

Illegality and Identity: The Complex Belonging of Undocumented Indonesian Migrants in Amsterdam

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of undocumented Indonesian migrant workers in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, with a specific focus on their sense of belonging within the host society. Undocumented status profoundly shapes their experiences, creating layers of vulnerability and marginalization that compel reliance on informal networks for survival and emotional well-being. Through 33 in-depth interviews and participant observations, this research adopts a subject-centered approach to investigate how undocumented migrants perceive and experience belonging. The analysis prioritizes their perspectives, identifying two key factors—social networks and cultural familiarity—that influence their sense of belonging. Social networks within the Indonesian community play a central role, providing critical support in areas such as housing, employment, and emotional well-being. These trusted connections, often formed through community groups and organizations, help migrants navigate life under restrictive conditions while avoiding detection. Cultural practices, such as enjoying Indonesian cuisine, participating in religious observances, and engaging in community events, further sustain their identity and create spaces of solidarity. Despite prolonged stays, particularly among 11 participants who have resided in Amsterdam for seven years or more, these migrants do not develop a strong sense of belonging to the Netherlands. Instead, their sense of belonging remains deeply tied to Indonesia, reflecting the interplay between legal precarity, social connections, and cultural identity. This study highlights how undocumented status influences these dynamics, offering a fresh perspective on the resilience of marginalized communities in crafting belonging under conditions of exclusion.

Keywords: : *sense of belonging, undocumented migrants, Indonesian migrants, cultural familiarity, social connection*

Abstrak

Studi ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman pekerja migran Indonesia tanpa dokumen di Amsterdam, Belanda, dengan fokus khusus pada rasa keterhubungan mereka dalam masyarakat tuan rumah. Status tanpa dokumen secara mendalam membentuk pengalaman mereka, menciptakan lapisan kerentanan dan marginalisasi yang memaksa mereka bergantung pada jaringan informal untuk bertahan hidup dan kesejahteraan emosional. Melalui 33 wawancara mendalam dan observasi partisipan, penelitian ini mengadopsi pendekatan berpusat pada subjek untuk menyelidiki bagaimana migran tanpa dokumen memahami dan mengalami rasa keterhubungan. Analisis ini memprioritaskan perspektif mereka, mengidentifikasi dua faktor utama—jaringan sosial dan kedekatan budaya—yang memengaruhi rasa keterhubungan mereka. Jaringan sosial dalam komunitas Indonesia memainkan peran sentral, menyediakan dukungan penting dalam hal perumahan, pekerjaan, dan kesejahteraan emosional. Koneksi yang terpercaya ini, yang sering terbentuk melalui kelompok komunitas dan organisasi, membantu migran menjalani kehidupan di bawah kondisi yang terbatas sambil menghindari deteksi. Praktik budaya, seperti menikmati masakan Indonesia, berpartisipasi dalam kegiatan keagamaan, dan menghadiri acara komunitas, lebih lanjut mempertahankan identitas mereka dan menciptakan ruang solidaritas. Meskipun tinggal dalam jangka waktu lama, khususnya di antara 11 partisipan yang telah tinggal di Amsterdam selama tujuh tahun atau lebih, para migran ini tidak mengembangkan rasa keterhubungan yang kuat dengan Belanda. Sebaliknya, rasa keterhubungan mereka tetap terkait erat dengan Indonesia, mencerminkan interaksi antara ketidakpastian hukum, koneksi sosial, dan identitas budaya. Studi ini menyoroti bagaimana status tanpa dokumen memengaruhi dinamika ini, menawarkan perspektif baru tentang ketangguhan komunitas marjinal dalam membangun rasa keterhubungan di bawah kondisi eksklusif.

Kata Kunci: : *rasa keterhubungan, migran tidak berdokumen, migran Indonesia, kemiripan budaya, koneksi sosial*

Introduction

The migration of Indonesian workers to the Netherlands is a continuation of historical ties that stretch back to the colonial era. The Netherlands, once an emigration country, transitioned into a hub for migrants, particularly from its former colonies, beginning in the 1960s (Zorlu & Hartog 2002). Among these migrants are undocumented Indonesian workers who, despite significant cultural, linguistic, and religious differences, find themselves drawn to the Netherlands. These workers navigate a complex landscape where their legal status is precarious, yet the connections they form with both their homeland and host country are profound.

The shift from an emigration to an immigration country was driven by increased prosperity and a decrease in emigration, which attracted diverse groups of migrants, including those from Indonesia and Suriname (Vermeulen & Penninx 2000; Gusnelly 2016). Earlier waves of migrants laid the groundwork for subsequent generations, establishing

networks and support systems that continue to play a crucial role in helping new arrivals adapt to life in the Netherlands (Van Amersfoort & Van Niekerk 2006). These networks provide essential support in areas such as housing, employment, and creating communal spaces for cultural and religious practices, fostering a sense of solidarity and easing the challenges of undocumented life (Raharto 2007).

Amsterdam, a historically significant hub in Dutch society since the sixteenth century (De Jong 2011), serves as the focal point of this study. Known for its international character and reputation for tolerance, Amsterdam has long attracted migrants, fostering cultural diversity for centuries (Nijman 1999). With a population of approximately 1.18 million¹ in 2024 (Statistics Netherlands [CBS]), the city saw its first major wave of immigration in the 20th century when Indonesians arrived following the independence of the Dutch East Indies (Hugo 2006). In recent decades, Amsterdam has experienced waves of undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers from various regions, making it an ideal research site (Van Meeteren et al. 2013).

Understanding the experiences and sense of belonging among undocumented migrants is crucial, despite the methodological challenges in estimating their numbers. Belonging is not merely about feeling accepted; it is a vital component of well-being, influencing both mental and physical health (Weinberg 2012; Mattes & Lang 2021). Research indicates that while social and structural exclusion can have detrimental effects on migrants' well-being, a strong sense of belonging may serve as a powerful resource for resilience, helping them navigate the challenges of life in a foreign land (Brenman 2021; Kim, 2021; Dyck & Dossa 2007; El-Shaarawi & Larchanché 2022).

This study examines how long-term residence in the Netherlands on the sense of belonging among undocumented Indonesian migrants in Amsterdam. It explores how these migrants navigate their identities, balancing their deep cultural connections to Indonesia with the challenges of integrating into Dutch society. Moreover, the research aims to identify the key factors influencing their attachment to Indonesia and how these elements shape their overall experience of belonging to a foreign country. By focusing on the lived experiences of these migrants, the study provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of identity, integration, and belonging in a globalized world.

Data and Methods

This study focuses on the experiences of undocumented Indonesian migrants in Amsterdam, a city with a long history as a hub for diverse migrant populations. To ensure the anonymity and safety of participants, all names were anonymized, and strict ethical guidelines were followed. Before commencing fieldwork, I established trust with participants through a gatekeeper and maintained confidentiality during participant observations. Participant observation, a key ethnographic method, allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the daily and working lives of these migrants. I actively participated in both formal and informal Indonesian gatherings, such as Islamic lectures, political campaigns, birthday parties, and funeral services. Additionally, I engaged in the daily work of one participant as a cleaner and assisted another with her business. This immersive approach provided

1 <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb>

valuable insights into their lives and interactions within the community.



Figure 1: Cleaning a Dutch House with a Research Participant (Photo Credit: Author)

In-depth interviews were conducted with 33 participants—13 women and 20 men from various backgrounds—using snowball sampling to recruit individuals meeting specific criteria, such as residing in Amsterdam for at least seven years. The participants, who have resided in the Netherlands for a range of 1 to 15 years, reflect a diversity of experiences shaped by their legal precarity and cultural heritage. These interviews, lasting between 30 minutes and a few hours, were recorded and transcribed with the participants' consent. The analysis examines the nuanced ways in which migrants navigate their belonging, shaped by cultural ties to Indonesia and the structural limitations imposed by their undocumented status.

In the following sections, I first review existing literature on undocumented migration and belonging, focusing on how these intersect with legal precarity and cultural identity. Next, I present the theoretical lens employed to frame the concept of belonging, emphasizing its relational and multifaceted nature. Following this, the empirical findings discuss the critical role of social networks in providing practical and emotional support, followed by an exploration of how cultural familiarity reinforces ties to Indonesia, shaping the migrants' experiences in the Netherlands. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the broader implications of this study, offering insights into the resilience of undocumented migrants

and the need for inclusive policies to address their challenges.

Between Homeland and Host: Belonging Among Undocumented Indonesian Migrants in Amsterdam

Defining belonging presents challenges both conceptually and emotionally. Belonging is multifaceted and it intersects with various aspects such as national and emotional citizenship (Mari & Shvanyukova 2015; Mensink 2020), cultural identity (Miller 2000; Amadasi 2014), migrant acculturation (Gui et al. 2012; Klingenberg et al. 2021), and place-belongingness (Antonsich 2010; Gilmartin & Migge 2016). For my study, I define a sense of belonging as migrants' perception of their ability to integrate and engage in the host nation (Ward 2013; Simonsen 2019) or how they perceive themselves in society (Amit & Bar-Lev 2015; Webb & Lahiri-Roy 2019).

A sense of belonging, as a dynamic and relational concept, is deeply shaped by migrants' lived experiences, which are influenced by their legal status, cultural background, and interactions with the host society. For undocumented Indonesian migrants in Amsterdam, their sense of belonging often reflects a complex negotiation between their aspirations and the structural constraints they face. Ani, who has lived in Amsterdam with her husband for eight years, highlighted that, for her, the Netherlands is primarily a place to earn a living and not where she envisions spending her retirement years.

I'm not interested in becoming legal because in the Netherlands, I feel like this is where I struggle; my real life is in Indonesia. I also don't want to be Dutch even though I like working here. People respect me here, but for my family's future, I will return to Indonesia (Ani, Interview, January 22, 2024).

Similarly, Rita, a 47-year-old from Malang, expressed her intention to return to Indonesia soon, as one of her children is graduating from high school this year and she wishes to support him through the university admission process. She mentioned that her love for Indonesia remains strong, even though moving back might alter the way she seeks her livelihood.

Honestly, I don't want to be a permanent worker here because I don't want to settle here since I love Indonesia very much. My family is here but I want to spend the rest of my life in Indonesia. I know it is harder to live in Indonesia in terms of livelihood, but that is where I was born. So, I will be returning to Indonesia soon because I have not seen my children since I have been living here (Rita, Interview, 04 February 2024).

Ani's and Rita's narratives indicate that while the Netherlands offers economic opportunities and social respect, it remains a transient space for these migrants—a means to an end rather than a destination for integration or identity. Their enduring connection to Indonesia is not merely nostalgic but deeply tied to their sense of identity, familial obligations, and long-term aspirations. This reflects how their sense of belonging is shaped more by their cultural and emotional ties to Indonesia than by their extended stay or favorable experiences in the Netherlands.

The findings underscore that an extended stay in the host country does not

significantly alter the participants' sense of belonging. For them, a sense of belonging is not contingent on geography or legal status but is a psychological and emotional connection to people and places that resonate with their identity and roots (Hurtado & Carter 1997; Smaldone et al. 2005). Despite favorable living conditions and work experiences in the Netherlands, their connection to Indonesia remains central to their sense of self and purpose.

Scholars have identified various factors that impact individuals' sense of belonging, including legal status, which plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of migrants (Nuñez 2009; Amit & Bar-Lev 2015). International migrants encounter a wide range of experiences that influence their sense of belonging, from daily interactions in legal, economic, social, and cultural spheres (Kitchen et al. 2015; Hou et al. 2018). Positive interactions in these areas can strengthen migrants' sense of belonging, while negative experiences can diminish it (Chow 2007; Kemeny & Cooke 2017).

Furthermore, migrants from other countries may experience different levels of belonging based on the host society's reception and integration policies. For example, Latin American migrants in the United States often face significant barriers to belonging due to legal restrictions and social exclusion, which can lead to fear and anxiety (Abrego 2014). In contrast, some migrant groups in Canada report a stronger sense of belonging, attributed to more inclusive immigration policies and multicultural societal values (Hou et al. 2018). The host environment plays a crucial role in either fostering or diminishing migrants' sense of belonging. Inclusive policies, access to social services, and community support can enhance the sense of belonging, while restrictive immigration laws, discrimination, and social exclusion can diminish it. For undocumented migrants, the lack of legal recognition often leads to precarious living conditions and limited opportunities for social integration, adversely affecting their sense of belonging (Gonzales et al. 2019).

Belonging: A Framework for Understanding Migrants Experiences

For undocumented Indonesian workers in the Netherlands, developing a sense of belonging is particularly challenging due to their precarious legal status. This status restricts their access to institutional support, job security, and opportunities for social integration. A sense of belonging, however, is not merely about physical presence but involves emotional connections and societal inclusion. It encompasses two key dimensions: place-belongingness, or emotional attachment to a specific location, and the politics of belonging, which considers the sociopolitical factors that enable or constrain one's inclusion within a society (Antonsich 2010).

In the context of undocumented migrants, belonging emerges as a dynamic and relational process shaped by individual experiences, social relationships, and structural constraints. Legal precarity often limits formal rights and avenues for integration, making alternative pathways—such as social networks and cultural familiarity—essential for fostering belonging. By adopting a subject-centered approach (Zhou et al. 2008; Ryo 2017), this study examines how these two factors enable undocumented migrants to mitigate exclusion and build a sense of home within an otherwise unwelcoming environment.

Social Networks: Lifelines in Marginalized Contexts

Social networks are foundational to fostering belonging, particularly for marginalized groups such as undocumented migrants. These networks are defined as webs of interpersonal relationships that provide emotional support, information, and resources (Granovetter 1973; Ryan et al. 2008). They typically manifest in two forms: bonding social capital, which connects individuals within the same ethnic or cultural group, and bridging social capital, which links them to broader, more diverse communities (Putnam 2000).

For undocumented migrants, bonding social capital is especially critical. It offers cultural familiarity, emotional solidarity, and practical assistance, helping individuals navigate challenges related to housing, employment, and legal uncertainties. However, reliance on tightly knit networks can also create barriers to broader integration, as these connections often reinforce social isolation from the host society (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). For undocumented Indonesian migrants in Amsterdam, social networks serve as vital lifelines, providing not only material support but also a sense of community and identity. The interplay of these networks with cultural familiarity further enhances their capacity to foster belonging.

Cultural Familiarity: Anchoring Identity in a New Environment

Building on the critical role of social networks, cultural familiarity plays a complementary role in shaping belonging for undocumented Indonesian migrants. Defined as the recognition and reproduction of shared cultural practices, values, and traditions in a new environment (Ngo 2009; Berry 1997), cultural familiarity serves as an emotional and psychological anchor for migrants facing the uncertainties of legal and social exclusion. These practices create a sense of stability and connection to their heritage, fostering both individual and collective identity.

Cultural familiarity takes many forms, including traditional food, language, religious observances, and participation in cultural events. For undocumented Indonesian migrants, these practices are not only a source of comfort but also a means of asserting their identity in a multicultural society like the Netherlands, where diversity characterizes both migrant groups and the broader host society (Sam & Berry 2010; Vertovec 2023). Moreover, engaging in culturally familiar practices strengthens solidarity within migrant communities, complementing the support offered by social networks. Together, these elements create communal spaces where migrants can navigate the challenges of exclusion while maintaining their sense of self and cultural continuity.

Building Bridges: How Social Networks Shape the Belonging of Undocumented Indonesian Migrants in Amsterdam

The experiences of undocumented Indonesian migrants in Amsterdam highlight the interplay between social networks and belonging in the context of migration. Facing legal precarity, economic instability, and social exclusion, these migrants rely on social connections not only for practical needs but also for emotional support and cultural preservation (Sensenbrenner & Portes 2018). These networks create a foundation of security

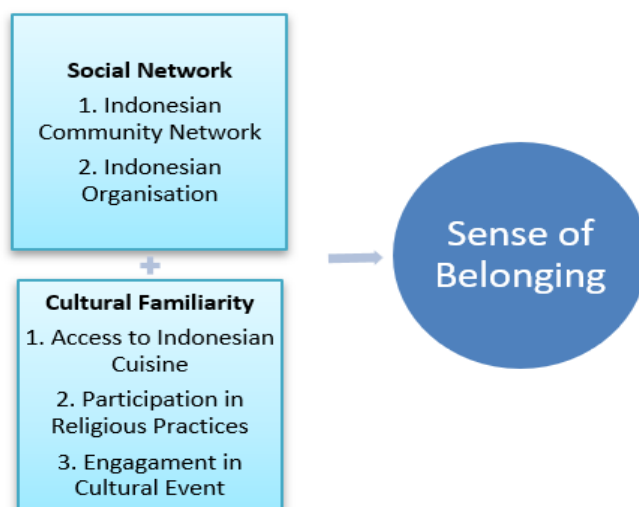


Figure 2: Key Elements Influencing Sense of Belonging among Undocumented Migrant in Amsterdam (Author)

and continuity, enabling migrants to navigate the challenges of their undocumented status while maintaining ties to their community and cultural identity. This section will explore how these networks contribute to fostering belonging by providing critical support and reinforcing collective identity.

For many undocumented Indonesian migrants, existing social networks are pivotal. Migrants who arrive with pre-existing connections benefit from immediate support, including assistance with housing and employment. For instance, Dila, who came to the Netherlands via Austria, received accommodation from her sister, who has been residing in Amsterdam already.

My sister was already here, like me, she didn't have any documents, so she had a lot of what you call it jobs, that's why she brought us, her siblings, here. My sister picked me up at the airport and I directly stayed with her (Dila, Interview, 24 January 2024).

Having a friend living in the Netherlands also creates the bravery to go abroad to seek a better life. Ani from Madiun, who now runs businesses in rental cars and laundromats in Indonesia, has shared that due to the invitation of her friend, she wanted to go to Amsterdam to achieve her dreams.

For me personally, the reasons to come to the Netherlands were first because of economic factors, because I came from a poor family, and there was always belittlement, insults, and ridicule from extended family or neighbors too. So, I thought and kept thinking about becoming a father and mother for my child, so I finally dared to go abroad via my friend. My goal in the Netherlands is to make my parents happy, secondly to achieve my child's dreams, and thirdly, I want to shut down the mouths of all those who have ever belittled me by raising the status of my family (Ani, Interview, 22 January 2024).

However, not all migrants have the advantage of pre-existing connections. Some arrive in the Netherlands with no prior network, often due to being misled by agents or other intermediaries. These migrants must actively seek out fellow Indonesians to build a support system. Fudaili, 60 years old from Solo, has been living in the city for 15 years. He shared that, lacking prior connections, he had to endure homelessness in order to survive in Amsterdam.

I was cheated by a travel agent. Cheated that there's money for you here, 100 euros a day. I came here, there was nothing; no one helped me. I was homeless for almost a year. Then, by looking here and there, I was helped by Mas Heri, whom I met at the Moroccan mosque over there. He invited me to his house, stayed with him and then he helped me survive here (Fudaili, Interview, 22 January 2024).

Similarly, Sufi, a 48-year-old from Ponorogo who has lived in the Netherlands for 10 years, recounted a similar experience in finding housing since he had no connections upon his arrival in Amsterdam. He noted that understanding Indonesian customs and culture helped him secure accommodation.

Because working in Indonesia is difficult, I am by an agent who offered to work in Europe, and promised to work in a keripik factory here in the Netherlands with a salary of 75 million. Arriving here, nobody welcomed me at the airport. The agent number cannot be reached. After a while, I was thinking that I would not return to Indonesia because I spent a lot of money to come here. The first thing that came to my mind was where I could sleep tonight. Then I thought, Indonesians like gambling, simple, that's how I thought. So, I went to the casino to inquire about rental rooms. Finally, I met an Indonesian man and got the room info from there (Sufi, Interview 22 January 2024).

The interview excerpts highlight the critical role of connections and community in the lives of undocumented Indonesian migrants in the Netherlands. Those who arrive without pre-existing networks face significant challenges, often exacerbated by deceptive agents who mislead them about opportunities and support. Social hubs like mosques and casinos serve as vital points for building connections and finding support where Indonesian people usually gather.

Secondly, having acquaintances also might help newcomer migrants with job assistance. Established networks can also aid in finding employment opportunities. Friends or family members might recommend job openings, introduce new arrivals to potential employers, or even teach them how to work properly. Dila, who has a money changer business and personal shopping service for Indonesian people, acknowledges that she faced no difficulty in getting a job since she replaced her sister's work.

I took over my sister's job. Before she returned to Indonesia, she taught me the proper way to do the work and introduced me to her clients. So, I didn't have a hard time finding a job because she had already given me plenty of work. I just needed to do the job properly. Over time, I developed, for example, it's like everything, oh, connections usually, Miss, you have friends, your friends need something, so you make more friends, so it develops like that, Miss, over time. So, everything comes from references, through what you call it, word of mouth, yes, Miss (Dila, Interview, 29 January 2024).

A similar situation happened to Ita, a 33-year-old from Cilacap, who mentioned that having a friend in Amsterdam made it easier for her to find a job.

The way I got my first job was by joining a friend who had been working here for a long time, doing cleaning. I was trained because I didn't have any cleaning experience in Taiwan. After 3 months, I handled the job myself. Not all, just 1 or 2. So, after I could do it, I was given my own job, then it developed by itself (Ita, Interview, 22 January 2024).

By contrast, those without prior connections must work harder to find employment. Sufi, who initially struggled to secure a job upon arrival, now holds multiple jobs in Amsterdam, including cleaning and cooking, and has managed to earn at least 5,000 euros per month.

Every Indonesian restaurant in Amsterdam I applied to all of them, applied for work because I didn't know how to find a job here. Then I made advertisements, and distributed flyers, there were 20,000 flyers, seriously. So, I listed all Albert Heijn in Amsterdam, I even had the address list. So, every Monday I go around all Albert Heijn, I and paste them all again, if my name is not there anymore, I paste them again, and put them here again (Sufi, Interview, 22 January 2024).

In a similar way, Enik, who prefers working as a cleaner, mentioned that the first step she took to find a job was by placing an advertisement on the bulletin board at Albert Heijn to inform people of her skills and her need for employment.

Sister Wan, Herlina and I tried to find jobs by distributing flyers, advertisements, like that. I was hired as a cleaner, but only one place in Amsterdam hired me for cleaning, and after that, I didn't get anything else. Finally, I got a call that there was a job for me taking care of a 5 to 6-month-old baby. The one who babysat him, who took care of him, wanted to return to Indonesia. But that did not take long because the salary for babysitting is very low. So, I resigned because I got a call from a client through the advertisement I put on Albert Heijn. From that one client, I got more and more clients (Enik, Interview, 19 January 2024).

The experiences of undocumented Indonesian migrants in Amsterdam reveal the critical role of social networks in shaping their sense of belonging and providing support under precarious conditions. Migrants with pre-existing connections benefit significantly upon arrival, as these networks offer immediate assistance with housing, employment, and emotional well-being. Social ties within the Indonesian community not only facilitate initial settlement but also provide access to informal job markets and cultural spaces, enabling migrants to navigate the challenges of living in Amsterdam. These networks help bridge the gap created by their undocumented status, offering practical solutions and emotional solidarity (Ryan et al. 2008; Sensenbrenner & Portes 2018).

Conversely, migrants arriving without established networks often face severe challenges, including homelessness and exploitation. Many actively seek out Indonesian-specific spaces, such as mosques or community gatherings, to form new connections that become lifelines for survival. These social networks act as crucial mechanisms for

accessing resources and navigating Amsterdam's restrictive legal environment, echoing findings from studies on the resilience of migrant communities (Granovetter 1973; Putnam 2000). However, the reliance on ethnically bounded networks and cultural practices often anchors migrants more deeply to their Indonesian heritage rather than fostering integration into Dutch society. This dual dynamic underscores the limitations of belonging for undocumented migrants, shaped by both their legal precarity and the supportive yet isolating nature of their ethnic-specific networks (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004; Anthias 2008). Despite the Netherlands' relatively inclusive migration policies, undocumented status constrains their opportunities for broader social engagement, reinforcing a sense of belonging rooted in their homeland.

After settling their housing and employment needs, undocumented Indonesian migrants in Amsterdam often seek out organizations to connect with individuals who share similar cultural backgrounds and legal statuses. Joining groups such as the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) and *Ngobrol Bareng* (Ngober) plays a vital role in their lives by fostering a sense of community and providing practical resources. These organizations facilitate the exchange of information, such as job opportunities, and offer a safe space for members to share experiences and support one another. For instance, migrants like Ani, who works seven days a week, emphasized the significance of such networks. After two years of working in Amsterdam, Ani became a member of IMWU, as required by the organization, which helped her navigate the challenges of living without documentation.

I only joined the IMWU group; the events are just yearly gathering that I join. I am busy working, but I try to be active on the WhatsApp group to get updated with the latest information. We usually discuss the problems of undocumented workers and try to solve the problems together. So, I don't feel alone in trying to make a living in the Netherlands. There are friends who might have similar problems. We help each other because we are all undocumented workers (Ani, Interview, 22 January 2024).

Similarly, Enik, who is not only busy working but also active in IMWU and an Indonesian political party, mentioned that joining organizations expand their connection not only with undocumented workers but also with documented workers as well.

I usually join IMWU events, and political parties, I'm a member of the PDIP party here. I enjoy joining Indonesian organizations. It feels great to meet people who share the same background. Even if it's just for eating and singing together, I like it. It helps ease my homesickness for Indonesia. Whenever there are events organized by the group, I try to take time off work to meet with other Indonesians. Because of meeting so many people, I felt confident enough to start my own personal shopping service (jastip) (Enik, Interview, 19 January 2024).

Participation in organizations such as the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) and *Ngobrol Bareng* (Ngober) plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging among undocumented Indonesian migrants. However, this sense of belonging remains rooted in Indonesia rather than the Netherlands. Beyond providing practical support, these organizations serve as vital spaces for cultural connection, where migrants can engage with others who share similar cultural backgrounds and legal statuses. Through resource

sharing, collective problem-solving, and participation in culturally significant activities such as sharing Indonesian food and traditions, migrants maintain their ties to their homeland. These interactions help mitigate feelings of isolation and reinforce their Indonesian identity, even as they navigate the challenges of undocumented life abroad. Ultimately, the role of these organizations extends beyond support, emphasizing the enduring connection these migrants feel to Indonesia, which continues to define their sense of belonging despite their physical presence in Amsterdam.

Overall, the experiences of undocumented Indonesian migrants in Amsterdam illustrate that their sense of belonging is deeply rooted in social networks and community participation. Pre-existing connections ease initial transitions, offering essential support in areas like housing and employment, while the absence of such networks exacerbates challenges and delays integration. Social hubs, such as mosques and community organizations like the IMWU, provide spaces for collective problem-solving, emotional support, and cultural continuity, fostering a sense of solidarity. Participation in these networks not only helps mitigate feelings of isolation but also empowers migrants to navigate life in Amsterdam. By leveraging these social structures, undocumented migrants create a sense of belonging that is intrinsically tied to their shared identity and resilience, enabling them to maintain cultural roots while adapting to the challenges of their environment.

Anchored in Tradition: The Impact of Cultural Practices on Indonesian Migrants' Sense of Belonging

Expanding on the vital role of social networks, cultural familiarity emerges as another key factor in fostering a sense of belonging for undocumented Indonesian migrants in Amsterdam. One notable way migrants maintain ties to their homeland is through Indonesian cuisine. The accessibility of familiar dishes, particularly halal options, provides both comfort and a tangible connection to their cultural heritage. David, a migrant with experience living in multiple countries, highlighted that finding Indonesian food in Amsterdam is significantly easier than in other parts of Europe.

The first thing is that they (Dutch) are welcome, respectful to Indonesian people, and easy to get Indonesian food. In terms of food, there's no need to worry about finding halal food. Oriental stores have plenty of ingredients from Indonesia, and if you want halal meat, you can just go to a Turkish or Moroccan store. There are also many Indonesian restaurants, but they tend to be a bit expensive, so I usually cook for myself and bring my own food to work, unless I am really tired (David, Interview, 22 January 2024).

Additionally, Enik acknowledged the importance of getting familiar with food in a foreign country. She was crying after getting rice on her first arrival in Amsterdam. Hence, finding familiar Indonesian food in her first years eased her to find identity with Indonesian culture and became one of the reasons she will not return to Indonesia anytime soon, although she has been living in Amsterdam for 8 years, leaving her husband and 2 kids in Magetan, East Java.

Finding Indonesian food is easy, our work is appreciated, and the salary is better than when I worked in Hong Kong. What is more can I expect. I have a personal shopping service (jastip). So, if anyone wants any food from Indonesia, they just need to ask their family to send it via my service. Overall, I'm quite happy with the food here. Compared to other European countries, it's much easier for me to get Indonesian food here. I travel around Europe a lot and have friends in different countries, and they say it's hard to find Indonesian food over there (Enik, Interview 19 January 2024).



Figure 3: Assisting a Research Participant in Selling Nasi Pecel During the 2024 Presidential Election (Photo Credit: Anisah)

Hence, based on the statements, the ability to consume familiar food allows migrants to retain a connection to their cultural heritage since food is a powerful symbol of identity and tradition, and for many Indonesians, traditional dishes are a key component of their cultural expression. Furthermore, Indonesian food often becomes a centerpiece for social gatherings. Sharing meals can strengthen community bonds, create a sense of home, and provide comfort in an otherwise foreign environment (Fieldnotes, 16 December 2023).

I believe the comfort of familiar tastes and smells can alleviate feelings of homesickness and stress, contributing positively to the mental well-being of migrants. I experienced homesickness on my first arrival in Amsterdam since I did not find familiar Indonesian food in Amsterdam until I met my gatekeeper, who offered me Indonesian food, which was fried rice and soto (Fieldnotes, 13 December 2023). Thus, easy accessibility of food for migrants becomes an essential requirement to make them feel at home in a foreign country. As a result, the presence of Indonesian culinary establishments and ingredients in Amsterdam thus serves not only as a practical resource but also as an emotional anchor for the migrants, enhancing their sense of belonging in the city.

Religious practices also play a significant role in fostering a sense of community and cultural continuity among undocumented Indonesian migrants. Many Indonesians in Amsterdam actively participate in mosque activities, where they find both spiritual fulfillment and social support. For Dila, the support network within her mosque was instrumental in balancing her work and family life.

As for me, Alhamdulillah, I have friends in the mosque who are interspersed with official people here who help each other, and support each other, when I'm working, yes, I automatically leave my child with my friend A or B, if I'm working. When my

child was a baby, it was like that, I left him with them (Dila, Interview, 24 January 2024).

Hence, for undocumented migrants, a mosque exists not only for worship but also serves as a community hub where migrants can meet, socialize, and support each other. As a result, regular participation in mosque activities helps build a cohesive community, offering emotional and practical support to its members. Moreover, the mosque also provides spiritual fulfilment for migrants, such as attending Islamic lectures, prayer gatherings, and other religious activities that help migrants fulfil their spiritual needs as mentioned by Sufi who has been living in Amsterdam for 10 years and works as a house cleaner and a chef in Italian and Indonesian restaurant. Consequently, this connection to their faith provides comfort and a sense of purpose and balances their worldly lives.

I'm active in the mosque. It's every two weeks, we have a religious gathering. I am also the team of the Islamic funeral service in that mosque. I am the team leader. So, by being active at the mosque, I can meet up with other Indonesian friends and chat about Indonesia. It's not just about work. Before I got busy, I also used to take free Dutch language lessons with other Indonesians there. It's just nice to meet people who are also active at the mosque (Sufi, Interview 22 January 2024).

Therefore, religious activities serve as cultural continuity among Indonesian migrants. Religious practices often include elements of Indonesian culture, such as specific prayer recitations, festive celebrations, and community meals, as I observed in one of the Indonesian mosques in Amsterdam. Moreover, when I attended the Islamic lectures every Wednesday, I was always given Indonesian food by the community members (Fieldnotes, 24 January 2024). These activities help maintain cultural continuity and reinforce a sense of belonging. I believe that religious participation not only fulfils spiritual needs but also strengthens social bonds and cultural identity among undocumented Indonesian migrants.

Cultural events are another vital component of cultural capital that help Indonesian migrants in Amsterdam maintain their sense of belonging. Participation in these events includes Indonesian Festivals such as Independence Day celebrations, traditional dance performances, and other cultural festivities that allow migrants to celebrate and showcase their heritage. These events offer a space for communal joy and cultural pride. Some participants spare their free time to celebrate Indonesian big events since they are busy working, as mentioned by Enik from Magetan, who works in cleaning houses and offices as her daily job.

I join big events only, such as when we celebrate Independence Day at Erasmus Park, and Eid at PPME. If there are events like political gatherings or ILH (Indonesians Living in Holland), I join as a participant or set up a stall there. But I usually end up selling things. I often sell nasi pecel or snacks from Indonesia. There are many customers, sometimes even more than I can handle, and some people end up missing out. You should help me sell nasi pecel during the upcoming election. There will usually be many performances and a variety of Indonesian foods besides the election. This will be my first time selling at an election event, so I'm a bit nervous about not having enough help (Enik, Interview, 19 January 2024).



Figure 4: Attending a Congregational Prayer and Islamic Lecture at an Indonesian Mosque
(Photo Credit: Author)

These regular gatherings and reunions with fellow Indonesians create a support network where migrants can share experiences, provide mutual support, and strengthen communal ties. These interactions often mimic the social structures of their home country, reinforcing a sense of familiarity and community. I was very lucky to participate in the 2024 presidential election and to witness the huge gatherings of Indonesian people in De Broodfabriek, Rijswijk, the Netherlands. Moreover, I also had a chance to help my participant sell nasi pecel Madiun in her stall. The event was bustling with Indonesians from all over Amsterdam. This gathering welcomed both documented individuals and undocumented Indonesian workers. I also encountered one of the participants who had organized transportation for undocumented migrants from Amsterdam, enabling them to vote and attend the gathering (Fieldnotes, 10 February 2024).

Furthermore, Indonesian migrants enjoy coming together during the summer for barbecues and to host art performances as acknowledged by Rita who has been living in Amsterdam for 7 years and regularly attends Indonesian gatherings in the parks in Amsterdam in her free time, especially in the summer

During the summer, there are more gatherings, Miss. The days are longer, so we usually organize events in parks for barbecues, Indonesian Independence Day celebrations, and performances. It's always a joy when we have such events; they remind me that I'm Indonesian, even though I'm living in the Netherlands (Rita, Interview 04 February 2024).

Hence, by participating in these cultural events, undocumented Indonesian migrants can preserve their cultural identity and foster a community atmosphere, which is essential for their emotional and social well-being.

In addition to cultural gatherings, language use and communication practices further illustrate the connection Indonesian migrants maintain with their heritage. Many

participants expressed little interest in learning Dutch, as they found it unnecessary for their work or daily interactions. When asked about the potential benefits of learning Dutch for easier communication, the majority of participants emphasized their ability to converse with employers using simple English or gestures. During public gatherings, they often spoke their local languages, such as Javanese or Madurese, reinforcing their cultural ties. As one participant explained, their primary focus is on earning an income rather than pursuing language skills or legal work status, which would require proficiency in Dutch. These linguistic practices reflect the migrants' priorities and further highlight how cultural preservation shapes their experience of belonging in the Netherlands (Fieldnotes, 08 February 2024).

The linguistic practices of Indonesian migrants in the Netherlands highlight a pragmatic approach to communication that aligns with their primary goal of earning a livelihood. By relying on simple English, gestures, or their local languages such as Javanese or Madurese, migrants minimize the necessity of learning Dutch. This choice reflects their focus on immediate economic needs rather than long-term integration into Dutch society, which would typically require language proficiency. Despite this pragmatic approach, these practices also serve to maintain a strong connection to their cultural heritage and community. Speaking local languages in public gatherings not only facilitates communication but also reinforces their shared identity and cultural continuity.

This linguistic behavior is intrinsically tied to their sense of belonging. By prioritizing their native languages over Dutch, migrants create a social space where cultural familiarity prevails, fostering a sense of comfort and identity within the host society. This demonstrates that their sense of belonging is not necessarily rooted in assimilation into Dutch culture but in the preservation and practice of their own cultural norms. The use of familiar languages acts as a cultural anchor, allowing migrants to navigate their lives in a foreign environment without losing touch with their roots. This strategy highlights how cultural preservation can be a deliberate and effective means of cultivating a sense of belonging, even in the absence of full linguistic or legal integration into the host country.

Conclusions

The sense of belonging among undocumented Indonesian migrants in Amsterdam offers a compelling lens to explore how marginalized individuals navigate identity, community, and survival under restrictive conditions. For these migrants, social networks emerge as lifelines, providing essential support in the absence of institutional aid. Kinship ties, friendships, and community-based organizations not only mitigate immediate challenges such as securing housing and employment but also foster emotional solidarity. These trusted connections act as a buffer against the heightened vulnerability that undocumented status imposes, enabling migrants to navigate precarious circumstances while maintaining a sense of dignity. This reliance on social networks underscores how undocumented migrants craft spaces of belonging in environments where formal integration is largely inaccessible.

Equally significant is the role of cultural familiarity, which reinforces a sense of identity and belonging to their homeland even while living abroad. For undocumented Indonesian migrants, cultural practices like enjoying traditional cuisine, participating in religious ceremonies, and engaging in community events become powerful tools

for preserving their cultural heritage. These practices provide continuity in their lives, connecting them to their roots and offering comfort amidst the uncertainties of their undocumented status. The intersection of social networks and cultural familiarity creates a hybrid form of belonging—one that is deeply anchored in Indonesia while shaped by the constraints and opportunities of their lives in the Netherlands. This dynamic reveals the resilience of undocumented migrants in crafting belonging through their shared cultural identity and community bonds.

Therefore, the experiences of undocumented Indonesian migrants also illuminate the broader implications of exclusionary legal frameworks on identity and integration. Unlike documented migrants who might engage more openly with host societies, undocumented migrants are compelled to seek belonging within insular communities, often limiting their interaction with the broader Dutch society. Yet, their strong cultural ties and reliance on the community reveal a profound resilience and ability to adapt under adverse circumstances. This study challenges traditional narratives of belonging by showing how undocumented migrants redefine it through the interplay of social and cultural factors. Their stories call for greater recognition of the humanity and contributions of undocumented migrants and emphasize the need for more inclusive policies that address their unique challenges while fostering pathways for integration and well-being.

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