



## Reintegration Of Indonesian Migrant Workers: Economic And Social Challenges In Post-Migration Contexts

Ro'fah<sup>1</sup>, Revika arnita sari<sup>2</sup>, Haddad Alwi<sup>3</sup>, Muh. Ulil Absor<sup>4</sup>  
<sup>1234</sup>UIN Sunan Kalijaga

9<sup>th</sup> International Da'wah Conference

Shaping the Future of Da'wah:  
Addressing Inequality, Advancing  
Inclusive Societies, and Driving  
Sustainable Development

[rofah@uin-suka.ac.id](mailto:rofah@uin-suka.ac.id)

---

### ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords:*  
migrant reintegration;  
empowerment; civil  
society; Indonesian  
migrant workers

---

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the economic and policy dimensions of reintegration of Indonesian migrant workers returning from overseas employment. This study employs twofold of data collections including key informant interviews and focus group discussion to returnees of migrant workers. This study explores how returnees navigate post-migration livelihoods, financial precarity, and institutional support. Findings reveal that reintegration is far from linear: most migrants experience unstable income, failed micro-businesses, and limited access to formal credit. Government programs such as Desa Migran Produktif (Desmigratif) and vocational training and grassroots migrant organizations particularly women-led cooperatives play critical roles facilitating reintegration, providing solidarity, mentoring, and financial inclusion. The study concludes that sustainable reintegration requires a shift from welfare-based aid to empowerment-oriented, rights-based programs emphasizing financial literacy, long-term mentoring, and institutional collaboration among government, civil society, and local communities.

---

## Introduction

International labor migration has long been a livelihood strategy for Indonesians seeking economic mobility and improved family welfare. Each year, hundreds of thousands of Indonesians, predominantly from rural, low-income regions, migrate abroad to work in domestic, construction, and service sectors across Asia and the Middle East. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2007), Indonesia ranks as the second-largest sender of migrant workers after the Philippines. Estimates from the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Workers Agency (BNP2TKI, 2013) reported nearly 4 million registered overseas Indonesian workers, while the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2008) estimated the number may exceed 6.5 to 9 million, including unregistered migrants. Of these, nearly 69% are women, reflecting the feminization of labor migration from Indonesia.

While Indonesia celebrates these workers as *pahlawan devisa* or “heroes of remittances,” the reality of migration and return reveals profound complexities. As documented by Silvey (2004) and Parreñas (2001), female migrants, concentrated in domestic and caregiving work, are often exposed to exploitative labor conditions, long working hours, withheld wages, and isolation. Despite sending substantial remittances that sustain household consumption and local economies, their post-migration reintegration remains precarious. Reintegration is

frequently assumed to occur naturally, yet evidence shows that returnees often face unemployment, social stigma, psychological strain, and economic marginalization (Raharto, 2016; Lindquist et al., 2012).

Studies in Indonesia and South Asia reveal that return migration rarely guarantees social or economic stability. Arif (1998) and Athukorala (1990) found that unemployment rates among returnees are typically higher than among non-migrants due to skill mismatches and weak local labor markets. In Indonesia, many returnees, especially those from low-skilled sectors, struggle to re-enter the workforce, manage savings effectively, or establish micro-enterprises (Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2014). This economic fragility often leads to circular migration, where individuals re-migrate abroad to escape poverty (Willoughby & Henderson, 2009; Wickramasekara, 2003).

Beyond economics, reintegration is also a deeply social and cultural process. Long absences abroad often disrupt family structures, emotional bonds, and community participation (Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2014). Many migrants, upon returning, experience “reverse culture shock,” struggling to adapt to the values and social expectations of their home communities (King, 2000). Female returnees face a “double stigma”, expected to resume caregiving roles immediately while simultaneously being judged for their absence. Women are frequently labelled as “failed mothers” or “unsuccessful wives” if they return without visible financial success, despite years of sacrifice abroad. Such gendered stigma perpetuates emotional distress and weakens self-confidence, further hindering reintegration.

However, emerging scholarship challenges the view of returnees as passive victims. The Gendered Migration Framework (Parreñas, 2001; Silvey & Parreñas, 2020) emphasizes that migration and return are both structured by gendered power relations and shaped by the intersection of global capitalism and local patriarchy. Meanwhile, Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 1995; Payne, 2014) highlights how migrants actively negotiate these structures through personal, organizational, and community-level agency. Studies show that women often mobilize their migration experiences into new forms of collective empowerment, joining or forming grassroots organizations and cooperatives that facilitate mutual aid, advocacy, and entrepreneurship (Huang & Yeoh, 2007; Hugman, Bartolomei, & Pittaway, 2011).

Building on these insights, this paper argues that reintegration should be conceptualized as a multidimensional and gendered process rather than a purely economic event. This paper is aimed to analyze the economic, social, and cultural realities faced by Indonesian returnees, particularly women, in their home communities; and highlight the role of empowerment and collective agency in fostering sustainable reintegration.

This paper contributes to broader migration scholarship by bridging policy analysis and gendered social inquiry. It calls for a paradigm shift, from short-term, charity-based interventions toward rights-based, empowerment-driven reintegration that recognizes returnees as agents of transformation rather than passive beneficiaries of aid.

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the reintegration experiences of Indonesian return migrant workers in Yogyakarta. The qualitative approach was selected because reintegration is not merely an economic transition but a deeply embedded social and cultural process that reflects emotional, psychological, and institutional dimensions. Such complexity requires interpretive understanding through personal narratives and contextual observation rather than measurement alone. The study therefore sought to uncover how gender, empowerment, and social belonging intersect in shaping the post-return lives of former migrant workers.

The research was conducted in Yogyakarta, a province that has long been recognized as one of Indonesia's most dynamic migration hubs. The region is home to extensive networks of migrant-sending communities and has developed various grassroots organizations that support returning workers, such as Koperasi Pekerja Purna Migran Indonesia (KOPPMI) and Ikatan Mantan Buruh Migran Indonesia (IMA). These organizations not only provide economic assistance but also function as spaces of psychosocial support and collective empowerment. Moreover, Yogyakarta's close coordination with Badan Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia (BP3MI) makes it a strategic research site to examine the intersection between policy initiatives and community-based reintegration practices.

Data collection was carried out between January and June 2025 using two primary qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' migration trajectories, working conditions abroad, reintegration experiences, and perceptions of empowerment upon returning home. In total, seven return migrant workers and one institutional representative participated in the research. Among the returnees, six were women who had previously worked as domestic and care workers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Saudi Arabia, while one male participant had been employed in a construction-related sector. In addition, one official from BP3MI Yogyakarta was interviewed as a key informant to provide an institutional perspective on reintegration programs and challenges. All participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure variation in gender, destination country, and duration of stay

abroad, thereby allowing the inclusion of diverse reintegration trajectories—from successful and economically stable returnees to those experiencing vulnerability or exclusion.

To complement the individual interviews, one focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with eight members of KOPPMI and IMA. The FGD provided an opportunity to examine reintegration from a collective perspective, focusing on the organizational role of cooperatives, access to capital, and mutual support systems among former migrants. Both individual interviews and FGDs were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, and took place in locations familiar to participants. Each session was audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with repeated readings of transcripts to gain familiarity with participants' narratives, followed by open coding to identify recurring patterns, key words, and metaphors related to reintegration. These initial codes were then grouped into broader conceptual categories that aligned with the study's theoretical orientation: the Gendered Migration Framework (Silvey, 2004; Parreñas, 2001), Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 1995; Payne, 2014), and the Reintegration Strategies Framework (Cassarino, 2004; Raharto, 2016). Through iterative comparison, the researcher developed analytic themes that explained how gendered power relations, institutional practices, and community participation shaped the reintegration process. Triangulation across three data sources, returnee interviews, organizational insights from FGDs, and institutional perspectives from BP3MI, was employed to enhance validity and ensure that findings captured both individual and structural dynamics.

All research procedures adhered to standard ethical protocols for qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written and verbal consent was obtained before interviews and FGDs. To preserve confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and identifying details were removed from transcripts. Given the sensitive nature of women's migration experiences, particular attention was paid to creating a safe and supportive interview environment. All data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

## Results

The analysis of interviews and focus group discussions reveals that reintegration among Indonesian return migrant workers is shaped by intertwined economic, social, and

institutional factors. The process is far from linear and reflects a complex negotiation between personal aspirations, community expectations, and structural limitations. Three major themes emerged from the data: (1) economic reintegration and livelihood instability, (2) gendered stigma and psychosocial challenges, and (3) the role of migrant-led organizations in facilitating empowerment and social recovery.

### **Economic Reintegration and Livelihood Instability**

For most participants, migration was a livelihood strategy motivated by economic necessity. Migration offered an opportunity to escape poverty, pay debts, and provide education for children. However, the return to Indonesia did not always translate into stable economic improvement. Many returnees reported difficulty finding employment or sustaining small businesses started with their savings. Some invested their remittances in micro-enterprises such as food stalls or home-based shops, but these ventures often collapsed within months due to limited capital, weak local markets, and lack of mentoring.

Economic reintegration challenges were also gendered. Female returnees, who had worked for years as domestic and care workers, often lacked recognition as skilled laborers. Their experiences abroad were rarely acknowledged as professional expertise. Consequently, they struggled to re-enter the local labor market and were forced to rely on informal or low-income activities. In contrast, the only male participant in the study described his return as smoother socially but equally unstable economically. He managed to construct a small house using remittance savings but failed to find consistent employment. These experiences highlight the limited structural opportunities available for sustainable post-migration livelihoods.

### **Gendered Stigma and Psychosocial Challenges**

Economic instability was compounded by gendered stigma. Many female returnees described reintegration as emotionally difficult because of social judgment and strained family relationships. After years of separation, they faced accusations of neglecting their domestic roles and were often labeled as “failed mothers” or “failed wives.” One participant reflected, “Sebagai ibu yang gagal, istri yang gagal. Pokoknya dibikin merasa bersalah.” (“As a mother and as a wife, I am made to feel guilty.”) Such narratives reveal that returning women must renegotiate their social identity within communities that continue to define female respectability through domestic presence rather than financial contribution.

The psychological impact of these moral expectations was significant. Several participants described feelings of isolation and emotional distance from their children, who had grown up under the care of grandparents or relatives. Despite sending remittances to support their families, many returnees felt their sacrifices were overlooked or misunderstood. One participant shared that her teenage child was embarrassed to admit that she had worked abroad as a domestic worker: “Anak saya malu punya ibu yang kerja di luar negeri.” (“My child was ashamed to have a mother who worked abroad.”)

Nevertheless, many women demonstrated resilience by transforming these experiences into a source of personal strength. Some expressed a sense of empowerment derived from their migration journey, describing themselves as more confident, independent, and adaptable than before. Yet, they acknowledged that community acceptance remained conditional, dependent on visible financial success or adherence to moral norms. Reintegration, therefore, involved not only rebuilding livelihoods but also restoring dignity and social belonging.

### **The Role of Migrant Organizations in Reintegration**

In addition to support provided by formal institutions, such as BP3MI, migrant-led cooperatives and associations emerged as vital sources of assistance and empowerment. Organizations such as Koperasi Pekerja Purna Migran Indonesia (KOPPMI) and Ikatan Mantan Buruh Migran Indonesia (IMA) provided spaces for returnees to rebuild confidence, share experiences, and pursue economic initiatives collectively. Members described these organizations as “second families” that helped them overcome isolation and regain self-worth.

Through cooperatives, many women learned financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and peer mentoring. More importantly, they found solidarity and recognition. One participant emphasized, “Di koperasi ini kami belajar bukan hanya soal uang, tapi soal percaya diri.” (“In this cooperative, we learn not only about money but also about confidence.”) The cooperative environment offered emotional support as well as practical skills, fostering a sense of mutual care and shared purpose.

These migrant organizations also served as intermediaries between returnees and local institutions. By organizing training, advocacy meetings, and savings programs, they bridged the gap between formal reintegration policies and the lived realities of migrant workers. Participants agreed that government programs would be more effective if they collaborated with these local networks, which understand the specific needs of returnees at the community level.

### **Institutional Support and Policy Limitations**

Reintegration policies in Indonesia face structural and logistical barriers. Funding constraints, limited coordination between national and local agencies, and the focus on placement rather than return all undermine reintegration efforts. Most initiatives remain project-based, lacking the long-term follow-up necessary for sustainable outcomes. While government programs emphasize training and small business assistance, they rarely address the psychosocial dimensions of return such as stigma, emotional well-being, and social acceptance. As a result, reintegration continues to depend heavily on individual resilience and informal community networks. The programs of KOPPMI and IMA demonstrate the potential of community-driven models that integrate economic, emotional, and social empowerment. However, without sustained institutional recognition and financial support, these grassroots initiatives risk remaining peripheral to national migration policy.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study demonstrate that reintegration among Indonesian migrant workers is a complex, multidimensional process shaped by economic, social, and institutional factors. Reintegration cannot be reduced to financial or employment outcomes alone; it also encompasses psychosocial adjustment, identity reconstruction, and community acceptance. The experiences of returnees in Yogyakarta illustrate that while migration can provide temporary economic relief, sustainable reintegration depends on the interaction between individual agency, gendered social structures, and institutional support.

### **Economic Reintegration: Between Opportunity and Precarity**

The study highlights the paradox that migration, though initially driven by economic necessity, does not guarantee economic stability upon return. Many participants' difficulties in managing remittance savings or sustaining small businesses suggest that financial capital alone is insufficient for long-term reintegration. Training programs, while valuable, are often short-lived and lack systematic follow-up. This finding aligns with previous research by Raharto (2016) and Bachtiar & Prasetyo (2014), who argue that Indonesia's reintegration programs remain fragmented and overly focused on entrepreneurship without addressing broader structural constraints.

Policy support must therefore move beyond one-off interventions toward more sustained mentoring systems. Financial literacy, business incubation, and post-training monitoring are critical for ensuring that returnees can convert remittances into productive

and sustainable livelihoods. Reintegration should be viewed as a continuum of support that begins before migrants' departure, continues during their employment abroad, and extends well after their return.

### Migrant Organizations as Drivers of Collective Empowerment

In addition to significant role of government programs, the role of migrant cooperatives such as Koperasi Pekerja Purna Migran Indonesia (KOPPMI) and Ikatan Mantan Buruh Migran Indonesia (IMA) underscores the potential of community-based approaches in promoting sustainable reintegration. These organizations function as spaces of learning, mutual care, and empowerment, where returnees can rebuild confidence and social connections. Their work demonstrates that empowerment is not only achieved individually but collectively through shared experience and solidarity.

In practical terms, these community initiatives strengthen programs provided by government programs. They combine financial education with psychosocial support, thereby integrating economic and emotional recovery. The success of these community-driven initiatives suggests that reintegration policies should formally recognize and collaborate with migrant-led organizations. Local partnerships between government institutions and community based initiatives could ensure that reintegration programs are more responsive to the lived realities of returnees.

This finding also resonates with regional experiences across Southeast Asia. Similar patterns can be observed in the Philippines, where migrant family associations and cooperatives have long played a pivotal role in facilitating return (Asis, 2006; Rodriguez, 2010). Indonesia's grassroots cooperatives therefore represent a local adaptation of this regional trend — what Yeoh (2020) terms “vernacular governance,” or the emergence of bottom-up institutions that complement the formal state.

### Conclusion

This study has explored the reintegration experiences of Indonesian return migrant workers, focusing on the economic, social, and institutional dimensions that shape their post-migration lives. The findings reveal that reintegration is a long and multidimensional process that extends beyond financial recovery to include social acceptance and psychological well-being. While most participants left Indonesia in pursuit of better livelihoods, their return journey often unfolded within a challenging landscape marked by unstable income, limited institutional support, and persistent social stigma.

Three key insights emerge from the analysis. First, economic reintegration remains fragile. Sustainable reintegration requires long-term guidance and collaboration between formal agencies and local institutions. Second, social reintegration is heavily gendered. Women returnees face not only economic precarity but also moral judgment as they attempt to reclaim their roles within families and communities. Addressing these challenges demands a reintegration approach that is gender-sensitive, inclusive, and rooted in psychosocial understanding. Third, the study highlights the vital role of migrant-led organizations such as Koperasi Pekerja Purna Migran Indonesia (KOPPMI) and Ikatan Mantan Buruh Migran Indonesia (IMA). These community-based groups bridge the gap between formal policy and lived experience, providing spaces of mutual learning, collective empowerment, and emotional support.

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that reintegration should be re-envisioned as a shared responsibility between the state, civil society, and migrant communities. Government agencies can enhance program sustainability by integrating migrant cooperatives into policy design and implementation. Financial and psychosocial components should be developed in tandem to ensure that returnees are supported both materially and emotionally. Reintegration programs must also adopt monitoring mechanisms that track progress over time, not only at the point of return.

In conclusion, reintegration represents not the end of the migration cycle but its most critical stage — a stage where economic, social, and emotional dimensions converge. When managed inclusively, reintegration can transform the challenges of return into opportunities for empowerment and community development. The experiences of migrant workers in Yogyakarta demonstrate that meaningful reintegration depends not only on programs and funding but also on recognition, dignity, and participation. Building on these insights, future policies should prioritize long-term empowerment, inter-agency coordination, and community partnership to create a reintegration process that is both sustainable and humane.

## References

- Arif, G. M. (1998). *Reintegration of Pakistani return migrants from the Middle East in the domestic labour market*. *The Pakistan Development Review*, 99–124.
- Athukorala, P. (1990). *International contract migration and the reintegration of return migrants: The experience of Sri Lanka*. *International Migration Review*, 323–346.
- Bachtiar, P. P., & Prasetyo, D. D. (2014). *The return migration and various reintegration programs for low-skilled migrant workers in Indonesia*. BNP2TKI. (2013). *Penempatan Berdasar Daerah Asal (Kota/Kabupaten) 2011–2012*. Retrieved from <http://www.bnp2tki.go.id>
- Cassarino, J. P. (2004). *Theorising return migration: A revisited conceptual approach*. EUI Working Paper RSCAS, 2004/02.

- Huang, S., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2007). Emotional labour and transnational domestic work. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 14(4), 441–458.
- Hugman, R., Bartolomei, L., & Pittaway, E. (2011). Human agency and implications for migration. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 24(3), 287–306.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2007). *Combating forced labour and trafficking of Indonesian migrant workers 2006–2008*. Jakarta: ILO.
- King, R. (2000). *Generalizations from the history of return migration*. In B. Ghosh (Ed.), *Return migration: Journey of hope or despair?* IOM.
- Lindquist, J., Xiang, B., & Yeoh, B. (2012). *Opening the black box of migration*. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 21(1), 1–17.
- Parreñas, R. S. (2001). *Servants of globalization: Women, migration and domestic work*. Stanford University Press.
- Raharto, A. (2016). *Return migration and reintegration in Indonesia*. *Asian Population Studies*, 12(2), 123–138.
- Rahman, A., & Ananta, A. (2021). *Assessing reintegration programs for Indonesian migrant workers*. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 52(3), 411–428.
- Silvey, R. (2004). *Transnational domestication: State power and Indonesian migrant women in Saudi Arabia*. *Political Geography*, 23(3), 245–264.
- Willoughby, J., & Henderson, H. (2009). *Preparing contract workers for return and reintegration – Relevant for development?* Global Forum on Migration and Development.
- Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 581–599