



Invisible to Influential: Women Migrants' Community-Based Enterprises in the Creative and Digital Economy

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Abstract

This paper explores the post-migration transformation of Indonesian women migrant workers into grassroots entrepreneurs within the emerging creative and digital economy. Drawing on life narratives and qualitative data from multiple informants—including returnee workers, community mentors, and policy advocates—the study reveals how formerly invisible women reclaim agency through micro-enterprise development, skill-sharing, and local leadership. Despite enduring systemic exploitation, emotional trauma, and gendered stigma, these women demonstrate a shift from being passive remittance senders to becoming active agents of economic and social change. The research categorizes key thematic areas—emotional resilience, structural vulnerability, informal economy, family dynamics, and community empowerment—highlighted through word cloud analysis, frequency mapping, and intersectional coding. The findings show that digital literacy, peer mentoring, and creative production (e.g., crafts, home-based services) have opened pathways for sustainable reintegration and financial autonomy. Furthermore, the study argues that such women-led initiatives challenge both patriarchal norms and state-centric migration policies by building alternative, solidarity-based economies. These enterprises are not just survival mechanisms—they are expressions of dignity, resistance, and localized innovation. Ultimately, the paper advocates for stronger integration of gender-sensitive, community-rooted entrepreneurship into national development and digital inclusion policies.

Keywords: women-migrants, digital literacy, creative economy, post-migration empowerment.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of female labor migration has grown significantly over the past three decades, positioning women not only as global economic contributors but also as bearers of structural and emotional burden. In Indonesia, women's international migration is often framed within state-led remittance strategies and household survival logic. Yet, research increasingly reveals the hidden costs associated with this movement—ranging from labor exploitation to long-term familial disconnection (Parreñas, 2001; Silvey, 2006). Despite policy improvements, the post-return phase remains understudied, particularly in terms of women's reintegration into the creative and digital economies.

Scholars like Yeoh and Lam (2007) and Ford and Piper (2020) argue that migration decisions and consequences are gendered, shaped by power relations within both sending and receiving contexts. Similarly, studies by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2019) indicate that returnee migrant women often face a lack of institutional support, emotional trauma, and persistent marginalization. These challenges open a critical gap: How do returnee women recover agency and rebuild life after migration? And what role do community-based micro-enterprises play in this process?

This paper addresses that gap by examining the narratives of returnee Indonesian women migrants, focusing on how they develop home-based, often digital and creative enterprises to navigate economic recovery and personal transformation. The study particularly highlights the case of Bu Elisa, whose creative products—developed through skills acquired pre- and post-migration—have reached global markets in the United States, Europe, and China through informal digital

channels. Her success exemplifies a rarely discussed trajectory: one that shifts the image of former migrants from invisible laborers to visible local innovators and exporters.

The research employs a qualitative, life-history approach, combining narrative interviews with text analysis tools such as word cloud visualization, thematic frequency mapping, and intersectional coding. Five key thematic categories are used to guide the analysis: emotional experience, structural challenge, economic strategy, social/family dynamics, and empowerment. By centering these women's voices, the paper highlights how micro-entrepreneurship is not only a means of survival but also a tool for dignified reintegration and grassroots innovation.

Theoretically, this study draws upon intersectional feminist migration theory and the emerging framework of entrepreneurship from the margins (Korsgaard et al., 2021). These perspectives emphasize the interplay between gender, labor, and local agency in shaping post-migration outcomes. The paper also critiques the current development discourse that fails to account for informal, women-led economies and proposes a model that integrates grassroots entrepreneurship into national digital and creative economy policies.

Scholars of migration have long emphasized the gendered dimensions of transnational labor. Women migrants often occupy informal, low-paid sectors such as domestic work, caregiving, and service industries (Parreñas, 2001; Silvey, 2006). These roles expose them to risks of exploitation, physical abuse, and legal invisibility, particularly in contexts where labor laws are weak or selectively enforced. Feminist migration theories stress that migration decisions are rarely voluntary but emerge from structural pressures rooted in patriarchal households, economic scarcity, and national development agendas (Yeoh & Lam, 2007).

While much attention has been paid to the departure and remittance phases of migration, far less is known about what happens after return. Recent studies (IOM, 2019; Ford & Piper, 2020) suggest that return migration can be a site of reinvention—particularly for women who leverage their transnational experiences into localized forms of agency. Reintegration is not simply a process of assimilation but can become a stage for building social capital, emotional healing, and financial independence through small-scale enterprise and community participation.

Grassroots entrepreneurship has emerged as a critical field in post-migration studies. Micro-businesses founded by returnee migrants—especially women—often originate from domestic knowledge (e.g., sewing, cooking, crafting) and evolve into sustainable livelihoods with proper support, access to markets, and basic digital literacy. The rise of digital platforms has enabled these businesses to scale beyond local boundaries, connecting rural producers with global consumers. Digital inclusion empowers marginalized individuals to not only market their products online but also to shape narratives of identity and capability.

In the case of Bu Elisa, one of the returnee informants, her home-based creative products (including handicrafts and fashion accessories) have reached international markets in the United States, Europe, and China—facilitated through direct trade relations with foreign individual buyers. This finding disrupts the common narrative of rural entrepreneurs as confined to local consumption and highlights the overlooked global reach of informal women-led enterprises.

The “creative economy” has been promoted as a growth sector in many Southeast Asian policy agendas. However, state-driven models often fail to recognize informal and community-based enterprises led by women migrants as part of this economy. Their invisibility is exacerbated by gender biases, lack of formal certification, and limited integration with mainstream economic infrastructure. Bridging this gap requires a policy framework that is inclusive of grassroots innovation and responsive to the lived experiences of returnee migrant women.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to analyze how returnee migrant women in Indonesia utilize personal experiences and digital tools to construct economically viable and socially meaningful enterprises. The scope includes qualitative life histories and document-based reflections from five informants: three returnee women, one community mentor, and one policy advocate. By doing so, the study seeks to contribute to academic discourse on gendered reintegration, while also informing policy directions for inclusive digital economy strategies in developing regions.

2. Methods.

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative life-history approach, suitable for exploring the depth and nuance of lived experiences among returnee women migrant workers. The approach emphasizes

personal narratives as valid and rich sources of socio-economic insight, particularly in contexts where statistical data may not fully capture subjective agency, emotional burden, and informal innovation.

Through this design, the study investigates how former women migrants transition into grassroots entrepreneurs, how they internalize trauma and stigma, and how they eventually contribute to local creative and digital economies.

2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected from five primary sources, consisting of:

- a. Three in-depth interviews with returnee migrant women (Bu Elisa, Bu Juana, Juana2),
- b. One key informant interview with a female community mentor (Bu Cici),
- c. Three reflective articles and policy documents from a male advocate and policy actor from Migrant Care (Bambang).

The interviews were documented in Indonesian and analyzed in their original language to preserve cultural and emotional nuance. Supplementary materials included field notes, published essays, and testimony-based narratives.

2.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted in several stages:

- a. Open coding: Keywords and repeated phrases were identified across all narratives.
- b. Categorization: Themes were grouped into five overarching categories—emotional, structural, economic, social/familial, and empowerment.
- c. Word cloud visualization: This method helped to identify dominant semantic fields and keyword frequency.
- d. Venn diagrams: Used to compare thematic overlap across different informants (e.g., between women migrants; between structural advocates).
- e. Frequency mapping: A bar chart was constructed to show the distribution of key themes, further supporting interpretation and triangulation.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

All informants were anonymized using pseudonyms or role descriptors. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Given the sensitive nature of trauma, identity, and migration, care was taken to represent each narrative respectfully and without sensationalism.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Thematic Landscape of Post-Migration Narratives

From the word cloud analysis across five informants, five key thematic categories emerged: emotional experiences, structural challenges, economic survival, social/family dynamics, and empowerment through entrepreneurship. Emotional narratives were often intertwined with decisions to migrate and return, reflecting guilt, isolation, and trauma. Structural themes included legal invisibility, exploitation by recruiters or employers, and the lack of state support.

Economic narratives centered on the burden of debt and the aspiration to convert migration savings into meaningful investment. Notably, Bu Elisa's creative enterprise grew from a small sewing business into a community initiative, exporting products to the United States, Europe, and China through direct contact with foreign buyers.

3.2 Frequency Mapping of Keyword Themes

A frequency map showed that structural issues (14 keywords) were the most dominant, followed by emotional resilience (11), and then empowerment, economic, and social-family themes (each around 10). This highlights the multidimensional complexity faced by returnee migrant women—not just financial reintegration, but also emotional repair and structural navigation.

Category	Keyword Frequency
Structural	14
Emotional	11
Empowerment	10
Economic	10
Social & Family	10

Table 1. Keyword Frequency

3.3 Intersectional Narrative Venn Diagrams

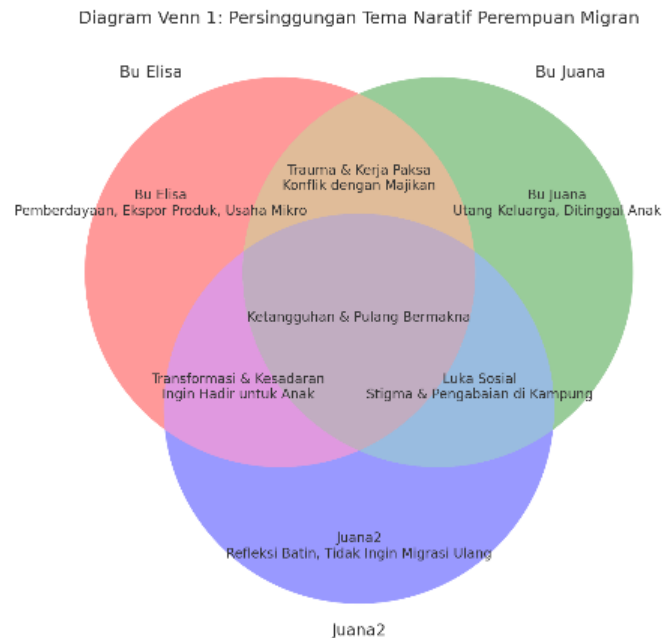


Figure 1. Venn diagrams were developed to visualize shared and unique thematic domains

Interpretation of Venn Diagram 1: Intersecting Narrative Themes of Three Migrant Women

Figure [X] presents a Venn diagram mapping the thematic intersections among three Indonesian returnee migrant women: Bu Elisa, Bu Juana, and Juana2. Each woman's life story reveals distinct yet overlapping dimensions of migration, hardship, and transformation. The visualization aims to capture the relational complexity and shared emotional terrains that underlie their post-migration trajectories.

1. Unique Themes (Non-Intersecting Areas)

- Bu Elisa's narrative stands out for its focus on entrepreneurial transformation. After enduring exploitative labor abroad—including cleaning multiple large homes without proper compensation—she returned and began building a micro-enterprise. Her business evolved from local craft production into an informal export network reaching the US, Europe, and China. Her story highlights themes of *digital inclusion*, *global micro-exports*, and *community mentoring*.
- Bu Juana's story centers on structural constraints. Compelled to migrate due to family debt and poverty, she faced alienation from her children, and societal stigma upon return. She experienced little institutional support, highlighting themes of *gendered vulnerability*, *emotional sacrifice*, and *financial precarity*.
- Juana2 takes a more introspective approach, prioritizing *spiritual recovery* and *emotional reconciliation*. Unlike the others, she intentionally rejected remigration and turned inward—choosing healing over economic gain. Her focus is on *family reconnection*, *reclaiming motherhood*, and *community participation without financial expectation*.

2. Shared Themes (Overlapping Areas)

- Elisa & Juana share experiences of workplace exploitation and emotional distance from their children, as well as initial reliance on migration as a survival mechanism.

- b. Juana & Juana2 converge on feelings of social stigma, especially the burden of being viewed as morally suspect or failed mothers. Both stories reflect a deep yearning to repair fractured maternal identities.
- c. Elisa & Juana2 intersect in their eventual embrace of self-determined recovery and family reintegration, although they use different strategies (entrepreneurship vs. spiritual renewal).

3. Core Intersection (Center of Venn Diagram)

At the center, all three narratives converge on themes of:

- a. Resilience in the face of transnational adversity,
- b. Gendered sacrifice, and
- c. The pursuit of a meaningful “return”—not merely geographic, but social, emotional, and existential.

Each woman, in her own way, contests the narrative of return as failure. Instead, their stories reframe “return” as a space of transformation, reidentification, and empowerment.

Analytical Significance

This thematic triangulation affirms the intersecting nature of post-migration experiences, where personal trauma, economic innovation, and cultural redefinition coexist. It highlights the need for intersectional and narrative-based policy frameworks that recognize:

- a. The emotional and unpaid costs of migration,
- b. The potential of grassroots, women-led entrepreneurship, and
- c. The non-linear pathways to reintegration.

By listening to these overlapping and diverging voices, policymakers, researchers, and community advocates can better design gender-responsive and contextually grounded reintegration programs.

3.4 Digital and Global Outreach from Below

The case of Bu Elisa challenges assumptions that grassroots enterprises are locally bounded. Through informal but effective use of social media and peer-to-peer export, she reached global buyers, bypassing traditional market gatekeepers. This aligns with global literature on informal innovation and entrepreneurship from the margins (Korsgaard et al., 2021).

Her story also illustrates how literacy, leadership, and labor intersect in post-migration recovery. By mentoring other returnees, she fosters a local solidarity economy that is both gender-responsive and digitally adaptive.

4. Conclusion

This study has illuminated the lived experiences of Indonesian women returnee migrants through a qualitative, life-narrative approach. The findings reveal that post-migration reintegration is not a linear process of economic adjustment, but a complex interplay of emotional healing, structural constraint, social negotiation, and entrepreneurial creativity.

Thematic analysis shows that emotional trauma and guilt—particularly related to separation from children—intersect with exploitative labor systems, social stigma, and lack of institutional protection. Yet, within this landscape of vulnerability, returnee women also enact forms of agency by initiating grassroots businesses, sharing knowledge, and engaging in community mentoring.

The case of Bu Elisa particularly demonstrates that post-migration entrepreneurship can evolve beyond subsistence into scalable, export-oriented production—even without formal government intervention. Her products, exported directly to the United States, Europe, and China, offer a compelling example of how informal women-led enterprises can enter global creative markets when supported by digital access and social capital.

This research also emphasizes the value of cross-sectoral narratives. While women migrants articulate internal struggles and community efforts, structural actors like Bu Cici and Bambang provide critical readings of the institutional failures and policy vacuums that perpetuate cycles of migration and invisibility.

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