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## Transformative Journey of Success Stories Indonesian Migrant Workers from South Korea

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### Abstract

*This study examines the transformative journeys and success factors of Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) who have returned from South Korea. Using a qualitative case study approach, we interviewed ten returned PMI who were successful in socio-economic reintegration and entrepreneurship. Findings suggest that the accumulation of financial capital, work experience, skills enhancement, and strong social networks while in South Korea are the main foundations for post-migration success. In addition, family support and personal resilience play crucial roles in overcoming reintegration challenges, encouraging them to invest in productive businesses or develop stable careers in Indonesia. This study provides in-depth insights into the adaptation and innovation strategies of returned PMI, and underlines the importance of comprehensive empowerment programs to maximize the potential of these human resources for national development.*

**Keywords:** Migrant, Workers, Entrepreneurship.

### 1. Introduction

International labor migration has become a significant global phenomenon, with millions of individuals crossing national borders in search of better economic opportunities. For developing countries like Indonesia, migrant workers (PMI) are the backbone of the economy, contributing substantial remittances that support families and national development. Data from the Indonesian Migrant

Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI) consistently shows that the number of PMI continues to increase, with South Korea being one of the popular destination countries due to its structured employment policies and competitive wages.<sup>1</sup>

Most literature on migrant workers tends to focus on the challenges, vulnerabilities, and exploitation they face, both while working

<sup>1</sup> Badan Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia, Data Penempatan dan Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia Periode Januari 2025 (Jakarta : BP2MI, 2025), <https://bp2mi.go.id/statistik-detail/data-penempatan-dan-pelindungan-pekerja-migran-indonesia-periode-januari-2025>.

[penempatan-dan-pelindungan-pekerja-migran-indonesia-periode-januari-2025](https://bp2mi.go.id/statistik-detail/data-penempatan-dan-pelindungan-pekerja-migran-indonesia-periode-januari-2025).

abroad and during the reintegration phase upon returning home. Issues such as difficulties in adaptation, financial problems after returning home, and social stigma often dominate the narrative, however, behind these narratives, there is a segment of former migrant workers who have not only managed to adapt, but have also shown significant transformation in their social and economic lives after returning to Indonesia to become entrepreneurs.<sup>2</sup>

This success often manifests itself in the form of entrepreneurship, stable career development, or tangible contributions to local communities. These success stories, while they exist, are underrepresented in the scholarly literature, especially in the international context. Existing research tends to generalize the migrant experience, without delving deeply into the specific factors that enable certain individuals to not only survive, but thrive after their migration period. South Korea, as one of the recipient countries of migrant workers, offers a unique context due to its relatively transparent Electronic Employment Permit System (EPS) that provides legal protection for migrant workers.<sup>3</sup>

Experience working in a disciplined and technologically advanced industrial environment in South Korea has the potential to equip Indonesian migrant workers with valuable technical skills, work ethic, and financial literacy. Therefore, it is important to dig deeper into how the experience in South Korea transformed these individuals, and what factors contributed to their success in reintegrating and developing themselves in Indonesia.

The author predicts that successful migrant workers after returning from South Korea not only collect financial capital from remittances, but also human capital, namely increased skills, work discipline, work ethic, and Korean language proficiency, as well as social capital such as network of relationships and cultural understanding. These three types of capital will be an important foundation for their success in doing business or working in Indonesia. This phenomenon not only has a positive impact on the economic aspect, but also causes significant social changes in the lives of workers and their families.<sup>4</sup>

This study aims to bridge the gap in the literature by exploring the "transformative journeys of success stories" of South Korean returnees. By focusing on the positive and empowering aspects, this study will provide valuable insights not only for policymakers in designing more effective reintegration programs, but also for prospective migrant workers and the wider community to understand the positive potential of well-managed migration. By highlighting success narratives, this study is expected to provide a more balanced and inspiring perspective on the impacts of international migration.

## 2. Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a narrative case study design, a qualitative approach was chosen to deeply understand the

subjective experiences and meanings given by individuals to the transformative journey of former PMI, according to Creswell, in his book *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, qualitative research is an approach to understanding a human or social problem based on a particular research tradition.<sup>5</sup>

In the research entitled "Transformative Journey of Success Stories of Indonesian Migrant Workers from South Korea", the qualitative approach is very relevant because it allows the author to dive into the rich and complex life experiences of migrant workers, understand their motivations, challenges faced, strategies used, and the meaning of "success" from their own perspective. This cannot be measured only by numbers or statistics.

The narrative case study design will allow the researcher to explore in detail the life stories of migrant workers, capturing the sequence of events, turning points, and their interpretations of the successes they have achieved after returning from South Korea. Key participants in this study are Indonesian Migrant Workers who have returned from South Korea and have been identified as having achieved transformative successes in various areas of entrepreneurship, career development, or social contribution. The research location will be centered in Cilacap, Central Java, given that this area is one of the significant pockets of migrant workers.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, by combining a qualitative approach and a narrative case study design, the author will be able to create a rich and contextual understanding of the success stories of Indonesian migrant workers from South Korea, capturing the essence of the transformations they experience through the lens of their personal experiences.

## 3. Results and Discussion

This section presents key findings from the research on the transformative journey of successful Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) returning from South Korea, obtained through an in-depth analysis of the participants' life narratives. The findings are grouped into several main themes that describe the dynamics of transformation, from initial motivation to the manifestation of success after returning to Indonesia.

### a. Initial Motivation and Departure Process Become the Seed of Transformation.

Most participants expressed that their primary motivation for working in South Korea was driven by strong economic pressures and a desire to change their family's fate. Economic conditions in their home villages in Cilacap were often the main trigger, where local job opportunities were limited and incomes were insufficient to meet basic needs, let alone save for the future. On average, participants recognized the much greater earning potential in South Korea, which they believed could be a bridge to a better life.

<sup>2</sup> Setyaji and Sri Setiawati, "Analisis Jumlah Pekerja Migran Indonesia (PMI) Dan Remitansi Terhadap Tingkat Kemiskinan Di Kabupaten Ponorogo."

<sup>3</sup> Marfiani. "Kerjasama Indonesia - Korea Selatan Melalui Program Employment Permit System (EPS) Terhadap Pengiriman Tenaga Kerja Indonesia (TKI) Ke Korea Selatan." Tesis Sarjana, Universitas Pasundan, 2017.

[https://repo.fisip.unpas.ac.id/index.php?p=show\\_detail&id=495&keywords=](https://repo.fisip.unpas.ac.id/index.php?p=show_detail&id=495&keywords=).

<sup>4</sup> Arrazi, Muhammad Agil Thoriqan, et al. "Komparasi Dinamika Sosial-Ekonomi Sebelum dan Setelah Menjadi Pekerja Migran Indonesia." *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Humaniora* 3.2 (2024): 283-298.

<sup>5</sup> Creswell, J. W. *Research Design: Qualitative Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2014)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bp2mi.go.id/berita-detail/rekor-di-tahun-2023-penempatan-pekerja-migran-ke-korea-selatan-tembus-12-240>

The departure process, despite the bureaucratic challenges and considerable initial costs, is seen as an initial investment in the transformational journey of prospective Migrant Workers abroad. They bear the risks and uncertainties with a strong belief that this effort will pay off. The narrative suggests that this phase is the seed of change, where dreams and hopes begin to be planted as motivation to achieve success.

#### **b. Experience in South Korea is a Step of Adaptation, Challenges, and Capital Acquisition.**

The period of employment in South Korea is a crucial phase in this transformative journey, marked by intensive adaptation, multifaceted challenges, and the accumulation of various types of capital. The participants interviewed by the author generally faced major obstacles in the areas of language, significant cultural differences, and high work demands. However, rather than giving up, these migrant workers developed strong adaptation strategies. "At first I had difficulty in communication, but I forced myself to learn from Korean friends who had been there before, from TV drama conversations, even from translation applications," said Nursito, a retired PMI who now owns a Korean Language Education Institute.<sup>7</sup>

More than just income in the form of salary, participants progressively accumulate financial capital through savings and remittances sent to their families back home, other human capital obtained in the form of technical skills, work ethic, discipline, and language skills, as well as other social capital obtained through friendship networks with fellow Indonesian migrant workers, foreign nationals, and local Koreans. This experience shapes their character into individuals who are more resilient, independent, and broad-minded. The pressures and challenges they face actually become catalysts for personal growth, honing problem-solving and resilience skills.<sup>8</sup>

#### **c. The Process of Returning and Reintegrating Begins a New Chapter.**

Returning home is not the end of the journey, but the beginning of a new chapter in the transformation of former PMI, the reintegration phase often poses its own challenges, such as readjusting to the local social and economic environment. Several participants interviewed by the author faced stigma or unrealistic expectations from the surrounding community. "At first I was a bit shocked, in Korea everything is fast and on time, here, sometimes they promise a certain time, it can be delayed for a long time. I have to get used to it again," said Soderin, a former PMI from South Korea who now opens a grocery store in Cilacap.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, there are assumptions and expectations from family and society that become a burden in themselves. Namely, there is an assumption that PMI who return home will definitely bring a lot of money and will immediately be "successful", this is often felt by

former PMI so that it can cause financial and social pressure that makes PMI feel burdened to immediately show the results of their hard work abroad. However, with the capital that has been accumulated, they are able to adapt and realize the dreams they have built while in South Korea.

#### **d. Manifestation of Transformative Success, More Than Just Financial.**

The transformative success of participants is not only measured from a financial aspect, but also from a broader and more holistic dimension, from several advances experienced by former PMI which the author has managed to summarize in several notes:

##### **1. Economic Improvement**

Almost all participants showed a significant increase in the standard of living of former PMI who were able to build houses, buy productive assets, and finance their children's education. Some of them succeeded in building their own businesses, grocery stores, workshops, farms, or culinary businesses that not only supported the family economy but also created jobs for the surrounding environment, this shows a shift from just workers to local economic actors.<sup>10</sup>

##### **2. Personal and Family Development.**

Participants showed increased self-confidence, independence, and decision-making skills. They became role models for their families and communities. "I used to be shy, but now I am more courageous in speaking up and deciding things," said Nursito, who is now actively elected as a council member in Cilacap Regency. Former PMI also actively encourage other family members to pursue higher education or seek better opportunities.

One of the most striking changes is the increase in self-confidence after successfully adapting to a foreign environment, overcoming language barriers, and becoming independent in managing life in Korea. Returning PMI often return with a stronger mentality, they become more courageous in making decisions, speaking in public, and starting new initiatives.<sup>11</sup>

##### **3. Change of Mindset.**

This is the most profound aspect of transformation experienced by former PMI, the experience in South Korea opened their horizons, changing their mindset from subsistence to investment and self-development, former PMI became more visionary, dared to take measured risks, and had a better understanding of the global work world. "Now I think not just for today, but for the next 5 or 10 years, in Korea we are taught to plan," said Ari Jumantri, who is now developing a modern hydroponic agricultural business.<sup>12</sup>

Although many PMIs bring back new skills, there is often a gap between the skills they acquired abroad and the needs of the local job market or available business opportunities. For example, the skills to operate industrial machinery in a Korean factory may not

<sup>7</sup> Hasil interview penulis dengan bapak Nursito (Direktur Lembaga Pendidikan Bahasa Korea Master) di Kantor Pusat LPK Master tanggal 25 Juni 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Faidati, Ashima, and Nuril Farida Maratus. "Dinamika Pemenuhan Hak dan Kewajiban dalam Keluarga Muslim Pekerja Migran di Sutojayan, Blitar dalam Tinjauan Normatif-Sosiologis." *Kodifikasi* 19.1 (2025): 133-148.

<sup>9</sup> Hasil interview penulis dengan bapak Soderin (Pemilik usaha Toko Kelontongan di Jeruk legi) tanggal 25 Juni 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Eliana Kesumadewi dan Aprilyani Aprilyani, "Mengatasi Pengangguran Melalui Peningkatan Kewirausahaan dengan Program Tenaga Kerja Mandiri," *Journal of Macroeconomics and Social Development* 1, no. 4 (26 Juni 2024): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.47134/jmsd.v1i4.360>.

<sup>11</sup> Rohmah, Babun Ni'matur, Purnama Sari, and Riska Ayu. "Tingkat Perubahan Kesejahteraan Ekonomi Keluarga Buruh Migran." *Intaj* 1.1 (2017): 120-144.

<sup>12</sup> Hasil interview penulis dengan bapak Ari Jumantri (Pemilik kebun Hidroponik eks Korea di Cilacap) tanggal 26 Juni 2025

be immediately relevant to the agricultural sector or MSMEs in Cilacap without modification.

The findings of this study reinforce the perspective that migration is not just a physical movement, but a complex and transformative social process. The concepts of social, human, and financial capital prove to be very relevant in explaining how PMI was able to transform the experience in South Korea into a foundation for success. The intensive adaptation experience and the challenges overcome are in line with the acculturation theory (Berry, 1997) where individuals develop strategies to interact with a new culture while maintaining their original identity.

The researchers also see that success is not monolithic, for PMI, success is a holistic narrative construction, including financial stability, self-development, entrepreneurial ability, and contribution to family and community. The aspect of mindset change is at the heart of this transformation, reflecting their ability to internalize new values and practices from the South Korean work environment. This narrative of success also highlights the agency of migrant workers, where they are not merely victims of circumstances, but active actors who consciously plan, struggle, and realize changes in their lives. This is in line with the view that individuals are active storytellers of their own lives.<sup>13</sup>

Overall, the "Transformative Journeys" told by the participants are clear evidence that investment in migration, although full of risks, can produce significant dividends, not only in material form but also in the form of improving the quality of human resources that are competitive and mentally resilient.

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on an in-depth discussion of "The Transformative Journey of Success Stories of Indonesian Migrant Workers from South Korea", it can be concluded that the experience of migrating to South Korea is a multidimensional process that goes beyond just seeking a living. This study confirms that the success of returning migrant workers is not only measured by financial accumulation, but also by the holistic transformation they experience in various aspects of life.

This transformative journey began with a strong economic motivation, where the hope of changing the fate of their families drove them to endure various challenges in a foreign country. While in South Korea, former Indonesian Migrant Workers not only collected financial capital, but also significantly developed human capital in the form of skills, discipline, work ethic, independence and social capital in the form of networks and relationships. This experience, although marked by adaptation and challenges, actually became a catalyst that strengthened the character and capacity of former Indonesian Migrant Workers.

The core of this transformative success lies in the change of mindset. PMI return with a more visionary view, dare to take measured risks, and have a high entrepreneurial spirit, this is manifested in various forms, economic stability through independent business or a better career, improving the quality of family life especially through investment in children's education, self-development which includes increasing self-confidence and independence, and social contribution in their home community. They are no longer just workers, but agents of change who bring positive values and inspiration to their environment.

Overall, the success story of these Indonesian migrant workers from South Korea is a narrative of perseverance, adaptation, and self-empowerment, proving that with strong determination and optimal use of opportunities, migration can be a path to a better life transformation, not only for individuals but also for families and the wider community.

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