



Indonesian Migrant Workers and Human Investment for Global Competitiveness

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Abstract. This study focuses on human investment made by Indonesian Migrant Workers (IMWs) related to their international migration. This research used qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interview on ex IMWs in Cilacap District, Central Java Province and also related stakeholders. The result shows international migration of IMWs can be viewed as an investment in human resources. The investment can be divided into before and during the migration or while working abroad. There is a significant difference in the investment before departure between IMWs with low education levels, such as elementary or junior high school graduates, and individuals who have completed high school, vocational school, or university education. IMWs with limited education have fewer investment options before departure, as their job prospects, such as domestic work, require minimal competency than those with higher education. Investment in human resources can also occur during the migration period or while working abroad. In general, IMWs acquire new job-related skills regardless of their educational level. These skills can serve as valuable assets when applying for jobs either internationally or upon returning to their hometowns. Working abroad can also provide individuals with valuable insights into work ethics and discipline. Furthermore, foreign language proficiency can be advantageous when working in the same country or returning to Indonesia.

Keywords: Indonesia Migrant Workers (IMWs), Human investment, International Migration, Cilacap District

Introduction

The international migration of workers is a longstanding phenomenon in Indonesia's workforce history, which can be traced back to the Dutch colonial era in the 19th century, specifically in 1890 when migration was first conducted across borders [1]. Despite the cessation of colonialism in 1945, the practice of sending migrant workers continued. Moreover, during the 1960s, the sending of individuals to work abroad, commonly known as Indonesian migrant workers (IMWs), resumed due to limited job opportunities [2]. This trend gained momentum, and in 1970, the Department of Manpower, Transmigration, and Cooperatives initiated the Inter-Regional and Inter-

Country Work Program (AKAD and AKAN) to dispatch workers abroad, in compliance with the provisions of Government Regulation No. 4/1970. Subsequently, private entities have also become involved in sending IMWs [1].

Currently, the management of IMW is overseen by BP2MI, which took over from BNP2TKI (National Agency for the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers) since 2020 based on Presidential decree no 19 in 2019. Gulf countries have become an important destination for IMWs mobility since the 1980s. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a significant surge in worker migration from Asian countries, particularly to Middle Eastern nations [3]. During the 1990s, there was a notable shift in the countries where migrant workers were heading. Saudi Arabia, as the main destination country in the 1980s, was replaced by Malaysia [4]. Conversely, in 2009, the government imposed a moratorium on IMWs deployment in Malaysia due to numerous cases of informal abuse, especially among female workers [5], which lasted only two (2) years. A moratorium on the placement of IMW was also imposed in Saudi Arabia in August 2011 [6] or the same reasons as in Malaysia, contributing to a decrease in IMW deployment in these countries.

A moratorium on the placement in Middle Eastern countries has caused a shift in the main destination for IMW. Between 2017 and 2018, Saudi Arabia rose to become the sixth most prominent destination country for Indonesian migrant workers, while Hong Kong and Taiwan emerged as the second most important after Malaysia [4]. Apart from the job opportunities available in Taiwan, this condition was also influenced by higher salary standards for domestic helpers in Hong Kong and Taiwan compared to Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. This is an attractive factor, especially for individual working as domestic helpers and caregivers for the elderly in Taiwan.

Moreover, demographic changes in some destination countries, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, have resulted in a decrease in the proportion of young populations and an increase in older individuals. This condition has increased the demand for caregivers from other countries to take care of the elderly population.

It is commonly observed that the educational attainment of IMW placed abroad tends to be relatively low [4]. The majority, about 68% to 77%, are elementary and junior high school graduates, while high school graduates account for 17% to 30%. Individuals with higher education, such as a diploma and above, make up only 2% to 5%. Considering the low education, IMW can only fill low-skilled jobs, and they are mainly domestic workers, with female PMI being dominant [5]. This factor is not advantageous in the competition to capture the global job market, and the situation worsens without adequate skills. The job market for low-skilled workers is limited and is highly contested by developing countries, then Indonesia also has to compete to obtain jobs. Therefore, low-educated individuals should have appropriate skills for overseas job requirements.

Even though most IMWs abroad are low-educated and employed in domestic work, they still have to meet the requirements of employers. In this case, IMWs candidates should strive to meet these requirements, which can be considered an investment in human resources. In the context of international migration of workers, the "desire" or "plan" to work abroad can be seen as a driving factor for investment [7]. Before commencing work overseas, candidates from IMWs are expected to meet the standards mandated by employers to comply with the established criteria or quality benchmarks. Individuals intending to work abroad will try to meet these quality standards by investing in the quality of "migrant worker candidates" resources. Investment can be achieved through various means, including formal and informal education. This may involve acquiring specific skills and undergoing specialized training relevant to the area or country where an individual intends to work [4]. During migration, IMWs also gains other benefits such as higher income and experience to improve their skills and insights, useful for their future work or life.

This study focuses on the investment made by IMWs in preparing to work abroad excluding the cost of migration. The emphasis is on the human resources invested in the migration preparation process, as well as the experience and skills gained while working abroad. Based on the description in the background, international migration investment is conducted before and during the process in the destination country.

1.1 International Migration and Investment in Human Resources

Early literature recognizes the benefits related to migration such as remittances and return migration [8] but later on some studies conclude that migration leads to the loss of the educated and the highly skilled people and that the subsequent brain drain can result in a permanent decrease in income and growth of the source country [9]. This view has been increasingly challenged in the last decade by many studies [8]. Its argues that the possibility of emigration induces optimizing agents to invest more resources in human capital. According to these studies only a fraction of those who invest in human capital can indeed emigrate, average level of human capital and average productivity in the country of origin can increase even after emigration is netted out, a phenomenon labelled as "brain gain". Moreover, Beine, Docquier, and Rapoport (2008) conducted research on a cross-section of 127 countries and find that countries with low levels of human capital and sufficiently low emigration rates are more likely to benefit from the brain gain [10].

Other study find that Migration and investment have implications for human resources [11]. IMWs candidates often try to improve their skills to meet the criteria set by employers. Meanwhile, the efforts can be categorized as an investment in human resources. The relationship between migration and investment in human resources has been discussed by several economists, starting with Sjaastad (1962), where individuals are considered to incur monetary and psychological costs with the hope of receiving higher income and other benefits [12].

The analysis of investment in human resources in the context of migration refers to understanding three concepts/definitions, namely human resources, capital, and investment. Wright et al. (2006) defined human resources as individuals capable of performing a job [13]. Human capital is the abilities and qualities that increase the productivity of individuals [14]. This capacity, including knowledge, skills, abilities, experience, intelligence, judgment, and wisdom, is possessed by individuals and collectively by the population and its capital in performing a job. Meanwhile, capital is obtained through investment, defined as an activity that requires resources, such as costs. This investment can include education, on-the-job training, health maintenance, migration, and information-seeking efforts, requiring resources. It improves skills, knowledge, and health, increasing future cash and psychological income [12].

The relationship between migration and investment in human resources can be understood through the Human Capital theory. In this theory, migration can be seen as an investment through cost and return to the analysis [14]. It is considered an investment, requiring individuals to obtain future returns in the destination area. Therefore, the analysis focuses on the difference between the cost and the income expected to be earned in the destination area. Understanding the relationship between these two variables can be analyzed by placing migration as a driving factor or a means for investment to improve the quality of human resources.

In perceiving migration as an investment, the mobility of international workers is not solely a reaction to the potential of earning higher incomes but provides prospects for enhancing their skills. Research has demonstrated that overseas knowledge and expertise can lead to higher earnings than the skills developed from domestic work experience. Among migrant workers, the possibility of learning and improving skills while migrating is greater for workers with lower skills [15]. This is primarily because migrant workers with lower skill levels are exposed to a wider range of new experiences and opportunities for learning in the destination country. A significant number of Asian migrant workers engage in work overseas for a limited period. This yields advantageous outcomes in human resources quality, for instance, gaining experience in utilizing cutting-edge technology or comprehending intricate work processes within organizations [16].

Generally, the relationship between migrant workers and investment can be observed when candidates prepare themselves in their homes and after arriving in the destination country. Prospective candidates planning to work abroad go through a preparatory phase to develop a strategy for the migration process. This stage involves enhancing their skills, obtaining the necessary health certifications required for work, and acquiring knowledge about the job requirements and conditions, which may involve allocating resources. These efforts aim to obtain benefits that exceed the costs incurred. In the second period, IMW can also improve their skills through work experience and training to use foreign languages, which may not directly require resource allocation. These skills and work experience gained will be assets for their future migration.

Methods

This research was conducted in 2017 in Cilacap Regency, West Java Province, which was then the fifth-largest sender of IMW. However, as of 2022, it has become Indonesia's second-largest sender out of 514 regencies/cities, with Indramayu Regency, West Java Province, ranking first. Initially, most migrants from Cilacap Regency worked as domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. However, due to a shift in destination countries, some IMW from this regency now work in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The type of work performed is also starting to change, not only as domestic workers but also as elderly caregivers.

This research used qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interview with 22 ex IMWs. The informants comprised of 20 female and two former male IMWs, aged between 27-53 years, with the lowest elementary school education level and the highest Bachelor's degrees. The experience working abroad ranged from 3 to 18 years, The informants performed a limited number of tasks, specifically tending to domestic duties, providing care for the elderly, including seniors and sick individual, nurturing children, as well as working in factories. Besides, indepth interviews were also conducted with teachers and lectures from vocational high school and a health science college (STIKES) which preparing its students to work abroad.

Data analysis was conducted by classifying each informant's answers according to the analysis needs, including the preparation process categorized as an investment before migration and work experience abroad, including skills obtained from work. The benefits of gaining work experience abroad, also known as migration investment, are numerous and signify. Work experience that improves skills can be considered an investment for future work. Meanwhile not all statement of the informant was quoted, only significant information from IMW retirees will be exposed and highlighted to support the argument of this paper.

2 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The relationship between the migration of workers and investment in human resources can be divided into two periods. The first period is before the workers migrate abroad, during which the candidates prepare themselves in their hometown. The second period is after they arrive at their destination, during which their efforts are geared towards maximizing the benefits derived from the costs incurred. Subsequently, during this second period, IMWs may acquire or refine their skillset through direct and indirect training opportunities, without incurring direct costs. This includes enhancing foreign language proficiency, which can be valuable for future employment opportunities. The skills and work experience gained while working abroad can also become capital for future migration, highlighting the importance of investment in human resources for migrant workers.

2.1 Investment Before Departure

The investment in human resources made by the IMWs candidates before leaving to work abroad can take the form of formal education, skills training, and other empowerment. These efforts can increase the competencies and conditions of working abroad. Meanwhile, the investment can be conducted by the IMWs candidates or institutions of the IMWs placement at the local or national level. It constitutes an effort to protect IMWs when working abroad. The qualifications/skills and understanding of their working conditions reduce the risk of problems.

Previous research on the migration of IMWs has shown that they have low education levels, with the majority only completing elementary school, and some cannot even read or write in Latin script [17],[18],[19]. This can hinder their ability to understand important information, such as the contents of employment contracts, which is critical for their protection as IMWs in a foreign country. Despite the rise in educational attainment, the skillset of individuals regarding their work is still categorized as low.

Investment in human resources through formal education is not a strategy for preparing oneself to work abroad. The increase in education among IMWs candidates is primarily due to the government's compulsory education program, which was launched in 1994 [20]. This could be attributed to the compulsion for IMWs candidates to seek employment abroad due to economic pressures and a scarcity of job opportunities in their respective hometowns, as well as other personal factors. The improvement of skills, which can be interpreted as investment in human resources, is typically accomplished by recruitment agencies. However, training provided by recruitment agencies usually only covers the basics of performing domestic chores for candidates working as domestic workers.

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This research highlights the connection between the education level and type of job of IMWs and the investment in human resources. Individuals with lower educational attainment levels appear to have made no significant investments, either individually or through their families, in preparation for overseas employment. Considering the economic pressure that drives their migration process, "becoming a IMWs" is often not planned or well-prepared. Although some IMWs candidates may have increased their education level from elementary to junior high school, they may lack awareness of the importance of acquiring additional skills and knowledge related to work condi-

tions in the destination country. The training provided to IMW candidates in the context of investment usually only covers basic knowledge of performing domestic work and the language of the destination country. This training is typically provided by recruitment companies through sending IMW abroad or through vocational training centers. However, the language training received is often limited, as some former IMWs may only know a few words used in their destination country, as revealed in interviews with two informants, **SUY** and **DAR**:

Q (Question): What training did you receive after applying for a job at the company?

A (Answer): I received training in cooking, caring for the elderly or children, and many more.

Q: How long is the training at the company?

A: One month at the company in Mecca

Q: How about the language problem?

A: I do not understand the language there, but the Saudis already understand it while learning slowly

(SUY, IMW retirees with elementary school education and have worked in Saudi Arabia twice)

Q: When working for a company in Singapore, was there any training?

A: Yes, there was

Q: Do you still remember what you learned?

A: I practiced English, then how to iron clothes, use the washing machine and vacuum cleaner, and tidy up the house.

(DAR, IMW retirees with elementary school education and have worked in Saudi Arabia twice)

The investment made by male IMW candidates in training before working abroad does not differ significantly from that of females. For unskilled workers, there is almost no preparation or investment in special skills. Typically, these candidates are low-educated and do not receive special training related to the skills required for working abroad from the deployment agencies. Male IMWs are at a disadvantage compared to their female counterparts, who typically receive training before beginning work as domestic workers. The skills required for their jobs are only acquired through on-the-job training while working abroad. This is highlighted in the interview with **TON**, a male IMW with a junior high school education who worked as a press operator in a plywood factory in Taiwan.

Q (Interviewer): when registering, did you already have the expertise as a press operator?

A (TON): No, I did not have

Q: Then, how do you learn?

A: Slowly

Q: Was there any training when applying to work at the company?

A: No

Q: How about the language?

A: Language is not an important aspect there, what is needed is energy. I learn slowly

Q: Who trains you when no one has performed this job before?

A: The first component in the process is referred to as the "agent." The agent's role lasts one week, and all communication is conveyed in Indonesian. Individual with sound rationale will promptly comprehend the information conveyed. This process typically requires one month to complete.

This condition is different for IMWs with higher education. Therefore, education affects job opportunities abroad and the investment made to meet the criteria required by employers. IMW candidates can register with foreign recruitment companies after meeting the required competency criteria. Individual with higher education are expected to improve their skills, such as the experience of a male IMW named **MAR**, who has a vocational high school education and has worked in Taiwan as a forklift operator. Before departing for Taiwan, **MAR** could not drive a forklift, but it was a requirement at the company. This condition forced him to take a course at his own expense, as explained below:

Q (Interviewer): some individual do not prepare any skills for work.

A (MAR): Especially the forklift problem, because I used to take a course.

Q: Forklift driving course?

A: Yes. To operate a forklift and lift goods.

Q: Where did you get the information on the requirement to operate a forklift?

A: From the boss of the company, that you must be able to operate a forklift

Q: Then, is the course taken independently or by the company?

A: Independently

Q: Self-financed?

A: yes.

Q: it means you have performed some preparations to work abroad

A: yes

The experience of **MAR** shows that to achieve better job opportunities abroad, IMW candidates with relatively high education are willing to make sacrifices while recruiting companies do not facilitate the necessary skills improvement. Recruitment companies seem to only "provide services" in exchange for compensation but do not include preparation for their placement.

Meanwhile, the skills and competencies needed for nursing have been prepared by the school attended. For example, a health science college (STIKES) in Cilacap Regency provides English and other language subjects students need to work abroad. Schools usually collaborate with overseas healthcare staffing companies that provide

language training tailored to the destination countries, as explained by a lecturer at STIKES in Cilacap Regency below:

....., because Indonesia has many educational institutions and limited job opportunities, graduates are advised to consider going abroad.

..... adequate preparation should commence at the curriculum level, including additional English credits. A specialized English group has been established and equipped with the necessary resources as part of the student activity unit.

... Furthermore, collaborations, such as in Bandung, exist for individual considering working in Japan. There is an institution that provides training in the Japanese language and culture.

2.2 Organizer of Skills Training for PMI Candidates

The regulation issued by the Minister of Manpower and Transmigration No. 23 of 2009 states that IMW candidates should not only meet the requirements of age, education, health, and others but also have the necessary job competencies according to the position requirements. Individuals may participate in training programs that adhere to established competency standards to acquire these competencies. Therefore, candidates invest resources in relevant training programs to acquire competencies before working abroad. These programs are organized by the state and private institutions, companies, or training programs owned by Indonesian migrant worker placement companies (P3MI). The government also has a training institution known as the Overseas Training Work Center (BLKLN) located in several provinces in Java and Sumatra. The function and responsibility of BLKLN are to offer training for IMW who intend to work overseas and must possess a permit or be registered and accredited by the Accreditation Agency for Training Institutions (LALPK). These training programs are intended to provide, improve, and develop job competencies, productivity, discipline, attitudes, and work ethics at certain skills and expertise under job qualifications and positions (Minister of Manpower and Transmigration Regulation No. 23 of 2009).

Cilacap Regency, as a research location, has several training centers owned by private or government. However, most of the training centers in this regency are owned by P3MI. The local government only provides competency tests because there is no budget for free training. The training sessions in Cilacap are exclusively designed for informal job opportunities such as domestic work. However, training for formal employment is conducted in other cities. The existence of training centers does not guarantee that IMW candidates receive adequate training as preparation for working abroad, especially for domestic workers. This is because of the low commitment of P3MI institutions in preparing IMW candidates. It is similar to the experiences shared by **SWI**, a former IMW who has worked in several countries. **SWI** is a 45-year-old woman with a junior high school education. This individual first worked abroad in

Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. Before departure, the woman did not know the rules and requirements for employment in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia and had little familiarity with the Arabic language due to the lack of training. Her most recent employment was in Hong Kong as a caregiver for the elderly, and the training was only received during this time. While in Hong Kong, she learned about employment regulations abroad through personal experiences.

Besides BLK, another institution that is competent in preparing and providing training is vocational high schools. Each vocational high school should also have a Special Job Market (SJM), functioning as a placement agency for the graduates under their expertise, such as medium-skilled workers. Vocational High School 2 Cilacap has established a School-Enterprise Joint Program (SJM) and has proficiently facilitated job placements for its graduates to work abroad. This educational institution, with its SJM, amalgamates the interests of its students and the employment industry by imparting the necessary skills aligned with the job candidates, serving as an investment for their professional pursuits. Upon enrollment in this school, students must decide on preferred majors based on interests and career aspirations. For sending graduates abroad, the SJM collaborates with deployment companies that provide training such as the language and cultural aspects of the destination country. The recruitment process does not require high costs, relieving the burden.

2.3 Investment During Migration Period

A considerable proportion of IMWs opts to work overseas to enhance their standard of living and secure a better financial standing. Additionally, employment abroad endows these workers with knowledge, skills, and experiences as valuable assets upon returning to Indonesia or pursuing professional opportunities in their hometowns and other countries. This can be considered an investment made by IMWs during their migration or while working abroad. Furthermore, skill improvements such as language proficiency in the destination country are one of the returns gained apart from the skills acquired. Moreover, the strong work ethic culture is also a valuable learning experience. Several former IMWs interviewed during the research attested that the work ethic acquired during their abroad employment can be effectively applied upon reintegration to their hometowns or future job opportunities:

SWI, we are used to washing dishes. However, we learn its practicality and speed because the individual there like clean, fast, and practical results.

TON. By working abroad, we learn about discipline and order. Because domestically, this is still lacking... We also obtained a lot of experience but cannot use it here because of the absence of the engine.

The acquired experience through working abroad may also be a valuable investment to pursue overseas employment in the same profession. This is evident from

experience shared by **UMI**, 38 years old, with a high school education, and last worked in Taiwan taking care of the elderly. She aims to resume elderly care services in Taiwan, and fulfilling the mandatory examination requirement is the sole condition for obtaining authorization to travel. This individual gained many skills in caring for the elderly from her first work experience as an asset for future work in Taiwan. **UMI** first worked as a private nurse hired by the patient's family to care for the elderly treated at a hospital.

During training, the elderly I cared for the first time was in the hospital, and then the nurses taught me directly not to call them often. I was taught to suck phlegm, feed through a tube, massage, and give small exercises. There, I got free knowledge...

The training provided within Indonesia solely utilizes dolls, rendering it an indirect approach whereby suctioning phlegm cannot be practiced. The skill of clearing phlegm is scarcely attained locally. Additionally, there exists apprehension that the tube may cause skin abrasions, resulting in the elevation of skin tissue rather than expelling phlegm.

Besides improving language and job-related skills, female IMWs working in Hong Kong and Taiwan also have the opportunity to pursue formal education and courses during off-work hours. There are opportunities in these countries to obtain a degree through Open Universities (OU), in which the learning process is performed online, as stated by some former retired IMW:

Q: ...There is training, but are there schools for that?

A: There are Open Universities

Q: Is it only necessary to attend university during the weekends?

A: Lessons are usually held online. Face-to-face meetings are only held once every two months, and the rest are conducted online.

Q: Is the school paid?

A: Yes, there is a fee for OU, but it is cheap

IMWs may also acquire skills unrelated to their job description due to the opportunities and leisure time for personal development and skill acquisition aligned with their interests, as exemplified by **UMI**'s experience. **UMI** did not take a vacation during her work in Taiwan but attended the training held by the Indonesian community, such as writing. However, she pursued online education on business and ventured into trading beauty and healthcare products online. Knowledge of online business was practiced in Taiwan and continued after **UMI** returned to Cilacap, as explained below.

A: I abstain from taking any leave from my work, hence my preferred method of acquiring knowledge and skills in business involves participating in online learning programs

Q: What kind of online business?

A: I sell beauty and health products

Q: Do the items also come from there?

A: No, from Indonesia, but Japanese and Korean products

Q: Then, you sell the items here?

A: I sell it online, throughout Indonesia and abroad

Q: Is it your current business or at the time there?

A: Since I was there until now

The opportunity to attend courses and formal education may not be available while in Indonesia. Even though the educational pursuits are disconnected from their current employment, they can serve as a valuable investment for the IMWs in augmenting professional standing. Working experience abroad also broadens their horizons and knowledge about job opportunities in other countries. This assists IMWs in making good decisions when selecting the country and job for their next migration after completing the first contract.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, international migration for IMWs can be viewed as an investment in human resources. The process can be divided into investments before and during the migration or while working abroad. There is a significant difference in the investment before departure between IMWs with low education levels, such as elementary or junior high school graduates, and individuals who have completed high school, vocational school, or university education. IMWs with limited education have fewer investment options before departure, as their job prospects, such as domestic work, require minimal competency. The investment made involves training individuals to perform familiar household chores. However, they may need to use modern tools and undergo language training for their destination country. High school graduates who apply for jobs that require certain skills are expected to meet the competency criteria required for the type of work offered by themselves. Meanwhile, vocational school graduates usually acquire these skills during their education. The same applies to university graduates, especially for jobs as elderly caregivers, where the skills obtained in nursing school are very useful in performing their job.

Investment in human resources can also occur during the migration period or while working abroad. In general, individuals in the workforce acquire new job-related skills regardless of their educational level. These skills can serve as valuable assets when applying for jobs either internationally or upon returning to their hometowns. Besides job skills, some IMWs also have the opportunity to take courses. The skills acquired can be used to start personal businesses or make their lives easier upon return to Indonesia. Certain individuals may pursue further education during work breaks through open universities in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Working abroad can provide individuals with valuable insights into work ethics and discipline. Furthermore, foreign language proficiency can be advantageous when working in the same country or returning to Indonesia.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have the same contribution to this article.

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