

Gender Issues on The Impact of Covid-19 Among Female Migrants and Families

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Abstract. Indonesia has been sending female migrant workers overseas since the 70s. The covid-19 pandemic has hit these women hence they worked as the breadwinners for their families. The research aimed to study gender issues as the impact of covid-19 among the international female migrants and their left-behind families in Indonesia, particularly on issues on children's education, family economic status, and family health being. The method used is a mixed quantitative and qualitative research method which includes a household survey (605 families), interviews with left-behind family members (30), telephone interviews with female migrant workers (30), and an online survey of migrant workers (2828). The research found that they faced difficulties managing children's education and social life during the lockdown in the social impact. In terms of economic, the cost of economic hardship suffered by both female migrants and their left-behind husbands and families, such as pay cuts, delayed payment of wages, non-payment of wages during illness, job losses, working hour extension, and some barriers on sending remittances that caused a problem for receiving left behind families. The impact in health aspect is more likely to address access to health insurance and mental health issues because of the increasing of family concerns and work-related stress. The result showed that gender issue has existed in regulating the role of Indonesian women who work abroad and men who are left behind. However, with the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic, it remains perpetuated that women and men determine particular attention according to their gender attributes.

Keywords: Female migrants, left behind families, gender issues, pandemic

1 Introduction

The global health crisis of Covid-19 has created a drastic change in the entire world. Various restrictions were put in place to stop the spread of the deadly virus. This crisis has an impact on all aspects of life, including gender issues among the families that are "forced to adapt" to prevailing conditions. Likewise, in Indonesia, the pandemic has hit all aspects. Indonesia reported more than 54,000 new coronavirus cases in mid-July 2021, surpassing recent daily infections in India, whose disastrous outbreak is declining, and becoming Asia's new virus hotspot (Guardian, July 2021).

Migration from Indonesia has been going on for hundreds of years but has increased exponentially to date (IOM, 2010). Indonesia is the country with the fourth-largest population in the world, with a population of 268,074 in 2019, of which 134,657 are male and 133,416 females (BPS, 2020). Indonesia started a government-sponsored overseas migrant worker program in the 1970s (Farbenblum, 2013). Since then, there has been a significant increase in

the number of Indonesian migrant workers abroad (Raharto, 2007). Around 80% (1.3 million) of all recorded Indonesian migrant workers are women and most work as domestic workers in the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Syafitri, 2012). Although female migrant workers must be over the age of 30 to qualify for labor migration schemes (Raharto, 2007), a large number of migrant workers are under this age group and are unmarried, and the migration is largely driven by poverty (Hunga, 2011). The age group, gender, and socioeconomic status of female migrants significantly influence their well-being in the receiving country and the family members left behind (Farbenblum, 2017).

Sending migrant workers is very important for Indonesia as a strategy to reduce poverty and unemployment issues. These women who work in informal sectors require middle-low skill capacity such as housemaids, caretakers for the elderly, factory workers, etc. Job placement data released by the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI) shows that job placements as domestic workers or household assistants rank the highest at 80% in February 2021, whereas 89% are women and the rest are women men (BP2MI, 2021).

Adhere to the patriarchal system, men are responsible in the public sector while women in domestics applied in the context of labor division. The theory of nature assumes that labor division between men and women is based on biological factors. Men are biologically considered stronger, active, and aggressive so they deserve to be positioned as the head of the household whose job is to earn a living to support their family. While women are considered weaker, passive, and submissive, it is the duty to take care of the house, husband, and children in the family.

This is widely accepted by society and considered a universal value. Nurture theory views that gender is built from social construction and the influence of community values so that it is closely related to the cultural context. The massive female dominant work to migrate overseas has shifted the idea when women bear as the breadwinners. Husbands were left handling childcare and home domestics loads.

The phenomenon of Indonesian female migrant workers breaking through their domestic functions and shifting to the function of breadwinners has an impact on the emergence of new contracts in the family. Some families agree that domestic problems, including taking care of children, are turned into the responsibility of the husband, but there are still many who think that the husband still has to work to earn a living, especially if there are other family members who can carry out the function of taking care of children, such as grandmothers or siblings. Migrant mothers carry out their gender affection function to the children they leave behind so that distance care continues. The intensity of communication of migrant women to their children is much higher than that of men or husbands who work as migrants.

The chosen family members to be responsible for domestic work tend to appoint women members such as grandmother, women siblings (sister), aunties, or other female relatives. In the hustle-bustle of pandemic where crisis hits, it is challenging for migrant families to cope with the situation considering the added loads both for female migrants and left behind families, social, economic, and health issues among them. Sudden job losses due to Covid-19 may alter this gender equality in income contribution and may work disproportionately, disadvantaging women and affecting gender equality in other domains of family life such as decision making, for example.

This research aims to directly explain such imbalances in gender equality among female migrant workers and their left-behind families, particularly on the arrangement of children's education, family economic status, and family health being.

2 Methodology

The study was conducted in Sukowilangun Village, Sub-district Kalipare, Malang Regency. It was chosen considering the demographic and socio-economic patterns of female migrant workers in Sukowilangun that resemble the common patterns of Indonesian female migrant workers. Those patterns including the economic background of the female migrant who are mostly come from a low-income family, their marital status, have left-behind children and husbands, and most of them are working in the household sector such as household assistants of family caretakers.

The method used is a mixed quantitative and qualitative research method which includes household survey (605 village's families), interviews with left-behind family members (30); telephone interviews with female migrant workers (30) covering three regions in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East; and online survey of female migrant workers (2828). However, this paper will only focus on the qualitative data assessment through the female migrant and left-behind family interviews.

The household survey was done to identify households with a current international female migrant. The sample size for the household survey was determined based on the target number of international migrant households. The household survey was addressed to the head of the household using a short questionnaire. Once households with an international female migrant were identified, interview 30 left-behind husbands (or parents in case of unmarried women) from the 36-48 households were done using an interview question route.

The obtained contact details of the migrant women during the household survey through a consent process. This will involve the left-behind family member seeking permission of the female migrant to provide her details to the study team to contact her for taking consent for the interviews. This paper focused on the qualitative data of the study. It was analyzed in Nvivo-12 software for pre-determined themes and emerging themes.

3 Result and Discussion

Typically, Indonesian form nuclear families, meaning a household consist of husband, wife, and children. Some families are formed in extended ones; consist of husband, wife, children, parents, and other relatives. The nuclear family is preferable in terms of the expectation of the family to be independent. But in the migrant context, extended family households were benefitted from the facilities of day-care for their children. Parents or siblings were generous to help husbands task of taking care of the children while women were overseas.

In a household, family members share the housework. Traditionally, the wife is responsible for domestic works, such as shopping, cooking, cleaning the house, washing clothes and household tools, nurturing children, and so forth. Husband is in charge as the breadwinner, such as farmers or farm laborers, merchants, factory workers, and so on. Daughters, mothers, or any other female siblings help mother's work. In some families, wives work in the public domain, but they are also responsible for the household chores after working.

Normatively, a husband is the main breadwinner. Once the wives migrate to work overseas and are considered as the main breadwinner for the family, the division of labor in the family need to be renegotiated between husbands, wives, and other family members. Female migration, particularly wives, has changed gender relations in households. The husband took over all the

household work. In households with grown-up daughters or other female relatives, they took over their woman's domestic works, some are released from household works.

When the husband oversees overall responsibility, particularly in children rearing, the main obstacles are socialization and children's assistance in their learning process. During Covid-19, this problem is getting worse. The implementation of lockdown and social distancing limits people from having social interactions. As mentioned, that men remain to earn a living to meet their daily needs. Covid-19 restrictions put them off that disrupted their livelihood. The female migrant workers who are working legally in a household tend to be safe from the problems during the pandemic. They are usually unaffected, even protected by their employer.

Division of Duties as Educators Between Migrant Mothers and Fathers at Home

Ministry of Education and Culture Republic of Indonesia issued the Circular Letter from the Number 36962/MPK.A/HK/2020 on Online Learning and Working from Home Regulation in the Context of Preventing the Spread of Corona Virus Disease (Covid-19) which is the basis for stopping the physical teaching and learning process until the government issues the next regulation.

As a result, all students from elementary to tertiary levels must carry out the distance learning process with the new normality model. The teaching and learning are done from home using online media with applications such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Team, and others. The process has created its dimensions of problems, especially for children who still need supervision and guidance in learning.

Problems that often arise are the increasing costs that families must pay for the procurement of learning support facilities and the cost of internet quotas. Now that the school is online, the needs are also increasing. Now buying the phone credit top-up is compulsory. I bought new handphones for school purposes. So many expenses. (A, 25 yo).

... even though we received a subsidy from the school, but it was only once and not enough to pay the monthly expenses for the internet. (MS, 40yo)

This problem not only occurs in the children of migrant workers but also becomes a burden for all families who have active school children. In addition to financial problems, other things that arise are the focus on learning and complaints from parents who view that studying at home cannot be carried out seriously like at school, children play more than study. During the pandemic, my child is studying from home. Apart from increasing expenses, school from home is not effective in my opinion. If they study from home, their children play more than they study because it feels like home, not like at school. Especially if the parents can't supervise. (I, 47yo).

Some of these problems can be anticipated, but some are out of control, such as method limitations, infrastructure, and infrastructure problems. This pandemic has had a bad impact on my sister because she can't go to school and online school from home. He didn't understand what his teacher was teaching him. Not to mention the internet connection in my village is not stable. Therefore, my sister misses her due to a connection issue. (SR, 21yo).

The shocks that occurred at the beginning of the pandemic disrupted the learning system because of the unpreparedness. Educators and students are forced to use technology as the only medium. The gap in education, economics, geographical location, facilities, and infrastructure is challenging in implementing this method. In addition to the economic burden caused, social consequences and psychological problems also arise as a logical consequence of this system.

During the normal situation, the role of mothers as caregivers and mentors is very strong in certain social and cultural groups. In migrant families, some mothers must migrate to other places and this role is inevitable (Alzoubi, 2011). Migratory mothers often have a direct contribution to the welfare of their children by providing basic needs such as education and

better opportunities like other mothers who are at home (Contreras, 2012). Parenting ideas are carried out by juxtaposing traditional ideas about physical and emotional parenting with the reality of parenting from outside the home, providing physical support that comes from sending money and emotional assistance through technological media such as the internet or by telephone (Yeoh, 2010).

The pandemic has suppressed this role even further with the phenomenon of children learning from home. Migrant mothers feel responsible and pay more attention to the problem of their child's education at home. Mrs. T who is currently working in Taiwan stated that the role of education remains her responsibility. Since her children are studying from home, she must call them every night to support their schoolwork. Some subjects like English can also be helped by Mrs. T who is much familiar with the language she has been using during work in Taiwan. But the study found that the strong cohesion of the mother-children relationship remains irreplaceable.

I have daily communication with my children. My daughter who sits in year 2 now, will call me whenever find difficulties in doing her homework particularly English. I do my best to help especially during the study from home like now. Her aunty cannot help her so automatically she will seek help from me. (T, 31yo)

Interestingly, some husbands take over child-care and get involved in their school-from-home process, although they found it as the most challenging task during the lockdown. They become a teacher while the child was doing distance learning. Fathers are required to give a portion of time as a breadwinner and pay attention to their children at home. Mr. S stated that

For me and most people, the problem with school children is the most striking. Most parents in the village work from the morning so there is no time to accompany their children to study. I became a pioneer in forming a parent group to monitor children's learning progress.

So, I asked the teacher to provide a report in the group on how the children had been learning so far. Because my son is now in grade 6, his last year of elementary school. That group was created without the children knowing. Let them just focus on learning. This is one of our steps so that children continue to learn well even though they must go online. I hope everything will recover quickly so that parents will not worry about the education of their children anymore. (S, 47yo)

But the study also finds that some other female migrants give up the condition of their families and children because they feel helpless with the situation. Most Indonesian female migrant workers have a low level of education so that their capacity as educators is not adequate in the process of teaching the children they leave behind. Other family members including husbands help as much as they can, but some were overwhelming. The children were expected to be independent.

I keep helping my child even though the school is online. I reminded him to keep a balance between his school and his activities. If the school is slack, I'll tell them to stop their activities. This online school makes it difficult for me because I have to deliver here and there for children to study in groups. If he goes to regular school, he can go by himself on a motorbike. It's also difficult when he's studying and he doesn't understand, so I have a hard time trying to help. It's better to go to school as usual, so parents just leave the responsibility to the teacher. It's not too difficult to teach at home. Yes, if the parents are not busy working, they can still do it but if you are like me, they work every day from the morning, so it is a little difficult to help children learn. (S, 47yo)

The Burden of Left-Behind Families

When women migrate, a tendency occurs to rely upon their responsibilities to other women, such as their mother or sister. The closer the social relationship with migrant women, the more choices they will make. The gender order confirms that women are considered more affectionate, patient, patient, and loyal in caring for and educating children.

With the responsibility of children learning from home during this Covid-19 period, the workload of grandmothers has increased. A grandmother is also a resource, responsible for helping to educate children when in absence of the father. This is not easy because there is a gap in education and understanding of technology. Research conducted by Aminuddin (2019) shows that the workload of migrant parents left behind, especially female parents (grandmothers) is very high. They have the same workload from year to year but as time goes by, they are getting older and their health is more vulnerable, the workload becomes heavier. Such responsibilities can cause psychological distress and reduce the well-being of the migrant parents left behind.

Now I must learn how to use "the online". I'm not used to using a cellphone like that. If there is an assignment, send it online." (M, 52yo). The solution is to seek help from other parties, both neighbors and children who understand the lesson (aunts or uncles of the child).

Yes, I am the one who teaches, I am the teacher. But I can't speak English. If there is English, then go to my other child (S, 55yo). However, not all aunts or uncles can understand and provide solutions to school assignments due to the knowledge gap itself.

Children's lessons are difficult now, I also don't understand. In my time, the lessons were not like this (T, 35yo).

The research also noted the high rate of layoffs (PHK) and the reduced income of the families of migrant families left behind. This is positively correlated with family mental health. High-stress levels and parenting pressures can hinder parents' ability to support their children's educational needs.

Gender Issues in Economic

Some interesting findings show that the father still places himself as the head of the household whose main function is as the breadwinner even though the economic contribution for the family is smaller than the mother's contribution. In a patriarchal system, the gender attribute becomes a symbol that cannot be exchanged. If the family has other family members or supporting parties (helpers), then the care and education of children are delegated to them. Moreover, the rate of job loss and income reduction increased rapidly during the Covid-19 crisis so that migrants and their families put economic problems as a priority issue.

I must work so the children learn by themselves at home. I must earn the living. The conditions are more difficult. I don't have time to teach children to study. (M, 50yo)

Most of the households in the research site (66%) income is 1 million Rupiah monthly. The Covid-19 pandemic has the worst impact on the family who mainly depend on remittance by their daughter, wife, or mother who works as migrant workers. Our respondent explained that the reason for the delay in remittances was the lockdown policy, which forbade all citizens to go out and closed all the banks they used to send the money. During the pandemic, the amount of money sent by migrant workers to their families has also reduced and some of them also had not sent the money yet.

As the result, some of the migrant families had trouble in providing their daily needs. They did not have enough money to pay the electricity and water bills, buying groceries, and pay their children's education who need additional expenses for internet credits due to the implementation of online schooling during the pandemic.

Most of the people in the village reported the deflation of income due to pandemics, particularly those who work in domestic sectors such as farm labor, shopkeeper, the daily worker in the informal sector, and those who do odd jobs. Many of them have also lost their job.

A lot of small merchants have experienced a decrease in their income due to low customers. Some of them even lost their job including farm labor and construction labor because no one needs their services. As mentioned by one of our respondents, because of Covid, we have almost no job order, sometimes we can't even go out, which most job opportunities are outside the village. We have difficulties in buying rice, it is hard to buy groceries because we don't receive any assistance and can't get a job. Finding a job is difficult, the economy declining, health also declining (M, 43yo).

Some people who work as employees have lost their jobs as the reduced number of employees arise to sustain during the pandemic. For farmer families, the drop in selling price of agricultural products accompanied by high transportation and delivery costs during the pandemic has made a major disadvantage. Most of the interviewed female migrants had an issue in sending remittances when the pandemic started.

But at the first time of lockdown here, the bank closed for about 3 months, so it was difficult to send money to my family in Indonesia. It was around March-May 2020. It made me late to send money to Indonesia (DW, 30yo). Before the pandemic, I used to send money once in 2 months for my family in Indonesia. Yet, in the early pandemic outbreak and lockdown, I only send the money once in 4 months because I could not go to the bank. (H, 25yo)

4 Conclusion

The pandemic has caused structural changes from the country level to the individual context. All countries have agreed to carry out restrictions and lockdowns to reduce the spread of the deadly virus. Therefore, human mobilities are strictly hampered, including inhibiting Indonesian female migrant workers who have migrated abroad since the 70s. There has been a feminization of Indonesian migrant workers where the women leave as the backbone of the family, working hard to earn a living for themselves and the families they leave behind. The patriarchal structure in Indonesia has shifted women who were previously placed in the private sphere were replaced into the public sphere and even beyond cross-national borders.

The renegotiation occurs in gender arrangements where the mother takes part as the breadwinner and the father takes care of the house and children. However, this change cannot occur automatically. There is still an affectionate label for women who take on their gender responsibilities to "take care of the house" from afar such as helping children study, buying family necessities, etc.

Research shows that this pandemic crisis reinforces that role even more to perpetuation. The problem of children's education from home, namely the teaching and learning process carried out from home is somehow carried out as mother responsibility, either directly or indirectly. The economic problems faced by husbands because of the impact of the pandemic also show that the realm of men's work in the pandemic era is fragile, on the other hand, women who work at home by employers are more secured. Responsible employers keep the spread of the virus carefully by giving more effort to health procedures. Inevitably, cases of illegal female labor and job losses have occurred.

As consequence, these women must return to Indonesia. In terms of health, this pandemic is prone to causing stress for both the bereaved families and women who are leaving because

they become more worried about their families' fate and health condition. Lockdown also causes an increase in the number of working hours that are prone to causing stress in the workplace of female migrants.

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