



Who are the most vulnerable prospective migrants?

Understanding risk factors
for Indonesians intending to migrate

May 2019

SEEFAR

OUR VISION

is for a world in which vulnerable people have more opportunities to advance themselves.

THE PURPOSE

of our social enterprise is to work with those people to build a better future.

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Introduction

Modern slavery¹ is a global issue deeply connected to labour migration. Migrants and those pursuing work abroad are often at risk of financial, emotional and physical exploitation. Victims of modern slavery cite experiences of physical and sexual abuse, harsh working conditions, restriction of movement, wage theft and debt bondage, among other challenges.²

Overseas domestic workers are particularly vulnerable because they live and work in private households. Many are isolated from the outside world and cannot access support or justice systems. Few victims of modern slavery escape unscathed: these experiences have long-lasting psychological, social and economic impacts that can linger well after return.

Indonesian domestic workers face acute risks early on

An estimated 4.5 million Indonesians work abroad in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. Approximately 1.9 million Indonesian migrant workers are undocumented and the majority are women.³



¹ The term 'modern slavery' is used as an umbrella term that includes human trafficking and forced labour, consistent with the ILO definition (International Labour Organization, 2018).

² US Department of State. "Trafficking in Persons Report."

³ Ibid. See also: World Bank Group, "Indonesia's Global Workers: Juggling Opportunities & Risks."

For these migrant women, vulnerability to exploitation begins at the earliest stages of migration planning. Many migrants have low levels of knowledge about key aspects of migration, such as legal rights, costs or risks abroad.⁴ Labour recruiters and brokers often exploit prospective migrants' knowledge gaps by charging high recruitment fees, withholding passports or even selling non-existent jobs.⁵ Indonesian gender dynamics, such as financial dependence on a male relative, or the threat of gender-based violence may amplify female vulnerability.

New research needed to profile vulnerability

While these challenges are well-documented, less is known about how certain risk factors may increase the need for protection.⁶ Programmes aimed at reducing exploitation in the pre-departure phase are often area-based (i.e. applied to a particular geography) rather than tailored to reach the most vulnerable potential migrants.

This issue brief aims to fill this gap using new evidence from Seefar's 2018 strategic communication campaign in Indonesia. The campaign targeted Indonesian women intending to work abroad as domestic workers.⁷ The project aimed to increase beneficiaries' knowledge and awareness to improve migration decision-making and reduce the risk of exploitation.

This report examines data from 985 Indonesian prospective migrants who took part in the campaign. The data includes demographic characteristics, migration plans and migration knowledge levels. Findings are not representative (or causal in nature) but rather are intended to highlight emerging risk factors and identify key questions for future research to explore.

⁴ Seefar, "Large Scale Modern Slavery Research."

⁵ Rahayu, "View of Indonesian Migrant Worker Policies and the Vulnerability of Women Migrant Workers to Becoming Trafficking Victims"; Spaan and van Naerssen, "Migration Decision-Making and Migration Industry in the Indonesia-Malaysia Corridor."

⁶ Seefar, "Large Scale Modern Slavery Research."

⁷ The intervention targeted women interested in working as an overseas domestic worker in Cirebon and Subang in West Java and Cilacap in East Java. All beneficiaries were at least 15 years old. To identify beneficiaries convenience and snowball sampling approaches were used by local facilitators.

What is vulnerability?

Before departure, information imbalances are primary drivers of vulnerability to harm and exploitation.⁸ Prospective migrants are often unaware of key elements of migratory pathways including:⁹

- Costs and debt
- Legal rights at home and abroad
- Migration risks and realities
- Pre-departure requirements
- Working conditions abroad

While prospective migrants may receive information about migration from a variety of sources (e.g. official channels, social media and television), they generally trust and rely on their personal networks (e.g. family and friends) to inform their decision-making. This information may be inaccurate or incomplete (particularly when delivered by migration recruiters or brokers) and lead to suboptimal decision-making at the earliest stages of migration planning.¹⁰ Recruiters further exploit information imbalances through strong local networks and offering money to prospective migrants before departure.¹¹

Though government-mandated pre-departure training aims to mitigate information imbalances, this training is often a ‘check-the-box’ exercise that is too short (often just one day) and does not adequately cover migrant rights and risks overseas.¹² Some training may skirt key issues or only focus on job-related skills instead of protection abroad.¹³ A lack of government enforcement can empower malicious migration actors.¹⁴

Consequently, **vulnerability to exploitation can be defined as a lack of accurate knowledge** rather than other definitions that merely report on incidents of harm. This suggests that measuring knowledge during

⁸ Seefar, “Large Scale Modern Slavery Research”; Seefar, “Reluctant Journeys: Why Afghans Migrate Irregularly to Europe.”

⁹ Kavar, “Gender and Migration.”

¹⁰ Spaan and van Naerssen, “Migration Decision-Making and Migration Industry in the Indonesia–Malaysia Corridor”; Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh, “Opening the Black Box of Migration”; Killias, “The Politics of Bondage in the Recruitment, Training and Placement of Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers.”

¹¹ Andrevski and Lyneham, “Experiences of Exploitation and Human Trafficking among a Sample of Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers”; Halabi, “Contract Enslavement of Female Migrant Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates”; International Organization for Migration, “Labor Migration from Indonesia: An Overview of Indonesian Migration to Selected Destinations in Asia and the Middle East.”

¹² Surtees, “Female Migration and Trafficking in Women.”

¹³ World Bank Group, “Indonesia’s Global Workers: Juggling Opportunities & Risks.”

¹⁴ Killias, “The Politics of Bondage in the Recruitment, Training and Placement of Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers”; Palmer and Antje, “Indonesia.”

the pre-departure stage can help identify prospective migrants who are particularly at risk of exploitation. It also permits an analysis of the characteristics of prospective migrants who display higher or lower levels of relevant knowledge, which is highly relevant to programme design.

Who are the most vulnerable?

Following this approach, Seefar used hierarchical regressions to uncover key relationships in its data.¹⁵ It discovered that certain demographic and migration characteristics are closely related to markers of vulnerability, including migration knowledge and perceptions of migration risks. These characteristics are discussed below and hold important implications for vulnerability reduction programming in Indonesia.

Demographic characteristics



Age

Children comprise a disproportionately high percentage of trafficking victims in Indonesia, with the largest age category of victims being 8-24 years old (34%).¹⁶ Other research has also found younger first-time migrants to be overconfident about migration.¹⁷ Similarly, Seefar's data suggests that younger beneficiaries were more vulnerable. On average, younger beneficiaries held lower migration knowledge and viewed migration risks as less probable than older potential migrants.



Relationship status

Victims of modern slavery include both single and married migrants but single migrants comprise the majority of victims.¹⁸ Seefar's data also found higher vulnerability among single beneficiaries than married beneficiaries, though these patterns could be interlinked with beneficiary age.



Education

Lower levels of education have been linked to exploitation¹⁹ and Seefar's data supports this finding. However, Seefar's data also found that less

¹⁵ Hierarchical regression is a statistical method of examining relationships between a dependent variable and one or more independent variables. Hierarchical regression means that the independent variables are not entered into the regression simultaneously but rather in steps.

¹⁶ Larsen, Andrevski, and Lyneham, "Experiences of Trafficked Persons"; World Bank Group, "Indonesia's Global Workers: Juggling Opportunities & Risks."

¹⁷ Spaan and van Naerssen, "Migration Decision-Making and Migration Industry in the Indonesia-Malaysia Corridor."

¹⁸ Larsen, Andrevski, and Lyneham, "Experiences of Trafficked Persons."

¹⁹ Seefar, "Large Scale Modern Slavery Research."

educated beneficiaries tended to rate migration risks more highly, which could suggest that they were more aware of their lack of knowledge.



Location

Area-based approaches to vulnerability reduction assume that certain locations have populations that are particularly at risk. For example, West Java and NTB have been two key regions of origin for Indonesian overseas domestic workers and are often targeted in programming.²⁰ However, Seefar's data found that vulnerabilities were not linked with beneficiaries' provinces.

Migration characteristics

Seefar's data suggests that in addition to demographic characteristics, factors related to an individual's migration plans and profiles are highly relevant to identifying vulnerability among female prospective Indonesian migrant workers.



Departure Date

Beneficiaries intending to leave sooner (e.g. within 1-3 months) tended to reveal higher vulnerabilities than those with later departure dates (e.g. 7-12 months). One explanation could be that those close to departure may be more committed to leave and less sensitive to migration risks.



Destination

Destination countries vary in their labour protection regime, risk profiles and enforcement capacity.²¹ However, during the pre-departure phase destination choice was not linked with vulnerability in Seefar's data. In other words, beneficiaries intending to work in Saudi Arabia did not appear more vulnerable than those leaving for Hong Kong.

²⁰ BNP2TKI, "Indeks Statistik Penempatan."

²¹ Andrevski and Lyneham, "Experiences of Exploitation and Human Trafficking among a Sample of Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers."



Recruiters

While the literature suggests that contact with recruiters is a key risk factor, Seefar's data found that beneficiaries who had contact with middlemen, agents or recruitment agencies did not have higher levels of vulnerability than those who had not been in contact with these people.



Reason for Migration

Indonesian prospective migrants are motivated to leave through a combination of economic, personal, family and security factors (though financial motivators are the most frequently cited).²² Seefar's data did not uncover clear patterns between vulnerability and migration reasons but this relationship requires additional research.



Previous Migration

Those who have previously worked or lived abroad often have more information about migration.²³ Similarly, Seefar's data found that first-time migrants were more vulnerable than those who had previously worked abroad due to lower migration knowledge.

²² Larsen, Andrevski, and Lyneham, "Experiences of Trafficked Persons"; Seefar, "Large Scale Modern Slavery Research."

²³ Seefar, "Large Scale Modern Slavery Research."

Recommendations

Many Indonesian potential migrants view harm and exploitation during migration as “bad luck or unfortunate circumstances” rather than a realistic outcome caused by a system failure.²⁴ Filling the knowledge gap among prospective migrants is key to changing this attitude. Doing so will also decrease existing vulnerabilities and improve migration decision-making.

Seefar found powerful links between demographics, migration characteristics and vulnerability. These findings are highly relevant to policy and programme design. Specifically, the evidence suggests that vulnerability reduction efforts should be targeted to maximise impact:

- **One-size-fits-all programmes will not be as effective as programmes that adopt people-specific approaches.** Interventions should strategically select their target audiences using relevant demographic and migration characteristics. Programmes should also consider new approaches, such as targeting prospective migrants before they leave their home communities.
- **There is a need for more research on vulnerabilities during the pre-departure phase.** Large-scale quantitative surveys can generate much-needed evidence for intervention. Creative research designs involving longitudinal components, such as tracing Indonesian female migrant workers from the pre-migration phase through their journeys, would better map vulnerabilities onto outcomes and experiences of modern slavery.
- **With better data, donors and programme implementers could generate risk profiles based on individual demographic and migration characteristics.** This approach would provide a powerful tool to ensure that assistance and information are directed to the most vulnerable potential migrants.
- **Pre-departure training should shift its focus from ‘hours delivered’ to an approach that emphasises vulnerability reduction.** Seefar’s beneficiaries who said that they had participated in trainings were not found to be more or less vulnerable, highlighting the need for a new approach. Standardised and impartially-administered assessments on migrant rights should be integrated into pre-departure training and additional independent informational resources made available.

²⁴ Surtees, “Female Migration and Trafficking in Women.”



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