



**Chapter title: The Sexual Economy of Desire: Girlfriends, Boyfriends and Babies Among Indonesian Women Migrants in Hong Kong<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an output of the Research Programme Consortium on Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts, a project funded by UK aid from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

## **Abstract**

This chapter examines the cultural and political logics embedded in state and institutional imperatives that shape the experiences of Indonesian women during labour migration, in Hong Kong, in three areas related to women's sexuality. The first is about the mutability of sexuality among women who choose homosexual partnerships during migration. The second, is about Indonesian migrant women's in relationships with local men and foreign men. The last area focuses on the unintended pregnancies when 'foreign' babies' are conceived and sometimes born in Hong Kong. Although pregnancies are seldom intended, this chapter shows that three aspects are related to the realities, policies and practices that frame globalised labour supply. In addition, this chapter concludes that Indonesian migrant women are poorly equipped to deal with issues of sexual and reproductive health because of the impact of gender ideologies on women's access to information and support in Indonesia.

(Word count: 147)

**Keywords:** Indonesian labour migrants, migrant women, sexuality, pregnancy, lesbian

## **Gender and the Sociology of Migration**

Structural transformations in global relations of trade and production have affected women's lives and these are reflected in recent feminist literature from studies about rural women and the shift from subsistence towards commercial agricultural production, the feminization of labour within the international division of labour and to gender and migration in the integration of global systems in trade. (Sassen, 2000). Feminist studies of women's mobility in internal and overseas migration focused on niche sectors such as factory, domestic, care and sex work. As 'counter-geographies of globalization', labour migration constitutes a shadow economy that relies on and reproduces institutional features of the formal capitalist economy. (Sassen, 2000).

In labour migration, constructions of women migrants' bodies become destabilized with increased distance from home and reduced familial supervision at destinations of employment, and while migrant women enact strategies that challenge social constructions away from home, their agencies are circumscribed by the material possibilities of social positioning in hierarchies of class, gender, nationality and ethnicity. Transformations in women migrants' behavior, values and worldviews have been noted in earlier studies<sup>2</sup> and these are consistent with young women's desire for knowledge and experience away from home. Personal transformations in migration do not, however, always represent radical breaks with the past and takes place on a transformative continuum within the life history of each individual. What is sometimes misread as transformative in migration, frequently as forms of resistance, is often continuous with and consistent with their personal histories in a different cultural context between that of home and a foreign destination.

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<sup>2</sup> Women migrants in Indonesia: Elmhirst 2000; Williams 2003. For Nepal, Thailand and Vietnam: Puri and Busza 2004; Hettiarachy and Schensul 2001; Belanger and Khuat 1998.

However, it is precisely the potentially transformative spaces created by women migrants in their physical dislocation from home that causes unease and that explains why women's migration is a sensitive subject in sending and receiving states<sup>3</sup>. Hence, labour migration is never just about the export of raw labor power because the migrant body becomes the focus of contestations and criticisms in both sending and receiving countries. (Bourdieu 2000: 175). This attention aims more precisely at the bodies of migrant women—biologically reproducing bodies—that can threaten this identity important to both sending and recipient groups. (Bourdieu 2000: 180).

A cultural economy perspective of the relationships of Indonesian women migrant workers in Hong Kong shows how these relations are located within the globalised order of labour supply, the geo-politics and socio-economics of sending and recipient states, as well as, within the matrices of marginality in destinations of migrant labour. This deliberate emphasis on the social attributes of positioning is necessary to avoid the excesses attached to the romanticisation of women's agencies, personal identity politics, and mobility and employment as being unquestioningly, empowering for women migrant workers. Markets and economies are complex and cannot be understood simply as economic entities that are objective and material, separate and independent of the value-laden sphere of human culture and society. This chapter underscores the complexity of human actors in the seemingly objective material processes of labour supply and stresses the inter-penetration of culture and economy in dialogical and dialectical ways that underwrite the relations between perceived social-economic structures and the practices of human agents. The 'cultural economy' of sexuality, hence, draws together, the people, institutions, discursive processes and practices that constitute it, showing how current

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see the public reaction in Indonesia to the sexual abuse of its migrant women workers in the Middle East, in Robinson (2000); and the attempts of recipient states, employment/recruitment agencies' and employers' at constructing and disciplining the 'body' of migrant women in Hong Kong and Taiwan in Constable (1997a, 1997b), So (2005) and Lan (2006). In a more extreme case, foreign women who enter as domestic workers are not allowed to ever marry and settle locally with Singaporean men, even after the termination of their employment there.

day processes shape the cultural reproduction of people who try to find a place for themselves within it.

This chapter on Indonesian women as foreign domestic workers (FDWs), between seventeen and twenty-five in Hong Kong, traces the role of women's sexuality in homosexual and heterosexual liaisons. It documents issues and conditions in their sex lives, and examines the repercussions of the cultural understanding of gender in Indonesia that affect women migrant workers. In addition, it contributes to the sociology of migration by connecting materiality, processes, strategies and embedded ideologies, linking the micro-politics of individual migrant lives to the effects of power that pre-exist individuals in social life. This chapter looks beyond the fragmented differences among individual women to examine the sources of power that pervade their lives. Indonesian women's expressions of sexual identity can be both empowering and disempowering during labour migration but the findings here reflect only the experiences of my respondents.

Based on fieldwork from mid 2002 to end 2005, the research for this chapter is derived from ethnographic fieldwork with hundreds of Indonesian women workers over the years in the form of conversations rather than formal interviews. They were conducted in social gatherings in public parks and at private parties, in NGO offices and in shelters for homeless women migrant workers. As a researcher and I was privileged by the trust with which they discussed their love lives, a subject that is centrally important to them. The initial awkwardness and defensiveness among lesbian women disappeared when I told them that I too, am a lesbian woman, which helped in getting to know them as friends and respondents. The conversations were mostly in a mixture of English and Cantonese, the latter I learnt in Hong Kong as most Indonesian women migrant workers were more adept in it than English. I had begun to learn Indonesian but I was

not, at the time of this study, sufficiently proficient to do more with it than raise amusement among my respondents with my mistakes.

### **Women migrant workers: embodied and embedded**

The official number of Indonesian migrant workers at the end of 2000 was 1,461,236 (Asian Migrant Centre and Migrant Forum in Asia 2000: 149) but other estimates have placed it at over four million. (Loveband 2003: 4). In 1999, 387,304 Indonesians left for overseas employment (Komnas *et al.*, 2002: 7) with the official target set at one million for 2009. Over seventy per cent are women of which, sixty-five per cent go to Asian destinations and thirty-five per cent to the Arab states. (Jakarta Post, 25 January 2006). Remittances from Indonesian migrants in thirty-five destinations, totaled US\$2.9 billion in 2005. (Asian Migrant Centre and Migrant Forum in Asia 2000: 155, 2002-3: 164; Asia Pulse, 25 January 2006).

Indonesia's domestic economy is unable to generate sufficient jobs resulting in a deficit of one million jobs annually. (Hugo 1995). Unemployment compounds the problem of marginal livelihoods based on agriculture, which has traditionally been subsidised by other sources of non-farm income in Indonesia, including trade and migration for work. (Rodenburg 1995; Silvey 2000). Broader structural developments have also intensified the shift away from resource-based livelihoods with an increasingly central role for labour export. (Asian Migrant Centre and Migrant Forum in Asia 2001: 68-9).

Under the New Order government<sup>4</sup> Indonesian women's participation as citizens was based on their difference from men as "reproducers of the next generation of workers" (Robinson 2000: 250), and as wives and mothers. In 1993, they appeared as workers in the

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<sup>4</sup> A term used to describe the government in Indonesia from 1965 to 1998 under President Suharto

state's development plans for the first time.<sup>5</sup> State sponsored ideologies have normative powers in the reification of values and behaviour conditioning social acceptance, and contribute to a cultural regime defining what is acceptable and desirable. By relegating women to their heterosexual and biological roles, the legitimate uses of women's bodies are normalised by public regulations in intimate areas of their lives—that of heterosexuality, marriage and reproduction. By extension, the recognition of women's role in national development, e.g. in labour migration, is premised on paternalistic assumptions that they require the protection of the state. There are, however, some who claim that economic developments have led to the reworking of gender norms governing female employment and mobility in Indonesia.<sup>6</sup> (Elmhirst 2000; Hancock 2001).

The role of women in the Indonesia has been relegated to upholding ideals of order and development from the standpoint of the male-headed family, based on notions of women's sexual purity. There was widespread public outrage in Indonesia when cases of the sexual abuse of Indonesian women migrants in the Arab states received media attention. (Robinson 2003). Cultural meanings and interpretation embedded in social practices constitute the modes by which people's lives are indexed, by themselves and by others and where women are construed to be the ultimate repository and vector of the values of the group, criticisms aim primarily and more violently at the bodies of women. (Bourdieu 2000:180). Gender is one area where the differential valuations of male and female bodies shape the processes, chances and outcomes in their lives. Gendered social roles dichotomize bodies in anatomically deterministic ways, by creating 'natural' categories of male and female, reified in turn through social practice. (Errington 1990:9).

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<sup>5</sup> The Guidelines for State Policy (Garis Besar Haluan Negara, or GBHN) are set out by the government once every five years.

<sup>6</sup> Hugo 1995 attributed to structural changes in the economy, higher education of women and shifts in *adat* or customary law

On the other hand, Errington (1990:3-5) pointed out that the supposed egalitarian gender relations found in studies by foreign researchers on Southeast Asia, on the relative positions of power that women occupy have gone unchallenged for a number of reasons—including the absence of more extreme forms of control over women’s bodies.<sup>7</sup> Local patterns of social relations, e.g. Javanese women’s control of household finances, were misread by researchers from outside such communities, to support ideas of gender equality among men and women even when such local practices connote different meanings to those involved. For example, while Lev (1996) argues that urban Indonesian women are less subject to gender discrimination and that gender difference is understated, others find that gender makes a difference when it comes to asserting political claims in the public sphere. (For example, Atkinson 1990).

In 1997, President Suharto justified goals for women’s higher education only in the context of raising children, “[Women] must have a high education so as to enable them to teach a nation’s intelligent and God-fearing generation”. (Suryakusuma 2004: 130-131). Hence, even as Indonesian women are needed in the national economy, biological and reductionist claims backed by tradition and religion in Indonesia, are invoked tying women to the notion of *kodrat* (nature and destiny). These claims form the basis of powerful state ideologies on gender that underpin national policies and practices in other aspects of women’s lives, such as their access to health and sexual reproductive services. (Suryakusuma 2004: 214 and Bennett 2005).

With Indonesian women’s labour migration is on the rise, how do these state sponsored cultural systems affect their experiences? The following traces some of the sources and consequences of institutionalized power manifested in norms and processes that shape Indonesian women’s experiences in labour migration.

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<sup>7</sup> More extreme forms, e.g. foot binding, female genital mutilation, girl marriages, dowry marriages and widow burning.



## **Indonesian woman as migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong**

Indonesian women domestic workers coming mostly from East and Central Java, constitute the second largest ethnic minority in Hong Kong. Their numbers have increased from one thousand in 1994 to 116,000 in 2006<sup>8</sup>. Among foreign domestic workers, Hong Kong is a favoured destination compared to Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and the Middle East States for a number of reasons, including the existence of standard employment contracts, a legislated minimum wage, etc. However, Indonesian women migrant workers encounter the most problems among the different migrant groups because, in addition to problems common to all FDWs, they encounter problems that stem from policies and practices in the Indonesian system of labour export. (Sim, 2003). Some of these include inordinately high placement fees, incarceration during pre-departure training, unscrupulous agencies, etc.

When the minimum allowable wage was legally pegged at HK\$3,270 (US\$420)<sup>9</sup> nearly half of Indonesian domestic workers—48 per cent— were paid less than the minimum wage with some as low as half the minimum wage, comprising the largest underpaid group. In terms of rest days, 60 per cent receive less than four legislated rest days per month—of which, 40 per cent get two days, 14 per cent get one day and 6 per cent get less than one or no rest days per month. (AMC and MFA in Asia, 2001: 27). In terms of their choice of employers, 91 per cent work for the ‘least preferred’ employers in Hong Kong among FDWs, i.e. the local Chinese. (AMC *et al.*, 2001).

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<sup>8</sup> Hong Kong Immigration Department’s statistics May 2006 stood at 99,582 and informal estimates place this at 116,000 in September.

<sup>9</sup> The minimum allowable wage was first established in 1973, originally to protect the wages of local domestic workers. Conversion rate of 1 US\$=7.78

On average Indonesian domestics are about twenty-seven years old,<sup>10</sup> (Loveband, 2003; Hugo, 1995; Robinson, 2000) single,<sup>11</sup> (Asian Meta Centre *et al.*, 2001) with secondary school education, and have lived in Hong Kong for just over two years. Apart from the underpayment and the lack of rest days, Indonesian women migrants encounter other problems with employers, recruiters, employment agencies, Indonesian officials, wage cut pressures, marginalisation and discrimination based on ethnicity, class and gender. (ATKI 2001, 2005; ISSHK, 2006; Wee *et al.*, 2003). The first wage cut of the minimum allowable wage of 5 per cent took effect in January 1999 (Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants, 2003) followed by a cut that took the form of a government levy of HK\$400 on 1 April 2003, purportedly as a form of tax on employers but which, in reality, is passed onto FDW in reduced wages. (Wee and Sim, 2005).

In 1987, the Hong Kong Immigration Department introduced a policy, the New Conditions of Stay, or the Two-week Rule, which stipulated that, FDWs would not be allowed to change employers during the first two-years of their contract except for those whose employers have abused them, gone into bankruptcy or have died, FDWs who terminated their contracts prematurely had to leave Hong Kong within two weeks. This rule does not take into account the debt burden (see below) of FDWs when they are prematurely terminated in their employment and the difficulty of finding a new employer within the given two weeks. This has consequences as it leads to their overstaying on their visas and becoming undocumented in Hong Kong. (See below).

Not only are Indonesian women migrant workers overstaying and becoming undocumented in Hong Kong but this correlates with an emerging trend in other destinations of Indonesian labour migration in East Asia. (Sim, 2004). This phenomenon where legal entrants

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<sup>10</sup> The ages of Indonesian women migrant workers are commonly adjusted to the match the market demands. According to AMC *et al.* (2001), most Indonesian women workers in Hong Kong are 21 years old, which agrees with the profile of respondents interviewed in this study. The youngest was fifteen when she first arrived in Hong Kong.

<sup>11</sup> 99.6 per cent are women

become overstayers is symptomatic of an oppressive labour exporting system from Indonesia that Indonesian migrant workers wish to avoid. In some destinations, Indonesian labour migration is significant for generating the highest rates of overstayers in East Asia compared to other groups.<sup>12</sup> For example, between 1999 to 2002, Indonesian migrant overstayers in South Korea increased by 807 per cent, the highest among all migrant groups with Indonesian women overstayers increasing, for the same period, by more than 1,000 per cent. (AMC and MFA, 2000: 231; AMC and MFA, 2002-3: 187). In Japan, between 1990 to 2003, undocumented Indonesian workers increased by more than 2,000 per cent. (AMC and MFA, 2002-3: 173) while in Taiwan, the runaway rate of Indonesian workers increased by 2,400 per cent in eight years. Indonesian female overstayers in Taiwan also outnumbered males by 3:1 between 1993-7, (AMC and MFA, 1999: 195; AMC and MFA, 2002-3: 260) and nearly 4:1 in 2000.

### **Women migrant workers and sexuality**

Little has been done in earlier studies that do not connect migrant women with sexual exploitation, abuse, disease, sex work or impurity. These revolve mainly around following themes and do not allow for the expressivity of the women involved:

- As victims of sex abuse in destination countries
- As a source of sexual threat and competition for female employers that reflect nationalistic and ethnicised anxieties of foreign women's sexuality in recipient countries (Constable 1997a, 1997b, 2000; Groves and Chang 1999; Lan 2000)
- As trafficked women in sex work

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<sup>12</sup> 'Irregular migration' is the term used by international organisations but it is of limited utility here as it includes those who travel with forged documents but who are 'documented' in their false identities. It is a well-known fact that migrant workers from Indonesia travel with documents, which have been tampered with to varying degrees, for example, a change of name, age or marital status, thus rendering the term 'irregular migrant' meaningless as most would be 'irregular' for one reason or another without criminal intent. The term 'documented migration' is also misleading for the above reasons.

- As carriers of HIV-AIDS

While there has been some research on Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, their dating preferences and religious conversions from among them, almost nothing exists on Indonesian women migrants in Hong Kong. Based on research in Hong Kong, this chapter argues that what has been missing from existing studies on migrant women's sexuality are their 'non-work' experiences and responses to needs for sex and love—beyond the formal scope of work and that is relatively free from supervision and contractual obligations—as voluntary actions and self-expression.

'Non-work' emerges as a key site for studying changes to migrant women's cultural understanding because these non-work moments are highlights looked forward to, by foreign domestics who work and live with their employers six days a week. In addition, non-work time is when they live, enact and expand their roles and notions of self and identity in circumstances of individual expressivity versus the instrumentality embedded in formal work relations. Two cases included in here, however, are of forced sexual encounters that provide insights into some thorny issues in Indonesian women's migratory experiences.

## **Girlfriends**

From the time an Indonesian migrant woman leaves her home, she is considered the ward of the recruiting agency until she is sent to an overseas destination. This is in line with the Indonesian 'One Door Exit Policy' which stipulates that all migrant workers must enroll with government licensed recruitment agencies and training centres that manage the entire process until the worker returns home. For this service, migrant workers must agree before leaving Indonesia to pay government mandated fees that differ with destinations, amounting to several months of wages when she starts working overseas.

In Hong Kong, this fee set is equivalent to thirty-four months of average wages in Indonesia or about seven months of wages in Hong Kong.<sup>13</sup> For poor women without access to capital, they pay their way when they are employed. However, the accrual system of repayment assumes that migrant workers can work uninterrupted, complete their contracts and be able to pay off their debts. This assumption is flawed because migrant workers can be terminated prematurely, at any time during employment or encounter abuse, which prevents them from working with the same employer and repaying their debt.

The average length of stay in a training centre is between four months and three years before an employer is found overseas. Pre-migration experience for inductees in Indonesia is often traumatic, amidst very poor living conditions in training centres. Packed in tight rows on the floor, they spent months sleeping skin-to-skin with the next person. Baths are taken communally with one bucket of water each. Earlier research confirms that physical and sexual abuse are rampant and minimum official standards to regulate practices within these camps are rarely enforced. Restrictions were placed on inductees' movements, and poor camp conditions resulted in health problems with little medical care. (United Nations Commission on Human Rights 2003).

Most of their families live beyond affordable distances and for those deprived of family visits, and forbidden from leaving the camps, they are unable to get basic sanitary provisions and toiletries. In addition, the passage from home to the training centre often contributes to increased vulnerability among women migrants. For one nineteen year old, the overnight ride in the passenger seat of her recruiter's car to the training centre became a nightmare. The recruiter while driving, and despite the presence of three other passengers in the back seat, molested her relentlessly until she threatened to throw herself out of the moving car in a suicide attempt.

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<sup>13</sup> 1 IDR = 0.000110963USD. The fee is approximately US\$2,288 equivalent to 20.62 million Indonesian Rupiahs. The average monthly wage in Indonesia is 600,000 Indonesian Rupiahs or US\$66.

Increased vulnerability, trauma and loneliness have been cited by some as reasons for why they became involved in same-sex relationships.

Another source for same-sex relationships stem from returned Indonesian women workers who have worked overseas. For seeking new foreign employment from Indonesia on their return, they are required to go through the entire process in training camps. It is through some of these relatively sophisticated women familiar with urban lifestyles in cities elsewhere that same-sex relationships become something of a ‘fashion statement’. Uci, a first time migrant, met many lesbians in the training center and she said that lesbian relations were trendy among those with overseas experience. In her view, apart from fulfilling a physical need for sex, ‘Being a lesbian makes a woman ‘powerful’ (i.e. attractive to other women, socially transgressive, a rebel).<sup>14</sup>

In terms of gender performance, the enactment of sexual choice in the direction of same-sex relations among women is read as ‘powerful’, not limited to its ability to give a materiality to what is named/chosen by migrant women as sexuality, but for its reiterative ability to produce a discourse and phenomenon that resist, reshape and re-appropriate for women, their bodies “from the regulatory norms that govern their [cultural] materialization and the [political] signification of those material effects”. (Bulter 2003:2). This unexpected emergence among migrant women workers led to de-naturalising, destabilising and rethinking amongst them of women’s bodies within Indonesia’s gender ideology. It radicalized women’s definitions of self and location, dislodged the regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality and pried open spaces for resistance to gender disparities and domination within mainstream discourse and practice. As an alternative, lesbianism shook free the automatic conflation of sexed bodies with gender roles and male privilege, and with that the naturalization of hierarchy and power within the other realms of

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with respondent

human relationships. For some among them, this led to a moment of collective disassociation between materialized cultural bodies and an alternative gender identity that offered the potential for personal liberation from the gendered oppressions of roles grounded in female bodies.

At the same time, alternative sexuality became 'imaginable' and popular among some Indonesian women migrants because it also provided a means of bonding under unusual circumstances as described above. Hence, women's homosexuality in Indonesia cannot be constructed solely as the outcome of pernicious, modernist and western discourse but is a result of existing gender ideologies in Indonesia, needs for paid employment, the nature of labour export and the gendered demands for labour globally. Among those interviewed in Hong Kong, I have encountered only one woman who had a lesbian relationship before her association with labour migration processes. At 16, she had her first relationship with an older female cousin in East Java, which lasted several months.

In Indonesian society, as in a number of Asian cultures, homosocially tactile interaction among those of the same sex is seldom construed as sexual. Holding hands between adult members of the same sex is understood to be companionable. It is also not uncommon for young Asian women to be unfamiliar with their own sexual anatomy and notions connected with female pleasures. Notions of sexual relations are associated with the presence of a penis, so that among most lesbian and non-lesbian Indonesian women respondents, what emerges is a view that where there is 'no penis equals no sex'. Among those who are organized collectively around their sexual identity in Hong Kong, however, there is an emerging awareness and pride that what takes place between them and their partners is 'sex'; but these are still fairly rare.

Traditionally the female-body is constructed as an organ of male pleasure, reproduction and an object of secular and religious discipline, to which no libidinous desires are attributed, thus de-sexualising women's bodies. For sex to become conceivable between two women, role-

playing becomes necessary where, for most, the model for Indonesian women same-sex couples in Hong Kong is heterosexist, with a masculinised or ‘butch’ woman and a feminine woman partner. This phenomenon suggests a lack of alternative models to the heterosexual prototype—where if a woman finds that she is attracted to another woman, the ‘desirer’ immediately thinks that she has to assume a male role and identity because the conventional definition of a woman precludes the desire for another woman. Despite what may seem obvious as symbolic inversion<sup>15</sup> (Babcock 1978) there is no discernible intention to displace dominant norms through parody and the assumption of male roles can be read equally as attempts at denaturalizing or re-idealising heterosexual gender norms.

None of the ‘butches’ described themselves as men trapped in women’s bodies nor expressed a desire to become men through sex-reassignment surgeries, but there were a few who claimed that they were ‘born this way’ and that their families accepted them as masculinised women, uninterested in men. Most respondents recognise themselves as women capable of taking up the role of social males when they are romantically linked to another woman. It is in this light that they feel most comfortable talking about their sexual preference.

The term ‘lesbian’ used here denotes participants of female same sex relationships, whether or not physical expressions of sex were involved. These include deep friendships and romantic friendships situated somewhere on the ‘lesbian continuum’ (Rich, 1980), that emerge in repressive pre-migration conditions that resonate with earlier studies on total institutions; but the notion of being lesbian is not generally positive and it would be a ‘label of last resort’. It is recognised as a catch-all category that describes them but not one that they automatically pick it

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<sup>15</sup> Babcock (1978:14) defined symbolic inversion as “any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political”.



for self-definition nor one that they are personally vested in. 'Lesbian' is, however, commonly used by non-lesbians women to point out those in same-sex relationships.

The lesbian scene among Indonesian women in Hong Kong is one of 'butches' (*sentul*) and femmes (*kantil*), divided by dress and behaviour. Masculinized lesbians or *tombois* dress to capture a sense of carelessness, with what seems to be little attention to the attractiveness of their physical attire because it is 'hip' to be a 'mess', underscoring their contrast with feminine women. Their appearances are self-consciously constructed as an integral part of the performance of a role, newly developed and deeply implicated in an emergent sense of self and agency. As Corbett (1996) suggested for the North American context and that could possibly holds true for emergent lesbian identities among migrant women workers in Hong Kong, gay people are likely to have internalized self-representations of both masculinity and femininity that are conflicting and incompatible, dress and comportment become experimental stages for self-expression and definition.

The usurpation of mores related to men's dress and demeanor refer to the culturally defined social codes that men depend on to reproduce masculinity in culturally appropriate ways. (Beynon 2002:2). Hence, the development of the lesbian community, subject to notions of the conventional binary gender system, bifurcates even among the local Hong Kong lesbian community into 'tomboys', known commonly as TBs, and their girlfriends. While these performances relate to personal histories, they express the dialectical tension between transgression and conformity that also represents experiences with crises in identity related to marginality. (Isaacs and McKendrick 1992:55).

## *Avoidance of men*

Understood within women migrants' life histories, transformations in sexual preference is quite often a strategy employed to preserve their moral universe in the unfamiliar contexts of a foreign destination and not indicative of anomie or rebellion. When nineteen-year old Eli could not cope with her employer's demands, she 'ran away' and moved into the shelter<sup>16</sup> where she met Binte, who became her first lesbian lover. Eli was the 'butch' or masculinised partner in this relationship. Following the resolution of her claims against her employer, Binte returned to Indonesia intending to go back to Hong Kong as quickly as possible.

Earlier in Indonesia, Eli had become pregnant at sixteen and underwent an illegal abortion resulting in a sense of shame and failure towards her parents. She promised herself that she would avoid intimacy with men until she was married. While she was popular in the shelter with women who were vying to become her girlfriend, she viewed her homosexuality as a temporary aberration and she was vehement that she would not get involved with men in Hong Kong because all 'they want is money and to get the girls pregnant'. After her 'downfall', Eli took great pride in her own redemption. Her father had been moved to tears when she started sending money home and she felt that she was finally, a dutiful daughter. If she were to become pregnant with no husband, she promised herself that she would never go back.

The policies on abortion in Indonesia vary in different areas. In Lampung, Sumatra, where Eli came from, the laws are not clear and subject to local interpretations. Young women like Eli carry the emotional scars of a culture where safe and legal abortions are unavailable. In some areas, only if a woman produces a marriage certificate, *Surat Nika*, will she be allowed to receive contraception at public or private clinics. Contraception involves mostly birth control

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<sup>16</sup> Shelters are mostly free accommodation provided by NGOs for homeless or unemployed foreign domestic workers who need a place to live while engaged in legal claims with their ex-employers.

pills, hormonal patches, injections and the IUD. The responsibility for birth control falls mainly on women as male contraception, like the condom is almost never recommended and most respondents report that they are not at all familiar with it.

Labour migration had served to redeem Eli's status within her family but there is no change in gender relations back home and in fact, remittances from overseas employment serve to reproduce traditional values and gender norms. According to an Asian feminist, sons are valued for who they are while daughters are valued for what they do.<sup>17</sup> The use of remittances is often subject to the male head of the household's authority. Gender relations in Indonesia, are thus not being challenged through women's labour migration and economic independence. The alternative sexual orientation that Eli discovered, protected the moral code at home and addressed her needs for physical and emotional intimacy in what would have been a lonely experience.

### *Disappointment & betrayal*

Polygamy is publicly discouraged by the government in Indonesia and through policies among its civil servants. Most Indonesian women today expect monogamy and it is on this premise that married women leave their homes to support their husbands and families. The reality for many Indonesian women migrants is quite different.

Noora like Eli became pregnant at sixteen, and her father had forced her to marry. The theme of personal redemption through remittances to their families for past transgressions of sexual boundaries is a common one. Because of her husband's unemployment, Noora decided to work overseas. Noora's involvement with women began after she learnt that her husband had married another wife. Having failed once, she felt betrayed and her sexual transformation began shortly after that. In both dress and mannerism, she became more aggressively male than Eli in

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<sup>17</sup> Dr Vivienne Wee

usurping the sexual rights of biological males through having a series of clandestine relationships with multiple Indonesian women in Hong Kong simultaneously, i.e. the same sexual rights with her husband. She constructed herself as a social male reflecting her distrust and rejection of men, while emulating their sexual proclivities. If men had done her wrong and she wanted their rights, which brought increased status and not stigma as a *tomboi*, in labour migration.

These two case studies show the deliberate de/construction that took place in the creation of sexual identities. They illuminate the socio-historical context within which such decisions take place, in which biological and cultural determinations are discarded while debunking the common misunderstanding that lesbians are failed women for being unable to attract men and hence, their involvement in same-sex relationships. These two accounts critique the sexual conventions among Indonesian men and the ideologies that underwrite them. However, female same-sex relationships are not always the result of male sexual privilege. (See below).

### *Femmes*

For the women who vied for her attention, a relationship with butch women like Eli, would provide benefits because it is in the company of a social male, that *femme* women (the feminine half of the dyad) can act out gendered scripts, that is, behave like ‘women’, and relate to ‘men’ in ways that will bring no shame. Moreover, there is the possibility of physical intimacy and comfort in what would otherwise be an exercise in sexual repression.

Many young, attractive and single Indonesian women are frequently caught in the ambivalence of desiring and rejecting men at the same time. They fear the consequences of indiscretion with men that lead to the loss of reputation, chastity and to unwanted pregnancies. Susanna expressed her desire to stay in Hong Kong for as long as it is possible to avoid parental pressures to marry. In extreme cases, well-meaning families would arrange migrant women’s marriages only to surprise them on their return. Families are motivated to expedite migrant

women's marriages in order to safeguard young women's chastity in migration especially when the latter intend to stay away.

Susanna like other *femme* women in the shelter had expressed the desire to have Eli as her partner. There is evidence about 'femme fever' in Hong Kong where several 'straight' women or feminine women would pursue a *tomboy* because 'she is so cool, just like a boy'! What is revealing is that despite social norms in Indonesia defining women's roles, migrant women question and reject these norms for different reasons. Aside from the opportunity to resist which comes from their distance from home and financial independence, there is also a nascent sense of feminist consciousness among them, that as women, they are not treated fairly.

On their return home, even for short visits, butch women often revert to being feminine and submit to their families' pressure to marry. In physical appearance, they deliberately tone down their aspects of dress that would cause disapproval from their families, mostly their parents, like their hair style, hair colour, accessories, attire, etc. while in behaviour, most revert to being more feminine in deportment. In one account of two long-term lesbian couples who returned to Indonesia, one remained unmarried, another returned to her husband, the third married while the fourth, became a religious Islamic leader. For another lesbian woman who had had two relationships with women while in Hong Kong, a bout of drinking with her friends on her return home, led to an unintended pregnancy and marriage, before she returned to Hong Kong to work again, two years later. Beyond these patchy accounts, and before more research, it is not possible to understand what happens to returned lesbian women to Indonesia.

### *In the employers' home*

Earlier research by Constable (1997a & b) had shown that female employers partake of disciplining the dress and behaviour of their live-in domestic help because of their concerns that the latter could be attractive to their husbands, that is, the male employers. A number of butch

women domestic workers have said that their female employers accept them, and that butch dressing and their lesbian identification have not posed problems with their employers. On the other hand, employment agencies who arrange interviews between employers and domestic workers, have frequently intervened with higher standards for how 'maids' should look to prospective employers and have sent some butch women home prior to their interviews, to 'tone down' or make adjustments to their dress or appearance, i.e. to be less masculine, before the meetings took place. There was one case of termination based on the identification of an Indonesian domestic worker as lesbian but according to the latter, she had been terminated not on account of her sexuality but because the 15-year old daughter of her employer claimed to have fallen in love with her. There are no laws in Hong Kong to prevent dismissal based on sexual orientation.

### **Boyfriends**

In 1986, French noted the cross-cultural romances between migrant Filipina domestic workers and Pakistani men in Hong Kong and Hawwa (2000a) investigated the increase in religious conversions among Filipina domestics to Islam in Hong Kong, among those who were involved with or married to Pakistani men. Less than 1 per cent of Hong Kong's population in 2000 are Muslim. A high proportion of converts to Islam in Hong Kong come from among FDWs and supports theories of marginality and exploitation as pivotal factors in decisions to convert). Ethnic minority groups like Pakistani men and Filipina women in Hong Kong, share similarities, e.g. low social position, a high proportion of single people among each group and marginality as sizeable minority groups (French 1986; Constable 1997b, Hawwa 2000).

There are about 25,000 Pakistanis in Hong Kong. Earlier generations from India had arrived from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century employed by the British colonial administration. (Hawwa 2000a: 47). But Hawwa (2000a: 53) found that even among those born in Hong Kong, there was

limited interaction with the Chinese population because of educational, cultural and language differences, and because Pakistanis were “considered economically poor” and “morally suspect”. Cultural and economic differences frame the interactions between minority groups as well as with the dominant group in Hong Kong. One of French’s respondents said (1986: 217), “We Pakistanis get on well with the Filipinas because we are all foreigners here in Hong Kong and the Chinese don’t like us”. But most Pakistani migrants are male and because of the Islamic system of *purdah* (seclusion) for women, and their inability to support their families in Hong Kong, means that male migrants although *single* in migration, “a lot...are actually married”. (Hawwa 2000a: 51).

Indonesian women migrants constitute the largest group of Muslims in Hong Kong and a recent survey showed that 45.5 per cent are able to speak English. (ISSHK, 2006). Perceived to be docile, chaste and respectful of male authority, they are popular with Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Nepali and African male migrants. The common element of Islam makes Pakistani men and Indonesian women in Hong Kong ‘natural’ partners because of what is assumed to be cultural affinity. (Hawwa, 2000a). For low-status and marginalised male migrants excluded from mainstream society by class, race, ethnicity and nationality, young migrant women from another developing country become sexual targets.

An Indonesian woman academic in Hong Kong described her ordeal, when being mistaken for an Indonesian domestic worker at the Department of Immigration, she was stalked by a Pakistani migrant worker who insisted on being friends with her. This, according to her, happens with unsurprising regularity. In another situation when I was walking out of Kowloon Park at dusk one weekend with two Indonesian migrant women in their early twenties, we were followed so closely by three African males that we felt their knees knock into the backs of our legs as we were hurrying out of the emptying park. They, too, had wanted to be ‘friends’ and

their aggression stopped only when I demanded their identification papers, to report them for sexual harassment. My respondents confirm that phenomena of this nature “happen all the time”.

For another minority group, Ullah and Hassan’s (2005) study of Bangladeshi men in Hong Kong explored the practical motivation for their romantic agendas. Labour export is a cornerstone in Bangladesh’s development (Chin, 2002 in Ullah and Hassan, 2005: 2) and while bilateral agreements facilitate labour export-import between Bangladesh and countries like Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and countries in the Middle East, no agreement exists with the government in Hong Kong. Bangladeshi migrants seeking work in developed countries use Hong Kong for transit because entry visas are not required on arrival. Given a two weeks’ visitors’ permit at the airport, some overstay and work as labourers without permits for two to ten years. Some pay up to US\$11,000 each for the opportunity of overseas employment..<sup>18</sup> (Ullah and Hassan 2005:2). Others use multiple passports to circumvent immigration rules. They congregate in or around Chung King Mansion in the Tsim Sha Tsui area of Kowloon where their contacts with Bangladeshi businesses, provide them with opportunities for work. (Ullah and Hassan, 2005).

The concentration of networks for Bangladeshi migrants, e.g. in Sham Shui Po, Tsim Sha Tsui and Central Star Ferry areas coincide with congregational spaces for Indonesian women on their rest days. Almost all fifty-six Bangladeshi male respondents, married and unmarried, in the above study admitted to having girlfriends in Hong Kong, and two-thirds have multiple girlfriends, mostly Filipinas and Indonesians. One respondent boasted that it was easy to have girlfriends in Hong Kong, up to ten if he wanted. According to him, there are ‘[h]undreds and thousands’ of Filipino, Indonesian and Thai young ladies in Hong Kong, and approaching them was a guarantee of getting them as girlfriends.

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<sup>18</sup> Seven hundred thousand Bangladesh taka is approximately US\$11,000.



Illegal Bangladeshi overstayers do not possess the Hong Kong Identity Card, a standard requirement, whether one were renting a house or getting a telephone connected. For 'invisible' transients, acquiring a girlfriend with the necessary papers provides them with immediate access. Foreign girlfriends on standard two-year domestic worker contracts, possess identity cards and they enable their boyfriends to rent apartments, open bank accounts, etc. necessities for living in Hong Kong. Ninety three per cent of Ullah and Hassan's (2005) respondents were on two-week tourist visas and seven per cent claimed not to have any visa or passport. More than half have been to Hong Kong between six to ten times. When their two-week visas expire, most go to neighbouring Macau or Shenzhen in China, and return immediately to Hong Kong on a different passport.<sup>19</sup> On an average each visited Shenzhen or Macao thirty times a year. (Ullah and Hassan, 2005).

Most Indonesian migrant women going to Hong Kong are single and considerably younger than those going to the Middle East. (Hugo, 2000). Many spend their rest days in cybercafes, 'chatting' with online Indonesian boyfriends whom they have never met, usually in South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. For those who go to the mosque or 'hang out' in public areas, like parks, the chances that they will meet both local and foreign men are very high. There is, however, a clear distinction between the profiles of foreign migrant men who are usually younger and physically more attractive than local men, although the latter are, possibly, more financially secure.

Lisha spent her rest days at the Star Ferry Terminal in Tsim Sha Tsui with a group of friends, which included migrant men of different nationalities. She was drugged one weekend and woke up in a rented motel room, raped and abandoned. She could recall the events of the day until an Indian friend had plied her with alcohol. She suspected that he had drugged and raped

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<sup>19</sup> If they return to Hong Kong with the same passport, they are given another seven days or sometimes denied admission. Each possessed an average of five passports (Ullah and Hassan 2005)

her but on awaking, she had more immediate worries. It was past midnight and she was late going back to her employer's house. She did not make a police report.

### *Love and illegality*

Indonesian migrant worker populations have the highest numbers of overstayers in East Asia. Indonesian women migrants overstay their visas for a number of reasons and being undocumented increases their vulnerability exploitation, but what most people do not realize is that love, which is generally perceived to be an empowering emotion, can be the motivation for overstaying, that result in conditions of increased risk to women's security.

Susan, 21, had been overstaying illegally for fourteen months because she was in love with her boyfriend, a 25-year old Pakistani permanent resident in Hong Kong. She could not find a new employer after the end of her contract and stayed beyond the permitted two-week period. Marriage was out of the question because of parental objections. Her boyfriend supported her while she was unemployed but after fourteen months, she was ready to surrender to the authorities because she wanted to marry and could not do so as an illegal overstayer. She was unable to return to Indonesia earlier as she had not felt able to trust her boyfriend to wait for her to return because had Susan returned home to find new employment in Hong Kong, she would have had to wait an indefinite period in a training centre in Indonesia, before she can return to Hong Kong. In the meantime, she had come of age and no longer needed her parents' approval to marry.

Nika moved into a shelter while awaiting the outcome of her claims from her employer. Her problems began when she fell in love. First, with a local Chinese man then simultaneously with a Pakistani migrant worker. When she became pregnant, she was not entirely sure who the father of her child was. She intended to, and later indeed, delivered in Hong Kong, certain that she could not go home or even tell her family about her predicament. She wanted to wait until

delivery to find out who the father of her baby was. If the baby's father was her Chinese boyfriend, she would make an application for child support but if the father turned out to be her Pakistani boyfriend, she felt that he could not and would not her or the child.

For twenty-five year old Santi, love proved even more complicated. While waiting for her financial claims against her former employer was being processed, she fell in love with a Pakistani man. When it became apparent that Santi was pregnant, her new employer terminated her contract. Things took a turn for the worse when her boyfriend, an overstayer, was arrested and imprisoned before being deported. To her, going back to Indonesia would have meant the end of their relationship. She overstayed so that she could visit him in prison. She ran out of money in the eighth month of pregnancy and began sleeping in Star Ferry Terminal and Kowloon Park. By which time, Santi felt that she could not go home as her pregnancy would bring shame to her family and she was concerned that she would not be able to support herself and her child in Indonesia.

These accounts are discussed among Indonesian women migrants in Hong Kong, repeated as a warning against transgression. One long time Indonesian migrant woman said she felt ashamed to see other Indonesian women in Hong Kong become pregnant through illicit sex, and despite her own sexual estrangement from her husband for more than twenty years [due his infidelity with her sister!], she felt that "my body belongs to my husband".

A common thread in the above accounts is that of unprotected sex where women who became sexually involved did not know or think that they could insist on contraception. By inference, a woman who asked that male contraception like condoms be used, indicated that she was sexually experienced and quite possibly, of loose morals. Among Indonesian women migrant workers interviewed, there was a presumption that in matters of sex, men should take the lead, espousing an understanding that is sorely out of touch with realities in migration.

At the same time, Indonesian women migrants are some of the harshest critics of those who transgress sexually. Some common criticisms of ‘fallen women’ in their midst are:

- ‘They even do sex freely’ (sic)
- ‘They have sex with Indians, Pakistanis, Chinese’ (sic)
- ‘Sex is their own business but this is the culture at Star Ferry Terminal’ (sic), and
- ‘They enjoy...they don’t protect themselves, they fall down from the sky [when they find themselves pregnant], they are not ready to be mothers’
- Single mothers in Indonesia, they are ‘very condemned for the whole life’

## **Babies**

ATKI’s 2001 and 2005 surveys of 1,085 and 2,777 Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong showed that a small number—32 and 34 of them respectively—had encountered sexual assault. While this chapter discusses migrant women’s voluntary decisions regarding sex, there are those who face sexual abuse and those who become pregnant by their employers or kin. (See below).

Mala was repeatedly raped by her employer and her employment was terminated when she became pregnant. She was indebted to her agent and too terrified of her employer to report her rape. In the eyes of the law, there was no violation. She delivered in Hong Kong and attempted to lodge a report for child support when her baby was born. The attempt was unsuccessful because her employer moved to new premises and became un-contactable. In cases where the victims are too terrified or ignorant to know how to proceed in collecting evidence of sexual abuse, police reports are either not made, or if they are, these seldom stand up to standards necessary for prosecution.

Children born to foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong are issued visitors' visas, which allow them to stay for a limited time after which they are sent home to their mothers' country. Where employers intervene giving permission allowing a child to remain with its mother, the child has to leave when its visitor's pass expires. Being born in Hong Kong does not give them the right of residence but for those who cannot be returned to Indonesia, another option is that of adoption. Indonesian women are, for various reasons, reluctant to consider the termination of unwanted pregnancies via abortion, and where the child is born, they are as reluctant to consider adoption. There are two exceptions to the rules of residence for babies conceived out of wedlock. One, if the child's father is a Hong Kong permanent resident and recognizes the child as his, and two, if the child is put up for adoption and adopted by a permanent resident. However, if a child is adopted by a parent of foreign origin, it follows its adoptive parent's nationality. The advantage of being recognized by a parent who is a Hong Kong permanent resident confers on the child the right to permanent residence when s/he reaches the age of eighteen. However, simply by being born in Hong Kong confers no automatic rights of residence and they cannot acquire any rights, e.g. naturalized permanent residency, the right to vote or eligibility for public housing.

Under the adoption policies of the Hong Kong Social Welfare Department in the placement of children, an adoptive family of some cultural similarity is preferred but in the case of Indonesian-Pakistani/Nepali babies for example, a foreign couple may be considered if Asian parents cannot be found, as in the following account. When Edward was born to his Indonesian mother in a public hospital in Hong Kong in 2002, she pinned a letter to him before she left the hospital, one step ahead of the police who would have apprehend her for overstaying her visa. In her letter, she explained that she had to give him up because the situation was not ideal for her or his Nepali father, and that neither parent could afford to bring him up. Edward was adopted by a

Euro-American couple in Hong Kong, who have two children of their own and while his papers are being processed for him to become an American citizen, his adoptive parent being permanent resident in Hong Kong mean that Edward can exercise his rights for the same when he reaches eighteen.

According to Ms Li, a lawyer, who has helped processed about two hundred private adoptions for foreign couples in Hong Kong over a decade, born to Filipina domestics, biological mothers are usually illegal overstayers and their boyfriends leave them when the women become pregnant. If they possessed a Hong Kong identity card, they can admit themselves into public hospitals to deliver for a fee of about HK\$200 (US\$26) without being discovered because the hospitals' databases are not linked to other government departments, i.e. the Immigration Department. For Edward's mother, it is likely that his mother did not have a valid identity card and in which case, the hospital authorities would have informed the police.

In a continuation of Mala's story (from above), she had no choice but to return home, without financial assistance, with her two-year old son when she failed to find his father and the case for the child's financial support failed. As for Nika (above), when her son was born in Hong Kong, she realized that his father was her Pakistani boyfriend. He refused to take her calls and finally, changed his mobile phone number. As she could not return to her family, her friends in Hong Kong pooled funds for her and her child to live for a year in Jakarta, Indonesia. When all options ran out, she confessed to her mother who forgave her and asked that her grandson be brought home.

For another reluctant mother, Lisha (above) who was drugged and raped on her rest day, she too became pregnant and delivered in Hong Kong. In her case, she admitted herself into the hospital but as soon as the baby was born, she ran away, hoping that it would not be traced to her. When the police found her, through her hospital admission record, she was given the choice

of being charged for abandonment or to take her baby back. She opted for the latter after much persuasion and later returned to Indonesia with her child.

When illegal status coincide with pregnancy, there are more profound consequences. After Santi (see, above) delivered in Hong Kong she was arrested as an illegal migrant, and both mother and child were sent to prison before being repatriated to Indonesia. For Santi who intended to return to work in Hong Kong, she will not be permitted entry using the same passport and she will inevitably return to Hong Kong on a falsified travel document, which means that she will again be living in fear of apprehension.<sup>20</sup> (Asia Pulse, 24 January 2006). In another case, Ronnie, an overstayer who was raising her two-year old in Hong Kong, she decided to surrender to the authorities for the sake of her daughter. Her Nigerian boyfriend left for work in Japan soon after their daughter was born and it was Ronnie who decided to return to Indonesia when her daughter reached school going age so that the latter could have access to formal education.

There are, however, accounts of marriages between Indonesian women migrants and local men that seem to work despite socio-cultural differences. (See below). They also have relationships with foreign Caucasian men working or passing through Hong Kong. In one unhappy example, Yasmin met her English boyfriend when she was a volunteer in a migrant labour organisation. When she became pregnant, he insisted that she undergo an abortion, and left her when she refused on religious grounds. Yasmin was not welcomed home when she told her mother of her pregnancy but her mother changed her mind later when Yasmin had to leave again to work in Hong Kong. Yasmin was coached by her recruitment agency to lie about her past experiences to her new employer, or be 'unemployable'.

Yasmin returned to Hong Kong with a clean slate as 'someone else' but this prevented her from claiming for child support from her ex-boyfriend who was an English teacher and later

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<sup>20</sup> Migrant workers traveling on falsified documents are exploited by agents who are aware that these migrants cannot report abuses without being discovered for traveling with falsified travel documents.

a student in Hong Kong. This is because such an application would require her employer's address. If her employer found out that she had lied about her background, she could be sacked and as she was supporting her mother and child in Indonesia, it was a risk she could ill-afford. Without supplying her employer's address, there was no way in which she could make claims for her child's upkeep. As she later discovered, her ex-boyfriend had had a child with a prior girlfriend, a Filipina domestic worker in Hong Kong, and whom he refused support as well.

To non-urbanites, city living is often imagined as exciting and this is even more so for young and inexperienced women testing the limits of their independence in a foreign country. Suyat, a 17 year old Indonesian domestic worker met a New Zealander tourist in a park on her rest day. Despite the language barrier—he spoke only English while Suyat spoke Indonesian and Cantonese—he had invited her to his hotel where they had sexual intercourse within hours of their meeting. Suyat was a virgin but she said that, it was not a case of rape because she had found him highly attractive and she had been carried away. No contraception was used nor other methods of safe sex were practiced.

In another case, Ben, a 30-year old German postgraduate student studying in Hong Kong discussing his sexual predilections with his friends, told them that he would always chose FDWs for sexual encounters because, as a “white man”, he was extremely popular with them. Moreover, as they all had without exception, one rest day a week he could “have” a different woman for each day of the week if he so wished.<sup>21</sup>

When asked in a personal interview about the lack of information and access for women migrants with regards to contraception and safe sex, the Indonesian Consul General in Hong Kong replied that such information could be made available for Indonesian women only with the

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<sup>21</sup> Sunday is generally the rest day for foreign domestic workers, but this is negotiable between employer-employee and they often take other days off in the week if they are required to work on Sundays. Ben's account was related to me by his close friend.



approval of the *Imam* (Islamic leader) in Indonesia. There is no law, however, in Indonesia that requires women's sexual knowledge to be policed in this way, and it is often privileged male opinion, that in reality, circumscribe women's lives.

## **Conclusion**

In Indonesia, culture determines a woman's role and place and in the words of a female Indonesian migrant worker, "women are not treated equally, they are required to do the cooking and have babies". In her understanding of gender relations between men and women, while men want sex, it is women who have to attend to matters of birth control; but when a husband wants a child, his wife has to produce one. Gender imbalances are built into the roles that men and women occupy in Indonesia's nationalist project and while some migrant women workers do come to varying levels of awareness about its disparity, what is more common is for them to confront these imbalances as they occur in their personal lives in labour migration where they adopt one of a number of strategies. As illustrated above, some attempts backfire and instead of empowerment, women's contingency efforts like in overstaying their permitted stay can lead to greater dangers to themselves.

For lesbian women, same-sex relationships became not just a mark of modernity among them but a safety valve for their needs and emotions in unstable and unsafe spaces in migration. While young, single women may wish for adventure and new experiences, they are also terrified of breaching the cultural rules that apply to women's chastity in Indonesia. Hence, issues at the heart of identity politics and discourses of power clash for women who are dislocated in temporary migration and yet situated in societal systems circumscribed by dominant values and ideologies. By enacting individual agencies, they reproduce and also challenge the sedimented realities of their lives, redraw cultural boundaries and re-position themselves in conditions of individual and social change. While experiences in labour migration can be potentially liberating

for rural women, these also pose a minefield for Indonesian migrant women in negotiating their lives in foreign lands.

Ideological contradictions pervade perspectives of Indonesian women in their many roles, as wives, mothers, unwed daughters, labour migrants, and so forth, and these inform the practical arrangements that supply Indonesian women to international labour markets. Hence, although pre-departure and overseas services provided to Indonesian migrant women by public and private institutions emphasize ‘protection’, they all fall short of meeting migrant women’s real needs. Many pitfalls facing them in their sexual behavior and choices, stem from ignorance that could be addressed by systematic information dissemination. Support services, for example, counseling, which are almost non-existent except for sporadic NGO interventions during migration can alleviate the consequences of youthful misadventures, e.g. unwanted pregnancies, botched abortions and sexually transmitted diseases.

The Indonesian cultural regime is a masculine fantasy based on the construction of women’s sexual innocence that bolster notions of men as the protectors and initiators of women’s sexuality that dovetails with nationalist agendas for development. Women’s needs as citizens are denied in public discourse. Problems of access to information and support are compounded for poor women migrant workers and these can only be understood within the framework of the patriarchal bias in nationalistic ideology that shapes how women’s bodies are defined in Indonesia. Even as some may argue that legal reforms on divorce and the relatively sympathetic treatment of women’s concerns in the religious courts in Indonesia are happening, (Lev, 1996: 163, 194) the complexities involved in interpretations and enforcement of the law, more often than not, result in support for androcentric ideologies of women’s place and role in practice (Badlishah 2003), that undermine women’s human rights in Indonesia.

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