

NAVIGATING CONSTRAINTS: INDONESIAN WORKERS' EXPERIENCES UNDER KOREA'S EPS

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Abstract: This paper explores the experiences of Indonesian migrant workers in terms of job mobility and agency within the Employment Permit System in South Korea. The research relies on Strong Structuration Theory to analyze how external constraints—legislative laws and control by employers—interact with internal factors such as economic goals and sociocultural barriers that impact migrant workers' decision-making. Semi-structured interviews with Indonesian laborers showed the systemic problems due to sectoral inequalities, such as vulnerabilities brought about in the industry of fishing. Evidence shows restricted job mobility policies heightening the employees' dependence upon the employer, thus limitations to freedom and encouragement towards precarious situations. Employees try to get through such restrictions by strategic choice and through informal networks.

Keywords: Employment Permit System, Job mobility, Strong Structuration Theory, Temporary Labor Migration, Sectoral Disparities, Indonesian migrant workers

INTRODUCTION

Temporary labor migration has become a global strategy to address labor scarcity. Individuals move across borders based on temporary work permits and are often tied to their employer or job for legal status. The system comes in many varieties worldwide—from bilateral labor agreements to temporary work permits—and has been welcomed as a flexible way of supplementing labor market demands in receiving countries.

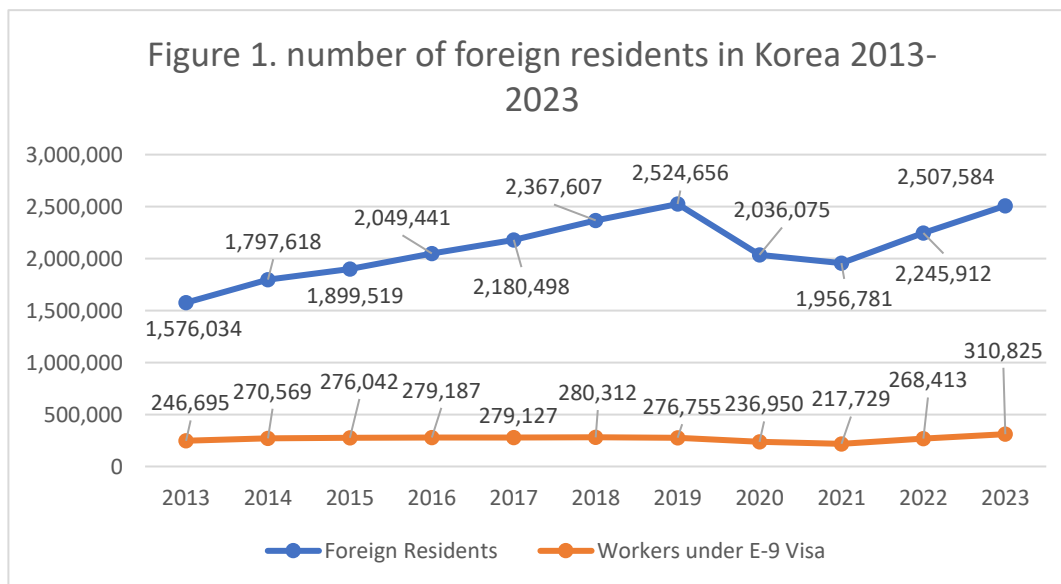
Rising domestic wages and dwindling building projects overseas led South Korea to change from a labor exporter to a labor importer in the late 1980s. A notable flood of migrant workers—mostly from Asian countries—to meet labor shortages in small and medium-sized businesses defined this change (Choi, 2001). Originally designed to solve the unskilled labor shortage in the early 1990s, the Industrial Trainee System met severe backlash for its exploitative character. This prompted the government of South Korea, to establish the Employment Permit System (EPS) in 2004, with the aim of protecting the rights of foreign workers and providing a means of legally doing so (Roh, 2014). By reversing the focus on immigration toward labor market regulations, the EPS became the first law in Korea enacted to protect the fundamental rights of foreign workers. (Kim & Koo, 2016).

The program has been structured in such a way that domestic workers have job opportunities available while businesses are free to choose international labor. It aims to protect their rights for

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legal employment and prevents unlawful residency by not allowing permanent settlement of foreign workers (Ha, 2011). In accordance with the law, foreign workers are only allowed to be employed for a maximum period of four years and ten months in Korea. At the end of the contract, they have to go back home. Workers may apply to switch to a longer visa and possibly settle permanently over time, although the pathway is narrow. The E-9 visa targets workers from Southeast Asia, while the H-2 visa is for workers who are descendants of Koreans. The EPS's G2G method also entails that recruitment is done directly between the governments of Korea and the countries of origin. Applicants are required to take the language and skill tests before their selection (Lim, 2023). Workers can be reemployed upon leaving Korea after their contract has expired under set conditions. They are usually made to wait for a period of one to three months before re-applying from their home country for the E-9 visa. The workers who get re-employed are those who have a clean record, meaning they have not been involved in any illegal activities or unauthorized job changes. There can be an exemption to the waiting period in some areas where the labor shortage is particularly significant.



Source: Ministry of Justice, Statistics on Immigration and Foreign Residents, 2023, October 16, 2024, Status of Foreign Residents by Nationality (Region) and Visa Status.

Figure 1 presents the trend of foreign residents and E-9 visa holders in South Korea from 2013 to 2023. E-9 visa holders represent non-professional employment under the EPS, which has been gradually increasing. While smaller in scale compared to the total foreign resident population, the steady growth of E-9 visa workers underlines the ever-greater reliance on foreign labor to meet demand across areas like manufacturing, agriculture, and construction. Everett S. Lee's push-pull theory maintains that economic problems and a lack of work opportunities at home "push" people from underdeveloped countries, and "pull" them toward the promise of consistent employment and higher wages abroad (Lee, 1966). In this sense, the EPS presents a good option since it helps foreign workers replace significant shortages.

Whereas the EPS may outwardly look very appealing given a number of "pull" factors, the factual realities migrant workers find are often considerably different from prior expectations

(Garelli & Tazzioli, 2020). The system faces criticism for its role as a short-run manpower supply policy without incorporation into South Korean society (Park, 2016). One of the most problematic parts of the system are the restrictions on job mobility. EPS has limitations on the grounds and frequency of changing jobs, which the Korean Constitutional Court supported (Lee, 2022). According to Article 25 of the Foreign Workers Employment Act, a foreign worker can change workplaces up to three times during their initial employment period and up to two times in case of extended employment. These are, however, subject to certain conditions, such as when the workplace has closed down, when the employer has been mistreating them, or when the contract has expired. Additionally, workers must acquire permission from the authorities involved before switching from one employer to another, including the employer (Foreign Workers Employment Act, 2022). Failure to do so may trap workers in undesirable situations, as seen in the tragic case of 31-year-old Cambodian worker Nuon Sokkheng, who died in December 2020 while sleeping in a poorly heated greenhouse on a farm in Pocheon, Gyeonggi Province (Lee, 2020). If one manages to quit, EPS regulations require workers to find employment within three months after leaving their job.

Of South Korea's varied foreign workforce, Indonesians make a sizable and fast rising proportion. With 63,226 Indonesian citizens recorded by South Korea in 2023, it ranks as among the fast-growing migrant populations. Indonesia is a major contributor to the country's foreign workforce with 36,053 Indonesian workers hired under the EPS on an E-9 visa as of 2023 (Ministry of Justice, Republic of Korea, 2023). This means that about 57% of all Indonesians living in South Korea are participating in the EPS program. The other 43 percent reside in Korea with visas such as E-10 (vessel crew), C-3 (short-term visiting) and E-7 (foreign national of special ability). The significant increase of 12,385 Indonesian residents between 2022 and 2023 reflects Indonesia's strategic position as a key supplier of labor to South Korea.

Under the EPS, many Indonesians make major contributions to the labor market for South Korea; however, statistics shows a rising proportion of the population facing difficulties including legal vulnerabilities and illegal status. Data from the Ministry of Justice, Republic of Korea (2023) show that illegal immigration count has consistently increased over years from 355,126 in 2018 to 423,525 in 2023. Former E-9 visa holders continued to be among the top five visa categories with the highest number of illegal immigrants from 2019 to 2023. The number of Indonesians living illegally in Korea has increased, rising from 8,110 in 2018 to 11,806 in 2023.

Figure 2: Number of Illegal Immigrants in Korea

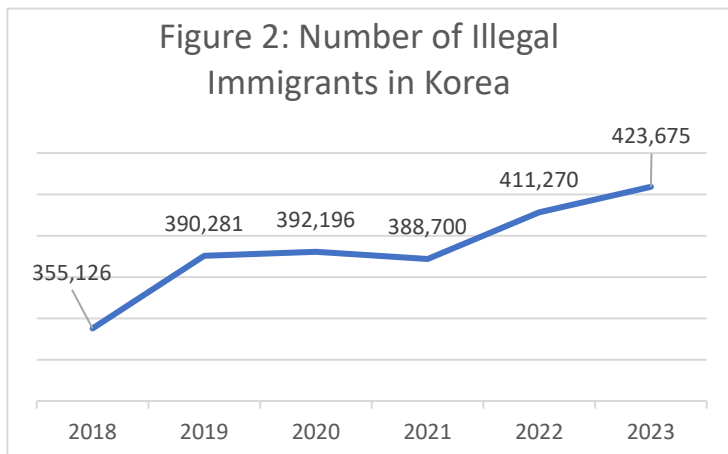
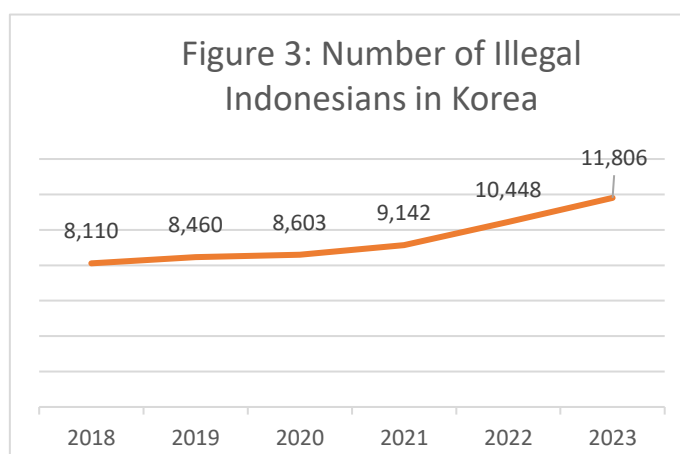


Figure 3: Number of Illegal Indonesians in Korea



Source: *Ministry of Justice, Republic of Korea. (2023). Status of illegal foreign residents by visa type. Retrieved October 24, 2024, from https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=111&tblId=DT_1B040A33&conn_path=I2*

Source: *Ministry of Justice, Republic of Korea. (2023). Status of illegal foreign residents by nationality. Retrieved October 24, 2024, from https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=111&tblId=DT_1B040A36&conn_path=I2*

In the framework of Strong Structuration Theory (SST), developed by sociologist Rob Stones to refine Giddens’s original Structuration Theory, the interaction between structural conditions and human agency is central to understanding social phenomena. According to Stones (2005), individuals are both enabled and constrained by structures. Yet agents are constantly navigating and even shaping these systems. Legal restrictions on job change may not lead to illegal migration per se, but they do force employees to weigh their options carefully and make well-informed decisions within the framework of these regulations. The trend of undocumented migration can be interpreted as actors using their agency to find ways to improve their circumstances or leave an unfavorable one, as well as to circumvent structural restraints. Push-pull factors influence their migration, but overcoming structural barriers inside the EPS determines their journey.

Previous studies on the EPS have pointed out various issues in the system, especially regarding the temporary and regulated employment of migrant workers. Kim and Song (2023) discuss how the dual goals of stringent migrant control and economic productivity create policy contradictions that limit the possibilities for social integration. Such temporary labor rotation ensures the need to fill short-term shortages with migrant workers. Work published by Ha (2011) and Kim and Koo (2016), shows such approaches as leads to constant violation of workers' rights, since it is hardly possible in practice to improve working conditions through change in their place of employment by workers themselves. In addition, the legal analysis by Lee (2022) delves into how the Korean Constitutional Court sustained such restrictions in the face of concerns about how they will harm workers' rights. More specific research has looked at Indonesians' experiences with Japan's Technical Internship Training Program (TITP), a similar visa program. Gunawan and Iskandar (2022) noted that some Indonesian migrants in Japan use unofficial networks to get out of restrictive situations and end up undocumented in the country for better work. Irawati and Iskandar (2022) documented how Indonesian workers in Japan face discrimination in the workplace. Limited job mobility further heightens their vulnerability and are forced to adopt coping mechanisms such as relying on support networks. These studies highlight some common issues that Indonesian workers encounter with Japan's TITP and South Korea's EPS—a wider

pattern of East Asian migration policy that prioritizes economic and security concerns over the rights and mobility of migrant workers.

Despite the growth in studies of both EPS and TITP, specific studies on Indonesian workers under the EPS have been mostly bypassed. This study spotlights Indonesian migrant workers who work under EPS with E-9 visa category. Specifically, it examines how structural constraints such as limited job mobility and the employer-bound visa system shape their experiences and decision-making processes. Additionally, the study explores how these workers navigate these systemic limitations, using Strong Structuration Theory to understand their strategies and challenges.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Strong Structuration Theory (SST) was developed by Rob Stones (2005). SST refines the methodological precision of Giddens's Structuration Theory into an analysis tool capable of tackling higher-scale institutional policies to minute personal acts of individuals. (Stones, 2005).

SST argues that structures are not just outside forces that constrain individuals. Instead, structures are causes as well as results of social practices, and thus actors build and reproduce the structures they are part of by their actions accordingly (Stones, 2005). As explained in the duality of structure, social systems permit agents and restrict agents to act inside current systems or challenge these structures through daily activities. Going beyond this duality, SST emphasizes that social structures depend not only on the application of laws or regulations externally but also on interior structures of knowledge, attitudes, and cultural practices that actors bring with them. Internal structures influence how individuals understand and navigate external constraints (Stones, 2005).

This study adopts Strong Structuration Theory as the analytical framework for a number of reasons. First, SST sets up a sophisticated theoretical underpinning for the interrelationship between structural constraints and agency in complex migration contexts, beyond what conventional approaches are capable of. More conventionally, approaches to migration studies such as political economy models or rights-based perspectives, have emphasized one side or the other in their causes of migration and/or the agency of human actors, thus leaving themselves open to certain gaps in trying to describe dynamic and recursive processes. However, SST overcomes this limitation by emphasizing the dual nature of structure; how it simultaneously permits and restricts agency. Goss and Lindquist (1995) applied SST to Southeast Asian migration studies to see how transnational networks are simultaneously shaped by and serve as instruments for migrant agency. Second, the quadripartite framework that SST adopts—namely, external structures, internal structures, active agency, and outcomes—enhances the analytical acuteness of the theoretical framework in question. The theoretical contextual frames provide a broad view of the structural background and the causal processes of the migratory phenomenon. Finally, the emphasis that SST places on time-space distanciation, a concept taken from Giddens' work (2004), grasps the temporal and spatial dynamics of migration processes. Drawing on this idea, Stones (2005) explains that migration decisions evolve over time and across geographic contexts, reflecting the transnational nature of labor flows. This is valuable for understanding how systemic constraints influence migrant workers' decisions and long-term trajectories.

Table 1. The key components of SST

Component	Description	Examples in Study
External Structures	Regulations, policies, and institutional frameworks that shape workers' experiences under the EPS.	Employer control, legal constraints on job mobility, dependency on employers for job changes.
Internal Structures	Workers' knowledge, dispositions, and cultural practices that influence how they interpret external constraints.	Familiarity with EPS rules, Indonesian cultural values like familial obligations, reliance on social networks.
Agency	Capacity to act within, against, or outside constraints imposed by the EPS system.	Choosing compliance with EPS rules, seeking job transfers, relying on informal networks to navigate constraints.
Cycle of Structuration	Continuous reproduction or transformation of structures through workers' actions.	Reproducing the system through compliance, resisting through undocumented work, adapting through negotiation.

The external structures refer to the regulations, policies, and institutional frameworks that shape the experiences of migrant workers. These external factors are very influential in workers' chances of employment, job mobility, and integration into the workforce. A basis of these outside systems influencing labor migration is laws and the legal framework that guide hiring, employment, and mobility of foreign workers. These regulations have certain limitations that restrict the behavior of the employees.

The migrant workers from Indonesia bring with themselves knowledge, attitudes, and cultural practices—all part of their internal structure. These factors affect workers' perception and implementation of the EPS criteria and their decision-making within the boundaries. The internal structures depend greatly on the understanding of the working system. Indonesian migrant workers possess varying levels of understanding in terms of their rights and responsibilities while working under EPS regulations, job transfer procedures, legal employment constraints, and limitations to employment. According to Gunawan and Iskandar (2022), the Indonesian cultural values of respect for authority and familial responsibilities influence employees' decisions in either putting up with poor working conditions or not taking actions that could jeopardize their job security.

Workers' agency within, against, and beyond the limits set by the EPS system is their possibility of acting. The dynamic interaction between knowledge, cultural norms, social networks, and a set of rules externally structured through their interaction that gives shape to job mobility makes up agency. Workers do decision-making by weighing non-compliance risks against desirable changes in their conditions; it implies that workers exercise their agencies within the context set forth by restrictions imposed via EPS.

The cycle of structuration or the result emphasizes how internal and external structures are always and continuously changed and reproduced by agents. In this respect, Indonesian employees interact with the EPS by either reproducing the system, whereby they follow its rules and regulations, or take active action to change it by resisting, adapting, or negotiating.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences and decision-making processes of Indonesian migrant workers. Qualitative methods are suited to capturing the nuanced interplay of structure and agency in everyday life (Stones, 2005; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Study conducts semi-structured, open-ended interviews with Indonesian workers. According to Brinkmann (2013), semi-structured interviews provide a level of freedom for informants to freely communicate their narratives while addressing important issues linked to the research aims.

The research participants are informants who were sampled through a snowball sampling methodology. Snowball sampling locates the subjects that meet the selection criteria of the research through taking advantage of the subjects' own networks (Bryman & Bell, 2019). All four of the chosen individuals are Indonesian nationals who are either currently or have previously worked under the EPS in South Korea. Snowball sampling was particularly useful given the geographical dispersion of informants and the challenges associated with accessing migrant worker communities. All interviews lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, with an assurance of confidentiality to the interviewees to make them more forthcoming (Marvasti, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), considering the sensitivity of disclosing undocumented status. Eight main themes were explored through a series of questions including basic information, pre-departure

Table 2. Informant Data

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Hometown	Education	Employment Sector
Raka	Male	27	Magelang, Jawa Tengah	Vocational High School (SMK)	Manufacturing
Bayu	Male	30	Kediri, Jawa Timur	High School (SMA)	Manufacturing
Ardi	Male	26	Karawang	Vocational High School (SMK)	Manufacturing
Fajar	Male	34	Cirebon	High School (SMA)	Previously Fishing, Now Manufacturing (Undocumented)

preparations and motivations, job selection, working experiences, barriers faced, job mobility, and system reflections and how they advised their decision-making.

Data from the interviews were coded and subjected to thematic analysis, using a coding framework enabled by MAXQDA software, in order to identify relevant patterns and themes in the responses of the informants. The study objectives, SST, and an initial analysis of the interview transcripts informed the iterative development of the initial coding system. Codes were then grouped into thematic groups of external structures, internal structures, agency, and outcome; the key themes from the quadripartite framework of SST. The coding process started line by line for all transcripts in MAXQDA. Considering the complexity of the data, large portions were highlighted and labeled variously. For example, a quote describing a fishing sector worker trying to leave the industry could be labeled with "Job Mobility Challenges," "Employer Control," and "Worker Resilience" altogether to portray its multifaceted nature. The study conducted proximity

and intersection analyses to identify relationships among codes. Proximity analysis was used to identify themes or patterns that recurred across the dataset by measuring the frequency with which different codes appeared closely within the same interview segments. Intersection analysis was used to investigate the overlap of certain codes.

Geographical dispersion of the informants and the delicate nature of the subjects that had to be addressed were the practical hurdles that had to be overcome in order for the data to be collected. The goals of the study were explained to the informants by the researcher, who then protected their identities by using pseudonyms and not including specific details that could reveal their workplace. According to Marvasti (2004), the positionality of the researcher may influence data interpretation. The researcher maintained a reflexive approach throughout to avoid the element of bias.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: JOB MOBILITY AND WORK-RELATED FACTORS

The limitations on job mobility within the EPS arise from a combination of legal frameworks and employer control, creating an environment where workers' autonomy is constrained by strict regulations. Workers are not allowed to move between sectors and job mobility can only happen within the same sector with employer's consent. Proximity analysis revealed frequent co-occurrence of the codes "Job Mobility Challenges," "Employer Control," and "Limited Agency," meaning there are systemic barriers embedded within the EPS framework. Agency helps to elucidate how workers navigate these restrictive systems. Here, agency is not defined as complete freedom but rather as the capacity of workers to make decisions within the limitations imposed by the EPS.

Workers from Indonesia see the fishing industry in South Korea as their last resort because of the challenging conditions. There was a clear narrative among informants that the fishing industry was less desirable than manufacturing due to its physically demanding and socially isolating nature. Raka, Bayu, and Ardi expressed a clear preference for manufacturing, citing better working conditions and more opportunities for job mobility. Their preference reflects the strategic use of internal structures, such as sectoral knowledge and personal goals, to maximize stability within the EPS framework. Indonesian workers (not all but mostly) go through an educational institution, or a sending organization called 'LPK (Lembaga Pelatihan Kerja)'. According to the Ministry of Manpower, Republic of Indonesia (n.d.), there are 300 registered LPKs in Indonesia. LPK provides language lessons, job trainings, or cultural educations depending on the targeted receiving country. Ardi notes that his time in LPK was mostly focused on learning Korean language because he knew he had to work hard to get the desired score to apply in manufacturing sector. While the rest of the informants replied that they learned Korean for anywhere in between three to six months, Ardi honed his Korean skill for almost a year. At the end, he was able to get an exceptionally high score in his Korean qualification test and avoided working in fishing sector.

Workers' dependency on employer approval for job transfers illustrates the unequal distribution of power. Baldwin (1978) characterizes power as relational and dependent on interdependence, while Blau's concept of exchange asymmetry (1964) highlights how workers' reliance on employer goodwill often fails to yield equitable outcomes. Fajar's experience in the fishing sector epitomizes these dynamics. Despite his awareness of the EPS transfer process, his employer's refusal to authorize a transfer trapped him in abusive conditions. With just him and his employer on the ship, he could not get a proper recording of the moments of violence on his own. Fajar's testimony reflects this:

For the fishing sector, I already knew from the start that this work would be physically and mentally demanding, especially if working with a boss who is harsh. Sometimes I was treated like this, beaten, yelled at, and even threatened. I tried to request a transfer, but my boss refused to sign the papers. I had to endure, even though working at sea is very tough, I knew the risks. But after being treated like that, I couldn't take it anymore, I had to leave.

Fajar's decision to leave, despite the risks, exemplifies a form of resistance against structural constraints, albeit at significant personal cost. His experience highlights the structural vulnerabilities that workers in isolated sectors face. Systemic constraints can perpetuate cycles of exploitation within the EPS.

Informants in the manufacturing sector, Raka, Bayu and Ardi, reported fewer barriers to job mobility. They described stable working conditions and positive relationships with their employers, which provided them with greater flexibility to navigate their roles within the EPS framework. A sector-specific external framework can produce unequal agency experiences for workers, as seen in the relatively easy mobility in manufacturing. The respondents' internal structures, such as their familiarity with sectoral distinctions and their dependence on informal networks for direction, were significant in their selection of manufacturing. For instance, Raka knew several distant cousins who worked in Korea before. He mentioned that he was able to get valuable tips and tricks about work life and condition before applying to LPK. This demonstrates how workers' individual actions and internal structures—such as knowledge and informal networks—can mitigate systemic limitations.

All informants, regardless of industry, acknowledged the difficulty of the EPS job-change process. Employer consent emerged as a major obstacle. Informants described the process as reliant on “luck” due to the necessity of obtaining an employer's signature. The failure to secure consent often led to undocumented status in extreme cases, creating a precarious situation for workers. Also, the fact that workers are not allowed to move between sectors legally added heavily to the decision-making of the workers. Raka noted:

From what I've heard, most of those who become undocumented are people who moved from the fishing sector. In fishing, they experienced things like violence, low wages, and high work risks, so they moved to the manufacturing sector. But because they couldn't choose their sector, they had to become undocumented.

Raka shed light on another dimension of structural control, describing the obligatory nature of overtime work in his manufacturing job:

Actually, in this company, we generally have mandatory overtime of 2 hours, making it a 10-hour workday. Then, if there's additional overtime, it usually goes until 10 PM. We start work at 8 AM. By 7 AM, we're already getting ready for work, and from 8 AM to 7 PM, we work. If there's additional overtime, it goes until 10 PM.

While he acknowledged the physical toll it takes, he emphasized his decision to comply with the system rather than attempt a job change, stating that he "didn't want trouble." In his book about power and society Blau (1964) posits that individuals comply with authority when alternatives are absent. Bayu and Ardi echoed this sentiment, emphasizing their preference for enduring difficult

conditions over risking the complications of navigating the job transfer process. Plus, Bayu, Ardi and Raka stressed how “blessed” they consider themselves compared to many others around them. Bayu mentioned stories he heard from other Indonesians including instances such as delayed payment, poor living conditions and discrimination that comes with verbal violence. Here it is evident that there are sectoral disparities between fishing and manufacturing, but disparities still exist even in the same sector, again depending on one’s “luck”.

Despite the challenges, all informants demonstrated strategic decision-making within the boundaries of the EPS, although with varying degrees of success. Fajar’s unsuccessful attempt to change his job in the fishing sector highlights the limitations of formal mechanisms in addressing abusive conditions, whereas Raka, Bayu, and Ardi showcased the potential for agency when structural flexibility allows for negotiation.

ECONOMIC PRESSURES AND WORKER STRATEGY

Economic incentive is perhaps the biggest motivation for Indonesian workers to seek job overseas. A survey indicates that 73% of Indonesian migrant workers cite financial reasons as their primary reason for seeking employment in foreign countries (Sembada et al., 2024). The proximity analysis revealed a strong connection between the codes "Economic Pressures," "Family Considerations," and "Worker Strategy," demonstrating how financial incentives play a pivotal part in determining whether employees will adhere to or fight against restrictions that limit their ability to move about within their current jobs. Financial motivation not only attract Indonesian workers but also keep them compliant. Due to both immediate and long-term pressures, workers are driven to negotiate these structural constraints, usually by using agency within the confines set by the system. Workers' different strategies expose their challenges to balance future aspirations, the restrictions of their legal status, and material needs.

Migration costs, including recruitment fees, transportation, and medical exams, accumulate before employment. Raka and Bayu borrowed funds from family, adding financial strain, while Ardi and Fajar saved beforehand, illustrating how preparedness and circumstances influence outcomes. Despite these differences, all informants noted they could recoup relocation costs within three to four months of starting work, emphasizing the economic appeal of the EPS despite structural drawbacks.

The timeliness and limitations experienced by older workers are shown by Fajar's experience. He was worried that his chances of success in the competitive manufacturing industry would be diminished due to his age, so he migrated swiftly at 34 years of age. Fajar mentioned that he could not afford to keep on paying and waiting until he gets a better score in Korean proficiency test. The difficult conditions of fishing weren't going to deter him from seeing it as his only urgent job alternative. Lee (1966) outlined a set of push-and-pull variables that lead people to take on riskier and more difficult tasks due to financial constraints and the fear of losing out on other career chances. Strategic considerations played a role in Fajar's choice to enter the fishing industry, but the time-sensitive nature of migration policies and the inherent constraints imposed by age also played significant roles.

All informants stressed the importance of supporting families in Indonesia. With children, Raka and Bayu viewed migration as a temporary means to save money for business ventures upon returning home. Bayu stated:

First, I want to build a house for my family, especially for my wife and child. Second, I want to gather capital. In the future, I want to start a business. I want to return to

Indonesia because my family is there. I don't want to stay here for long, just to gather capital and go home.

Plans to return to Indonesia are in line with the principles of return migration theory, which states that people frequently use temporary migration as a means to reintegrate economically into their home country (Castles & Miller, 2009). Both Raka and Bayu made clear that they do not wish to stay in Korea after the first contract. To them, economic incentive was the only reason why they chose to work under the EPS. The two informants stated that they know neighbors or cousins who went through EPS to gather money and successfully started their own business back home; giving them confidence that they could too. This adds more reasons to comply with the system and achieve their goal as fast as they possibly can.

Ardi on the other hand expressed his desire to build his life in Korea. He was the only informant who had the knowledge of how to apply for a long-term visa; he gained information through government websites. His motivation to stay compliant is a combination of economic incentive and future dream of moving up to a more permanent state. Despite the challenges of undocumented work, Fajar expressed a long-term goal of building a future for his family in Korea, showcasing his effort to reinterpret agency within a constrained system by balancing immediate survival with future aspirations.

The several strategies taken by workers, who are both limited and enabled by the external constraints, reflect duality of structure. Intersecting data revealed overlaps between the codes "Economic Goals" and "Limited Agency", meaning financial constraints hinder workers' ability to combat systemic challenges and compel them to endure difficult conditions.

CULTURAL ADAPTATION, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND WORKER AGENCY

The proximity analysis highlights the interconnection of "Language Barriers" and "Social Isolation" in shaping workers' experiences. Informants noted that the Korean language test they completed before migrating did not sufficiently prepare them for the nuanced demands of workplace communication. The hierarchical nature of East Asian cultures, regional dialects, and business jargon further compounded their challenges with understanding Korean.

The informants expressed a lack of Korean contacts to turn to in times of workplace emergencies or conflicts. This lack of recourse to local networks reinforced their dependency on shelters and other informal support systems and also limited their cultural knowledge gain. All informants stated that understanding strictly hierarchical culture in their workplace was very difficult. East Asian countries including China, Japan and Korea are strongly influenced by Confucianism, emphasizing respect for hierarchy and authority. This leads to a more structured and formal workplace atmosphere (Cheng, 1990). According to Lowe et al. (2015), Southeast Asian countries exhibit a more diverse cultural influence leading to a more flexible and adaptive work culture. Conflict management also tends to be more avoiding and integrative (Onishi & Bliss, 2006). Informants mentioned how Indonesians prefer to avoid direct confrontation while Koreans show more competitive manner in the same situation. Combined with the lack of proper Korean skill, workers are in difficult position to speak up for themselves when met with unfair treatment. In Fajar's case, there were communication problems and the necessity to prove his allegations that made it difficult for him to receive shelter assistance in his escape from abusive working conditions. Fajar expressed the stress of not being able to communicate properly in times of trouble:

If there was a miscommunication, the boss would get angry. Sometimes his anger even turned physical. I couldn't explain because my Korean wasn't good enough. If I tried to explain, he'd get angrier. In the end, I just stayed quiet. I didn't know who to report to because it was just me and the boss on the ship.

In this context, language barriers, cultural difference and the lack of networks function as external structures that constrain agency.

Granovetter's concept of weak ties (1973) emphasizes the importance of less intimate relationships in accessing new information and opportunities. For Indonesian workers, weak ties with peers or community organizations provided critical resources and practical advice that were unavailable through their strong ties, such as family. Raka, Bayu, and Ardi benefited from living and working within Indonesian communities, where they found emotional and practical support to help them adapt to cultural norms and overcome job-related difficulties. Both Ager and Strang (2008) and Lin, Cook, and Burt (2001) concur that migrants adapt most successfully when they have strong informal networks, particularly where official support systems are inadequate. However, Fajar's experience in the fishing industry highlights the limitations of social networks in remote areas. The role of bonding social capital within ethnic communities underscores the importance of cultural familiarity in mitigating social isolation, while the absence of bridging social capital highlights systemic barriers to integration (Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001). His physical isolation on a ship cut him off from his peers, and seeking external support became significantly more challenging. Geographical barriers, as an external structure, compounded the difficulty of leveraging both formal and informal networks.

The informants' degrees of agency were also influenced by their education, social networks, and resource availability. For instance, Ardi demonstrated proactive adaptation by leveraging his Korean language skills to maintain contact with a Korean friend despite geographical distance. In times of trouble Ardi shares his emotions and concerns with the local friend. He also mentioned gaining a subsequent amount of knowledge on Korean work culture and how to "please" his employer from his friend. Pizziconi & Iwasaki (2022) argue that native friends provide insights into vague cultural concepts that are crucial for understanding the language in context. Repetition, or practice is also essential for language retention (Pimsleur, 2013). Although small, his connection to a local Korean provides him chances to practice the language and culture in advance. In contrast, Raka, Bayu and Fajar experienced limited engagement with local Koreans, highlighting the impact of physical and social segregation. Living within close proximity of factory grounds further restricted Raka and Bayu's exposure to Korean culture and language practice. All three of them stated that they have no local Koreans who they considered a friend. Singh et al. (2022) noted that insufficient cultural knowledge significantly hinder migrants' ability to integrate effectively. Without any meaningful local connection, workers' dependency on informal network becomes even greater.

Not only informal networks but also shelters and formal support systems also played a critical role during crises. All informants identified shelters as their primary resource during workplace or personal emergencies. Bayu and Ardi mentioned the same shelter as their primary go-to: the Chungcheongnam-do Foreign Resident Integration Support Call Center. According to the latest data retrieved from Chungcheongnam-do (province) Foreign Resident Integration Support Call Center (2024), 6,353 foreigners came to the shelter for help in November 2024. Workers with E-9 visa (under EPS) was on the top of the list with 3,591 cases. The number of supports provided in Indonesian language was 861 cases, making it the 3rd most common language

used in the shelter after Vietnamese and Russian. Raka emphasized the importance of shelters having staff who spoke Indonesian, which eased communication and helped workers navigate complex issues:

When I have trouble managing documents like bank account issues, I contact the shelter here. They have interpreters.

This accessibility made shelters invaluable, particularly for those without local Korean networks, providing not only legal and logistical assistance but also reassurance in navigating an unfamiliar environment. These findings feature the importance of both formal support systems and informal networks in empowering migrants to adapt and assert agency in challenging circumstances. However, informants Bayu and Raka briefly mentioned that few other shelters they used to know closed down recently. According to Jeonbuk National University, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (2023), South Korean government decided to allocate zero budget for the foreign workers support centers under the Ministry of Employment and Labor for the year 2024. The budget in the previous year was approximately 7.1 billion won. Despite increasing the number of workers under EPS to 165,000 from 120,000 in 2024, the ironic decision to cut shelter help contradicts EPS's principle of protecting worker rights. By March 2024, six of the closed regional centers reopened in response to the new government project "Foreign Workers Regional Settlement Support Project" (Choi, Jeong, & Lee, 2024). The reopened centers are operating on significantly reduced budget and staffing. Additionally, 35 smaller regional centers are now struggling to maintain their operations. Less access to formal support could push workers towards informal network, repeating the cycle of social isolation and limiting workers' agency within the system.

CONCLUSION

Financial incentives emerged as a crucial factor in workers' compliance with the system. When asked about their aspirations, most informants emphasized financial stability for their families and the ability to save for the future as key motivators for their satisfaction with EPS wages. These financial goals often led workers to accept the system's constraints and comply with its demands. However, data also indicated that workers might turn to coping mechanisms, including becoming undocumented or seeking shelter assistance in extreme circumstances, such as verbal or physical abuse. While the study's small sample size limits conclusions about broader trends among Indonesian workers, a pattern of systemic issues in the fishing sector was evident. All informants were aware of Indonesians who had left the fishing industry and become undocumented migrants, underscoring the need to address abusive conditions, structural isolation, and employer dominance in the sector. Sociocultural factors, such as language barriers and social isolation, further constrained workers' agency. Limited Korean language proficiency and the absence of meaningful social connections with Koreans hindered workers' ability to navigate workplace conflicts or advocate for themselves. These challenges functioned as external structures that significantly restricted workers' capacity to act independently within the EPS framework.

In combination with employer-bound visa which acted as the biggest hurdle in job change procedure, it was evident that the structural challenges were effectively suppressing Indonesian workers' agency. Yet the degrees of suppression differed among the informants, which was heavily affected by their internal structure. Some effectively navigated around hardships while others went through far more unfortunate experience. The EPS is designed to balance economic utility with

migration control, but this balance often compromises worker mobility and agency. Indonesian workers' experiences illustrate how they navigate these structural constraints through resilience, strategic decision-making, and, at times, resistance. In particular, the vulnerabilities in the fishing sector emphasize the urgent need for policy reforms. Addressing employer dependency, creating more flexible job mobility pathways, and investing in linguistic and social integration programs are critical to aligning EPS practices with its objectives. By doing so, the framework can promote both economic efficiency and worker dignity.

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