

were mostly dominated by the lower middle class. Data from the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia (2020) reported that from March to June 2020, 5.970 women in the informal sectors were laid off, resulting in a drastic drop in household income.

An equally vulnerable group with large diasporas worldwide was the Indonesian migrant workers. They were affected significantly by the pandemic and the lockdown policy in the host country. Based on the 2019 data released by GoI through Indonesia's National Agency for Placement and Protection Migrant Workers (BNP2TKI)—whose official name changed to the Indonesia Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI) in 2020, the number of legal and documented Indonesian migrant workers abroad was 276,553, with women workers dominating at 69% (191,237 people). Women workers were hit the hardest. As of June 2020, 70.4% of the total 32.401 migrant workers who returned to their home countries were women (Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020).

In the host countries, the problems experienced by migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic include: work termination, late salary payment, lower salary than agreed, suspended salary payment, long working hours, heavy workload, no overtime allowance, no days off, contracting COVID-19 from their employers, and not having health insurance. Some of them are also faced with immigration problems such as visa and work permit expiration, as well as travel restrictions, language barriers, and uncertainty arising from the crises (ILO, 2020, p. 12). Meanwhile, all migration cycles from pre-departure, work placement, to homecoming also needed safeguarding. Therefore, the GoI took decisive steps to handle the workers' returns during the pandemic and temporarily suspended the entire work placement of the Indonesian

migrant worker candidates at the destination countries starting on March 20, 2020 (Nugroho, 2021, p. 49).

Previous studies have examined the issues faced by Indonesian migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Purnama and Susanna (2020) discuss the community's response to the PSBB policy and peoples' negative perceptions of migrant workers. These workers were prohibited from returning to their hometowns, especially near the end of Ramadhan month (April-May 2020). This finding is in line with the research study by Octastefani (2020), describing how GoI banned *mudik* (returning to hometown for the Eid holiday), fearing that the COVID-19 transmissions would increase rapidly. These two studies indicate similar negative perceptions across the board. Such negative perceptions mostly stem from the fear of transmission among and from the returned migrant workers who were at risk of international travel, but also for the domestic workers from other regions. A study by World Bank (2020) states that BP2MI facilitated the return of both documented and undocumented migrants from Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The documented migrants faced a lot of problems already, such as the loss of income sources and the expiration of work permits and visas, which could charge them with immigration violations. Undocumented migrant workers were even more vulnerable because they did not have the same protection rights. Since the number of Indonesian women workers in Malaysia was high, BP2MI was expected to act proactively in response to the adverse conditions posed by the pandemic.

Using media coverage, Anam et al. (2021) studied how women migrant domestic workers from Indonesia in Malaysia, and Taiwan coped with the inconvenience in their employment during the pandemic. Other studies from OECD (2020), OCHA (2020), and Lloyd-Sherlock et al. (2020) described the COVID-19 pandemic as

highest numbers of women migrant workers sent back to Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the implementation of the lockdown policy. *Fourth*, almost two-thirds of Banyuwangi women migrant workers came from rural areas, with low-income levels and a greater risk of economic disruption.

To obtain a robust result, this study uses a qualitative descriptive method with data collected from literature studies and in-depth interviews. The secondary data in the literature studies were obtained from newspapers, journals, books, book chapters, and government websites available for the public online, using carefully selected keywords, such as Indonesian migrant workers, Indonesian female migrant workers, migrant workers returning home, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the primary data were collected from in-depth interviews with semi-structured questions. The rationale for using interviews is that this method of producing knowledge about human situations provides unique access to the lived world of the subjects, who, in their own words, describe their activities, experiences, and opinions (Kvale, 2007, p. 9). The key informants were the Indonesian women migrant workers returning to Banyuwangi Regency during the COVID-19 pandemic in the period of April-June 2020, who worked as an informal worker in Taiwan for three years with a legal official document, were economically disadvantaged, had a low level of education (under junior-middle high school), and were married with children. Five key informants were interviewed via WhatsApp Call in November-December 2021. Two key informants lived in Tegaldlimo Village, and three lived in Sembulung Village.

The in-depth interviews were conducted to accommodate the diversity of the profiles of women migrant workers. The nuance cannot be reduced to a single profile since these workers have different personalities, motives, and experience levels (World Bank, 2017, p. 27). The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

vary among these workers, influenced by various factors such as socioeconomic status, educational background, mobility experience, line of work, and age. All data collected from the interviews and literature studies were processed using an interactive model: reducing data, selecting important information, presenting a series of data systematically, and drawing conclusions (Miles et al., 2019).

Results

Before working as migrant workers, most women were housewives who depended on their husbands' daily wages (on average IDR 35,000 / US\$ 2.3) as farm laborers in rural areas. Some of these housewives also worked as seasonal laborers in agriculture (rice, sugarcane, corn, soybeans, coconut, cassava, etc.) with a daily wage of IDR 25,000 (US\$ 1.7). The average income of households was around IDR 1,500,000 (US\$ 100) per month, which was inadequate to meet their daily needs. The motivation to work abroad was to improve the household's economic conditions, as job opportunities in rural areas were limited. Based on data from BNP2TKI in 2019, more than 80% of Indonesian women migrant workers worked in the informal sector, such as domestic workers, babysitters, elderly caregivers, plantation workers, and cleaning services, most of which require similar skills to domestic work at home before migrating. The earning could be up to six times as much, so deciding to work abroad was rational economic (World Bank, 2017).

Working as informal migrant workers was a popular alternative source of livelihood for these married women—a shortcut to breaking the chain of poverty. The reported cases of physical/psychological abuse and sexual harassment to women migrant workers reported by various media did not deter their decisions. Their risk was also greater because they had to leave their families (husband and children), who would depend on their livelihood on the work

contract agreement. With the long-distance family relationship, these women also had to maintain commitment and communication to avoid work-family conflicts. Cases had been reported where husbands filed a divorce or found another woman as their marriage failed due to, among others, communication issues during their wives' employment overseas. Nonetheless, working as a migrant worker was still considered promising. Success stories of those who returned from abroad could also be a source of motivation. Some families have a long history of international migration, where housewives work overseas from generation to generation. With the success stories, they invite others to follow suit.

Before the pandemic, most of these women reported a better economic status after the migration. They brought prosperity to their families and the financial capital to start businesses in their hometowns. They managed and utilized most of their income by sending remittances to their family. Their work was not only for their survival but also for many other family members depending on them. Several changes in lifestyle and family welfare were also visible. *First*, they could meet their daily consumption needs well and adequately. *Second*, the children of migrant workers could access better education and prepare for their future. *Third*, they could make better fashion decisions as they learned from the social and cultural conditions where they worked and lived. *Fourth*, they could accumulate business capital and invest in valuable assets, such as houses, land, vehicles, jewelry/gold, and electronics, all of which aims to improve longer-term livelihoods.

In terms of gender roles in the family, the husbands did the domestic work and child-rearing as the wives lived and worked overseas to provide the main household income. This condition greatly changed the roles and functions of husband and wife and parenting. In terms of husband-

wife relationships, women were no longer subordinated. Women were empowered and perceived as the savior of the family economy by overcoming poverty. Women migrants had louder voices in household decision-making. For example, based on the interview with a key informant, when her family wanted to buy a motorbike, as a breadwinner, she could determine the type, color, brand, and price range of the motorbike to be purchased.

In rural communities, the role of women was shifting from reproductive to productive. Women became breadwinners in the families to sustain the well-being of the family members (by providing daily needs, education, health, and housing). However, men remained the household heads as the communities in rural areas were largely patriarchal. Sociocultural ties were still influenced by the traditional patriarchal system, although it may no longer be relevant as the women stepped up to become the breadwinners in the households. The deteriorating household situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasized this imbalance of roles.

To halt the spread of COVID-19, in early 2020, many countries closed their borders and restricted movement. The global mobility decline at the onset of the pandemic in 2020 had far-reaching impacts on migrant workers worldwide. The virus does not discriminate (ILO, 2020, p. 19) and places everyone at risk. In the early months of the outbreak, vulnerable groups prone to COVID-19 transmission were health workers, people with comorbidities, pregnant women and toddlers, and the elderly. However, as the pandemic progressed, more and more groups of people became vulnerable, including migrant workers.

In early 2020, when COVID-19 began to spread in Indonesia, most of the COVID-19 cases were imported cases, particularly from returned migrant workers. There were 587 confirmed cases and ten deaths among migrant workers in Indonesia (Santia T, 2020

in Harjana et al., 2021, p. 2). Therefore, the arrival of migrant workers was considered a threat. A similar situation also occurred in Banyuwangi, where the transmission of COVID-19 cases was predominantly from the returned migrant workers. From April 2020 to September 2021, the number of Indonesian migrant workers who returned to Banyuwangi was 2,673 people (BP2MI Official Website, 2021). They were required to show a legal health certificate (rRT-PCR/ real-time Reverse Transcriptase-Polymerase Chain Reaction) and other documents stated by the government.

Upon arrival in Indonesia, both central and regional governments required all the returned migrant workers to undergo a strict medical examination and a quarantine in shelters under the regulation of the Ministry of Social Affairs (UN Women, 2020, p. 4; The Jakarta Post, 2020). In Banyuwangi, returnees also self-isolated to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The government facilitated the process by ensuring that the swab-test status was negative for COVID-19 before sending them home to villages in the regency. They were also closely monitored by the COVID-19 task force in the village and the sub-district so that their return home was welcomed by their families and communities with a feeling of security and comfort. Meanwhile, those who tested positive had to undergo isolation in the hospital until they recovered and tested negative. This procedure was carried out to minimize the potential of COVID-19 transmission from returned migrant workers while providing assurance to the community members who responded negatively to their returns.

The COVID-19 situation created a change in social views for migrant workers. Before the pandemic, migrant workers held a high social position and pride in their community. During the pandemic, some family and community members considered them carriers of the COVID-19 virus from foreign countries.

They did not allow migrant workers to return to their homes (Abdullah, 2020, p. 489). This situation was challenging because the community worried their return to their village could transmit the virus. They responded excessively, panicked, and even showed discriminatory treatment and a negative stigma to returning migrant workers, especially when their return coincided with more COVID-19 cases (Banyuwangi Regency entering a red zone). The fear of COVID-19 led to intolerant behavior; for example, community access was strictly forbidden, and those who violated community standards faced severe sanctions (Abdullah, 2020, p. 489).

The Government of Banyuwangi Regency then requested that the community stop stigmatizing migrant workers as 'COVID-19 carriers' because the negative stigma did not only negatively impact migrant workers but also their family members. The returnees had obeyed and followed strict health protocol procedures. In addition, in collaboration with the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) developed a public video campaign to address the stigma against the returning Indonesian migrant workers, titled 'Avoid the Virus, Not the Person' (OCHA, 2020) to protect the mental wellbeing of the returnees.

The effectiveness of COVID-19 handling was crucial because it also determined the economic recovery on the household level. Surviving the crisis was not easy because when migrant workers returned to Indonesia, not all could find an alternative source of livelihood in their villages. Moreover, when they returned home during the pandemic, demands for jobs increased along with the rising unemployment rate, but new jobs were difficult to find. Meanwhile, they had to continue paying loan installments—such as for motorcycles, cars, houses, or land—which had been made before the pandemic. Savings collected from working abroad were dwindling gradually. In

this situation, returning to work as a women migrant worker could be a solution, but the possibility was low. Indonesia's status was high-risk, so the destination countries, with their close-border policy, rejected arrivals from Indonesia.

Based on data from the Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia's press release on October 10, 2021, before the COVID-19 pandemic (2015-2019), the average remittance reached US\$ 9.8 billion per year, most of which came from Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Taiwan. In 2020, there was a 17.5% decline in remittances due to the decline in Indonesian migrant workers' incomes and job terminations in the work destination countries (World Bank, 2020). However, it should be noted that the pandemic disrupted the economy both globally and at the household level. Upon their return to their home country, women migrant workers had to immediately earn emergency income from other sources. In this situation, life adversities became greater. The pandemic has significantly reduced family income, overburdened them, and reduced their space for self-improvement.

For rural communities, the COVID-19 pandemic's socioeconomic impact was severe. Not only they had to deal with the return of migrant workers but also many other workers working in the urban areas who had been laid off. Therefore, the village government had to work hard to protect their communities, especially with the limited availability of village funds to support their protective equipment needs. In this context, the communities tried to protect themselves by implementing a local lockdown while carrying out collective activities (*gotong royong*) to provide necessities to residents affected by COVID-19, such as spraying disinfectants, distributing home-made cloth masks, and establishing guard posts to monitor the mobility of villagers. This was done to protect the village from the outbreak while allowing for good economic resilience. In

the context of a pandemic, rural communities have the advantage of various social capital, which becomes a collective force to encourage socioeconomic recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One common problem for women migrant workers related to their families was how the family managed the remittance (Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, 2020). Before the pandemic, remittances from Indonesian migrant workers contributed to poverty reduction and encouraged savings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, remittances could minimize income shocks and support household consumption (Olivia et al., 2020, p. 165). However, these savings only lasted for a few months because they were not enough to maintain the family's economy in the long term. As such, women migrant workers also had concerns about their families due to the loss of the main income that supported their families at home.

In this transition period, savings from working overseas could cover the daily needs for a short-term period. The women migrant workers were already in situations of vulnerability a few weeks after returning home. They needed time to adapt quickly to the situation. Most returned as more skilled workers with the experience and remittances accumulated from working overseas. They tried to develop their capabilities and used their capital to make a living. However, changing professions or moving to formal jobs was difficult because of their older age, marriage status, and low educational background. One of the key informants said that, for those with low incomes and limited skills, the fear of being exposed to COVID-19 was nothing compared to the fear of being unable to provide for their families. Thus, they continued to work in the informal sector according to their abilities to sustain the family's livelihood. They were not worried about daily consumption because many food sources were available around the

house, for example, a garden with vegetables, fruit, chilies, cassava, and corn, that could be used for daily consumption. Besides, living in the village was cheaper rather than living abroad.

Almost two-thirds of women migrant workers remained economically active after returning home. They gained skills and experience while working abroad, making them more likely to engage in paid work once they return to their hometown. They looked for alternative sources of income by taking advantage of opportunities in rural areas, including individual and collective efforts. There are five ways to earn income individually. *First*, they returned to work as a farm laborer. For many migrants, rural areas, the agricultural sector, and subsistence farming are part of the informal safety net to which they return when times get tough (Kusumaningrum et al., 2021, p. 4). Returning to farm work is also mentioned by Laula and Paddock (2020) in the case of hospitality workers from the tourism sector in Bali. The agricultural and rural areas provide jobs and work areas least affected by COVID-19 (The Local Government of Banyuwangi Regency, 2020; ILO, 2020). The agriculture sector provides the livelihood of many people in rural areas. In a pandemic, this sector allowed women migrant workers to survive because they were farm laborers before the migration. They did not need to be highly skilled, and the sector could also absorb many workers (Susanto et al., 2017). In other words, agriculture became the driving force for the family economy and a reliable pillar of national economic recovery during a pandemic.

Another informal job taken by the returned women migrant workers was an online ride-hailing driver or courier. They utilized their motorbikes and mobile phones to do their jobs. The social restriction policy forced people to carry out activities from home. While the ride-hailing request decreased, the delivery of food and goods increased through

online applications. On average, when orders peak, they could earn up to IDR 200,000 (US\$13) daily. Meanwhile, on weekdays when orders are low, they can earn around IDR 30,000 – 50,000 (US\$ 2-3.5) on average.

In efforts to obtain income collectively, most were involved and engaged in small and medium-sized enterprises' (SMEs) activities. *First*, they participated in garment SMEs (sewing). Those skilled at sewing could become home tailors to produce and sell products such as clothes, face masks, hazmat clothes, face shields, surgical gowns, shoe wrappers, head coverings, etc. *Second*, they produced local food products (dry and frozen food). This type of culinary business was the most in-demand during the pandemic. Dry and frozen food is practical and can be consumed anytime as they have a longer shelf life than fresh, ready-to-eat foods. For example, dry tempeh, chicken/beef meat floss, and potato chips were the most sought-after dry foods. Meanwhile, the most sought-after frozen foods were sausages, meatballs, dim sum, nuggets, pizza, etc.

Third, they produced local fruit products, such as dragon fruit sticky cake (*dodol*), salak sticky cake, Osing coffee, smoke-dried bananas, and seaweed crackers. These local products are well-known culinary delights from Banyuwangi, famous for their delicious taste, low price, and long-lasting durability. *Fourth*, they were engaged in the livestock business. Some of them chose to develop their business capital by cultivating various livestock with shorter maintenance duration to minimize the risk of loss. They choose to raise chickens, ducks, quail, catfish, or tilapia fish. *Fifth*, they produced crafts from Banyuwangi batik cloth and woven bags. Some of them had skills in batik-making and bag-weaving. The production could be done from home. Before the pandemic, the results of these woven bags were not only sold in local Banyuwangi but also exported abroad. However, since the pandemic, the demand for woven bags for export decreased.

The SME activities were driven by the collective action of the village community. They relied on this sector as an alternative source of livelihood to deal with the COVID-19 impact. In addition, SME activities could sustain and grow because they are connected to digital platforms (e-commerce sites in Indonesia) for online shopping. Digital shops through social media platforms helped increase their income and grow the local economic ecosystem. As such, business activities can be carried out more quickly and easily. Although there were many challenges, such as the low level of digital literacy, they could still take steps to enter economic digitization. In order for SMEs activities to be sustainable, the government has also attempted to prepare a digital ecosystem for SME products, for example, the free shipping program for SMEs products throughout Indonesia, *Warung Naik Kelas* (Wenak) which provides productive business tools for small stalls and assistance in the management of SMEs. In addition, the government has also revived the Day of Shopping to Markets and SME products, held every month on special dates (1/1, 2/2, 3/3, and so on). This campaign also invites state civil apparatus and employees to support the local economy. It was also carried out to assist local businesses in seizing opportunities from the changes in consumer behavior, which leaned toward online shopping during the pandemic.

Aside from participating in SME activities, the returnees also had a great potential to develop businesses by utilizing the network they developed while working abroad. The skills they develop during their employment can also help them find new sources of income. In other words, entrepreneurship can be an alternative to be cultivated to become permanent employment so that they do not need to return to work as migrant workers after the pandemic. The local government can provide more support so returnees can reintegrate into the domestic economy and the

labor force. Transferrable skills and experiences can be utilized to help them transition into the domestic labor market and participate in economic activities.

Discussion

For many women migrant workers, their employment abroad is their first paid work experience. Before migrating, they spent more time on unpaid care work. In general, women or mothers work longer hours than men or husbands because many women who do paid work outside the home also do unpaid work at home, such as cooking, taking care of children, cleaning the house, caring for the sick, accompanying children to study, taking care of husbands, etc. Mothers and daughters do more housework compared to fathers and sons. This gender-based distribution of tasks still applies even if women have paid work outside the home. The experience of returned women migrant workers is in line with a study by Hochschild and Machung (2012), which emphasizes that women with a first shift at work will continue with a second shift at home. With the first and second shifts that they have, working mothers still have to take care of everything in between, so they have the most share of household responsibilities. This belief and standardization of gender roles are rooted in the strong traditional gender construction (patriarchal culture), which is still adhered to by most Javanese people. Patriarchy gives rise to the dominance of men over women. Women often have to submit to these norms, which impact their socioeconomic life and disadvantaged position in a household. The findings in this study confirm these premises. Apart from being burdened with household chores and taking care of children, they are also burdened with earning emergency income, as described above. On the one hand, in traditional construction, they still identify with their activities at home as a wife, mother, and neighbor. On the other hand, they also

try to identify themselves with egalitarian constructions because they also can make money like their husbands. Therefore, it can be said that the returned migrant workers are transitional women with both traditional and egalitarian ideologies.

The unequal domestic burden between men and women increases during the pandemic due to mobility restrictions. When women migrant workers returned home, they received a heavier work burden than men. *First*, they had multiple roles and tasks. Women needed to manage and balance time. Having a dual role as a mother and working woman simultaneously was a big challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic. The dual role of women became even greater with the work-from-home (WFH) policy. *Second*, they were pressured to always present the best to their family. Women are required (by societal norms) to be smart in managing the economy and a healthy family lifestyle to provide the best for their families. *Third*, they were at risk of psychological and mental health problems. The magnitude of the roles and responsibilities can affect psychological and mental health and even trigger the emergence of domestic violence. Upon their return, the responsibility for domestic affairs (such as taking care of children, serving husbands, and cooking) was returned to them. Meanwhile, they also had to earn because their families depended on their remittances.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003, p. 1) quoted that “gender is not something we are born with and not something we have, but something we do (West & Zimmerman, 1987) – something we perform (Butler, 1990)”. From a gender perspective, we can conclude how the pandemic's impact adds to women's burden and reduces their rights. The position of most women in Indonesia is not equal to men (Chairani, 2020). Women are faced with limited job opportunities, skill gaps, and low productivity due to the double burden. As a result, women's work participation is more concentrated in the informal sector. However,

this does not dampen their efforts to meet their family needs even though their income is much lower than when they worked as women migrant workers. In addition, they should take advantage of their sudden return to Indonesia to spend quality time with their families, who have not seen each other for a long time.

Conclusion

The sudden return of women migrant workers has shown that during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were part of a new vulnerable group in the informal sector with greater socioeconomic vulnerabilities, uncertain income, working hours, lack of savings, and old-age insurance. For those with low incomes and limited skills, the fear of being exposed to COVID-19 is nothing compared to the fear of being unable to provide for the family. The problems faced by women workers are not new. The double burden of women in supporting family's economic life during the pandemic increases because after the women migrant workers return to their homes suddenly, they must adapt quickly to the situation and try to find an emergency source of income. In this context, they struggle to engage in paid work by looking for alternative income sources in rural areas. To get emergency income individually, they work as farm laborers or become online ride-hailing drivers. Meanwhile, to earn income collectively, they are involved and engaged in SMEs, such as sewing, producing local food and fruit products, doing livestock business, and making crafts.

The COVID-19 pandemic also becomes a critical momentum and reflection to strengthen the potential of women and build rural areas as a sustainable socioeconomic pillars for society. They provide lessons learned to counter socioeconomic problems in rural areas forcing women to become migrant workers for economic reasons. With the social capital owned by rural communities, returned women migrant workers can use their skills and

experience abroad to engage in paid work in the local labor market. Moreover, efforts to increase women's understanding of equal rights and relations in the household must be continued. In the future, villages can become a base for employment and provide an alternative for women so they do not have to work as migrant workers after the pandemic ends.

Due to the limitation of this research, future research should consider exploring more deeply about women migrant workers returning to Indonesia but focusing more on those who live in-urban areas. Since the situation in urban areas differs from rural areas, findings may also differ. Finally, these research results are expected to contribute to the development of migration studies, especially related to the migrant workers' problems as seen from a post-repatriation perspective due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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