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MIGRANT WORKERS' VULNERABILITY AND MASS REPATRIATION PHENOMENONS DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK: FROM GLOBAL IMPACTS TO THE INDONESIAN CASE

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Abstract

The COVID-19 outbreak that emerged in the People's Republic of China has changed the landscape of human life. In a short period of time, this mysterious and deadly virus spread sporadically to various parts of the world. Responding to this, many countries have imposed social restriction policies and even total lockdowns. This policy resulted in two major consequences, namely a global economic recession and an extreme increase in unemployment. In this crisis situation, one of the most affected vulnerable groups is migrant workers. The COVID-19 outbreak has caused many migrant workers to lose their jobs, forcing them to carry out mass repatriations. This research aims to describe and analyze the vulnerability of migrant workers and the phenomenon of mass repatriation during the COVID-19 outbreak, starting from the global impact to the more specific cases of Indonesian migrant workers. To analyze this phenomenon, this research uses a descriptive qualitative approach. The research results show that: First, migrant workers who represent 4.7 percent of the global workforce face loss of income due to layoffs and depletion of work permits or visas. Second, there are differences in data from BP2MI and the World Bank regarding the number of Indonesian migrant workers with data disparities reaching 4.3 million people. This becomes a big problem in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 outbreak because the government has difficulty reaching them. Third, the crisis situation due to COVID-19 has significantly changed the repatriation mechanism for Indonesian migrant workers because it has to be adjusted to the national policy for handling the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus the mass repatriation of Indonesian migrant workers due to the COVID-19 outbreak is included in the force majeure category.

Keywords: Migrant Workers, Mass Repatriation, COVID-19, Global Impact, Indonesian Case

Abstrak

Wabah Covid-19 yang muncul di Republik Rakyat Tiongkok telah merubah lanskap kehidupan manusia. Dalam waktu yang cepat virus misterius dan mematikan tersebut menyebar secara sporadis ke berbagai penjuru dunia. Merespon hal tersebut, banyak negara memberlakukan kebijakan pembatasan sosial bahkan penguncian wilayah secara total. Kebijakan tersebut mengakibatkan dua konsekuensi besar yaitu resesi ekonomi global dan meningkatnya pengangguran secara ekstrem. Dalam situasi krisis tersebut, salah satu kelompok rentan yang paling terdampak adalah pekerja migran. Wabah Covid-19 telah membuat banyak pekerja migran kehilangan pekerjaan sehingga mereka terpaksa melakukan repatriasi massal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan dan menganalisis kerentanan pekerja migran dan fenomena repatriasi massal di masa wabah Covid-19, mulai dari dampak secara global hingga pada kasus yang lebih spesifik mengenai pekerja migran Indonesia. Untuk menganalisis fenomena tersebut, penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa: Pertama, pekerja migran yang mewakili 4,7 persen tenaga kerja global menghadapi kehilangan pendapatan akibat pemutusan kerja dan menipisnya izin kerja atau visa. Kedua, terdapat perbedaan data dari BP2MI dan Bank Dunia terkait jumlah pekerja migran Indonesia dengan disparitas data mencapai 4,3 juta orang. Ini menjadi masalah besar di saat krisis seperti wabah Covid-19 karena pemerintah kesulitan menjangkau mereka. Ketiga, situasi krisis akibat Covid-19 telah merubah mekanisme repatriasi pekerja migran Indonesia secara signifikan karena harus disesuaikan dengan kebijakan nasional penanganan pandemi Covid-

19. Dengan demikian repatriasi massal pekerja migran Indonesia akibat wabah Covid-19 termasuk dalam kategori *force majeure*.

Kata Kunci: Pekerja Migran, Repatriasi Massal, Covid-19, Dampak Global, Kasus Indonesia

1. Introduction

At the end of 2019, the people of Wuhan in the People's Republic of China were shocked by the emergence of a mysterious and deadly virus called Corona Virus Disease (Covid-19). Sporadically, the virus spreads throughout the world and immediately changes various landscapes of human life. The extreme death rate has made the world community gripped by extraordinary fear in the face of this mysterious virus. In a very short time, this virus triggered a health crisis and an economic crisis simultaneously, forcing the World Health Organization to designate it as a global pandemic as of March 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). This mysterious virus Covid-19 immediately became a global conversation and sparked speculation among many people. Many experts argue about the origin of this virus. Even those who are not experts suddenly comment a lot about this virus. As a result, there is a lot of hoax information that is scattered and makes world citizens confused. In fact, the confusion of information actually creates greater fear.

The uncontrolled spread of Covid-19 has forced various countries, including those in the Asia Pacific region, to impose social restriction policies and even total lockdowns. This policy certainly reaps consequences and triggers other bigger risks. *First*, this policy triggers a massive economic recession (Shoss *et al.*, 2021; Pan *et al.*, 2020). This recession does not only hit developing countries or the third world but also developed countries with big powers such as the United States and the People's Republic of China. The World Bank (2022) announced that the global economic recession in 2020 due to the Covid-19 outbreak has hit 92.9 percent of countries in the world. This number has broken the record for the highest economic recession in post-World War II. The world recession has had a direct impact on the destruction of the industrial sector, both the manufacturing industry and service industries such as tourism, hotels, and so on.

Second, this policy triggers an extreme increase in unemployment. Massive social restrictions and a total lockdown will definitely disrupt world economic activity. This situation had an impact on the labor market and decreased workers' incomes. Thus, the stagnation of the pace of the world economy has a direct impact on the loss of jobs and an increase in the unemployment rate. Based on this situation, the International Labour Organization predicts that the increase in global unemployment will reach 205 million people in 2022. This number has clearly increased significantly from 187 million compared to 2019 (United Nations, 2021). Specifically, in the Asia Pacific region, the number of workers experienced a drastic decline of 6.18 million during the crisis due to the Covid-19 outbreak (Indonesian Ministry of Finance, 2021).

In this crisis situation, one of the most vulnerable groups is migrant workers (Molenaar & Van Praag, 2022; Fassani & Mazza, 2020). Lots of media reports that the Covid-19 outbreak has made the fate of migrant workers uncertain. As a result, many of them are forced to leave the host country and undertake emergency repatriation to their country of origin. From this situation, a big question arises, how does the global pandemic Covid-19 affect migrant workers around the world, and what factors contribute to the mass repatriation of Indonesian migrant workers? Based on the problem formulation above, this research will provide a coherent explanation starting from the global implications of Covid-19 to the migrant workers and then focusing on specific issues related to Indonesian migrant workers. Theoretically, the results of this research are expected to provide new ideas in enriching insights and contextual understanding for the development of regional studies and migration studies. Practically, the results of this study are expected to provide information to relevant

stakeholders, especially the Indonesian government and migrant worker placement companies in protecting migrant workers during a crisis situation due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

2. Literature Review

Various problems and demands of life have triggered many people to migrate to a new place. The move to a new place can occur within a country or move across countries. In a lot of literature, it is stated that a person must leave his country and live abroad as a diaspora to achieve a better standard of living. In line with this argument, Todaro and Smith (2020) argue that basically migration is an economic phenomenon. Furthermore, Todaro and Smith assume that migration flows occur due to differences in economic distribution from one place to another. Based on these reasons, many people choose to work abroad as migrant workers, especially to developed countries with high incomes.

However, in general, migrant workers decide to work abroad for a certain duration. Indeed, some of them decided to stay in the host country. One reason that often arises is marriage with a local citizen. But in the end, most of them will return to their countries for various reasons. According to Constant and Massey (2002), the interpretation of repatriation or reverse migration can differ depending on the orientation. Therefore, in this research, it is important to describe the reasons for repatriation in the context of Indonesian migrant workers. From various literatures, it can be concluded that there are several reasons why Indonesian migrant workers decide to return to their homeland, including:

First, repatriation after the mission is considered complete. According to De Haas, Fokkema, and Fassi (2015), this reason is the most appropriate for emigrating and returning. From the beginning, migration is seen as a two-way journey and repatriation is seen as a logical consequence after achieving success in the host country. Regarding Indonesian migrant workers, most of them have the goal of finding a better life. In the host country, they collect their income to bring back to their homeland as a future capital. When the savings or capital collected from their income is deemed sufficient, they will immediately return to Indonesia to meet their families again and continue living together. Based on this reason, repatriation has a positive impression.

Second, repatriation due to unfulfilled expectations in the destination country. According to Cassarino (2004), before going abroad, migrant workers generally imagine the ease of getting a job and high wages in the host country. The same reasons surfaced for Indonesian migrant workers. They decided to go abroad to earn a higher income than staying in Indonesia. When the situation they face in the host country is not in line with their expectations, especially regarding the amount of wages, then disappointment arises from expectations that are not fulfilled. This disappointment then prompted them to return to Indonesia. This situation occurred due to the failure to find valid information about the condition of their destination country. In this digital era, the possibility of failure is quite high because hoaxes are spread in various media. For this reason, their repatriation has a negative impression.

Third, repatriation due to force majeure conditions. Van der Heijden (2011) suggests that the repatriation of migrant workers in this situation may occur due to several major issues such as conflict or war. These cases often occur in Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Iraq, or Libya. In this situation, migrant workers do not want to return to their country in principle. This is because they feel that actually their

expectations regarding work and wages can be met in the host country, moreover they also feel that their mission has not been completed. They still want to stay longer because the high wages will speed up their process of raising capital. However, because the conditions of the host country did not allow them to continue their work, they were forced to choose to return to Indonesia. In this situation, the impression of their repatriation is neutral, it can be viewed positively or negatively depending on the perspective. Based on the three reasons explained above, this research will analyze the reasons for the mass repatriation of migrant workers due to the Covid-19 outbreak and the impressions of this return.

Before analyzing the vulnerability of migrant workers and the phenomenon of mass repatriation during the Covid-19 outbreak in more depth, we need to analyze previous research with a similar theme. In principle, research with similar themes has been quite massive. An example is research from Kikawa et al. published through ADB (2022), Jones et al. published through ILO (2021), and İçduygu published through IOM (2020). These three studies analyze the vulnerability of migrant workers and the phenomenon of mass repatriation globally. In addition, there are several studies that analyze the vulnerability of migrant workers and the phenomenon of mass repatriation during the Covid-19 outbreak more specifically by region or country, such as research from Weeraratne (2020) which examined the repatriation of migrant workers in the South Asian region, then research by Asis (2020) and Liao (2020) examined the repatriation of Filipino migrant workers. However, from the various studies mentioned above, no research has been carried out in a coherent manner, starting from the global impact and then specific to one country, as was done in this research. This research analyzes the vulnerability of migrant workers and the phenomenon of mass repatriation in a coherent manner, starting from global impacts to the case of Indonesia. Thus the novelty of this research becomes clear.

3. Research Method

In order to obtain holistic research results, this research uses a qualitative descriptive approach. To collect data related to the migrant workers' vulnerability and mass repatriation phenomenon during the Covid-19 outbreak, the author conducted observations, interviews, and literature studies. Observations were made through observing the mass repatriation process of migrant workers to Indonesia, especially during the arrival stage. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with several migrant workers who were repatriated to Indonesia. Interviews were conducted with four migrant workers who returned to Indonesia. The four resource persons were selected based on gender balance (two males and two females) and age balance (two over 40 years old and two under 40 years old). However, considering the consequences of the interview need to be considered in terms of possible harm to the subject as well as the expected benefits of participating in the study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), especially since this research was conducted during the Covid-19 outbreak, the author must be extra careful to protect resource person and the author himself as an effort to prevent the virus transmission. Therefore, interviews are conducted after the migrant workers have finished undergoing quarantine or are conducted online. While the literature study is carried out by analyzing various sources such as books, journals, newspapers, websites, and other mass media. Then, the collected data was analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2019) through three major steps, namely data condensation, data display, and verification or drawing conclusions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Global Impact of the Covid-19 Outbreak on Migrant Workers

The International Labour Organization estimates that around 164 million migrant workers – representing 4.7 percent of the global workforce – live in countries where workplace closures are mandatory or recommended (ILO, 2020). They are concentrated in the informal sector, an economic sector with short working duration, without proper protection, weak social protection, and low wages, and are mostly dominated by women (Samson & Kenny, 2016). Ironically, migrant workers are a vulnerable group who are often the first target of termination when problems arise in the host country, but they are also often the last group to access rights such as proper health care.

Regarding the response policies against Covid-19 in host countries such as unemployment benefits, subsidies for daily necessities, and social security, migrant workers are still often neglected (Liem et al., 2020). In many cases, when they need medical treatment, they decide not to access it for fear of being arrested by local authorities on charges of violating social restrictions. Moreover, in several countries, informal jobs such as working as housing assistance, small building projects, and agricultural workers are not considered official workers, so they cannot access worker welfare insurance (Octavia, 2020). Therefore, the termination of employment due to the Covid-19 outbreak creates an even worse impact on them. They lose their income and face the problem of depleting work permits or visas.

The two complicated problems above can drag them into cases of immigration violations. This is because their status which was originally legal and procedural could change to become illegal. This problem has the potential to lead them to debt and human trafficking which will make the situation even more dangerous (UNODC, 2021). During a pandemic, they also often receive discrimination such as unilateral deductions or non-payment of wages, overcrowded shelter conditions, difficulty getting vaccinations or medical assistance from the host country, to forced repatriation which makes them considered virus carriers. This condition illustrates the hard life of migrant workers who often face precarious situations.

Considering the fact that almost half of the total migrant workers in the world work in Asia Pacific countries, the World Health Organization urges these host countries to provide vaccination assistance for migrant workers (WHO, 2021). In the author's notes, appreciation should be given to several host countries that are trying to provide protection to migrant workers during a pandemic. Taiwan, Japan and South Korea were some of the first host countries to provide vaccinations for foreigners including migrant workers. Now, in the new normal situation, Covid-19 is starting to be more manageable, even though new variants are still emerging. Migrant workers around the world also started working normally. However, it should be taken seriously that the Covid-19 outbreak, especially during the initial phase of its spread, has provided a very valuable lesson about the importance of improving the system for protecting the rights of migrant workers which is often neglected. This should be a big lesson to be corrected as best as possible in the future.

4.2 Vulnerabilities of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Crisis Periods

Indonesia is one of the countries that departs many migrant workers to various destination countries. Unfortunately, there are doubts about the accuracy of the data on the number of migrant workers. If we look at official data from the Government of Indonesia published by the Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Agency (BP2MI), the number of Indonesian migrant workers reaches 4.3 million people with Malaysia, Taiwan, and Saudi Arabia as the main destination countries (Anam et al., 2021). In addition, Indonesian migrant workers are scattered in many countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, the United Arab Emirates, and other countries. However, this data is different from a survey conducted by the World Bank and the Australian Government (2017), it is estimated that the actual number is nine million people.

If we compare data from BP2MI and the World Bank, a significant gap is found that reaches 4.7 million migrant workers. This means that the number is not registered by the Government of Indonesia and most likely is an illegal or non-procedural migrant worker. This difference in data is of course a big problem because migrant workers who leave without a procedural mechanism are outside the reach of the Indonesian Government's protection (Hartono & Samsuria, 2021). As a result, when a crisis such as the Covid-19 outbreak occurs, it will be difficult for the Indonesian embassy, consulate general, or representative office to monitor and reach them. This can make them trapped in the host country due to the lockdown policy, forced to survive with limited food stocks and depressed psychological conditions.

It should be noted that basically, the Government of Indonesia has taken various steps to prevent the illegal departure of migrant workers and eradicate human trafficking, namely comprehensive protection starting from pre-departure, working period, and returning to Indonesia, optimizing the role of the military and police, and early detection of various possible crimes experienced by migrant workers. In addition, the Government of Indonesia continues to strive to apply strict sanctions or penalties to labor brokers or brokers who send migrant workers illegally. Strengthening in every line continues to be improved, but it seems that it has not been fully able to eradicate the departure of illegal migrant workers as a whole.

As a basis for the study, it is necessary to understand that the majority of Indonesian migrant workers come from groups of people with low levels of education (World Bank, 2017). Therefore, many of them are blind to regulation and depend on the agent. Unfortunately, their lack of knowledge is often manipulated by irresponsible syndicates. For example, they have complete and valid documents but do not have access to them because their documents are controlled by their boss or agent. Another example, they were asked to sign a contract document without understanding the substance of its contents. As a result, they are blind to their rights and obligations so their services are exploited without getting proper compensation.

During the Covid-19 outbreak, both procedural and non-procedural Indonesian migrant workers have become an increasingly vulnerable group (Wahab, 2020). Losing their job makes them only depend on odd jobs, so they don't have a steady income to meet their daily needs and send money to their families in Indonesia. this situation prompted them to repatriate to Indonesia.

Basically, not all countries implement a full lockdown so that a number of Indonesian migrant workers can still work. For example, Taiwan was able to control Covid-19 with various strict restrictions such as border control, case identification with measurable big data analysis, and 124 other measures (Chen, 2021; Yeh & Cheng, 2020). However, there are more countries that carry out full lockdowns so that Indonesian migrant workers cannot work, such as Malaysia and several Middle Eastern countries (Hilhorst & Mena, 2021). The high number of returnees of Indonesian migrant workers who have to return to their homeland has resulted in an unusual situation: mass repatriation.

According to the International Organization for Migration, more than 180,000 migrant workers decide to return to Indonesia due to uncertainty in the host country (IOM, 2021). In this crisis situation, their repatriation becomes a big dilemma for the government. On the one hand, they are Indonesian citizens who have the right to return to their homeland at any time. Moreover, they are often referred to as foreign exchange heroes who have contributed greatly to the country's development (Basrowi & Maunah, 2019). But on the other hand, their mass repatriation could exacerbate the rate of transmission of Covid-19. Therefore, the phenomenon of mass repatriation of migrant workers requires special handling so that it does not become a more complex disaster. This is not an easy thing because it requires a mechanism that is far different from the normal situation.

4.3 Repatriation Mechanism Changes: An Effort to Handle Outbreaks

If viewed from the reasons for repatriation as described in the literature review section, the mass repatriation of Indonesian migrant workers due to the Covid-19 outbreak belongs to the third category, namely repatriation due to force majeure conditions. This is because basically, Indonesian migrant workers feel that in fact their expectations regarding work and wages can be fulfilled in the host country, they also feel that their mission is not finished. They still want to work longer hours because the high wages will speed up their capital-raising process for the future. However, because the conditions of the host country did not allow them to continue their work due to the closure of their workplaces, they were forced to choose to return to Indonesia, either temporarily or permanently. In this situation, the public's impression of their return was divided. There are those who think that this is the best choice, but there are also those who see them negatively as carriers of the virus to Indonesia.

As the second largest country of origin for migrant workers in the world after the Philippines (Suyanto, 2020), the Government of Indonesia always tries to fulfill the rights of Indonesian migrant workers from pre-departure to post-return. The repatriation mechanism for Indonesian migrant workers has been regulated through Government Regulation Number 3 of 2013 concerning the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers Abroad and strengthened in the general provisions of Law Number 18 of 2017 concerning the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers. Repatriation arrangements are an integral part of the Government of Indonesia's efforts to guarantee protection for migrant workers. Under normal conditions, repatriation is usually carried out independently for several reasons such as long leave, meeting with family, completion of the contract period, and other logical reasons.

According to the Indonesian constitution, the process of repatriating Indonesian migrant workers is a joint responsibility of the Ministry of Manpower, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (Wickramasekara, 2019). In practice, the repatriation mechanism is simple in design, and not many institutions are directly involved technically. Broadly speaking, the repatriation process is divided into two stages, namely in the host country and in Indonesia. During the host country phase, according to BP2MI (2014), there is only one administrative requirement that must be met by Indonesian migrant workers to prepare for their return, namely reporting to a representative office of the Government of Indonesia. Such reporting can be done independently or through a placement partner company in the host country. The representative office of the Government of Indonesia then processes the report and forwards it to BP2MI the agency responsible for Indonesian migrant workers.

After arriving in Indonesia, BP2MI coordinates with immigration and customs at the airport or seaport to check the documents and luggage of Indonesian migrant workers. Finally, BP2MI coordinates with the local government authorities where the migrant workers come from to collect data on returnees. In the repatriation process, the Indonesian migrant workers are not only protected by BP2MI but also accompanied by the Indonesian Migrant Worker Placement Company (P3MI) which previously sent them. Placement companies ensure the safety of migrant workers from the airport or seaport until they arrive home or meet their families (Morgan & Nolan, 2011). With a simple mechanism that must be followed, the repatriation of Indonesian migrant workers was a common phenomenon before the Covid-19 outbreak.

However, everything became different after the Covid-19 outbreak. International migration that occurs within a community can lead to the transmission of infected viruses or diseases (Castelli & Sulis, 2017). Responding to this, when Covid-19 began to spread in Indonesia, the mechanism for returning migrant workers changed drastically as a precautionary measure. In general, this remains the joint responsibility of the Ministry of Manpower, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection as in normal situations. However, in practice, it becomes much more complicated, lengthy, and involves more institutions because both Indonesian citizens and foreigners entering Indonesia must follow the applicable health quarantine procedures. In other words, procedures for repatriating migrant workers during a pandemic must comply with Indonesia's national policy for handling Covid-19.

However, the Indonesian government's unpreparedness in dealing with a crisis situation due to the Covid-19 outbreak has caused confusion. Through various media platforms, the Government of Indonesia has stated that mass repatriation of migrant workers must be watched out for and it is important to carry out strict screening on the grounds of preventing transmission of the virus. However, in practice, there have been inconsistencies because some migrant workers did not undergo quarantine and a Covid-19 test upon arrival in Indonesia. The confession of one of the migrant workers to BBC Indonesia (Lumbanrau, 2020) shows that they were only asked for health checks in the form of heart rate and body temperature. After that, they are free to leave the airport, be picked up by their families, and arrive home easily. However, in other cases, migrant workers have to undergo quarantine after a few days at home. In this case, the

Covid-19 Task Force officers suddenly picked them up to undergo isolation at a state facility. In fact, during the few days they stayed at home, they had gone to public places and interacted with many people. This situation should not be repeated and should be evaluated for future improvements.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion above, it can be concluded that: *First*, migrant workers who represent 4.7 percent of the global workforce face complex problems during the Covid-19 outbreak, namely loss of income due to termination of employment and depletion of work permits or visas. This problem can drag them into other, more dangerous problems such as debt and human trafficking. Even at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, they had difficulty accessing health services and vaccinations. This proves that their rights are often neglected. *Second*, regarding the accuracy of data on the number of Indonesian migrant workers, there are differences between BP2MI and the World Bank. According to BP2MI, the number of Indonesian migrant workers is 4.3 million people, while a survey conducted by the World Bank and the Australian Government shows the number of Indonesian migrant workers is nine million people. This means that data gaps were found reaching 4.7 million, which are most likely non-procedural migrant workers. This data disparity becomes a big problem during a crisis such as the Covid-19 outbreak because the Government of Indonesia has difficulty reaching them. *Third*, the crisis situation due to Covid-19 has significantly changed the repatriation mechanism of Indonesian migrant workers. The repatriation mechanism which started out as simple became more complex, lengthy, and involved many institutions. This is because the repatriation process must be adjusted to the national policy for handling the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on these facts, the mass repatriation of Indonesian migrant workers due to the Covid-19 outbreak is included in the third category, namely repatriation due to force majeure conditions.

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