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Housing needs of migrant women industrial workers in Surabaya: insight from a life story approach

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Abstract

This study examines housing needs of migrant women working on an industrial estate in Surabaya, Indonesia. Information was gathered through a combination of household surveys and life stories. This article presents findings generated through the life story research. Such research places the initiative for what is brought out with the story teller; involves personal interpretation of situations and events by both the teller and the researcher; and promotes cumulative generation of understanding by the latter, through recurrent interaction and continuous reflection.

The approach helped clarify the main factors influencing the migrant workers' perceived need for housing. The women try to adapt by combining values and responding to expectations and demands of two different worlds: the relatively traditional rural community which they came from and the modernized urban society to which they migrated. This process of adaptation is analyzed through three main roles with related norms and expected behaviors: those of rural-urban migrant, young single daughter, and independent income earner. The findings contradict a main message from similar research, namely, that housing choice is primarily determined by price, reflecting a prime concern of the women with satisfying basic material needs. Instead, the choice was found to be much more influenced by a desire to respect norms and behaviors to which the women were socialized at home without excluding themselves from exploiting new opportunities in their present urban environment.

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Keywords: Housing; Life story research; Migration; Indonesia

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1. Introduction

Most women factory workers are migrants who have come from a village to the city for a job. After migration, they have to face a style of living that is different from the life in their village. Most of the migrants are young, and they tend to be relatively receptive to new ideas and lifestyle (Lie & Lund, 1994).

Researchers on migrant women factory workers, in countries such as Thailand, Hong Kong and Malaysia, have concluded that a main concern of the women has been to meet daily expenditures of urban living, primarily for necessities (Yap & Shrestha, 1997; Porpora, Lim, & Promnas, 1995; Salaff, 1981; Lie & Lund, 1994). Moreover, these and other studies have shown that most of the women remit part of their income to their families back home, commonly including contributions to their siblings' education.

However, such studies have tended to neglect or underestimate less tangible and more complex aspects of migrated women's experienced realities and options of choice. The present study explores such issues pertaining to housing, representing a basic necessity indeed for the women in the city. Simultaneously, housing is intimately related to one's sense of self (Bratt, 1989). Consequently, the study duly recognizes individual perceptions of housing needs and affordability and of choices that emanate from these perceptions. Moreover, the perceptions are strongly influenced by wider social norms and concerns of communality, and they are formed in the interface between pressures posed by the women's rural tradition and typical urban lifestyles.

The study was undertaken from 1997 to 1999 in an industrial estate in Surabaya, Indonesia, named Rungkut. Initial data were collected through a survey of 200 estate factory workers, living in seven *kampungs* [compounds] surrounding the estate. This survey was followed by an in-depth analysis of 18 purposively selected women, using the life story research method. The main criteria for selection of the women for detailed study were: first, based on the survey, they were judged as typical unskilled industrial workers; second, they had been in charge of the daily management of their expenditures themselves; third, and largely related, they had decided on their housing on their own; and fourth, they all lived in rented dwellings without any family relationship with the owner.

2. Life story approach

A qualitative research design with participant observation and life stories as the core means of generating information is considered as an appropriate approach for exploring the issue to be addressed in this paper, i.e. housing needs of single migrant women industrial workers. This kind of research includes detailed documentation of situations, people, events and observed behaviors as well as direct quotations from people about their experiences, feelings, beliefs, intentions and actions. Moreover, such description is intertwined with an interpretative mode of analysis.

Life story research is intended to explore individual meanings of lives as they are expressed in the narratives of participants (Plummer, 1996). Over past decades, some social sciences have increasingly recognized story telling of life as a major information source (Burgess, 1994; Murray, 1992; Jellinek, 1991). Personal narratives may be highly effective in bringing the hidden into view (Davies, 1992).

Life stories also transcend the dichotomy of the individual and the society, as the individual and the social worlds tend to be expressed in a highly integrated manner. Thereby, life stories illuminate processes through which persons become both their own creation and social human beings. While the perceived world is shaped within the individual, the way it is so is influenced by discursive processes also involving other people's construction of their worlds (Burgess, 1995; Gilbert, 1992; Patton, 1990)—being fundamental for an ability for constructive interaction. Consequently, in this study, individual meanings of housing needs are perceived as being discursively constructed and re-constructed by individuals in social interaction, through which shared meanings also tend to be created.

Notwithstanding its exploratory nature, life story research may also aim at building theory. To that end, it starts with individual cases and directly expressed experiences, and develops progressively more abstract conceptual categories to synthesize, explain and understand the data and to identify patterned relationships (Charmaz, 1996; Glaeser, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1978).

In life story research, the classical requirements of sampling do not apply. Plummer (1996) suggests two approaches. One is encountering participants largely by chance, in the sense that they are not selected but emerge ad hoc from some wider exploration. The other is purposive selection based on formal criteria, of high relevance for the purpose at hand. The chance encounter seems to have been the most common way of finding participants in this kind of research (Plummer, 1996). The present study, on the other hand, chooses participants through purposive sampling, by the criteria mentioned in the previous section. This is thought to be most appropriate for theory construction (see also Neuman, 1997; Charmaz, 1996; Burgess, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Life story focused interpretative research is inductive, making it fundamentally different from positivist research, being based on a deductive mode of analysis. The researcher becomes the instrument for “measuring” data (Neuman, 1997; Kleinman & Copp, 1990; Collins, 1984). Thus, the researcher's personal feelings and experiences are also important for generating conclusions. Indeed, the researcher considers his or her impressions of observations as data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), whereby knowledge is built through processes of learning.

3. Features of women factory workers in Rungkut industrial estate

Most of the migrant women factory workers are young and single. One hundred and forty six of the 200 respondents in the initial survey (see above) were found to be between 19 and 25 years, while 159 were unmarried. Their education was probably not far from average for this age group in rural areas in Indonesia: none had any university education, 96 had graduated from high school (with eight year of schooling), 90 had completed junior school, and the rest (14) had at least some primary schooling.

The factory workers get paid biweekly. Their total income consists of a basic wage and an “overload” wage. One hundred and twenty six of the surveyed women earned between 100,000 and 200,000 rupiah, 59 more than that, and 15 less. The total earnings were found to depend primarily on the amount of overtime they had. The cost of their rented room (see below) varied between 30,000 and 60,000 rupiah. About half of the respondents were found to remit part of their money to their home village. Most of them participated in *arisan* [the traditional system of

rotating group saving], organized in the factory or in the *kampung*, with contributions of 5000–25,000 rupiah per week (1 US \$ = 8000–9000 rupiah). A few also saved in a bank, primarily for their future wedding.

4. Understanding the woman and housing relationship

4.1. Roles and expectations

The migrated woman industrial worker plays different roles, influenced by two worlds: a relatively traditional rural and a more modernized urban one. It is difficult, if not impossible, to keep the two worlds separate. Consequently, the woman feels obliged to meet expectations from both of them.

One role is that of a young single daughter. By this, she should meet the expectations of her family, in particular her parents, to get married and have children, thereby continuing the family lineage. As a family member, she is also expected to support her parents and any siblings by regularly sending part of her earnings home, or at least by giving money in the form of a gift.

Simultaneously, the woman industrial worker is an independent income earner, having a considerable amount of money at her disposal, in rural economic terms. The money gives her power that a young woman in the village would never have. As an income earner in the city (that is, through a combination of her roles as migrant and independent earner) the young woman also feels expectations and obligations from her urban environment, primarily her urban peer group. She “has to” take care of her appearance, by buying and wearing fashionable clothes and make-up (often advertised by favorite movie stars or singers), and she “has to” frequently invite her friends and roommates for meals. Although such joint meals resemble rural customs, they have become a form of consumptive behavior unknown in the village. In fact, much of the money that the woman spends on food is for treating others in such ways. This contradicts arguments by others (also referred to above) of a limitation of spending to basic necessities only.

Simultaneously, the use of substantial amounts of money on such items of current consumption limits much the ability to spend on other things. It may influence the woman’s readiness to remit money home (half of the workers sending none). And, of direct relevance here, it also effects her ability to pay for housing, in reality limiting her choice to various alternatives of *rumah kost* [rented rooms]. In addition, as we shall see, there are cultural reasons why migrant women industrial workers do not give priority to expensive accommodation, not to speak of buying a house. Their housing preferences are also, like feelings and adaptations in other spheres, shaped by a mix of obligations and expectations from the rural and the urban worlds.

4.2. Maintaining traditional values

In the patriarchal system typical of Indonesia, men are responsible for the income and the protection of their family. Therefore, boys are treated to become leaders, strong, and able to provide the income that is needed. Women are appreciated when they can take care of the general wellbeing of the family. As Moser (1993) states, women in patriarchal societies have triple roles: reproductive, productive and household managing. The impact of a patriarchal system on aspects

such as education is also well known: girls have a lower chance to further their studies than boys, since their most appreciated knowledge is considered to be in cooking, household management, and care for their family members.

This study found that the patriarchal system has an impact on housing tenure as well. Statements by Tri and Sri illuminate main norms in this regard. In Sri's case, the girl who gets married moves to the house of her husband, while in Tri's case, the husband moves in with the girl's family. Still, they share the perception that it is the men who should take responsibility for the housing of the family.

In our village, *mbak* [elder sister], the tradition is that a young woman should be married before she is 15 years old. My father said that marriage is a confirmation that you are a pretty and good girl. Later, if you are not happy, you can always get a divorce; that is okay. However, my mother said it differently: a girl has to marry soon because it will reduce the family's expenditures. When the girl gets married, she will leave her home and stay with her husband. If the boy has no work yet, she will live in the house of the boy's parents.

(told by Sri)

Last year when I went home for *idul fitri* [Muslim festival after fasting], my parents asked me to get married, but I did not want to. ... In my village, it is the tradition that when the first daughter gets married, her husband will stay at her house and the house will be given to him, and the husband will be responsible for all the household expenditures.

(told by Tri)

However, values that are transmitted by friends in the city and by television programmes have some influence on women's ideas about the relationship between gender and housing. The story by Tatic, who had just got married, illustrates such new relations between men and women. She said, among other things:

Before we got married, we decided that we would do everything together. Bagyo is very kind to me. He always helps me wash the clothes and even washes the dishes after cooking. Sometimes, when I have overtime work in my job, he cooks dinner when I am sleeping after work, because I am tired after standing the whole day in the cigarette factory. Now we work together in the city to save money, so that we can buy a piece of farmland in my husband's village.

(told by Tatic)

Still, the patriarchal tradition that daughters have to marry to honor the family's name prevails. The daughter should become a good wife, have children, and be a good mother. Thus, also for the young industrial workers marriage is a perceived destination. All the respondents intended to marry before the age of 25. Many also wanted to save some money for the wedding, and some did. Housing would be taken care of when married.

Other studies have made similar findings. Zhang (1999) found that migrant women workers in China want to earn money, find a husband, and then return to their home village. Changani (1976) found that young industrial workers in Thailand expected to return to their home village or to follow their husband to his village after getting married.

A majority of the respondents in this study came from East Java, and they were found to have a strong attitude of *nrimo* [destiny by God's will] regarding their lives. Koentjaraningrat (1997), as well, states that Javanese villagers accept bad luck and good luck as their *nrimo*. This attitude also affects the perception of housing of the young women industrial workers. As far as they can, they will live for today; tomorrow will have its own challenges.

Mbak, we are *wong cilik* [small people]. It is not good to have high desires. We can wish that someday we will get married to a good man and have a house. But I do not want to struggle for it. Each of us lives with her own *nrimo*.

(told by Sumi)

The story of Nem, as well, reflects the *nrimo* attitude, making her into a lazy worker. She was often absent from the factory for 2 days a month, just to relax and read her favorite novel in her room. Sometimes, she spent a whole day with her boyfriend during working time, and she did not hesitate to visit the researcher's house. When asked why she was absent from the factory, she answered that life can just be planned for a day; tomorrow is uncertain. When asked why she did not work hard so that she could save money and some day buy a house of her own, she replied:

Mbak, I am only *wong cilik*. I have to *nrimo* [accept the will of God]. When I was born, it was already predestined whether I would be a rich woman or not. So, I have never thought about housing. It is enough for me that I can live and sleep in a proper room, although it may not be so comfortable.

(told by Nem)

Mbak, as Javanese people we must accept God's will. We cannot change God's will. And marriage is God's will. We have to be thankful for every day of good fortune. I learnt from my father that each person has her own destiny. But my father also said that we have to be diligent and *nglakoni* [patient in sorrow], because that is God's will.

(told by Parmi)

In summary, the women-housing relationship is influenced by the patriarchal culture and the attitude of "*nrimo*". This includes a destiny to get married, whereby housing will also be provided. Media information may be changing their perception about women's and men's relationships gradually, but marriage and marriage at a young age is still not questioned, and traditional role structures of married couples including the responsibility for housing, still seem to be widely taken for granted.

4.3. Recreating the village environment

The migrated woman realizes that social relations in the urban-industrial society are different from relations in her village of origin. In the village, there is a strong natural affection within the family and the neighborhood, reinforced by a frequent need for mutual help. After migration, the woman gets exposed to a more glamorous lifestyle combined with more impersonal and transactional relationships. The woman industrial worker in the city becomes a more vulnerable individual, responsible for her own behavior. This pushes her to try to develop new friendships

that may provide her with some of the simple, warm and stable human relationships she was accustomed to.

A few researchers have addressed owner–tenant relationships in urban housing. Wahab (1984) found that in Karachi the relationship between landlords and tenants was generally unfriendly. He also provides evidence from Nairobi that in commercialized settlements the relationship between landlords and tenants was generally hostile. In another study of rental housing in Kenya, Amis (1988) claims that the landlady–tenant relationship centered on the payment of a monthly rent, and that the ultimate sanction for non-payment was physical violence and immediate eviction. In contrast, Nelson (1988), based on studies in four cities in Indonesia, found that landlady–tenant relationships were frequently amicable, tending to be based on family-like principles of mutual help.

The present study found that the landlady–tenant relationship mostly included features of a parent–daughter connection. The development of such a relationship between the house owner and the tenant reflects a corresponding felt need of the women industrial workers, as unmarried daughters far away from their own family and the traditions in the village. There, the patriarchal system defines the division of activities. The man is the breadwinner, responsible for the family income; the woman is the *ratu rumah tangga* [queen of the household], taking care of day-to-day household activities. The young women used to help their mother at home, and the boys helped their father in the field, if the father was a farmer. The daughter used to tell her problems to her mother and ask her for guidance. When the young woman starts a new life in the city, the relationship with her mother gets less close. While wanting to enjoy freedoms of the city, she also misses her earlier parent–daughter (particularly mother–daughter) intimacy and the safety of the family environment. Therefore, she tries to find someone who can guide her like her mother did in the village and give her a feeling of safety.

This is well reflected in the fact that the owner often calls their renters *anak-anak kost* [children who rent], and the renters often call the owner *ibu kost* [mother who rents out]. It is also reflected in the fact that most young women industrial workers prefer to stay in rental rooms of houses in which the owner lives as well.

Some of the respondents expressed their feelings as follows:

Mbak, I like to stay in a *rumah kost* for women only. I feel safe there. And I like an owner who can be like my mother. Although my friend says that my *ibu kost* is too strict, I like to be at home before nine o'clock at night.

(told by Umi)

Mr. and Mrs. Djoko are very kind to me. I use to play with their daughter, Rurin. I learn a lot from her. I graduated from primary school in my village. Rurin, *mbak*, is just eight years old and in grade two. Still, sometimes I cannot understand her homework. I also like to read stories for Rurin. She knows many tales too. Sometimes, in the evening, I watch television together with them in their living room.

(told by Tri)

I like to stay here, because Mrs. Marjono is very kind to the tenants. She uses to call us *anak-anak kost*. I use to help her to sweep the backyard and to cook. She sells *singkong goreng* [fried

cassava] in her *warung* [small shop]. After washing the plates, I usually take two singkong, or sometimes when I do not have enough money for dinner, I just buy one instant noodles in her *warung*, and with only 300 rupiah I can cook the noodles in her kitchen and ask a free plate of rice.

(told by Nem)

The story of Titin, however, is different. She lives in company rental housing managed by a landlord who is paid by the company. The landlady–tenant relationship is unfriendly, as Titin complained:

“*Mbak*, none of us likes the landlord, because she is bad to us. She always gets angry with us, like when she finds us ironing with an electric iron, because every room has only 100 watt of electricity. That is enough for a lamp and for a television set, for those who have that. For ironing, you have to pay 2000–3000 rupiah per month extra. Moreover, we are not allowed to have guests stay overnight.”

(told by Titin)

It may appear surprising that Titin did not move to another rental room, in a house where the owner also stayed. However, Titin said that she liked the company rental housing, because it was cheap and clean. And later, she added that she liked to stay because her boyfriend stayed there, too. Moreover, she said she felt secure living together with Tatiek, her neighbor, who comes from the same village. Apparently, she also perceived her as a replacement for her mother, whom she could ask for help and guidance. In other words, Titin could satisfy her need for a mother substitute and personal security in a somewhat alternative way.

4.4. *Recreating togetherness*

When young women industrial workers get a job in the city, they immediately need a place to live and sleep. Often, they stay with a relative or another person known to them, who may also have given them the information about the job. Soon after they receive their first wage, they start looking for their own place to stay.

Having limited life experience, the young migrant women cannot avoid fear of the unknown, and even of dangers such as crime, when they arrive in the city. Living alone causes the worst fear, because in the city people are largely unconcerned about each other. Stories about women who could not get help when their bag was stolen scare others. As mentioned, the women try to protect themselves by selecting kind owners who can replace their absent parents in the city. In addition, they do so by sharing the living room with friends.

However, a recent study in China concluded that migrant women industrial workers did not like to stay in company dormitories, because 40 workers had to share one large floor (Zhang, 1999). Hadi (1988) found a similar attitude in Surabaya; industrial workers did not want to accept the provided municipal housing because 10 persons were intended to stay in one big room.

The present study found the same. While wanting to live together with friends to feel safe, the migrant women did not like to share their room with more than one or two others. The common argument was that more persons would create too much noise. This reflects traditional norms: in

order to keep her reputation as a good girl, a daughter should not speak loudly or laugh too openly. This is reflected in a popular proverb in Java: “*yen wis ono telu cah wadon ngumpul ramene koyok pasar*” [when more than three girls come together, there is more noise than at the market].

Moreover, it was found that a roommate is not just a person to feel safer with, but also a friend with whom the young woman can feel togetherness and intimacy. For this reason, many want to have roommates from the same village, while others want roommates from the same factory. The essential thing is to find one or two persons with whom one can share stories about work, boyfriends and the like, and even cry together with.

After a hard day at work, we are eager to tell a friend just how angry we were at our boss and how unappreciated we felt we were. This helps us to get the problem off our chest.

(told by Titin)

Sharing personal “confidential” information is an important way to begin a relationship and to develop an increasing degree of intimacy. This may also develop into strong solidarity. For instance, during the rainy season, Nem never hesitated to go and meet her roommate, Surti, when she came from work, bringing the umbrella to the corner of the alley where the *bemo* (small public transport van) stopped.

Nem, Surti and Aisyah lived together in one room. Nem said that Aisyah is a friendly but shy girl, and that she does not eat much; that is why she is very thin. She also said:

Yesterday, *Mbak*, I bought new cosmetics. Aisyah took the box and she said that the color of the eye shadow is so beautiful. I knew that she liked it, but she is a simple type that never used to wear cosmetics. So, I said to Surti: “Sur, let’s give Aisyah some make-up”. I was the one who applied the make-up and Surti combed her hair with many golden threads. We were happy because she looked so happy. She fell asleep with full make-up.

(told by Nem)

“We always do *urunan* [pooling money] for cooking. We always take care of each other, too. For instance, I don’t like much chilli, but my roommate likes it a lot. Because of me, she never puts many chillies when she is cooking, but will have her own *sambal* [spice mixture] to add on her own plate.”

(told by Minah)

“*Mbak*, it is nicer to have a roommate than to stay alone, because we can have a close friend to ask advice from when we are in trouble—especially about the relationship with our boyfriend, or when I fight with colleagues in the factory. With a roommate, I have someone at home whom I can share my sadness with.”

(told by Narti)

In rural communities, people tend to live in extended families. In the city, on the other hand, each nuclear family tends to stay in its own place. This sense of togetherness of a bigger (extended) group, being their rural custom, is also reflected in many statements, such as this:

I like to stay at this *rumah kost* because all the tenants here are good and nice. We often help each other, like when it rains: the one who is at home will take our clothes in. We like to wash the clothes together, to cook together and watch the *cinetron* [film on cassette] together. It is very nice, we are *guyub* [harmonious] as one big family.

(told by Nem)

The bathroom, in particular, is like a communal place for the women, where they meet and gossip, while they are waiting in line or washing their clothes. This situation is a reminding of their custom of washing and taking a bath together in the river nearby their village.

5. Conclusion

Although they are independent income earners who live and work in an urban society, women industrial workers in Rungkut see themselves first of all as daughters, because they are young and unmarried. As daughters, they have to meet obligations to marry and to continue the family lineage by having children. Although the views on husband–wife relations are changing under the influence of modern urban culture, most women industrial workers in Rungkut see themselves following their husband after marriage. Since it is the traditional responsibility of the husband to provide housing, and since Rungkut is unlikely to be their place of long-term residence, the women industrial workers do not consider it worthwhile to invest in housing of their own. Therefore, almost all the women industrial workers have rented accommodation.

Expenditures on housing are also related to pressures on the young women for alternative uses of their money. Being independent income earners, they can in principle spend their income more or less the way they want. Still, the pattern of expenditures is strongly influenced by specific role models and social expectations, relating to both their traditional background and to their new urban environment. Apart from the daily expenditures to satisfy own needs, many send money home for their parents or siblings, and a few save in a bank, primarily for their wedding. In addition, they tend to spend much money on clothes and cosmetics, in order to show others that they are urban and modern, and they feel an obligation to treat their roommates and other friends lavishly. This leaves them with relatively little money for purposes such as housing.

Simultaneously, when selecting their housing, other considerations other than financial ones tend to dominate. Being alone in the city and feeling the obligation to maintain the image of good girls and daughters, the place of accommodation assumes utmost importance for the young migrant women. They try to recreate aspects of their home and traditional rural life in the sub-urban compound. To that end, they seek a rental room with an owner who can act as a *pseudo* mother for them, that is, who can look after their needs, make sure that they come home in time, etc. They also try to find roommates who can play roles that siblings and other young relatives and friends played in the village. These roommates give them not only safety and security in an alien urban society, but also a sense of togetherness and intimacy.

The main conclusions are structured in greater detail in [Table 1](#).

Table 1

Migrant woman worker-housing relations

Housing aspect	Woman's role	Housing-related considerations	Type of housing
Housing tenure	Young single daughter	The woman does not think of owning a house, because she perceives housing as something to be prepared after marriage, and to be at least primarily taken care of by her future husband.	She wants a rental room.
Owner–tenant relationship	Young single daughter	The woman feels a desire to re-establish a mother–daughter relationship in her new place of living, and to do so in as familiar a housing environment as possible.	She wants a place where the owner can act as a substitute parent.
Occupancy	Young migrant woman	Having been used to live within closely knit family and village networks, the woman feels uncomfortable and even scared to live alone. In addition, the village culture expects her to do things such as washing, eating and sleeping together with others rather than alone.	She wants to share a room with others.
Cost	Young independent earner	A range of demands on the use of the woman's income—such as treating friends, spending money on clothes and cosmetics for their appearance, felt obligations towards relatives back home, and, sometimes, saving for her future wedding—makes her ability to pay for housing relatively low. Still, cost is not a major consideration, compared with other considerations regarding housing.	She wants a decent room with frequent relatively small rent payments.
	Young single daughter		
Dwelling environment	Young migrant woman	The woman faces the challenge of balancing between traditional rural norms of being a good daughter and aspects of urban culture that may contradict such norms. For managing this situation, she seeks, beside a mother figure, a group of peers that she can communicate openly with and thrust deeply.	She wants roommates and, preferably, a wider group within the same house that she can develop intimate relations with.
	Young single daughter		

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