

# The Reposition of Women's Role in Migrant Worker's Families in Karawang

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**Abstract.** Being a migrant worker is an alternative choice for many Karawang people to get out of the economic hardship. The decision of many women to be a migrant worker indicates the reposition of their role from reproduction to production. However, this creates internal problems, as well as deeply affects their domestic functions and roles, in their families. This research aimed to describe the reposition of women's role in migrant workers' families related to their decision to work abroad. Case study was the method used to provide a complete and in-depth view on the subject under study. The subject was multi-sources with ten key informants of female migrant workers from Tempuran District in Karawang Regency. Data were collected through in-depth interview, observation, and library study. The result shows that the reposition of female migrant workers' role in Karawang is from domestic sphere (as housewives) to public sphere (as breadwinner). It occurs because of family economic pressure, which eventually resolved by working abroad. Although it has a positive impact on the fulfillment of family economic needs, it has a negative impact on psychological and social aspects of abandoned husbands and children.

**Keywords:** Migrant Worker, Role Reposition, Domestic Role, Exploitation

## 1 Introduction

Karawang Regency is an area of West Java known as sending area of migrant workers—most of them are female—particularly to Middle East. Tempuran is one of its sub-districts where most of its female citizens become migrant workers. The majority of them work as domestic workers. Based on observations and interviews, some of them claim to have success when working abroad despite having to part with their loved ones. It can be seen from their family's ownership, including houses, land, cattles, jewelries, and vehicles.

The high interest of Tempuran's women to be migrant workers is mostly encouraged by economic pressure, a high support from family for work, and very limited job opportunities matched with possessed skills in the region as well as the increasing family needs that is getting complex more and more.

Some areas of Tempuran is categorized as rural area that has mainly common environmental land, thus the region has a high rate of poverty due to most of its people only depend on agriculture while the farming land is getting narrower. This condition, in one way or another, forces women in Tempuran to play an active role in helping family income, by being migrant

workers. Money earned by working abroad is expected to change their lives.

Other quantitative data show that more than 70% of female migrant workers from Tempuran are already married and even have children. They are forced to split up with their husbands and children for a long period of time, about 2 to 3 years, per one contract term. The fact is quite alarming because the role of women as a home keeper has changed to the main breadwinner of the family. This often leads to unbalanced structure and function of the family because husbands are often unable to replace the role of mothers who are working abroad for a while. The most common problems found are tensions in marital relationships, such as disharmony and weakening of family ties that may eventually end up with a divorce.

The disharmony is often caused by the non-functioning roles that should have been played by each family member. Men, as a father and head of family, should earn a living and protect his wife and children. He also acts as a decision maker. Women, as a mother and wife, should protect and educate their children with affection. The children should devote to their parents and follow and carry out all the instructions and directions from their parents in order to be a proud child. Women's decisions to enter the productive sector, by working as migrant workers, resulted in shift in family member's roles. The departure of the wife for being a

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migrant worker makes the structure of the family not intact anymore, where husband is in charge of household works for a while [1]. As a mother and wife, who should have been controlling the domestic affairs, such as taking care of the children and the house, women has been replaced by another figure? In fact, mother's role cannot be replaced by a husband or father or even an extended family. This ultimately leads to household problems, such as divorce and the growth and development of children.

This research seeks to explain the reposition of women's role in migrant workers' families due to their decision to work abroad. The reposition sought by this research is from the important role of women as wives and mothers with household duties and obligations (domestic sphere) to the consequence of being migrant workers (public sphere). Along with the decision to be a migrant worker, the reposition of role and function of family members seems to have been a logical consequence of the loss of women's role in the family. However, women's role as mothers who should stay with the family is very important and their existence is needed by the children. That's why their role should be substituted by other family members, such as father, grandparents, and relatives and even other.

## 2 Methodology

Case study was the method used to provide a complete and in-depth view on the subjects under study. It is considered relevant to obtain many data from the subject, particularly of the reposition of women's role in migrant workers' families due to their decision to work abroad. Using this, researchers studied many data such as individual, a group, or an event. Researchers aimed to provide a complete view and deep understanding of the subject [2]. This could intensively assess the members of the targeted group.

Data were collected through in-depth interview, observation, and library study. The subject was multi-sources, with ten female migrant workers as key informants. The appointment of key informants and research location was purposive based on the objectives of the research. This study was conducted in Karawang, West Java because this regency is the red region in providing countless labors, especially women.

## 3 Discussion

In accordance with the aims of the research, the result focuses on three aspects: the real picture of female migrant workers in Tempuran, the reposition of women's role in migrant workers' families, and the impact of the reposition of women's role in the life of migrant workers' families.

Tempuran is the biggest *sending area* of migrant workers in Karawang Regency. Based on monography data of Tempuran, the workers are between 20 to 40 years old with low education (mostly primary school graduate). Most of them (70%) are married and have 2 to 3 children, or even 4 and more. Their destination are generally countries of Middle East, such as Arab Saudi,

Oman, and United Arab Emirates (especially Abu Dhabi), and only a small number works in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore. Based on length of work term, most of them have worked abroad for 4 years (2 contract terms or more).

The field observation in Tempuran shows that the socio-economics condition of the migrant workers' families are considered poor. It means they still face hardship in meeting their primary needs, such as food, clothes, healthy and ideal homes, education, and healthcare, not to mention the demand for secondary needs.

Economics plays important role in life, and the majority of Tempuran people rely on agriculture for their economic livelihood. The low rate of paddy fields or agricultural land ownership, and the difficulty of getting a job other than in the agricultural sector as a result of the increasing number of villagers lead to low income of families.

The strong desire of wives and mothers to improve the socio-economics of their families makes them want to be migrant workers because of its easy requirements. Based on interview with informants, most of the workers are mothers and wives from low-income families. Factors that encourage them are economic pressure and the incapability of their husbands to meet the increasingly heavy economic needs.

Factors that drive a married woman to work and leave her family for a certain period are to get additional income for family—so as not to depend on her husband, to avoid boredom or to make use of free time—for having certain skills, to gain status and self-development [3]. Women's role in household economy is increasingly important as the decline of the role of agriculture in rural economy. Women's involvement in household economic activities is driven by (1) economic pressure, (2) high support from family for work, and (3) lack of other employment that suits possessed skills [4].

The condition above is in line with the research of Muhammad Zidd [5] that states that the migration of international female labours from West Java rurals to the receiving countries is an individual rational act to get out of life difficulties faced by rural poor households. The difficulties include lack of employment, low agricultural land ownership, and poverty. On the other hand, the wide-open opportunity with relatively easy requirements, family support, easy networking, and much higher wages are the main attraction for rural women to work abroad as a domestic worker. Factors that drive them are low education, low access to non-agricultural employment, and many more.

The result shows that in addition to economic or family income improvement, the logical consequences of women's decision to be a migrant worker is the reposition of family members' roles and functions, in this case women as a wife and mother. After deciding to be a migrant worker, and leaving his family for a relatively long period of time between two and six years under the terms of the contract, their role shifts from caring, educating, and nurturing their children to earning a living for their families.

The role of husband, as part of significant others who

should guard and protect his wife and earn a living, shifts as well. Man as husband and father has now a different role and function in the family. He is no longer dominant in taking decisions for family since his power has been taken by his wife. This is due to her income from working abroad is much bigger than her husband's from working in agriculture or in construction as a labor. He also do the household works once done by his wife, such as buying groceries, cooking, feeding, nurturing and caring for the children. He is often assisted by extended family such as grandparents, uncle and aunt of the children. This reposition may impact on children's attitudes and behavior, lifestyle, parenting style, and the development of children's personality. The international work experience of the female migrant workers changes the social relationship within their families, particularly on gender equality between men and women [6].

This research also found out a picture that there's a change in economic activities in migrant workers' families. After being successful, the migrant workers then become entrepreneurs, for example by opening food stall business, livestock business and so forth. In addition, many of them buy land and paddy fields. Ones who don't run businesses make use of their money to build/improve their houses and buy household goods. This implicates behavior change. Positively, they manage their money for productive and effective activities. Negatively, they spend it consumptively for their prestige. They put their desires over needs, and eventually make them wasteful and excessive.

Economic change is highly influenced by social behavior. If it's positive, it will lead to positive economic activities, and vice versa. This may have an impact on the life of the migrant workers' families.

From economic control point of view, women's role reposition has a positive impact. Woman as wife and mother now has more dominant role than her husband in meeting the increase needs of the family. The improvement of the economic status of the family improve the social status among their community. The increase of women's desire to work not only affects the labor market constellation, but also their economy and welfare and their families [7]. The higher their income, the higher the health quality of their families. The family is now considered richer for being able to buy paddy fields, several vehicles and build houses. On the other hand, the negative impact is negative change in children's attitudes and behavior due to the lack of attention and affection.

Woman as wife are the household manager, the ones who know best how much the household needs and how much their husband's income. If women decide to work and engage in the family economy, it's because their husband's income is not sufficient. Therefore, they feel they need to give a hand and their husbands support this idea. Working becomes a strategy to deal with economic

pressures as well as to realize a sense of responsibility for the viability of household economy. The assumption that women work just to get an extra allowance to enjoy themselves is not entirely true. Women's income in cash is very important because it can be used to meet daily needs. Whatever people say, their income is meaningful to pay for future needs: school tuition, house improvement, and home furnishings.

## 4 Conclusion

Based on the explanation above, it can be inferred the followings:

1. Most of Tempuran female migrant workers are wives and mothers from economically poor families. Factors that drive them to work abroad are economic pressure, and their husband's incapability to meet the increasingly heavy family needs.
2. Women's decision to work abroad leads to role reposition between wives and husbands, from domestic sphere (housewives) to public sphere (breadwinner).
3. The reposition impacts the family economically (surplus in family economy so their needs are met), socially (husband/children does not make use of money from his wife/their mother wisely), and psychologically (negative change in husband and children's attitudes and behavior).

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