Bringing Agency Back In: Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia

Nurchayati

Universitas Negeri Surabaya

This article highlights how, in pursuing their goals, Indonesian female migrant workers exercised their agency by coping with the challenges of life and work in Saudi Arabia. Due to the lack of legal protection of their rights in Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, many such workers suffer various forms of exploitation and maltreatment by actors who took advantage of them. This study examines how three Indonesian domestic workers in Saudi Arabia adapted to an alien environment, overcame problems in the workplace, and negotiated with their employers. This study reveals that these women were not passive victims of the existing social system; they were capable of exercising their agency.

Introduction

Since the end of the oil boom in 1982, migrant workers have become one of Indonesia's major contributors of foreign exchange. In 1983, the country began exporting workers to the Middle East, aiming to earn USD 150 million (*Tempo,* 28 May 1983). The Indonesian government still relies nowadays on labor export to mitigate the long-term impact of the 1997/1998 economic crisis. In fact, tourism, small- and medium-scale businesses, and migrant workers constitute the three pillars of the contemporary Indonesian economy (BNP2TKI, 2008). The BNP2TKI (National Agency for the Placement and Protection of Overseas Labor) reported that Indonesian migrant workers contributed USD 8.24 billion of foreign exchange in 2008 and USD 5.05 billion in the first three quarters of 2011 (BNP2TKI, 2009; 2011). From January to September 2011, of all Indonesian migrant workers, those in Saudi Arabia were the largest

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senders of bank-mediated remittances (33.27 percent), second only to their counterparts in Malaysia (33.66 percent) (BNP2TKI, 2011).

Making a living abroad, Indonesian women migrant workers suffer various forms of exploitation by recruiting agents, the government, and overseas employers. The social contract between these workers as citizens and the Indonesian government does not work as it should. On the one hand, they are expected to help alleviate the effects of the Indonesian economic crisis. On the other hand, the government does little to protect their rights. For example, when Indonesian migrant domestic workers suffered maltreatment, torture, and rape from 1998 to 2009, the government did not provide them with adequate protection and legal aid (Tagaroa and Sofia, 1998:29, 66; Robinson, 2009:103-105). The media regularly carries stories of how government officials have subjected them to inefficient, confusing, corrupt, and exploitative treatments (Bujono, 1985).

Despite the breakdown of the social contract between the citizenry and the state, despite the misery many migrant workers have suffered at home and abroad, and despite the government's inadequacy in providing protection, many Indonesian women seek to earn a living overseas, especially in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. They constituted 73.27 percent of all Indonesian migrant workers in 2008 and 83.68 percent in 2009 (Depnakertrans, 2010).

This paper contributes an analysis of agency to the studies of Indonesian women migrant workers. It aims to understand their struggle for prosperity and respect and how they tackle the challenges of working in a transnational setting where different cultures interact. It describes how, in pursuing their goals, Indonesian migrant domestic workers exert their agency by handling the problems of living and working in a country whose immigration laws limit their physical and social mobility and whose labor laws and customs do not protect them. In particular, this essay examines how three Indonesian women domestic workers adapted to an alien environment, solved problems in the workplace, and negotiated with their employers over dress codes, payment of salary, and terms of their contracts. It explores how they resisted the abuse, sexual harassment, and exploitation that their employers tried to inflict on them.

Many journalists and scholars have represented women migrant workers as victims by drawing our attention to the sacrifices they make in search of a better life. Analyzing 193 articles in the Indonesian media discussing Indonesian women migrant workers, Ford (2003: 103) has discovered that only 3.6 percent depicted them as having agency while 87 percent portrayed them as victims. Some scholars and human rights activists also present the experiences of Indonesian women migrant workers with a special emphasis on violence and crimes they endure at home and in host countries (Tagaroa and Sofia, 1998; Wahyudi, 2002; Indonesia Research Team et al., 2005). One

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shortcoming of this type of literature is that victimization becomes the central theme and the major "lesson learned." Little attention is paid on how women migrant workers develop and mobilize their strategies to cope with the challenges of working in overseas milieus. Sympathizing with the migrant women they discuss and whose rights they defend, some observers unwittingly deny these women intellectual complexity and any meaningful degree of agency. Placing too much emphasis on the effects of exploitative and oppressive structures on these women's lives, such observers leave their human agency under-analyzed.

Several works, however, have appeared that focus on the agency of Indonesian women migrant workers. For example, Rahman (2003) examines the individual and collective power of Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore in confronting the "complex power structures" that regulated their life and work abroad. Williams (2008) underscores the agency of domestic workers from East Nusa Tenggara in coping with challenges in their workplace by employing religious practices and networks. In her research, Ueno (2009) analyzes the modes of resistance deployed by Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore to defend their rights against injustice perpetrated by recruiting agents, employers, and their own relatives. Finally, Sim (2009) examines not only the effects of exploitation on Indonesian women migrant workers but also the ways they interpret the causes of exploitation and resist it.

In this paper, I use the experiences of three Indonesian domestic workers in Saudi Arabia as a lens to analyze the interplay between social structures and women migrants' capacity to handle life challenges through the deployment of survival strategies that drew on social rules and resources.

The three-month fieldwork on which this article is based was undertaken in the village of Pranggang, Kediri,[1] East Java in November-December 2009 and February-March 2011. According to the Population Census of 2009, Pranggang had a population of 9,084 people, most of whom were Muslims by religion, Javanese by ethnicity, farmers by occupation, and junior high school graduates by education. Some people in Pranggang responded positively to the policy of exporting workers to Saudi Arabia that the government began to pursue in the early 1980s. It was, therefore, easy to find among the villagers women who were former migrant workers. My interviews with the village head (6 December 2009) and analysis of the village records yielded a rough estimate that an average of 155 Pranggang women undertook labor migration every year from 2006 to 2009. The destination countries were Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Saudi Arabia. My field

[1] Kediri is one of the major domestic worker-exporting districts in East Java.

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assistant Pandu, a local resident in his late twenties, introduced me to and arranged my first interviews with the key informants of this study: Sarinah, Lestari and Ratih, all of whom had completed their formal education at the primary school, were married Muslim housewives, and (at that time) made a living as farmers.[2] A fifty-year-old mother of two children, Sarinah had been to Saudi Arabia twice. In her first stint (1990-1993), she was employed as a domestic worker in the household of a retired officer in Riyadh, who had a wife and eight children. During her second sojourn, she worked in the village of Taif from 1997 to 1999, this time as a domestic worker for a young couple with three children. Born in 1967, Lestari, a mother of two children, had worked twice in Saudi Arabia. Her first employment (1993-1996) was as a domestic worker for a bookseller's family in Dhahran. Living in a large house, her employers had eight children and she was the only domestic worker they hired. After spending a year back home, she returned to work in Saudi Arabia again. In this second stint (1998-2000), Lestari was a domestic worker in Riyadh for a retired gardener and his wife. Ratih, aged thirty-four, was married to a bricklayer, with whom she had two children. She spent the years 2005-2007 in Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker for an expatriate Syrian couple who worked as physicians in Abha. She babysat their children and took care of the house but was not required to cook.

This study drew on biographical and ethnographic data—on the former to reconstruct the biographies of the three informants and on the latter to comprehend the culture of the Pranggang community—for it was instructive to see how their unfolding lives interacted with their changing society. The key informants' life stories emerged from the in-depth structured interviews I conducted with them in Javanese . I organized the interview questions into time segments (lives before, during, and after migration) and around topics (pre-departure experience, worker-agent interaction, employee-employer encounter, journey home, and migration's effects on family). To take the ethnographic snapshots of the village, I interviewed twenty-seven locals: the three key informants, their husbands and relatives, another three return migrant workers, the village head and his assistants, and other villagers. Besides observing sites of collective activities (the market, village office, water reservoirs, rice fields, food stalls, mosques, orchards and house yards), I participated in prayers, campaigns for the district head elections, palavers at local food stalls and informal gatherings.

[2] To protect the privacy of the informants and research assistant, I used pseudonyms. The assistant's tasks were limited to introducing me to the locals and setting up the appointments for my first interviews with them.

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This paper focuses on Sarinah, Lestari, and Ratih because it is an offshoot of the ongoing research I started in late 2008 to produce these women's life histories. Of the several Pranggang women I befriended, they were the most able and willing to become the subjects of my life-history projects. I discovered that labor migration shaped these women's adult lives and reflected the changes their community underwent. As it happened, they used the money they earned overseas to improve their well-being: they renovated their houses, purchased plots of farmland, started up small-businesses, and put their children through school. In this particular respect, my fieldwork revealed that they were typical of women return migrants in Pranggang. There were, however, three other Pranggang women whose hard work and sacrifices abroad did not improve their lot. Two of them were out of the village during my fieldwork and the third suffered mental breakdown that rendered her unfit for interviews.

Working Conditions in Saudi Arabia

During the reign of King Faisal (1964-1975), the Saudi government began economic modernization, resulting in the rise of the middle class whose members hired domestic workers for prestige and convenience (Oishi, 2005: 47; Gulati, 2006:56). About 80 percent of Saudi households nowadays rely on migrant workers to deal with household chores (O'Kane, 2009:3). Rukmini, an ex-migrant domestic worker in her early fifties whom I interviewed besides the key informants of this study, was aware of the Saudi practice of using domestic workers as a status symbol:

> My employers in Medina were a teacher and his wife, a homemaker and mother of two. Less well-off than their neighbors, they lived in a small rented house, where the amount of chores was too negligible to justify hiring a domestic worker. To make the most of the wages they paid me, they made me do laundry work for their relatives.

One of the obstacles to Saudi economic modernization was the shortage of manpower. To solve this problem, the government offered competitive wages to attract foreign workers, whom the country needed to run development projects (Shaw and Long, 1982:42). Saudi Arabia soon experienced an influx of migrant workers, who constituted over 50 percent of its workforce in the early 1970s (Bowen, 2008:119). The number of foreign workers grew: 4.5 million in 1995 and 5.6 million in 2008 (Ramady, 2005:356; North and Tripp, 2009:81). This trend led some in the government and citizenry to perceive migrants as a threat to the Saudi way of life (Kapiszewski, 2006:4-11). Since the mid-1980s, the government has been trying to address the demographic

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imbalance through the Saudization of the country's manpower (Feiler, 1987: 308; Zuhur, 2011:72).

The Saudi government also pursues a restrictive immigration policy (Scully, 2010:826-827; O'Kane, 2009:1). Offering no tourist visa, it allows only five categories of foreigners to visit the country: entrepreneurs, workers and their dependents, Muslim pilgrims, diplomats, and the citizens of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Rayburn and Bush, 1997:31; North and Tripp, 2009:113). To limit foreigners' mobility within the country, the government enforces housing segregation between citizens and non-nationals, prefers non-Arab aliens, and supports short-term work contract and the *kafala* system (Beaugrand, 2010:4). Ratih's experience exemplifies the even more severe constraints on movement that women domestic workers undergo under Saudi immigration policy:

> My boss and madam never let me go outdoors. Whenever they went out, they would shut me inside the house. My friend, a woman from Gringging, received even worse treatment from her employers. Once she was done with her chores, they would lock her up in her bedroom, furnished with a TV and a bathroom.

The isolation of women domestic workers exposes them to higher risks of abuse, exploitation, and sexual harassment, and makes it harder for them to seek help from the police and other authorities (Varia, 2010:10). Some Indonesian women domestic workers in Saudi Arabia sustained serious injuries and died on the run from abusive employers who confined them (Sherry, 2004:67-68). Most of the 4,550 Indonesian migrant workers deported from Saudi Arabia between 19 September and 24 October 2011 were women domestic workers running away from their employers, who had subjected them to non-payment of wages, physical abuse, or sexual harassment (*Metro TV*, 25 October 2011).

Under the *kafala* system, all foreigners need a Saudi sponsor to get an entry or exit visa approval when entering or leaving the country. Upon entering Saudi Arabia, they must submit their passport to their Saudi sponsors, who in turn provide them with an *iqama* or temporary residence permit (Rayburn and Bush, 1997:31-35). They will receive their passport back when the employment contract expires and they must leave the country (O'Kane, 2009:2). In compliance with the *kafala* system, Sarinah, too, must submit her passport to her employer, who also acted as her sponsor:[3]

[3] In most cases involving foreign domestic workers, their employers act as their sponsors.

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> [At the port of entry], an immigration official ushered me into a special room where he took my passport and told me to sit down and wait until my employers came to pick me up. […] During my stay in the country, my employers kept my passport and I could only have its copy.

The *kafala* system creates unequal labor relations. The employer can stop sponsoring the domestic worker's visa and terminate the contract at any time, forcing her to leave the country immediately without paying some of her wages. This sponsorship system turns migrant domestic workers into "illegal" aliens the moment their employers end their contracts or when they run away from their abusive employers. Despite calls by the Human Rights Watch and the International Labor Organization for the reform of the *kafala* system (Varia, 2008:8,125; *Khaleej Times Online*, 5 December 2010), the Saudi Ministry of Labor announced on 20 June 2011 that the country was intent on maintaining it (Khan and Harroff-Tavel, 2011:13).

Foreign domestic workers usually enter a renewable two-year contract that requires them to undergo a three-month probation period. This is a time of uncertainty and increased vulnerability because they must work for free and under their employers' constant and close scrutiny. If a migrant domestic worker passes the probation period, she will receive wages for nine instead of twelve months in their first year.[4] Employers have high expectations for their domestic workers because besides being charged expensive recruiting fees by employment agencies, they must also pay for the workers' visas and work and residence permits (Varia, 2008:29; Saudi Arabia Ministry of Labor, 2006:4). If an employer finds his new worker's performance unsatisfactory, he can send her back to the recruiting agency and demand a replacement. This system enables rogue recruiters to make more money by urging workers to flee their employer's house just a few days after their trial period ends. In this case, the employers remain responsible for covering the recruitment cost. The rogue agents then send the domestic workers to work for other employers whom they charge with recruitment fees (Bradley, 2006:129). On the other hand, rogue employers can abuse the system by transferring a domestic worker around among themselves before the probation period ends, thereby forcing her to work for free for multiple employers.

Migrant domestic workers find no protection in Saudi laws. They are, in fact, excluded from the Labor Law of 1969 and the Royal Decree No. M/51 of 27 September 2005 (Scully, 2010:827; Sherry, 2004:27). If their employers

[4] The practice seems to have begun when the Labor and Workmen's Regulations were enacted in 1969.

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mistreat them, it is hard for them to get legal aid. Law enforcers do not handle cases of severe physical abuse of women domestic workers unless the international media and human rights activists mobilize pressure campaigns. For instance, the employers who tortured the Indonesian domestic worker Keni binti Carda in September 2008 were not brought to trial until the case received considerable international attention (Human Rights Watch, 2010: 13).

Domestic workers commonly work from fifteen to twenty hours a day in Saudi Arabia (Zuhur, 2011:162). An Indonesian migrant worker named Siti, for example, said thus to the daily *Jakarta Post* (5 May 2011): "[My madam] did not allow me to rest for more than two hours. She also overload[ed] me with tasks." In 2009, the Shura Council attempted to pass a law on domestic workers' working hours but this attempt failed because the proposed law was deemed inimical to "the needs and traditions of Saudi families" (Varia, 2010: 15).

The Probation Period and Adjustment Challenges

The probation period exposed the informants of this study to the challenges of cultural adjustment that working overseas entailed. The challenges appeared in such areas as language, dress codes, local cuisine, and working conditions. This trial period, which was the initial episode in the interpersonal and cross-cultural encounter between the foreign domestic workers and their employers, often exposed the former to moments of discomfort, confusion, shock, and stress. The domestic workers must learn the basics of their employers' culture. The sudden "transplantation" from their small village world to an overseas metropolis, such as Riyadh and Jeddah, came to them as quite a shock.

One of the triggers of the shock that the informants suffered during their probation period was the foreign language. Consisting of numerous regional dialects and having an intricate grammar, Arabic is a difficult language to learn (North and Tripp, 2009:192-195). Sarinah, Lestari and Ratih reported to me that the two-week language course they took during their pre-departure training in Indonesia left much to be desired. The teachers in Jakarta taught them standard Arabic but their Saudi employers spoke colloquial Arabic. Thus, for the first six months of their encounter, the first-time migrant workers and their employers found each other mutually unintelligible, resulting in irritating complications. The employers, for their part, felt angry and cheated, having spent much money hiring a domestic worker who—unable to understand and perform even the simplest of all orders—seemed beyond training and good for nothing. Some employers reacted to their frustration by abusing their domestic worker verbally or physically, or by sacking her altogether. Lost in a linguistic limbo, their job security hanging by a thread, as first-time

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domestic workers, the informants kept their cool, politely grinning and bearing the angry words their frustrated madams hurled at them every so often. Through the day-to-day interaction with their employers and their children, the domestic workers eventually picked up colloquial Arabic. It was by employing this grin-and-bear strategy that Sarinah, Lestari and Ratih survived their probation period on their first stint.

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

By the time they started their second stints in Saudi Arabia, the informants had learned their lessons so well that they now had at their disposal the social knowledge they could draw upon to bolster their bargaining positions vis-à-vis their employers. When Sarinah returned to the country in 1997, for example, she was no longer the greenhorn she had been in 1990. She deliberately misled her employers to believe that she knew no Arabic so they would lower their guard and unwittingly reveal the otherwise hidden attitudes they had toward her. The knowledge of these attitudes helped Sarinah design and deploy various ways to "tame" her employers.

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

The second challenge was the dress code. The Saudi custom prescribes that men and women wear their traditional clothing when they go outdoor: the *gutrah* and the white *thobe* are for men while the *abaya* and the veil are for women. When they reach puberty, girls must conceal their face in the presence of men who are not members of their immediate family. All migrant domestic workers are required to comply with the Saudi dress code.

Sarinah, Ratih and Lestari found the Islamic dress codes in Saudi Arabia uncomfortable and impractical. While the sort of Islam they embraced in East Java did not require them to cover their head and face, in Saudi Arabian women

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were to don the *burqa*—which covered the whole body save the hands and eyes—in the presence of males who were not their immediate relatives, at home and in public. The cumbersome *burqa* made it difficult for the domestic workers to perform their chores. In their own home in Java they would have worn a short-sleeved duster dress and needed neither headscarf nor face-cover. In a Saudi household, they could remove their headscarf only when all members of their employers' family were out. Seeing it as part of her job requirements, Lestari complied stoically with the dress codes. "It was for survival's sake," she explained. By contrast, for safety reasons Sarinah could not do what Lestari did:

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

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

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Sarinah, Lestari and Ratih discovered that the actual working conditions in the Saudi households differed from what they had expected during their training in Indonesia and from the description in their contracts. In some cases, the discrepancies were considerable. As Ratih remembered, despite the stipulation in their contracts that as domestic workers they were to serve in a domestic setting, some wound up toiling in the sun as shepherds or farm hands, or serving their employers as shop-assistants at local bazaars.

> There was this friend of mine from Banyuwangi who left for Saudi Arabia shortly after she got married. She wound up working there as a shepherd. By the time she finished her contract and returned to Indonesia, prolonged exposure to the sun had tanned her skin to a dark brown. Consider also my neighbors Lina and Ani. They too became shepherds in Saudi Arabia against their will. In this respect, Saudi Arabia is not unique, though, for my neighbor Nina, who worked in Hong Kong, also ended up becoming a kind of a field laborer.

During the pre-departure training, the recruiting agents had advised the migrants to refuse work if the actual working conditions overseas differed from those specified in their contracts. Yet despite serious discrepancies between contract and reality, the informants decided to comply with their employers' wishes. "It would have been foolish to have done otherwise," Ratih explained to me. "We had made a lot of sacrifices just to arrive there. So we had better stay, keep the job, and make the best of a bad situation."

Sarinah and Ratih recalled that their employers viewed their relations with them in such a way that to hire a domestic worker meant to "buy" her as a human being. Once, while angry, Ratih's madam complained that after spending much money to "purchase" her, she still had to pay her regular wages. The madam considered it fair that migrant domestic workers should work for free during their probation period. She disregarded the fact that the contract did not require the workers to do so. It only said that the employer could use the probation period to appraise the worker's personality and job qualifications. The employer could use samples of the worker's personality and work ethic to decide whether or not she would continue hiring her. One of the ways the madam assessed her domestic worker's character was by testing her honesty. The madam would put a bit of money or jewelry in spots where the worker would stumble upon it easily. Sarinah recalled one of the tests she underwent: "I was tidying up the clothes in one of those closets when I found a bundle of money. I picked it up and delivered it immediately to Madam. Hadn't I done so, I would've flunked the character test." On the whole, the informants experienced the probation period as a time of fear and hope. Lestari, for one, remembered being haunted by the constant fear that her madam might ship her back to Indonesia.

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Life and Work Abroad

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

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

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

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

> I was always cautious, preparing for the worst. One day, my boss followed me around with some clothes in his hand. I had no idea what's on his mind but I was afraid he's going to do me harm. I took a knife from the kitchen drawer for self-defense and ran away. But he kept following me, waiving his hand at me. I ran around inside, trying to avoid the man. Finally, he realized that a terrible misunderstanding was going on between us, whereupon he made a few gestures to

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> indicate that all he wanted was for me to wash his clothes. I was like, "God, was I stupid!" The moment I understood what's going on, I was very embarrassed.

It took the informants nine to twelve months to become a competent speaker of Arabic. They soon realized they could use their newly acquired language skill as a weapon to protect themselves from physical abuse by their employers. They could do this by showing off to their employer in Arabic their understanding of the terms of their contract. This was a tactic they learned from the experienced colleagues they met in malls while shopping with their madam or in a family gathering their employer held. For example, when their madams were going to lay a hand on them, Sarinah and Ratih responded by challenging them to send them home to Indonesia. Speaking in Arabic, they showed their madams that they understood an article in their contract which said that by physically abusing her domestic worker, the employer rendered the contract void. By doing so, she must, at her own expense, send the worker home and pay her wages for her work until the termination of contract plus three months' salary. It was difficult for employers to find a new domestic worker as reliable as the one they had to send home.

As Ratih explained to me, the danger of physical abuse by Saudi employers was real:

> Some Saudi employers were physically abusive. If we're afraid of them, they would often lay a hand on us. But if we resisted them, they would think twice. It's true that during the first few months, we're rather vulnerable to their aggressiveness. We soon learned stuff; we knew how to stand for our rights. For example, one day when my madam was about to slap my face, I told her I would rather be sent home than be maltreated, whereupon she lost the guts to do what she was about to do.

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

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

When challenging her employers, she calculated her risks. Her calculation was right. She finally won as they stopped pursuing the matter any further. She knew that there were a few domestic workers before her who left

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before their contracts expired. She understood that the last thing her employers wanted was to train another new domestic worker.

Sometimes conflict erupted between Indonesian migrant domestic workers and their employers. Depending on the causes, the temperament of the people involved, and their methods of handling it, the conflict could either end quickly or last long. In some cases, minor mistakes on the part of the domestic worker caused her to receive severe corporal punishment from the employer. For example, Keni binti Carda—an Indonesian domestic worker working in Saudi Arabia—was badly abused and mutilated by her madam who was disappointed with her job performance (*Suara Merdeka*, 1 April 2009; Joewono, 2011). The common triggers of domestic worker-employer conflict include the madam's jealousy of the worker, unsatisfactory service, quarrels over childcare, complaints from the employer's children about the worker, sexual harassment of the worker by her boss, and linguistic misunderstandings.

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

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

The informants worked a daily total of twenty-and-a-half hours, starting at 4:30 A.M. and stopping at 2:00 A.M. the next day. One of the reasons was that the Saudis enjoyed holding family gatherings, which started at 10:00 P.M. and ended at 2:00 A.M. Friends and relatives came to visit, bringing their own domestic workers with them to help those of the host and hostess to organize the event. It was a physically exhausting event for the workers as they must cook many dishes to accommodate the guests. As a result, they rarely had

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enough sleep during their stints in Saudi Arabia. As Lestari once put it, "After hours I felt like a flat tire."

Exhausting though these gatherings were, they provided the informants with an opportunity to meet with one another and share information, ideas, knowledge, and experiences of recreational and strategic importance. Such an opportunity was rare because Saudi employers forbade their domestic workers to meet their compatriots. The idea was to prevent them from exercising their freedom to organize. However, the domestic workers managed to use the events to their own advantage.

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

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

Indonesian-Saudi cultural differences concerning nonverbal behavior sometimes lead to sexuality-related misunderstandings that make domestic worker-employer relations difficult. It is common in Indonesia to see women and men smile and nod at each other to express respect and politeness. In the Saudi context, however, smiling and nodding between opposite sexes could be interpreted as gestural expressions of sexual interest. In this regard, a manual for expatriates living and working in Saudi Arabia notes, "Women should not be overly friendly to Arab men in public. It may be misinterpreted as a 'come on'" (Rayburn and Bush, 1997:27). It also warns the reader that "[l]ooking directly at men and smiling can be misconstrued. Should you receive any unwanted advances, make some *immediate verbal reaction* [italics added]. Ignoring an advance is considered tantamount to approval" (Rayburn and Bush, 1997:97).

A handbook for Indonesian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia provides tips on how a good domestic worker should behave toward her boss. She

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should lower her gaze in the presence of her boss. Under no circumstances should she steal a glance at him or nod and smile at him because to make any of these gestures—at least in some Saudi contexts—is to act in a seductive manner, to present oneself as a loose woman (Saad, 2005:29-30), and to risk inviting sexual advances from men. Some Indonesian migrant workers, however, do not understand this gestural code or, if they do, they simply forget to translate their message (deference) from the Indonesian to the Arab code. In some cases, this lack of understanding and this failure of translation exposes domestic workers to sexual harassment by their male employers.

Cultural misunderstandings are not the only factors contributing to sexual harassment of Indonesian domestic workers by their Saudi employers. There are some who treat their domestic workers as sexual objects. As Rukmini recalled, one day she was home alone with nobody else but her boss. The man opened his robe and displayed his genitals to her.

When Indonesian migrant domestic workers had the chance to gather together, one of the things they did was learn from each other the tips and tricks for protecting themselves from sexual harassment. As Sarinah explained to me, one of these tactics was for the domestic worker never to say or do things that could be misconstrued as signs of sexual availability. Another tactic was for her to mount a physical counter-attack against a stubborn sexual harasser. When the son of her employers sought to harass her, Sarinah hit him with a broomstick and threatened that she would report the incident to his mother. Some fellow domestic workers armed themselves with a basin of water that they would throw at their boss and his son if they tried to molest her. Ratih recalled how this tactic often worked. The botched attempt at sexual harassment would leave its traces in the house, such as spots on the floor drenched with water. Seeing this, the madam would ask the domestic worker what had happened and the domestic worker would tell her the story, protesting her innocence. In some cases, this led to the development of mutual trust between the domestic worker and the madam. The third tactic was for the domestic worker to stay as far away physically as possible from all the adult male members of the family she served. If any of these asked her for a sexual favor, she would turn down the request firmly and assertively. Lestari did this when one of her employers' relatives asked her for a kiss on the cheek. In some cases, assertiveness could even protect women irregular migrants from sexual abuses. For example, Ria (pseudonym) — an ex-migrant worker now in her late thirties who worked in Jeddah in the early 1900s,— responded with a firm refusal when her boss demanded that she provide him with sexual services. Aware of her "female irregular migrants" status, he threatened to turn her over to the authorities. She silenced him by pointing out that the authorities would find him guilty of a more serious offense: employing a female irregular migrants worker.

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In a few cases, it was the migrant domestic workers who were guilty of sexual harassment or, at least, sexual provocation. Some domestic workers took a sexual interest in their bosses and made advances toward them (Kula and Alsagoff, 1991), which made their madams so bitterly jealous they subjected the domestic workers to various forms of physical abuse. Representatives of Indonesian recruiting agencies based in Saudi Arabia have received reports from some male employers who complained that their domestic workers had seduced them and their sons (Tobing et al., 1990:95-96).

Some of the stories the informants told me suggest that some sexual encounters between domestic workers and their male employers were consensual. Some women migrant workers sought to derive both financial and sexual benefits from their sojourns overseas. This is a reminder that women migrant workers are sexual beings having sexual needs. Some focus on their work and delay the gratification of these needs until their stint is over and they reunite with their husbands; a few others seize the opportunity for sexual enjoyment that presents itself overseas. For the latter, such recreation may alleviate the dehumanizing effects of having to work overtime and stay at home almost every day. The domestic worker-male employer sexual liaison can be doubly rewarding for the domestic worker if she receives some money from her boss in exchange for the sexual favors she does for and with him. This means extra money, a generous addition to her official wages, a supplement she can negotiate with her boss so as to make these favors a regular activity. Sarinah reasoned that some migrant domestic workers performed sexual service to their employers as "a side job":

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

Whether or not a domestic worker entered into a sexual relationship with her boss — Sarinah, Lestari and Ratih argued—would depend to some degree on the worker's personality. Some domestic workers, they said, were sexually expressive.

Occasionally, the altercations between return migrant domestic workers in their home village were shot through with allegations that their interlocutors earned extra income in Saudi Arabia by providing sexual service. For example, one morning, sitting on the bamboo bench at the porch of his home, my research assistant Pandu witnessed a quarrel between two former migrant domestic workers in which they launched a vituperative attack on each other. One party of this quarrel shouted to the other, "Cut out that holier-than-thou

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attitude, will you? When we were there [in Saudi Arabia], you and I were *lonté* [whores]."

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

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

Sarinah's colleagues managed their incomes differently, preferring to receive their wages monthly. Lestari, for one, knew that some fellow Indonesian domestic workers had trouble having their wages paid by their masters, especially when the latter were faced with financial difficulties. She also had heard stories of unfinished money business between Indonesian domestic workers and their employers even after the contract had expired and the domestic workers had returned home. In such cases, even though they were about to depart for Indonesia, the migrants had not received one hundred percent of their wages. Lestari was determined that this kind of trouble should not happen to her. She decided that the sooner she received her wages, the better she could manage her hard-earned income on her own. Experience had taught her that the employer could just renege on certain items in his or her contract with the worker. Her own employers, for example, failed to bring her to Mecca to perform the hajj at the end of her contract just because one of them fell ill. (There is a clause in the labor contract that requires an employer to help the Muslim employee to perform the hajj.) Now, she was worried that they would betray her trust again if she entrusted them with keeping her wages for her.

Conclusion

As some scholars have indicated, it is true that while making a living in Saudi Arabia, Indonesian women migrant workers not only encounter a social system that in some ways puts them at a disadvantage, they also come into conflict with more powerful employers who use the system's rules and resources against them. Yet it is also true—as Michel Foucault (1978:95) has reminded us—that "[w]here there is power, there is resistance." Capable of recognizing oppression and exploitation as they occur, some migrant domes-

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tic workers are able to identify and use the existing rules and resources in their host society to resist exploitative and abusive employers.

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

This study of three return migrant domestic workers has offered a complex picture of how their agency interacted with the social systems surrounding migrant work. In line with Giddens' argument (1979:72) that all social actors are capable of independent thought and action, this paper has shown that these women were not passive victims of the existing social system. They were capable of exercising their agency. In their search for prosperity and respect, they were dynamic social actors capable of strategic and independent thinking. These women were able to exercise their agency using different "methods" in various situations. To overcome the oppressive and exploitative acts that their employers committed against them, they employed several strategies. First, in resisting such acts, they used their employers' native language (Arabic) against them; these women protected themselves by talking back to them in Arabic, engaging in counter-intimidation, and negotiating for better labor relations and a better method of salary payment. Second, they also resisted their more powerful employers by engaging in dissimulation. For example, they pretended they did not yet understand Arabic. This enabled them to eavesdrop on their employers' conversation to discover their real thoughts, feelings, and attitudes, which in the future they could use against them. Third, they wielded other "weapons of the weak," such as secretly exchanging strategic information with fellow Indonesian domestic workers in malls (while their employers were busy shopping) and in kitchens (during family gatherings); faking constant diligence in the presence of their employers; pretending to prefer work at home to travel outdoors with employers so they could take a nap while the latter were out; and protecting themselves from sexual harassment by consistent avoidance and assertive refusal.

The informants also enacted their agency by adapting to Saudi culture in two ways. First, in about a year, through trial and error, they succeeded in mastering Arabic. As mentioned above, this language skill enhanced their bargaining power vis-à-vis their employers. Second, they also acquired the local body language, learning to distinguish sexual gestures from neutral ones to avoid the risk of sexual harassment.

Although Saudi Arabia abolished slavery in 1962, its cultural residue remains. It has contributed, as this study discovers, to the tendency among some Saudi employers to treat domestic workers as a sort of modern-day "slaves." In fact, as Bradley (2006:128) indicates, some Saudis also teach their children to view foreign domestic workers as under-civilized.

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It was in such an anti-worker culture that Ruyati binti Sapubi, aged 54, was beheaded in Mecca on 18 June 2011. The court found this Indonesian domestic worker guilty of murdering her Saudi madam, who had subjected her to years of abuse (*Guardian*, 22 and 25 June 2011). The case moved the Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, to declare Saudi Arabia an unsafe destination for Indonesian migrant workers (Sahal, 2011). It also eventually compelled the Indonesian government to impose a moratorium on labor export to the country. Though the ban may temporarily prevent more Indonesian women from seeking jobs in Saudi Arabia, its long-term effects on the patterns of Indonesian women's labor migration requires future research.

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