Suddenly Home: Returned Women Migrant Workers due to COVID-19 Pandemic Seeking Emergency Income and Equal Gender Roles in the Household

Theresia Octastefani1,2, Bayu Mitra A. Kusuma1,3
1Asia-Pacific Regional Studies, National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan (email: 81100b001@gms.ndhu.edu.tw)
2Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia
3Faculty of Da’wah and Communication, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic stopped practically all activities in almost all sectors of the economy, resulting in an unprecedented global economic crisis. One of the impacts was that millions of women migrant workers lost their jobs in their host countries. This article explores the struggle of Indonesian women migrant workers as they returned to their hometowns in Banyuwangi Regency due to the COVID-19 pandemic and were forced to find an alternative source of income for their families. This qualitative study uses literature studies and in-depth interviews to collect data and information. The results show that women took a heavier share of the workload in supporting their household during the pandemic. As a breadwinner, they had to quickly adapt to the situation and earn an income as soon as they returned home. They struggled to look for alternative sources of income in rural areas, which were limited to farming, online ride-hailing services (individual efforts), and SME activities (collective efforts), such as producing garments, food and fruit products, livestock, and crafts. For these women, the fear of being exposed to COVID-19 was pale in comparison to the fear of not being able to provide for the family. At the same time, once home, the workload from housework is theirs, doubling their burden.

Keywords:
returned women migrant workers; emergency income; equal gender roles;
Banyuwangi-Indonesia

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak, which started at the end of 2019, has resulted in unprecedented death tolls worldwide and challenges not only public health but also the world of work and people’s livelihoods (WHO, 2020). The attempt to curb the spread of COVID-19 by limiting mobility has disrupted economic activities and created more problems and complexities. This results in not only a crisis in the health sector but also in employment.

On March 15, 2020, the Government of Indonesia (GoI) started implementing the Large-Scale Social Restriction (Ind: PSBB) policy to minimize the impact of COVID-19. This implementation changed the way people lived and worked. Physical distancing affected productive capacity and productivity because not all work can be completed from home. Formal work, such as in the public and education sectors, can be carried out from home, but work in the informal sectors does not have the same flexibility. As such, those who depend on daily income suffer greatly. During the pandemic, informal workers had to work in crowded public spaces and faced a higher risk of COVID-19 transmission. They were often unequipped with personal protective equipment such as facemasks and hand sanitizer. These vulnerable informal workers