

## Conference Paper

# The Meaning of Housework (Domestic Sector) for the Left-Behind Husbands of Indonesian Female Migrant Workers in Arjowilangun Village, Kalipare District, Malang Regency

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## Abstract

The narrowing domestic opportunities for employment n has led many Indonesian people of working age become migrant workers overseas. The left-behind husbands of female migrant workers must play a double role as both head and homemaker in the family. This research considers the underlying social context and the resultant meaning of housework for husbands. The analysis design was based on the phenomenological perspective introduced by Alfred Schutz. The results showed that the female population in the observed village decided to follow the flux of Indonesian workers migrating abroad, mostly to Hong Kong and Taiwan. Relying on the pay cut scheme for their departure to the destination countries, they were able to earn up to IDR 7 million per month (nearly USD 500). The husbands left-behind, with an age range of 31 to 57 years, accepted the responsibility of doing housework or working in the domestic sector because of economic constraint (*'because motive'*) and the high income earned by their wives (*'in-order-to motive'*). They interpreted housework as either (1) invisible underemployment or (2) main job.

**Keywords:** Meaning, Husband, Indonesian Female Migrant Workers, Household

## 1. Introduction

A large number of women working abroad is closely connected to the employment opportunities in the domestic sector (household) that do not set many skill requirements. Focusing on Indonesian's labor migration system, Hugo (1978) claims that women migration affects the left-behind family. He further adds that the remittances sent by these women significantly contribute to the economic and regional development in East Flores.

When women work abroad, the husbands' role in the households is doubled, namely as a head and a homemaker. Analyzing the shifting patterns of gender relations in

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Published: 29 July 2020

Publishing services provided by  
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the WCGS Conference Committee.



migrant families, Daulay and Susilo (2001), Hengyu *et al* (2020) conclude that at the beginning the decision makers in these families are dominantly male. The economic base of female migrant workers is a source of strength in negotiating gender relations. In other words, the female migrant workers now have enough power to make decisions concerning the family's interest. Housework, such as cooking and clothes washing, has now become the duty of the husbands. It even includes work that is not in the least light, namely taking care of the children. The husbands must be able to establish closer relationship with children just as how the children felt it with their mothers.

Many husbands allow their wives to work abroad because of many factors, especially the wider employment opportunities in destination countries for females rather than for males. According to Susilo (2012) and Maite (2019) some destination countries such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Saudi Arabia need more female labor force participation in the domestic sector. The data recorded by the office of the observed village (i.e., Arjowilangun, Indonesia) also support this assertion, i.e., that most migrant workers in the village are female who work in Taiwan and Hong Kong (Kantor Desa Arjowilangun, 2014). Taiwan and Hong Kong are the two most selected destination countries by female workers because both of them have higher standard of wage than Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Brunei Darussalam, and Singapore. Besides, these two countries offer protection for women and foreign workers.

High mobility of female labors who work overseas is recognized not only as a solution to the labor problems and a contribution to the increased foreign exchange in Indonesia but also particularly as an improvement to the fortune and future of the migrant workers themselves and their households (Susilo, 2013). In the country of origin (i.e., Arjowilangun Village, Indonesia), the limited job opportunities and extremely low wages encourage human resources to pursue works in the domestic sector. According to the left-behind husbands, the pulling factor of playing a role as a homemaker is the amount of remittance. Various contexts underly how they perceive the housework, namely the understanding of housework itself, mindset (*related to the pattern of thinking*) of the migrant workers (*'self'*), and the *'in-order-to motive'* and *'because motive'*. To understand what domestic sector work means for the husbands, this research used a phenomenological perspective, which is distinguishable from positivistic and rationalistic approaches (Magnus, 2016).

In the application of phenomenological perspectives, researchers obtain knowledge through a set of process, i.e., observation, data acquisition, analysis, and inference or conclusion drawing, that is inseparable from moral views. The phenomenological perspective has advantages in assessing the meaning of domestic sector work for the

husbands as subjective reality. It requires some interpretations before finally entering the world of meaning (*understanding*) and the world of the research subjects' concept (Abayomi, 2017).

The concept of phenomenology was first developed by Edmund Husserl, followed by the emergence of phenomenological perspectives by Alfred Schutz and Peter L. Berger (Ritzer, 1996). Among the three approaches, the Alfred Schutz's is the most suitable for the focus of research on the meaning of domestic sector work for husbands because it develops under the assumption that understanding is inseparable from '*because motives*' and '*in-order-to motives*'. This research focuses on the following problems: (1) how the social context of the left-behind husbands shapes their understanding of their role as domestic workers and (2) the meaning of housework for husbands.

## 2. Method

This study used a phenomenological perspective developed by Alfred Schutz with the paradigm of social definition oriented to micro studies concerning on intersubjective world in everyday life. Understanding (*the world of the meaning*) is attributable to '*because motives*' and '*in-order-to motives*'. According to Alfred Schutz, it is inseparable from individual social context ('*because motives*'). The research subjects were all husbands of Indonesian female migrant workers in the Arjowilangun Village, Malang Regency, Indonesia. The number of subjects was determined when the subject's answers achieved saturation. The information was acquired from the subject using the participatory observation method and in-depth interviews. The stages of the research were as follows: (1) research preparation, (2) field research, and (3) data analysis (data reduction, data display, and verification).

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Social Context

Social context is considered a factor that forces Indonesian labor to work abroad. Based on Alfred Schutz's phenomenology, the study of meaning is inseparable from social context because it shapes both '*because motives*' and '*in-order-to motives*'. This phenomenology emphasizes the need for tracing social context since the '*because motives*' of an individual are strongly related to his or her past. Detailed information about the social context of the research subjects is described below.

The research location (i.e., Arjowilangun Village) is a dry area where most of the agricultural land can only be harvested once a year. It is traversed by two rivers that have been developed into a technical irrigation system. Unfortunately, both rivers are located lower than the agricultural field and, therefore, cannot flow into the paddy fields. As a result, the agricultural livelihoods, particularly the ones depending on dryland agricultural practices, cannot sufficiently meet the economic needs of their households.

Large families, consisting of averagely five members, construct the social context of the farmer population in the village. In this situation, the children tend to have a low education level. The highest education of the research subjects (left-behind husbands) was senior high school, and the latest education of many subjects was elementary school. Two of the subjects, namely SN and MS, even stopped going to school after the second grade of elementary school. The unfavorable conditions of agricultural land, the large number of family members, and the low level of education are among the '*because motives*' to why the subjects allow their wives to pursue manual works abroad while they stay at home and be responsible for household chores, such as cooking, house cleaning, laundry, and grocery shopping.

### 3.2. Husbands' Understanding of Housework

The domestic work performed by husbands whose wives work abroad as migrant labors had a lot of meaning. Almost every subject had a different understanding regarding this work. To comprehend it, this research employed phenomenological perspective analysis. Based on the Alfred Schutz's phenomenological approach, the actions of Indonesian migrant workers were based on several mindsets, '*because motives*', and '*in-order-to motives*'; and induced by different situations and conditions. Referring to the perspective of Alfred Schutz's phenomenology, the subjects' interpretation of remittance formed a pattern of understanding: housework was interpreted as (a) invisible underemployment and (b) the main job.

#### 3.2.1. The meaning of housework as an invisible underemployment

Understanding domestic work as invisible underemployment means that the left-behind husbands perceive housework as a time- and an energy-consuming job that produces insufficient or even no money to meet their daily needs. Since their income could not meet the need of the families, hiring people for doing the housework was unthinkable. Therefore, they were willing to accept this housework, particularly because their wives'

occupation could fulfill the daily needs of their households. Such a willingness was constructed by a thought that if they worked in the village, they would not be able to provide for the family. It was motivated (social context) by their economically disadvantaged situations and an '*in-order-to motive*', namely the amount of income earned by their wives. Several subjects, including SN, expressed the same understanding.

"... Acting as a homemaker, I have a big responsibility. I have to get up early every morning. After the dawn prayer, I prepare the breakfast for my children. When they are at school, I cook once for lunch and dinner and then wash the clothes. Every day, after I finish with housework, I do my job as a construction worker. However, I have not done any constructions for the past two weeks because no one asked me to build a house (order). If no one orders [my service], then I go to the river and fish. If my catch is too little to sell, then I cook it and serve it as a side dish for dinner. The downside is [I feel] a lot of distress, especially with endless housework, such as [I have to] think about the dish for tomorrow. [I feel] so lonely, I sleep alone and have no friend to discuss the household. The upside is when I cannot earn any money, the remittance from my wife who works overseas can fulfill the family's needs ..."  
(Interview, September 16, 2019)

Based on the above statement, housework, which is often underestimated by the male spouse, turns out to be exhausting. SN further added that the people in his neighborhood had low income, only IDR 500,000 per month (USD 35). With this income, they cannot provide for the family. According to SN, housework took almost a full day to finish, but it did not contribute to his monthly income. In this case, the domestic work was understood as invisible underemployment. The subjects' effort to complete household chores was caused by an '*in order motive*', namely allowing the wives to work abroad as migrant labors with the hope that it could improve the economic welfare of the family. It was also motivated by a '*because motive*', i.e., that the families used to lack sufficient economic resources before the wives worked abroad. SN and his family had to fulfill their basic or primary needs, such as food, drinking water, and clothes. They also needed to spend money for their secondary needs, such as money contribution or present when attending neighbors' or relatives' invitations to celebratory events, education fees and school supplies, medical costs, and debt payment. The money to pay all of these needs came from the wife's income.

Such understanding is in line with Alfred Shutz's statement that in phenomenology, the world of understanding is inseparable from '*because motive*' and '*in-order-to motive*'.

The other subjects, namely SR, SB, AB, AS, RS, and JM, also saw housework as invisible underemployment.

### 3.2.2. The meaning of housework as the main job

Understanding domestic work as a main job means that the left-behind husbands consider housework as their priority duty, or that they return to their day-to-day job only after it is completed. The subjects felt comfortable with this circumstance because the money sent from their wives who worked abroad as migrant labors fulfilled the family's daily needs. Considering domestic work as a main job also means that housework, which is used to be the primary task of the wives before working abroad, takes priority over the occupation of the left-behind husbands. A subject, AB, supported this statement. AB was born in 1976 in Blitar District, Indonesia. He lived in a family of migrant workers because his nine (9) younger and older brothers were migrant labors, while his other four siblings were female. AB further revealed that:

"My morning routine is to get up early and wake my 10-year-old daughter up after the dawn prayer. I make breakfast, dress her in school uniform, and then take her to school. Afterward, I clean the house and wash the clothes. After I finish the housework, I prepare myself for work. I work in the village hall as a *modin* (i.e., a religious functionary) for my neighborhood. As a father and mother for my daughter, I always pick her up from school at noon. I prepare for lunch and wait on her side until she falls asleep. Then, at 2 p.m., I leave the house to find grass. There is almost nothing to like when acting as a homemaker. Is there any pleasure of being left by a wife for working abroad? It is a hassle because all I have to do is doing household chores. But, what can I do? Even if I forbade my wife from pursuing work overseas, she would strictly remain in her position and reason that it was for the future of our child and a better economic situation. What I like from this condition is that my wife's income can pay for most of the household needs ..." (Interview, September 9, 2019)

Based on the above statement, domestic work becomes the obligation of the left-behind husbands when the wives have to earn money abroad as migrant workers. AB understood that his wife's decision solely aimed to improve the economic life of the family. He also believed that his day-to-day work as a homemaker was exhausting and unprofitable. His work as a *modin* did not pay much; therefore, he did the work only after when the household chores were completed. His role as a homemaker was more

important, particularly because the remittances were far greater than the money he could earn.

Aside from AB, another subject, HK also perceived housework as his main job. HK was born in 1969 in Blitar District, Indonesia. HK explained that:

”... My daily routine is taking care of two children. My first daughter is now in the second grade of junior high school, while her younger brother is in the fourth grade of elementary school. Just like the other families, every morning, I have to cook—prepare for breakfast, and wake my children up. When they are at school, I am preoccupied with housework, such as washing the clothes, cleaning the house, and cooking for lunch and dinner. After the housework is completed, and if I receive work order, I do my job as a construction worker. *Alhamdulillah* (i.e., all praise is due to God), since last month, I have been working on a house owned by Mr. HJ. The work routine is exhausting, but I have to continue [living like this] because of the agreement I made with my wife before her departure to other countries ...” (Interview September 13, 2019)

Based on the above statement, the subject continually prioritizes domestic work as his main job. He carried out his profession as a construction worker only when the housework was completed. This statement raises a ‘*because motive*’, namely, he allowed his wife to work abroad because his income as a construction worker could not pay for the daily needs let alone establish a savings plan. It also contains an ‘*in order motive*’, namely, he was willing to play the role of a homemaker with the hope that his wife’s work overseas could pay for house repair and fulfill the economic needs of the family. The left-behind husbands’ understanding of housework is the consequence of the ‘*because motive*’, i.e., poverty in the country of origin, and the ‘*in-order-to motive*’, i.e., the large amount of income earned by the wives who work abroad as migrant labors. This finding is in line with Alfred Schutz’s phenomenology: that the world of meaning is strongly related to ‘*because motive*’ and ‘*in-order-to motive*’. The husbands’ interpretation of housework in this study is in line with Susilo (2014), which states that the meaning of remittance for Indonesian migrant workers is influenced by both ‘*because motive*’ and ‘*in-order-to motive*’.

## 4. Conclusion

The context behind the phenomenon in the study area (i.e., Arjowilangun Village) develops from dry land with low productivity that cannot help the dependent families to meet their economic needs. Moreover, the farmer households have many members, and this circumstance is mostly associated with low education level. Many subjects (left-behind husbands) are elementary school graduates. This context is one of the reasons ('*because motive*') why the subjects allow their wives to pursue manual work overseas, i.e., an occupation that offers high income ('*in-order-to motive*'), and accept the obligation to do household chores every day. Referring to the perspective of Alfred Schutz's phenomenology, the subjects' interpretation of remittance forms a pattern of understanding, namely housework as either (a) invisible underemployment or (b) the main job of the left-behind husbands.

## Acknowledgment

This research was funded by the BLU FIS UM Malang in 2019. Authors would like to convey their gratitude to Lemlit UM Malang, Indonesia.

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