

# THE EVER FAILING COUNTER MOVEMENT: THE CASE OF LOW CLASS WOMEN MIGRATION AT GROBOGAN, CENTRAL JAVA

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## ABSTRAK

Tulisan ini merupakan sebagian kecil data hasil penelitian yang dilakukan di Godong, Grobogan Jawa Tengah, tentang migrasi yang dilakukan oleh perempuan di Godong ke Malaysia dan Singapura sebagai TKW. Perempuan Godong yang umumnya miskin, berpendidikan rendah, harus menanggung beban kemiskinan dan mencari jalan keluar dari kemiskinan dengan bermigrasi. Hal ini mereka lakukan karena suami yang secara konstruksi sosial dianggap sebagai pencari nafkah utama, tidak memiliki pekerjaan tetap, menganggur karena PHK, dan menyempitnya lahan pertanian sehingga terjadi pengurangan buruh tani. Perempuan miskin di Godong sebagai TKW di luar negeri memiliki beban yang sangat berat, sebagai pencari nafkah utama dan harus tetap kukuh mempertahankan keberlangsungan hidup rumah tangganya. Tak jarang pengorbanan mereka tak mendapat penghargaan sebagaimana layaknya. Penghargaan yang mereka dapatkan di mata masyarakat adalah penghargaan sosial semu. Penghargaan yang didapatkan hanyalah sebatas uang yang dihasilkan dan segera setelah mereka kembali di desa tak ada status baru untuk mereka. Mereka tetap miskin, dan tidak mempunyai peran dalam kehidupan sosial kemasyarakatan, meski mereka merupakan sumber nafkah utama. Gerakan tandingan yang dilakukan oleh perempuan godong untuk mencari nafkah selalu gagal meningkatkan status dan peran mereka.

**Kata Kunci** : *social value, roles, status, counter movement.*

## INTRODUCTION

The low-class women constitute a group that is not very fortunate. They are poorly educated, lack of sufficient knowledge, unskilled, and they belong to marginal sectors. The same thing applies when we talk about low-class Javanese women, at least we can say that they also experience the same things. In a condition like that, and in the increasing life demands, women's burden is growing heavier. They have to survive and at the same time serve as an indicator of the family's survival.

In rural areas, it is quite common for us to see a woman who, while carrying her child, is

sweeping the floor or washing the laundry. If we ask her whether she works or not, she will answer that she doesn't work. The same thing also happens if, on a certain day, we see a woman busy slicing bananas to make jam, which she sells to the neighboring shops. When we ask what her job is to her or to the people in her neighborhood, even to the head of community, they will say that her occupation is a housewife. Making jam is merely considered as a thing to do in the spare time or it is just a part time work. The two illustrations give us a clear picture that the segregation between 'working' and 'not working' is not really defined by the final result of

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the work for the concerned party or for the family. In this case, everybody knows that actually it is the work of the two women that has made survival of the family possible. The community as well as the women themselves admits this. The definition of work very often not only involves what a person is doing, but also the condition of the work, as well as the social values attached to the work (Moore, 1988:43).

In the community, there is always a dichotomy of distribution of productive work (in the sense of producing something) and reproductive work (literally speaking, replacing what is finished or gone) for the preservation of system and social structure within the concerned community. People concerned with women issues as well as social science experts have been aware of the use that work which does not directly produce anything, for example child rearing, taking care of members of the family, cooking, sewing, washing the dishes, is supposed to be considered as work too. Productive work cannot be performed when basic work in the household is not taken care of. However, reproductive work refers not only to those happening in the household, but also those happening in the community, for example the activities to ensure the preservation of the existing social structure, for example life cycles, social activities in the community (Saptari and Holzner, 1997:16).

The consequence of the segregation of productive and reproductive work results in the dichotomy of public and domestic sector. Public sector is always associated with the work outside the house, while domestic sector is the work performed in the house. The implication of the public and domestic sector is the sexual division of work. Men are associated with the work outside the house, while women work in the house, doing household chores. Even though women are found to be working 'around the house' and earn wages for the survival of the family, such an effort is not appropriately appreciated, due to the communal assumption that a woman's place is at home. The further impact of this is when women begin to be active

in the political arena. Women are still considered as 'a housewife', who does not have sufficient knowledge and capacity, and not as a worker. The ideology of 'familialism' applies here (Abdullah, 1997) which shows the rejection against women's life as professionals.

A number of researches show that in rural areas in Java a lot of women have to work to earn wages for the improvement of the family's quality of life. Other women are the important 'actors' of the informal economy and become the mediator of economic (Bemmelen, 1992). In poverty and the burgeoning double burden, women have to shoulder three more important roles, each and every one of it determines the survival and the harmony of the family, namely: surviving, working in the family circle, and increasing the income (McGreevey, 1983; Dankelman and Davidson, 1998; Moore, 1998).

The demand to maintain the family life gives rise to a lot of women to 'work' any kind of work, in agricultural sector and informal sector (trading and industries). When women work in agricultural sector (usually traditional agriculture), they are considered to be family workers, whose function is only to help, and therefore they are very poorly paid. When the famous policy of green revolution swept the earth, women workers in agricultural sector became marginalized, and replaced by machines operated by men workers (Collier, 1981; Hansen, 1981, White, 1989). The condition forced women to move out from their villages, and began to migrate to big cities to work in food and beverage factories. That was the point when women began to be victimized by the system and the structure, which was, whether intentionally or not, created by men for men.

One of the strategies implemented by the lower class women to overcome poverty is to migrate either to the cities or to foreign countries and work as domestic workers. With very minimum educational background and knowledge, they leave their villages to seek for work. Some of the women migrate really far from their home villages and country to the neighboring countries. The women's courage to leave their villages and country and work as migrant workers

can actually be said to be a 'counter movement'. Women's role and position, which have always been defined in the figure of a good mother and wife, an obedient daughter to her parents and an obedient wife to her husband, begin to be questioned by women themselves. Women begin to take their steps outside the house for wages and the survival of the family. Women's courage is actually one of the proofs that women have reconstructed their history of life and begun to reconstruct the 'familialism' ideology (Abdullah, 1997). They leave behind the cultural boundaries and values that used to tie them down by migrating and moving out of the villages. They even go further crossing the boundaries of countries, although only in the capacity of being migrant domestic workers.

The migration performed by women has, of course, brought about a certain implications. First, the choice women take to migrate to certain places have involved the crossing of cultural and national boundaries, which gives rise to social, economic, psychological, and political consequences for women. Second, when women migrate to places far away from their home villages, there will be changes in their life style. Those who are still single will experience the shifting of position and status. From their capacity as daughters, who are solely dependent on their parents, which obliges them to obey the rules set by their parents, they transform into independent women who do not rely on their parents any more, once they move out of their parents' house and work as migrant workers. All the more reason for the married ones. They are 'forced' to leave their children and husbands for the supposedly highly paid work. Third, the overseas migration have naturally brought about frictions in their family life, both in the life pattern, the work pattern and also in the roles they have been playing.

The short cut taken by migrating as conducted by a lot of women to get out of the chain of poverty seems to have served as a solution to the problem. The fact is, however, it does not in the least make the burden shouldered

by women any less. The question raised in response to such a thought is whether the migration conducted by women can change or at least lessen women's burden. Or is exactly the opposite? That by migration women have actually exposed themselves to various social impact of migration. How far women are able to overcome the burdens they deal with, considering the complexity of the problem faced by migrant women and the lower-class women, obviously the various questions above require not simple answers.

This writing is intended to give a description of the multiple burdens shouldered by the low-class Javanese women. To do so I will take the case of migrant workers at Grobogan Central Java, which is one of the most important migrant-worker-exporting regions. The following writing will discuss a few matters related to the questions emerging along with women's migration. I will start the discussion by giving the picture of Javanese concept and ideology of women, values and norms of femininity in Javanese community, gender-biased social practices and the subordination of lower-class women, status and roles of migrant workers, migration and women's burden overseas. At the end of this writing, I will narrate the burden of migrating and the fake social appreciation for the returning migrant workers.

## **BEING A WOMAN IN JAVA**

To observe a Javanese woman we will usually come up with different conclusions. This is due to the different point of view and approaches in trying to analyze the gender relation and the interactive dynamics occurring in Javanese community. However, out of the existing conclusions, still we can draw a figure of a Javanese woman, who is described as obedient, acquiescent, submissive, soft, devoted to her parents and husband. Such an opinion is not totally wrong, especially if we closely read the opinion of Berninghausen and Kerstan. When they asked a number of women in Klaten Central Java about the ideal figure of a woman, most of

women answered that a woman is supposed to be 'a good mother', a quarter of the group said that a good woman is supposed to be 'a good and obedient wife'. (Abdullah, 1997:6)

Such a blue-print may not only influence the judgement as reflected in the attitude and behavior of men towards women, but also determines how a woman takes her position and role in the whole social process. The familialism ideology has caused women to 'only want to be' a good mother for her children, and a good wife for her husband. Such a discourse is established not only as defined by men, but also as defined by women themselves, which will just emphasize the domestic role of women to the society and to the women themselves.

A number of researches show that there are two different poles of groups in the analysis of the status and roles of Javanese women. The first group is the group that says that Javanese women have a big power and high status, both in the community and also in the family. Women attain the position through bilateral family status, which is to say that husband and wife are complementary to each other, and the significant contribution of women in the household is attained due to her participation in the productive work. The fairly important reality of the role of women is shown generally in the Javanese community, where women manage the household, the family finances and expenses. Besides, women play also an important role in the decision-making process. The fact shows that women have a quite big access to various resources, both in the family and in the society. The ability and the opportunity to access the economic, social, as well as cultural resources are the highly important factors in determining the status and the roles of women. The second group is the group that believes that the important role in the economic and domestic sector will not automatically position women in a high status and power. Women actually have double burden because they have to make a living for the family as well as take care of most of the domestic work. Women are then demanded to distribute their

time and resources to fulfill the two obligations at the same time (Kusujarti, 1997:82-83)

The ideology that stresses the prior role of women to be around the house, as mother and wife, has been socialized in Javanese community for centuries. Familialism emerged and has been preserved in a complex historical process by being continuously emphasized and socialized. It has also gone through redefinition in the existing traditional law, beliefs, as well as in the state and in the reign and government ever ruling Javanese community. The ideology stressing the role of women in the reproductive and domestic role is especially imposed on high-class Javanese women during the reign of Javanese monarchs. Women are described as graceful, soft, neat, but lack of sharp minds and spiritual ability, therefore women are considered to be incapable of handling strategic positions. (Kusujarti, 1997:90).

Such a condition has actually begun since the ancient Java period when there were certain concepts and values in Javanese community as contained in *Serat Centhini*, which is the lesson for young girls analogized as the five fingers of hand. The lesson seems to weaken the position of women. It contains the following:

1. Thumb : (Javanese : *jempol*)<sup>2</sup> *Poling Tyas*. As a wife, a woman has to submit completely to her husband. Whatever the husband wants, she has to submit to it.
2. Index finger: (Javanese: *penuduh*)<sup>3</sup>. A wife is not supposed to disobey her husband's *tudhung kakung* (husband's direction). The direction of a husband is not supposed to be questioned.
3. Middle finger : (Javanese : *panunggu*)<sup>4</sup>. A wife is supposed to glorify her husband and take care of her husband's dignity.
4. Ring finger: (Javanese: *jari manis*)<sup>5</sup>. A wife is supposed to have a nice and sweet facial expression in servicing her husband and whenever her husband wants anything.
5. Little finger: (Javanese: *Jejenthik*). A wife is supposed to always be *athak ithikan*

(skillful and smart) in any work she does to service her husband. In servicing her husband, a wife is supposed to be fast yet gentle (Hadidjaya and Kamajaya, 1979)

The concept of Javanese women is also found in *Serat Candrarini*, which is divided into nine points: (1) faithful to men, (2) willing to share her husband with [an]other women [woman], (3) loving towards other people, (4) skillful in women's work, (5) good at making up and taking care of her physical figure, (6) simple, (7) good at fulfilling men's desire, (8) attentive towards the parent's-in-law, and (9) fond of reading books of advice (Susanto et al., 1992:24).

The implications of such lessons that have been socialized and internalized as culture in the society, have extensively affected the way people in the community, including the women, in positioning women. When we read very carefully and closely all the points of the lesson, we will not fail to see that the content is really on the side of men. It spoils and gives men all enjoyment provided by women. However, such a way of thinking has become the way of thinking of the general community in establishing the stereotype of women. The concept has given rise to the formulation of how to become a 'good woman'. It has set the standard of 'what is appropriate' and 'inappropriate' for women and men. The concept is even preserved in social practices and certain symbols about how to position women in the society. The formulation that has shaped the behavior of men and women is finally interpreted as a woman's fate, which is assumed to be unchangeable. In the process of socialization and enculturation of the children, the idea of reproductive functions of women is heavily stressed by treating boy and girl children differently. Girl children are usually socialized to do what are considered to be 'appropriate' for girls. The same thing applies to boys. There is such a huge protection applied to young girls, even when they are still toddlers. The outside world is set to be 'frightening' for girls.

The concept of values of women in Java, feminine values and norms, which have been in

existence for a long time, are practiced in the social life up to the present time. Women, who used to be idealized as the 'reign' of the household and who have to stay home, due to the rising demands of needs and the advancement of time, have now dared to take her steps outside the house and work for a living. The transformation of women's role is then starting to rise, along with the friction and the transformation of social, economic, political, and psychological aspects of life. Women have had the courage to perform dynamic mobility far from their home villages and fill in the work market that used to be dominated by men. At this point, people start to question the public and domestic sector. Public sector is dominated by men, while domestic sector is dominated by women. When women begin to extend her arena into the public sector, a number of consequences also arise. First, the burden of women does not actually lessen by her choice to participate in the activities outside the house. The fact is women have to bear a heavier burden, which involves her duty at the public sector and her duty at the domestic sector. The duty at the two sectors has to be performed at the same time. Second, women have to have enough courage to compete with men (and women) in the work market, which has already become dominated by men. The attitude that has always been a taboo for women, become common for women to do as her occupation demands. Third, the burden in the work place experienced by women is very complex, starting from the low pay and appreciation, harassment, to the fact that women's male counterpart do not actually consider them as their professional milieu. Men co-workers tend to take women as 'other' who are not supposed to be in the work place, which is considered to be a 'men's space'. As a consequence, men co-workers can not really accept the competition with women fairly. They can not accept either that women are workers who also have ability to show. Women are only considered as complementary and they are not really taken as equal to men. Social practices that have disadvantaged women are still



continuing, supported by social structure and order, which are also responsible for the preservation of the practices. In the globalization era women are active in the production process, and they are not really facing any significant cultural and social hindrances in performing their activities outside the house, and in other non-domestic activities. However, women's all activities as well as social perception of women's status and position are still very much tinged with patriarchal values, which benefit men.

Low-class women experience the gender-unbalanced condition in social practices more strongly, because they accept the treatment they receive as their fate. The generally low-class women have to do all domestic chores, work in the rice-field, look for water and firewood, take care of the cattle, prepare family's food, which actually takes hours to finish (Heyzer, 1986). The reality in poor countries around the world shows the similarity, that women are the ones who suffer the most from poverty. In East Africa, for example, women have to spend 16 hours a day to complete some domestic chores such as taking care of the children, preparing food, and looking for water and firewood. On the contrary, they spend only one hour to take care of themselves and to communicate with the people in the community. (Fagley, 1979; McSweeney, 1979; Birdsall and McGreevey, 1983:5). In rural areas, Javanese women have to work 11 hours per day, while men spend only 8 hours per day (Nag, White, and Peet, 1978; Birdsall and McGreevey, 1983:5). In rural areas in Botswana, compared to the 7 hours a woman spends on working each day, a man has to spend only 5 hours (Mueller, 1979). Women are generally lack of control over themselves and their activities. They are more of a target of the hegemonic gender ideology, which really creates women's subordination.

It is quite an ironic picture that in poor countries, married women with small and young children have to work longer every day compared to the men. Unmarried women work even longer than the men do. The conclusion is obvious, that women, married or not, have to shoulder more burden than men (Buvinic et al.,1983). The

implication of the facts stated above is that women are poor individuals whose voice is not important to be listened to, whose wants and plans are denied, and whose ambition and strategy for survival and escape from poverty are not acknowledged. Another irony is that in such a condition, it is women that people depend upon to overcome poverty.

Actually, for low-class women, double burden is not anything new. They are used to doing it. They are used to working in the field while taking care of their children. They are used to making snacks for sale, or cleaning the house and at the same time looking after the children. The condition is not limited to married women. Those who are not married may also be doing similar work. Even when they are not taking care of their younger siblings, they may be looking after their nieces and nephews, or the children of their relatives'. Although low-class Javanese women are seemingly used to doing a lot of things at the same time, and they seem to have an extensive space to do their activities, in the reality, they are still bound and dependent on their husbands, especially in the decision-making process for the family. It is not uncommon that even a decision concerning women themselves is taken by the husbands, and not by the wives. Wong describes women's dependence on men accurately and interestingly through the following illustration.

*When I was a girl, a woman is always obedient and dependant on her father, when she gets married she depends on her husband, and when she becomes a widow, she still has to obey and depend on her son or her brother. A woman can only 'talk' when she is a mother in law, and she talks about her daughter in law (Hassan, 1976, Wong, 1976).*

Women are entrapped in a biased social jargon, which places them as objects in their relation with different subject surrounding them.

## **STATUS AND ROLES OF MIGRANT WOMEN AT GODONG**

Godong is one sub-district at Grobogan regency in Central Java. The distance between

Godong to the capital of regency is about 18 kms to the west. The area is located in the intersection of the way to Semarang and to Demak. Due to its location, which is in the intersection, we can say that Godong is a 'transit town' for the traffic of Semarang-Grobogan, Semarang-Demak and vice versa. We can see the bustle of a transit town through the busy daily activities of the markets and terminals. The town is even busier with the traffic heading to Kedungombo tourist site. The operation of the road to the tourist site has opened the isolation of Godong from other Southern sub-district towns. In fact, this is the only the road connecting Grobogan to Boyolali regency.

Geographically, the location of Godong is in the middle to low land; therefore its villages are quite often flooded during the rainy season. Most of the area of Godong is rain rice field. However, since the operation of irrigation from Kedungombo dam, the rice field areas can be sufficiently irrigated. Before the operation of the dam, rice fields at Godong can only be planted once a year, now it can be planted two to three times a year. We can say that the agriculture at Godong, with rice being the major plants, has been developing very fast since the operation of the dam. Ironically, even though the soil condition at Godong is fairly fertile, almost all villages in this area are considerably poor.

Godong covers the area of 8,679 ha, and is populated by around 80,047 people consisting of 39,427 males and 40,620 females. Educational background varies from kindergarten level to Senior High School level. The population that has primary school education to senior high school is 14% of the total population. Most of the population, however, has not finished the primary school education. The occupation of most of the population is farmers. Civil servants are at the second place, and traders are at the third place. With such a composition of occupation, the average people of Gobong works out of the villages or in the cities as construction workers, and most of them work as domestic workers. When the government opened the opportunity

to work as migrant workers to Saudi Arabia in the period of 1980s, Godong was one of the biggest migrant-worker-exporting areas.

Since 1984, Godong women have started to migrate to Saudi Arabia to work as domestic workers. The phenomena of being 'helper' abroad is becoming more interesting as there are more various destination countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The busy activities of migrant-worker-exporting business are also signified by there being a lot of migrant-worker agencies in the corners of Godong. Almost all villages have their agencies or 'contact persons', legal or illegal. Legally there are migrant-worker-sending institutions such as PJTKI. However, there are also individuals who play as agent or broker for the sending of migrant worker. These people, who may come from the villages themselves or from places outside the villages, act as a contact person for the candidate of migrant workers and the sending institutions or agents.

Generally there are three major factors that push women of Godong to migrate abroad. First, the poor economic condition forces them to make a living by becoming domestic helpers abroad, which enables them to earn a high salary. This is caused by the fact that besides the opportunity to work in the sectors other than agriculture is very limited, the condition of the soil is not sufficient to fulfill the increasing needs. The agricultural area of Gobong is less than 0.5 hectare. Second, the economic and the neighbor's success have prompted others to migrate likewise. Brick-and-stone- built houses in the village always involve the remittance drawn from one or more family members who work overseas. Third, the easy process of permit and other conditions have triggered women to have the courage to migrate. The involvement of the government is a guarantee for the people to leave behind their homes, families and villages. The story of violent masters overseas seems to bring no affect to their decision to work abroad. The three factors impart stronger influence compared to other factors.

The migration at Godong, most of them conducted by women, while most men stay in the village and work as farmers or they may also work in other villages or in the cities as construction workers. The choice to work as a migrant worker is considered to be the most profitable and the short cut to overcome the economic problem undergone by the family. Working as a domestic helper in Saudi Arabia or Malaysia is considered to be more profitable than working in the villages and in the cities. Besides, very often women cannot really expect much from their husbands' earnings, while women's earning from working in the farm, as a waging labor is not enough either. The limited land as well as the infertility of the land is the supporting factors that make women come to the decision to leave agricultural work. The decrease of work opportunity in agricultural sector in the home villages is very much influenced by the application of agricultural and non-agricultural technology, which is to be utilized more by men than by women. As a result of the extensive agricultural defeminization, the further impact is that women's role becomes marginalized. The irrigation and other adoption of technologies in agriculture do help in achieving rice self-sufficiency, but this has also caused women in the villages to lose the opportunity to work as waging workers. The situation urged women workers to shift to other work for the economic survival of the family. Women then start entering trade and service sectors which still need women human resources. It is in such helplessness that women arise as the savior of the family's economic situation by becoming migrant workers.

The work in agricultural sector and in the factories in the cities grows to be no longer considered prestigious, they prefer to work as domestic helpers only they want to do it overseas. The dream of getting high salary, being able to perform '*umroh*'<sup>7</sup> and '*haj*' make it more alluring for women to work as migrant workers. The strong will-power to break the poverty chain short in addition to the successful proof they witness

in the life of other migrant workers who work in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia in their villages have made more and more women apply to work as migrant-workers in both destination countries. Generally, when we ask a woman why she works abroad as a migrant worker, we will get two basic answers. First is she wants to help her family, and second, she wants to earn money or a higher wages (Findley and Williams, 1991). As a result of economic pressure, a lot of women have high hopes in working as domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Singapore, Korea and Taiwan. Not only because there is a high demand for domestic workers in those countries, but also because the work provides a much higher wages, compared to the wages domestic workers generally earn in their own countries (Jones, 2000)

The community, along with women's migration process, begins to experience transformation as well. The tendency for women to leave the house (to work out of the village or abroad) basically signifies the deconstruction process of the fixed social reality. The deconstruction then brings about a reconstruction process, which is the process of reconceptualization and redefinition of women. (Abdullah, 1997). The phenomena do not only mark the criticism towards the 'familialism' ideology, but also show that migrant workers can actually be categorized as agents of social transformation, even though the women themselves as well as other people may not be quite aware of that.

Other changes are apparent in the shifting of the role of men and women in the rural communities. Men or husbands left behind by their wives who work as migrant workers begin to play the role of the wives, take care of the children and the house, although they are usually helped by their mothers, mothers-in-law or their sisters. The adaptation goes to the role they play in the house. They begin to do what they have never done before, when their wives are around. The people at Godong begin to get used to seeing men looking after their small children and staying more in the house while their wives are working abroad.



Other transformation includes the status and roles of women. At Godong, women, who are economically better off, and so they are able to fulfill their husbands and children's needs, have a fairly strong bargaining power. It is women who actually take the important decisions in their households. This is actually a tendency that is deviant from the traditional values believed before when men take all decisions for the family. Women seem to have also a stronger role in determining the life cycle in the household. One case at Godong provides the illustration as follows:

*The wife (Siti Kholimah) who works in Malaysia has left Supardjo the family for 11 years. It is the wife who fulfills the needs of the children and the husband and the household. Even the house and the rice-field they have were bought from the money she receives from her work in Malaysia. The family did not use to have any house or rice-field at all. They used to live together with Siti Kholimah's parents. Now they have a big house, a piece of rice field, and enough saving in the bank in the name of their daughter's name. Supardjo always listens to his wife. When their daughter was getting married, for example, Supardjo dared not decide anything, and let his wife take all decisions; he even waits for his wife to set the date of the wedding.*

The changes and the transformation of the existing tradition, which are among other the impacts of migration, create a new adaptation in husband-wife relation. The traditional role of men as the head of the family and the breadwinner is now beginning to fade and shift. Husbands have no longer absolute power, because husbands whose wives leave to work abroad begin to get accustomed to the new condition of being dependent on their wives. In the surface it seems that husbands begin to 'listen to' and 'obey' their wives.

Even though the economic success of the migrant families seems obvious and that women seem to begin to have a strong economic basis, the achievement is actually not without sacrifice to some extent. There is cost a migrant woman has to pay, in the context of being a mother, a wife and as woman individual. She has to face various challenges and hindrances before the

departure till she arrives at the work place abroad. She has to deal with the feelings of losing contact with children, husband and parents. She has to put aside guilt and pity that fill her feelings when she is leaving behind her crying children, in order to seek for a better life for the whole family.

### **THE BURDEN OF MIGRATION AND THE FAKE SOCIAL APPRECIATION**

Before anything else, leaving the country has already been a burden for a woman. She shoulders a very big moral burden as she leaves for the survival or the economic improvement of the family. Such a burden is not only shouldered by married women whose husbands and children have high hopes from them. Unmarried women also have the burden to help their parents and their siblings. More than anything else, many Godong women use their leaving the country as a means of liberation from the bound of traditionally defined status and roles imposed on them. By going out of the village, women attempt to escape from the obligations imposed on them as women. However, the attempt is never fully successful because in foreign countries they enter a world of work that generally requires a lot of sacrifice. The burden shouldered abroad is not only physical, but also cultural and psychological. The work they have to do, owing to the segmentation of work, is physically demanding and without any fixed working hours. The absence of fixed rules for migrant workers and the user of migrant workers caused all stated above. There is almost no organizations abroad that take care women's rights (Indonesian domestic workers) in the matter of waging and days off, like Sunday. Therefore they generally have to work too on Sundays. The condition is very different for workers from Philippines, for example, who can claim to have six working days and one day off. In Malaysia there is an organization which takes care of Indonesian migrant workers' problems established through the cooperation of Indonesian and Malaysian government, namely: The Association of Indonesian Children's Policy). This organization does not specifically handle

Indonesian women migrant workers, but other matters of Indonesian migrant workers in general (Jones, 2000).

Women migrant workers have to face cultural burden as they migrate to foreign countries where they have to adapt, not only to the new social-cultural environment, but also to the different patterns of behavior. The ethics imposed in their work place as well as the norms valid in the country where they go vary according to the country of destination. The difference causes a specific pressure to women migrant workers. Being domestic workers, migrant women are usually placed in very low strata in the series of discriminative social relation or in various forms of exploitation usually found in the workplace. The recent poor image of Indonesia in Malaysia, for example, has to be shouldered too by migrant women in the form of suspicion and discriminative treatment.

The above problem gives rise to a certain psychological problem for women who are far away from their home villages and their closest persons. The situation can be worse when the social-cultural environment and workplace are not very conducive. Being away from husbands, children and parents or from their home villages can become an extensive psychological problem when other problems at workplace occur. In certain cases, their being abroad can really become a target of deception, especially regarding the money they send home, or the property they possess. Consequently, all sweats, tears and blood they have to sacrifice may not always bring positive impacts on the women themselves. That is particularly due to the patriarchal social system and structure.

Social-cultural and psychological problems described above have become important symptoms faced by women, and they directly go along with the efforts to conduct counter movement against things defined by social system and structure outside themselves. The counter movement has almost no substantial meaning, as on one side there are so many problems faced by women, and on the other side the implications on the changes of women's

position in their community have shown the failure of systematic counter movement conducted by women.

Different impacts brought about by the migration process have not always succeeded in changing the status of women. The changes are only temporary, as once the women return home, they experience the process of domestication which puts them back to the original definition of women as bound by series of unbalanced social relation. Various advantages gained by women as the impact of migration have finally only increased the resources beneficial to the family and the community, and not to the women as individuals.

The discussion of the general impact of migration cannot be separated from the changes occurring both in terms of material as well as in terms of non-material. The material impact is physically or directly observable, in the form of the economic condition changes of the migrant workers' family. While the non-material impact includes the changes that can be observed in the reality of a community, among others in the form of the changes of social structure, social-cultural norms, and the changes due to the psychological pressure. The condition mentioned above is actually taking place now in Gobong community; for example we can see the improved economic condition of the migrant workers' family. The permanent physical building, the ownership of two-wheeled vehicles (which is becoming a trend now), the ownership of rice-field, cattle, and bank saving signify all the changes. The utilization of the remittance sent home to build houses can actually be understandable, as houses are symbols of migrant workers' success. Besides, houses can actually help them lift their social status in the community. Families of migrant workers are also found to be wearing foreign merchandises (Saudi Arabia or Malaysia). The case of Ninik shows this tendency. Ninik is a young woman recently married and has a three-month old baby (in December 1999). She will rock the baby in a cradle she bought in Malaysia. The cradle is like a hook with a spiral where a baby can be placed in. To rock it, she

just has to push and the spiral will move up and down. Such a cradle is the representation of one's connection to foreign countries.

In the case of Godong community, non-physical changes also take place, for example the loosening of marital bound, the level of permissive attitude of husbands in tolerating their wives' 'free' behavior, the unbalanced inter-generation relation, and the disappearance of socialization role of children.

The case of Rosiyem, a 45-year old woman who has been working a migrant worker since 1985, first to Saudi Arabia, then to Malaysia. She shows a very extensive openness. Rosiyem tells that she is happy working in Malaysia because she feels 'free'. When she was in Malaysia, she even got pregnant by another migrant worker. She told her husband about it and said that if her husband could accept the baby she would return home, if the husband would not accept, she would continue the relationship with the father of the baby she was carrying. Her husband accepted Rosiyem and the baby.

The courage Rosiyem had to tell the truth to her husband shows that she has a strong bargaining position. The acceptance of new things and even things considered to be contradictory to the existing norms seems obvious in this case. The community of the village is aware of the origin of the baby Rosiyem is carrying, but they seem to ignore it. We can draw conclusion here too that socially, community seem to accept extramarital baby, which clearly shows the shift of values of a marriage, the status of children, not only towards families of migrant workers, but also towards the society as a whole. Another case shows how a daughter begins to have the courage to give advice to her parents, being the one who provides her family's needs back home. Children begin to live more independently and no longer depend on their parents, either in economic context or in the context of traditional value bounds. The socialization role of a mother towards her children is fading as well. There is a case of a mother who has been gone to Malaysia for 11 years and never returned home. She did not know that her first daughter had already got

married and had a child. She did not know that she had a grandchild. The case shows the potential break of intergeneration relation chain.

The remittance sent home by migrant workers is usually used to fulfill the house's physical needs as well as to fulfill the daily needs of the family. The general case occurring at Godong is an older sister who is sending money to put her younger brother to school. The migrant worker is not sending for her younger sister, as the younger sister can be sure of becoming a migrant worker herself. I am trying to say here that remittance used for education is still a case, but it is still limited and it is usually prioritized for brothers or sons. The remittance is also saved in a bank or used to buy rice-field or land for investment when she returns. Physically, at Godong we can clearly see which family has a member who migrates or not, as the remittance sent is appropriately put into something advantageous.

Most women at Godong help their husbands by working as a farming labor, or looking for firewood, or staying at home and working any kind of jobs they can find; washing laundries for others, or selling snacks and ice. When they work as migrant workers, they leave the works. However, the burdens have never really been lifted off from women once they return home. Most of the women who return home say that they are reluctant to work back in the rice field and they find it really hard to do, but gradually they have no choice but return to work in the rice-field, as one migrant worker says:

*"It is so hot to go to the rice-field. I almost collapsed. When I first returned from Malaysia to the village and then to the rice-field, I wanted to cry. It was so hot and I had a headache. I couldn't stay long in the field, but what can I do...? Now I have to live everything again, as I am not allowed by my husband to work as migrant worker anymore. The truth is if I could choose, I would definitely choose to be a migrant worker"*

We can observe the appreciation of the community towards women migrant workers through the way they position the women. The

community regards a woman who has worked as a migrant worker as a figure who is different from other women in the village. She is considered awkward to do all the things she used to do before she works as a migrant worker. The people consider her to be a rich person, someone who knows how to make money and who has rendered her family a good deal of services, and she is considered the hero for the family. The community's appreciation is also shown through the willingness of the neighbors or the general community to 'listen to' her or even seek advice from her (for example about wedding parties) or a certain advice, as she is now considered to be a person of experience.

Even though the work burden and the old habits the women used to do have already been left behind, they are still imposed by the burden once they return home to the village. One interesting case for us to know is the shift of domestic roles from women to men. At Godong, husbands or men in general are used to taking care of household chores, taking care of the children, looking for water, cooking and doing other things which their wives or other women used to do. The interesting part is when the wife returns, even for a short time as she is going back again, the roles that have been played by the husband in his wife's absence, are immediately 'returned' to the wife. The household chores are performed by the wife or by women in general again. The wife, quite happily, accepts the chores as she considers that as a wife it is her 'fate' to do all duties defined for her. Some other cases even show that a wife will feel guilty when she is not doing the domestic chores, so when she returns to the village she forbids her husband to do the household chores for she believes it is her fate to do all those things.

Actually when we really pay attention to the situation, we will find that women migrant workers has not really been free from domestic burden, either when they are in their home villages or when they are abroad. We know that when they go to the foreign countries they work as domestic helpers and that means they are actually doing domestic works. The difference lies in the fact

that in their home village, they are doing the works in their own home, abroad they work for others or their bosses. We can say, though, that going or not going women are still burdened by domestic chores. Another difference is that when the women are still in the village, they do the domestic chores unpaid, abroad they do it for a lot of money. It is then clear that the burden of a woman has never become any less. A woman is actually carrying two burdens in her shoulder, one as the breadwinner and two as the one responsible for domestic chores, even when she has migrated a long way from home. We also have to count the psychological burden experienced by a woman who has to leave her children, husband and parents to work as migrant worker. We may also think about the psychological burden that a migrant worker has to carry along with her before she decides to go as a migrant worker. The burden has never really been put into the surface. A woman who leaves for foreign countries is likely to feel uneasy, as they are leaving behind the traditional values and social bounds that she has always been clinging to. She has to get rid of the emotional bound with the past in her home village – a price she has to pay to work as a migrant worker in foreign lands.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite the fact that women migrant workers have to deal with a lot of bitterness and that they are so vulnerable to violence, many women are not to be discouraged to migrate. The positive impact in the term of economic success, as shown by the neighbors who have migrated before them to work as domestic workers, seems to have pushed them to do the same thing. Various sad stories experienced by a lot of women migrant workers working as domestic helpers are not strong enough compared to the high wages dancing in their eyes to actually hinder them from going.

The values and concepts of a soft, submissive, obedient, shy, cowardly figure of a Javanese woman seem to have undergone significant changes. Javanese women are no



longer those described in the Javanese traditional concepts and values. They have grown into a figure that are more courageous, more open and ready to face challenges and competition. It seems here that women have begun to reconstruct their history of life. Traditional values have become the past for them. Women have undergone the redefinition of her Self, both in her status, roles and position in the community. The changes have actually shown the failure of women in doing the transformation of the fate ascribed to them.

The adaptation patterns performed by the husbands in their wives' absence working as domestic workers prove to be a fake pattern of adaptation, which means that once the wives return, the husbands are no longer willing to play the roles they used to play. This also shows that actually the social appreciation given to migrant women is a fake appreciation. A migrant woman worker is never really free from the burden: when she is abroad she is doing the relatively heavy works she used to do in her home village.

The changes and the shift in the community have started to occur when women go abroad to work as domestic workers. The relation of husband and wife, parents and children, as well as women migrant workers and their children have experienced evaluation and shifts in the daily practices. Women who have a strong economic capital play the actors of their family cycle of lives. The phenomenon is understandable considering that the migration is still dominantly prompted by economic objectives. The multiple burdens of low-class women seem to have forced women to come up with difficult choices, and migrating to foreign countries apparently is still their major choice for breaking down the chain of poverty.

When women are the ones who perform economic transformation, women do not exactly receive any social appreciation they deserve to get. The attempts and efforts conducted seem to always end up in failure due to the fact that the existing social structure and system are still patriarchal.

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- <sup>1</sup> *Poi* means completely (translator's note)
  - <sup>2</sup> *Panuduh* means direction (translator's note)
  - <sup>3</sup> *Panunggul* means high – glorify (translator's note)
  - <sup>4</sup> *Manis* means sweet and nice (translator's note)
  - <sup>5</sup> *Manis* means sweet and nice (translator's note)
  - <sup>6</sup> performed like haj, but considered as 'little haj', the religious pilgrimage performed by muslims at least once in a life time. (translator's note)