

Article

## Gendered Morality and Development Narratives: The Case of Female Labor Migration from Indonesia

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**Abstract:** This article discusses two dominant and contradictory representations of Indonesian female migrant workers: as national “heroes” who contribute to Indonesia’s economic development, or as exploited “victims” of labor abuse. By analyzing public statements by Indonesian state actors, news reports, and migrant activists’ websites, I argue that representations of migrants as victims do not undermine representations of migrants as heroes of development. Instead, in Indonesian public discourses about migrant women, various institutions and actors often evoke similar gendered moral assumptions of what makes a “good” or “bad” Indonesian woman and worker. These assumptions serve narratives that imply which migrant workers are heroes who deserve media attention; which migrants are unfairly abused and deserve state protection; and which migrants partly deserve their tragic fates. I term these assumptions *gendered moral hierarchies*, which distinguish between “tolerable” and “illegitimate” violence. Gendered moral hierarchies in representations of migrants downplay the responsibility of states and institutions for migrant safety, labor protection, and aspects of social welfare, by emphasizing individual moral responsibility and blame. More attention to gendered moral assumptions behind migrants’ narratives of development and victimhood can illuminate how they experience the risks and promises of transnational labor migration in gendered and culturally specific ways.

**Keywords:** gender; labor; migration; development

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## 1. Introduction

On 9 January 2014, an emaciated, badly burned, and scarred 23-year-old Indonesian woman, Erwiana Sulistyaningsih, was found limping at the Hong Kong International Airport, barely able to walk [1]. The extreme abuse and violence she suffered during her employment as a domestic worker in Hong Kong came to light only after various graphic images of her scarred face, bruised body, peeling skin on her fingers, and blackened feet and hands, were circulated and went “viral” among Indonesian migrant and activist groups on Facebook. Pressure from these online communities led to an organized 5000-strong protest march in Hong Kong under the slogan of “Justice for Erwiana”. Migrant domestic workers, sympathetic employers, and Hong Kong residents participated. These events arguably led to a widely publicized legal case against Erwiana’s previous employer, Lo Wan-Tung—a case of alleged torture, which was initially classified as “miscellaneous” until the protest march [2]. Yet, when Lo was arrested and questioned, investigators reported that “documents were also shown to our officers indicating the maid quit of her own accord” [3]. When asked why Erwiana, in her visibly wounded condition, had gone unnoticed by Hong Kong immigration officers, the Director of the Immigration Department said, “It is difficult to judge whether there were injuries because of her complexion. We cannot blame the officer” [4].

This example highlights the processes through which forms of abuse and violence experienced by migrant workers can be simultaneously made publicly visible and invisible: Erwiana’s physical wounds are literally documented, via graphic images made public, and undocumented, undetectable via her official migration papers or by customs officials. As one of the six million Indonesian migrant workers abroad today, the vast majority of whom participate in precarious work [5]—work that is usually informal, flexible, characterized by low and uncertain wages, a lack of unionization or protective regulations, and job security—Erwiana’s plight is familiar; the protests and abuse apparently unexceptional. They have instead arguably become part of a transnational landscape of long-term, ongoing exploitation of migrant domestic workers. Why and how do some cases of migrant labor abuse—such as Erwiana’s—garner extensive public support and state attention, while many others remain undocumented, tolerated, and apparently less relevant to public concern?

This article takes the widely publicized case of Erwiana as a point of departure to discuss two dominant and contradictory public representations of Indonesian female labor migrants: as national “heroes” who contribute to Indonesia’s sustainable economic development, or as exploited “victims” of an unequal global labor economy. Drawing on public discourses about migrant women, migration, and development in formal statements by Indonesian state actors, news reports, and migrant activists’ websites, I analyze the gendered moral assumptions underlying representations of migrants as “heroes” or “victims”. I argue that representations of migrant workers as exploited victims do not necessarily undermine representations of migrants as heroes of development, or the state-sanctioned notion that labor migration is a pathway to personal, rural, and national development. Instead, these representations of migrants as heroes and victims similarly emphasize migrants’ individual responsibility in terms of gendered morality. Building on existing scholarship on this hero–victim dichotomy largely based on labor migrants from Indonesia [6–10] and the Philippines [11–17], I focus on the less-studied category of the “immoral victim”, or female migrants who may be depicted as criminals or perpetrators alongside their victimhood. As I will elaborate, this focus on migrants’ individual morality and responsibility allow

discourses of migration as a pathway to development and migration as labor exploitation to appear mutually complementary.

The Indonesian state is one among many neoliberalizing states that actively promote labor migration as a temporary solution to national unemployment and poverty. Using Indonesia as a case study, I frame this article's discussion within the "migration-development nexus" [18] and current debates over the role of labor migration in post-Millennium Development Goals [19]. Scholars involved in these debates on the relationship between migration and development have largely focused on the social and economic causes and consequences of labor migration on migrants' countries of origin [18,20]. These studies often emphasize greater protection and welfare provisions for migrant workers, and/or proposed solutions and pathways to developing these countries concerned, such as increasing the range of employment options for migrants and their communities [19].

Instead of asking how migration can better contribute to development, or how development programs can be reformed to include "well-being" [21,22], this article builds on ethnographers of gendered transnational migration [23–31] to examine how migration as a development strategy, even if a "temporary" one, is taken for granted, promoted, and maintained by international migration institutions, states, and NGOs, despite compelling evidence that the lives and labor of many migrant workers are literally unsustainable and unbearable [32,33]. What kinds of lives, luxuries, forms of abuse and sacrifice, are being sustained in the name of development? What is it about the promise of development in the Indonesian context that makes migration appear necessary? I focus my discussion mainly on female migrants, since women form about 80% of Indonesia's growing migrant worker population.

This article presents findings that various Indonesian institutions and actors, in their selective representations of migrant heroes or victims, often evoke similar moral assumptions of what makes a "good" or "bad" Indonesian woman and worker. These gendered moral assumptions serve narratives which imply what I call a *gendered moral hierarchy* of migrant workers: those who are heroes who deserve media attention; those who are unfairly abused and deserve state protection; and those who partly deserve their tragic fates. I argue that in attempting to distinguish between the "guilty" and "innocent" victim, and between "illegitimate" or "tolerable" violence, these gendered moral hierarchies emphasize migrants' individual moral responsibility and blame. The responsibility of states and institutions for migrant safety, labor protection, and aspects of social welfare is thus downplayed in public discussions of labor migration, exploitation, and development.

This article is organized as follows: in the next section, I introduce the article's theoretical framework. Section 3 gives a brief background on labor migration and development in Indonesia, and an analysis of representations of migration as a pathway to sustainable development by the National Agency of Placement and Protection for Indonesian Migrant Workers (BNP2TKI) [34]. In Section 4, I demonstrate how the gendered and moral assumptions embedded in public representations of migrants as heroes of development are similarly evoked in Indonesian media accounts of female migrants as victims of abuse and exploitation. Further, I complicate the hero–victim dichotomy by considering the category of the "immoral victim", a category more familiar to and discussed in relation to media representations of migrants in countries where they work, such as Saudi Arabia [35], Hong Kong [32] and Singapore [36,37]. I then conclude with a discussion on the contribution of this article: an analysis of how gendered moral hierarchies embedded in these representations of migrants' success or victimhood potentially legitimize extreme violence against "immoral" migrants as deserved. More mundane forms of labor abuse—such as long

working hours, inadequate rest or food, poor living conditions, and delays in wage payments—may be represented as “tolerable” and “normal” in comparison to extreme cases of violence. Analysis of gendered moral hierarchies of heroes and victims can illuminate the effectiveness as well as the limits of many rights-based and/or development discourses employed by development practitioners and activists who negotiate for migrants’ rights and labor rights in countries of migrants’ origin and work.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Labor Migration, Gender, and Development**

There are currently around 232 million international migrants today, half of whom are women [38]. In 2012, the total number of migrants’ financial remittances was US\$530 billion, more than three times the global aid budget [39]. For dozens of migrant-origin countries, migrants’ remittances are worth more than financial aid received [39]. With these increasing official numbers of transnational migrants and their financial remittances, a distinct field of policy-oriented scholarship and research has been articulated, that of transnational migration and development. This discussion, referred to as the “migration-development nexus”, can be summarized in terms of an ongoing debate on whether migration contributes to economic and social development of migrants’ countries of origin, or whether migration further contributes to exploitation and under-development of these countries [18,20,40,41].

In the past decade, policy-oriented research has largely moved away from these debates to focus on the question of how to “make migration a positive factor in sustainable development and poverty reduction” [21]. Migration is framed in terms of a win-win-win situation, where migrants, countries of migrants’ origin and destination, all stand to gain from cooperating to facilitate transnational temporary migration [42,43]. This positive focus on migration provoked current debates over the role of migration in post-Millennium or post-2015 Development Goals. Generally, two dominant approaches, not mutually exclusive, emerge from these scholarly and policy debates. One side can be characterized by those who focus on aspects of economic governance and management, such as how migrants’ remittances can be most productively channeled, invested, and used to benefit migrants’ communities of origin and nations [19,44]. The other view emphasizes and calls for more national and international institutional accountability to ensure the welfare and rights of migrant workers [45]. Lacking in migration-development discussions is more sustained critical and culturally-nuanced analysis of how migrants, their non-migrant peers, labor activists, development practitioners, and state actors define and engage with multiple discourses of “development” and “well-being”, with contradictory and overlapping assumptions of gender norms and morality.

In this article, I draw on Jan Nederveen-Pieterse [46] and Petra Dannecker’s approach [47] (p. 123) to “development” as “a set of beliefs and imaginations of how life should be”. These beliefs and imaginings often include implicit assumptions about development that underlie any discussion or claim about migration and development. Development projects and discourses often represent “particular political or class interests and cultural preferences” [46] (p. 8). This views development as a process of multi-level negotiations and struggles between different stakeholders over the meaning of socio-economic “improvement”. Questions about economic growth, equity and rights are hence not objective. There is no agreed upon standard measure; measures of development are always inherently political questions [46] (p. 137), [48].

Transnational migration scholars, particularly those whose work center on gendered migration or feminized migration, have contributed to destabilizing straightforward evaluations of “development” in relation to migration. While few, apart from Dannecker [47], Rachel Silvey [30], and Nicola Piper [41], have explicitly theorized or critically focused on development in their discussions, many scholars of gendered migration have argued that migration is a product of and reproduces structural inequalities within and between communities and nations, across the lines of gender, race, class, nationality, politics, and also religion [23–33,49,50]. While there are critical voices against states who promote migration as a primary strategy of economic development, such as those articulating migrants as “agents” of development, these are often not as popular, publicized, or represented in mainstream media coverage of migration, development, and everyday migrant and labor activism in Indonesia. These critics have argued that migration-for-development policies and programs unfairly add to migrants’ responsibilities to financially support themselves and families, by further positioning them as primarily responsible for their communities’ and countries’ development [16,29,44,51,52]. Highlighting migrants as heroes or agents of development is also often done at the expense of calling for better labor and immigration policies. This applies not only in the case of Indonesia but also other countries where labor migrants are typically from, such as the Philippines [11–17], Bangladesh [53], Nepal [19], and India [54].

Simultaneously, activists who focus on migrants’ “victim” narratives to critique migration-for-development policies risk promoting a “culture of punishment”—one that focuses on punishing unscrupulous human traffickers, abusive employers, or profiteering recruitment agents [7–10,32,33]. This approach risks reinforcing the idea of the vulnerable migrant—who is often female—who needs to be protected by the state [55,56]. Scholars who analyze narratives of victimhood in human trafficking reports and campaigns have highlighted how such narratives may instead support and complement policies which perpetuate social and economic inequalities behind migrants’ vulnerabilities, by focusing on individuals who are responsible for harm or evil, as opposed to more redistributive approaches to justice [33,56,57]. At stake in these discussions is how the vulnerability, risk, and responsibility of particular migrants are conceived by state authorities, activists, and academics. These influence how programs of intervention, development, or protection of migrants are initiated, implemented, or critiqued [58].

Scholars focusing on migrant activism have also drawn attention to the structural, conceptual and political differences between nongovernmental organizations and grassroots organizations [45], questioning the effectiveness and limits of universalizing “rights talk” [58–61] or “protective” measures [52,58]. These studies emphasize that migrants do not form a homogenous group with similar motivations behind their movement or desires for the future. These studies, largely done by feminist scholars, go beyond polarizing representations of female labor migration as ultimately exploitative or empowering for women. They instead “contextualize women’s migrants’ experience to show to what extent they are victims and agents”: the complex, situated ways agency operates within constraints; and to what extent migrant women successfully negotiate new forms of surveillance, and discipline [28,62].

For example, Ming-Yan Lai [60] analyzed the contradictory discourses and strategies by migrant organizations to “empower” female migrants in Hong Kong. She argued that the emphasis of female sacrifice and homeland ties in these discourses may instead limit the effectiveness of migrant mobilization, due to the moral burden and pressures they place on the migrant. These normative moral pressures women face by migrant organizations add to other existing physical, financial, psychological, and emotional demands from their family members and employers. Thus gendered moral discourses of

female sacrifice and nobility may instead drive female migrants away from learning about and exercising their rights to decent working and living conditions. More recently, based on ethnographic research among migrant women in South Korea, Hae-Yeon Choo [59] argued that the act of claiming rights entail both material and moral costs and benefits, particularly for women. She argued convincingly that in drawing on the discourse of trafficking and victimization to hold the South Korean state accountable for the human rights of migrant wives and hostesses, feminist activists simultaneously reinforce moral hierarchies that renders problematic some migrant women's work and intimate relationships [59] (p. 447) and [62]. This leads to some migrants who choose alternative, sometimes more dangerous paths such as overstaying, "illegal" migratory routes and jobs, rather than claiming victimhood and their rights [62–64].

These arguments build on a substantial literature on the hero–victim dichotomy that women migrants face in particular. A common observation made by scholars on female migration in South-East Asia and elsewhere is that women encounter a broader range of social and bureaucratic negotiations, and higher moral expectations for their migratory success and return, as compared to their male peers [6–15,23–28,32–37,51,52,56–65]. Following these scholars, this article highlights the ways that representations of Indonesian migrants as heroes of development, or exploited victims, commonly share local culturally and religiously inflected assumptions about gender and morality. Departing from more familiar analyses of heroes and victims as two distinct tropes, I argue that these gendered moral assumptions produce a hierarchy of different types of heroes and victims. Drawing on the Indonesian case, I emphasize that not all victims are represented as defenseless, moral, and pitiable. Instead, some migrants may be represented as "immoral victims" who are partially guilty of a crime or sin, and thus "blameable" for their own debt, death, sickness, or abuse.

As I will elaborate and argue, these gendered moral hierarchies sustain faith in migration as a primary strategy of the state for rural development in Indonesia, in allowing incompatible notions of labor exploitation and development to appear largely mutually complementary. The next section provides supporting evidence on how these gendered moral assumptions justify and are justified by various migration and development policies in the case of Indonesia.

### **3. Migration as Sustainable Development? Labor Migration and Gendered Morality in Indonesia**

Indonesia received USD 7.4 billion worth of remittances in 2013, from about six million migrant workers abroad [34]. Such transnational labor migration has been encouraged by the state in terms of "development" since the mid-1980s, particularly due to the potential for financial remittances to contribute to the Indonesian economy [52,66–69]. To facilitate these migration processes, the Indonesian state introduced a licensing regime in 2004, one that was not strictly enforced, for recruitment agencies, and a National Agency for Placement and Protection of Migrant Workers was set up (BNP2TKI). The rate of transnational labor migration, especially female migration, grew drastically in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, alongside the rapid economic restructuring and democratization of Indonesia marked by the fall of President Suharto's centralized, authoritarian military government in 1998. This political and economic restructuring included large-scale decentralization, and the introduction of market rationality to more spheres of life [70].

Women form about 80% of Indonesia's growing migrant worker population. The majority of them come from rural and uneducated backgrounds, and work in informal sectors, such as domestic workers.

Significantly, more than half of them are working in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, both Islamic countries [71]. Since 2009, migrants' financial remittances already exceeded foreign aid, and made up 1/3 of total foreign direct investment [72]. These official figures underestimate the significant informal transfers of remittances in cash and gifts through friends and migrant networks. Although there are over six million Indonesian migrant workers today, when the New Order state first encouraged temporary transnational female labor migration as part of its development agenda, this appeared to contradict its earlier Islamic and nationalistic discourses of *kodrat*. *Kodrat* refers broadly to the idea of fixed destinies and duties specific to men and women [73] (p. 229). Generally, men are presumed to be breadwinners while women's place is in the home as nurturing mothers and wives. Even in the 1970s, under the banner of "women and development", when the state encouraged women to labor in the wage-earning sphere, this was on the condition that women did not neglect their domestic duties [36] (pp. 252–253). In other words, women were articulated as citizens primarily through their roles as mothers and wives [74] (p. 206).

By the 1980s, the state began to promote transnational female labor migration, mainly targeted at rural, uneducated women. The encouraged separation of low-income, rural women from their families contrasted starkly with its nationalist "family" metaphors based on the ideal middle-class nuclear family. This promotion of rural women's labor migration as the antidote to rural poverty highlights the state's complicity in reproducing gender and class hierarchies in Indonesia [52]. By the 1990s, in the state's promotion of labor migration to the Middle East, their "dominant vision of idealized femininity was translated into a migratory income-earning woman for the sake of the "national family's" larger goal of economic development" [52] (p. 253). It is within this later context of the rapid increase in transnational female labor migration and accompanying financial remittances, that state authorities began representing migrant women as "heroes" of national development, or more precisely, "foreign exchange heroes" (*pahlawan devisa*) [75]. A banner welcoming these "heroes" home can be seen in the Jakarta airport [75].

Currently, the Indonesian state continues to promote migration as positively contributing to the social and economic development of the nation. For example, the then-chief of National Agency for Placement and Protection of Migrant Workers (BNP2TKI) Jumhur Hidayat recently drew on a 2013 World Bank report to not only highlight the potential for migrants' remittances to contribute to the national economy, but also emphasize that migrants' financial remittances are in fact more resilient to economic crises than foreign aid and foreign direct investment [75]. This makes migrant remittances a more "sustainable" resource for development than its alternatives [39,76]. To quote the report, he "expressed his gratefulness to the migrant workers for helping Indonesia bear the impact of the economic crisis... 'If there are lay-offs during a global economic crisis, poorly paid migrant workers are usually the last ones to lose their jobs'" [75].

Additionally, in January 2014, BNP2TKI made several press statements focusing on aims to empower "foreign exchange earners" through financial education and entrepreneurship programs [77,78]. State representatives promote migration and remittances directly to regency and district-level populations as fundamentally beneficial to "the people's economy" (*ekonomi rakyat*) [79].

Labor migration and higher wages overseas have indeed enabled some migrants to send their children to school, afford medical fees in cases of family emergencies, build more comfortable houses, start small businesses, and access a higher level of consumption [42,69]. However, in these statements and many others regarding remittances, Indonesian Ministries dealing with transmigration and labor represent such cases of "success" as normal and guaranteed, as long as migrants work hard. Rarely, if ever, do these reports on "development" focus on the issue of better wages, legal rights overseas for migrant workers,

or causes of unemployment in Indonesia. Instead, low wages for migrant workers are framed and accepted as inevitable due to market forces; the sustainability of migrant remittances largely depend on the ability for migrants to accept unfairly low wages and endure harsh working conditions. Juhur's statements are representative of spokespersons for the state's labor-associated ministries, who applaud migrants' "hard work" and self-discipline, while state institutions' responsibilities are primarily to help migrants channel and use their remittances more productively.

In addition to the state's emphasis on individual self-responsibility and discipline as a factor for successful migration and development, I highlight two examples to support scholars who note that the Indonesian state and recruitment agents promote migration not only in its economic promises and advantages, but also in terms of gendered, moral, and religious or spiritual development—such as representing migration in terms of carrying out a patriotic or (feminine) familial duty [51,80–82].

In a visit to a regional office in East Java in July 2013, Juhur addressed specifically women who desire to become migrant domestic workers overseas (but who have not yet left): "The lure of high wages overseas and the association with consumption indeed can encourage (the migrant) to become wasteful or extravagant... Do not change your mobile phones frequently, buy mobile (phone) credit, smoke, or sit happily in cafes (clubs). The wasteful migrant reduces the possibility that one can send money to families in the homeland (*tanah air*). Remember, if you consume too much, you will accumulate debt, and this isn't good for your future, and your family. I'm asking you later not to be wasteful, be frugal, and save money" [83].

That same month, Juhur's message to female migrant candidates in Central Java similarly called for women to save money and be wary of "flirtatious employers" (*majikan genit*). He emphasized twice, "If you are seduced by your employer, refuse, but also don't be tempted (*jangan mau*). Just say that you are only there to work. If everything is fine over there, then bring money home and start a business" [84].

The gender-specific exploitation and abuses confronting Indonesia's migrant domestic worker population have been widely documented [6,7,23,32,51,52,57,81,82,85–90]. While experiences of migration are variously dependent on chance, luck and a migrant's confidence, personality and skills, many of these women usually risk or are trapped in forms of debt bondage to informal recruiters, recruitment agencies or employers; face physical, verbal or psychological violence by employers; have unregulated work hours and conditions and share their employers' residences. High-profile cases of abused Indonesian female migrants overseas have contributed to challenging the sovereignty of the state, questioning its responsibilities to its citizens abroad, and shed light on its role in effectively "sponsoring" what precarious labor and trafficking-like labor migration [88–90].

However, these state representatives' emphases on migrants' financial education, responsible consumption behavior, and proper female moral discipline, shift the focus away from these broader structural inequalities and state complicity in exploitative recruitment and training processes. They instead explicitly (mis)represent the failure of some female migrants to remit money and accumulation of debt in terms of their tendency towards extravagant consumption patterns. The dangers of physical or sexual abuse of female migrant domestic workers, most of whom are required by laws in destination countries to live with their employers, are represented mostly in terms of female promiscuity and moral weakness, in allowing themselves to be tempted and seduced. Juhur's "pep talks" quoted above effectively represent good workers as "exploitable" women, while reinforcing a national feminine ideal of the



sacrificial family-oriented citizen. Simultaneously, his speeches pathologize those who may reject such conditions of “success”, and do not conform to these gendered moral ideals.

Furthermore, these gender and moral ideologies are usually religiously and culturally inflected [82]. Although Indonesia is a religiously plural country, the vast majority of Muslim voters and politicians arguably ensure the strong influence that Islamic discourse and the Muslim population have over national politics. Female labor migration and remittances are often discussed by state representatives and recruitment agents in terms of religious piety or identity [63]. State bank and migrant ministries representatives also highlight the increase of remittances around the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan [91,92], thus linking migration with the fulfillment of religious and familial duties.

Many scholars have made the link between institutionalized gendered Islamic morality in Indonesia and the state’s paternalistic attitude towards female labor migration, which is most evident from the ways in which state officials have reacted to publicized cases of abuse and violence against migrant domestic workers [7,52,88]. For example, state responses to publicized cases of abuse and violence against migrants have been to implement laws that arguably further restricted women’s mobilities, such as issuing moratoriums which temporarily banned female migration to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. Stricter bureaucratic requirements for female migration were also imposed, as compared to their male counterparts [52,93,94]. In 2012, the Indonesian state announced plans to “stop sending domestic workers abroad by 2017” [94]. As I have discussed, there has also been a significant and apparently contradictory turn in state discourses to articulate the responsibility for safety onto women themselves [83,84].

These responses were generally met with skepticism by migrant and labor activists in Indonesia. Generally, the state moratoriums, publicized inter-state negotiations, and the 2017 “stop migrant domestic work” plans were seen by some migrants and activists as the result of pressure from the influential national community of religious leaders, the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI) [95]. MUI has officially issued a religious decree (*fatwa*) that transnational female labor migration was un-Islamic [96] (p. 4). Migrant workers and activists have also argued that these negotiations and plans have not done much to reduce the rate of violations against migrants [97]. Instead, news articles on ending moratoriums or inter-state negotiations have notably focused on how to *increase* employment quotas for “cheap Indonesian labor” in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, for Indonesian migrants in “non-domestic work” industries [97,98]. While the Indonesian state has appeared to successfully resolve issues with Malaysia and Saudi Arabia on issues such as migrants’ rest days, salary, and right to keep their passports, I agree with scholars and activists who argue that these negotiations sit uncomfortably alongside the state’s active promotion of migration as a pathway to national economic development. More can be done in addition to inter-state agreement on “best employment practices”. Some examples are soliciting and reviewing feedback from migrants and their families, on how to better implement and improve on existing labor laws locally and abroad, addressing migrants’ access to social support networks and welfare provisions abroad, and unemployment and structural poverty in Indonesia [8,90,94,99,100].

Together, these responses and “solutions”, which are mainly targeted and applied in instances of female migration, link migrants’ achievements of economic success (in terms of their ability to remit money) to their gendered, moral, and religious responsibilities as good mothers, daughters, and wives. On the flipside, discourses of “protection” of migrant women reinforce perceptions of all women as potential victims [52,57], since these discourses seldom refer to male migration. It is important to note

that migrant and labor activists, workers, and their families contribute to and critique these moral evaluations and expectations in diverse ways [52,59], and that these gendered moral evaluations operate similarly in other migrant-origin countries in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, these public responses from institutions of authority reinforce Indonesian perceptions of migrants who do not conform to this ideal as vulnerable women: uneducated, untrained, naïve, in need of protection and control, or even as psychologically ill, morally ambiguous or suspect [99,100]. These measures or “solutions” to the exploitative and unstable migrant work conditions have been opposed by more critical migrant labor activists and scholars, who argued that forbidding women from migrating would not actually stop their migration but only contribute to increasing the vulnerability of women to exploitation in increasing numbers of risky and undocumented forms of migration [52] (p. 259). These are as opposed to changes proposed by activists that would favor and enhance migrants’ bargaining power, such as freedom to speak out against exploitation, or choice in terms of residence and employment opportunities in their countries of origin [45,49].

Silvey has argued persuasively that states do not incidentally neglect the protection of domestic spaces and migrant workers’ rights, since the lack of regulation of such spaces produces and maintains particular middle-class and elite privileges required for the further generation of social, economic and political capital [52] (pp. 259–260). Indeed, while the state frequently frames migrants as “heroes of development” in bringing in billions of US dollars’ worth of remittances annually, they also systematically devalue domestic work, forms of practical skills and labor associated with rural populations’ lack of formal education, and migrants’ safety [101,102]. In another representative speech, an un-named state official explains that migrants’ lack of “skills” and “under-education” render them “more prone to exploitation and torture by unscrupulous employers and agencies” [6–10,57,71,103]. While this may be true to some extent, the National Agency’s discursive and programmatic focus on migrants self-responsibility also explain labor abuse in terms of migrants’ own uniquely class-based failings.

In other words, the majority of state discourses and responses to the exploitation and abuse of Indonesian migrant workers contributes to sustaining the precarity of migrants’ lives and labor. This is done through discursively naturalizing the unfair working conditions of workers in informal sectors domestically and abroad with reference to global market inequality, in addition to partially shifting the blame for abuse and violence onto migrants themselves. A consequence of this dominant discursive framework is that the possibility for successful and safe migration journeys is largely left to migrants’ sheer perseverance, courage, chance, and personality. As I will further elaborate in the next section, such “blameable” migrants are largely depicted as being either immoral, foolish and naïve, or “unlucky” [32]. My point is that any discussion of “development” must take into account the gendered and moral assumptions underlying notions and meanings of aspirations for social change and a “better” future, as well as how these assumptions operate across national boundaries with transnational consequences.

In the following section, I present evidence that gendered moral assumptions underlying state discourses of migration and development are similarly evoked in media and activist accounts of violence against Indonesian migrant women.

#### 4. Labor Migration as Exploitation? Gendered Moral Hierarchies and Victim Narratives

Dominant media and activist accounts of violence against migrant workers often strategically focus on cases that are extreme or scandalous—whether to sell newspapers, garner Internet traffic, or draw more people to activist causes. In the following analysis of some of these accounts in Indonesia, I contend that the representation and sensationalization of extreme cases in the public sphere serve to highlight these cases of abuse as exceptional, unintentionally supporting the Indonesian state’s official stance that “success” is the guaranteed achievable norm of the moral, self-responsible migrant. The media focus on extreme cases of violence may also contribute to rendering mundane forms of labor exploitation—such as long working hours, inadequate rest or food, poor living conditions, and delays in wage payments—as comparatively “tolerable” and “normal”.

When migrant workers, activists, and scholars have called for greater state accountability in the face of labor exploitation and abuse, these are usually framed in terms of human, migrants’ and labor rights. I support scholars who have pointed out that “rights” discourses are not abstract, universal, and value-free [59]. Instead, the politics of migrants’ and women’s activism are complex, and may contribute to reinforcing moral and gendered hierarchies embedded in understandings of victimhood, exploitation, violence, and protection. Rights discourses often require people who present themselves as particular kinds of persons or victims, often linked to agencies that fund NGOs and other forms of human and political interventions [7].

This section builds and contributes to the existing scholarship on the victim–hero dichotomy that can be found in global human rights discourse broadly [33,55,56], and more specifically in Indonesia in terms of human trafficking and labor migration [6–10]. Indonesian images and tropes of victimhood and heroism linked to migrants’ gendered morality find striking parallels in the case of the Philippines [11–17]. The latter may emphasize Christian “sacrifice” [17,104], in contrast to Indonesian concept of avoiding shame (*malu*) [105,106]. Elaborating on what makes a “hero” or “victim” in the Indonesian migration context today, I present examples to further argue that discourses of victimhood are not only contrasted with those of “heroic” agency. The category “victim” is not a homogenous one of the stereotypically innocent, exploited, and defenseless female migrant. Instead, it is a category that is inherently loaded with value judgments of what makes victims deserving or undeserving of their circumstances, or what makes some victims pitiable, while others, “blameable”. This section analyzes the gendered and moral assumptions in how activists and mainstream news media in Indonesia have represented various cases of labor abuse, violence, and illness of migrant domestic workers. The concluding section will then address the implications of these representations on discourses of rights, migration, and development by state and non-state actors.

Below, I present a tentative model of *gendered moral hierarchies* in the representation of migrants’ victimhood. I suggest that cases of violence and deaths of Indonesian migrant domestic workers can be distinguished in terms of how victimhood and blame is allocated, and thus I consider three broad categories: (1) “immoral” victims who are blamed for their plights; (2) “moral” victims who are innocent and deserve social justice; and (3) unlucky “victims of fate”. I argue the moral privileging of “successful” or “pitiable” female migrant who is innocent, vulnerable, heroic, and/or selfless, produces their negative gendered subordinates: immoral and ill-fated women who fall short of the ideal expectations of a mother, daughter, sister and wife. I discuss and compare these examples, to highlight that cases of “moral

victims”, such as Erwiana’s (introduced at the opening of the article), were able to garner more public outrage, support, and media coverage. In these cases where the migrant is “un-blameable”, recruitment agents, employers, and states can then become exposed to critique, and held accountable.

#### *4.1. Immoral or Morally Ambiguous Victims*

Despite an estimate by Indonesian NGO Migrant Care that approximately 1249 Indonesian migrants died abroad last year [107–109], the Indonesian government initially prevented, and now actively discourages second autopsies of the bodies of dead migrant workers once they have been sent back to Indonesia [110]. While such statistics have been the subject of debate among labor ministries and migrant NGOs [111–113], the state’s official discouragement of autopsies leaves the “true” causes of death open to gossip and speculation, while heavily skewing public acceptance of official reports of deaths overseas, as due to accidents, natural illnesses, or by death row sentences due to migrant workers’ unjustified or immoral motives [103,110]. Highly publicized cases of violence against migrant domestic workers often involve the death row sentence in Malaysia or Saudi Arabia [103,110]. In 2014, at least 236 Indonesian migrants have faced death row sentences worldwide, mostly women who have allegedly murdered their employers or other migrant workers, women who are accused of black magic, or accused of committing adultery with a Saudi Arabian man [103]. Labor activists often emphasize that harsh labor conditions, long-term physical abuse, low pay, or even no pay, are the conditions that provoke migrants’ violence in acts of self-defense or temporary insanity [110]. State officials have also admitted that some cases of “adultery” were actually cases of rape [103]. However, media reports and state officials tend to downplay these arguments, due to the lack of evidence [111–113]. Regardless of the truth, and keeping in mind the state’s discouragement of second autopsies, blame and responsibility seem to lie mostly on the “adulterous” women, or unskilled and uneducated naïve rural “victims” [103,114]. The emphasis on the potential guilt or immorality of the migrant victim is evident in the following news excerpt about Indonesians on death row sentences:

The (un-named) state official acknowledged that some of the suspects were actually rape victims, but that a significant percentage of them had been charged for having extramarital affairs with Saudi men... According to the official, data from Indonesian representative offices in Saudi Arabia showed that about 7000 children were born from such affairs. “The identities of their fathers are unclear. This should raise a serious concern because this is about our young generation too”, the official said.

The official said the government had worked to repatriate the children by providing temporary documents, though admitted that the children could have trouble obtaining official identity documents in Indonesia because they had no birth certificates and unknown fathers.

“The government has tried to establish Islamic marriages for [the women] to help them obtain documents in Saudi Arabia before returning to Indonesia, but most of them were reluctant because they had been married to Indonesian men before going abroad to work”, the official added [103].

In the above example, a significant part of the Jakarta Post article focused on the state’s claims to be actively helping illegitimate stateless children “return” to Indonesia, efforts that prove difficult due to the fact that these children’s births were the result of adulterous relations between Indonesian married women and overseas men. The state official’s narrative shifts the focus of the article away from

Indonesian migrants on death row sentences to the question of their morality and whether they deserve legal aid from the Indonesian government.

In another telling news report by the Jakarta Post, there was a list of “tragic fate of Indonesian workers in Malaysia” [115]. This list included detailed descriptions of extreme physical abuse of female migrants. Any mention of sexual abuse was glaringly absent. Similarly, Ford and Lyons observed that in discussions of human trafficking and labor exploitation in Indonesia, sex workers are noticeably seldom the focus [7]. In other words, cases that were not seen as “tragic”, or cases that attract less public attention and sympathy often involve more morally ambiguous and socially taboo aspects, such as sexual abuse, greed, depression, single parenthood, or divorce. These are sometimes told in the genre of a moral or cautionary tale.

For example, a report written and published on the website of an Indonesian migrant labor NGO begins with a Javanese folk saying: “One goes overseas in search of gold, but it rains stones instead” [116]. What follows is a story not of greed, but extreme physical torture of a domestic worker in Malaysia, who returned to Indonesia effectively paralyzed and mentally unstable due to being starved, beaten, and strangled for almost a year: “This proverb is apt to describe the unfortunate events experienced by Radisem Bint Sumarjo (28), a female migrant worker.... Currently lying at the Regional General Hospital... after working in Selangor, Malaysia. There are bruises all over her body, and her legs are paralyzed after being tortured by her employer... She requires an oxygen mask to breathe... According (to) the victim’s brother, Radisem only just managed to rest this morning, after babbling to herself all night long. It seems as if she is still in Malaysia, and in fear” [116].

The narrative goes on to represent Radisem’s migration experience in terms of her individual choice and aspirations for wealth: “Last July, Radisem left home with a sense of pride. She will become a maid in Malaysia and in future, she will be able to bring home large quantities of Ringgit. However, not only did she not get any ringgit, she also encountered misfortune (*nasib buruk*)” [116].

The writer then expands on how Radisem got a “good employer” and wrote home twice. However, her family stopped receiving news after this, only to find out much later that during this period of silence, “Radisem was often abused by her employer for stealing her employer’s money. Radisem received blows all over her body, from her legs, back, head and she was even strangled by her neck... She did not get to eat much or often. Sometimes only once a day... As a result of not bathing often, Radisem contracted a skin disease that added to her misery” [116].

Although the report ends by ultimately referring to Radisem as a “tragic victim” and calling for the Indonesian government to “take action”, the narrative is wrought with moral ambiguity, where Radisem’s “tragic” situation is variously explained in terms of her pride or greed, bad luck, and the fact that she might have stolen from her initially “good” employer. In a similar narrative vein, a human rights media platform begins a case of abuse in Taiwan by also framing the migrant woman’s departure as one where she is “cheerful” in spirits, although she left against her father’s wishes [117]. She returned as “crazy” and severely depressed, claiming her employer hit her till her teeth fell out. The report ends with police investigating “whether or not she was really mistreated” [117]. These examples illustrate how a genre of “victim” narratives that leave the moral of the story “open” to the reader’s interpretation, either implicitly or explicitly contains a warning along the lines of filial piety and modesty, and against greed.

#### 4.2. Innocent, Moral Victims of Abuse

These morally ambiguous narratives of women who were promiscuous, greedy, or disobeyed their elders, contrast with stories of extreme and moral victims. Consider the following report on 17-year-old Wilfrida Soik, who was charged with killing her 60-year-old Malaysian employer in 2010 [118]:

Wilfrida was charged under the Malaysian Penal Code, which carries a death sentence upon conviction; but the court ruled on Monday that she was mentally unstable when the incident took place, therefore, found her not guilty. (...)

Human rights activists and politicians, who have given legal assistance to Wilfrida and monitored the legal proceedings over the past four years, praised the ruling.

“The court’s verdict is fair because the murder was an act of self-defense, which was to protect herself from torture committed by her employer”, Migrant Care, an NGO that promotes the rights of migrant workers, said in a statement.

Migrant Care said Wilfrida should have been acquitted because she was underage when the crime took place.

“We have always believed that Wilfrida must be freed because she was under age when the incident happened. She is a victim of human trafficking”, it said. (...)

The investigation also showed that Wilfrida was only 17 years old when she entered Malaysia on falsified documents, which, thus, would make her eligible for protection under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which forbids capital punishment for minors, a convention that both Indonesia and Malaysia are signatories of. (...)

“The campaign to spare Wilfrida from the death sentence also brought together various groups, including members of the Regional Legislative Council (DPRD), the Regional Representatives Council (DPD) and the House of Representatives (DPR); the Catholic Church in Belu; interfaith communities; singer and activist Melanie Subono. Netizens also showed their support through the #SaveWilfrida petition on Change.org, which had more than 13,000 signatures, making it one of the most popular petitions put up on the popular website” [118].

In comparison to cases of “immoral” or guilty victims, Wilfrida’s case provoked a sense of public moral outrage, evident in the petitions collected in her name, and a wide range of groups and public figures that supported her court appeal against her death row sentence. Media and activist representations of her focus on her moral innocence in framing her as a “child”, a “victim of human trafficking”, and “mentally unstable” (hence, only partially responsible for her actions).

Another case involved a “53-year-old grandmother” who was beheaded for murder in Saudi Arabia in 2011. She claimed to have killed her employer because she was forbidden to return home to see her three children [119]. Her death sparked public protests in Indonesia, and provoked a state moratorium on labor migration to Saudi Arabia. These examples are representative in showing how, in almost all cases inspiring extensive media coverage and state intervention, women are highlighted as moral victims—and violence against them, unjustified.

Violence against them is unjustified. I highlight these cases to argue that they may have provoked more outrage because moral judgments are often based on the perception of one’s intentions; hence, a migrant is innocent because she was trafficked against her will, or a sacrificial mother, in migrating for the sake of her family. On the other hand, women’s agency and intentions are depicted as morally suspect

in cases of sexual abuse, or where women had professed some prior desire for adventure, pleasure, or wealth. Even in cases where women do not profess such “deviant” desires, where sexual abuse is concerned, the “innocence” and morality of women seem suspect by default, as I have discussed earlier on rape being represented as adultery [103,114]. The problem here is that this focus on moral agency and immoral agency contribute to shifting the focus of blame for violence onto migrants themselves. This also sanctions only a particular motive for migration—for economic reasons, and supporting one’s family—as opposed to addressing cases where women were pressured against their will by family members to migrate, or where women migrated to escape pressures to marry, or stigmatization as single mothers, or divorcees.

#### 4.3. *Natural, Unlucky Victims of “Fate”*

Finally, other deaths and sicknesses are represented in the media and informal discussions as “natural”, morally neutral, and associated with bad luck. These cases are often framed “factually”, and largely de-politicized by state authorities. For example, the following report on the hospitalization of two migrant workers in Dubai hints at the employers’ failure to provide adequate heating, but unlike other reports of migrants’ deaths and abuse, this one is free of criticism or blame, and does not conclude with calls for state action or suggestions for the implementation of proper labor laws ensuring proper living conditions for workers:

“Two Indonesian migrant workers in Dubai unfortunately experienced charcoal smoke poisoning on Friday. (...) They were poisoned after carrying a burning charcoal into the room, due to recent cold weather conditions in Dubai.

“In addition, the room provided by the employer for both workers was cold, and eventually they brought a piece of burning charcoal into the room. Both Indonesian migrant workers inhaled carbon monoxide from the burning of this charcoal. Both were found lying unconscious in the room” [120].

In such cases, I follow medical anthropologists who argue that diseases and illness are often never just “natural”, but also the result of improper and irregular diets, and environmental conditions that are usually social and political [121,122]. Yet, activist and migrant accounts of these sicknesses may sometimes uncritically frame these cases as “bad luck” and “ill fate” e.g., [116], although some minority critical voices are calling for enforcing autopsies on all Indonesian bodies that died overseas [110].

### 5. Discussions and Conclusions

This article has argued that the exploitation of Indonesian female migrants is largely legitimated and tolerated by Indonesian policy-makers and the general public due to the often overlooked morally gendered aspects of dominant narratives of female labor migration and development in Indonesia. A gendered moral hierarchy of heroes and victims in these narratives renders invisible, mundane, or irrelevant to policy-makers and public attention, the ones who might not be suffering as visibly or extremely as Erwiana (whose story I introduced at the beginning), yet who are not yet “successful” enough to return to Indonesia or be a model for developmentalists and the Indonesian nation-state. Furthermore, as migration ethnographers have highlighted, these gendered and moral expectations for migrants to “succeed” in being economic providers, and good women and men, mean that migrants often represent themselves and their host countries to their families and communities of origin in positive

terms of security or social mobility [123–125]. These pressures to represent migration in terms of success sustain the development narratives, desires and fantasies, of their non-migrant peers: that migration may remedy local struggles for livelihood and better futures.

I have analyzed some overlapping and intersecting representations and interests of migrant domestic workers by the Indonesian state, activists, and journalists. Whether female labor migration is represented by these actors as either exploitative, or a positive economic force for families and the Indonesian nation, depends on how they frame the role of and relationship among the Indonesian state, the global market economy, and the gendered moral responsibility of the Indonesian citizen-worker. Activists may strategically employ discourses of “victimization” to spare migrants from death row sentences, or negotiate for safer migration processes and working conditions for migrants overseas. The state may employ and contrast such discourses of victimhood to narratives of migrants as heroes, to distinguish cases of illegitimate and tolerable violence. In the latter, state collusion with recruitment agencies in facilitating labor migration is largely downplayed [7–10,88,89], and the focus of blame and responsibility for migrants’ vulnerabilities and abuse is on individual migrants, employers, and recruiters.

Whether Erwiana’s case can lead to substantial change in laws to enhance migrant workers’ welfare and political positions in their countries of origin and work depends on whether the outrage and grief over her suffering can not only effectively highlight the global structural inequalities, but also the culturally specific gendered moral inequalities that contributed to her plight [32]. So far, migrant activists have managed to provoke enough public uproar that led to unprecedented attention given to the case by state actors in Hong Kong and Indonesia. The limits of such outrage and attention may lie in the fact that Erwiana fits representations of the extreme moral victim, as a very young, fresh-faced woman whose experiences in Hong Kong reduced her to an undernourished, barely walking, heavily bruised body. Nevertheless, these are crucial moments of negotiation between states and migrant NGOs on a wide variety of issues. However, the potential for these cases to critique broader structural inequalities is limited in the pervasive dual and narrow visions of migration as a tool for development, or migration as a form of trafficking.

The gendered moral assumptions underlying representations of violence against migrant workers have significant consequences for whether international and states’ policies and regulations further restrict mobility and choice for migrants, or address gendered, cultural, and structural conditions of migration and violence. These hierarchical gendered and moral representations of victimhood mean that women may bear greater risks of moral judgment, especially in cases of abuse. Such stigmatization and pathologization crucially affects their access to local social support networks upon return to their hometowns. Nevertheless, over-emphasizing women as victims also means that exploitation of male migrants is over-looked [88]. Further research on the relationship between migration and development should focus on critically evaluating migrants’ and non-migrants’ visions of the future in relation to these broader policies, discourses, and public discussions. More research should be done to understand local gendered, moral, and religious expressions, and interpretations of development, exploitation, and responsibility. Ethnographic work in this area can contribute to understanding and complicating these gendered moral hierarchies I have outlined, and highlight the ways migrants and non-migrants unevenly negotiate the promises and risks of transnational labor migration in relation to development.



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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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