and Questions

In this thesis, I explore the lives of Indonesian women migrant workers through my dialog with three of them (Lestari, Sarinah, and Ratih), who have returned to their home village in Pranggang, Kediri, East Java. In particular, I demonstrate how these women’s struggles to reach their life goals interacted with the changing local, national, and global conditions. Theoretically, I attempt to understand the interaction between

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16 The following authors have taught me to consider the interaction between individual lives on the one hand and global history on the other (which includes local and national histories as well): C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 40th anniversary ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3; Stephen Rubenstein, *Alejandro Tsakimp: A Shuar Healer in the Margins of History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 64.
social structures and women migrant workers’ exercise of their agency, that is to say, their capacity to deal with life challenges through the deployment of survival strategies, drawing upon the rules and resources available in society. To reach these goals, I address three research questions:

1. What local, national, and global conditions in the last two decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century compelled these women to undertake labor migration to Saudi Arabia?

2. What “methods” did these women use to exercise their agency in and against their society to achieve wealth, social prestige, and life meanings? How did these methods shape their life trajectories? 17

3. How do these women’s stories and experiences challenge the nationalist discourse that the GOI often uses when talking about Indonesian migrant workers?

Theoretical Framework

In formulating my research questions, presenting my data, and making my arguments in this thesis, I draw upon the theoretical approach originally developed by Anthony Giddens, which centers on and interconnects these key concepts: agency, structure, and social system. 18 In his theory of structuration, Giddens uses the term “agency” or agent to highlight the fact that all social actors are capable of independent thought and action. Even the weak retain their capacity to see through the society that

17 The importance of asking this question is highlighted in at least the following works: Rubenstein, Alejandro Tsakimp, 59; Carolyn Kay Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman: The Story of Two Lives (London: Virago Press, 1986).

marginalizes and oppresses them. Though agents may not always be aware of all the factors that motivate their actions, and though these actions may lead to consequences they themselves never intend, the fact remains that they are capable of consciously monitoring their own actions and of rationally explaining these actions.

However, agency presupposes “structure” and vice versa. They are like two sides of the same coin; they depend on each other. In Giddens’ structuration theory, the term “structure” is used to refer to “rules and resources” in society which not only constrain but also enable social actions. Structure, therefore, is both the means and result of the social behavior it shapes from time to time. This is a phenomenon of the social world that Giddens calls the “duality of structure.” In more concrete terms, every time they exercise their agency, social actors not only rely on their own intelligence and skills; they also use, reproduce, and modify the common knowledge, tradition, and institutions that their society provides.

Through its intended and unintended consequences, the sum total of interrelated social actions in any given society not only reproduces the existing social system but also has the potential of transforming it. In this social system, one can find regularized, even institutionalized relations among individuals and groups; such relations, upon careful examination, could be either oppressive or liberating, or both.

19 Ibid., 72.
20 Ibid., 56.
21 Ibid., 63, 69.
23 Giddens, Central Problems, 69, 80.
24 Ibid., 66.
In this study, I use Giddens’ structuration theory to avoid two major pitfalls into which previous researchers have fallen. Some of them have so much emphasized the power of social structures to shape people’s lives that they deny human beings any agency at all. In contrast, others have placed too much stress on the role that agency plays in people’s life trajectories to the point that they “forget” that these trajectories are also the products of social structures.

**Researcher’s Personal Motives**

A good researcher ought to be self-critical, letting her reader know how her background has affected the way she defines her subject matter and carries out her research. I am aware that the data I analyzed in this thesis is the product of the interaction and negotiation between myself, as the researcher, and my informants. In the section that follows, I describe how I came to be interested in the Javanese women of Kediri, East Java, who have worked as housemaids in the Middle East.

The first time I heard a story of the problems facing women migrant workers was when I was an eighteen-year-old senior high school student. One day in 1993 my classmate Indah\(^{25}\) told me of a commotion that just broke out in Jamsaren, a neighborhood in the town of Kediri where she lived. A married woman had recently returned to join her family after having worked for a time as a domestic helper in Saudi Arabia. Strangely enough, she kept refusing to have sex with her husband. One night, as she was sound asleep, her husband lifted up her skirt and was startled. The lady’s genitals, Indah told me, had been damaged. Knowing, at the time, next to nothing about

\(^{25}\) I use a pseudonym to protect her privacy.
human sexuality, I had no idea of what the “damage” of a woman’s private parts meant and what might have caused it.

A few years later, I received an unexpected phone call from an Arabic-speaking man. My mother explained to me that the wife of one of my father’s employees had been waiting for the call.26 As I discovered later, the caller was a Saudi Arab, in whose household the woman had once worked as a housemaid. In the mid-1990s, only well-to-do families had a telephone installed at home. Usually, those who had no phone access would ask their neighbors who did to allow them to use the phone for receiving urgent calls. Years later I learned that when she received the call that day, the lady was already pregnant with her Arab ex-employer’s baby. Her Javanese husband seems to have known this. After the birth of the baby, which her neighbors referred to as “the Arab baby,” the lady returned to work again in Saudi Arabia.

Despite the intermittent circulation of horrible stories of women migrant workers in my neighborhood and in the media, such stories failed to stimulate my academic interest. To be frank, there were times when I, as a member of the middle-class, felt offended by what seemed to me as the “arrogant” public demeanor of some returning Indonesian women migrant workers, for example when they showed off their passports and electronic gadgets (Walkmans or cell phones) at airports, on airplane, or on board a bus. Indeed, from 1994 to 1998, while working toward my BA in psychology, I developed a strong interest in human lifespan development and behavioral disorders. Later, between early 1999 and late 2008, I served as an instructor of educational

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26 A mechanic, my father employed six assistants at the time.
psychology at Surabaya State University, while conducting research on gender and
sports. All through these years, it never occurred to me that migrant labor could be an
interesting subject.

It was on December 6 or 7, 2008 that the subjects of gender and transnational
labor first appeared on my intellectual “radar screen.” I was preparing for my MA
program in Southeast Asian Studies at Ohio University. That night, on my journey from
Jakarta to Columbus, I made a stop at Changi Airport, Singapore. In the transit lounge I
saw dozens of Indonesian women migrant workers sleeping on the floor, awaiting the
next flight. The sight aroused in me a mixture of embarrassment, sympathy, and anger. It
was embarrassing because the way these ladies slept struck me as “uncivilized,”
portraying a bad image of Indonesian women on the international scene. I sympathized
with them because in search of a better life they had to suffer like this. I was angry
because I knew that the GOI failed to take care of the people it kept on celebrating as
“foreign-exchange heroes.”

What constituted the turning point in my relationship with the subject of
Indonesian women migrant workers were three courses I took at Ohio University in 2009.
In the mid-winter of 2009, the materials I read to prepare my final paper for Dr. Risa
Whitson’s course called “Global Feminism” opened my eyes to the great number of
Indonesian women who worked overseas, their considerable contribution to the
Indonesian economy, and the lack of protection for the women migrant workers by the
Indonesian government. In spring 2009, I took a course called “Women and
Globalization,” which was taught by Professor Elizabeth Collins. The literature I used for
the course expanded my knowledge of women, labor, and migration. Finally, it led me to the decision to write a thesis that would seek to understand the experiences of Indonesian women migrant workers. I started to struggle with such questions as “How can I understand their lives?” and “What do these lives mean?” and “To what purposes have the workers used the stories of their lives?” Finally, in winter 2010, the course on “Cultures of South Asia” taught by Dr. Haley Duschinski opened my eyes to the extent to which nation-builders and national governments have been willing to sacrifice their own citizens. Altogether, these learning experiences have convinced me that to understand the complex issues of gender and transnational labor migration I must analyze them by using local, national, and global perspectives.

**What I Seek to Contribute to the Field**

Much of the existing literature on Indonesian women migrant workers has accomplished a useful task of describing and analyzing the social system side aspect of the subject matter, which has to do with changing global economic conditions, state labor policies, and the migrant worker recruitment industry. Some scholars have examined how changes in the global economy affected the Indonesian economy. For example, in a recent edited volume of articles, a group of economists have studied how the New Order’s economic development strategy changed in response to the coming and going of the oil boom.\(^{27}\) Other scholars have deepened our understanding of the effects of culture and politics on the Indonesian economy in general and on the demand for migrant workers in Indonesia.

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particular. Still, other scholars have shown that the Indonesian government’s policy of exporting domestic helpers is part of its general attempt to alleviate the impact of the economic crisis, which broke out in 1997 and 1998.

The main problem with this social system-oriented literature is that it presents only half of the story. It shows Indonesian migrant workers as a mere product of social processes going on at local, national, and global levels. Absent in this scholarly treatment is Indonesian migrant workers’ agency: the extent to which and the ways in which they are capable of shaping their own lives in response to the opportunities offered, and the constraints set by their society and the changing global economic order. Some scholars and human rights activists have sought to fill in the gap by presenting the experiences of Indonesian women migrant workers with a special emphasis on various forms of crime and violence they have had to endure at home and in host countries. These scholars have revealed the workers as victims by calling our attention to the sacrifices the latter have had to make in search of a better life. One shortcoming of this kind of literature,

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30 See, for instance, Robinson, Gender, Islam, and Democracy, 109; Tagaroa and Sofia, Buruh Migran, 15-26: Taty Krisnawati, “Kekerasan di Sekitar Buruh Migran Perempuan (TKW)” [Violence against women migrant workers], in Negara dan Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan [State and violence against women], ed. Nur Iman Subono (Jakarta: Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan, 2000), 219-236. See also Indonesia Research Team and others, Underpayment: Systematic Extortion of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong: An In-depth Study of Indonesian Labor Migration in Hong Kong-August 2005 (Hong Kong: Asian Migrant Centre, 2005).
however, is that victimization becomes the central theme and the major “lesson learned.” For example, while doing a fine job of exposing the mechanics of the organized crime against returning migrant workers in Java, the otherwise admirable study by Sri Suari Wahyudi ends up portraying their experiences in ways that overlook the migrants’ agency. Consequently, the author fails to see the deeper meanings of her own data; she fails to discern, for example, that the organized crime she examines was, in part, the unintended consequence of some of the ways in which the women migrants have chosen to exercise their agency. But what if women migrant workers are more than mere victims?

In general, little attention is paid to how the migrants themselves developed and implemented some strategies to cope with the challenges of working in overseas milieus. I contend that while sympathizing with the migrant women they discuss and whose rights they attempt to defend, some observers go so far as to deny these women intellectual complexity and any meaningful degree of agency. Putting too much emphasis on the effects of exploitative and oppressive structures on the women’s lives, such observers fail to pay analytical attention to the agency that the former may have exercised.

Recently, however, a number of pioneering works have appeared that focus on the agency of Indonesian foreign domestic housemaids (FDHs). In her 2003 doctoral dissertation, for instance, Noorashikin Abdul Rahman examined the individual and collective power of FDHs in Singapore in dealing with the “complex power structures”

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31 See, for example, Sri Suari Wahyudi, “Kejahatan Terorganisasi Terhadap TKI pada Tahap Pemulangan dari Luar Negeri dan Penanganannya oleh Polri” [Organized crime against Indonesian migrant workers from their return home to the investigation of the crime by the police] (master’s thesis, Universitas Indonesia, 2002), 71-72.
that regulated their lives and work abroad. In 2008, Catharina P. Williams called our attention to the agency of Indonesian women migrant workers from East Nusa Tenggara in dealing with challenges in their workplace by employing religious practices and networks. In 2009, Kayoko Ueno published a journal article in which she analyzed the “strategies of resistance” deployed by Filipina and Indonesian house servants in Singapore to protect their rights against “exploitation and coercions by employment agencies, employers, the [host] public, and [the workers’ own] family members….”

My thesis builds on Abdul Rahman’s, Ueno’s, and Williams’ work. In particular, however, I go beyond the three scholars by paying equal attention to how Indonesian foreign domestic workers exercised their agency before, during, and after their migration. I also have chosen to study foreign domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, whose cultural practices toward domestic helpers are different from those in Singapore.

My thesis seeks to contribute a discussion of agency to the studies of Indonesian women foreign domestic workers. It is time to know and understand (a) the ways contemporary Indonesian women migrant workers try to make sense of their lives; (b) their struggle to achieve prosperity, self-esteem, and power; and (c) their methods of dealing with the life challenges of working in a transnational setting where different cultures interact. I use my thesis to help shed light on such issues. My contribution to this

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field of inquiry is to offer an *in-depth* examination of women migrant labor by focusing on the interaction between biography (individual development) and history (social change). This is why I use *life history* as a method to conduct my research project.

**Quasi-Life History Approach**

Different scholars from different disciplines have investigated migrant workers by using various types of research. Geographers, the most prominent of whom is Graeme Hugo, have used a *survey method.*\(^{35}\) Historians, such as Jan Breman, have employed *historical research* to shed light on the change and continuity in rural-urban migration in Asia.\(^{36}\) Anthropologists, such as Michele Ruth Gamburd and Mary Beth Mills, have relied on *ethnography* to interpret the experiences of women migrant workers in Sri Lanka and Thailand, respectively.\(^{37}\) Other researchers have employed *life history* as a research method to interpret labor mobility and its consequences, by focusing on how people use their memories to tackle life challenges in the present. The anthropologist Katy Gardner, for example, has written the life histories of old Bengali migrant workers in London, paying special attention to the connection between age, memories, and migration.\(^{38}\) Modifying Gardner’s steps, I have conducted quasi-life history research to understand the ways three Javanese women migrant workers in Kediri have struggled in

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\(^{35}\) Hugo, “Domestic Workers,” 54-91.


and against their own culture to achieve “economic security, social prestige, political power, and some sense that life has meaning and value.” In my analysis of the life experiences of Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih, I have considered intra-societal differences and the struggle between self and society. I have viewed the Javanese culture of my three informants as simultaneously local, national, and global. Being a quasi-life history research, however, this study does not offer a reconstruction and interpretation of my informants’ whole life span; it focuses on their adulthood. My three-week fieldwork was too short for me to inquire into their childhood and adolescence.

**Data Collection Methods**

I carried out the fieldwork part of my research in the village of Pranggang in Plosoklaten, Kediri, East Java from November 27 to December 20, 2009. I have known this village since my childhood. I used to spend my holidays there, visiting my cousins, aunt, uncle, and grandmother. During my fieldwork, I stayed at the house of my maternal aunt, whose husband was a local religious leader, and was related by kinship to the village head. My aunt and my cousin (Pandu) helped me as “gatekeepers” as they had contacts with the locals. Owing to her cooking prowess, the villagers often asked my aunt to assist them with the preparation of many kinds of ceremonial feasts. She was also well known for her generosity. Neighbors turned to her for help in times of trouble. I asked her to help me approach my informants. Well known and well liked by many in the village,

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40 Ibid., 63.
my cousin Pandu introduced me to village officials as well as some of my most important informants; he also helped me by arranging my first interviews with these people.

My command of Javanese, both low and high, turned out to be a cultural asset. Of course, the people of Pranggang knew Indonesian, our national language. But they were more comfortable communicating in Javanese. Many felt that Javanese was more polite than Indonesian and that the former was richer and more nuanced than the latter.

The data for my research comes in two formats: biographical and ethnographic. I used the biographical data to write the life histories of Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih, who are the protagonists of my thesis. I have employed the ethnographic data to represent and analyze the Pranggang community (its culture and its evolution) in which these women have grown up and lived. I have done my best to pay critical attention to the interaction between their lives and their changing society.

Both biographical and ethnographic data were collected through interviews and participant observations. Most of what I know of my informants’ life histories, however, resulted from my dialog with them. To take the ethnographic snapshots of the Pranggang community, I talked to community members, the village head and his assistants, returned women migrant workers, and their husbands and next of kin. In addition, I also observed the key sites where collective activities often took place: the market, village office, communal water reservoirs, rice fields, food stalls, mosques, orchards, and house yards. Whenever I could, I attended such events as collective prayers, the campaigns for the district head elections, palavers at local food stalls, and informal gatherings.

41 All of the interviews and observations were conducted in Pranggang from November 27 to December 20, 2010.
That I ended up working with Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih was the result of the negotiation between me and my gatekeepers. I needed three returned women migrant workers who would be willing and able to share their life stories with me. After some casting about, my aunt and Pandu came up with Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih. Like most of their counterparts in the village, they were all successful ex-migrants. In this regard, they were typical representatives of their social group. Out of three failed women migrants in Pranggang, only one stayed in the village during my fieldwork, but she was still too traumatic for me to recruit as my informant.

**Thesis Outline**

The thesis comprises six chapters. Chapter One, “Introduction,” justifies and launches the subject matter, breaking it down into three research questions. Chapter Two, “The Contexts,” reveals the global, national, and local settings in which the informants have been working and living their lives in the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. This background information helps us understand the subject of the next three chapters: the stories of what it meant to be a Javanese woman who—in search of a better life—went to work as a housemaid in the Middle East.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five constitute the core of the thesis. It is here that I recount the life histories of Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih. The stories are presented thematically and chronologically. The third chapter discusses the reasons why Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih decided to become migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, leaving their loved ones in East Java for years. It demonstrates how these women enacted their agency in response to the society that both hurt and helped them. The key theme their stories
underscore is this: They were dynamic social actors capable of strategic thinking who made and executed long-term plans. They made calculated efforts to attain what they saw as a better life, by using, modifying, and reproducing the rules and resources available in society. They both benefitted and suffered from the consequences of their actions.

Chapter Four highlights how in pursuit of their goals, these women exercised their agency by coping with the problems of living and working in a country whose legal system not only limited their physical and social mobility but also failed to protect them. In particular, this chapter examines the ways in which they adapted to an alien environment, overcoming problems in the workplace, and negotiated with their employers over dress codes, the disbursement of their wages, and the terms of their contracts. It pays special attention to the ways in which they resisted the abuse, attempted sexual harassment, and exploitation that their employers inflicted on them.

The fifth chapter focuses on how they attempted to protect and use their hard-earned money in order to realize the dreams that had impelled them to undertake international labor migration. This chapter scrutinizes the interplay between agency and social system as it was experienced by these women during and following their return to Plosoklaten, Kediri. My examination deals with how, in their pursuit of wealth and prestige, they sought to solve the problems confronting them during their domestic travel back home and after they rejoined their home community. The chapter also explores these issues: to what degree the women’s ways of acting out their agency helped them attain their objectives, and to what degree these ways worked against them by reproducing the structures of exploitation and oppression they faced.
Finally, in Chapter Six, “Conclusion,” I present the insights I gain from my scrutiny of the three life histories. I then discuss the limitations of my study, and close the thesis by recommending that migrant workers exercise their agency in ways that would strengthen their bargaining power vis-à-vis the Indonesian government and their foreign employers.
CHAPTER 2: THE CONTEXTS

Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.
— C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination, 1959

This chapter describes the social contexts that we must consider if we are to understand the stories in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 about three Javanese women who made a living as domestic workers in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. It is useful to exercise what C. Wright Mills has termed “the sociological imagination,” a type of social thinking that aims to grasp “individual biography and global history” by contemplating how the two interact in society. With this goal in mind, I devote this chapter to the depiction of the global, national, and local worlds in which my informants have learned to survive. First, I shall discuss the global and national developments that have prompted the transnational migration of Indonesian labor. Then I shall portray the village of Pranggang, where all three of my informants have spent most of their lives.

The Global Milieu

This section deals with the oil boom, that global factor which pulled many Indonesians to the Middle East in search of well-paying unskilled jobs. The boom, which occurred in two waves (1973-77 and 1979-82), had a powerful impact on world

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43 Steven Rubenstein, Alejandro Tsakimp: A Shuar Healer in the Margins of History (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 64.
44 Mills, Sociological Imagination, 6.
economy. Oil-exporting countries like Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) reaped massive profits, some of which they reinvested in the expansion of their industrial powers and physical infrastructure.\textsuperscript{45} Their industries, though, suffered from labor shortage.\textsuperscript{46} In any case, economic development in these oil-rich countries led to the growth of their middle classes, whose members experienced changes in their ways of life. For example, more women in the Middle East received higher education and pursued professional careers. The more they took part in the public sphere, the less time they had to do house chores, and the greater their need for domestic helpers.\textsuperscript{47}

While oil-endowed Arab countries prospered during the oil boom in the 1970s and 1980s, their neighbors in North Africa and South Asia suffered from the burgeoning foreign debt and the general economic crisis that the steep increase in world oil prices unleashed. The governments of these countries deemed it wise to export their workforce to petrodollar countries such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. At first, for reasons of cultural affinity, the latter countries preferred Arab to non-Arab migrant workers. Soon, however, the ruling elites of the Gulf States worried lest nonlocal Arab workers mobilize their secret societies to overthrow monarchies.\textsuperscript{48} It seemed much safer for them

\begin{footnotes}
\item[48] Due to cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities, the Gulf countries preferred workers from Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, and Syria. These affinities, however, jeopardized
\end{footnotes}
to hire migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia, who had no political stake in the Middle East. Moreover, unlike their Arab counterparts, who often brought their families with them while working overseas, South and Southeast Asian migrants were willing to leave their dependents behind. Finally, they were also cheaper, more compliant, and easier to lay off. Besides the “pull” factors in the Gulf States themselves, which invited a good many Indonesians to seek jobs there, there existed a number of “push” factors in their own country, ones that motivated them to become migrant workers. I will examine these push factors in the following section.

**Indonesia’s Economic Development in the New Order and Afterwards**

With the support of a middle-class coalition of student activists, Muslim leaders, the intelligentsia, bureaucrats, technocrats, and army officers, the New Order regime came to power in Indonesia in 1966; this occurred after the demolition of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and the mass murders of roughly half a million of its alleged members in retaliation for the involvement of some of the Party’s top leaders in the botched coup of September 30, 1965. Under General Suharto’s leadership, the New Order embarked upon economic development. Indeed, throughout its reign from 1966 to 1998, the Suharto administration rested its legitimacy on “two pillars”: “stability and

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49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 6-7.
economic development.”

The Left’s sudden demise, the simplification of party politics, and the domestication of political Islam helped the New Order achieve and maintain stability.

Until the outbreak of the East Asian economic crisis in 1997 and 1998, the New Order government presided over an unprecedented era of “rapid and sustained economic growth,” especially during the oil boom (1974–1981), when the country’s GDP rose by 7.7 percent per year. Indonesia’s economic development relied on four bases: the foreign aid from capitalist countries, the oil bonanza, foreign direct investment (FDI), and “sound economic management.” The West provided the New Order with massive foreign aid because it saw the regime’s rise in 1966 as the triumph of capitalism over communism in Southeast Asia. The importance of oil is evident in the fact that “[c]orporate tax on oil rose from 55 percent of central government domestic revenues in

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1974 to a high of 71 percent in 1981.” From 1968 to 1984, 75 percent of the FDI flowed to the oil sector. The rest went to import-substitution industries. Indonesia’s “sound economic management” may have resulted from the periodic consultations between the IMF’s and World Bank’s economists and the New Order technocrats, most of whom were US-trained and often called the “Berkeley Mafia.” The latter played a central role in the overhaul of the national economy. The New Order government invested much of the oil revenues in promoting regional development, expanding the country’s health and education systems, introducing the green revolution, building modern “physical infrastructure,” and creating heavy industries.

During the oil boom, in a time of rapid economic growth, the Government of Indonesia (GOI) saw no use in selling migrant labor to the Middle East. But the boom did not last long. World oil prices returned to normal in the early 1980s, causing Indonesia’s revenues from oil and gas exports to drop “from USD 18.4 billion … in 1982” to “USD 8.3 billion … in 1986.” In sum, the end of the oil boom resulted in serious problems such as “falling oil revenues, declining income terms of trade … rising foreign debt service obligations,” and a much slower growth rate.

Painfully aware of the problems caused by the decline of world oil prices, the GOI sought to solve them by taking two measures. First, even without the pressure from the IMF and the World Bank, the GOI implemented a neoliberal economic restructuring

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58 Robison and Hadiz, “Indonesia,” 119.
that involved “contractionary budget measures,” the deregulation of the banking sector, and the liberalization of trade and market.\textsuperscript{60} The idea was to create a more attractive environment for FDI. The GOI changed its industrial policy from import-substituting to export-oriented manufacturing.\textsuperscript{61} Between 1980 and 1983, it encouraged the growth of heavy industries and invited foreign investors to provide the capital. To save money, the GOI cut fuel subsidies. To liberalize the economy, the Investment Coordination Board removed some “restrictions on the operation of foreign firms.”\textsuperscript{62} In 1986, the GOI introduced the May 6 Package, “which open[ed] up new sectors to foreign firms, reduce[d] localization requirement, and [removed] regulatory barriers.” Since then, the FDI to Indonesia came to focus on export-oriented manufacturing and such service sectors as real estate, hotel, banking, and insurance.\textsuperscript{63} By 1989, when Indonesian conglomerates had grown strong enough to compete with foreign companies, the GOI announced its “Negative List,” which identified a few fields still barred to foreign


\textsuperscript{61} In the early decades of the New Order, the making of Indonesia’s economic policy was dominated by two groups of economists. The first group consisted of nationalist economists who contended that the government should protect their emerging domestic business class from foreign competition. The second group consisted of the liberal economists who argued that Indonesia should be more open to the international market. The clash of the two groups led to the fact that though Indonesia opened itself up to foreign investment, the country continued applying restrictive regulations. The government provided foreign investors with limited freedom to run their businesses in Indonesia. It did this to protect infant domestic businesses, giving them opportunities to strengthen their economic basis.


\textsuperscript{63} Hill, \textit{Indonesian Economy}, 76-78.
investment. This policy increased the inflow of FDI from USD 1.4 billion to USD 4.7 billion.64 Most of the FDI came from Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and the US.65 Upon examination, some of the major features of Indonesia’s post-oil boom economic reform resembled those of the SAP (the structural adjustment program), which the IMF and World Bank imposed on those developing countries which received emergency loans to get out of a foreign debt crisis.66

The second major way in which the GOI responded to the end of the oil boom was by creating and exploiting sources of revenue other than oil and gas exports.67 One non-oil export commodity was migrant labor (see figure 2). In its Third Five-Year Development Plan (1979-1984), migrant workers constituted one of the major non-oil commodities. The government’s goal was to send 100,000 migrant workers, and the official report shows that it succeeded in sending 96,410 workers.68 The main target country to which the GOI sent its migrant workers was Saudi Arabia. In a general meeting attended by the governor of Indonesia’s Central Bank, the managers of government banks, and the representatives of the Association of Indonesian Contractors

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65 Hill, “Foreign Investment Regime,” 600.
66 Thorbecke, “Macroeconomic Disequilibrium,” 43.
68 Graeme Hugo, “Indonesian International Domestic Workers: Contemporary Developments and Issues,” in *Asian Women as Transnational Domestic Workers*, ed. Shirlena Huang, Brenda S. A. Yeoh, and Noor Abdul Rahman (Singapore: Marshal Cavendish International, 2005), 57. See also Indonesia Research Team, et al., *Underpayment: Systematic Extortion of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong: An In-Depth Study of Indonesian Labor Migration in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Asian Migrant Centre, 2005), 6.
(AKI) and the International Operations Committee (KOI) on July 7, 1978, Udayana Hadibroto declared:

If … Indonesia can send 60,000 pilgrims [to Mecca] a year … why don’t we also send 60,000 workers to Saudi Arabia? If it costs a hajj pilgrim USD 2,000, then 60,000 pilgrims will spend USD 120 million. […] But if 60 migrant workers earn USD 1 million a year [in Saudi Arabia], then how much money will 60,000 migrant workers make? USD 1 million x 1,000 = USD 1 billion, right?

Figure 2. Appearing in the national weekly Tempo on June 9, 1988, this cartoon talked of “export fever.” In response to the declining oil prices, the government encouraged the export of non-oil and non-gas commodities, including women migrant workers (TKW).

The number of Indonesian migrant workers has increased over the years. In the period between 1984 and 1989 (the Fourth Five-year Development Plan), for example, the government set for itself the goal of sending 225,000 workers. It managed to exceed

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the target by actually sending 292,262 workers. The government was then determined to double the number of migrant workers to be sent overseas in its subsequent Five-Year Development Plan. In the Seventh Five-Year Development Plan, the target became 2,800,000.\(^71\) In 2008 alone, the government planned to send 750,000 workers and it almost achieved the target by sending 748,825 workers, of whom 234,643 went to Saudi Arabia with 211,000 of them working in the informal sector.\(^72\) These facts and figures reveal that sending migrant workers was one of the major ways for the government to solve economic problems. In an interview with the daily *The Jakarta Post* in 2001, the minister of Manpower and Transmigration,\(^73\) Jacob Nuwa Wea, stated, “The government will also pass a law to facilitate labor export to help ease unemployment … [as … a]bout 40 million people are now jobless.”\(^74\)

Today, the GOI continues its policy of sending Indonesian workers abroad. As President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono declared in 2008, “Three sectors may save Indonesia from the current monetary crisis: small and medium enterprises, tourism, and

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\(^71\) Hugo, “Domestic Workers,” 57.
\(^73\) Transmigration is “the resettlement [program] from [overpopulated] Java, Madura and Bali to the Outer Islands,” especially Kalimantan, Indonesia’s largest island, which in 1980 was inhabited by only 1 million people. Transmigration served several purposes: to abolish regional disparities, utilize “the outer islands’ natural resources for economic and social development, [alleviate] the inter- and intra-regional income disparities, [create] jobs, [and] reserve the population migration from the thinly populated outer regions to overpopulated Java.” The transmigration program was launched in 1977. See Dietrich Kebschull, *Transmigration in Indonesia: An Empirical Analysis of Motivations, Expectations, and Experiences* (Hamburg, Verlag Weltarchiv GmbH: 1986), 5.
the export of migrant labor.” The GOI, he promised, would do its best to “develop the three sectors.”75 To ensure the regular influx of foreign exchange into the country, the GOI planned, in June 2010, to send a million migrant workers per year in order to reach the annual target of IDR 125 billion.76 Nurfaiz, president of the Association of Labor-Exporting Companies (APJATI), added that Indonesia could send five percent of total population to work overseas.77 The GOI’s target is not unrealistic: since 2005 Indonesia has been sending around 800,000 workers abroad every year.78 The problem is that the Indonesian parliament has not passed any law that provides migrant workers and their families with real protection. In fact, the lawmakers and the president have done the opposite. For example, to maximize foreign exchange earnings, the Law No. 39/2004 and the Presidential Instruction No. 3 /2006 do not require recruiting agencies to provide

77 “IMWU: TKI Lebih Butuh.”
78 Ibid.
migrant workers with proper pre-departure training.79 While helping the agencies reduce their production costs, the laws increase the possibility of future conflict between Indonesian migrant and their overseas employers.80 Like Malaysia and some Middle Eastern countries, Indonesia has not ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.81

Indonesian migrant workers have come mostly from villages, with women forming the majority. The GOI encouraged them to find employment overseas. The Pusat AKAN (Center for Overseas Employment), an institution attached to the Department of Manpower, encouraged Indonesian women workers to seek jobs abroad, as part of an effort to reduce unemployment, increase Indonesian people’s welfare, and augment state revenues.82 In 1983, Indonesia sent 28,960 workers overseas, 62 percent (17,899) went to the Middle East. Of these Middle-East-bound migrant workers, 63 percent were women.83 According to the Department of Labor’s official report, there


80 Ibid.


were, in 1998, 411,609 Indonesians who became migrant workers and 78 percent of these were women. Moreover, 43.6 percent (179,521) of Indonesian migrant workers in 1998 went to the Middle East. The proportion of migrant workers who went to the Middle East increased to 91.5 percent in 2001 and dropped to 82.8 percent in 2004. In 2006, about 300,000 Indonesian migrant workers worked in the Middle East. The actual numbers may have been higher than these as some of the migrant workers went undocumented. In 2008, for example, data from the Soekarno-Hatta airport reveals that 45,626 “migrant workers in trouble” returned home and 40.92 percent of them worked in Saudi Arabia. In 2009, those who worked in Saudi Arabia constituted 53.55 percent of the total 23,760 Indonesian migrant workers (IMWs); in early 2010, 54.10 percent of the total 25,064 IMWs worked in Saudi.

86 Undocumented workers are those who work overseas without proper documents. They work abroad without working visas or changing jobs without following the required procedures. Some of them become undocumented since their working permit has expired. Ibid.
88 Ibid.
Non-documentation was not a problem unique to Indonesian migrant workers in the Middle East. In comparison, in 2006, there were 2 million Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia and 700,000 of them were undocumented. In February 2008, the Malaysian government deported 34,595 illegal Indonesian migrant workers.\(^{89}\)

To sum up, the urban-rural inequality in Indonesia’s economic development led many village women to seek a better life by working overseas. Since their level of education was low, many became housemaids. They saw and still see Saudi Arabia as the favorite of all destinations,\(^{90}\) for the demand for house servants in this country remained high. Unfortunately, the bureaucracy, especially at the sub-district and district levels, was often so corrupt and inefficient that many women migrant workers chose to obtain incomplete and inaccurate documents, which—in some cases—hurt their own interests.

In the section that follows I will introduce the reader to one village in Kediri, East Java, some of whose inhabitants became migrant workers to cope with the consequences—both in the Middle East and in Indonesia—of the coming and going of the oil boom.

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\(^{90}\) Hernández-Coss, and others, *Malaysia-Indonesia Remittance*, 19.
The Field Site

1. The Javanese

The people of Pranggang are mostly Javanese, Indonesia’s largest ethnic group. In 2000, the Javanese numbered 83,752,853 or 41.65 percent of Indonesia’s total population. Of all Javanese, 36.16 percent lived in Central Java and 32.51 percent in East Java. As Leo Suryadinata has observed, though the Javanese increased in number “from 27.8 million in 1930 to 83.8 million in 2000,” their percentage dwindled. In 1930, they accounted for 47.02 percent of the country’s total population but in 2000 they constituted only 41.71 percent.91 In 2000, of all ethnic groups in Indonesia, the Javanese were the only one who settled all the provinces in “high concentration.”92 In the same year, the Javanese constituted 78.35 percent of East Java’s total population (34,756,400).93 But the province is also home to ethnic minorities such as the Madurese (18.7 percent)94 and Chinese (0.55 percent).95

Leaving the statistics aside, however, any cultural portrayal of the Javanese should give the reader an idea of what it means to be Javanese. A cautious attempt to do so should stress the fact that the actually existing Javanese are neither static nor homogenous, for they change over time and differ across groups.

92 Ibid., 34.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid., 44 and 47.
95 Ibid., 77, 79, and 81.
In general, what did the Javanese look like in the twentieth century? The fieldwork that two generations of American anthropologists conducted in Java after World War II led them to a cluster of cardinal traits that described the typical Javanese: “an overriding concern with status and hierarchy,”96 “a preoccupation with the ability of individuals to exercise control over their base instincts and passions,”97 the tension between “acceptance [nrima] and struggle,”98 an emphasis on “courtesy and civic virtue,”99 the reverence for aesthetics,100 and the control that women exercised over family finance and the marketplace.101 In addition, the most famous of these ethnographers, Clifford Geertz, noted that the Javanese were divided—by their ways of life and worldviews—into three “subtraditions”: the santri, the abangan, and the priyayi.102 Mostly traders and well-to-do peasants, the santri espoused a more puritan type of Islam. Some of them had gone on the hajj to Mecca. The abangans, by contrast, were mostly small-time peasants and championed “the animistic aspects of the over-all Javanese syncretism.”103 Finally, the exponents of the priyayi subtradition—who had their origin in the “hereditary aristocracy” that the Dutch colonial state had “turned into an appointive, salaried civil service”—promoted the Hinduistic elements of the Javanese

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97 Ibid.
99 Ibid., 5-6.
100 Ibid., 6-7.
101 Ibid., 7-8.
103 Ibid., 6.
culture and made a living as bureaucrats. In the 1960s, the “differing degrees of commitment to Islam,” especially between the santris and the abangans, led to political violence that involved the massacres of hundreds of thousands of leftist abangans.

My experience growing up as a Javanese woman confirmed at least part of the abovementioned ethnographic description of twentieth-century Javanese. Born in 1975 in Kediri, I spent the first two decades of my life there. First, as a toddler I learned from my parents to recognize and respect age-based social hierarchy while learning to speak Javanese. They taught me Low and High Javanese, the former for talking to my siblings and friends, the latter for communicating with the elders. Each having its own set of vocabulary, the two languages may appear to outsiders as if they are two distinct dialects. As I realized more and more, the two languages differ not only in vocabularies but also in tone, gesture, and mental attitude. To speak High Javanese is to speak politely by using a tone that is “cajoling, pleasing, and without sharp edges,” making gestures of deference, keeping self-control, and exercising self-effacement. People who fail to do so are considered as “not yet” and “not quite” Javanese. In my adulthood, I came to notice the incompatibility and impossibility of being angry while speaking High Javanese, for one could only speak it properly when one’s mind was more or less peaceful and calm. Second, as I often observed when my mother and I shopped at Kediri’s marketplaces, women controlled the trade in fruits, vegetables, spices, textiles, snacks, garments, and

\[104\] Ibid.
rice dishes. Third, in the university where I taught in Surabaya, it is customary for my
Javanese male colleagues to turn over all of their monthly wages to their wives, who
reserve the authority to manage family finances.

The Javanese, however, did change over time. As the Java expert M. C. Ricklefs
has discovered, compared to their descendants in the mid-1960s, the Javanese of the
1830s were much less polarized. In the mid-nineteenth century, Javanese society was
“relatively unified in terms of religious identity,” centering as it did on a Hindu-Islamic
“mystic synthesis” that showed “three characteristic features within the mystical variant
of Islam”: “a strong commitment to Islamic identity, widespread observation of the five
pillars of the faith, and acceptance of local spiritual forces.”107 By the early twentieth
century, the mystic synthesis had fallen apart due to the political and economic changes
that Dutch colonialism introduced to Java.

The Javanese constitute the largest linguistic group in Indonesia. Their language
comprises a number of dialects. Nowadays, most Javanese are at least bilingual, speaking
Indonesian and one Javanese dialect. In parts of East Java, such as Pasuruan, Lumajang,
and Jember, some Javanese even speak Madurese. Some, who have college-level
education, speak English as well.

2. Kediri

The village of Pranggang, where I did my research, belongs to the district of
Kediri, which has been the subject of a few anthropological studies. The most well-

107 Ricklefs, Polarizing Javanese Society, 11.
known among these include Clifford Geertz’s *The Religion of Java* (1960), Hildred Geertz’s *The Javanese Family: A Study of Kinship and Socialization* (1961), Robert R. Jay’s *Javanese Villagers: Social Relations in Rural Modjokuto* (1969), and Victoria M. Clara van Groenendael’s *Jaranan: The Horse Dance and Trance in East Java* (2008). Most of these studies concern Kediri in the 1950s. Since then, however, society has changed considerably. From 1965 to 1966, in the showdown between Muslims and leftists, the former emerged victorious and many of the latter were massacred.¹⁰⁸

Economic development, which the New Order (1966-1998) presided over, transformed the society. For example, in the early 1980s, many villages in Kediri did not have electricity. My grandfather used kerosene lamps to illuminate his whole house. By the late 1980s, electricity had entered his village. More and more children in the district enjoyed modern, secular education, as the New Order regime built new, government-subsidized primary and secondary schools in village, outside the town of Kediri and Pare. The Department of Education and Culture provided these schools with textbooks, which were often well-written and nicely illustrated. Students were free to use them both in the classroom and at home throughout the academic term or year. Copybooks were no longer a luxury as they were in the 1950s and 1960s. I also remember that every now and then the government sent doctors and nurses to our schools, providing the schoolchildren with free medical check-up and treatment, including blood tests, dental care, eye examinations, and vaccinations. Thus, in my childhood in Kediri of the 1980s I was to experience the works of “an activist welfare state,” into which Indonesia had turned

under the New Order. In terms of economic development, the district of Kediri performed rather well in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Its GRDP increased from IDR 7,707,541.7 million (USD 770 million) in 2005 to IDR 9,904,990.15 million (USD 990 million) in 2007, with agriculture as its major engine of growth.\textsuperscript{109} However, at least until 2003, the district remained one of the poorest in Indonesia. In 2001, for example, of the 1,375,812 people who lived there, 35,000 were poor while 215,000 were severely poor. In other words, the agricultural self-sufficiency the district enjoyed did not improve the farmers’ standards of living.\textsuperscript{110}

Kediri is one of Indonesia’s ancient towns in East Java. It is a three-hour drive to the southwest of Surabaya. Kediri has distinctive features. First, it is surrounded by mountains, with Mount Kelud in the east, Mount Wilis in the southwest, and the Klothok Hill in the west. The Brantas River, one of the largest rivers in Java, cuts across the town and splits it into two regions: East and West Kediri. In the thirteenth century, the Mongol forces, which Kubilai Khan sent—to no avail—to conquer Java, reached the town by sailing up the river. Second, Greater Kediri is rich in historical heritage. Three major Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms were founded here: Daha, Singasari, and Majapahit, which left behind some temples, statues, and stone inscriptions. Third, Kediri is endowed with fertile soil. Along the big and small roads that link Kediri with other towns and cities in East Java there are sugarcane and rice fields. In the nineteenth century and the first half


\textsuperscript{110} Tim Litbang Kompas, \textit{Profil Daerah Kabupaten dan Kota} [The profiles of regencies and municipalities], vol. 2 (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2003), 443-445.
of the twentieth, Kediri was the center of sugar production in the Dutch East Indies. Dutch entrepreneurs built and ran a number of large sugar mills around the town. Looking like “industrial dinosaurs,” three of them are still in business today: the Ngadirejo mill in the south, the Pesantren mill in the east, and the Mrican mill in the north. In the milling season, from November to April, they receive seemingly endless truckloads of freshly cut sugarcane from the adjacent areas.

Besides sugar mills, the evidence of a Java-Europe encounter in Kediri also includes the adoption of Christianity by a segment of the Javanese population. For example, if you go to Puh Sarang, a village up on Mount Wilis, four miles away from the town of Kediri, you will see an eye-catching Catholic church. Built in 1936, by the Java-born Dutch architect Henricus Maclaine Pont, the church “emulates old Javanese [architectural] styles,” suggesting that it is possible to blend Hindu and Christian cultures. The hybrid design of the church is a reminder of the age-old Javanese tendency toward syncretism.

Christians remain a minority in what I call Greater Kediri, which includes both the municipality and the district bearing the same name. Most of its inhabitants are Muslims. The town of Kediri is home to Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School, established in 1910 by the Muslim cleric Kyai Abdul Karim. Having thousands of students, the traditional (salafi) school offered primary to secondary education, the curricula of which emphasize the studies of Arabic, astronomy, scriptural exegesis, jurisprudence, the

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Hadith, the Koran, and theology, while also incorporating such courses as Indonesian, Javanese, and history, both Indonesian and Middle Eastern.  

In addition to “imported” religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, one may examine local cuisine to find the evidence of Kediri’s ancient and recent contacts with the rest of the world. Kediri is famous for its tofu and edible snails \textit{(Achatina variegata)}. As the Indonesian sinologist Myra Siddharta suggests, the Javanese learned how to make tofu from some members of the Mongol forces that invaded East Java in 1292. Since the 1970s, Indonesia has been shipping more and more snails to Canada, France, Greece, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Singapore, Taiwan, and the United States. The district of Kediri is the center of snail farming in the country. For example, most of the 3,648 tons of snails that Indonesia exported in 1989 came from the district. The locals learned to eat snails during the Japanese Occupation (1942-45) to survive food shortages. Nowadays, they cook snails into chips and barbecues.

Kediri’s contribution to Indonesia’s economic development is significant. Consider, for example, the case of the clove cigarette industry. The town is home to Gudang Garam, the country’s largest cigarette manufacturer. Founded in 1958, it now employs no less than 45,000 workers. “In the late 1980s,” it produced “40 billion


\footnotesize\textsuperscript{115} Naryo Sadhori S., \textit{Teknik Budi Daya Bekicot} [Snail farming techniques] (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1997), 1-5.

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{116} Anthony J. Whitten, and others, \textit{The Ecology of Java and Bali} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 300.
cigarettes a year” and “held 39 percent” of the market. Since the 1990s, the company has been “the largest corporate taxpayer” in Indonesia. For several years until 1992, for example, it remained the largest payer of excise duty on tobacco products in Indonesia. The fact that Gudang Garam is based in Kediri explains why in 1999 the municipality enjoyed the the largest GRDP throughout the country (IDR 43 million). In 2001, the firm contributed to 76 percent of Kediri’s GRDP. Roughly 70 percent of the workers are women, who come from the neighboring towns and districts: Blitar, Tulungagung, and Trenggalek. My parental home is on the main road that connects Kediri with these towns. In my childhood, I used to see, at five in the morning, long files of women workers on their bicycles, chatting in the dark, riding their way side by side to the cigarette factory up north. At five in the afternoon, the same women were already cycling along to the south, homeward-bound. Many of their colleagues, though, chose to travel home by minibus. By this time, the minibus was so packed with passengers that the

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121 Tim Litbang Kompas, Profil Daerah: Kabupaten dan Kota [Regional profiles: districts and municipalities], vol. 1 (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2001), 277.
workers had to stand up cheek by jowl, some sticking their legs out the door, others pressing their buttocks against the glass of the rear window.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the influx of capital into the Kediri and the growth of the middle class had led to the emergence of consumerism. In 2000, a mall called Sri Ratu (the Queen) was built in Kediri. It soon became a site of most attractive spectacle. People from all over the district, including those from the hills, came to visit the mall for shopping and sightseeing. To some who saw them for the first time, the escalators at the mall appeared as a technological wonder. As my sister told me, at the mall’s grand opening, security guards were placed at the upper and lower ends of the escalators, ready to prevent accidents from happening to the visitors who were not accustomed to the strange gadgets. Some found the act of stepping on the escalators quite intimidating. Some lost their footing and fell, rolling and tumbling down the metal steps.

The GOI, as we know, encouraged foreign investment to push the country’s economic development. As some farmers near Pranggang discovered, though, the intrusion of global capital into their village involved both opportunities and risks. In 1983, Charoen Pokphand, one of the world’s largest agro-industrial corporations based in Thailand, established its subsidiary called BISI in the adjacent village of Sumber Agung. Besides producing pesticides and distributing fertilizers, it develops and sells the hybrid seeds of “corn, rice, fruits and vegetables.” A number of farmers in the village signed a contract with BISI to grow the hybrid maize for the company, using the seeds it provided. The company, in turn, processed the maize into poultry feed. Recently, the firm filed a

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lawsuit against ten farmers in Sumber Agung. As it happened, they succeeded in developing a maize variety similar to but better than the one that BISI produced. They seem to have figured out the secrets of BISI’s technology. People soon flocked to buy the seeds of the farmers’ superior maize, for it was sold at only IDR 4,000 to 6,000 per kilogram while BISI’s seeds cost IDR 17,000 per kilogram.\footnote{Referring to Law No. 12/1992, the company argued that the ten Sumber Agung farmers had committed industrial piracy,\cite{sardiyoko2006} by plagiarizing its patented technology. BISI won the legal battle. Six of the ten farmers ended up in jail.}

3. Pranggang: The Village and Its People

The village of Pranggang, my research field, is in the sub-district of Plosoklaten, which belongs to the district of Kediri, East Java (figure 3). It is a twenty-minute drive to the south of the town of Pare, the district of Kediri’s capital, and twelve and a half miles to the east of the city of Kediri, the capital of Kediri municipality. A web of roads, small and large, links Pranggang to major towns and cities in East Java. Plying the new

Figure 3. Greater Kediri
Source: http://www.kediri.kab.go.id/sites/default/files/images/petaKEDIRI.jpg
route between Surabaya to the northeast (the province’s capital) and Blitar to the south (the home town of Indonesia’s first president Soekarno), air-conditioned minibuses pass through the village every day, from five in the morning to ten at night. To get to Pranggang from Malang, a city to the east, the second largest in the province, you should take a bus that will carry you to Pare, where you can then ride a microbus and get off in front of Pranggang village hall. To the east of Pranggang stands the active volcano Mount Kelud (5,679 feet), to whose eruptions the plains surrounding it owe their fertility. As is common among the locals, for transportation in and around Pranggang, I relied mostly on my motorcycle. Over the years, more and more people possess motorcycles. In 1984, there were 60 of them. In 1991, there were 88. Even today only a few people own cars. In 1984, there were only four cars (excluding trucks). In 1991, the number increased to nine.\(^{126}\)

Two-lane and paved with asphalt, a main road cuts across the village from north to south, busy from dawn to dusk, with bikes, motorcycles, cars, and trucks passing and re-passing every few minutes. From the main road, a number of side roads branch out to the east and west. Some are paved; some are of tamped-down, sandy dirt; but due to good drainage, all are accessible by four-wheeled vehicles, not only in dry season, which lasts from April to October, but also during the rainy season, which begins in October and ends in April (see figure 4). Here and there on the side roads people have installed

Figure 4. A village road in Pranggang.
speed bumps to prevent speeding. Along the main road and the side roads, on your left and right, you can see a series of one-storied houses, large and small, with steep tiled-roofs and whitewashed, cement-plastered brick walls. A few are protected with fences or adorned with hedges. Some have a mango or a rambutan tree in the front yard. Chickens used to be let loose to scavenge for food in the house yards but people abandoned this practice when the avian influenza broke out in 2003. The floors in some of the houses are made of polished concrete. The wealthier among the locals have their floors paved with glazed ceramic tiles. Some of those living along the main road become small entrepreneurs running a roadside gas kiosk, a grocery store, a telecommunication kiosk, a food stall, or a cell phone shop.

According to the Population Census in 2009, of all villages in Plosoklaten, Pranggang had the largest population (9,084 people). Pranggang consists of six hamlets: Bangunrejo, Dermo Banjarjo, Mangunrejo, East Pranggang, West Pranggang, and Sumberjo. I focused my fieldwork on West Pranggang, which consists of five neighborhood associations (Rukun Tetangga) and has a population of 878 people. Most people in Pranggang are Muslims by religion, Javanese by ethnicity, farmers by occupation, and junior high school graduates by education.

Pranggang has five ground springs (see figure 5) that provide people with water to irrigate their fields, take a bath, and do their laundry. The water is of such a good quality that the town of Kediri depends on Pranggang for its supply of drinking water. At first, the state-owned water supply company (PDAM) exploited Pranggang’s water without the permission of the Pranggang community. Unhappy with this, in return for the water
Figure 5. A fishpond, which also serves as a water reservoir.
supply, they demanded that the PDAM pave the village roads. The PDAM rejected the demand but agreed to pay the village a monthly compensation of IDR 600,000 (roughly USD 60). The new head of the PDAM, however, discontinued the payment.

The people of Pranggang cultivate their lands by growing rice (see figure 6), chili pepper, maize, soybean, eggplant, tomato, ground nut, sugarcane, cassava, and vegetables. Of all these commodities, rice and sugarcane remain the most important. Plosoklaten is the fourth largest food-producing sub-district in Kediri. Since rice production suffered a lot from the recent outbreak of the rat plague, many farmers have turned their rice fields into fishponds.

![Figure 6. One morning in a rice field in Pranggang](image)

People in Pranggang responded positively to GOI’s the policy of sending women migrant workers to Saudi Arabia. It implemented the policy in the early 1980s. It is easy to find women who were former migrant workers in the village. According to the village
head, only 10 percent of these workers followed the legal procedure when they went for work to Saudi Arabia.\footnote{127} The village records show that in 2006, 30 of the 33 migrant workers from this village were women. In 2007, 16 people went to work overseas and 13 of them were women. In 2008, 13 people became migrant workers; 9 of them were women. In 2009, 12 out of 13 people who became overseas workers were women.

This chapter has described the changing social worlds where my informants—Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih—have lived and worked in the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. This background information helps us understand the subject of the next three chapters: the stories of what it meant to be a Javanese woman who—in search of a better life—went to work as a housemaid in the Middle East.

\footnote{127} To work overseas, people need the proper documents. To get these, they must go through a process beginning at the village office and ending at the sub-district office. Some people choose to take the shortcut, asking a recruiting agency to procure the documents on their behalf. Typically, to quicken the process, the agency does not go to the village from which the villagers actually come. It goes instead to the office of the village where it is based and asks for fake documents, which state that the applicants come from this village. In the future, this forgery may lead to complications, for example, when the workers die, it is hard to send the mortal remains to the right address.
CHAPTER 3: BECOMING WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS

REASONS AND PROCESSES

Some people were rich; others were poor. People were judged by what they have. I examined myself and my parents. […] My parents were poor. […] Would I wind up in poverty too? I wanted to have my own property, no matter how small. […] I always wanted to work overseas….
— Lestari, 2009

My house was ugly back then. It was a house with plaited bamboo walls. By working overseas I could earn enough cash to build a house with dignity, a decent house that shows me as one of the haves.
— Sarinah, 2009

Women balanced realistic assessments of their vulnerability abroad against their knowledge, skills, resources, and needs.
— Michele Ruth Gamburd, The Kitchen Spoon’s Handle, 2000128

For Indonesian women such as Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratti— and indeed for many of their counterparts in other developing countries—to become migrant workers was a momentous decision to make. It had the potential of creating major changes in their lives. At least, it meant a long-term separation from their husbands and children, or parents and siblings. At worst, it might cause them to experience maltreatment, exploitation, and sexual harassment. The risks involved and the initial objection of their husbands or parents did not stop them from going to work in Saudi Arabia. The determination with which they decided to undertake the migration cannot be adequately explained by referring only to the macroeconomic forces that shaped Indonesia, the oil-rich Gulf

States, and the global labor market. We must also pay attention to the key role the women themselves played in their migration; we must examine their agency.

With the anthropologist Laura M. Ahearn, I understand *agency* as “the socio-culturally mediated” power that an individual has to act in her interaction with other individuals, who in turn have agencies of their own.\(^{129}\) This interaction, which can take the form of transaction, negotiation, and conflict, may reproduce and modify the pre-existing social system, which empowers and disempowers the individuals who interact in it. Agency is socio-culturally mediated in the sense that in exercising it, individuals draw upon the rules and resources in their society.\(^{130}\)

This chapter considers the reasons why Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih decided to become migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, leaving their families behind in Kediri, East Java for a few years. First, it starts by offering their brief profiles. Second, it points out that they hoped to achieve “a better life,” which they defined as one in which they and their families could enjoy more wealth and more respect. Third, it shows the web of social contacts they relied on to find information about job opportunities overseas. Fourth, it looks at how they made and justified their decision to carry out transnational labor migration. Finally, it describes the kind of preparation they had to go through prior to their departure.

At a deeper level, the chapter aims to demonstrate how these women enacted their agency in response to the society that both hurt and helped them. Their stories highlight

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the central theme that they were dynamic social actors capable of long-term planning and strategic thinking. They made calculated efforts to attain what they saw as a better life, by using, modifying, and reproducing the rules and resources available in society. They both benefitted and suffered from the consequences of their actions.

**Introducing Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih**

Sarinah’s, Lestari’s, and Ratih’s migrations occurred in different eras. Both Sarinah’s and Lestari’s journeys to Saudi Arabia occurred when the New Order (1966-1998) still ruled Indonesia, while Ratih departed when Indonesia had experienced a regime change. She left in 2005, about seven years after the East Asian economic crisis struck Indonesia and triggered the fall of the New Order.

**1. Sarinah**

Sarinah struck me as an assertive woman; for unlike many of the Javanese women I had known before, she spoke her mind. One day in December 2009, accompanied by Pandu, my research assistant, I visited her at her house at four o’clock in the afternoon, the time when people in the village usually received guests. When she opened the door, Pandu asked her if she had time for a short talk with us. Unlike the average Javanese, who in a similar situation would pretend to be glad to have guests, she said in a no-nonsense way that she would rather we meet her later at a more convenient time. She offered me two options: either the evening of the same day or at ten o’clock in the morning of the following day.
A forty-eight-year-old mother of a twenty-three-year-old son and a thirteen-year-old daughter, Sarinah has been in Saudi Arabia twice. During her first stint from 1990 to 1993, she served as a maid in the household of a retired officer in Riyadh; who had a wife and eight children. During her second sojourn, Sarinah worked in a village called Taif from 1997 to 1999. This time she was a housemaid for a young couple with three children. He was a soldier and his wife was a teacher. The latter delivered her baby three days before she arrived. Her first contract required her to serve for two years, but her employers extended it for another year. When her second employers offered to do the same to their contract, Sarinah rejected the idea because she thought the couple was rather tight-fisted and that the lady was jealous of her. In 2001 she planned to go to Saudi Arabia for the third time but failed to do so. Her husband objected to her plan, pointing out that she should stay to look after her aging, diabetic mother. Despite her husband’s objection, Sarinah insisted on going anyway.

Throughout her pre-departure orientation days in Jakarta, however, her mind was in disarray. The thought of those she left behind—her teenage son, her five-year-old daughter, her ailing mother, and her disapproving husband—caused her disquieting qualms. To make matters worse, the lack of water supply at the recruitment center where the training was held made her unable to pray five times a day, as a pious Muslim should. Last but not least, as a Javanese she could not dismiss the fact that her departure for the job training took place on an inauspicious day.\footnote{Some Javanese believe that certain days in their ethnic calendar are ominous for starting business, building a house, or holding important events. In Sarinah’s case, it so happened that the day she departed for the recruitment agency was the same as that on} Finally, on the tenth day of her training
program, her misgivings had become so severe she decided to abort her whole plan. She snuck out of the recruitment center and ran home. By so doing, she forfeited her training fee of IDR 600,000 (USD 60).

2. Lestari

Lestari was a shy, polite, and low-profile Javanese woman who did not like to show off her belongings. The living room of a successful migrant worker would normally display a modern-looking set of sofas and a teakwood entertainment center boasting a powerful stereo system. When I first visited Lestari’s house, however, I was surprised to find nothing in the living room\(^\text{132}\) but empty white walls, a modest coffee-table with three chairs, and an unused dining-table. Despite being the reserved and taciturn one among her siblings, she had the courage to change her life by working overseas. She set an example that her older sister then followed. Willing though she was to be my informant, she was quite apprehensive about the questions I would be asking her. When Pandu let her know of my arrival in Pranggang, she panicked and said, “Oh, my Lord! What questions is she going to ask me? I have forgotten my Arabic. Could you please tell me the questions in advance?”

Lestari worked twice in Saudi Arabia. Her first employment, from 1993 to 1996, was as a servant for a bookseller’s family in Dhahran. Living in a large house, the boss

\(^{132}\) In East Java, the middle-class house usually has a terrace, a living room, a dining room, two or three bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and—if the owner has a car—a garage. The degree of intimacy between the guest and the host determines to which of these spots in the house the former has access.
and madam had a total of eight children and Lestari was the only housemaid they hired. They extended her contract from two to three years. She returned home for a year and then went back to work in Saudi Arabia for the second time. In her second stint, Lestari served as a domestic worker in Riyadh for a retired gardener and his wife. The aged couple had only one son, a married man who now lived in his own house with his family. Lestari’s second job was much lighter than her first one. In December 2009, she desired to work in Saudi Arabia again, but her six-year-old only daughter did not like the idea and always started to cry every time she heard her mother talk of working overseas.

3. Ratih

Born in 1977, Ratih was the youngest of my three informants. Unlike Sarinah and Lestari, whose employers were native Saudi citizens, Ratih served from 2005 to 2008 as a housemaid for an expatriate Syrian couple who worked as physicians in Abha. Ratih babysat their children and took care of the house but was not required to cook. At the time I spoke with her, she had been to Saudi Arabia once.

The way she first introduced herself to me implied her subscription to a social hierarchy of domestic jobs, whereby the position of babysitters carried higher prestige than that of housekeepers. “I was not a housemaid, you know,” she averred. “I was a babysitter and worked at the hospital.” Our next talks revealed, however, that she babysat at her employers’ home rather than at their hospital.

Wishing to return to Saudi Arabia for work, Ratih was waiting for an invitation from her sister, who worked in Riyadh. Although there were many job opportunities in Saudi cities, Ratih would prefer to work in towns for three reasons. First, the workload in
towns was lighter than that in cities because houses tended to be smaller in the former than in the latter; urban Arab households frequently held family gatherings that lasted until 2 A.M. and were attended by many relatives. Their housemaids had to prepare the food and beverages. Second, undocumented Indonesian migrants tended to concentrate in cities. Ratih claimed that many of them worked illegally in Riyadh, and she feared being suspected of association with them. Third and finally, towns tended to be cooler than cities.

If she had no choice but to work in Saudi cities, Ratih would prefer the cosmopolitan ones such as Jeddah, to the more homogenous ones like Riyadh. Many expats live in Jeddah; in fact, they constitute one third of its total population, making it the most culturally diverse of all Saudi cities. In contrast, the majority of Riyadh’s population is Saudi Arabs who embrace the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, which includes dress codes that Ratih considered too strict. Applying for a job in Jeddah would increase her chance of being hired by an expat. As she observed, “While native Saudi women wear the burqa, the [female Arab] expats [in Jeddah] observe Islamic dress codes in ways that are more flexible. They are more like us [non-puritan Muslim women] in Indonesia.”

Although she herself was born into, and grew up in, the agrarian world of East Java, Ratih abhorred the idea of working as a farmhand in rural Saudi Arabia. A job in such a setting, she explained, was likely to involve herding goats in the dry lands under

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the burning sun or running a stall in the open-air local market buying and selling vegetables. Prolonged exposure to excessive heat and light from the sun, which such activities entail, would irreparably tan her skin. She wanted to keep her fair complexion, which among the Javanese remained one of the major elements that define female beauty.

**Why They Chose to Become Migrant Workers**

The overarching reason why Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih decided to become migrant workers was that they desired a better life, which they defined as one in which they could enjoy more comfort, greater wealth, and more respect. They contended that they deserved such a life, but they lacked the right skills and the right level of education that could have enabled them to acquire well-paid jobs in the national labor market. With the qualifications they possessed, had they stayed in Indonesia, they would have ended up toiling as poorly-paid and frequently maltreated factory workers or house servants. Even these jobs were hard to find, for the country possessed a fast-growing workforce but was unable to provide enough opportunity (see figure 7). As a result, the job market was smaller than job seekers wanted and the competition for jobs grew tighter.

Being a housemaid *within* Indonesia was even less attractive than being an industrial worker because of the low status many Javanese still associate with the former. This was the point that Ratih, especially, often emphasized in our conversations. Sarinah and Lestari, too, saw this job as a sign of poverty on the part of the

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135 See, for example, “Interview Yuli Maiheni” in Sarah Eunkyung Chee, Deepa Bharathi, and Lee Siew Hwa (eds.), *Reclaiming Dignity: Struggles of Local Domestic Workers in Asia* (Bangkok: Committee for Asian Women, 2004), 105.
worker herself and her family of origin. There still exists a practice called *ngèngèr* among the Javanese whereby the poor send their children to stay in the home of older and better-off relatives who provides food, clothes, and shelter as well as proper education. In exchange for this help and as an expression of gratitude, the children do many kinds of domestic work. For a married couple to resort to *ngèngèr* is thus tantamount to

Figure 7. A cartoon on why fresh graduates of secondary schools become migrant workers. Since there are too many graduates for too few job opportunities in the country, international labor migration (i.e. to Malaysia and Singapore) becomes the solution. The cartoon says, “This country [Indonesia] promises nothing to those whose study stops at junior/senior high school.”

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acknowledging their poverty and lower status in the eyes of their extended family and
neighbors. The association of domestic work with ngèngèr explains, at least to some
degree, why domestic work involves neither prestige nor the recognition that it is real labor, and not just favor. That unfortunate association also helps explain why Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih regarded housemaids as helpers rather than workers. Their view was shared by Dwi Untoro, a senior official of the Jakarta Manpower Agency:

We never [consider] these domestic workers as real workers, [nor] as real laborers. […] They stay in their [master’s] houses. They eat what their master eats. And they go where their master goes. […] Historically, this kind of worker is not paid at all.\textsuperscript{139}

It is thus a small wonder that many lower-class Javanese still think it more prestigious for them to work as industrial workers than to toil as local domestic workers.\textsuperscript{140}

To be a transnational domestic worker, however, is an entirely different matter. Since transnational housemaids work abroad, the chances are small that their neighbors would see them perform non-prestigious daily domestic tasks for their masters. From Indonesian domestic workers’ point of view, this attitude is understandable; as social beings, they also desire respect and prestige. In this regard, they are not unique. Some Filipina housemaids in Singapore, for example, refused to be called “maids” or “domestic helpers”; they prefer to be called “DHs,” which stands actually, for “domestic helper.”\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{139} Sheppard, \textit{Workers in the Shadows}, 21.
\textsuperscript{140} Jaleswari Pramodhawardani, and others, \textit{Kesetaraan dan Keadilan Gender dalam Budaya Patriarkhi} [Gender equality and justice in patriarchic culture] (Jakarta: LIPI Press, 2006), 115.
In the Hollywood motion picture *Jerry Maguire* (1996), a male babysitter passes himself off as a “child technician.”

Terrible stories of Indonesian migrants suffering maltreatment in Malaysia, Singapore, and Saudi Arabia do not weaken many women’s determination to work overseas as housemaids. It is not only migrant housemaids who face such problems; their counterparts who work within Indonesia are also exposed to the similar danger because of the lack of protection from the authorities. It is true that to be a housemaid abroad and to be a housemaid in Indonesia is similar in terms of workload and risks. For example, housemaids in Indonesia work long hours, from fourteen to eighteen hours a day; they do not receive a weekly day off; they also suffer from other forms of exploitation and abuse. Their wages are meager; they often earn IDR 300,000 per month. In contrast, Indonesian migrant housemaids receive much higher wages; for example, they could earn about IDR 720,000 in Malaysia and IDR 1,400,000 in Saudi Arabia. Greater incomes coupled with a similar workload and risks explain why many

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143 Sheppard, *Workers in the Shadows*.

144 Ibid., 1, 14, 32; Rumpun Tjoet Njak Dien, “Domestic Workers in Indonesia: Problems and the Need for Protection,” in *Reclaiming Dignity: Struggles of Local Domestic Workers in Asia*, ed. Sarah Eunkyung Chee, Deepa Bharathi, and Lee Siew Hwa (Bangkok: Committee for Asian Women, 2004), 92-96.


uneducated rural women in Indonesia have been attracted to the opportunity of working as housemaids abroad. The same finding has also been reported for Sri Lanka.  

1. Sarinah

Sarinah was born in 1962 into a large family in the village of Jarak, about five kilometers away from Pranggang. She is the third-born of a total of nine altogether, but two of her siblings died young. Her parents were greengrocers at the local market. Sarinah’s education went no further than elementary school.

In 1985, Sarinah married a trader from Pranggang; his income was enough to support the new family. Living in a house with plaited bamboo walls, she delivered her first baby boy. After some years, life became hard for the family, which relied exclusively on the husband’s earnings. Since their son was soon to enter school, they were going to spend more money. Concerned about her family’s standards of living, Sarinah decided to do something. “My kids,” she said, “should have a bright future. I thought I should work overseas to pay for my children’s education.” A bright future was not the only thing she wanted. She also desired wealth and respect, which in her village community one could display by having a nice house. “My house was ugly back then,” she told me. “It was a house with plaited bamboo walls. By working overseas I could earn enough cash to build a house with dignity, a decent house that shows me as one of the haves.”

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When a neighbor, whose wife had worked in Saudi Arabia as a housemaid, told Sarinah of a job opening there; she decided to take the chance. Although she had heard horrible stories of Indonesian migrant workers on television, such accounts did not undermine her resolve to work overseas. In 1990, in the sixth year of her marriage, Sarinah asked her husband to let her work as a migrant. In the beginning, he did not permit her to go but she pleaded with him over and over again until he gave in. He wondered if she would be responsible and willing to face all the consequences.

It was I who decided to work overseas. I thought it would benefit my husband, my son, myself, and the whole family. Had it been my husband who worked overseas, I would have been in greater trouble. I would have had to handle everything: getting my son to school, putting food on the table, and doing other necessary things.

From the start, working abroad turned out to be a challenging endeavor for Sarinah. She must provide a large sum of cash, at least IDR 400,000 (USD 182) 148 to cover the registration fees and the job training program. Unfortunately, she did not have the IDR 400,000 for the recruitment fee, but her desire to work overseas was so strong she turned to one of her neighbors, a moneylender, for help. She took out a IDR 400,000 loan from her, to be paid back in six months with an interest of IDR 200,000.

With the help of her neighbor, who worked as a *calo*\textsuperscript{149} or job agent, Sarinah visited a local recruiting agency. Choosing not to follow the standard procedure, which she deemed labyrinthine, she cut corners by letting the agency arrange her documents.

I did not go to the village office. I only had a letter of permission from my husband. Had I gone strictly by the book, it would have taken me forever. So I simply went to the local recruitment agency [and asked the agents to get me my documents]. Bypassing the standard procedure like that, I needed just one day to get all the paperwork done and I was then all set to go. The only trouble was that my documents used a fake address.

In 1997, after the birth of her second child and after renovating her house with the money she earned in Saudi Arabia between 1990 and 1993, Sarinah ran out of money and therefore wanted to return to Saudi Arabia for work. Unfortunately, the local job agency that organized her first departure had gone out of business. One day, a radio advertisement informed her of an agency in Tulungagung, about half an hour’s drive south of Kediri. She went there and inquired about the registration requirements. No sooner had the agents provided her with the standard information than they suggested that, to save time and money, she let them do the paperwork for her. Sarinah complied with their suggestion and the agents got their contacts at the village office nearby to furnish her with a fake identity card and a letter of reference. All that the agents asked of her to get her the documents were her photographs and a registration fee of IDR 300,000.

\textsuperscript{149} *Calos* were go-betweens who connected local recruiting agencies with people who wanted to work overseas. For every individual he or she recruited, the *calo* received a commission. In the early 1990s, one recruit was worth IDR 100,000 in commission, a large sum of money, about half the starting salary of a university instructor. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a *calo* earned between IDR 1,000,000 and 3,000,000 per every individual he or she managed to recruit. My three informants used the words *calo* and *sponsor* interchangeably to refer to these go-betweens.
This was IDR 100,000 cheaper than the recruitment fee for her calo-mediated first departure.

2. Lestari

Coming from a relatively well-to-do family, she decided to work overseas despite her parents’ disapproval. Her grandfather was one of the wealthy men in the village. He was the only man in his community who could afford to have a wooden-wheeled ox-cart. For many years, his descendants kept the ox-cart’s wheels as a memento of their family’s former glory. Her family was also one of the very few in the village that owned a black-and-white television set in the early 1980s, a time when electricity lines had not even reached the village. The wealth of the family had declined over the years because after the old man died his lands were divided up among his many children into a number of much smaller plots. This parceling out of the lands condemned Lestari’s parents, uncles, and aunts to inefficient, small-scale subsistence farming.

Born in Kediri in 1967, Lestari was the fourth-born of eight children, two of whom died young. Her parents were farmers who lived off a small plot of land. Her only older sister married a small-time cattle breeder from another sub-district in Kediri who later turned into a farmer and ran a small business dealing in mlinjo crackers. After the wedding day, Lestari’s sister and her husband moved in with his parents. At some point in her adolescence, Lestari suffered from a severe typhoid fever that kept her out school for about three months and prevented her from taking the final examination. Due to this unfortunate event, she did not even finish junior high school. To resume her education, she attended an Islamic boarding school for awhile before she finally dropped out.
In her early twenties, Lestari often examined her life and compared it with those of her neighbors. She once told me of one of the reasons why she decided to work overseas:

Some people were rich while others were poor. People were judged by what they have. I examined myself and my parents. My life had only just begun. My parents were poor. What would become of me? Would I wind up in poverty too? I wanted to have my own property, no matter how small. I did possess some things but I did not earn them. They are all gifts from my parents. I lived with them but I did not want to remain their dependent forever. I always wanted to work overseas, you know, like some women in the village. The problem was, I did not have the IDR 450,000 for the registration fee. I had tried and sent some money to Uncle Is [a calo] but he said it was not enough. So I could not go. It was a few months before I managed to get the money I needed. It was harvest time and my parents received some cash from the sale of their sugarcane. I took away some of it and used it to register as a migrant worker.

In the meantime, local calos spread the news of job opportunities in Saudi Arabia, making the idea of transnational labor sound all the more interesting to Lestari. One such calo was a neighbor who had sent his wife to work overseas. After hearing of this news, Lestari discovered that a few other women in her village had been to Saudi Arabia working as house servants and none of them had encountered serious problems abroad.

3. Ratih

Ratih is the firstborn of two children in her own biological family. She later had another six stepsiblings after her parents divorced and her mother remarried. Her biological father remarried and had two more children. Ratih grew up in her mother’s new family. Owing to the family’s poverty, her formal, secular education did not go beyond primary school. Her parents then sent her to an Islamic boarding school in Ringin
Anom, Pare. At seventeen, she married a bricklayer and they lived in the house of her parents until she gave birth to a baby girl.

Unwilling to put up with living with what she believed to be mischievous ghosts in her parents’ house, Ratih asked her husband to build a house of their own on a piece of land across from the former. Day after day, they lived together in their little bamboo-walled house and their living standards remained low. She wanted her family to enjoy a better life. The experiences of her younger stepsister and the other women in the village had proven to her that working overseas could bring about upward social mobility. She told her husband of her intention to work in Saudi Arabia: “Honey, look at our miserable house. What if I went [to work overseas] so we could settle our debts and renovate the house? Would you let me go?” Her husband replied, “If that is what you desire, I will let you go. But the thing is, I do not have the wherewithal.”

Having secured her husband’s permission, Ratih began passionately looking for information about the documents required and the amount of money needed for working in Saudi Arabia. Once she got what she needed, she informed her mother about her plan and asked a favor. “Mom, I intend to work in Saudi Arabia but I do not have enough money. Could you please find me some cash for my job training?” Her mother tried to find a loan and got IDR 500,000, which was not enough as the fee was IDR 600,000. Ratih took the money she had to a local recruiter, Pak Lazim, who told her that she could pay half the fee now and pay the rest after she settled in Saudi Arabia. She gladly accepted his offer and started arranging for the required documents. In contrast to Sarinah

\[150\] In Java, married men are addressed by the term Pak, short for Bapak (Father).
and Lestari, she chose to go through the standard procedure of processing her travel documents starting from her village office all the way up to the district level.

In sum, the stories of Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih show they were driven by the desire to have a better life for their families. One major theme in their narratives was that wealth and respect were the core elements of what they considered as a better life. They would not feel they had achieved these elements until they acquired such “indicators” as a better house, better education for their children, and stronger factors of production in the form of land and small-business firms. Examining their own qualifications as well as the national and international labor markets, they concluded that to become migrant workers was the best chance they had of realizing their dream of a better life. This “dream” was so strong they were willing to enter the grey area, taking both “legal” and “illegal” steps necessary to become migrant workers.

Why They Chose to Work in Saudi Arabia

A cluster of pull factors made Saudi Arabia an attractive destination for Indonesian women migrant domestic workers, including Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih. First, it offered the highest net wages for the same job that the women could do in Indonesia and other destination countries. This is the case because unlike their counterparts in Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong for example, who had their monthly wages deducted for their pre-departure training (ranging from two to fifteen months),151 Indonesian migrants in Saudi Arabia were free from such deduction.152

151 Nisha Varia, *Slow Reform Protection of Migrant Domestic Workers in Asia and the Middle East* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2010), 19; Indonesia Research Team and
Second, Saudi Arabia was especially attractive for Indonesian Muslim migrants because they would have the chance to perform the hajj in Mecca and Medina during their stint in the country. In a developing country like Indonesia, to perform the hajj remains the privilege of people in the upper-middle and upper classes. Working in Saudi Arabia provided women like Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih with the opportunity to make the pilgrimage, which would raise their status and prestige among their neighbors. In their recruitment campaigns, agents often talked about the opportunity to perform the hajj in order to entice lower-class women to become migrant workers to the Middle East in general and to Saudi Arabia in particular.

Third, religious affinity between employer and worker also played a role. Being Muslims, Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih preferred Muslim to non-Muslim employers. Muslim bosses allowed them to say prayer five times a day and fast in the month of others, Underpayment: Systematic Extortion of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong: An In-Depth Study of Indonesian labor Migration in Hong Kong – August 2005 (Hong Kong: Asian Migrant Care, 2005), 37-39; Ueno, “Strategies of Resistance,” 508; Noorashikin Abdul Rahman, “Negotiating Power: A Case Study of Indonesian Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore,” (PhD diss., Curtin University of Technology, 2003), 108; Sri Suari Wahyudi, “Kejahatan Terorganisasi Terhadap TKI pada Tahap Pemulangan dari Luar Negeri dan Penanganannya oleh Polri” [Organized crime against Indonesian migrant workers from their return home to the investigation of the crime by the police] (MA thesis, Universitas Indonesia, 2002), 62.


Ramadan. Saudi Arabia with its holy city of Mecca was known as the center of Islam. A study by Rachel Silvey, for example, has found that recruiting agents in Indonesia told prospective migrants over and over again that working in Saudi Arabia “could win favor with God (Allah) through the intensified practice of religious duties that would be supported there.”  

Fourth, in comparison to other destination countries, the employment requirements for overseas domestic workers in Saudi Arabia were more flexible than those in other destination countries. Unlike their counterparts in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other Arab countries, Saudi employers did not include age limit in their selection criteria. Sarinah, for example, worked for her Saudi Arab employer at twenty-nine and thirty-five, while Ratih at twenty-eight. Lestari departed to work in Saudi for the first time at twenty-two and returned back for the second time at twenty-six.

In one of our conversations, Ratih explained the advantage of working in Saudi Arabia:

Compared to their Kuwaiti and Abu Dhabian counterparts, Saudi employers were more accommodating. They had no preference for younger housemaids. Young and old, all candidates had equal opportunity to be hired. You might be over twenty-five, but if you’re in good health, you could still apply for a job in Saudi Arabia. Unlike the Saudis, the Kuwaitis and Abu Dhabians preferred to employ the young ones. So did Taiwanese and Hongkongese employers, who set the age limit at twenty.

Another factor that attracted Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih to work in Saudi Arabia was that the education requirements for housemaids there were lower than in other countries. Employers in Taiwan and Hong Kong, for example, refused to hire anyone

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155 Ibid., 135.
who did not complete high school. In Saudi Arabia, people with a primary school diploma could still find employment as domestic servants. Even if they did not finish primary school, they could buy fake diplomas from some middlemen.

Living and working overseas entailed encounters with alien cultures. To survive the encounters, to maximize their benefits while minimizing their costs, it was not adequate for migrant domestic workers to master practical skills alone such as operating a washing machine, a dishwasher, a vacuum cleaner, a gas stove, or a coffeemaker. They also needed effective language skills. From a linguistic viewpoint, Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih considered working in Saudi Arabia less challenging than in Hong Kong and Taiwan, for despite the very short Arabic class they took at the central recruiting agency, the classical Arabic they learned in the Islamic boarding schools proved useful in helping them adjust to the Saudi culture. In contrast, since the linguistic gap—for Javanese Muslims—between Indonesians and the Chinese-speaking employers was wider than that between Indonesians and the Middle Eastern employers, Javanese housemaids destined for employment in Taiwan and Hong Kong must spend months learning elementary Chinese prior to their departure. As Ratih once put it:

Taiwan and Hong Kong, I knew, offered better wages, but I needed to start working as soon as possible. It did not take me long to complete the language training required for working in Saudi Arabia. In two weeks, I

158 Wahyudi, “Kejahatan Terorganisasi,” 58.
was ready to go. Taiwan and Hong Kong, however, was an entirely different matter.

In brief, a number of factors explain why Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih chose to work in Saudi Arabia. These factors included higher net wages, the opportunity to go on hajj, lower job requirements, and the narrower religious and linguistic gaps between them and their employers.

Training and Preparation

After the local recruiting agency deemed their documents in order, it notified the recruits of the day they should depart for the central recruiting agency in Jakarta to receive their pre-departure training. While some recruits headed directly to Jakarta, others had to spend a night at the local recruiting agency before they left. These different treatments depended on the local agency’s policy and on the completeness of the recruits’ papers. Some recruits were to take a medical checkup at the local agency, while others were to do so at the central agency in Jakarta. For instance, as Sarinah used different agencies for her two departures for Saudi Arabia, she had undergone the two different procedures:

I went twice to Saudi Arabia. The local agency that recruited me the first time did not tell me to take a medical exam at the local level. The second time around, however, I worked with a different agency that required me to do so. Recruits diagnosed with a mild disease like hypertension were allowed to join the pre-departure training at the central agency in Jakarta, provided that they agreed to undergo outpatient treatment till they were cured. Those diagnosed with major health problems, though—such as heart or lung disease, hepatitis, or skin fungus—were sent home immediately. The medical checkup was the same at the local and central recruiting agency. The recruits who flunked the medical exam received a partial refund of their recruitment fee.
The completeness of their documents also determined whether the applicants could go directly to Jakarta, or whether they should spend a night first at the local recruitment agency. One day a calo picked Ratih up at her house early in the morning to go straight to Jakarta as she had all the documents ready, which she had obtained by going through the standard procedure. In contrast, Sarinah and Lestari, who had chosen not to go by the book, had to spend a night at the local agency, waiting for it to help them put their documents in order.

Accompanied by their calos, the recruits went to the central recruitment agency, where they received, for about a month, the pre-departure training in which they learned various job-related skills. They did this while waiting for their passports, visas, and contracts to be processed. The trainees learned many skills ranging from cooking, housekeeping, and sewing to babysitting, elderly care, and foreign languages. After the completion of her training, Sarinah had to spend another month at the recruiting center waiting for the issuance of her visa. The crash job-training program did not work evenly for her. Despite the sewing class she took, she still could not sew. The English and Arabic classes she took were only two weeks long. She did poorly in the former but rather well in the latter. Ratih’s and Lestari’s language trainings were even shorter. Ratih told me that her Arabic class, for example, lasted only one week. Other prospective migrant workers (PMWs) receive no language preparation at all.\(^{159}\)

\(^{159}\) Wahyudi, “Kejahatan Terorganisasi,” 61.
The time it took to get them ready varied from one to two months. Some trainees were so lucky it took them only twenty-five days to complete the training and receive their papers. A few, however, had to wait from three to seven months at the agency until they received their placement. Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih stayed at the central recruiting agency for two months, twenty-five days, and a month respectively.

Upon completion of their job training, Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih stayed idle at their training center while waiting for their job placement. Yet other PMWs had different experiences. Some were sent by their recruitment agencies to do unpaid internship (magang) in catering companies or in nearby households. However, these companies and families paid the agencies some money as the fees for using the services of the PMWs. Some PMWs did not see this as a form of exploitation; they felt it was better for them to do the internship and interact with the outside world than to stay idle at the training center.

The central recruiting agency also provided the job trainees with a checklist of the dos and don’ts of the Saudi culture. To keep out of trouble, they were to avoid doing things their Saudi employers would consider unseemly, such as putting on any kinds of perfume and cosmetics. They were to comply with the Saudi dress code, like wearing the headscarf at home and the burqa in public.

During the pre-departure training, life was not easy for the recruits. The Jakarta-based recruitment agencies did not provide them with decent housing at the training

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160 Ibid.
161 Ibid.
centers. It was as if they had stayed in barracks.\textsuperscript{162} Some had to sleep on the mat-covered floor because the sleeping halls did not have enough bunk beds. The agencies did not employ a single housekeeper at their training centers. As a result, under the supervision of the training site managers, the recruits had to do the day-to-day house chores for the agencies: they worked in small teams, taking turns to clean up the offices and cook three meals for themselves and all their colleagues.

In some cases, pre-departure training centers did not provide sufficient water supply for the trainees.\textsuperscript{163} Recruits had to get by with what little water they could get for taking a bath, doing their laundry, and performing the ritual ablutions for the five daily prayers. Due to the miserable conditions at her training center, Sarinah decided to return home:

> Since the agency did not provide me with enough water to do the ritual ablutions, I skipped some of my daily prayers over and over again. This was terrible. Besides, I could neither take a bath nor wash my dirty clothes. I just could not go on that way, you know. So I took off and went home, thereby forfeiting my IDR 600,000 registration fee.

Recruits had to survive on a meager diet during their pre-departure training.\textsuperscript{164} The daily ration per meal consisted of one or two cups of steamed rice with a stingy helping of stir-fried Chinese watercress. “I ate like a cat,” Ratih said. If a trainee could


\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 177.

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
not stand the ration of the day, she could eat out at the agency’s in-house cafeteria.

However, every time journalists visited the training center, the menu of the day was made
to look decent. As Ratih revealed in one of our interviews, the recruits were to tell lies to the visiting journalists:

The director of the recruiting agency realized how awful our usual meals would look to the journalists. Therefore, on the day they visited the center, he saw to it that nice and nutritious dishes were served on our dining table. Prior to the visit, he also briefed us on the “right” answers we should give to the journalists if they asked us of our experiences so far at the training center. He warned us not tell them the truth. So we told them lies. To do otherwise was to jeopardize our own plans. We were just recruits. Had we spilt the beans to the media, the government would have shut down the agency and our departures would have been cancelled.

As soon as the journalists left, things went back to “normal” at the training center.

When the recruits had completed their training, they were ready—at least in theory—to depart for Saudi Arabia. Many became excited about the prospect of leaving soon. About three in the morning, an official at the agency used a loud speaker to call out the names of those recruits who should get ready to apply for their passports. The agency provided a bus to send them to the immigration office. Since there were more passengers than the vehicle could accommodate, they scrambled for the seats on the bus. “We were like children,” Sarinah recalled, “competing against one another. I had to do that. Otherwise, I would have gotten no seat and had to stand up during the journey to the immigration office.”

The PMWs could not depart for Saudi Arabia until they received visa approval, which would not be issued until there was an employer who decided to hire them.\(^{165}\) This

\(^{165}\) Varia, *Slow Reform*, 4.
system created unequal labor relations between workers and employers, with the employers having more power and control over migrant workers. In Indonesia, the system has made some recruits leave earlier than others, leading late departees to envy the early ones and allege that the agency was playing favorites. The allegation, however, is unfounded, for the agency does not decide which person should go when. It is the Saudi employers who choose which candidates they want to hire on the basis of the database provided by the agency. As Sarinah and Ratih explained, these employers had their own preferences. For example, some would rather hire women from East Java, while others preferred those from West Java:

Saudi Arabs liked workers from East Java better than those from other parts [of Indonesia] such as West Nusatenggara. The former, they said, were more compliant and more deferential towards their bosses. That was why East Javanese recruits tended to find their employers and depart for Saudi Arabia earlier than their colleagues from elsewhere. The Saudis liked domestic workers from Kediri in particular, not only because they were quiet and modest, but also because they were more trustworthy. I mean, they neither wore amulets nor practice sorcery.

After they had had all their documents in order, the recruits waited for the recruiting agents to do the role-call to identify who were ready to leave. As Ratih once told me,

We’re all worked up. We had packed all our belongings into our bags so we were ready to go any time they called us. As soon as our clothes had dried after we washed them, we put them into our bags just in case we were to leave. Every time the agency made an announcement over the loud speaker, our hearts beat wildly.

Sarinah added that she was always dying to see her name come up on the list of departees that the agency announced. “I desire,” she said, “to depart as soon as possible.”

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166 Ibid.
Before leaving, all the departees were to sign their employment contract. A few did so after reading its terms and conditions carefully. Many, however, signed it right away, believing the agency would not cheat them out of their rights. The agency officials briefed them about which documents to keep during their stay in Saudi Arabia, for instance a copy of their contract and passport. They gave the recruits a telephone number to call should they face problems abroad. The agency officials reminded them that their contract stipulated that they were to undergo three months of probation during which their employer would watch and test if they were up to the job. If they failed the probation, their boss would have the right to terminate the contract and return them to the recruitment agency, which in turn would send them home without providing them with any form of payment whatsoever.

**Conclusion**

The stories of Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih underscore the central theme that in pursuit of better life that offered prosperity and respect, they did exercise their agency within the social systems they faced in life. They took charge of their own lives; they compared what they were with what they could be; they conducted their own “research” into what it took to become a migrant workers; they assessed the “costs” and the “benefits,” the “threats” and the “opportunities,” involved in (a) becoming or not becoming migrant workers, (b) working overseas in Saudi Arabia or elsewhere, (c) living in a Saudi city or in a small Saudi town, (d) cooperating with a rogue recruitment agency or reporting it to the authorities, and (e) going by the book or cutting corners to obtain the required documents.
To minimize the resources they needed to reach their goals, they decided to work in Saudi Arabia and cover up the corrupt practices of the recruiting agency, while two of them used falsified documents. In so doing, they both benefitted and suffered from the consequences of their actions: they sped up their departures for Saudi Arabia, but they had to spend extra money for the service of the middleman and to endure maltreatment during their training.

Finally, the structural conditions where these women lived had “two faces”: it is true that the migrant labor recruiting system subjected them to exploitation and that the state’s development policy marginalized them. But it is also true that the existing systems contained resources they could use to reach their goals. The recruiting agencies, for example, helped them acquire jobs and the international labor market offered them much better opportunities than those available in their home country. While this chapter has considered the goals that compelled Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih to become migrant workers, the next chapter will explore the forms of agency they exercised while struggling to reach these goals in Saudi Arabia.
CHAPTER 4: WORKING IN SAUDI ARABIA: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Improvising within preexisting structures, women have some leeway to negotiate their relationships with their employers. [...] The housemaids … encountered difficult situations abroad…. The initiatives they took, the avenues they pursued, and the resources they drew upon in times of trouble reveal the nature of women’s agency in adverse conditions.

Inadequately supported by [recruitment] agencies, police, labor laws, and embassies, women occupied vulnerable positions in the global economy. Nevertheless, they showed character, knowledge, intelligence, and critical thinking, all characteristics lacking in the generic image of the migrant maid in trouble.

— Michele Ruth Gamburd, The Kitchen Spoon’s Handle, 2000

Of all countries in the world, Saudi Arabia is one of the most difficult to enter. It offers no tourist visa and there are only four major categories of foreigners who are allowed to visit the country. These eligible foreigners include businesspeople, people under contract to work for a Saudi employer, people who perform the hajj, and the citizens of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Once they are in the country, foreign nationals—in general—face restrictions on their freedom of movement, residence, and socializing. They must live in expat compounds and have their passports kept by their sponsors in exchange for temporary residence permits. Women expatriates are forbidden to drive.

Living and working in Saudi Arabia is even harder for women migrant workers than it is for the average foreign national. They face stricter restrictions on their mobility and social interaction because they must stay at their employer’s house and are not allowed to travel outdoors alone. Their isolation not only exposes them to higher risk of abuse, exploitation, and sexual harassment; it also makes it harder for them to seek help from the police and other government authorities.169

While Chapter 3 has described the goals that impelled Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih to become migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, this chapter aims to describe how in pursuit of their goals, these women exercised their agency by responding to and overcoming the problems of living and working in a country whose immigration laws limit their physical and social mobility and whose labor laws and customs did not provide them with adequate protection.170 In particular, this chapter examines the ways in which they adapted to an alien environment, handled problems in the workplace, and negotiated with their employers over dress codes, payment of salary, and terms of their contracts. It pays attention to the ways in which they resisted the abuse, attempted sexual harassment, and exploitation that their employers tried to inflict on them.

**Working Conditions in Saudi Arabia**

During his reign from 1964 to 1975, King Faisal and his government used petrodollars to modernize the Saudi economy. In the late 1960s, it began investing a lot of its oil earnings in building hospitals, schools for girls and boys, and a television

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170 Ibid., 8, 15.
station. As a result, people’s living standards increased considerably, especially in the mid-1970s, causing the rise of the middle classes and transforming Saudi households. Modern education caused more and more women to enter the professions and thus required the service of domestic workers.

In its attempt at economic modernization, Saudi Arabia faced such obstacle as the lack of manpower, expertise, and technology. To solve this problem, the Saudi government invited foreign workers to take part in its development projects, causing an influx of foreigners into the country. Foreigners constituted more than half of the country’s total labor force in the early 1970s, raising the population to 7.3 million in 1975, of which two million were foreign nationals. Since then, the number of migrants in the country has been growing, accounting for 24 percent of its total population in 1995 and 18.5 percent of the total in 2008. Such a demographic trend made some elements in the government and the citizenry anxious, causing them to see

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migrants as a threat to the Saudi culture and Islamic values.\textsuperscript{180} To bring the country’s demographic composition to normal, from the mid 1980s to 1995 the government reduced the number of migrant workers by replacing them with Saudis\textsuperscript{181} and tightening its immigration policy.\textsuperscript{182}

The Saudi government has sought to control foreigners’ movement within the country in many ways, most notably by pursuing a restrictive immigration policy. To enter or leave the country, all foreign nationals need a Saudi sponsor to provide an entry or exit visa approval.\textsuperscript{183} In the case of the migrant housemaid, her employers act as sponsors, whom the Saudi government holds responsible for her conduct during her stay in the country. Once she enters Saudi Arabia, she must submit her passport to her Saudi sponsor, who in turn provides her with a temporary residence permit called \textit{iqama}.\textsuperscript{184} The housemaid will get her passport back from her sponsor the day her contract expires and she must leave the country. The system not only makes it impossible for the migrant worker to leave the country without her sponsor’s approval; it also creates unequal labor relations between her and her employers, enabling the latter to exercise greater control over the former.\textsuperscript{185} For example, the boss can withdraw his sponsorship of the worker’s

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 95; Rayburn and Bush, \textit{Living and Working}, 46; Varia, \textit{Slow Reform}, 17.  
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{184} Rayburn and Bush, \textit{Living and Working}, 31-3, 89-90.  
\textsuperscript{185} The \textit{iqama} serves the foreigner as his ID document, which he should always carry with him during his stay in the country. See Rayburn and Bush, \textit{Living and Working}, 35, 89.  
\textsuperscript{185} Varia, \textit{Slow Reform}, 4.
visa and terminate the contract, leaving the worker with no choice but to leave the country immediately as required by law.

**Arrival**

The six-hour flight from Indonesia to Saudi Arabia was quite an experience for Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih as they had never flown before, and never travelled overseas. Arriving at the King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, Sarinah had mixed feelings: on the one hand she survived the journey; on the other hand she was sad when she stepped back and contemplated the magnitude of the “project” she was undertaking.

> Once I arrived there, I cried in silence, thinking to myself: “Oh, Allah! I am far away from my kid and husband, and I will be living with strangers.” I did not have the slightest idea of what the new world was going to look like. I hated leaving my family behind but this was something that I had to do to get away from poverty.

At the airport, the immigration official ushered the migrant workers into a special room where they had their travel documents checked. Once a migrant’s paper was cleared, the official would summon her employers to stop at the office and pick her up. While waiting for her employers, Ratih had mixed feelings: curiosity about them, fear lest they should turn out worse than she had expected, and sadness because she was far away from her family and homeland. Before leaving for Saudi Arabia, she had heard many times over that some Saudi madams and bosses were cruel to their servants. “It could not have been the sole fault of the employers,” she surmised. “Out of foolishness, the workers might have done things that caused their employers to fly off the handle.”
The employers soon arrived at the airport, carrying with them a copy of their servants’ document and photograph. They then saw the immigration officials about the papers. Once the latter got clearance, the immigration officers would call out the migrant workers’ names and tell them to meet their employers. Sarinah’s, Lestari’s, and Ratih’s passports were taken and kept by their employers until their contract expired. The workers were allowed to retain a copy of their passports.

On the way from the airport to her employers’ house, Ratih was anxious because she did not understand modern colloquial Arabic. What she learned at the Islamic boarding school in Kediri and during her job training at the recruiting agency in Jakarta were classical and standard Arabic, which were not spoken in everyday life in Saudi Arabia. As she moved on, she grew more nervous. Though Jeddah was already far behind, they had not reached their destination. “Where are they driving me to?” she thought to herself. Looking out the car’s window, she saw barren, treeless mountains and when the car was passing through a long, dark tunnel, she feared she would end up working in a remote village as a farm hand. At long last, she arrived in Abha at the employers’ house, which stood in a hospital compound. It was one of the small houses the hospital provided for the members of its medical staff.

No sooner had Sarinah entered her employers’ home than they searched her baggage for forbidden items. The treatment did not surprise her at all, for the recruitment agents had told her that once they arrived at their employers’ home, the madam and boss would inspect their new employee’s belongings to ensure that their servants brought neither cosmetics nor amulets with them and that they had a supply of “Islamic” clothes.
Migrant housemaids must not wear any makeup in Saudi Arabia and their employers would confiscate all types of cosmetics including face powder that their housemaids brought with them. In compliance with the regulation, Sarinah gave all her cosmetics to her friends in the recruitment agency in Jakarta the day she left for Saudi Arabia. She also took care to bring with her quite a few Islamic-looking dresses, which she needed to adapt to Saudi culture. The employers would provide their incoming servant with “Islamic” clothes, used or new, if they saw that she did not bring enough such clothes with her. Learning from her first stint in Saudi Arabia, Sarinah could plan her second departure in 1997 much better. This time she brought with her fewer “Islamic” dresses. She also brought some dresses that ran counter to the Saudi Islamic dress code. By doing so, she succeeded in pressing her new employers to buy her new Islamic clothes.

The Trial Period and Challenges of Adjustment

In the first three months of their stay in Saudi Arabia, domestic migrant workers experience a so-called “trial period.” This is a time of uncertainty and increased vulnerability for them in that they must work for free and under their employers’ constant and close scrutiny. Employers have high expectations for their new housemaids because recruiting agencies have charged them a lot of money for hiring fees. In 2008, for example, they had to pay between USD 1,300 and 2,340.186 Besides recruiting fees, employers have to pay for the workers’ visas and working permits.187 It is small wonder

that if an employer is not satisfied with the performance of his new housemaids, he can send her back to the recruiting agency in her home country. To make matters worse for the housemaid, the Saudi labor laws do not specify the rights and obligations of both employers and domestic workers. As a result, some employers end up treating their maids as if they were slaves.\footnote{Ibid., 128.}

The trial period also exposes migrant workers to the challenges of cultural adjustment that working overseas entails. The challenges appear in such areas as language, dress codes, local cuisine, and bad working conditions. The trial period is the initial episode in the interpersonal and cross-cultural encounter between housemaids and their employers. It often exposed the former to moments of discomfort, confusion, shock, and stress. The overseas housemaid must learn the basics of her employers’ culture. The sudden “transplantation” from her small village world to an overseas metropolis such as Riyadh and Jeddah may come to her as quite a shock. The next sections will describe how Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih learned to cope with the challenges of adjustment they faced during the trial period.

1. **Language Challenge**

One of the triggers of the shock that the migrant housemaids suffer during their trial period is foreign language. Arabic is a difficult language to learn. It consists of numerous regional dialects and its grammar is complicated. Muslim migrant housemaids from Indonesia may master elementary classical Arabic, but the Saudis seldom, if ever, speak this language in everyday life. To master contemporary Arabic while living in the
country is more difficult than many would imagine. Foreigners in Saudi Arabia have little chance of acquiring modern Arabic for two reasons. First, they are to live in a special zone the local government assigns to them. The zoning policy limits the contact they can have with the natives. Second, English is used in the country as the business language for communicating with Saudis and foreigners.  

The two-week language course that Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih took during their pre-departure training in Indonesia left much to be desired. The teachers in Jakarta taught them standard Arabic but the madams and bosses in Saudi Arabia spoke colloquial Arabic. Thus, especially for the first six months of their encounter, the first-time migrant workers and their employers found each other mutually unintelligible, which resulted in irritating complications. The employers, for their part, felt angry and cheated: they had spent a lot of money hiring a domestic helper who—unable to understand and carry out even the simplest of all orders—seemed beyond training and therefore good for nothing. Some employers reacted to their frustration by abusing their maid verbally or physically, or by sacking her altogether. Lost in a linguistic limbo, their job security hanging by a thread, some first-time housemaids kept their cool, politely grinning and bearing the angry words their frustrated madam hurled at them every so often. Through the day-to-day interaction with their employers and their children, the maids picked up the colloquial Arabic. It was by employing this grin-and-bear strategy that Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih survived their trial period on their first stint. As Ratih recalled in our conversation:

Though at the time I did not understand Arabic, the tone of their speech left little doubt that they were grumbling about me. I noticed that in her grumblings my madam said certain words over and over again. I committed these words in memory. It was a few months before I discovered that they were terms of abuse. Once the madam’s kids became close to me, they revealed to me the meaning of all those words.

By the time they started their second stint in Saudi Arabia, some women migrants had learned their lessons so well that they now had at their disposal the social knowledge they could draw upon to bolster their bargaining positions vis-à-vis their employers.

When Sarinah returned to the country in 1993, for example, she was no longer the greenhorn she had been in 1990. She deliberately misled her employers to believe that she knew no Arabic so they would lower their guard and unwittingly reveal the otherwise hidden attitudes they had toward her. The knowledge of these attitudes helped Sarinah a great deal in designing and deploying the best ways to “domesticate” her employers.

Not knowing that I had a good command of Arabic, she made fun of me and spat out insults at me, calling me filthy names, comparing me to animals. I tried not to take it to heart, though, because I was away from home, from my family and relatives, and I had nowhere else to go. So I tried to make it feel like I was home and did whatever my madam told me to do. Her nasty words offended me, to be sure, but since I was still in my trial period, I knew better than to quarrel with her. Had I done so, she would’ve sent me home immediately. So I remained silent, keeping cool until my trial period was over and I was in a position to talk back to her.

2. Dress Codes

The Saudi custom prescribes that men and women wear their traditional clothing when they go outdoor: the gutrah and the white thobe are for men while the abaya and
the veil are for women.\textsuperscript{190} When they reach puberty, girls must conceal their face in the presence of men who are not members of their immediate family. All migrant housemaids are required to comply with the Saudi dress code; some find it cumbersome.

Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih found the Islamic dress codes in Saudi Arabia uncomfortable and impractical. While the sort of Islam my informants embraced in East Java did not require them to cover their head and face, in Saudi Arabia women were to don the \textit{burqa}—which covered the whole body save the hands and eyes—in the presence of males who were not their immediate relatives, at home and in public. The cumbersome \textit{burqa} made it difficult for the maids to perform their household chores. In their own home in Java they would have worn a short-sleeved duster dress and needed neither headscarf nor face-cover. In a Saudi household they could remove their headscarf only when all members of their employers’ family were out. Seeing it as part of her job requirements, Lestari complied stoically with the dress codes. “It’s for survival’s sake,” she explained. By contrast, for safety reasons Sarinah just could not do what Lestari did:

\begin{quote}
In compliance with Islamic dress code, my madam was adamant that I wear the \textit{burqa} at all times, especially when we went outside the house. The problem was, the face-cover blocked my eyes and blurred my vision. One afternoon my madam and I went out for some errands. I soon had trouble seeing my way through the face-cover. As if blind, I stumbled about in the street and was unaware that I was going the wrong way until my madam said, “Where do you think you are going?” The moment I realized what was going on, she broke out in laughter. On another occasion the \textit{burqa} I had on made me so clumsy I fell down the stairway along with the baby I was carrying in my arms. Thank God, neither of us sustained any serious injury. But this accident caused my madam to change her mind and let me cease wearing the \textit{burqa}.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{190} Rayburn and Bush, \textit{Living and Working}, 25.
Unlike Sarinah’s and Lestari’s native Saudi employers, Ratih’s expatriate Syrian madam and boss let her leave her face uncovered. To her surprise, they were very flexible about practicing Islam. The longer she stayed in Saudi Arabia, the more divergences she saw between the Arab world as it actually existed and the ideal image she had of that world.

Before I visited Saudi Arabia, I took it at face value that this was a holy land. But while I lived there, it shocked me to discover that some Arabs, including my Syrian employers, were much less pious than I thought they were. Muslims though they were, I rarely saw them praying. And they fasted no more than four days during Ramadan.

The fact that her Syrian employers were non-practicing Muslims meant that they rarely allowed her to have the breaks she needed to say her obligatory prayers five times a day. One day her madam and boss even took offense when Ratih kindly reminded their children to pray. She noticed as well that the kids sometimes yelled rude, angry words at their parents, which struck her as distasteful.

3. Native Cuisine

Local cuisine posed a problem to my three informants. Coming from rural East Java, they were used to three meals a day (breakfast at eight, lunch at twelve, and dinner at seven), each consisting typically of steamed rice served with soup, greens, and a piece of bean curd, tempeh, salted fish, chicken, or meat. The eating habits in Saudi Arabia differed from those in Indonesia: people breakfasted at ten in the morning, lunched at four in the afternoon, and dined at ten in the evening. Sarinah, Lestari and Ratih found most dishes in Saudi cuisine unpalatable. It was hard for them to eat mashed spinach, raw vegetables, or rice cooked in sweetened milk. They tested a few tricks to tackle the food
challenge. Sarinah tried to live on fruits alone, which did not work, for such a diet rendered her too weak to work. She soon abandoned the method. Finally, like Lestari, she taught her body to adapt to Saudi cuisine. To survive the trial period both of them adopted a functional approach to eating whereby they had meals not for pleasure but for the mere calories they needed to perform their daily tasks. Compared to them Ratih was luckier in that her employers provided her with enough foodstuffs such as rice and instant noodles that she could use to cook her own meals. She barely cooked for her madam, boss, and their children, for they relied mostly on carry-out food for their daily sustenance.

4. Bad Working Conditions

As Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih soon discovered, their actual working conditions in the Saudi households differed somewhat from what they had expected during their training in Indonesia and from the description in their contracts. In some cases discrepancies were considerable. For instance, notwithstanding the stipulation in their contracts that as housemaids they were to serve in a domestic setting, some wound up toiling in the sun as a shepherd or some sort of farm hand, or serving their merchant-boss as a shop-assistant at the local bazaar. Ratih once recounted to me in an interview:

There was this friend of mine from Banyuwangi who left for Saudi Arabia not long after she got married. She wound up working there as a shepherd. By the time she finished her contract and returned to Indonesia, prolonged exposure to the sun had tanned her skin to a dark brown. Consider also my neighbors Lina and Ani. They too became shepherds in Saudi Arabia against their will. In this respect, Saudi Arabia is not unique, though, for my neighbor Nina, who worked in Hong Kong, also ended up becoming a kind of a field laborer.
During the pre-departure training, the recruiting agents had advised the migrants to refuse work if the actual working conditions overseas differed from those specified in their contracts. In reality, however, despite serious discrepancies between contract and reality, most women migrants decided to comply with their employers’ wishes. They could not have done otherwise, Ratih claimed. “We had made a lot of sacrifices just to arrive there. So we had better stay, keep the job, and try to make the best of a bad situation.”

My informants believed it was chance that decided the kind of employers they ended up working for. If the maid was lucky, she would serve generous employers. If she had bad luck, she would be assigned to a madam and a boss so stingy they denied her access to the refrigerator and kitchen and fed her with leftovers. Some employers were short-tempered and abused their maids physically every now and again. Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih considered themselves the lucky ones as they all had kindhearted employers.

Sarinah and Ratih recalled that their employers viewed their relations with them in such a way that to hire a housemaid meant to “buy” her as a human being. Once, while angry, Ratih’s madam complained that after spending a lot of money to buy her, she still had to pay her regular wages. The madam thought it only fair that migrant housemaids should work for free during their trial period. She disregarded the fact that the contract did not require the maids to do so. It only said that the employer could use the trial period to appraise the maid’s personality and job qualifications. The employer would use samples of the maid’s personality and work ethic to decide whether or not she would continue hiring her. One of the ways in which the madam assessed her servant’s character
was by testing her honesty. The madam would put some money or a piece of jewelry somewhere in the house where it was easy for the maid to stumble upon. If the maid did not report what she saw to her employer or if she did not pick up and deliver the thing to her, she would fail the character test. Any maid who either flunked the character test or showed unreliable work habits would fail the trial period and be sent back to the recruiting agency. Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih recalled that the trial period felt like “a time of fear and hope.” Lestari, for one, remembered being haunted by the constant fear that her madam might ship her back to Indonesia.

Another aspect of the working conditions that Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih found rather surprising was the drastic restriction of their freedom of movement. It turned out that Saudi employers in general shut their housemaids in their houses and prevented them from having a cellular phone for contact with the outside world. Once they were done with their chores for the day, they were to stay behind the locked door of their bedroom and take a nap.

**Life and Work Abroad**

The post-trial period in my informants’ stint in Saudi Arabia partly differed from and partly repeated the trial one. On the one hand, after surviving the tryout, they now enjoyed a greater degree of job security: the threat of sudden dismissal no longer hovered in the air. On the other hand, in both the trial period and the rest of their stint in the country, Sarinah’s, Lestari’s, and Ratih’s everyday life revolved around the same themes: Arabic as both challenge and opportunity, and the struggle for control over time, space,
and labor. Two new issues, however, did not appear until the trial period concluded. They included the sexual dimensions of overseas domestic labor and money management.

1. Language

Three months’ immersion in a Saudi household was too short for Lestari, Sarinah, and Ratih to develop proficiency in Arabic. Their command of the language did not go beyond a few words and simple phrases. Consequently, their interaction with their employer was so full of misunderstanding that they failed to perform their daily chores competently. Sarinah could not suppress her laughter as she recalled how so much was lost in mistranslation between her and her boss and madam:

Man, was I stupid or what? I had spent three months [there] but understood nothing. Every time my employers issued an instruction, I did not know exactly what to do. I made so many mistakes my madam decided to teach me some imperative sentences in Arabic. But for quite some time even this did not work. I kept on misunderstanding her. When she asked me to close the door, for example, I responded by bringing her a basin. When she told me to fetch her a knife, I got her a soup spoon. At first the madam laughed at the funny mistakes I made. After some time, though, she broke down and cried—perhaps out of frustration at my slow progress. There were times when I doubted whether I had what it took to keep the job. I then decided that I should stop and think it out before responding to any of my madam’s orders. This was how things were until the sixth month.

In response to the failure of verbal communication, there were times when Sarinah’s employers resorted to body language. Sometimes this strategy worked; sometimes it resulted in serious complications:

I was always cautious, preparing for the worst. One day my boss followed me around with some clothes in his hand. I had no idea what was on his
mind but I was afraid he was going to do me harm. I took a knife from the kitchen drawer for self-defense and ran away. But he kept following me, waiving his hand at me. I then ran around inside, trying to avoid the man. Finally he realized that a terrible misunderstanding was going on between us, whereupon he made a few gestures to indicate that all he wanted was for me to wash his clothes. I was like, “God, was I stupid!” The moment I realized what was going on, I was very embarrassed.

It took Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih nine to twelve months to be become a competent speaker of Arabic. They soon realized they could use their newly acquired language skill as a weapon to protect themselves from physical abuse by their employers. The housemaid could do this by showing off to her employer in Arabic her understanding of the terms of her labor contract. This was a tactic that the housemaid learned from her more experienced colleagues, whom she met in malls while shopping with her madam or in a family gathering that her employer held. For example, when their madams were going to lay a hand on them, Sarinah and Ratih responded by challenging them to send them home to Indonesia. Speaking in Arabic, they showed their madams that they understood an article in their contract which said that by physically abusing her housemaid, the employer rendered the contract void. By doing so, she must at her own expense (a) send the maid home and (b) pay “her wages for her work until the termination of contract plus three months’ salary.” Moreover, it was not easy for employers to find a new maid as reliable as the one they had to send home. Ratih explained to me that the danger of physical abuse by employers was real:

Some Saudi employers were physically abusive. If we were afraid of them, they would often lay a hand on us. But if we resisted them, they

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191 See Lestari’s contract on her second stint in Appendix A.
would think twice. It is true that during the first few months, we were rather vulnerable to their aggressiveness. We soon learned stuff; we knew how to stand for our rights. For example, one day when my madam was about to slap my face, I told her I would rather be sent home than be maltreated, whereupon she lost the guts to do what she was about to do.

It should be pointed out that it was not only the madams and the bosses who maltreated their maids. Sometimes, Sarinah recalled, it was the employers’ children who committed the physical abuse:

When I served my first employers, I often came to blows—verbally and physically—with one of their daughters. One day, after a fight with the girl, my madam and boss interrogated me. During the interrogation, I challenged them to send me back to my recruitment agency if they really thought I was the guilty one.

When challenging her employers, she calculated her risks. Her calculation was right. She finally won as they stopped pursuing the matter any further. She knew that there were a few maids before her who left before their contracts expired. She understood that the last thing her employers wanted was to train another new maid.

2. Struggle for Control over Time, Space, and Labor

Sometimes conflict erupted between Indonesian migrant housemaids and their employers. Depending on the causes, the temperament of the people involved, and their methods of handling it, the conflict could either end quickly or last long. In some cases, minor mistakes on the part of the housemaid caused her to receive severe corporal punishment from the employer. For example, Keni binti Carda—an Indonesian maid working in Saudi Arabia—was badly abused and mutilated by her madam who was
disappointed with her job performance. The common triggers of housemaid-employer conflict include the madam’s jealousy of the maid, unsatisfactory service, quarrels over childcare, complaints from the employer’s children about the maid, sexual harassment of the maid by her boss, and linguistic misunderstandings.

Some Arab madams do not like seeing their maids idle. No sooner does a maid finish with her chore than her madam finds her another task to keep her busy. Some tasks are ridiculous and unnecessary. For example, some madams make their maids mop the wall several times a week or dust the furniture and wash the carpet every day. A work regime like this pushes the workers beyond their endurance. After a few months, some of them become so bored and exhausted they quit their job or run off. Others decide to stay and keep the job while devising some tricks to cope with the terrible workload. For example, Sarinah regulated her work pace in such a way that she could take a rest secretly:

My first madam hated seeing me idle even for a minute. She wanted to see me busy all the time. To deal with this, I used a trick: Once I was done with my major chores, I kept carrying around this piece of cloth, which I used from time to time to wipe every stupid thing I could lay my hands on. The point was to look busy all the time. Whenever I could, I’d politely refuse my madam’s invitation to go with her to parks or malls. As soon as she and the kids were out, I took a nap. I would wake up the moment I

heard them coming home. I would pretend as if I had been busy doing the house chores all along.

The International Labor Organization reported in 2004 that migrant housemaids in the Middle East often worked very long hours, typically from 5:00 A.M. to 11:30 P.M. Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih worked even longer hours in Saudi Arabia. They must work a daily total of twenty and a half hours, starting at 4:30 A.M. and stopping at 2:00 A.M. the next day. As a result, Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih rarely had enough sleep during their stints in Saudi Arabia. As Lestari once put it, “After hours I felt like a flat tire.”

One of the reasons is that the Saudis enjoyed holding family gatherings, which start at 10:00 P.M. and end at 2:00 A.M. Friends and relatives come to visit, bringing their own maids with them to help those of the host and hostess to organize the event. It is a physically exhausting event for the housemaids as they must cook many dishes to accommodate a lot of guests. In appreciation of their hard work, the host and hostess sometimes reward the visiting housemaids with gifts in cash or in kind.

Exhausting though these gatherings are, they provide migrant maids with an opportunity to meet with one another and share information, ideas, knowledge, and experiences of recreational and strategic importance. Such an opportunity is rare because Saudi employers forbid their maids to meet their compatriots. The idea is to prevent them from exercising their freedom of organization. However, the housemaids manage to use the events to their own advantage.

193 For comparison, see Rayburn and Bush, Living and Working, 25.
Besides their employer’s family gatherings, Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih could also meet their fellow Indonesian women migrants at shopping centers and amusement parks. Their Saudi employers visited such places from time to time with their children. To take care of the latter, they also brought their housemaids. Usually, while the madams and bosses were busy shopping, they told the maids to look after the children. While doing their job on such an occasion, the maids could meet and talk with other maids. They took care not to make this communication too conspicuous lest their employers intervene and dismiss it. Some madams and bosses were less strict and let their maids get together with their colleagues provided that they did not neglect their duty of looking after the children.

3. Sexual Dimensions of Transnational Labor Migration

The theme of sexuality also figured in the narratives of my informants about their experiences living and working in Saudi Arabia. Their overseas employment revolved around, but cannot be reduced to, the economic encounter between the migrant maid and the host employer in which labor was exchanged for cash and either party did what he or she could to maximize his or her results. Intended or unintended, consensual or coerced, the intrusion of sexuality into the encounter could render it more complicated.

Cultural differences between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia concerning nonverbal behavior sometimes lead to sexuality-related misunderstandings that make housemaid-employer relations difficult. It is common in Indonesia to see women and men smile and nod to each other to express respect and politeness. In the Saudi context, however, smiling and nodding between opposite sexes could be interpreted as gestural expressions of sexual interest. In this regard, a manual for expatriates living and working in Saudi
Arabia notes, “Women should not be overly friendly to Arab men in public. It may be misinterpreted as a ‘come on.’”\(^{194}\) It also warns the reader that “[l]ooking directly at men and smiling can be misconstrued. Should you receive any unwanted advances, make some *immediate verbal reaction*. Ignoring an advance is considered tantamount to approval.”\(^{195}\)

A handbook for Indonesian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia provides tips on how a good housemaid should behave toward her boss. She should lower her gaze in the presence of her boss and step aside when meeting him in the doorway. Under no circumstances should she steal a glance at him or nod and smile to him because to make any of these gestures—at least in some Saudi contexts—is to act in a seductive manner, to present oneself as a loose woman,\(^{196}\) and to risk inviting sexual advances from men.

Some Indonesian migrant servants, however, do not understand this gestural code or, if they do, they simply forget to translate their message (deference) from the Indonesian to the Arab code. In some cases this lack of understanding and this failure of translation exposes maids to sexual harassment by their male employers.

Cultural misunderstandings are not the only factors that contribute to sexual harassment of Indonesian migrant housemaids by their employers. There are some who treat their servants as sexual objects. For example, Ratih recalled the story that her friend


\(^{195}\) Ibid., 97.

told her. Sometimes, when she was home alone with nobody else but her boss or his son, the man would unzip his fly and show off his genitals to her.

When Indonesian migrant housemaids had the chance to gather together, one of the things they did was learn from each other the tips and tricks for protecting themselves from sexual harassment. As Sarinah explained to me, one of these tactics was for the maid never to say or do things that could be misconstrued as signs of sexual availability:

My employer’s sons were mischievous: They sent out signals that they liked me. I ignored these, though. As long as I acted “normally” and did not respond to their overtures, no sexual relations would ever happen between us. But if I had responded to their advances, sexual contacts would have occurred any time the opportunity arose. The point was never for you to smile either to your boss or to his sons. In so many cases [of sexual harassment], I think the maid—out of naivety—had sent out the wrong signals.

Now let me tell you this story. It was embarrassing, even disgusting, but I will tell it anyway. It was about the father of either my madam or my boss, I am not sure. The man lived in Medina, okay. On the one hand, he was the dirty old man type; on the other, he was generous. I was too afraid to accept any of his gifts for my friends had warned me: “If your boss, or one of his friends, or one of his relatives gives you money, this is a sign of danger; it means the man’s sexually interested in you.”

The warning proved right. I was to join my madam and boss whenever they visited their parents. During my stays there, the old man would call me again and again, asking me to do something for him. But then his hand would grope my body. […] One night, he snuck into my room when I was fast asleep. Lucky me! My boss caught him red-handed and scolded him for what he did. After this incident, I refrained from joining my employers when they went to Medina to visit their parents.

Another tactic was for the maid to mount a physical counter-attack against a stubborn sexual harasser. When the son of her employers sought to harass her, Sarinah hit him with a broomstick and threatened that she would report the incident to his mother.

Some fellow housemaids armed themselves with a basin of water that they would throw
at their boss and his son if they tried to molest her. Ratih recalled how this tactic often worked. The botched attempt at sexual harassment would leave its traces in the house, such as spots on the floor drenched with water. Seeing this, the madam would ask the maid what had happened and the maid would tell her the story, protesting her innocence. In some cases, this led to the development of mutual trust between the maid and the madam.

The third tactic was for the maid to stay as far away physically as possible from all the adult male members of the family she served. If any of these asked her for a sexual favor, she would turn down the request firmly and assertively. Lestari did this when one of her employers’ relatives asked her for a kiss on the cheek. “Had I complied with the man’s wish,” Lestari said, “I would feel very awkward, very embarrassed, when we met again in the future.”

There were cases in which it was the migrant housemaids who were guilty of sexual harassment or, at least, sexual provocation. Some maids took a sexual interest in their bosses and made advances toward them, which made their madams so bitterly jealous they subjected the maids to various forms of physical abuse. Representatives of Indonesian recruiting agencies based in Saudi Arabia have received reports from some male employers who complained that their maids had seduced them and their sons.

From some of the stories that Lestari narrated to me, it appears that some sexual encounters that happened between maids and bosses were consensual. Some women

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198 Tobing and others, Perjalan Nasib, 95-96.
migrant workers sought to derive both financial and sexual benefits from their sojourns overseas. Lestari shared with me these stories:

A brother of my boss was married to a teacher. This couple was childless. Sometimes, when his wife was out teaching at school, the man would have sex with his housemaid. From what I know, the maid doesn’t seem to have the slightest objection to such a relationship.

Now I have another story, which I heard from my friend. When they met, maids told each other stories, you know. There was this middle-aged maid who performed regular sexual service to her boss and his son [in return for some cash]. It didn’t make any sense to me: How could father and son share the same sexual partner?

These stories remind us that women migrant workers are not only economic beings but also sexual beings, with their own sexual needs. Some concentrate on their work and delay the gratification of these needs until their stint is over and they reunite with their husbands; a few others seize the opportunity for sexual enjoyment that presents itself overseas. For the latter, such recreation may alleviate the dehumanizing effects of having to work overtime and stay at home on almost a daily basis. The maid-boss sexual liaison can be doubly rewarding for the maid if she receives some money from her boss in exchange for the sexual favors she does for and with him. This means extra money, a generous addition to her official wages,\(^\text{199}\) a supplement she can negotiate with her boss so as to make these favors a regular activity. Sarinah reasoned that some migrant maids performed sexual service to their employers as “a side job”:

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We can count how much money we earn by working in Saudi Arabia. I have worked in Saudi twice, you see, but this is all I have. I tried to save as much money as I could. My family led a simple life, surviving on a frugal diet. If a maid earned that much money, it was really unusual. She might have done a “side job” in addition to working as a housemaid.

Whether or not a housemaid entered into a sexual relationship with her boss, my informants argued, would depend to some degree on the maid’s personality. Some maids, they said, were coquettish (genit) or—to put it in more neutral terms—sexually expressive. My aunt told me the story of one such migrant worker:

Before her contract expired, Pariyem became pregnant; she then returned home to give birth to her baby. It turned out to be an Arab baby. Even before she went to work in Saudi Arabia, the girl was already the flirtatious type. I mean she was known to have seduced men in the neighborhood. So when she got pregnant abroad, it came as no surprise at all to us.

In one of our conversations, Ratih, too, talked about a sexually expressive neighbor of hers who was working in Saudi Arabia as a housemaid:

One of my sisters is now working in Riyadh. She told me that this neighbor of ours named Rina offered sexual service in Saudi Arabia, in addition to doing her usual job as a servant. It was not surprising; she had done the same thing back home. Before I heard this story of her side job abroad, I kept wondering how she managed to earn that much money which she often sent home. Saudi bosses were generous to their maids if [these women] were willing to perform extra [sexual] service. This was how these women made a lot of money.

Once in a while the altercations between returned migrant domestic helpers in their home village were shot through with allegations that their interlocutors earned extra income in Saudi Arabia by providing sexual service. For example, one morning in
December 2010, sitting on the bamboo bench in the porch in his house in Plosoklaten, my research assistant Pandu witnessed a quarrel between two former migrant domestic workers in which they launched a vituperative attack on each other. To his surprise, one party of this quarrel shouted to the other, “Cut out that holier-than-thou attitude, will you? When we were there [in Saudi Arabia], you and I were lonté [whores].”

4. Money Management

When they decided to work overseas, housemaids were dreaming of a better future for their families. They learned from others that overseas work could—in one way or another—ameliorate the standards of life of people like them. Whether or not they could make their dream come true depended not only on the actual income they generated by working abroad, but also on the prudence and acumen with which they managed this income.

Actually, housemaids could negotiate with their employers for what they thought were the better ways of administering their wages. Sarinah, for example, would rather receive her paycheck once every few months. Once she indicted to her employers that she wished now to receive her wages, the latter would escort her to the bank where she could not only cash her check, but also send the money to her husband in Indonesia.

Ratih and Lestari managed their wages differently than did Sarinah. They preferred to receive their wages on a monthly basis. Lestari knew that some fellow Indonesian maids had trouble having their wages paid by their masters, especially when the latter were faced with financial difficulties. She also had heard stories of unfinished money business between Indonesian maids and their employers even after the contract
had expired and the maids had returned home. In such cases, even though they were about to depart for Indonesia, the migrants had not received one hundred percent of their wages. Lestari was determined that this kind of trouble should not happen to her. She decided that the sooner she received her wages, the better she could manage her hard-earned income on her own. Experience had taught her that the employer could just renege on certain items in his or her contract with the worker. Her own employers, for example, failed to bring her to Mecca to perform the “hajj”\(^{200}\) at the end of her contract just because one of them fell ill. Now she was worried that they would betray her trust again if she entrusted them with keeping her wages for her.

**Renewal or Non-Renewal of Contract**

Upon completion of their contract, Indonesian migrant housemaids were freed from their obligations, got their passport and other documents back from their employers, and were ready to fly home. While some departed for Indonesia as soon as possible, others chose to have their contract renewed and stay in Saudi Arabia for another year. Either of these options had its own consequences. To return home immediately meant to lose the chance of making more money. To renew the contract was to earn more money and to suffer another year of separation from their loved ones.

Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih chose to have their contract extended. They engaged in some calculations to justify their decision to sacrifice one year of family togetherness in exchange for more income for their household. Yet they also understood that some

\(^{200}\) There is a clause in the labor contract that requires an employer to help the Muslim employee to perform the hajj.
contract renewals had terms that did not work to their benefit. Accordingly, after some bargaining, Sarinah rejected her first employer’s offer to renew her contract:

The day my three-year contract expired, my boss and madam offered me a one-year extension and a leave to visit my family in Indonesia. The offer sounded interesting at first; I thought I would buy a [roundtrip] air ticket, get together with my family for some time, and fly back to Saudi Arabia to resume my work. But then I saw this Saudi-based representative of my recruiting agency who told me that it was the employers’ obligation to buy their maid an air ticket if she takes a leave. So I asked my madam and boss for a ticket. But they were like, “Why don’t you buy it out of your own pocket? We will reimburse you on your return [to Saudi Arabia].” I did not like the offer. So I went home to Indonesia, determined never to return to them. Then they sent me letters, begging me to work for them again, saying that their kids missed me. I did not budge an inch.

In her second stint, Sarinah also refused the contract renewal that her employers offered her, and it was because this time she could not stomach her madam’s jealousy any more.

Despite their capacity for consideration and negotiation, the ways they used this capacity was still inadequate for the purpose of modifying the legal system and immigration practices that produced the unequal labor relations between them and their employers.

**Conclusion**

As some scholars have pointed out, it is true that while making a living in Saudi Arabia, Indonesian women migrant workers not only encounter a social system that in some ways puts them at a disadvantage, they also come into conflict with more powerful employers who use the system’s rules and resources against them. Yet it is also true—as Michel Foucault has reminded us—that “[w]here there is power, there is resistance.”

Capable of recognizing oppression and exploitation as they occur, some migrant

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201 Quoted in Gamburd, *Kitchen Spoon’s Handle*, 121.
housemaids are able to identify and use a variety of rules and resources in their host society to resist their exploitative and abusive employers.

Besides the confrontation with a social system that sometimes puts them at a disadvantage, living in Saudi Arabia, though temporarily, also involves an encounter with a foreign culture, to which women migrant workers must learn to adjust if they want to survive in it, function well, and succeed in reaching their objectives.

This chapter has described the ways in which Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih exercised their agency by attempting to overcome the oppressive and exploitative acts that their employers committed against them. First, in resisting such acts, they used their employers’ native language (Arabic) against them; these women protected themselves by talking back to them in Arabic, engaging in counter-intimidation, and negotiating for better labor relations and a better method of salary payment. Second, they also resisted their more powerful employers by engaging in dissimulation. For example, they pretended they did not yet understand Arabic. This enabled them to eavesdrop on their employers’ conversation to discover their real thoughts, feelings, and attitudes, which in the future they could use against them. Third, they wielded other “weapons of the weak,” such as (a) secretly exchanging strategic information with fellow Indonesian housemaids in malls (while their bosses were busy shopping) and in kitchens (during family gatherings); (b) faking constant diligence in the presence of their employers; (c) pretending to prefer working at home to travelling outdoors with employers so one could take a nap while the madam was out; (d) carrying too few Islamic clothes so their
employers would buy them new clothes; and (e) protecting themselves from sexual harassment by consistent avoidance and assertive and vigorous refusal.

These women also acted out their agency by overcoming the challenges of adapting to Saudi culture in two ways. First, in nine to twelve months, through trial and error and through constant exposure to Arabic, they succeeded in becoming an effective speaker of the language. As mentioned above, this language skill enhanced their bargaining power vis-à-vis their employers. Second, they made efforts to acquire the local body language, learning to distinguish sexual gestures from neutral ones in order to avoid the risk of sexual harassment.

In my investigation, the cultural residue of slavery contributed to the tendency among Saudi employers to mistreat their housemaids, treating them as if they were their “slaves.” Although slavery in Saudi Arabia was abolished in 1962, some employers in this country still see domestic workers as a new version of slaves. In fact, as John Bradley indicates, some Saudis are still taught by their parents to look at foreign domestic workers as less civilized than themselves.202

This chapter has described in detail the ways in which Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih struggled to earn the money they needed to build a better life for their families. The next chapter will focus on how—since the day they left Saudi Arabia for Indonesia—they did their best to safeguard and manage their hard-earned financial resources in order to realize the dreams that in the first place motivated them to become migrant workers.

CHAPTER 5: LIFE AFTER TRANSNATIONAL LABOR MIGRATION

In the past, mine was a rickety house with bamboo plaited walls. But then I was willing to risk a lot to increase my wealth and put my children through school. Thank God, I made it. I am well-off in many ways now. I will not be seen as poor anymore.
— Sarinah, 2009

In general, this chapter explores the interaction between agency and social system as it was experienced by these women after their return to village Java from their stints as migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. My discussion focuses on how, in their search for prosperity and prestige, they responded to and overcame the problems they faced during their domestic travel back home and after they rejoined their home community. In particular, the chapter considers to what extent the women’s methods of enacting their agency enabled them to reach their goals, and to what degree these methods worked against them in the long run by reproducing the structures of exploitation and oppression they encountered. In addressing these issues, I compare my own findings to those presented in the existing literature. My aim is to reveal that some scholarly representations offered of Indonesian women migrants are caricatures.

Finally, this chapter highlights the intended and unintended effects that transnational labor migration had on the lives of these women and their families. I will show that despite and because of the sacrifices they made, these women succeeded in providing their families with better houses, putting their children through school, and strengthening the economic capacity of their households. The unintended effects of their
migration included the widening of their life’s horizon and the strengthening of their bargaining position vis-à-vis their spouses and relatives.

Through Myths and Dangers: Migrant Workers’ Journey Back Home

In their attempt to build a better life for their families, migrant workers have to overcome many hurdles. Their struggles do not end with the conclusion of their contract and their arrival in Indonesia. In fact, the moment they step out of the planes at the Sukarno-Hatta International Airport, another series of struggles begins. Throughout their travels from the airport in Jakarta to their home villages, they confront trials and tribulations, including cynical nationalist myths the government imposes on them and various forms of crime that gangsters commit against them (see figure 8).

1. Heroization of Migrant Workers and Non-Protection of Their Rights

The world’s economic system today is such that some developing countries cannot create enough jobs for their citizens, while some rich countries enjoy rapid economic growth, but suffer from insufficient labor supply. In response to this situation, the government of the Philippines (GOP) and the government of Indonesia (GOI) export part of their workforce to reduce unemployment and poverty, and to rely on migrant workers’ remittances to fill their supply of foreign exchange. For example, 11.8 percent of the Philippines’ GDP comes from migrant workers’ remittances\(^\text{203}\) and the GOI depends on remittances as one of the pillars of Indonesia’s economic development.

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\(^{203}\) Stephen Castles, “Comparing the Experience of Five Major Emigration Countries” (working paper, International Migration Institute, James Martin 21st Century School
Figure 8. A cartoon in the national daily *Suara Pembaruan*, August 7, 1994, which depicts two rogue airport officials extorting money from returning migrant workers at the arrival terminal. One of the officials says, “This is not an extortion; this is active participation.”

Aware of the central role that migrant workers’ remittances play in the national economy, the GOI and the GOP encourage their citizens to work overseas and operate a number of institutions to regulate labor migration.

It is interesting to look at how governments and recruiting agencies in developing countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, and India encourage labor export. First, they

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resort to slogans. To attract the interest of importing countries, the GOP wields such a slogan as “Able Minds, Able Hands, to Foreign Lands” while recruitment agencies in Indonesia praise their workers as “obedient, patient, and cheaper.” Second, to encourage their citizens to undertake labor migration, governments in Indonesia, the Philippines, and India portray migrant workers as heroic figures. While the GOI hails migrant workers as “foreign exchange heroes,” the Indian government praises them as “angels of development,” and the GOP celebrates them as “new national heroes” to whom one week in 2000 is dedicated as the “Migrant Heroes Week,” and for whom a welcoming ceremony is performed at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport every year since 1993.

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2. Crimes against Migrant Workers

In Indonesia’s case, despite government slogans and the significant contribution of migrant workers to the national economy, they still receive little protection of their rights by the state. Indeed, of all governments in Southeast Asia, the GOP is the only one to have ratified the ILO Convention on Migrant Workers. Since the GOI remains reluctant to do so, Indonesian migrants are exposed to abuses and crimes both at home and abroad. Sri Suari Wahyudi’s study has revealed how in 2002 a number of different groups ran illegal money-changing rings at the Sukarno-Hatta International Airport in Jakarta, preying on returning migrant workers:

> In the past, money-changing services were offered by not only authorized companies but also porters, cleaning service guys, and security guards, what have you. The [unauthorized money-changers] were funded by some members of the airport authorities. What can I say? But things are more orderly nowadays. These people are now under scrutiny. Sometimes the district-level lawmakers conduct unannounced inspection. The police are uncompromising. That said, the clever and experienced ones know how to handle the situation: they stay out for a while but as soon as the surveillance is relaxed, it will be business as usual.212

This “organized crime,” Wahyudi discovered, had been run for years by operators familiar with the way the airport worked. Ironically, among these criminals were those who were supposed to ensure the safety of returning migrant workers. The criminal network was unreachable by law-enforcers because its agents included some low- to high-ranking officials stationed at the airport by the regency, the department of manpower, the department of transportation, the department of justice, the office of the

attorney general, the banks, money-changing companies, the police, and the army. The criminals also included illegal taxi drivers, highwaymen, rogue journalists, public figures, NGO activists, even lawyers from an NGO offering legal aid to migrant workers.\textsuperscript{213} Consider, for example, the money changers at the airport. To run their business at the airport, they spent at least IDR 50 to 250 million a month to bribe the airport authorities.\textsuperscript{214}

The key thing is for us to cultivate allies. The moment these allies hear that a migrant worker has filed a complaint to the airport authorities, they will let us know this instantly. We will then conduct rapid investigation: is it the migrant worker who checked through our post or not? Where did she file her complaint to? Was it to the police or somebody else? Who was handling the case? We will nip the case in the bud. One day a crew of the TVRI [state-owned television station] came to visit and they asked if we could provide them with the operational funds to do an investigative reporting in Central Java. This is how we cultivate friendship; this is how we run things.\textsuperscript{215}

As this observation suggests, various actors are involved in “institutionalized” predatory practices against migrant workers. The involvement of rogue journalists in the criminal enterprise partly explains why the domestic media spends more time reporting the abuses Indonesian migrant workers experience \textit{abroad} than those they suffer within their home country. But the study by Wahyudi suggests that in 2002 the crime rate against Indonesian migrant workers is at least as high in Indonesia as it is abroad.

The enthusiasm with which the GOI encourages transnational labor migration on the one hand and its hesitancy to safeguard Indonesian migrant workers’ interests on the other demand an explanation. This combination of attitudes indicates an attempt on the

\textsuperscript{213} Wahyudi, “Kejahatan Terorganisasi,” ibid., 242-71.
\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 241-42.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid., 243.
part of the GOI to ensure Indonesian migrants’ competitiveness in the international labor market, where the buyers prefer cheaper, weaker, and less-protected workers. It is no wonder therefore that every time they are confronted with cases of Indonesian migrants suffering from abuse and other related problems overseas, the GOI’s representatives respond in an impulsive, defensive way by claiming that the workers have brought the problems on themselves, adding that such cases are rare and negligible. For a typical example, consider the Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda’s statement in August 2009 in response to the plight of hundreds of Indonesian migrants who, after fleeing their abusive employers, were forced to live for months without proper ID in makeshift encampments day and night underneath flyovers in Jeddah:

> By displaying themselves, exhibiting themselves, in Saudi Arabia’s main thoroughfares, they were trying to get themselves arrested by the police so they could get free housing, free meal, and free flight home.\(^{216}\) […] With their luggage ready [by their side], they were staging an unseemly demonstration in other people’s country.\(^{217}\)

> Only a small minority of middle-class labor NGO activists make sustained efforts to protect the rights of Indonesian migrant workers. The bulk of the Indonesian middle-classes care little about the plight of migrant workers in particular and that of the working class in general. There are members of the middle classes who look with embarrassment at fellow citizens who happen to be migrant workers, especially if they think these


workers behave in a manner that soils Indonesia’s reputation overseas. A letter to the editor in the daily *Kompas* on November 2, 1997 is a fine example of such an attitude. The author complained about what he saw as the unseemly way the minister of manpower had treated returning “illegal” migrant workers:

Dear Minister of Manpower, Mr. Abdul Latif. […] We should not have welcomed returning illegal migrant workers by hanging a garland of flowers around their necks. This treatment should be reserved for those who have boosted the fame of our nation abroad. What these illegal migrant workers did was give the misleading impression overseas that ours is a nation that knows neither discipline nor rules.²¹⁸

Discipline and compliance with regulation seem to constitute the writer’s core values. These, I argue, are among the key values championed by the Indonesian middle-classes in the New Order. Like many other members of the middle classes, the writer worried more about the indiscipline that migrant workers exhibited than about the abuses they suffered abroad.²¹⁹

### 3. The Difficulty of Bringing Money Home

In their quest for higher status, greater income, or a more meaningful life, many Indonesian women are willing to court danger as migrant workers. The media at home and abroad, as well as numerous studies by NGO activists and university students, have reported that at many points in the journey from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia, some returning migrants lost their hard-earned money through corruption, swindling, extortion,

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²¹⁸ Soewondo, “TKI Bermasalah Bukan Pahlawan” [Illegal migrant workers are not heroes], *Kompas*, November 2, 1997.

²¹⁹ I must admit that before I undertook this study, my own attitude toward Indonesian migrant workers was strikingly similar to that of the man whose letter to the editor is quoted above. It is perhaps because we belong to the same middle class that underwent expansion during the Soeharto administration (1966-98).
A few even lost their lives at the hands of bandits. Aware of such a danger, my informants handled their funds with greater care than did their unfortunate counterparts. Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih relied on two of the safest ways of sending home the greater part of their wages: at first they used bank draft; later on they did wire transfer. Sarinah recalled that her boss and madam would drive her to a Saudi bank whenever she needed to do a wire transfer or to purchase and send a bank draft to her husband. In this regard, Ratih’s experience was similar to Sarinah’s.

In their journey home from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia, all my three informants recalled that they carried the remainder of their funds in two forms: traveler’s check and cash. It was their employers who helped them buy the checks. They brought just enough cash to defray travel-related expenses and they split the money into several portions which they concealed behind different parts of the clothes they were wearing or put in the luggage they were carrying. This was to reduce the risk of losing all the money they had in case they were targeted by criminals.

I show these details about money handling to contend that some women migrants learned to use several tactics for protecting their hard-earned money. This minimized the loss they might suffer in the event of an unfortunate encounter with criminals or corrupt officials. The tactics constituted the arts of survival they had to practice in local, national, and international settings that had failed to provide people like them with effective

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220 See an excellent study by Sri Suari Wahyudi, “Kejahatan Terorganisasi terhadap TKI pada Tahap Pemulangan dari Luar Negeri dan Penanganannya oleh Polri” [Organized crime against Indonesian migrant workers: From the day they arrive in Indonesia to the day the policy investigate the crime] (master’s thesis, Universitas Indonesia, 2002).
protection. In many cases, the Indonesian government has failed to protect women whom it has encouraged to undertake transnational labor migration. One way a few governments promote the export of their migrant workers and downplay the maltreatment that some of them suffer is by celebrating them as “national heroes.” This is the trick the governments of the Philippines and Indonesia have been doing for a few years.

4. The Dangerous Journeys from the Airport to Home Village

Of all the international airports in Java, Juanda in Surabaya is actually the closest one to my informants’ home village in Kediri. The distance between the two places is 75 miles, about a three-hour drive. Yet most of my informants chose to arrive at Sukarno-Hatta in Jakarta for two reasons. First, they thought it was the only port of entry in the country for international flights. Second, one of them considered it to be less crime-infested than Juanda. By entering Indonesia through Jakarta, they ended up taking a much longer journey home because the distance between Jakarta and Kediri is 431 miles, almost six times the distance from Surabaya to Kediri. If they went by bus or charted car, it took one or two days to reach their home village in Kediri, depending on how scattered were the final destinations of the other passengers.221

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221 The trip by land from Jakarta to Kediri takes fifteen to twenty hours, depending on the means of transportation, its class, and the volume of the traffic. In general, train is faster than bus. For example, the first-class train takes twelve hours while the bus of the same class takes fifteen hours. See the official site of Kereta Api Indonesia, “Beranda Jadwal KA” [Train schedule], June 22, 2010, accessed June 21, 2010, http://www.kereta-api.co.id/?option=com_jadwal.

222 Migrant workers usually take a bus or a charted car available at the airport. These means of transportation were purported to be specially designated for migrant workers.
Upon their arrival at the Sukarno-Hatta Airport, regular international passengers and returning migrant workers received different treatments. While the regular passengers must go to Terminal 2 only, the migrant workers should proceed to both this and Terminal 3. Why this different treatment? The GOI has argued that Terminal 3 is intended as a special service lounge to honor migrant workers and protect them from crimes. It was built by the Manpower Minister’s decree of August 31, 1999 and opened by President B. J. Habibie in September 1999.\(^{223}\) Despite this noble intention, Terminal 3 ends up working in ways that cause two sets of problem for returning migrant workers: (1) greater inconvenience in terms of time, energy, and money; and (2) greater exposure to extortion and other crimes.

The moment Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih arrived at Terminal 2, they stood in line facing a row of immigration counters, greeted by white neon signs saying, “Selamat datang, pahlawan devisa,” which means “Welcome, foreign exchange heroes” (see figure 9). Later in Terminal 3, they underwent a series of tiresome treatments required by the police and the Department of Labor. The police officers double-checked their luggage while the officials from the Department of Labor registered them. The police justified this extra examination of the baggage by saying that it was meant to ensure its safety.\(^{224}\) During their passage through Terminal 3, my informants were charged various fees, including one for the porter and bus services. For example, in 2005 for porter services, Terminal 3 charged migrant workers a costly fee of IDR 25,000. The airport authorities

\(^{223}\) Wahyudi, “Kejahatan Terorganisasi,” 81; Saad, *Panduan Buruh Migran*, 45.

\(^{224}\) Saad, *Panduan Buruh Migran*, 43.
justified the charging of special fees at Terminal 3 by saying that it was meant to raise funds to subsidize returning migrant workers who happened to face problems such as the non-payment of wages, deportation, or early dismissal. Moreover, migrant workers also had to spend a long time at the terminal, ranging from one day to two weeks, waiting for the next flight, ship, bus, or rental car to bring them home. My informants, however, remembered having to wait only several hours before they found the means of

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225 Ibid. See also Wahyudi, “Kejahatan Terorganisasi,” 115. She noted that in 2002 migrant workers were charged a porting fee of IDR 8,000.
226 Saad, Panduan Buruh Migran, 43.
transportation they needed. Terminal 3 was really hectic; in early April 2002, for example, an average of nine hundred migrant workers arrived there per day.  

Increased inconvenience was not the only problem with Terminal 3. Several studies have revealed that the terminal has become a fertile ground for various crimes against returning migrant workers. Upon their entry into the site, they are exposed to extortion by immigration officials, money changers, telephone operators, and airport porters. These findings are confirmed by the testimonies of my informants. As Ratih recalled in December 2009,  

The situation [at Sukarno-Hatta International Airport] was going too far [kenemenen]. Too many people charged us illegal fees. Many wore uniform. When we arrived at the airport, we were directed to a special place for returning migrant workers [Terminal 3]. At this special lounge, travel agents pestered us to use their transportation service to bring us home. In addition, from here to the bus, there were way too many [porters]

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227 Wahyudi, “Kejahatan Terorganisasi,” 77.  
228 Ibid.; see also Indonesia Research Team, Underpayment.  
who handled our baggage, all charging us for every single bit of their service. Things were different in Saudi Arabia. People were glad to help you there; none of them asked for money.

How do Indonesian migrant workers act out their agency in a predatory social system like this? The conversations I had with my informants have revealed that they are capable of developing a few defensive tactics. First, they tried their best to avoid any contact with suspicious people. Second, if contact was inevitable, they told the strangers at the airport that they brought no cash with them.

Many guys approached me at the terminal and they were like, “Do you have a gift from abroad for me, sis? Can you spare me some change? One riyal or two will do.” I kept saying to these people, “I am sorry but I have no money.” Had I complied with requests like these, I would have gone bankrupt before I reached my home.

Not all migrant workers were as streetwise as Ratih; some were simply naïve. Lestari, for example, did not even know she was being charged fraudulent fees at the airport; she was unaware that she was overcharged for the service she received, saying that it was how things were in Indonesia.

Crimes against returning migrant workers are not confined to international airports such as Sukarno-Hatta, Adisumarmo, and Juanda. The threat of crime hovers over their trip from these airports to their home villages in Java. The Indonesian media still abounds in news about returnees being robbed on their journey home; some were left
penniless on the roadside; others were still lying unconscious on the pavement when pedestrians found them; still others were killed, their bodies dumped in the woods.  

The major routes between Jakarta and numerous districts throughout Java remain dotted with crime-infested areas well-known to drivers, passengers, and the police. A returning migrant, who became a victim of robbery, recalled that the route he happened to take was infested with gangsters. In 2004, the chief of Central Java regional police admitted that there were about twenty-seven crime-prone points along the major route on the north coast alone. The number of the crime-ridden zones is on the rise. For example, in 2008, the regional police reported that one segment of the north coast route—that which stretches from Batang and Brebes—had fifty-one such points.

A set of physical features make particular segments in the route attractive for criminals to use as their zones of operation. For example, gangsters are known to target those segments of the trans-Java highway that are hilly, winding, dark, and far removed from housing areas. Robbers lie in wait in such spots for their victims. Thus, for mutual

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231 Wahyudi, “Kejahatan Terorganisasi.”


protection against highway robbers, inter-provincial truck drivers in Java prefer to travel in convoy. They do this also to guard against the bajing loncat (Javanese for “jumping squirrels”): those thieves who “waylay vehicles on a long journey.”

The police do their best to make the crime-infested areas safer only at certain times in a year, especially on and around the Id al-Fitr. On these days Muslims go mudik, which causes the traffic to triple in volume, leaving the trans-Java highway flooded by about sixty-two thousand cars and sixty-four thousand motorbikes a day. To protect the travelers, the police go so far as to station special forces in what usually are crime-ridden areas.

Aware of the danger they might face during their journey home, some returning migrant workers took the precautions against robbery. They took stock of the alternatives

\[^{234}\text{Christopher Torchia, Indonesian Idioms and Expressions: Colloquial Indonesian at Work (Singapore: Tuttle, 2007), 14.}\]

\[^{235}\text{Mudik is the practice among Muslims in Indonesia of traveling from the city where they live and work back to their town or village of origin. They go mudik on the few days in Ramadan before the ‘Id al-Fitr to celebrate this holiday together with their relatives. Since millions do so on the same days, the daily inter-provincial traffic by air, sea, and land triple in volume. Afterwards, during the week right after the ‘Id al-Fitr, the same sudden and massive migration occurs in the opposite direction. Indonesians call it arus balik or “counter current.”}\]


they saw available and opted for what seemed to them the safest mode of transportation. While some went home by the airport bus specially designated for returning migrants, others traveled by one of the official airport shuttles. Both types of services could be requested at the terminal’s counters. Though the buses and shuttles promised safe trip home, the sad fact is that some of the drivers they employed were really crooks. We can see how Ratih and Sarinah exercise their agency in this regard. The passage below presents Ratih’s memory of her journey from Jakarta to Plosoklaten:

I returned in 2008. My travel companions [in Java] were fellow migrants whose villages of origin were different from mine. We chartered a minibus to carry us home from [Sukarno-Hatta]. There were twelve of us: three from Kediri; nine from various places in Central Java. There was a long discussion among us before we went to the travel counter [at Terminal 3] and rented a minibus from the shuttle service. Each of us must pay IDR 470,000 but they provided no meals. From time to time, the driver made a stop at a restaurant where we could buy our own meals. The official at the travel counter told us not to pay additional fees in case the driver asked for them during the trip. However, in the middle of the trip, the driver and his assistant demanded we pay another IDR 500,000 per person. We said “no,” reminding them we had already paid the fares at the counter. The driver went mad. We were afraid he would hurt us. We were in the middle of nowhere at the time. So we gave him the money. What else could we have done?

Sarinah’s and Lestari’s experiences were similar to Ratih’s. Sarinah shared with me the following story:

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238 This was an exorbitant rate. For comparison, the Jakarta-Kediri bus fares in the same year cost only IDR 80,000 (economy class) and IDR 200,000 (first-class). The economy buses served no meal but stopped at restaurants where passengers could buy their own meals. The executive buses, by contrast, provided air conditioning, a restroom, pillows, blankets, breakfast, and dinner. In mid-2008, 1 USD was equal to about IDR 9,308.40. See Direktorat Jendral Bea dan Cukai, “Informasi Kurs Terbaru” [Updated exchange rate], accessed August 26, 2010, http://www.beacukai.go.id/rates/exchRateID.php.
My return home was in 1993. The plane landed in Jakarta at Sukarno-Hatta. A group of officials approached me…and arranged my travel from the airport to my home village. They had waited for us; they picked us up at the exit area; and they guided us. I took a bus with about fifty-five fellow returning migrants, all heading to East Java. In the middle of the trip, the driver charged us [an extra fee of] IDR 150,000. We refused to pay but the driver got furious. To avoid further trouble, I gave him what he asked for. After all, Jakarta-Kediri was a very long trip and I did not know directions. What if something [bad] happened to us during the trip?

[...] I learned from this bad experience. In my second trip home from Saudi Arabia, I changed tactic. I opted for another mode of transportation. This time, with a few fellow migrants, I chartered a car. We paid all the fares at the travel counter at [Terminal 3]. Yet in the middle of the trip, the driver demanded that we pay another IDR 100,000 per head. The minibus was filled beyond its capacity; too many passengers, too much luggage, were packed on it like sardines. I could not move; my legs were numb; my travel bag was on my lap. The passengers petered out, as we went along, and I had more and more space. It took me two days to reach my village.

Although Sarinah changed her tactics in dealing with the crooks at the airport, this was to no avail. The organized crime at work at Sukarno-Hatta was far more complicated than she could possibly imagine. The only thing she thought she could do in such a situation was minimize the loss she might suffer and the danger she might face for the rest of the trip. Had she refused to give the driver what he wanted, the man could have become more violent, ending up killing or raping her. Typically, before demanding extra charges, rogue drivers would stop the vehicle late at night and in the middle of nowhere.

239 The men might have been criminals wearing uniforms to impersonate airport officials.
240 In 1993, 1 USD was worth IDR 2,063. See “Index Valuta Asing” [Exchange rate index], *Kompas*, January 2, 1993.
The experiences of Sarinah and Ratih show that faced with the threat of crime, these women did exercise their agency. They did so, however, in ways that—in the long run—work against migrant workers in general. They succeeded, no doubt, in fending off larger financial and physical losses they could otherwise have suffered. However, if seen from a broader perspective, the methods of survival they employed did little or nothing in the way of removing the exploitative practices in the social systems that many must pass through during their international migration.

**Rejoining the Village Community**

Several studies have investigated the economic effects that remittances have on the families of migrant workers, their village communities, and their countries.\(^{242}\) To begin with, some returning migrants and their families enjoy better quality of life than they had before.\(^{243}\) It makes sense: taken altogether, the amount of money involved is massive. For example, consider the district of Tulungagung, one of the largest senders of migrant workers in East Java. In 2001 alone, the remittances the district received from its migrant workers overseas reached IDR 175 billion, over eight times its annual revenue of


IDR 20 billion.\textsuperscript{244} The same thing is observable in other labor-exporting districts in the province of West Nusatenggara.\textsuperscript{245}

Through the money they earned abroad, the lives of Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih changed for the better. As some of their fellow migrant workers did in Java\textsuperscript{246} and Nusatenggara, they invested their earnings in ways that in the long run increased their overall well-being: they renovated their houses, purchased plots of farmland, started up small-business enterprises, and put their children through school. Lestari, for example, renovated the house of her parents and built her own. She also bought at least two plots of land to grow rice and sugarcane. In addition, she and her husband began raising chickens and cows. As for Sarinah, she spent her money not only on land and a house makeover, but also on her children’s education. Her son, for example, finished high school and now works as a security guard in an international agribusiness firm in Plosoklaten. She is glad that her son has enjoyed a much better education than hers. Ratih’s success story is similar to those of Lestari and Sarinah. Her husband used some of the money she sent him to improve their house. She recalled how happy she was in Abha, Saudi Arabia when she saw the photograph of their newly renovated house, which her husband sent her. Upon her return to Pranggang, she started a seed-breeding business on a plot of land next to her house.

As far as the village of Pranggang is concerned, it should be noted that my informants’ success stories do not represent isolated cases. Despite failure stories one

\textsuperscript{244} Tim Litbang Kompas, \textit{Profil Daerah: Kabupaten dan Kota} [Profiles of regions: districts and cities], vol. 2 (Jakarta: Kompas, 2003), 454.
\textsuperscript{245} Sukamdi, Satriawan, and Haris, “Impact of Remittances,” 155.
\textsuperscript{246} Tobing, and others, \textit{Perjalanan Nasib}, 12-16.
often hears and reads elsewhere, my own observations as well as my interviews with the village head, his assistants, and other villagers have revealed only three migrant workers who “did not make it” (gagal), meaning that their hard work overseas did not improve their lot. My investigation revealed an interesting pattern: the majority of the returning migrants there spent their money in this order of priority: (a) house renovation, (b) purchase of farmland, (c) acquisition of means of transportation (mostly motorcycle). A small minority of them were enterprising enough to start a small business.

In their interviews, these women suggested that food, clothing, and shelter are necessary but not enough to make their lives meaningful; they also expressed a need for a sense of respect, which they sought to achieve by boosting their prestige in the eyes of their neighbors. To do so, they have used a number of different tactics. Lestari and Sarinah resorted to gift giving. Prior to their return to Indonesia, they purchased some souvenir items in Saudi Arabia such as clothes and jewelry. Once they arrived at their village, they handed out gifts to their close relatives. An even more effective way for them to heighten their prestige was by owning a larger, stronger, and more modern-looking house (see figures 11; see also figure 10 for a house that has not been renovated). A house like these gives them a sense of pride and of accomplishment. It serves as a symbol of status and boosts the prestige of her family in the village community (see figure 12). Still another tactic was for them to point out their capacity to afford a more
Figure 10. The not yet renovated house of a Pranggang woman currently working in Saudi Arabia.

Figure 11. A house in Pranggang renovated with funds that its owner saved by working in Saudi Arabia.
expensive flight from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia. Sarinah took delight in reiterating this story in our interviews:

> When I went back home, I flew Garuda [Indonesian Airways]. It was more costly than other airlines. My madam offered me a cheaper flight but I was like, “No, no, no. Could you please buy me the costlier flight with Garuda? It will go directly to Jakarta.”

Besides changing their living standards and social status, the transnational labor migration these women undertook widened their life’s horizon, strengthened their bargaining position vis-à-vis their husbands, and increased their control over family resources. Working and living for a while in Saudi Arabia opened my informants’ eyes to at least one different form of gender relations. This exposure enabled them to see in a comparative perspective the wife-husband relations in their own households. As a result, these began to appear relative and open to some changes. In this regard, Sarinah had an interesting recollection to share.

> Once married, Saudi women stay home, eating and sleeping; there was no need for them to work. Married women in Indonesia are different; they face tons of problems, having to make sacrifices so their households survive. As if that was not enough, they have to put up with their husband’s nasty words. But the law [shari’ah] is the same here in Indonesia as it is in Saudi Arabia: it says that husbands must not neglect their wives; that men must never make life hard for women. Indonesian husbands are the most laid-back in the world. To make ends meet, Indonesian women are willing to help their husbands make a living.

Ratih also shares a similar story:

> In Saudi Arabia, the husbands controlled all the money. They took care of all purchases. The wives just asked for things they needed, which their husbands would deliver to them. If they wanted makeup, they just pick up the stuff at the mall and their husbands would pay for it at the cashier. I often saw how wives could shop to their heart’s content. They did not
have to worry about expenses. It was their husbands’ job to make money. The husband must provide for all the needs of his wife. He must put ready-to-eat food on the table. The wife need not prepare meals for the family. With my own eyes, I often saw how husbands shopped alone at the local market for cooking ingredients such as shallot and garlic. To my surprise, they even shopped for menstrual pads for their wives.

However, as Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih soon realized, the downside to the Saudi gender-relations was that the wives did not enjoy freedom of movement in the public sphere. They were to spend the bulk of their daily life indoors as they were forbidden to travel outdoors without their husband or a mahram to escort them. In contrast, though Indonesian women fared worse financially, they fared better in terms of the freedom of movement; they were free to move around in their village, free to visit their neighbors and shoot the breeze almost any time during the day. In addition, Muslim women in Indonesia were not to follow as strict a dress code as their Saudi counterparts. My informants admitted that they did not like the Saudi dress style. It did not fit in with what they saw as Indonesian culture (*budaya* Indonesia). As Sarinah expressed,

> Actually, my first madam recommended that upon my return to Indonesia I keep wearing *abaya*. I did not think it was a good idea. It would scare people off. Indonesian culture is different. Do you know Sister Robiah? [turning to the author’s aunt]. She wears *abaya* and a face cover. People are afraid of her, aren’t they? It is [religiously] advisable to put on a face cover. But it so goes against Indonesian tradition that its wearer will end up a laughingstock.

Having considered the pros and cons, my informants made up their mind that it was better to be Indonesian than Saudi women.

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247 A *mahram* is a male relative who a woman is forbidden to marry.
Some studies have discovered that one of the consequences of working overseas is that it may change women migrant workers’ bargaining positions vis-à-vis their husbands, parents, and siblings.\(^{248}\) This finding is confirmed by Lestari’s experience. Owing to the large sum of money she earned abroad, her contribution to her family’s income grew by leaps and bounds, far exceeding that of her husband. As a result, she began to have a greater say in the decision-making processes in her own nuclear family and in the extended family. For example, she told her husband to till their own land and raise cattle rather than work for other people.

Sometimes the change in the household’s balance of power could be extreme. My research assistant Pandu recalled the scene he saw in the mid-1990s:

One afternoon, I sat around and chatted with my friends at a [neighborhood-watch] post in front of a rice-hulling mill. One of these people was a worker at the mill; he was waiting for the payment of his wages. All of sudden, the man’s wife came. She was an ex-migrant worker. She crashed her bike into her husband. Then everyone watched as she slapped him in the face again and again. She said to him, “Now I know how you have squandered our money, hanging around with teenagers like this, huh?” Then she dragged him home just like that. This incident took us by surprise.

Some migrant workers have succeeded in changing their lives for the better; others have not. What made the difference? In my view, the key to success was effective teamwork between wives and husbands in handling of the family funds. Migrants who earn the same sum of money may end up in very different economic scenarios. Some

people are like Sarinah and her husband: they think in a long-term perspective and manage their hard-earned funds wisely by investing in human capital and in productive enterprises. These people “make it.” But others are extravagant and unwilling to delay gratification; they spend most of their money for fun. One example is Sarinah’s sister-in-law and her husband. The money she earned in her seven stints overseas (Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Hong Kong) did not improve her family’s quality of life.

Some Indonesian migrant women are unfortunate enough to have irresponsible husbands who not only cheat on them, but also waste the remittances their wives have sent them.249

**Conclusion**

Contrary to some of the works I critique in Chapter 1, my study of Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih has led me to a rather complex picture of how the agency these women acquired interacted with the social systems surrounding them. As their remembered experiences suggest, agency and the social system have shaped each other in such a way that these women were neither complete losers nor complete winners. In fact, in their own eyes and in those of their neighbors, they are now successful, respectable, middle-class women. This is an accomplishment. Throughout my analysis, they appear as dynamic actors who retained some capacity to shape their future: they were capable of identifying their options, weighing them, and choosing those which they believed would lead them to the best possible outcomes for them and their family.

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As this chapter has revealed, the nation-state and these women themselves attached different meanings to the transnational labor migration they undertook. Government officials, on their part, keep speaking of them as “foreign exchange heroes.” The women themselves did not even know of the slogan, much less care about it. They did not care about how much foreign exchange the government had at its disposal. But they did care about their own and their families’ future. Their dreams were not ones of nation-building but rather “family-building.” It was to make the latter come true that they were willing to suffer much.

In their journey home from Jakarta to Kediri, Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih were faced with corrupt officials and elements of the underworld. This encounter subjected them to different forms of corruption and extortion. In the face of such dangers, they sought to protect their safety and property by exercising their agency in a number of ways that included (a) carrying a small amount of cash in their travels, (b) splitting this amount into several smaller ones, (c) carrying traveler’s checks, (d) polite and firm refusal to strangers who pestered them for money, and (e) compliance with officials, porters, and drivers who charged them illegal, exorbitant fees.

The problem is that some of the methods by which they responded to the corrupt and extortionist practices at international airports in Indonesia may have the unintended effect of reinforcing or reproducing such practices. Gangsters may have long understood that unlike industrial workers, most migrant workers have no unions to protect them and thus will not put up any organized resistance to the extortion and exploitation the underworld commits against them. It is important to keep in mind that criminals, too,
have their agency, which they enact in two critical ways: first, by constantly perfecting their methods of operation;\textsuperscript{250} and second—as the study by Wahyudi has discovered—by organizing themselves into overlapping networks of information-sharing and mutual support and protection in pursuit of their collective goals.

\textsuperscript{250} Wahyudi, “Kejahatan Terorganisir,” 258-61.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The starting point of this study is the contrast between the Indonesian government’s discourse of “foreign exchange heroes” and the reality of women migrant workers’ struggle for a better life for themselves and their families. As my study has discovered, and as I will discuss below, at one level this contrast reveals the discrepancy between nation-building and, for lack of a better word, “family-building.” At a deeper level, however, the contrast points to a significant link between the two; it shows that the government is still far from achieving one of the goals of Indonesia’s nation-building as stated in the Preamble of the Constitution of 1945: a just and prosperous society (masyarakat adil dan makmur).

The government of Indonesia (GOI) extolls Indonesian migrant workers as “foreign exchange heroes” in appreciation of the central role they play in the country’s economy. Not only do their remittances provide the GOI with foreign exchange, but their employment overseas also helps alleviate unemployment and poverty in Indonesia. The GOI has decided to keep relying on labor export as one of the pillars of Indonesia’s economic development. It even has gone so far as to treat it as a key factor in “nation-building.” This is why the GOI engages in the heroization of Indonesian migrant workers.

As I have pointed out, over-reliance on labor export for nation-building indicates the GOI’s economic failure. This is exacerbated by legal failure: the GOI does a bad job of protecting the rights of migrant workers. Fierce competition in the international labor market has made the GOI reluctant to ratify the ILO Convention on Migrant Workers. When, as a result of this lack of protection, many Indonesian migrants suffer exploitation
and maltreatment abroad, heroization can “neutralize” the problem by resorting to the nation-building discourse of foreign exchange heroes. This discourse makes suffering seem normal: it is normal for heroes to suffer and even die so that the nation can survive.

However, the phenomenon of transnational labor migration looks richer and more complex as soon as it is seen from below, that is, from the perspective of migrant workers themselves. They have different stories to tell; they attach personal meanings to their experiences. These people’s accounts and experiences of their migration are connected to, but in many ways are also more than, the story of nation-building. Whereas government officials speak about them as “foreign exchange heroes,” they themselves conduct their migration for their own purposes. Although the remittances they send home have the unintended consequence of helping the GOI’s balance of payment, this is never the driving force behind their migration. What compels them to struggle and work overseas is a dream of a better life; it is a dream about “family-building.”

**The Social System and the Agency of Women Migrant Workers**

If we really want to understand their migration, we must take the personal dreams of migrant workers seriously, examining them in juxtaposition with the national dream. In compliance with C. Wright Mill’s advice, we must correlate biography and society, examining the two in local, national, and global contexts. By doing so, we are able to pay equal attention to the social system and human agency and to their interaction.

There are a number of factors that cause many Indonesian women to work overseas as housemaids. Internationally, petro dollars have enabled oil-rich countries such as Saudi Arabia to undertake economic modernization, which, in turn, has led to the
growth of their middle classes as well as the transformation of their households and ways of life. Meanwhile, Indonesia’s economic growth has become slower since the end of the oil boom. To make matters worse, the labor market has not been able to accommodate the growth of manpower. Viewing a labor shortage in the Middle East as an opportunity to overcome its economic problems, the GOI began to encourage citizens to work overseas.

After successfully alleviating economic troubles by sending migrant workers overseas, the GOI continues to perceive labor export as an attractive solution. While many Indonesian citizens in towns and cities have enjoyed prosperity as a result of economic development, many in villages have remained poor. The social system has offered few options for undereducated women to enjoy wealth. Unable to provide enough jobs in the country, the government has encouraged these women to work overseas. While the government has promoted migration as a means to achieve prosperity, people from rural areas have begun to view it as an opportunity for them to change their life. The success of early migrant workers has encouraged other women to follow suit, with migration quickly becoming one of the fastest ways of gaining wealth.

To become housemaids, however, women must face many challenges. Many sending and receiving countries do not acknowledge housemaids as a type of worker and therefore exclude them from labor laws. These countries refuse to ratify the ILO Convention on Migrant Workers. As a result, there are no legal protections for migrant workers’ rights. Migrant workers suffer many forms of exploitation and abusive treatment from actors who attempt to take advantage of them, including foreign employers, recruitment agencies, middlemen and government officials. In Saudi Arabia,
cultural traditions have prevented the state from regulating the maximum number of working hours for housemaids, exposing them to exploitation. The country did not abolish slavery until 1962, and parents continued teaching their children to view their society as perfect and to look at foreign domestic workers as less civilized than themselves.\textsuperscript{251} This has contributed to the tendency among Saudi employers to treat their housemaids abusively, considering them as modern-day slaves. In Indonesia, the government is unable to properly protect female laborers throughout the entire migrant employment process. Despite such conditions, many women are still interested in working overseas. They use many methods to overcome the obstacles they face before, during, and after international labor migration.

My study of three returned women migrant workers from Kediri, East Java has produced a complex picture of how their agency interacts with the social systems surrounding migrant work. In line with Giddens’ argument that all social actors, without any exception, have the capacity to execute independent thought and action,\textsuperscript{252} my research has revealed that women migrant workers are not only victims of the existing social system but also capable of exercising their agency. In their attempt to achieve prosperity and respect, my informants are dynamic social actors capable of strategic and independent thinking. They make assessments of needs and opportunities, actively evaluate the pros and cons of their options, execute long-term plans, and independently make decisions. Furthermore, they make calculated efforts to attain what they see as a

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better life by using, modifying, and reproducing the rules and resources available in society. These migrant workers are able to exercise their agency using different “methods” in various situations. At the family level, they engage in negotiations with husbands, parents, and children in order to be able to work overseas. They do a little research on things necessary for international labor migration such as information on opportunities of working overseas, contact persons, and local recruitment agents, as well as loan sources to pay for job training fees. Women migrant workers also consider whether they would go by the book to obtain their documents or whether they would cut corners. During their job training, they enact their agency by willingly working without pay for the recruiting agencies and collaborating with them by covering up their labor law violations. They are also capable of exercising their agency in various ways in the workplace abroad and during their journey back home to their village.

Some of the ways in which Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih have enacted their agency empowered them while other ways hurt them. Some of these methods helped them achieve their goals and protected them from violence as well as minimized losses. They were willing to use the calo (middlemen) service to speed up documentation processing and pay exorbitant fees to drivers during their journey back home. These choices resulted in a number of unintended consequences, such as maintaining and reproducing such corrupt practices. In the long run, these choices might have encouraged further oppression and strengthened the bargaining position of some actors of the predatory practices vis-à-vis migrant workers.
**Heroization of Migrant Workers**

It is interesting to note the way in which the Indonesian government has attempted to save the nation by promoting labor migration. Labor migration has enabled the government to cope with economic problems since the beginning of the 1980s. It benefits from sending migrant workers overseas as they contribute to the country’s balance of payment, but it remains reluctant to protect the workers. In return for what migrant workers have contributed to the country, the government hails them as foreign exchange heroes. This means that the government seeks to sacrifice migrant workers for nation-building. The heroization of migrant workers seems to be part of the nation-building project.

Indonesian history shows that this policy is not new. In the past, even before Indonesia gained its independence, the nationalist leaders were willing to sacrifice Indonesian workers to achieve freedom. In 1943, Soekarno—who later became the first president of the republic—sent thousands of Indonesian male laborers called *romushas* overseas to help Japan’s war effort by building infrastructure. Japan promised to pay them and praised them as “Heroes of Labor.” Nonetheless, the fact remains that severe exploitation caused many of them to meet their deaths. It was estimated that about 200,000 to 500,000 men were forced to serve as *romushas* and only 70,000 of them survived. Soekarno received criticism for having sent these people to their deaths. In defense of his policy, he deployed nationalist discourse and said, “There are casualties in

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every war. A commander-in-chief’s job is to win the war even if it means losing a few battles on the way. If I must sacrifice thousands to save millions, I will. We are in a struggle for survival. As leader of this country, I cannot afford the luxury of sensitivity.”

In the New Order, even before using the slogan of “foreign exchange heroes” to rationalize the sufferings of migrant workers overseas, the GOI had justified its bad treatment of the teachers it employed by extolling them as “Heroes without Decoration.” The GOI realized the central role that teachers played in nation-building and economic development but it also realized that it could not provide them with decent wages. In return for their sufferings, the GOI praised the teachers as national heroes. By employing the heroization discourse, the government accomplished a few objectives. First, it normalized the sufferings of the citizens involved: it was normal and even admirable that heroes suffered and died for their country and for future Indonesians. Some heroes died in the military struggle for independence; others died of abuses while working overseas either as romusha forced laborers or as migrant house servants. Some heroes were much luckier in that they did not have to die to serve their country; they just suffered economic exploitation and various forms of maltreatment either as teachers or migrant domestic workers.

Indonesia is not unique in this regard. In India and Pakistan, for example, people who died of Partition violence at the time of independence represent “sacrificial martyrs

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255 Soekarno, and Adams, Sukarno: An autobiography, 193.
to the Pakistani national cause.”

It is as if the victims of the Partition had been nothing but a sort of human fertilizer necessary to the growth of the nation-state of Pakistan. The Pakistani government once claimed that “the history of Partition” is “one of martyrdom, courage, and victimhood.” What such cases suggest is that nation-building remains an ambivalent project; it inspires love and hatred; it both unifies and divides communities; and it involves ongoing internal struggle over power, resources, and identity.

Limitations of This Study and Directions for Further Research

This study has some limitations we should consider in order to put its findings in a proper perspective. Since I did my field research for less than a month, I should acknowledge that the data I collected for my research was far from sufficient. Furthermore, it was in the last week of my fieldwork that my informants began to open up to me by telling me their more intimate stories. Had I done my research longer, my data would have been richer than the material I present in this thesis. The life histories I wrote of my informants would have been more complete; I would have included their childhood and adolescence, for example. I could also have worked with more informants who were more cooperative. In this study, one of my informants was rather reticent throughout the research I did in the village; she told me too little about herself. Ideally, I should have worked with a more open, more cooperative informant than she was.

My fieldwork in Pranggang was rather too short for real ethnographic research to take place. Although staying a month in the village enabled me to begin building rapport

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257 Ibid., 201.
with the locals and getting the feel of the village community, it was far from enough time to even know the community, never mind to achieve an ethnographic understanding of it. Ironically, the day I left the village was actually the very day I felt that my informants and the community had begun to accept me. A better ethnographic study of the people of Pranggang would require at least one year of participant observation.

Recommendations

This study has led to the conclusion that some of the causes of the exploitation and abuses that migrant workers experienced in Saudi Arabia include (1) lack of legal protection for migrant workers both in Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, (2) the exclusion of domestic workers from labor laws, (3) the immigration policy in Saudi Arabia that binds migrant workers to their employers and allowed the latter to hold the former’s passports, (4) the absence of migrant workers’ labor unions, and (5) the willingness of migrant workers to cut corners in obtaining their travel documents.

Based on these research findings, I recommend that, with the help of independent trade unions from other sectors, migrant workers should start organizing themselves by establishing independent unions. Not having labor unions to protect them, migrant workers remain incapable of organized collective actions in defense of their rights. This is a serious problem as some of the social actors that exploit or maltreat them have their own informal or formal organizations. For example, the crimes against migrant workers are committed by members of organized crime networks who protect one another and constantly perfect their modus operandi. In contrast, most migrant workers have no unions to protect them; they thus remain incapable of putting up any organized resistance
to the extortion and exploitation the underworld keeps on committing against them. Therefore, establishing trade unions would contribute greatly to helping them overcome their problems.

Second and finally, my study has revealed that some types of crime are the unintended consequences of the ways in which migrant workers have exercised their agency. It is advisable that prospective migrant workers not cut corners because practices such as exorbitant fees charged by middlemen would not exist if there are no people who use their service. Prospective migrant workers should follow the legal procedure to obtain their travel documents. If the legal procedure is unfair or inefficient, the unions of migrant workers should launch a prolonged, organized, collective action to pressure the government to reform the procedure.


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APPENDIX A
APPENDIX B

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

Project Title: Foreign-Exchange Heroes? The Life Histories of Three Indonesian Women Migrant Workers

Primary Investigator: Nurchayati Nurchayati

Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: Haley Duschinski

Department: Southeast Asian Studies

Rebecca Cale

Rebecca Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

Approval Date: 11/19/10

Expiration Date: 11/20/09

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.