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

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 Cicalang, approximately one hour southeast of Bandung. It is the third factory in which she has worked since she first arrived three years ago. After finishing senior high school, she wanted to leave home to work. While she looked for jobs, 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 leave her family 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 experiences. 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 link- ing her family members from Central Java to those in West Java distinguish her experience from that of most migrant workers in South Sulawesi, where women’s labour migration and participation in factory work is more limited. Risa, who was born in Jeneponto, approximately four hours from Ujung Pandang in South Sulawesi, had run away from home at age 13. She had in common with many of the migrant women workers in Sulawesi, a sense that her mobility was stigmatized, whereas at West Java, most women felt that their migration was a normal, indeed often undertaken activity with the support of the family and consent of female family members. This difference came through in many of the narratives, showing its importance in shaping women’s subjective, place-based experiences of migration. 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 over- worked 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 sup- port 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. Intervies with the two women and their family members provide the experiences of the broader distinctions between the two workers’ local communities.

Mina and Risa’s place-based experiences of migration are not representa- tive of the experiences of all women in the two regions. Rather, their experiences provide insight into the ways that women’s subordination in the workplace is intimately inter- woven 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 Indonesian migration 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 ana- lytical linkages between domestic negoti- ations and the gendered dynamics of factory employment. But further ethnograph- ic work can extend these founda- tional findings to develop deeper understand- ing of the relationships between the two workers’ stories in the context of an inter-scale political-economic analysis can contribute to the goal of under- standing gender in multiple spaces and across scales as a crucial pivot around which geographic distinctions in work- ers’ agency is organized.

By Rachel Silvey

Meanwhile, the bibliographic network shows a gradual development and consolidation, e.g. through a new office in India represented by the Indonesia Institute of Sciences (IIS), Jakarta. Establishing an office for ABIA in Jakarta under the guidance of professor Sedyawati was also discussed. With a firm foothold in Indonesia, the database, organisation and arts in the ABIA database, already strong from the very early days of the project onwards, will thus be guaranteed.

The ABIA project is eager to extend its bibliographic coverage to countries of South and Southeast Asia of which Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and South Sulawesi, in-depth interviews with migrant factory workers have increasingly revealed the richness of spatial mobility experiences of 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. 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.

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