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<th>Labor migration and media coverage in Indonesia.</th>
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Press coverage of labor migration issues in Indonesia has, on the surface, been extensive. Case upon case of unlucky women are revealed; those failing in their mission to better the lives of their family, and instead return, in the least, humiliated.

Coverage of the lucky ones has also been adequate, through the stories of the hard work and sacrifice in leaving families which finally paid up. Better homes and having millions of rupiah in cash became the exclusive experience of returning migrants.

The press has clearly revealed, also through the investigation and campaign of non-governmental organizations, the otherwise hidden stories of the migrant worker at a loss in a foreign prison, with doubtful access to a fair trial.

The risks of working abroad, particularly in domestic work, through such stories has been well exposed. From year to year various levels of exploitation are told: from the recruiting in the villages to the returning of women facing more extortion at the airport and on the way home.

Such reports are then followed up with visible measures such as on-site inspection at airports and the introduction of absurd rules of such as increasing the minimum age of workers to 30, and that women sent as maids were only to work in "royal families" in Saudi Arabia. Older women would be less appealing and royal families behave themselves, it was assumed.

Still, stories of abuse continued regardless of where the women worked and many were clearly faking their ages.

Despite such reports, poverty and the stories of success from returning neighbors are clearly the first hand sources for the aspiring worker. Press coverage therefore failed to quench the urge to test one's fate.

It has been the audience of the print and electronic media who are inflamed by such stories, leading to calls now and then to stop sending domestic workers altogether.

Such calls would hit the news without much critical review in the media of whether it was realistic -- and business went on as usual. There were repeated attempts to gradually phase out the sending of women as maids, which seemed futile given the absence of change of job opportunities in the villages.

There were furious statements by the earlier minister in
charge of women affairs, Mien Sugandhi. She raised a little more collective indignant feeling that Indonesians should be able to protect their women better. But policies progressed little more than the minister strongly suggesting that the term "TKW" -- an acronym merely meaning women workers -- was degrading and should not be used.

Many in the media then refrained from using the term -- again without a critical look at what was wrong with it. The minister apparently wanted to bring more respect to the women without referring to them with the term that conjured images of droves of poor, uneducated, battered and helpless maids on foreign shores.

But as in the case of other issues relating to gender inequality in the country, much fuss was made about the politically correct word instead of the necessary actions.

Finally in departure to past governments, recently the State Ministry of the Empowerment of Women called on a temporary freeze on sending women working as domestic workers to Saudi Arabia, supported by First Lady Sinta Nuriyah.

Shortly after it was launched the campaign backfired, with representatives of labor supply companies and aspiring migrants themselves pouring onto the streets last week, demanding the freeze be immediately lifted.

The government backtracked, saying the sending of workers as maids to Saudi Arabia, following earlier reluctance as expressed by the President, was not going to be stopped, it was just being "improved."

The campaign, says an activist, is admittedly "symbolic" given the harsh reality that women, in sheer determination, will break down all obstacles once they see domestic work in Saudi Arabia as the only way out for them and their families.

Another activist and critic of the campaign says banning workers to Saudi Arabia overlooks the fact that the scale of illegal migration to Malaysia is an even worse problem, exposing women to higher risks.

Such a campaign is indeed overdue in comparison to similar earlier actions by the Philippines and Sri Lanka; however the reports on unfortunate Indonesians working in Saudi Arabia was seen as a crucial opportunity to launch the campaign of better protection of workers.

Activists should also realize that a freeze was attempted by
the Ministry of Manpower in the 1980s, only to see women break through the ban by posing as pilgrims. Indeed many say an attraction to work in Saudi Arabia is the opportunity to go on the haj.

Why is such a campaign now possible? Earlier ministers of women affairs did not get enough support to stop sending domestic workers even if they wanted to.

The answer may be that the support of the First Lady is no coincidence given her background as a student in women's issues and her membership in the National Commission for Violence Against Women.

The new government's friendly relations with NGOs has also enabled their agendas to meet to such an extent that some activists feel the cosiness may get too far to maintain a critical stance towards the government.

But one thing has not changed and it is this factor which is likely to impede the well-intended campaign: working conditions for domestic workers in the country.

This has also been overlooked by the media; we are among those who employ maids in the same "cultural" environment with their relatives and neighbors.

A member of the National Commission acknowledged that changing working conditions for maids, linked to the feudal nature of employment of domestic workers here, would be much harder to change.

The campaign is therefore a desperate effort to at least provide protection for workers that can still be reached by the government, while maids in the country are private property of households, similar to those working overseas once a woman enters the employer's residence.

The attitude towards "women's work" -- the routine care of the household -- leads to the perpetually low wages for local domestic workers. It is therefore naive to stop people from taking their chance at earning some Rp 1 million a month for household work compared to barely Rp 150,000 in the country.

In response to whether one has considered the horrible risks portrayed in the media, a woman aspiring to work as a maid overseas has more than once answered: "That was just her bad fate, mine might be different".

The uproar over abuse of a maid in the early 1990s led the
Jakarta administration to draw up a regulation on the employment of domestic workers. But it failed to set a minimum wage, reflecting the underlying unwritten rule that maids are not workers, that they are lowly paid because of their low education, that "they sleep and eat for free."

As "part of the family," a maid's wage is not public business, but a fairly high wage "ruins the market," meaning there is nevertheless quiet consensus among employers regarding wage levels.

The similar attitude in some countries of destination that helpers are part of the family despite written contracts, and are thus vulnerable to abuse within the walls of the employers' home, has not seemed to ring a bell within the media and the public.

An editor noted that abuse of a maid in Indonesia quickly leads to outrage when it is in the form of extreme physical abuse involving a Chinese Indonesian employer.

The attitude towards domestic workers contrasts with that towards baby sitters, where contracts, minimum wages and rights to holidays apply. This clearly reflects the difference in the formal sector -- baby sitters are generally available from agencies -- while relatively few domestic workers are obtained through agencies.

Media policy on coverage

Reporters are led to not only highlight "tragedies." In the past years, the government's interest to send as many workers as possible to overcome unemployment and yield foreign exchange, and the women's right to seek a better life have been taken into account.

Success stories are deliberately sought to balance the ones on tragedies and failures. However inevitably the bad news is blown up more because of the more components and sides to the story involved. Reporters, where possible, are sent to the remote village homes of the family of victims, giving a face to the figures of workers and the billions of rupiah they contribute each year.

The government has often complained that only those who have undergone misfortunes, once said to be "only a few percentage", get much more coverage.

While the media may rightly feel that the "bad" stories serve to reflect problems in labor exporting, something does seem to be
missing in the coverage of migrant labor.

The NGO Solidaritas Perempuan has observed that much less coverage has been given to the aspect of policies.

The media may argue that not enough was worth writing compared to the numerous cases of the women, while policies are "dry" stories.

Policies of migrant labor in Indonesia have indeed been repetitive such as the trimming down of labor supplier companies only to end in government-sponsored agencies and a reportedly mere shifting of the source of exploitation.

Those in the newsroom may not immediately remember similar policies and similar proposed titles from reporters to the stories written a few years back. But the daily routine of "checking the last story" would reduce repeated stories, as would the daily procedure to interview the best source possible on a given issue.

As with other subjects, coverage of migrant labor policy suffers from the lack of questions on past policies from the right sources, probably brought one by a lack of a sense of history among us in the media.

In a rush the editor would then patch up reports with immediately available files, which also may suffer the same shortcomings -- hence the image of repetitive stories on migrant labor policies.

In general information is accessible enough. However the reporter on a newspaper without a special labor beat is pressed hard to trace regulations and policies and closed sources when problems are suspected. Again as in other beats, seeking the source of irregularities will come up against the smug relations of other reporters with the sources -- a main problem in today's journalism in Indonesia.

Reporting of risks, opportunities

Saudi Arabia and Malaysia as the main countries of destination are naturally the more widely covered. Coverage of risks and opportunities of migrant labor in other countries, such as Taiwan, are largely limited to countries where correspondents are coincidentally based or where reporters are visiting on other assignments.

Coverage is also supported by the work of nongovernmental organizations working on the migrant labor issue, through the use of their sources or contacts. Reporters have written stories based on information from all sides including returning workers
but little has changed.

In the 1980s reporters of the leading Kompas daily had comprehensively exposed problems of Indonesian workers in Saudi Arabia (which was later published as a book) and years later, as a second generation of workers enter the international labor market, problems remain the same -- essentially being that risk is perceived as being an individual's destiny while state protection is minimum.

Kompas reporter Maria Hartiningsih, who was also involved in the team covering Indonesian workers in Saudi Arabia, was obviously so sick of the situation that years later, she stubbornly transgressed the "balanced reporting" principle, hardly giving one line to the "other side" in a one page story on Indonesian women migrant workers in Singapore. 

The lack of reporting of risks and opportunities in new countries of destinations may mean more risks to the brave young people venturing to work in those countries with little background information. Stories of women who find too late that they are being forced into prostitution eventually do leak out to NGOs and the press. But again the stories are unlikely to affect other aspiring workers as long as they trust the broker of a labor supplier company in their villages.

As a researcher in the 1980s noted, Indonesia's position as a late comer in the international labor market compared to Koreans or Filipinos, for example, and the lack of skills in English, contribute heavily to the low bargaining position.

A low bargaining position has over the years led to the apparent stance of taking extra care in not "offending" major destinations such as Saudi Arabia, while securing the billions of rupiah gained in annual revenue.

Envoys and other representatives would bristle and say they were not "a nation of barbaric people."

Admiral Sudomo, one of the ministers, even had candidate workers sign statements that they would not talk to the press.

The stance towards workers' protection used to be along the lines of, in the words of a former minister, that workers "should not be soft, they should have an iron mentality and have bones of steel." Women workers in particular, officials said, should be mindful of the difference in cultures, and not lift their eyes and smile towards male employers. Thus labor supplier companies
should prepare them for such cultural differences.

This attitude has reinforced the tendency among the women who feel that their protection lies more in their own fate.

The government's stance shifted slightly only during the last years of Soeharto's rule, and as mentioned above, the promised bilateral agreements have yet to bear much fruit.

Nongovernment organizations have started efforts to encourage workers setting up unions among themselves but this is in a very early stage even after some 10 years.

The issue of unions and efforts of networking among workers is another area rarely touched by the media; perhaps the alien sounding idea of maids setting up unions explains this.

One is reminded again of the media tendency in reporting about women: they focus on "agonizing", while the "organizing" part, a long, gruelling process with small achievements, is therefore far less interesting.

Ati Nurbaiti, The Jakarta Post.