

Reconceptualising ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘self’: Identity struggles in domestic migrant worker returnee narratives

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Abstract

This article reports on a study of domestic migrant worker returnee narratives. The stories were recorded in villages in Java, Indonesia, and the women talk about their experience of remigration. Because of years of separation, family members are ‘family’ only in name, and the familiar concept of ‘home’ has become a strange place. The homecoming therefore involves attempts to redefine ‘self’ and ‘home’, and to reconnect emotionally with estranged family members. The article also considers returnee narratives as a critique of current identity research, which assumes that everybody ‘has’ or ‘owns’ an identity, but fails to recognise that for many people in developing countries, identity is an enforced position for which there is no alternative. It has to be occupied and it is not attributed with any prestige and therefore, cannot be used a resource for enhancing privilege. Finally, the article argues that migrant workers’ experiences should be included in our thinking about globalisation and intercultural communication.

Keywords: domestic migrant workers, returnee narratives, discourse analysis, identity struggles, disenfranchised groups, globalisation

Introduction

Inequality is one of the driving forces of globalisation (Blommaert, 2010). It drives labour-intensive production to developing countries where labour is cheap, and it instigates the push-and-pull mechanism, pushing poor migrant workers away from poverty and unemployment in their home countries and pulling them towards affluent societies with promises of jobs, better pay and the prospects of upward social mobility. Governments in developing countries and employment agencies have joined forces and labelled labour export as a win-win situation, which simultaneously addresses unemployment in developing countries and labour shortage in developed countries. However, what these accounts fail to recognise is the detrimental consequences migration has for migrant workers and their families. Particularly migrant mothers are caught in a terrible dilemma: staying at home means continued poverty for the next generation; leaving home means subjecting themselves and their loved ones to years of separation.

The Philippines is one of the world’s largest exporters of labour with close to 10 million migrants working overseas. Another key player in labour export is Indonesia with currently an estimated 4.5 million migrant workers overseas, but the number is sharply increasing with close to 700,000 new migrant workers leaving Indonesia every year. Around 80% of the migrant workers who are currently leaving Indonesia in a steady flow every year are women. They work as domestic helpers, typically in

the Middle East or in other Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. They usually work on short-term contracts with no security and low pay, and they do it because it allows them to send much-needed remittances to their families back home.

The majority of Indonesian domestic migrant workers (DMWs) go to Middle Eastern countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, for their first contract. They do it because they believe that their Muslim brothers and sisters will treat them well, and because it may offer them an opportunity to make the holy pilgrimage. However, several studies have shown that these women are often subjected to inhumane treatment and appalling working conditions (Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004; Vlieger, 2012). Another factor that adversely affects migrant women's lives in the Middle East and in some Asian countries is that virtually no migrant worker laws exist to protect their rights, or the laws that exist are inadequate or are not being enforced. No receiving countries in the Middle East has a minimum wage requirement, stipulation of working hours or statutory holidays, and this puts migrant women in a vulnerable position and indirectly condones exploitation.

Scholars in intercultural communication have emphasised the need to engage with less privileged groups such as migrant workers and asylum seekers and let their experiences inform our thinking about globalisation (MacDonald & O'Regan, 2012). And anthropologists have advised that scholars should focus their attention not just on DMWs' lives in the diaspora but also on their experiences of remigration (Constable, 1999). This article aims to fill these gaps by analysing DMW returnee narratives as they were reported in small-group sharing sessions in villages in East and Central Java in Indonesia. Stories were also recorded in Bohol in the Philippines but they are not included in this article. Some of the women who participated in this study were part of my research on DMWs' life stories in Hong Kong (Ladegaard, 2017a). Some of them had stayed at a church shelter and had participated in sharing sessions there; some of them had overstayed and had shared their stories with me prior to their deportation from Hong Kong. The purpose of the fieldtrips was to visit these women after their return to their homeland and record their coming-home narratives.

The Study

Background

The research that is reported in this article is part of a larger on-going study of Filipina and Indonesian DMWs' life stories. Stories were recorded once a week over a 4-year period in Hong Kong at a church shelter that provides temporary accommodation to DMWs whose contract has been terminated, or who have run away from abusive employers. I was a volunteer at the shelter and conducted sharing sessions with newcomers to get the details of their cases documented. I soon realised that these stories of abuse and exploitation needed to be documented and shared with a larger audience, so the project was turned into a research project while I continued my work as a volunteer at the shelter.

As the stories accumulated over time, and as I met increasing numbers of migrant workers who had been deported, or who wanted to leave Hong Kong because of

experiences of abuse, I became interested in the next chapter in these women's lives: their experiences of remigration after several years as migrant workers overseas. In the sharing sessions at the shelter, their anticipated return was often mentioned, but rarely as something they looked forward to, and the questions they contemplated, which became core topics in the next phase of the project, included: How to reconnect and bond with children they have never spent much time with, and with husbands with whom they have had little or no chance to be intimate for years on end? And how to fit into a village with no electricity and running water after years in urban centres, and reconnect with neighbours who might never have left the village?

The Fieldtrips

The two fieldtrips were organised in close collaboration with local migrant worker NGOs. Through the Hong Kong branch of these NGOs, I received invitations from migrant worker NGOs in Indonesia and the Philippines to visit villages with large numbers of migrant worker returnees. I was also scheduled to visit former clients and residents from the NGOs I had worked with in Hong Kong. I spent 3-4 weeks in each country and travelled around East and Central Java in Indonesia and around Bohol in the southern part of the Philippines with a driver and an interpreter. The women had been contacted prior to my arrival by the migrant worker NGOs and asked if they wanted to meet with me and share their stories.

Most of the women were sharing their stories in groups of 4-8 people; some women preferred to talk to me and/or the interpreter without their friends present. Each sharing session lasted 1-2 hours; it was recorded and transcribed by a bi- or multilingual speaker of Bahasa, Javanese and English (for the Indonesian data) and Tagalog and English (for the Filipino data). A total of 107 migrant worker returnees participated in the sharing sessions: 67 in Java and 34 in Bohol, in addition to a pre-departure sharing session with six Indonesian women who had been deported from Hong Kong.

In most of the migrant villages we visited, I stayed with one of the migrant families and this provided me with the opportunity to observe and participate in life as it is lived in migrant worker communities. What was striking in all the communities I visited was the lack of employment opportunities. All sending migrant worker communities in Java and Bohol are characterised by extremely high unemployment, and only in one of the 19 villages I visited was there an employment opportunity for the returnees: a palm oil factory that provided contract work which paid IDR20,000 (US\$1.5) for a 10-hour workday.

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

The research is informed by methodological and analytical concepts from anthropology and sociolinguistics. It uses the concept of sharing sessions (as opposed to interviews) where the key concept is the idea of *sharing* life stories and experiences. There was no interview guide or pre-defined research questions; rather, the aim was to get the women to tell stories that are important to *them*. Only three general questions were used to introduce the sharing sessions (with occasional follow-

up questions): 1) What was it like to be a migrant worker; 2) What was it like to come home? 3) What are you thinking about the future? Some groups never got past the first question because they had so many painful stories to share about their overseas work experience, while other groups focused more on the coming-home narratives, which will be the focus in this article. The stories were collected using the ethnography-of-communication approach (Saville-Troike 2003), which emphasises the need to observe the research site and include as much contextual information as possible in the interpretation of data. Staying with and talking to migrant worker families was invaluable in terms of understanding their lives and experiences and realising that becoming a migrant worker really *is* the only viable option for many of them. The four years I had spent at shelters in Hong Kong also provided me with background information, which helped me interpret the returnee narratives.

Another framework that has been important for understanding how narratives are conceptualised is social constructionism (Burr, 2015), which argues that narratives are situated and dynamic discursive constructions. It claims that when people talk (and tell stories), they also present and negotiate social identities. A social constructionist approach to storytelling would question the assumption that stories are given, and that they represent underlying psychological states. Rather, stories – and the identity positions they portray – are constructed in discourse, and the construction involves not just the narrator but also the audience. It would see talk and storytelling as constitutive of context and the people who talk/narrate as social actors (Augoustinos, Walker & Donaghue, 2014). Narratives in sharing sessions are very much co-constructed. Even when there seems to be only one storyteller, other group members' verbal and non-verbal input is an integral part of the story. Ochs and Capps (2001) suggest a continuum between the 'default narrative' with only one active storyteller at the one end, and a dynamic, co-constructed narrative with multiple tellers at the other. They claim that the default narrative, which has been the object of most research, is quite rare in group-conversation. Even if there is seemingly only one storyteller, other group members also take part via subtle (para)linguistic means, or by means of their very presence, and thus, become co-participants in the development of the narrative (Ladegaard, 2017a).

The narratives have been analysed using a framework that combines Toolan's (2001) attention to linguistic detail with a narrative therapy approach (White & Epston, 1990). Toolan (2001) argues that analysts need pay attention to both narrative structure and function, and by closely analysing the linguistic components of narratives, we also get important information about the narratives themselves, their narrators and co-narrators, and their audiences. According to the narrative-therapy approach, we live storied lives and people should therefore be encouraged to tell their stories in order to make sense of past experiences because "our stories do not simply represent or mirror lived events – they constitute us, shaping our lives and our relationships" (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007 p. ix). A key assumption in narrative therapy is therefore that helping people to reinterpret and change their life stories will eventually help them change their actual lives.

Data Analysis

In response to the second question above: What was it like for you to come home?, the women shared a large number of diverse stories, but with common themes. This section of the article will explore three recurring themes in the coming-home narratives: the need to reconceptualise the concepts of ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘self.’

Reconceptualising ‘Home’

In the first example, six migrant worker returnees in a village in Central Java are discussing what it was like for them to come home. The women have compared their overseas experience to years of fasting, and coming home is like *idul fitri*, celebrating the end of the Ramadan. This is the background for Dindra’s remark in line 1. A female interpreter (Int) and a male fieldworker (FW) were present in all the sharing sessions (transcription conventions in the Appendix).

Excerpt 1

Dinda, 36 years, 2 years in United Arab Emirates (UAE), 2 years in Malaysia, 2 years in Kuwait, back since 2007; **Wani**, 39 years, 2 years in Taiwan, 2 years in Hong Kong (HK), back since 2010; **Harum**, 38 years, 2 years in Saudi Arabia (SA), 2 years in Taiwan, 3 years in HK, back since 2007; **Mita**, 36 years, 9 years in Singapore, 2 years in HK, back since 2013; **Nini**, 48 years, 4 years in Singapore, back since 2006 (Original in Bahasa (B), English (E) and Javanese (J)).

1. Dinda: but there are also many who come back and divorce (B)
2. [general laughter]
3. Wani: divorce and marry again (B)
4. Int: has anyone experienced it? (B)
5. Mita: yes [laughs] the first husband [laughs] (B)
6. Harum: this is her second husband (B)
7. Mita: now it’s the second husband, when I first left, he was left
8. behind and married again (B)
9. Nini: left behind, marry again (B)
10. Int: she’s experienced it before (E) [quietly to researcher]
11. Mita: so I have to [laughs] I try to [laughs] (E)
12. Nini: so many cheating husbands (B)
13. Mita: the first husband already divorced again, has one son (E)
14. FW: was that because you were a migrant worker (E)
15. Mita: yeah, because I worked there, so my husband cheated, take
16. other women [laughs] take a beautiful girl [laughs] (E)
17. Dinda: also the same with me (J)
18. Wani: Indonesian migrant workers have many problems (1.5)
19. yeah, family problems because the husbands are left behind (B)

The multi-party discourse in Excerpt 1 follows a number of narratives in which the women have talked about the pains of being overseas: the separation from their families, the loneliness, the anxiety involved in working for an abusive employer, and, the constant fear that their husbands may take another woman while they are away. When ‘the light of the home’, the role of the mother and wife in traditional

migrant worker families (Asis, Huang & Yeoh, 2004), disappears, she also gives up controlling the home, and that leaves space for another woman to take her place. This problem was brought up at least once, sometimes repeatedly, in each and every sharing session, and there is no doubt it is a serious problem. Nini's comment in line 9 sounds almost like an adage: "left behind, marry again" suggesting that this phenomenon is an integral part of these women's lives and experiences.

Note how Mita phrases the problem: "because I worked there, so my husband cheated" (line 15), and Wani concludes the discussion by saying "family problems because the husbands are left behind" (line 19). The women identify themselves as being indirectly responsible for their husbands' infidelity. In another sharing session in Central Java, Dita, a 33-year old returnee who spent six years in the Middle East, puts it like this:

I heard it from other people [that her husband was cheating] but I was patient because I was the one who left him behind, I was patient, just being patient and I chose I would not divorce him (original in Bahasa).

Dita says she had to be patient and tolerate her husband's infidelity because *she* was the one who left him behind. Providing for the family is presented as women's responsibility and when the husband is unfaithful and families fall apart, migrant women also see themselves as being responsible. They have to be patient and tolerate infidelity because *they* chose to leave. I have discussed the concept of choice in migrant women's life stories elsewhere (AUTHOR 2017a) and I argue migrant women do not have real choice, or if they do, it is essentially a 'choiceless choice' (Langer, 1980). If staying at home means not being able to provide for the children's basic needs, migration becomes a necessity, not a choice. As Jovi, a 39-year old Filipina returnee, put it in a sharing session with four other migrant women in her village in Bohol: "the reason [for going overseas] is financial, because you see the future of your children (1.0) they don't **have** a future unless you go, so in a sense yeah (1.0) it's not a choice" (original in English).

While the migrant women take responsibility for leaving their husbands and children, a process that necessitates a redefinition of the concept of 'home', they acknowledge the pain that is involved. As indicated in the field-notes, Mita is close to crying when she explains that her husband had other women, and eventually marries "a beautiful girl" (lines 15-16). The same applies to Mita's previous statement in line 11: "I have to [laughs] I try to [laughs]". She does not complete the turn so we do not know what she intended to say, but possibly that she had to accept her fate, which is a common statement by Indonesian DMWs. The use of laughter is important and Mita uses it repeatedly (lines 5, 11 and 16). This is clearly not humorous laughter but, more likely, laughter used to conceal embarrassment, or to mitigate a (self) face-threatening act (admitting to her husband's infidelity). It may also serve as a coping mechanism; laughter may be deployed as a means to deal with adversity without being destroyed by it (Mindess, 2007). When migrant women are forced to accept their husbands' unfaithfulness and their families being dissolved, they may use laughter as a means to

confront traumatic events or difficult life circumstances, and thus, disarm calamity by laughing at it (Ladegaard, 2013).

The codeswitching also deserves a comment. It occurs repeatedly in every sharing session and its multiple functions are discussed elsewhere (Ladegaard, forthcoming). The sharing sessions are conducted mostly in Bahasa but with frequent switches to English, either for single statements or for longer excerpts of talk. Mita switches to English in line 11 in an otherwise predominantly Bahasa conversation. It is possible the switch is triggered by the interpreter's comment in line 10, but there might be other reasons since the comment was addressed very quietly to the fieldworker. Perhaps Mita wants to be more inclusive and switches to English to include the non-Bahasa speaking fieldworker. It is also possible that narrating emotionally difficult topics in another language allows the teller a greater sense of control over her emotions. Tehrani and Vaughan (2009) suggest that switching to the less emotionally charged L2 may provide emotional distancing which can be an important means for a distressed person to make sense of her emotions and past experiences. Thus, the use of English may help Mita to present a less emotional account of events (Martinovic & Altarriba, 2013).

The next example deals with another common theme in the returnee narratives: an experience of reverse culture shock and alienation from the home community. Excerpt 2 is from the same group of women as in Excerpt 1 (original all in Bahasa).

Excerpt 2

1. Nini: it [the community] seemed different as well (1.0) in the past it seems
2. like we didn't talk much but now people in the village talk a lot
3. Mita: yeah
4. Nini: if you wear this they talk about you, if you wear that they talk
5. about you [laughs]
6. Mita: people here are still not wearing trousers but when I got back//
7. Nini: //wearing trousers// [laughs]
8. Mita: //every day I wore// trousers in Hong Kong [laughter]
9. Nini: I wore pants this short [indicates on her legs]
10. Dinda: yeah, and then the neighbours talk about you (1.0) I mostly
11. stayed at home for one month after I came home from
12. overseas (1.0) in the past it was rare for people here to
13. wear trousers [laughs]

This short piece of multi-party discourse follows Dinda's account of what it was like for her to come back to her family and feel like a stranger: "when I was in my house I was like a stranger, never attached to anything, never being called mama, never, she only called her father." Dinda's story is a painful recollection of the alienation she felt when she returned after six years overseas: her daughter does not recognise her, and she feels detached from things she used to treasure. Then the women discuss how they were received in the village, and although the encounter is humorous with frequent outbursts of laughter (lines 5, 7, 8, 13), it is still an account of women who have acquired different cultural norms and therefore no longer 'fit in.' The people in the

village have become narrow-minded and prone to gossip, they claim (line 2), and no matter how the returnees behave, they feel they are being talked about (lines 4-5).

This story seems to operate at two levels. It is a story about culture clash: wearing trousers in a traditional Muslim community where women normally wear dresses and *hijab*. But it is also a story about change of cultural norms as an inevitable consequence of migration and the ostracism and alienation it leads to in the home communities. The gossip singles the women out; they have become outsiders. It does not matter what they wear, they will still be considered as outsiders (lines 4-5). Thus, they experience what Stack (1996, p. 199) concludes about African-Americans reclaiming the rural South in the U.S.: “You can go back. But you don’t start from where you left. To fit in, you have to create another place in that place you left behind.”

Reconceptualising ‘Family’

By far the most common theme in the returnee narratives is the pain experienced by migrant mothers when their children reject them. Excerpt 3 is from another sharing session in Central Java with six returnees.

Excerpt 3

Jasmine, 46 years, 3 years in Saudi Arabia, 3 years in Dubai, back since 2006; **Icha**, 30 years old, 4 years in Singapore, 2 years in Malaysia, back since 2010. Four more women were in this sharing session (Original in Bahasa).

1. Jasmine: sometimes the youngest one when I got back did not want to
2. be with me, the youngest one, only with her father like that [...]
3. perhaps she’s already in the second grade when I came back,
4. not yet started school when I left
5. Int: uh-huh
6. Jasmine: after I got back, for one year when she’s asking for money
7. for school, she’s not asking me but only her father like that
8. Int: uh-huh
9. Jasmine: very distant from me like that
10. Icha: //do not want us//
11. Jasmine: //when she cried// she did not want help from me, only from
12. the father (1.0) how does it make you feel as a mother?
13. sometimes I cried, then if, even when she’s eating she
14. refused to be fed by me
15. Int: uh-huh
16. Jasmine: sometimes when her father went to the rice-field, to the
17. farm like that, she didn’t want to come in, only stand in
18. front of the door like that (1.0) so it was like that,
19. the feeling [cries]
20. Int: yes (2.0) how long was it until you could finally, she
21. wanted to be close to you again?
22. Jasmine: until now she seldom asks anything from me like that,
23. it’s always her father like that (1.0) the child is [cries]

Painful stories of children rejecting their mothers when they return abound in the sharing sessions. What is atypical about Jasmine's story is that the rejection seems to be permanent: eight years after her return, the daughter still turns to her father and ignores her mother (lines 22-23). The feeling of rejection is so deeply ingrained in Jasmine that she cries when she remembers that her daughter did not even want to be in the house when her father was not there (lines 18-19), and when she acknowledges that the rejection is permanent (line 23). Pratt (2012) refers to the long-term separation between migrant mothers/wives and their children/spouses as "the destructiveness of distance" (p. 46), acknowledging that long-term separation often has detrimental consequences for the family, even if the women succeed in sustaining their families financially. But if their contract is terminated prematurely, or they work for an abusive employer and therefore have to run away, they usually come home with nothing – also a common scenario among the Indonesian returnees.

Migration has forced migrant families to redefine traditional gender roles. Parreñas (2005) discusses how men's traditional role as breadwinners and women's role as 'the light of the home', which should radiate in the home and hold the family together, have been reshaped by migration. Women's role as breadwinners has given them more status in the family and a greater sense of pride in their accomplishments: allowing the family to build a new house, for example. But the drawback is the separation from their children, both physically and emotionally. Despite the women's attempts to engage in long-distance mothering, which has become easier in recent years because of modern communication technology, their absence from home still causes anxiety and frustration. Children of migrant mothers often feel abandoned and they do not understand that when their mothers leave them, they do it to sustain them (Ladegaard, 2017b). Parreñas (2005) found that it was easier for migrant children to accept their mother's absence from home, and their attempts to engage in long-distance mothering, if they knew that the mothers *also* suffered because of the separation. The shared suffering might create bonding, or their mother's suffering might remind the children that they were missed and therefore loved.

Asis, Huang and Yeoh (2004) argue that migration has forced migrant families to relativise the 'family' concept. For migrant women, this process might entail reprioritising traditional family values so that putting their children or siblings through school and college, or lifting the family financially, become more important than being physically close to their children. Thus, relativising is perhaps a more manageable process for adult family members than for children who do not understand the compelling reason for parents to leave home. There is ample evidence to show that migrant mothers suffer emotionally from long-term separation, but they understand that they have to leave their children in order to sustain them (Ladegaard, 2017a). Young children do not understand the need, nor the emotional turmoil created by their mother's absence, and this may explain why the emotional separation sometimes remains even years after the mother's return.

The next example shows a mother's attempt to redefine 'family' after she has been forced to leave Hong Kong and the Nepalese man she loved and with whom she has two children. The sharing session was recorded in Rika's home in Central Java.

Excerpt 4

Rika, 33 years old, 8 years in Hong Kong, 2 years in Singapore (Original in English).

1. Rika: there [in Hong Kong] we have a family, they are (1.0) people
2. think we are there playing around, playing with another man
3. but (1.0) for me it's not like that, we are just (2.0) I'm living
4. with **one** man with **love** and we are making a family
5. FW: yeah, yeah
6. Rika: actually we want to do that but in a way my husband is sick,
7. that's why I cannot live [with him] I chose my children,
8. because I chose a future for them, not, not happiness for us
9. because I feel pain, pain, always painful that I separate from
10. him and then make another life (2.0) go back to Indonesia for
11. (1) my kids to go to school [sobs]

Rika met her Nepalese boyfriend in Hong Kong and they fell in love; she got pregnant and therefore was fired from her job. Instead of going back to Indonesia, she decided to overstay but this also meant staying in Hong Kong illegally with all the problems this entails. She considers her Nepalese boyfriend her husband (line 6) and what they had together in Hong was "a family" (line 1). People in the village talk about her and her mixed-race children: "they call me cheap and ask how I can play [around] with a man, many times they ask me to do something." But Rika maintains that what they had was a family because it was based on love with one man (note the heavily stressed **one** and **love** in line 4 indexing the ideal conditions for a family). Upon her return to Indonesia, she finally gives in to pressure from people in the village to 'do something', and she marries an older cousin in order to provide her children with a 'family'.

Thus, Rika is forced to redefine the notion of 'family' and give in to social pressure and a marriage of convenience. Despite her love and affection, she leaves her Nepalese boyfriend because the children have no legal status in Hong Kong and therefore cannot go to school (line 11). Like so many other migrant mothers, Rika brings the ultimate sacrifice – her own happiness – to provide for her children and secure them a better future (lines 8-10). She embodies the 'choiceless choices' migrant women are faced with: that their identity positions are fixed and the only viable identity left for them is the sacrificial mother, daughter and wife (Yeoh & Huang, 2000). Rika's life adequately illustrates Constable's (2014) point that Hong Kong's migrant worker laws define domestic workers as 'just workers', not as women who fall in love and have babies and therefore have a desire to form a family and be with them.

Rika's conflict is unsolvable: she is banned from working in Hong Kong because she overstayed, and in the local community, she is ostracised for bringing home two

mixed-race children and no husband. And faced with extreme poverty, she sees no other way than to become a migrant worker again so that at least she can provide financially for her children. She has signed up for a 2-year contract in Singapore and will leave her children with her husband. She engages in what Constable (2014, p. 216) has called “the migratory cycle of atonement”: migrant women who give in to their emotions and form families with men they love eventually have to give up their dream of love and a happy family and, driven away by poverty and prejudice in their home villages, embark on a new journey that forces them to reinvent themselves as sacrificial migrant mothers in the hope that this will allow them to atone for their transgressions.

Reconceptualising ‘Self’

Returnee migrant workers not only have to redefine home and family, they also have to reinvent themselves because their pre-departure ‘self’ no longer fits into the home context. The first example is from a pre-departure sharing session in Hong Kong where six Indonesian women, who have been deported for overstaying, talk about going home. The women got pregnant while they worked in Hong Kong and are anxious about returning to their villages with a child and no husband, and there is repeated crying throughout the sharing session. The women have brought their children who are playing in the room while the women tell their stories. A 2-year old boy is appealing for attention from the fieldworker, which leads to the comment in line 1.

Excerpt 5

Sujatmi, 29 years old, 5 years in Hong Kong; **Ratu**, 29 years old, 3 years in Hong Kong, 2 years in Singapore, 2 years in Malaysia. Four more Indonesian women were in this sharing session (Original in English).

1. FW: you’re a beautiful kid, **so** beautiful, **so** beautiful oh [laughs]
2. Sujatmi: thank you
3. FW: yeah, he’s lovely, lovely
4. Sujatmi: but this beautiful kid cannot break my parents’ heart, they
5. cannot, they don’t want (1.0) ‘you just, don’t say anything
6. if you don’t come back with your husband (1.0) I’ll hug you
7. if you do but if not, don’t come to my house’
8. FW: really?
9. Sujatmi: my father, yes
10. FW: what are you going to do then?
11. Sujatmi: I don’t know
12. Ratu: me also, my papa ask me ‘you can go back to Indonesia
13. if you bring your husband (1.0) but if you [do] not bring
14. your husband, don’t come’ xx I don’t know what I do but
15. I just keep quiet and then ‘sorry, sorry, sorry’ [...] because
16. Muslim people [who are] not married cannot have a baby,
17. very (1.0) a shame, a shame

Sujatmi and Ratu's stories are typical for Indonesian women who have become pregnant out of wedlock: they are not wanted back home unless they bring a husband. The compliment expressed in line 1 is perhaps an attempt to counter the women's narratives of shame and disgrace. What preoccupies them more than anything is how they will live with the shame of bringing back a mixed-race child and no husband. Some of the women are banned from their parents' house (lines 7, 13-14), and when I visited these women eight months later, I was shocked to see that some of them had been relegated to abandoned houses outside the village, or distant relatives had taken them in, or they had been given a room at the back of the house hidden away from the public eye. As Ratu testifies, the headline over these women's lives is shame (line 17), and the only thing they can do is to keep asking for forgiveness (note the repeated use of 'sorry' in line 15), and keep quiet when they are being mocked and humiliated.

The women who return after years overseas are fundamentally different from the women who left. They have been humiliated, fired from their jobs, some of them have been in prison for overstaying, and some of them were abandoned by the men who made them pregnant. Sujatmi's Pakistani boyfriend turns out to be married with two children in Pakistan, and Ratu's African boyfriend was desperate to be allowed to stay in Hong Kong and therefore, married a Chinese woman many years his senior. The women need to reinvent themselves and the only identity position available to them is that of a shamed woman who needs to find a way to atone for her sins. For most of the returnees, the only way out is the migratory cycle of atonement (Constable, 2014), which will allow them to make amends by providing a stable income for their family. As Constable (2014, p. 232) argues: "With their dreams of a better life, money is the lure that initially draws women into global migration and exposes them to its potentially corrupting or liberating transgressions. It is also the means through which such gendered transgressions can be remedied, forgiven and absolved, or mediated."

The last example is from Sinta's narrative. Unlike many Indonesian women, Sinta signed up to become a migrant worker herself because she wanted to get away from her abusive husband. When she arrived at the airport, the local agent searched her luggage and took out all the religious symbols she had brought: her *mukena* (to cover her head during prayer), prayer beads and Quran were removed from her bag and eventually chucked in the bin. The message was that she was going to Taiwan, a non-Muslim country, and she was told not to practice her religion. The employer is aware of Sinta's religious background and is trying to stop her from practicing her religion.

Excerpt 6

Sinta, 38 years old, 4 years in Taiwan, 4 years in Korea, back since 2008. Sharing session in her home in Central Java (Original in Bahasa).

1. Sinta: I went into my room several times to pray (1.0) I prayed
2. without *mukena* because it had been taken away [...] then
3. I got caught, one day the employer called me and I did not
4. answer because I was praying (1.0) then I was reported to

5. the agency 'Sinta went into her room to pray', like that, and
6. I said 'I was only praying', then I was scolded, 'I pay you a large
7. salary not to pray but to work' [...] after that I was not allowed
8. to close the door to my room and I was not allowed to go into
9. my room during the day until a CCTV camera was installed
10. so that they could monitor everything I was doing

Domestic migrant workers' religious faith is often a salient identity position for them (Ladegaard, 2017c). This is what sustains them, it helps them survive their trials and tribulations, and overcome their anxiety and homesickness. For some, it adds perspective to their suffering; it comforts them to know God is in charge and he will not allow them to be tested beyond their means. Their faith becomes the interpretive framework they apply to their diasporic lives; it provides meaning when there is none and it gives suffering a purpose: to bring them closer to God. Therefore, depriving Sinta of her religious symbols and preventing her from praying amounts to an attack on her identity.

The phrase she uses ('I got caught', line 3) suggests that she is being framed as a perpetrator involved in illegal activities. She is forced to reinvent herself as a non-religious person, or she is reduced from a 'person' with needs and desires to a 'worker' who is in Taiwan for the sole purpose of fulfilling her employer's needs (lines 6-7). The installation of CCTV cameras to monitor her every move (lines 9-10) is another violation of her rights and a common means for employers to control their domestic workers. Surveillance becomes a way for employers to reduce DMWs to docile bodies (Foucault, 1975), or to household commodities who can be "inspected, bought, traded, owned, generally objectified, and treated as economic investments" (Constable, 2007, p. 51). It deprives domestic workers of their humanity, the first step in the destruction of self and the beginning of a trauma narrative that many DMW returnees can tell (Ladegaard, 2015; forthcoming).

Discussion and Conclusion

Going home is something DMWs have been anticipating for years – some with dread, some with anticipation (Constable, 1999). Unlike professionals, who can choose to settle overseas because their skills are sought after in the global economy, DMWs usually cannot get permanent residency and therefore eventually have to go home. In Hong Kong, the court has established that DMWs are not 'ordinarily resident' and therefore do not qualify for permanent residency, even if they have worked in the city for 20 years or more. This means they are 'permanent transients' (Clifford, 1994), unable to settle anywhere. The receiving countries they have lived in do not accept them as 'people' but only as 'workers' and will not grant them the rights that apply to other non-local residents. In their analyses of public discourses about DMWs in Hong Kong, Constable (2007) and Ladegaard (2011) found repeated reference to migrant workers' occupation of public space in Hong Kong as a cause for concern. The underlying assumption is that they have no right to their own space; they are perpetually alien no matter how long they have worked in the city. When migrant

workers are constructed as out of place, or as transgressing place-appropriate conduct, this effectively contributes to their dehumanisation and moral exclusion. As Opatow (1990, p. 1) argues: “Those who are morally excluded are perceived as nonentities, expendable, or undeserving. Consequently, harming or exploiting them appears to be appropriate, acceptable or just.” Thus, excluding DMWs from the societies in which they live and to whose prosperity they have made significant contributions becomes justifiable; they cannot make any claim to space, private or public, in Hong Kong, and when they go back to their homelands, they are also strangers. As Constable (1999, p. 225) puts it, “when they return to the place where they were born, they will be ... in a different space and therefore remain, in a sense, in exile.”

Emotions associated with homecomings are usually ambivalent and include aspects of both disenchantment and satisfaction (Stefansson, 2004). A mismatch between the imagined and the experienced homecoming is often reported in the literature, and coming home can be more difficult and emotionally destabilising than going out. This may also be true for DMWs who have often worked for affluent families in developed countries, and are going home to rural communities with no electricity and running water. As Stefansson (2004, p. 10) puts it: “it is often when confronted with the homeland, and in particular with the stayee population of this place, that they fully realise such changes and the extent to which they have been influenced by new social norms, urban living, and independence.” This realisation was expressed in several sharing sessions where the returnees discussed how they find the social norms of the local community restrictive and old-fashioned (Oxford & Long, 2004). The returnees do not ‘fit in’ and therefore become the objects of gossip in the village – something that was mentioned repeatedly by the returnees as a sign of frustration and disillusionment.

Most return migration research focuses on voluntary re-migration, either by first generation expatriates who were forced away by war or poverty and choose to go home after the war has ended (Stefansson, 2006), or by second generation immigrants who choose to go to their parents’ homeland to explore concepts of ‘belonging’, ‘place’ and ‘home’ (King & Christou, 2010). DMW returnees have a different reason for going home: they have no choice. When they left, they were pushed away from their hometowns by poverty and their desire to give their children a better future. When they return, they do it because they cannot get permanent residency in the countries in which they have spent the better part of their lives, or because they are forced away by circumstances. Thus, DMWs’ identity positions are enforced. It would be wrong to argue that DMWs cannot discursively position themselves; some of them do engage in discourses of resistance and openly object to their employers’ attempts to demean them (Ladegaard, 2017a). However, overwhelmingly, DMWs are positioned by others. Lin (2008, p. 1) argues

It is usually the powerful who are entitled to and have both more and the right kinds of capital and resources for constructing for themselves advantageous identities. Although people who find themselves in subordinate positions can attempt to construct positive identities for

themselves in their struggles to gain recognition, it is often the dominant regimes of the powerful that dictate the identity game to them on the basis of a rigged and stacked text.

This article has demonstrated that DMWs' identity game is dictated by others. These 'others' may be a patriarchal community that condones men's infidelity, labels women as *wanita tuna susila* (women of loose morals) and excludes them from the community because they bring back a child and no husband. The 'others' who dictate the identity game may also be their families for whom they are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice: to leave their children in order to sustain them (Ladegaard, 2017b). In their diasporic lives as well as in their return journey, DMWs demonstrate "a keen awareness of a fractured identity separate from and yet tied to the family back home, and a troubling gap and tension between taking care of the family and caring for oneself" (Lai 2011, p. 580).

Identity research has been heavily influenced by what Skeggs (2008) calls possessive individualism, a Western concept which argues that individuals generate the resourceful self by naming somebody 'an individual'. Discourse is believed to bring into effect what it names; it is performative (Butler, 1990). This idea makes us inclined to believe that everybody 'owns' a variety of competing social identities, which can be 'performed', 'negotiated' or 'changed' depending on individual needs. The problem with possessive individualism is that it "fails to recognize that for many identity is a position that is forced, that has to be occupied, for which there is no alternative and which is attributed with no value and hence cannot be mobilised as a resource for enhancing privilege, or a resource to the nation, to belonging" (Skeggs, 2008, p. 26).

As social actors we can use race, class, gender, or profession as a resource to enhance visibility and increase our sense of choice, but *only* if we are not restricted by these identity positions. In other words, *only* if these labels do not stick to us, if we can appropriate them, attach and detach them as mobile resources to fit our needs and aspirations, do they become powerful identity positions that we can mobilise to enhance our status (Skeggs, 2008, p. 25). DMWs are widely positioned by others and severely restricted by their class, ethnicity, gender, religion and profession. They are perceived as poor, dependable and dispensable individuals with little or no visibility and recognition in the global economy and therefore, they are forced to perform an inscribed identity. DMWs epitomise how inequality has become one of the driving forces of globalisation providing some people with increased visibility and chances of success, but at the same time, seriously constraining other people's lives and opportunities (Blommaert, 2010). Where identity is used as a resource for some, it becomes a fixed pathology for others.

Identity research is tied up with the notion of choice. We perform, negotiate and change our identities only if we have choice, but for DMWs and other people at the bottom of the globalisation market, there is little choice when it comes to identity positions. Privileged people become mobile and travel wherever they like, others like

DMWs become fixed in place. The notion of choice is a contentious issue in the migrant worker literature where some have argued that it applies to everybody:

it does not follow that people who have decided to leave home, travel abroad and look for work, even in the most arduous conditions, *never* have leisure time, engage in tourist activities or look for pleasure. Combining business with pleasure is a concept available to the poor as well as the rich, to those with a false passport as well as those with a real one (Agustin 2003, p. 32).

I shall argue as strongly as I can against examples of possessive individualism, which show how an individual author's experiences, usually written from a privileged position of power and influence, is translated into universalising explanations. DMWs are not victims per se, and victimisation should not be the modus operandi for people speaking on behalf of migrant workers. There are examples in the returnee narratives of women who became empowered to fight injustice and discrimination, and who managed to construct alternative narratives which allowed them to become agents in their own life stories. And this is the promise of the narrative therapy approach that was adopted for this research: that changing people's stories about their lives may help them change their actual lives (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007). However, for the majority of women in this study, choice remains illusive. They are positioned by others and, seriously restrained by their poverty, see it as their calling to sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of their families (Ladegaard, 2017b).

Research in intercultural communication has focused almost exclusively on elite groups travelling for business, education or tourism (MacDonald & O'Regan, 2012), and their experiences have produced a universalised narrative of increased opportunity and social advancement under globalisation. So far, disenfranchised groups like migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers have not been part of the narrative. In order for us to move forward in our thinking about globalisation and intercultural communication, DMWs' voices need to be heard and their sacrifices recognised. To make this happen, more research on migrant workers focusing on *their* stories about their lives rather than scholars' interpretation of these lives is required. As Sorrells (2013, p. 234) argues

Too often, people in positions of greater social, economic, and political power develop visions and actions with the intent of "helping" disenfranchised groups. Yet if the voices, perspectives, needs, and experiences of marginalized groups are not at the table, the process and outcome of the effort repeat and reinforce rather than rectify injustices.

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APPENDIX

Transcription Conventions

Bold = pronounced with stress/emphasis

Italics = Bahasa or Javanese

[it’s a] = word(s) inserted by the transcriber to ease comprehension

, = short pause, less than 0.5 second

(2.0) = pause in seconds

‘give me that’ = reporting direct speech

: (as in ah:) = the vowel sound is prolonged

xx = incomprehensible

// = interruption; //as I said// = overlapping speech

? = question/rising intonation

[...] turn(s) left out