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Indonesian women as export commodity: notes from Tanjung Pinang

Michele Ford

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Michele Ford is a PhD candidate in the Department of History and Politics at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Her dissertation research focuses on locating the role played by labour-oriented NGOs in Indonesia during the late New Order period and Habibie interregnum in labour history and labour movement theory. Michele studied Indonesian and Industrial Relations at the University of New South Wales, Australia, and politics at the Universitas Gadjah Mada in Indonesia before writing her Honours thesis at the Australian National University in 1995 on the philosophy, institutions and practice of *Pancasila* Industrial Relations. She has had published on *Pancasila* Industrial Relations, post-Suharto developments in Indonesian labour relations, labour movement theory and Indonesian women's work in a range of national and international journals.

Abbreviations

KOPBUMI	Konsorsium Pembela Buruh Migran Indonesia
NGO	non-governmental organisation
TKW	Tenaga Kerja Wanita
UNESCO–MOST	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization–Management of Social Transformations

In Indonesia, the plight of TKW (*Tenaga Kerja Wanita*—the common term for women migrant workers) has been a subject of public controversy for decades. Academic accounts of the conditions of Indonesian migrant domestic workers tend to resonate with local public perceptions. Authors such as Bethan (1993) and Robinson (2000a, 2000b) and Krisnawaty (1997) focus predominantly on the threats and privations facing women working abroad as domestic help—in Saudi Arabia in particular—and the shortcomings of official labour migration agencies. Yet, while conditions in receiving countries and the experiences of women in the barracks of registered labour export companies in Jakarta are the subject of many books and articles, the conditions experienced by women recruited by illegal agents are relatively little researched. While in Tanjung Pinang recently I conducted interviews with an illegal migration agent, his wife, and five women currently awaiting positions in Malaysia. The results of those interviews are the subject of this research note.

Indonesian labour migration to Malaysia: a brief overview

Malaysia was the largest destination of foreign labour in Asia in 1999, employing some two million legal and illegal foreign workers (Jones 2000:3). Most of Malaysia's foreign workers come from Indonesia. While traditional paths of migration exist from Indonesia to Malaysia, rates of labour migration have experienced a number of sharp increases in the twentieth century. In the 1950 Malayan Census, 189,450 residents of Malaya were noted as having been born in Java—a 111 per cent increase over the 1930 figure. A further 62,200 were born in South Kalimantan, while 26,300 were born in Sumatra (Mantra 2000:144). The number of Indonesians working in Malaysia experienced another sharp increase in the last decades of the twentieth century—part of a wider explosion in labour migration, in which the official number of Indonesians working abroad increased 38-fold between 1974–79 and 1989–94 (Department of Manpower statistics quoted in Krisnawaty 1997:292).

In terms of legal migration, Malaysia is second only to Saudi Arabia as a receiving country for Indonesian migrants. In percentage terms, Malaysia reached a high in 1991, when it received 32.3 per cent of all Indonesia's legal labour outflows (International Labour Organisation 1998:3).

Malaysia receives most of its illegal migrant workers from Indonesia. While it is difficult to determine how many Indonesians work illegally in Malaysia, in 1998 it was estimated that legal migration made up only one-third of all labour migration to Malaysia (International Labour Organisation 1998:5). Some 146,800 illegal immigrants—78 per cent of the total arrested between 1992 and 1995—were from Indonesia. A further 402,508 Indonesians in Malaysia illegally during the same period were allowed to register as legal foreign workers (UNESCO–MOST n.d.).

When the East Asian financial crisis hit in 1997, one of Malaysia's primary strategies was to expel Indonesians working illegally. After Malaysia's relatively quick recovery, however, the flows of migrant workers resumed with renewed vigour. A report published in mid 2001, quoting President

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Table 1 Historical distribution of (legal) labour outflows from Indonesia to top five destinations of 1993

Destination	1983	1985	1987	1989	1991	1993
Saudi Arabia	17,116	47,963	48,741	54,980	64,785	101,680
Malaysia	2,967	3,824	5,763	5,853	40,715	33,372
Singapore	2,515	1,338	1,705	4,311	9,937	11,842
Taiwan	1,720	102	4	43	190	5,204
United States	2,286	985	1,231	2,007	2,618	3,459
Malaysia as percentage of all legal outflows	**10.2**	**6.7**	**9.7**	**8.1**	**32.3**	**20.1**

Source: Adapted from International Labour Organisation (1998). 'Emigration pressures and structural change: case study of Indonesia', International Labour Organisation, Geneva:3. Available online at http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/migrant/papers/emindo/index.htm.

Megawati Sukarnoputri, noted that approximately one and a half million Indonesians live in Malaysia—some 600,000 of whom are working illegally (*New Straits Times,* 29 August 2001). In another report published in the same month, a Department of Manpower official in Pekanbaru was quoted as saying that the 600,000 figure pertained only to illegal migrants caught and detained in camps in Malaysia, rather than being the total number of Indonesians working illegally in Malaysia (*Harian Analisa,* 16 August 2001).

Female domestic labour migration to Malaysia: a view from Tanjung Pinang

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the ratio of female to male labour migrants grew even more dramatically than labour migration as a whole. Female labour migration increased 116-fold from 3,817 women in 1974–79 to 442,310 women in 1989–94 (Krisnawaty 1997:292). This trend continued in the late 1990s (Table 2), the number of legal female migrants was almost double that of males between 1995 and 1998, while, in the year 2000, 297,270 women and 137,949 men were placed overseas (Department of Manpower data provided by the *Konsorsium Pembela Buruh Migran Indonesia [KOPBUMI]*). In 1999 alone, female migrant workers remitted some 3 trillion Rupiah (approximately US$300 million) (Yunianto n.d.:5). Most of these women were employed as domestic workers in receiving countries (International Labour Organisation 1998).

Unlike Saudi Arabia and Singapore, (legal) male labour migration to Malaysia outstrips (legal) female labour migration (Table 2). Nevertheless, female domestic labour accounts for an important—and increasing—proportion of both legal and illegal labour migration from Indonesia to Malaysia. The official number of Indonesian women employed as domestic workers in Malaysia grew dramatically in the 1990s. While only 585 domestic work permits were issued to Indonesians in 1991, some 90,000 Indonesian women were employed as domestic workers in Malaysia by 1997 (Jones 2000:65). A large percentage of women

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Table 2 Gender distribution of legal Indonesian migrant workers by destination, 1994–97

Country	Female		Male		Total	
	Number	per cent	Number	per cent	Number	per cent
Saudi Arabia	246,221	48.86	20,970	6.76	267,191	32.81
Malaysia/Brunei	174,319	34.58	218,193	70.30	392,512	48.20
Singapore and Hong Kong	61,187	12.14	19,035	6.13	80,222	9.85
Other Middle East	15,283	3.03	795	0.26	16,078	1.97
Korea/Taiwan/Japan	6,895	1.37	38,361	12.36	45,256	5.56
Other	75	0.01	13,018	4.19	13,156	1.62
Total	**503,980**	**100.00**	**310,372**	**100.00**	**814,352**	**100.00**

Source: Department of Manpower data cited in Tirtosudarmo (2001)

migrating illegally to Malaysia are also absorbed into domestic work.

While Indonesians going abroad to work in Northeast Asia or the Middle East generally depart from Jakarta, most legal and illegal migrant workers leave Indonesia for Singapore and west Malaysia via Northeast Sumatra. In addition to leaving from centres such as Medan, Pekanbaru and Dumai on mainland Sumatra, migrant workers also leave from a number of ports in Insular Riau (*Kepulauan Riau)*, including Tanjung Balai, Batam and Tanjung Pinang.

Tanjung Pinang is a large town on the island of Bintan. Once the administrative capital of the region, it is now just another frontier port town. While a few mini-supermarkets have been established in Tanjung Pinang, there are no department stores or Western-style shopping malls. Instead, the tiny town centre is dominated by Chinese shops and traditional markets. In earlier times, Bintan was the site of significant bauxite mines, but Tanjung Pinang's economy now depends largely on smuggling and sex tourism.

In Tanjung Pinang, there are three levels of migration agents. The first includes agents who are officially recognised by the Department of Manpower in Jakarta. The second involves agents whose contacts are local. Although they are not officially recognised, they have the wherewithal to organise local identity cards and passports for workers from Java so that they can apply for positions in Malaysia. The third level of agents, who operate totally illegally, deliver workers with no papers to Malaysian shores at night on overloaded boats.

The agent I interviewed in Tanjung Pinang recently, as part of a preliminary study, is one of a large number of local 'entrepreneurs' in the second category. The agent, who was previously employed in the hospitality industry, works for a Malaysian who sources domestic workers for his friends and family. The Malaysian pays all the costs involved. Malaysian permits are obtained through a loophole, which allows Malaysians to source their own maids in Indonesia.

Although not originally from Tanjung Pinang, the agent has lived there for many

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years. He and his wife operate their business from their residence in the suburbs of Tanjung Pinang. They are not registered with the Department of Manpower, nor do they have a legally constituted company. They run their business on a 'family' model, in which they and their Malaysian contact work on a system of mutual trust. At the time of the interview, the business had been running for approximately one year. During that time, he and his wife had made a good living sourcing almost twenty women for placement in domestic work and other service positions in Malaysia.

The agent uses his own home in Tanjung Pinang to house the women he recruits from placement agencies in Jakarta. These agencies supply the Jakarta region with domestic workers, and are not permitted to supply workers for overseas positions. Once he has brought women to Tanjung Pinang by passenger ship, the agent uses his contacts in the local immigration office to obtain local identity cards and passports for the women. He then trains them in his own and other local homes while waiting for his Malaysian contact to find positions and obtain work permits for them. While most of the women he recruits are employed as maids, some work in small shops, restaurants and other service positions.

At the time of the interview, the agent had five women living in his home who were hoping to work in Malaysia. While all of them originated from the island of Java, they came from a range of ethnic backgrounds (Sundanese, Javanese and Betawi) and brought with them a range of work and life experiences (see Table 3).

The women spend 1–2 months in Tanjung Pinang before leaving for Malaysia. Most of them have spent an equivalent time living in domestic recruiters' barracks in Jakarta, Surabaya or Malang before leaving for Tanjung Pinang. The barrack system is used because both domestic and foreign employers of Indonesian domestic workers demand a quick response should a position become vacant. During the period awaiting placement, the women are provided with food and lodging, but receive no pay. Their lives are essentially on hold.

Once in Malaysia, the women are employed on a two-year contract. They receive wages of Rp850,000 (approximately US$80) per month, the first three months of which are paid to the Malaysian agent as reimbursement for costs incurred in their recruitment and placement. Of the five women interviewed, only one had experience working abroad. She had been employed in Singapore as a domestic worker between 1999 and early 2001. There, her duties included caring for four children and keeping house. She was permitted rest time once her duties were completed, but was not permitted to leave the house except for work purposes. For this she was paid S$250 per month (approximately US$140). She enjoyed her time in Singapore, and was optimistic that her time in Malaysia would be equally rewarding.

The other four women interviewed were also optimistic about their prospects in Malaysia. When asked whether they were worried by negative stories carried in the media about the conditions faced by Indonesian women employed as domestic

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Table 3 Summary from interviews from women presently in the agent's home

	TKW1	TKW2	TKW3	TKW4	TKW5
Origin	Serang West Java	Malang East Java	Gombong Central Java	Jember East Java	Jakarta (Betawi)
Age	27	28	17	said 30	35
Marital Status	married	married	unmarried	divorced	widowed
Number of children	1	2	none	2	1
Age of children	unknown	5 and 2	-	16 and18	14
Who cares for children	parents	parents	-	parents	sister
Previous overseas work experience	none	2 years as maid in Singapore	none	none	none
Previous domestic work experience	labour agent	none	none	7 years as maid in Surabaya	4 years in a factory, 6 months own business
Reason for seeking work overseas	neighbours working overseas good money	better conditions, provide a future for children	escaping family problems	provide for younger child and build a house	can't continue at factory (too old, poor eyesight), provide for child
Reason for seeking work in Malaysia	no real reason	Malaysia close wanted to try a different country	encouraged by a friend	close	had decided wanted to go overseas, opportunity arose

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workers abroad, two were not aware of the stories, while the others had decided that the potential benefits outweighed the risks of working overseas. The three women who had worked in Indonesia (as a labour placement agent, a domestic worker and a factory worker respectively) hoped that the wages and conditions on offer in Malaysia would be far better than those they had experienced in Indonesia. All the women interviewed were prepared to accept repeat contracts if conditions in Malaysia met their expectations.

A humane alternative to official labour migration channels?

The very human face of the agent and his wife in this 'cottage' export industry seemed to be appreciated by the women currently in his home. In contrast to the much-publicised conditions of some barracks in Jakarta, their living quarters were spartan but clean, and they looked well fed and healthy. They were clearly on good terms with the agent's wife, and seemed relaxed about waiting for a position to become available in Malaysia.

In the interview, the agent placed great emphasis on the fact that, while illegally obtained through personal connections, the Indonesian paperwork he provides for the women he recruits is legally recognised, and the appropriate permits for employment in west Malaysia are supplied by his Malaysian counterpart. Unlike the migrants who were taken to Malaysian shores in the dark of night in overcrowded human cargo-holders, the women he sent, having satisfied immigration requirements in both countries, are, he argues, 'going to good homes'. On the other hand, he openly admits that he can give no guarantees for the wellbeing of the women once they are placed in Malaysia. Yet—as he points out—in practice, officially recognised migrant labour recruitment companies provide little more than empty promises.

The wider economic and social issues around the need for women to work abroad in private homes, where their hours are long and their safety and wellbeing cannot be guaranteed, are clearly of concern. Yet, for the women I interviewed in Tanjung Pinang, the opportunity to work abroad was a cause for optimism, not pessimism. In their eyes, by deciding to work abroad, they were guaranteeing their future—an option not available to them if they stayed in Indonesia. They appreciated the efforts of the agent and his wife to place them, house them and train them so they could achieve their goals. The 'family' system, of which the agent was so proud, is designed to make a profit by turning women into an export commodity. It appears, however, that it does so in a manner which was more comfortable for the women concerned than the 'services' offered by the big, officially-sanctioned labour export companies in Jakarta.

The issues raised by this interview data reflect a range of theoretical and methodological concerns in the study of women's experiences of paid work overseas which set the agenda for future work in the Riau Islands and in other areas of Indonesia. To what extent is the role of officially-sanctioned labour supply companies simply to guarantee Indonesia a cash injection from the remittances of migrant workers? How do the means used by an overseas domestic

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worker to get a placement affect her subsequent experiences? Most important, perhaps, is the question of how best can researchers marry insights drawn from macro and micro level data so that the experiences of the women who work overseas are presented in their full diversity.

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