

# Migrant Motherhood, ‘Failed Migration’, and the Gendered Risks of Precarious Labour

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## Abstract

*This article offers an ethnographically-based counterpoint to recent optimistic macro-approaches to the “migration-development nexus” that view international labour migrants as “agents of change,” depict migration as a win-win for the sending and receiving states, and associate migration with positive changes in the sending community, including the influx of monetary remittances and the entry of new ideas, such as gender equity and human rights (Faist 2008). Based on over sixteen months of ethnographic field research among Indonesian and Filipino migrant workers who became mothers in Hong Kong, I argue that it is important to consider examples of so-called ‘failed migration’ (not only migratory successes) in order to fully understand the costs of migration, including the gendered risks and gendered inequalities. Cases of migrant mothers vividly reveal how migratory ‘failures’ are often blamed on women’s individual gendered moral shortcomings, but as I argue, their experiences, and those of all migrant workers, must be understood within specific contexts of precarious labour migration and Asian neoliberal policies of exception in Asia.*

**KEYWORDS:** Precarious labour, temporary migration, single mothers, Hong Kong, Indonesia

## INTRODUCTION

IN RECENT YEARS, ORGANISATIONS such as The World Bank and the Global Commission on International Migration refer optimistically to the “migration-development nexus” in which migrants serve as “agents of development” and temporary labour migration is depicted in increasingly positive terms (Faist 2008: 21). Rather than viewing migration as a sign of an economically troubled or underdeveloped migrant-sending country, this optimistic ‘new’ perspective, which began in the 1990s, “can be summarized in the statement that the flows of money, knowledge and universal ideas – called remittances – can have a positive effect on what is called development in the countries of emigration” (Faist 2008: 21). The positive impact of emigration from this macro-perspective is said to include not only financial remittances (the flow of money), but also the influx of new ideas such as “human rights, gender equity and democracy” to the sending country (Faist 2008: 22).

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Building on critical perspectives of scholars of gendered labour migration (e.g., Guevarra, 2006; Rodriguez, 2010; Silvey, 2007, 2009), combined with recent scholarly insights about neoliberal policies and precarious labour (Berlant, 2011; Butler, 2004; Kalleberg, 2009; Ong, 2006; Puar, 2012), while still acknowledging the potentially empowering aspects of migration (Constable 2007), this article presents an ethnographically-based and micro-situated counterpoint to the macro-perspective on migration. Within the current global context, it is clear that many labour migrants are particularly vulnerable workers and their work situations have implications that reach well beyond the workplace and the market and extend deep into their familial roles and gendered experiences, factors that are often ignored or disregarded by proponents of the ‘migration-development nexus’.

In this article, I ask how certain patterns of precarious migrant labour and particular neoliberal regulations contribute to what some migrant workers call ‘failed migration’, drawing on the case of Indonesian migrant workers who have babies in Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup> It is of course important to recognise that there are many examples of ‘successful’ migration in which remittances are sent home and make a significant contribution to the family’s well-being in the form of new houses, purchases of land, investments in education, and so on. But there are also many stories of failure, and these are as important as success stories for what they reveal about contemporary Southeast Asian female labour migration. From the perspective of migrant workers themselves, and their understandings of their parents’ and community members’ views, migrant mothers have ‘failed’ in their roles as good wives and daughters if they discontinue their remittances or they return home as single mothers. The fulfilment of individual desire at the expense of fulfilling familial obligations is viewed very critically by parents, spouses and other community members, as is the case in Thailand and elsewhere, where women migrants are criticised for investing in their individual interests at the expense of their rural families (Mills 1999).

While it would be fruitful to consider various examples of migration gone awry, including examples of workers who face multiplying and overwhelming debt, underpayment, exploitation, violence, illness, injury or – at worst – death, my focus here is on migrant women who get pregnant and have children while working abroad. Further research in migrants’ home communities is a

<sup>1</sup>That is not to argue that migrant workers are solely ‘victims’ or that they generally lack ‘agency’ except in the worst cases. As I have argued elsewhere (Constable 1997, 2007) migrant workers are highly active in their migratory choices. However, whereas many earlier studies focused on the subtle forms of power, resistance, and agency among ‘the weak’ including women and migrant workers, following Foucault and Scott (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1990; Constable 2007; Foucault 1979; Scott 1985), recent studies point to the relative hopelessness, abjectness, or bare life of those at the lowest levels of feminised labour who become trapped by the neoliberal logics of global labour extraction, often succumbing to its traps and losing hope (Constable 2014; Ong 2006). Pointing to those situations does not mean they are completely powerless, but it does highlight the constraints of particular labour regimes.

necessary next step to fully assess long term implications of single motherhood, but the examples I present allow us to question idealised assumptions about the connection between migration, familial well-being, and development. These examples show how migrant women face gendered risks and vulnerabilities, how gendered inequalities can be perpetuated, and how greater economic hardship can result from migration. As I argue below, migrant mothers' opportunities to pursue productive family lives are undermined by laws and policies of the sending and the receiving states.

This article focuses on the experiences of young Indonesian migrant workers who became pregnant in Hong Kong and returned home to East or Central Java. As I argue below, precarious labour, paired with precarious intimate relationships in Hong Kong, and the denigrated status of single mothers in their home communities, feed into what I have called a *migratory cycle of atonement*.<sup>2</sup> The paper has four main parts. The first addresses the wider context of migrant work and defines key concepts. The second looks at how migrant bodies are disciplined by employers and by the policies of sending and receiving states. The third turns to the perceived problem of undisciplined pregnant bodies in Hong Kong for local 'citizens'. The fourth considers the situation of returned single mothers in Central and East Java and why they are often eager to re-enter the cycle of migration.

## CONCEPTS AND CONTEXT

In the post-World War Two era, many countries depend on 'precarious labour' – forms of employment that no longer provide fulltime or lifetime employment and generous benefits. Workers face increased uncertainty, insecurity, instability, and risk, while states and industries face fewer risks, provide fewer benefits, and gain greater access and flexibility to hire short-term and contract workers (Kalleberg and Hewison 2013). State policies that support such precarious labour, are often glossed in general as 'neoliberal'. But what does neoliberalism mean and what aspects are relevant within the specific contexts of Hong Kong as a migrant-receiving region and Indonesia as a migrant-sending region?

In Hong Kong, neoliberal state policies can be said to include government-imposed rules and regulations that create zones of 'exclusion' that distinguish between privileged locals who deserve 'the good life' and migrant others who are excluded from such benefits. In Southeast Asia, as Aihwa Ong writes, "exceptions to neoliberalism exclude migrant workers from the living standards created by market-driven policies. In other words, exceptions to neoliberalism can both preserve welfare benefits for citizens and exclude noncitizens from the benefits of capitalist development" (2006: 4). The regulations stated in the 'foreign domestic

<sup>2</sup>I am not using 'atonement' in the literal religious sense, but in the sense of 'reparations' for what are seen as moral and practical failings.

helper' employment contract ensure that they are excluded from the benefits of citizens. They remain there only as temporary workers and have no opportunity to become permanent residents. Labour and immigration laws and less formal policies create the category of exceptional, excluded others.

Following the financial crisis of the late 1990s, market-driven neoliberal governmental policies in Indonesia also served to promote and to expand labour exportation of women as domestic workers to other parts of Asia, as a solution to the economic downturn. As was the case with Filipino overseas contract workers (OCWs) over a decade earlier, Indonesian migrant workers were hailed for their heroic contributions to their families and communities. This was accompanied, however, by debates that weighed the moral dangers of women's migrations against the potential economic benefits.

Like many 'guest workers' elsewhere in the world, foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Hong Kong are required to leave their families behind, often for years at a time, in order to devote themselves completely to their employer's household. The assumption is that young women in their prime reproductive years will separate themselves from their families or postpone marriage and maternity for the opportunity – or from the perspective of employers the *privilege* – to work abroad and send remittances that will contribute to the advancement of their families and their communities (Constable 2014). The presence of family members is considered incompatible with work demands, an impediment to a worker's 24-7 availability. Yet distant families are key motivating factors in women's decisions to go abroad, to work hard to earn money, and to sometimes tolerate abusive work conditions. Familial needs and sacrifice are the most common and most acceptable justifications for the separation of women from their normative and expected gendered roles of wife and mother, although many other factors may shape their migratory decisions.

Among the over 320,000 FDWs in Hong Kong as of early 2014, most are in their twenties and thirties and roughly half are married; 49 per cent are from Indonesia and 49 per cent from the Philippines. Most work six days a week for long hours; on their mandatory day off, they meet friends, compatriots or other migrant workers. It should not come as a surprise that some migrant workers become pregnant and have babies in Hong Kong (Constable 2014; Ullah 2010). Unlike Singapore, where domestic workers are required to undergo regular pregnancy tests and to return home immediately if they test positive, Hong Kong's labour ordinance provides domestic workers with maternity protections. Theoretically they cannot be terminated for being pregnant, but in practice employers often consider pregnancy incompatible with domestic work, and workers are dismissed or pressured to terminate their contracts or their pregnancies, and to return home.

The low visibility of migrant mothers is linked to the fact that they are easily assumed to be caregivers. Pregnant domestic workers, especially Muslim FDWs who wear *hijabs* can hide their pregnancies. Overall, FDW mothers have not

garnered much public attention, especially compared with the issue of pregnant mainland Chinese mothers, although a TVB Pearl documentary entitled ‘Lives in Limbo’ about Southeast Asian migrant mothers was aired in August 2009 and there have been several radio programmes and newspaper articles on the topic. After more than a decade of research among FDWs, I became aware of the issue only in 2010, when I was introduced to PathFinders, a Hong Kong non-governmental organisation featured in the documentary. PathFinders’ mission is to provide support to migrant mothers and their children. For sixteen months in 2011 and 2012 I conducted ethnographic research among Filipino and Indonesia migrant mothers, their children, and the children’s fathers. I conducted formal interviews with 55 mothers, and had informal meetings and conversations with more than 80 more, and with fathers, service providers, and community members.<sup>3</sup>

The number of migrant worker pregnancies is especially difficult to estimate. A modest rough estimate is probably in the low thousands each year.<sup>4</sup> Some pregnant domestic workers undergo legal or illegal abortions in Hong Kong or return home before their pregnancies receive much attention. Other women find ways to remain in Hong Kong, at least temporarily, and their stories reveal important but little-known aspects of the ‘precarity’ of women’s migratory experiences and the impact on their familial lives and gendered family roles.

‘Precarity’ has received much recent scholarly attention. Judith Butler (2011) highlights the precarity of post-Fordist flexible labour. It “denotes social positioning of insecurity and hierarchization, which accompanies processes of Othering” (Isabell Lorey, in Puar 2012: 165). One of several key meanings, according to Lauren Berlant is “an ongoing (structurally) economic problem – first, indicating that capitalism thrives on instability; and second, pointing to the ways that capitalist forms of labour make bodies and minds precarious, holding out the promise of flourishing while wearing out the corpus we drag around in different ways and at different rates...” (Puar 2012: 166). Berlant also points to “the desperation and violence” that is “released when the capitalist ‘good life’ fantasy no longer has anything to which to attach its promises” (Puar 2012: 171; Berlant 2011).

These aspects of precarity – as a form of economic, social, and bodily insecurity, of othering upon which capitalism thrives in various post-Fordist labour regimes – are particularly fitting to describe the experiences of pregnant migrant workers. Their experiences illustrate how highly regulated, disposable and replaceable bodies of Southeast Asian workers are marked by ethnic, gender and migrant otherness in Hong Kong. They are valued for the reproductive work they do for *other* families (child care, elderly care, cooking and cleaning), but their own biological reproductive labour and rights are devalued or denigrated.

<sup>3</sup>See Constable 2014, Chapter 2 for further details on methodology.

<sup>4</sup>Personal communication with PathFinders May 2, 2013; see also Ullah 2010.

## **MIGRANT WORKERS' BODIES**

Much has been written about how foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong (and elsewhere) are managed and disciplined through household rules and state policies, including labour and immigration regulations (Constable 2007). The process of entering the labour market as a FDW in Hong Kong and other parts of Asia entails numerous mechanisms in sending countries such as training camps, that discipline bodies and teach women to discipline themselves and also warn them of the moral dangers of failing to devote themselves to their work (see Guevarra 2006; Rodriguez 2010; Silvey 2007). Most Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong have a middle school education or a bit more. They are younger and far less educated than their mostly college-educated Philippine counterparts, and are thus widely considered more docile, submissive, and obedient.

During the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s, Indonesian workers quickly gained popularity in Taiwan and Hong Kong as they were actively marketed and increasingly available. Compared with Filipinos, Indonesian workers have worked fewer contacts, are less savvy and assertive, and are less well-connected to advocacy and activist organizations – although this is changing as Indonesian domestic workers develop grassroots organisations and increasingly participate in activism. In general, compared with Filipino workers, Indonesians are less knowledgeable about their rights and are considered by employers to be more complacent, compliant and less demanding of their rights such as legal salaries or mandated holidays.

The fact that Indonesian workers often owe as much as seven months' salary to the employment agency or the associated loan agencies also contributes to the likelihood that they will tolerate less than ideal work conditions so as to pay back their debts and eventually send money home. The financial mechanisms of recruitment are well understood to increase the vulnerability of Indonesian workers (Amnesty International 2013). FDWs are afraid to risk unemployment and further debt and are thus reluctant to report abusive work conditions for fear of unemployment. Even workers who know it is against the law and in violation of their employment contracts to work outside the employer's home, to sleep in a bathroom or on the kitchen floor, or to accept lower than the stipulated wages, may accept such maltreatment for fear of termination, unemployment and further debt.

Workers' bodies are controlled in multiple ways, including micro-processes of creating sexually neutral or unthreatening bodies through gender-neutral clothing and haircuts, and work routines that distinguish them from members of the employers' household (Constable 2000). Domestic workers, for example, are often prohibited from wearing makeup or sexy clothing at home, baggy shorts or jeans and t-shirts are the norm as are short or tied back and unadorned hairstyles. Their time is also restricted and curfews are often imposed by employers as a way to express 'care' and concern as one might for immature household members. Yet

it is difficult to control domestic workers on their rest day. Transformations from dowdy or almost invisible maid to sexy, religiously pious, tomboy or glamorous woman on her day off are common. Scenes of women applying makeup and changing clothes, donning *hijabs* in the hallway or elevator, or changing clothes in public restrooms, are barely hidden from public view. Workers' private lives and non-worker subjectivities burst onto Hong Kong's public spaces on Sundays.

## PREGNANT BODIES

Despite curfews and dress codes, employers cannot fully control what workers do on their day off. Workers may attend church or go to the mosque or partake in political or other migrant worker social activities. Some go to bars or discos, parties at rooming houses, gatherings in parks. Such venues offer opportunities to meet other migrant workers, men and women, and potential intimate partners (see Constable 2014; Sim 2009).

The majority of Indonesian FDWs are Muslim and their numbers increased in the mid to late 1990s, which correlated with an increase in Muslim male migrants (often undocumented workers or asylum seekers or torture claimants) from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India and parts of Africa. Of the 55 migrant mothers I formally interviewed and others I knew, most had South Asian (mostly Pakistani) or African partners, husbands, or boyfriends. Of those whose relationships were ongoing, several had taken part in a Muslim *nikah* marriage ceremony which socially and religiously sanctified their relationships within the community, defining them as morally permitted within the community, although they are not legally recognised in Hong Kong.

Rarely were Indonesian or Filipino women's partners their co-ethnics. Unlike other regions of Asia, such as South Korea and Japan, where there are male and female workers from Indonesia and the Philippines, Hong Kong has very few male migrant workers from Indonesia and very small numbers from the Philippines. Interethnic and international differences cause misunderstandings between partners and poses serious challenges to options for such families to stay together when women's domestic worker contracts end, and when women leave Hong Kong with their child(ren), as most inevitably must do.

Pregnancies among the women I knew were often accidental or unintentional. Some women used birth control (usually those who had a child already), but most did not. Circumstances varied greatly. A few women became pregnant as a result of rape, some involving date rape drugs or alcohol. Others were in consensual relationships with men who did not use condoms. Often the women did not use contraception for fear of what it might convey about promiscuity, sexual experience, or lack of commitment to the relationship. In many cases women mistakenly thought they would be 'safe' due to withdrawal or menstrual cycles. Some did not know how to use contraceptives properly. Some thought they

would leave pregnancy to chance or fate. A few men and women who were in longer-term committed relationships intentionally wanted to have children. Most such couples eventually discovered, however, that their relationships – including those who had married in a religious ceremony – were not likely to last beyond the temporary and spatial confines of Hong Kong, because of the non-resident status of the women and of the men.

Young migrant workers, far away from the watchful eyes and supervision of family members, may experience Hong Kong as socially or sexually liberating. Some women migrated to escape unhappy marriages back home; some migrated to resist arranged marriages. In Hong Kong, while many women avoid liaisons with men, and some have intimate same sex relationships with other women, others may be open to friendships or romantic relationships. Some actively seek ways to allay loneliness or to provide a break from the monotony of hard work. As many scholars have observed, women's migrations (like men's) may be linked not only to money, but to a desire for consumer desires and modernity (Mills 1999), or propelled by failed intimate relationships back home (Constable 1997; Puri and Busza 2004). None of the women I knew came to Hong Kong specifically to seek a husband, but some began harbouring fantasies of marriage and of permanent relationships after they arrived and met a partner or learned of others who had. Some women misunderstood the legal status of male asylum seekers or undocumented workers, or they misunderstood the intentions of local men (some of whom were already married). Some migrant men were already married back home. On the whole, men expressed more pragmatic and realistic understandings of the temporary and contextual nature of their relationships than women. Some men considered such relationships beneficial in the short run (women who were employed could provide them with money, food, companionship, and sex) but they were well aware that these women could not offer them Hong Kong residence as could local women who are Hong Kong permanent residents. Intimate relationships were complicated by misunderstandings that were fuelled by communication difficulties, cultural and religious differences on both sides, relating to sexual intimacy, gendered morality, and the nature and purpose of the relationship. For example, Muslim men might assume that 'immodestly dressed' sexy Indonesian women are not good Muslims or good women to begin with, and are therefore unmarriageable, whereas Indonesian women might assume that if a man takes her virginity, he is or will be her husband, as might be the case back home.

When migrant women became pregnant, their partners often left them. They had three options: abortion, adoption, or keeping the baby. Initially, women often attempted some means of aborting the child (usually through easily obtained drugs) despite their acknowledged religious views about abortion as wrong. In many such cases their efforts were unsuccessful. Some women procured legal or illegal abortions, some with the help of their employers, and continued to work. Some women waited too long and feared late term abortions. Bureaucratic

requirements (including three medical visits) to obtain a legal abortion made it an unappealing option for women who worked six days a week and sought quick solutions. Only a few women toyed with the idea of adoption; fewer still went through with it after the baby was born. Most women reconciled themselves to the idea of keeping the child and eventually returning home as single mothers.

If a worker presents her employer with official certification of pregnancy, theoretically she is safe from arbitrary termination. However, most workers do not know this, and at her employer or her employment agency's instructions, accepts termination as inevitable or deserved. Many women agree to terminate their own contracts, only to learn too late about their rights and entitlements. Two weeks after termination women are legally required to leave Hong Kong. Most who overstay become undocumented workers. Some managed to obtain medical care by showing their identification cards while others filed asylum or torture claims (on the basis of the United Nations Convention Against Torture or the United Nations Convention on Refugees) in an effort to remain in Hong Kong and obtain obstetrical care. Once women gave birth, most delayed the return home for as long as they could. Asylum/torture claims provided them with minimal social support and allowed them to remain in Hong Kong for a few months or even a few years while their claims were processed, but they were not allowed to work. As of this writing no former-FDWs had ever won such claims and few harboured the illusion that they could win.

Pregnant migrant workers are considered a problem for both sending and receiving countries. From the perspective of the 'host' community, they represent foreign parasitic bodies that threaten to feed on local resources and should be removed and sent back home where they belong. Mainland Chinese mothers who went to Hong Kong to give birth were demonised in popular local media in 2011 and 2012 as locusts that spawn out of control and devour local resources, competing with locals for maternity services and hospital beds, and who fuel local shortages of baby formula. Migrant workers are considered a potential problem, but one that can be effectively controlled through labour and immigration policies that expel undesirable workers and replace them with new ones.

To their home country and its representatives, such as local Indonesian consular officials, pregnant workers represent a failure to send home remittances and a failure to adhere to the idealised constrained female morality. The Indonesian Consulate opposes local adoption of FDW's children and takes a paternalistic stance, pressuring women to take their children home and not to jeopardise the reputation of Indonesian women.

Pregnant women and mothers who sought to prolong their stay, reported being told by local Hong Kong immigration officials and social workers to go home and take their babies with them. Women who contemplated adoption in Hong Kong faced even harsher criticism from local officials and social workers who said, "It's your baby; take responsibility." "He/she looks just like you; take him home to your family." "Do the right thing and take her home." "You are the mother, how can

you do this?” Some reported consular staff saying “eventually your family will accept the child” and if they do not “you can always give the child away to a farmer” or “this is your problem and you must take the baby home!” Many women said that their friends were equally critical of the idea of giving children for adoption.

## **RETURNING TO INDONESIA**

Eventually, most women whose partners were not local residents who were willing to marry them had to face the reality of going home with her child.<sup>5</sup> Telling parents, or husbands (for those who were still married in Indonesia), about the child was a major source of stress. It often took months, sometimes years, for women to build up the courage to do so. Some women had stopped sending remittances much earlier and had broken off communication rather than answer requests for money or explain lapses in remittances. Many women feared being disowned or shaming their parents. If their parents forgave them and agreed to accept the child, women still feared the shame and gossip of neighbours and relatives. Some said they needed time to prepare themselves to face the inevitable criticism.

In Indonesia and other countries where ideas about respectable femininity are tied to women’s roles as daughters, wives, and mothers in the home, never far from the watchful eye of fathers or husbands, women’s migrant labour poses a significant ideological and practical challenge (Rodriguez 2010; Silvey 2007). The family’s hope and expectation is that when a daughter or wife goes to work abroad, her energy is focused on working hard and earning money, remaining committed to her family, and regularly sending remittances home to improve the family’s standard of living and their standing in the community, as well as her own future well-being. The inverse of this dream is the nightmare of the woman who cannot tolerate the challenge of hard work and abuse, and who fails to remember her family and to remit money home. Worse yet, is when she returns home with a child, another mouth to feed, and brings her shame to her family.

Unmarried women, divorcees and single mothers face serious discrimination in some parts of Indonesia. As Nani Zulminarni, founder of the Indonesian organisation PEKKA (Women Headed Household Empowerment), argues:

“In order to meet the criteria of a ‘good woman’, one must get married and obey her husband. The negative treatment of unmarried women and single mothers by their communities includes the suspicion that they will

<sup>5</sup>I knew one local Chinese father who tried to keep the child away from the birth mother, sending him to live in mainland China. Other migrant men might say they wanted to keep the child but most had no realistic option of doing so and assumed – sometimes reluctantly – that the child was the mother’s responsibility. A few fathers later expressed remorse at letting the mother take the child.

instantly become someone's mistress or a home wrecker', sexual harassment in the workplace and in the neighbourhood, and stigmatisation 'as lonely women badly in need of a man'. In addition, divorcees and remarried widows are perceived as having failed as wives, as mothers and as women....the negative perception of widows and divorcees is similar to that associated with former prisoners and ex-prostitutes" (Refugee Review Tribunal 2010: 1).

Single mothers are considered a "disgrace to their families. Within the wider society, having a baby alone is viewed as sinful and unacceptable" and in some areas of Indonesia they are "excluded from village councils, shunned as immoral" and experience "difficulties in finding employment" (Refugee Review Tribunal 2010: 2). Single mothers face social exclusion, "discrimination from the authorities," and "financial hardships and severe challenges in providing for their children" (Refugee Review Tribunal 2010: 2).

After women broke the news, some parents were angry and some were relieved. Angry parents sometimes eventually agreed to care for the child if the mother agreed to migrate again and resume her financial duties. Indah, who had overstayed illegally in Hong Kong for more than six years and gave birth to two children there, had lived in fear, hunger and isolation while her drug-addicted South Asian partner became increasingly negligent and irresponsible. She was ill with anxiety about the possible prison sentence she would have to serve before she could return home with her two children. As her court date approached, she tried to focus her energy on her anticipated joyful homecoming in Indonesia. As she described it, she and the children would live in her parents' spacious but simple home; her parents would welcome their grandchildren; they would have enough food, safety and warmth. However, when I visited her in Central Java in 2012, the fantasy homecoming had disappeared. She described her brother's violent, angry tantrums. He called her a "whore" (forgetting that her earlier remittances had subsidised his first marriage and that his divorce had required that the family sell the piece of land she had helped them buy). Their home was derelict and their household income meagre. Indah had no friends, but was frequently approached by local men who beckoned her to come out and "have fun" because, she explained, they thought she was loose. Indah's mother fought with their neighbour because the neighbour's son teased and hit Indah's daughter and taunted her for having "no father." Months later, when I phoned from the United States, Indah was in tears because of her brother's rage and because she could not find a job. Her family complained that she had brought three mouths to feed and no money. Ultimately, when the children were older, she planned to go to work abroad again.

Other women had similar homecomings. Eka returned with her Hong Kong-born child to her parents' home in East Java. She saw her teenage sons for the first time in many years and faced their resentment and jealousy. Once the

money she saved and the boxes of goods she had sent from Hong Kong ran out, Eka's mother (who had taken care of the boys) nagged and shouted at her to become a prostitute or to sleep with the local shopkeeper because she could earn more money that way. In hope of re-establishing herself as a respectable married woman, Eka tried to reconcile with her long-estranged husband who had deserted her and their sons before she went to Hong Kong. She located him in Jakarta and he said he would accept her and the child if she would accept his shortcomings. However, within days of Eka's arrival he lost his job, they were evicted from his flat, and she learned of his overwhelming gambling debts that he expected Eka to pay off by going back to work abroad. Eka complained that he could not even afford to pay her bus fare back to East Java. A friend in Hong Kong wired her the money and she returned to her parents' home. She fantasised about leaving but could not yet fathom the idea of leaving her young child with her parents.

Indrawati's situation was one of the best of the women I knew. Her son's father was a Hong Kong Chinese married man (her employer's neighbour). At first the man was committed to Indrawati and Andre, and he promised to get divorced and marry her. When her contract was terminated and her Hong Kong visa about to expire, he helped her to go to nearby Macau, where he visited and provided support. Eventually he broke off all communication. With the help of an NGO, Indrawati returned to her parents' home in Central Java, where she and Andre were warmly welcomed. When I visited she had been back for almost two years. Her family was better off than the others I visited, largely because they had other family members with good jobs, including one who remitted money from abroad. They were rebuilding their rural house, installing an indoor bathroom and tile floor (the only ones I saw). Moreover, Indrawati's parents were relatively young and healthy. A close contact who worked at a local hospital created a new birth certificate for Andre that listed them (the grandparents) as his parents. After paying the local fees to register the birth, Andre would receive local benefits (such as free schooling) and could claim social and official legitimacy. As Indrawati explained, she would be Andre's 'sister' and not his mother, and this was happening with the local leader's tacit agreement (and expected payment). Indrawati had tried to go to work in Jakarta, but her parents had difficulty taking care of Andre and she earned so little money (under US \$30 a month) that she returned home. She planned to wait a year or two, until Andre was in school, and then to go to work abroad where she hoped to meet a marriage-minded man. So far, like Indah, the men she met only wanted to 'have fun'.

Joy, an Indonesian Christian, returned to Java with her daughter when her cancer was in remission (but without a good long-term prognosis). Her parents had passed away, so she had no 'family' to help care for Sarah, the baby she had with a Nepalese temporary migrant in Hong Kong. Joy and Sarah lived temporarily with a friend until the burden became too much for them. She then

asked the local pastor and his wife to foster three-year-old Sarah while she went to work abroad. Although her friend thought Joy still looked ill, she passed the medical examination and had entered a training camp for Singapore-bound domestic workers. As the pastor and his wife explained, once Joy is in Singapore, she plans to send them money to support Sarah. If Joy is ill again, they would raise Sarah as though she was their own child.

Anti's situation was similar to Indah's. She married a Pakistani man in a religious ceremony in Hong Kong, but her torture claim was close to ending and she returned home with her toddler only to discover that she was pregnant again. The stigma of returning home with a child, pregnant again, and without her husband meant, she said, that she was the subject of gossip and criticism. Her grandmother was especially angry and made sure Anti never left the house unaccompanied or after dark. When people asked Anti "Where is this husband of yours?" "Or when is he coming?" she told them he was too busy working. But rumours of his cohabitation with a Chinese woman had reached her, and she knew he would not come. Like the other mothers, Anti had planned – with her parents' approval and support – to return home with her child and then go to work in Singapore as soon as the child was accustomed to her grandparents and her surroundings. Anti's second pregnancy derailed or delayed her plans and subjected her and her family to the stigma of her presence. Her future hopes were dim. She could not hold back her tears as she sat on a broken chair with her infant on her lap while her two-year old played in the yard. I asked if she might commiserate with other nearby single mothers and she answered that there were plenty of single mothers returned from the Middle East, but they were best avoided as it would hurt their reputations even more if they were seen together.

When I asked Indrawati what advice she would give her younger sister who wanted to work abroad, she said "I'd tell her to work hard." When I pressed and asked what she might say to her about men or relationships, she said "nothing," that she would leave that subject to her mother. How could she expect anyone to take her advice, how could she speak about that, she asked rhetorically, when her own actions meant she had no credibility and no grounds from which to teach or promote morality? Like Anti, she accepted her shame, and did not question or blame the wider context of migration.

## CONCLUSION: THE MIGRATORY CYCLE OF ATONEMENT

In a lecture hosted by a Hong Kong NGO for Indonesian migrant mothers, a Chinese woman pastor who had done some development work in Indonesia presented a lecture on ways for women to support themselves and their children back home. She showed slides and talked about entrepreneurial projects like growing vegetables on rooftops, raising fish in plastic tubs, making prawn crackers or tofu, and selling prepared food at the local market. At the end of the talk

she asked the women what other sorts of things they might do. Most were silent or whispered among themselves. One woman eventually spoke up and said they could migrate again. The pastor was clearly displeased with the answer. Her point, she said, was to find ways for mothers to remain in Indonesia with their children and to find alternatives to migration. To her, migration was the problem, not the solution. Mothers should remain with their children.

“How can those mothers leave their children behind?” was a question I repeatedly heard from local employers, from Western expatriate NGO workers, and from various audiences and observers. Researchers increasingly pose questions about the negative impact of mothers’ absences on their children and about the injuries caused by “families apart” (Parreñas 2005; Pratt 2012). To mothers who leave their children behind in order to work abroad, the decision is not an easy one, but it is often understood as the best option. In Indonesia as in the Philippines and other regions where childcare is commonly shared by members of an extended family, it is not unusual for aunts or grandparents to help raise children. Work opportunities for migrant mothers, however, have greatly expanded the distances of separation between parents and children.

Contrary to common understandings, *money* was not the only factor in migrant mothers’ wishes to migrate again. Their hopes or decisions to re-enter the migratory cycle are set within a context of extended rural families that are more flexible than the typical Western nuclear family unit. Single mothers in Indonesia, especially in parts of Java, also face serious social stigma. Shameful and impure, they do not fit into the proper socially sanctioned categories of the good (or pure) wife and mother. They defy the proper categorisation of good migrant wives and daughters who are beyond sexual or moral reproach and who regularly send money home and contribute to local development as opposed to fulfilling their own modern desires (Mills 1999). When I asked one Javanese friend’s older brother his opinion of the women he knew who had returned to Indonesia with children, he said, “they knew the rules when they left” and “they are not so different from prostitutes.” His sister expressed sympathy for prostitutes who she described – following the popular song *Kupu-Kupu Malam* (Midnight Butterfly, a euphemism for prostitutes) – as driven by financial desperation to sell their bodies for survival, these single mothers were placed in the same or an equivalent degraded social category.

The precarious status of migrant mothers and their children is tied to their temporary migrant worker status. Migrant women might find partners abroad, but they have little opportunity to remain there with them. Foreign-born children are also a cause of women’s precarious status when they return home. Babies initially seem to anchor women down in Hong Kong, offering the promise of meaningful familial ties, and an escape from precarity. However, given the exceptional status of FDWs and of asylum seeker or undocumented fathers, and Hong Kong’s neoliberal policies of exclusion, a baby offers only false hope of security. Their very existence – with no fathers when they go to

Indonesia – contributes to their own and their mother's precarious status. With children, no husbands, and no money, single mothers and former migrant workers are migratory failures who threaten community morality. They symbolise the failure of the ideals of development through migration.

One of their only options – as expressed over and over again – is to find someone to take care of their children and to return abroad to work and send remittances as atonement or reparation for their sins. Those who go back to work abroad are not heartless mothers, nor are they simply motivated by money. They seek to escape the stigma of single motherhood, and relieve their parents and children of their presence. Leaving home again escapes the pain of failure and the reminder of their shortcomings (not to mention the constant taunting that accompanies their presence as 'bad women') and it also spares their parents shame. It allows women and their families to reconstruct them as productive and good daughters – successful migrants who send remittances and support the family, raise their standard of living, and thus contribute to development. Should Indah go abroad and send remittances, the neighbours could no longer taunt her mother about her useless daughter. Indah's child might still be 'fatherless' but her material well-being would provide a valued defence. Indah's or Anti's mothers might brag about replacing their dirt floors and wooden walls with concrete and they might buy land to farm. In other words, migration would lead to the ideal of economic development.

Migrant mothers' experiences raise questions about the impact of transnational labour migration on notions of gender and motherhood; on the stigma associated with single motherhood; and on the persisting challenges and makeshift solutions to 'family formation' against the backdrop of labour migration as an assumed pathway to development. Ultimately, I have argued that 'problems' that those in sending and receiving countries often believe are rooted in the moral failings of women migrants, are linked to bigger structural factors. Migratory 'failures' are linked to Hong Kong's neoliberal policies that are designed to fill labour shortages and provide local citizens the 'good life' at the cost of cheap and easily regulated and replaceable temporary workers. In Indonesia, 'failures' are tied to state-sanctioned neoliberal policies promoting temporary migration of young women that promises economic development but simultaneously reinforces the precarity of work, and to local gendered understandings of single mothers as morally damaged.

Repeated migration is a logical response to migrant single motherhood. Marriage is another 'solution'. As several Indonesian women said, remarriage for a single mother is often to a man who has problems or who sees her as a potential source of income because she will be willing to return to work to support her child in exchange for the legitimacy of marriage. Another option, one that Lilik, the one college-educated mother I knew was planning, is to live and work in a city far away from her family. That strategy, though, will only work for the rare few like Lilik who have education, skills, and income to support

herself and her child, assuming she can find an employer who will hire a single mother. For less skilled women, the incomes they would likely earn in Indonesia are barely enough for them to survive on the margins, let alone enough to support their children.

As I have argued, precarious labour and neoliberal policies take many forms. Labour migration offers the promise of economic ‘development’ with wages that seem high and well out of reach at home (although very low in the destination country), and a modern and cosmopolitan setting that offers greater freedom and adventure than at home. At the same time the personal costs may be great in terms of abuses suffered, sacrificed personal lives, mounting debts and exhausting and tedious work. Given the often temporary nature of the benefits of migrant work, and the stigma of returning home as single mothers, it is no wonder that so many migrant mothers try to stay in Hong Kong. For migrant mothers, returning home means facing criticism and shame, gendered and familial pressure. Given their earlier ‘failures’ one might expect single mothers to avoid repeated labour migration and the economic, social, and bodily risks and insecurities associated with it. But they seem eager to re-enter it because, as I have proposed above, systems of precarious labour thrive on reproducing such forms of insecurity, not on resolving them.

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