

Spaces of Protest: Workers' Narratives from Sulawesi and Java, Indonesia

Research >
Indonesia

In the context of a project on gender and labour migration that began in 1995 in West Java and South Sulawesi, in-depth interviews with migrant factory workers have increasingly raised the issues of women's labour rights, their interest in labour activism, and the inseparability of their spatial mobility experiences from the challenges they confront as workers. Two women workers' narratives in particular capture the struggles central to understanding the regional distinctions in gender and labour issues. Both narratives reveal the gender- and place-specific challenges facing labour activists and factory workers as these play out across the scales of the body, the household, the region, the nation-state, and the international political economy.¹ While space constraints preclude a full reading of the rich narratives themselves, the following brief discussion reveals some ways in which these two women's individual experiences give voice to commonly neglected dimensions of regionally differentiated gendered migration and labour dynamics.

By Rachel Silvey

Mina's narrative raises themes common to many migrant workers in West Java. She was born and raised outside of Yogyakarta and is the youngest daughter in a family of six children; she now works in a footwear factory in Cicalong, approximately one hour southeast of Bandung.² It is the third factory in which she has worked since she first arrived three years ago. After finishing junior high school, she wanted to leave her village, where there were few employment options other than local trade activities and rice farming, neither of which appealed to her. She did not have plans to marry soon after school, as her older brothers and sisters had done, and at 16 years old, neither she nor her parents felt that she should continue to depend on the family's income for her basic needs. Many of her peers, both male and female, had moved away to work in factories, and this seemed to Mina to be a way, among the very limited options, to improve her lot in life and gain some new experience. So, when her aunt and uncle came home to visit Central Java from Bandung, she decided to return with

them to West Java and stay until she found a job and a place to live.

Mina's strong social networks linking her family members from Central Java to those in West Java distinguish her experience from that of most migrant women workers in South Sulawesi, where women's labour migration and participation in factory work is more limited.

Risa, who was born in Jenepono, approximately four hours from Ujung Pandang in South Sulawesi, had run away from an arranged marriage. She had in common with many of the migrant women workers in Sulawesi, a sense that her mobility was stigmatized, whereas in West Java, most women felt that their migration was a normal, indeed often-undertaken activity with the support and consent of family members. This difference came through in many of the narratives, showing its importance in shaping women's subjective, place-based experiences of gendered mobility. Census data have determined that young women's mobility is more widespread in Java than in Sulawesi. Mina and Risa's narratives extend the census findings by illustrating the ways in which

the normalization of single women's mobility in West Java and the continued widespread stigmatization of it in Sulawesi distinguishes women's experiences of migration and work at the scales of the region and the household.

The basic differences in women's migration between the two regions have implications for labour organizing as well. Both Mina and Risa's employers have underpaid and overworked them, as is commonplace among factory management throughout Indonesia. But Mina, with greater support from local NGO activists and in a context within which women's labour itself is not stigmatized, has responded by becoming a labour activist herself. By contrast, Risa, despite facing similar abuses, has kept her struggles largely to herself. In addition, the village heads of their communities have monitored their activities in different ways. In West Java, the village head collaborates in the surveillance activities of the factory management, letting Mina know that she will be punished if she is found to be active in labour organizing work in the village. By contrast, in South Sulawesi, Risa's village head is more concerned about

monitoring young women's sexual behaviour. While these two forms of surveillance can be understood to support similar, national- and international-scale forms of gendered social control, they help explain why Risa's narrative refers more to questions of sexual morality, while Mina's refers more to moral concerns about labour policy. Interviews with the two women flesh out their particular experiences of the broader distinctions between the two workers' local communities.

Mina and Risa's place-based experiences of migration are not representative for the experiences of all women workers in the two regions. Rather, their experiences provide insight into the ways that women's subordination in the workplace is intimately interwoven with women's marginalization across spaces and spatial scales. There is rich literature that examines the ways in which the global economy relies on and contributes to gendered inequalities in the labour market, and research on Indonesia has provided insight into the complexities of the New Order state in determining gendered structures of inequality and perpetuating violence

against women. There are also in-depth studies of the gendered division of labour and resources within households, and this research develops analytical linkages between domestic negotiations and the gendered dynamics of factory employment. But further ethnographic work can extend these foundational findings to develop deeper understanding of the relationships between the local gendered struggles of women such as Mina and Risa and the broader-scale processes that shape the possibilities open to them. Situating women's stories in the context of an inter-scalar political-economic analysis can contribute to the goal of understanding gender in multiple spaces and across scales as a crucial pivot around which geographic distinctions in workers' agency is organized. <

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- 2 In order to protect respondent confidentiality, all names and place-names have been changed, except the large cities mentioned to provide a sense of the geographic context.