



The state's absence in protecting Indonesian migrant workers: An analysis of migrant worker exploitation and violence

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Abstract.

Background: Illegal Indonesian Migrant Workers (IMWs) continue to face persistent exploitation and violence despite their pursuit of better livelihoods abroad. This issue remains critically underexamined at the local village level, particularly in regions with high undocumented migration flows. **Methods:** This qualitative ethnographic study was conducted in Bujak Village, Central Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, through 50 days of fieldwork (24 June–13 August 2025). Data were collected using participant observation and in-depth interviews with three undocumented migrant workers selected via purposive sampling. The study employs a human security framework to analyze the structural and cultural drivers of irregular migration. **Findings:** The findings reveal that poverty, low educational attainment, and patriarchal cultural expectations collectively push residents toward undocumented migration facilitated by broker networks (*Tekong*). Once abroad, these migrants experience severe exploitation, including unpaid wages, physical violence, unsafe sea transport, and the complete absence of health or death insurance. Critically, the study finds that village-level government neither monitors nor intervenes in these departures, leaving migrants unprotected under Law No. 18 of 2017. **Conclusion:** The absence of state presence at the local level converts individual economic decisions into structural, systemic vulnerability. This study argues for stronger preventive and protective roles for both village and central governments to address the root causes and consequences of irregular migration. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This research offers a novel contribution to the labor migration literature by shifting the analytical lens from national border control to the local village level, empirically demonstrating how state neglect at the grassroots perpetuates migrant vulnerability. It provides rare ethnographic insight into the lived experiences of undocumented migrants from a high-sending village, highlighting the critical yet overlooked role of village government in both facilitating and protecting irregular migration flows.

Keywords: ethnography; human security; illegal migrant workers; Indonesia; labor exploitation; state absence.

1. Introduction

14 million migrant workers are in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) area (ILO GMS TRIANGLE Project, 2015). ASEAN is one of the fastest growing investment destinations in the world, with growth reaching 18.5% in 2015 (ASEAN Secretariat & UNCTAD, 2024). This growth is significant compared to the 5% growth in 2007. ASEAN is

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on the pathway to become one of the future centers world's economic growth, ASEAN's GDP is the third largest in Asia with a GDP of almost 3,2 trillion USD in 2019 (Sijabat, 2023). Economic growth is a key factor in the growth of migration within the ASEAN region.

Indonesia is the country that sends the most migrant workers to Malaysia. 39% of migrant workers in 2014 came from Indonesia (The World Bank, 2015). Migrant workers from Indonesia work in the plantation, agriculture, domestic and construction sectors, and almost 40% work as plantation midwives (The World Bank, 2015). Since 2000, Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) in Malaysia numbered 603,453 people and 74.8% of the total migrant workers in Malaysia. However, in 2005 there was a significant increase to 1,211,584 people and in 2010 decreased to 918,000 (Mahardika & Firdaus, 2022).

West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) is the province with the highest contribution of migrant workers in Indonesia with a total of 33,257 people in 2023 (Lama'a et al., 2025). There are many factors why West Nusa Tenggara is the largest contributor of migrant workers in Indonesia such as education, economic, unemployment, industry (Luh et al., 2024). In addition to low employment opportunities and stagnant industry in West Nusa Tenggara, low human resource skills are also one of the main factors in the high interest of NTB residents to become Indonesian migrant workers (Lama'a et al., 2025). North Lombok Regency has the lowest average level of education in West Nusa Tenggara with an average of 5.34 years of education, in contrast to Bima Regency with an average of 9.96 years of education (Juliana et al., 2023). However, the poverty rate is a major factor in the high rate of Indonesian migrant workers in West Nusa Tenggara (Lama'a et al., 2025). The definition of the word poor is the population whose average per capita expenditure per month is below the Poverty Line (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023). The number of poor people in West Nusa Tenggara is 79 thousand people with poor status (Juliana et al., 2023). The low level of education and high levels of poverty in West Nusa Tenggara have a significant impact on the high number of PMI originating from West Nusa Tenggara.

The large influx of migrant workers from West Nusa Tenggara is initially well-intentioned, as a way to alleviate poverty and unemployment by working abroad for higher wages. However, a problem also arises, namely the emergence of illegal migrant workers who become victims of *traffickers*. It is within this broader provincial pattern that Bujak Village, Central Lombok, sits as a case: a community where a substantial share of residents have left, and continue to leave, for undocumented work in Malaysia. Framed through a human security lens, this study examines the economic, personal, health, and political dimensions of vulnerability faced by residents of Bujak Village who migrate without documentation.

Based on the background presented above, this study seeks to examine the phenomenon of undocumented labor migration from Bujak Village by focusing on the factors driving migration, the experiences of migrant workers, and the role of local governance in providing protection. Specifically, the study investigates the structural and cultural conditions that encourage residents of Bujak Village to migrate to Malaysia through undocumented channels despite the significant legal, economic, and personal risks involved. It also explores the various forms of exploitation and violence experienced by undocumented Indonesian migrant workers throughout the migration cycle, including the stages of recruitment, departure, transit, and employment abroad. Furthermore, the study analyzes the role of the Bujak Village government in facilitating, preventing, or protecting residents who migrate as undocumented workers, while identifying the institutional and governance gaps that contribute to the persistence of irregular migration. Through these inquiries, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected socio-economic, cultural, and governance dimensions of undocumented labor migration and to generate evidence-based recommendations for strengthening migrant worker protection at the local level.

1.1 Drivers of irregular labor migration

Migration from Indonesia to Malaysia has grown alongside ASEAN's broader economic integration, with the ASEAN Economic Community actively facilitating labor mobility across the region since 2015 (ASEAN Secretariat & UNCTAD, 2024). Industrialized destination countries have been shown to favor migrant labor in part because it is cheaper and more easily exploited than local labor, with migrant workers frequently accepting pressure and additional work due to limited alternatives (Dimitriadis, 2023). This dynamic is compounded by the marginalization migrant workers often face in destination countries, where unemployment, gender, age, and racial background can result in exclusion from the formal economy altogether, exclusion that is, ironically, often deepened rather than resolved within the informal economy (Dimitriadis, 2023). Malaysia, alongside Singapore, Brunei, and Thailand, remains among the highest-demand destinations for migrant labor in the region, particularly in plantation, construction, and domestic work (Amri & Prianto, 2025; ILO GMS TRIANGLE Project, 2015).

Since 2000, Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) in Malaysia have numbered in the hundreds of thousands, fluctuating from 603,453 in the early 2000s to a peak of 1,211,584 in 2005 before declining to 918,000 by 2010 (Mahardika & Firdaus, 2022), a decline attributable in part to Indonesia's 2009 ban on labor migration to Malaysia, itself a response to the large undocumented population estimated at up to one million workers at the time (Prusinski, 2016; Nielsen & Sendjaya, 2014; Spitzer et al., 2023). Migration resumed following a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding in 2011 (Spitzer et al., 2023), though undocumented migration has persisted, with estimates suggesting around 500,000 Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia remain without permits (The World Bank, 2015; Djafar, 2012; Djatmika et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified economic pressure on migrant workers, reducing incomes by an estimated 40% relative to local workers during industry-wide slowdowns (Al Ayyubi et al., 2025; Veere et al., 2022). Taken together, this literature suggests that irregular migration from communities such as Bujak Village is best understood not as an isolated poor decision, but as a predictable outcome of compounding structural and economic pressures with few accessible legal alternatives.

1.2 Legal protection frameworks for Indonesian migrant workers

Law No. 18 of 2017 represents Indonesia's primary legal safeguard for migrant workers, structuring protection across three phases before, during, and after employment and mandating specific protections such as employment social security (BPJS Ketenagakerjaan), work accident insurance (JKK), and death insurance (JKM) (Pemerintah Indonesia, 2017). The law further obligates Indonesian diplomatic representatives (KBRI/KJRI) to supervise migrant workers abroad and guarantees rights to reasonable working hours, rest, and decent housing (Probosambodo et al., 2025; Yanto et al., 2023). However, this legal architecture is built around registered, documented migration; workers without permits fall outside its practical scope entirely, since permits themselves function as the proof required to access protection in the first place (Maksum, 2021). This is a critical gap in the existing literature: while considerable attention has been paid to what the law guarantees on paper, comparatively little research examines how or whether any protective mechanism reaches migrants who never entered the legal system, and what role local government might play in bridging that gap before departure occurs.

1.3 Exploitation, violence, and risk in irregular migration

Migrant workers without legal status are documented to experience significantly elevated risk of exploitation and violence, including unpaid wages, physical abuse, inadequate housing, and, in some documented domestic-work cases, scalding by employers (Sunam et al., 2021). Rustam et al. (2022) characterize illegal migrant worker status along three dimensions: entering a destination country entirely undocumented, overstaying or

misusing tourist visas to work, or misusing employment contracts arranged prior to departure categories that collectively describe much of the undocumented migration occurring from communities like Bujak Village.

Risk in irregular migration is not confined to the workplace; the journey itself is frequently dangerous given the absence of state oversight over transportation. Multiple documented shipwrecks illustrate this risk directly: an unnamed vessel sank in Malaysian waters in July 2014 (Adityowati & Jatmika, 2014); two vessels carrying approximately 80 undocumented workers sank near Tanjung Piai after colliding with a pursuing patrol boat that same year (Adityowati & Jatmika, 2014); a vessel carrying 57 workers sank near Sekinchan in December 2021, killing 10 (TEMPO, 2021); another sinking that same month caused 21 fatalities (TEMPO, 2021); and a vessel carrying 40 workers sank near Pisang Island in January 2022, killing 12 (Fajri, 2022). These incidents demonstrate that the absence of state protection for irregular migrants extends beyond employment conditions to encompass the physical safety of migration itself.

1.4 Research gap

While the literature reviewed above documents, separately, the structural drivers of irregular migration, the formal legal protections that exist on paper, and the forms of exploitation and physical risk migrants face, comparatively little research connects these threads at the level closest to where migration decisions are actually made: the village. Existing studies largely examine national policy frameworks or aggregate incident data, leaving underexplored the specific mechanisms—village government awareness, or its absence—that shape whether at-risk residents ever encounter protective intervention before departure. This study addresses that gap through an ethnographic case study of Bujak Village, examining how state absence at the most local level of governance produces and sustains the vulnerabilities documented in the broader literature above.

2. Methods

2.1 Research design

This study employs a qualitative social ethnography approach. Ethnography is a research method in which researchers immerse themselves in a community to intensively observe social behavior, interactions, and perspectives within their natural setting (Reeves et al., 2008). This approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, cultural practices, and social structures that shape undocumented labor migration from Bujak Village, Central Lombok, where a substantial proportion of men aged 18–50 years work as migrant workers in Malaysia.

An ethnographic approach is particularly suitable for addressing the study's research questions concerning the motivations behind undocumented migration, the experiences of migrant workers, and the role of local government in responding to this phenomenon. Through prolonged engagement with the community, researchers were able to observe how economic hardship, social expectations, migration networks, and local governance interact to encourage undocumented migration. Consistent with Kuper et al. (2008), ethnographic observation provides a valuable means of understanding patterns of social and economic life that cannot be fully captured through interviews alone.

Fieldwork was conducted over a period of 50 days, from 24 June to 13 August 2025. During this period, the researchers resided in Bujak Village, participated in everyday community activities, and observed administrative processes related to migrant documentation and permit legalization at the village office. This prolonged immersion enabled the researchers to develop contextual understanding while directly observing interactions between villagers, migrant workers, and local government institutions.

2.2 Data collection and ethical considerations

Data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals with direct experience working in Malaysia as undocumented migrant workers. Access to participants was facilitated by the village head (kepala dusun), who served as the community gatekeeper by identifying residents who met the study criteria. From this initial group, three informants (identified by the initials H, A, and NS) were selected based on their willingness to provide detailed accounts of their migration experiences. This criterion was considered essential because undocumented migration involves highly sensitive issues, including exploitation, workplace violence, unpaid wages, and legal vulnerability, making many former migrant workers reluctant to discuss their experiences openly.

The interview data were analyzed alongside ethnographic observations, focusing on three principal themes: (1) the motivations for migrating to Malaysia, (2) experiences of exploitation and hardship during undocumented employment abroad, and (3) perceptions of the role of government throughout the migration process. Combining participant observation with in-depth interviews allowed the researchers to triangulate findings and better understand both individual experiences and broader community dynamics.

This study adhered to established ethical standards for qualitative research involving vulnerable populations. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and the intended use of the collected data. To ensure confidentiality, all informants are identified only by their initials. Given the sensitive nature of undocumented migration, interviews were conducted with particular care, avoiding unnecessary probing into traumatic experiences and allowing participants to pause or discontinue interviews whenever signs of discomfort emerged.

The researchers also acknowledge their positionality and several limitations of the study. Access to the community was mediated by the village head, whose role as gatekeeper may have influenced participant selection and introduced selection bias toward individuals considered trustworthy or willing to engage with outside researchers. Furthermore, as researchers without prior social ties to the community, their outsider status may have affected the extent to which participants disclosed sensitive information despite the prolonged field engagement. In addition, the small sample of three informants limits the transferability of the findings beyond the Bujak Village context, although the consistency of themes across participants provides meaningful insight into the migration process. As noted by Bouncken et al. (2025), small purposive samples remain appropriate for qualitative studies that prioritize depth over breadth. Future studies involving larger and more diverse participant groups would strengthen the generalizability and robustness of these findings.

3. Results and Discussion

The socio-cultural background of Bujak Village, Central Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, is a rural community with a patriarchal culture. The majority of migrant workers in Bujak Village are male. In Bujak Village, a man or husband is expected to work and earn a living. When a family needs additional income, a son is also expected to support his parents. Therefore, if a child has graduated from high school and wants to continue their education but the family cannot afford it, the child will be encouraged to work. Those with a high school education background do not have many options when it comes to earning money, and there are not many job openings in Lombok with only a high school education (Juliana et al., 2023).

Bujak Village residents with only a high school education often work as farmers and construction workers. These two jobs don't generate substantial income and are often insufficient to meet daily family needs. Migrant workers are an excellent option for earning enough money to meet these needs. Migrant workers can earn tens of millions of rupiah per

month (Rustam et al., 2022). The substantial income of migrant workers is evident in the fact that being a migrant worker is one of the most sought-after jobs among Bujak Village residents, as nearly 90% of them lack higher education. Migrant workers from Bujak Village, Central Lombok, certainly face the situation described above. West Nusa Tenggara has low levels of education and high levels of poverty, resulting in a very high migrant worker population (Rustam et al., 2022).

The West Nusa Tenggara government has been unable to develop industry, thus failing to provide jobs. Meanwhile, Lombok Island, West Nusa Tenggara, is one of the provinces with the largest population, after Java and Bali, with a total population of 4,500,212 (Hamdi et al., 2023). With two out of three residents of West Nusa Tenggara Province living on Lombok Island, the government is unable to provide jobs. Government incompetence in providing jobs, low education levels, and high poverty rates are the main factors contributing to the high number of migrant workers. Furthermore, young people, from teenagers to adults aged 15-30, are highly interested in working abroad or becoming Indonesian migrant workers. Teenagers and young people from West Nusa Tenggara are eager to become Indonesian migrant workers (Luh et al., 2024). The low level of education also produces a low-skilled workforce, so the people of West Nusa Tenggara often get low-paying jobs as migrant workers. Migrant workers often get jobs such as porters, drivers, waiters, and domestic assistants (ART), which are also called 3D jobs (*Dirty, Difficult, and Dangerous*) (ILO GMS TRIANGLE Project, 2015). The job taken by the majority of migrant workers is as a domestic assistant (ART), with 25,012 migrant workers choosing to work as ART (Muhrim et al., 2024).

In Bujak Village, Central Lombok, an estimated 80% of male villagers are Indonesian migrant workers. Most of them work in Malaysia. The majority of male residents of Bujak Village choose to work in low-skilled jobs such as construction laborers, drivers, planters, garden waterers, and oil palm planters (Amri & Prianto, 2025). Female migrant workers from Bujak Village are rare, but they are also quite numerous because women/wives are expected to stay at home to take care of domestic matters and raise children. However, almost all women from Bujak Village with migrant status work as domestic workers. Female migrant workers are destined to work as domestic assistants (Prusinski, 2016).

The majority of migrant workers from Bujak Village, both men and women, work illegally in Malaysia. The number of illegal migrant workers working in ASEAN destination countries remains very high (Sunam et al., 2021). What causes the people of Bujak Village to prefer working as illegal migrant workers? Working abroad with a currency that tends to be stronger than the rupiah generates a large income. Earning a large income increases their status in the eyes of their surrounding community (Amri & Prianto, 2025). Not being able to find work immediately due to the lack of employment opportunities is a less fortunate fate for them. They cannot provide for their families and cannot even meet basic needs such as food, school, electricity, and clothing. Poor economic conditions force mothers of families to work abroad to meet their daily needs (Prusinski, 2016). Being an illegal migrant also means not being required to pay income tax, so the remittances received by families are also greater (Bernardianto & Sandita, 2017).

Working as an illegal migrant worker does not require a lengthy administrative process, and this process requires costs (Shivakoti et al., 2021). Becoming an Indonesian migrant worker requires a lengthy administrative process. Prospective migrant workers must process passports, employment agreements (PK), and many other documents. In addition to documents, prospective migrant workers must also process work visas. In processing passports, work visas, and *permits*, prospective migrant workers must prepare documents such as an Identity Card (KTP), Family Card (KK), birth certificates, and educational diplomas. Many prospective migrant workers cannot meet administrative requirements, such as not having sufficient educational qualifications or not having a birth certificate, resulting in many cases of prospective migrant workers falsifying their identities (Amri & Prianto, 2025). All administrative processes must be carried out through a legal and recorded system provided by the government, namely the One-Stop Integrated Service

(LTSA) (Pemerintah Indonesia, 2017). Prior to departure, prospective migrant workers must also undergo training (Amri & Prianto, 2025).

Being an illegal migrant worker does indeed earn a large salary without tax deductions, instantly and without the need to deal with administration. However, they do not receive protection before, during, and after working abroad. Salaries are not paid, violence during work (hitting, slapped, kicked, etc.), "imprisonment", diplomas are confiscated (Sunam et al., 2021). There are many cases of violence against illegal migrant workers, such as that experienced by Siti Hajar. Siti Hajar, a 33-year-old Muslim woman, on June 8, 2009, tried to escape from the household where she worked in Kuala Lumpur (Shivakoti et al., 2021). She tried to escape to the Indonesian ambassador, and there she recounted what she had experienced. She had been beaten with sticks, doused with boiling water, forced to eat food containing pork, and her salary had not been paid for 34 months (Shivakoti et al., 2021).

Arum, an Indonesian migrant worker, also had an experience where she did not have the opportunity to set her own salary; the company where she worked withheld her salary and passport (Sunam et al., 2021). Arum, with her position as a migrant worker, stated that she received a higher salary. "Usually I only get 400 Malaysian ringgit a month if I work legally, but now I do domestic work and get a salary of around 1,400 – 1,700 Malaysian ringgit (Sunam et al., 2021). Arum's poor family conditions forced her to work illegally; she was forced to face the risk of being caught by Malaysian authorities, arrested, or even deported. She said, "This is the fate of Indonesians here. What else can I do if this is my fate?" (Sunam et al., 2021). Arum's attitude against the system and taking advantage of opportunities from the system that allows illegal migrant workers to work in Malaysia. Many *Tokey* and *Tekong* parties take advantage of the corrupt system where officials and government agencies can be bribed (Sunam et al., 2021).

Arum justified and exploited the opportunity to become a broker for illegal migrant workers and invited friends from the same village (Shivakoti et al., 2021). Arum had experience working as a migrant worker in Malaysia, even working for several companies simultaneously and earning a salary four times higher (Shivakoti et al., 2021). Arum had successfully exploited loopholes in the system that allowed illegal migrant workers to work freely. Arum used her connections and knowledge from her years as a legal migrant worker. Being an Indonesian migrant worker may seem liberating because their income is tax-free. However, Indonesian migrant workers lack protection when they need it most. In situations where wages are not paid, they experience violence and other human rights violations; they cannot access state protection, and the laws of their destination countries are also unable to assist them.

Companies in destination countries can recruit migrant workers through brokers or *middlemen*. These brokers act as intermediaries between companies and migrant workers. These brokers are often Indonesians already employed by the companies in question and are responsible for finding workers in Indonesia. Brokers often also seek out illegal migrant workers because they are cheaper, more convenient, and most importantly, easier to blackmail or threaten (Dimitriadis, 2023). Brokers and their *trafficking networks* possess strong financial resources and connections. Brokers typically rent or purchase used vessels and collaborate with authorities and politicians to avoid suspicion. Brokers can smuggle thousands of illegal Indonesian migrant workers each month, allowing brokers to pay 1.2 billion rupiah each month to government agencies and authorities in Malaysia and Indonesia (Amri & Prianto, 2025). Brokers also typically bribe immigration officials in destination countries to allow illegal migrant workers through, the amount of which varies depending on the migrant worker's status (Shivakoti et al., 2021).

Brokers often receive commissions if they successfully invite others to work for related companies (Amri & Prianto, 2025). This action constitutes *Transnational Organized Crime* (TOC), which is organized crime that crosses national borders. There are three categories of crimes that cross national borders, namely: (I) illegal trade crimes such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and arms trafficking, (II) Financial crimes such as money laundering and smuggling, (III) Crimes using technology such as *data breaches*, identity theft, and espionage (Rustam et al., 2022). West Nusa Tenggara, one of the largest provinces

contributing migrant workers, often becomes a "playground" for transnational criminals. The NTB Regional Police have handled nine cases related to 18 suspects; in 2019, NTB became one of the provinces in the red zone category for human trafficking (Rustam et al., 2022).

West Nusa Tenggara is a province highly vulnerable to human trafficking through the illegal migration of Indonesian migrant workers. Migrant workers are one of the most common professions in West Nusa Tenggara. The people of West Nusa Tenggara also consciously and willingly register and depart as Indonesian migrant workers. Human trafficking of illegal Indonesian migrant workers is a multinational crime involving a combination of crimes such as document forgery, smuggling, and bribery of officials. Behind these crimes are networks of *traffickers* (Maksum, 2021). Human trafficking under the guise of contributing illegal migrant workers is very common in West Nusa Tenggara. As explained above, brokers or *middlemen* assigned by companies from the destination countries receive commissions for each successful recruitment of individuals to work for the company. Therefore, this case falls into the category of organized crime that transcends national borders (Rustam et al., 2022). Human trafficking, in which Indonesian migrant workers are the victims, successfully exploits a corrupt legal system through violence, monopolistic control, threats, and bribery of officials and public officials.

Table 1. Profile of interviewed informants

Informant	Age	Education	Legal status during migration	Sector / Occupation	Duration abroad	Year of departure
H	53	Junior high school (SMP)	Undocumented (1990-1995); documented 1996-1998 and from 2001	Palm oil plantation; construction	~5 years undocumented; several additional years as documented worker	1990
A	43	Senior high school (SMA)	Documented (passport, visa, permit) on plantation; undocumented as construction worker	Palm oil plantation (4 months); construction (2.5 years, undocumented)	~2.9 years total	November 2004
NS	43	Elementary School (SD)	Undocumented throughout	Construction	7 years	1998

Illegal Indonesian migrant workers are highly vulnerable to a wide range of human rights violations throughout the migration process. Their undocumented status often places them outside formal legal protection, exposing them to exploitation, extortion, deception, arbitrary detention, and forced labor without adequate or even any remuneration (Dewanto, 2020). Rather than occurring as isolated incidents, these abuses form part of a recurring migration pattern in which structural socio-economic pressures, informal recruitment networks, irregular border crossings, exploitative working conditions, and weak institutional protection reinforce one another. In this context, the exploitation experienced by undocumented migrant workers can be understood as a form of contemporary slavery, characterized by coercion, severe dependency, and the denial of fundamental labor rights (Dimitriadis, 2023). Based on the ethnographic findings of this study, the cycle of irregular migration and exploitation experienced by migrant workers from Bujak Village is illustrated in Figure 1.

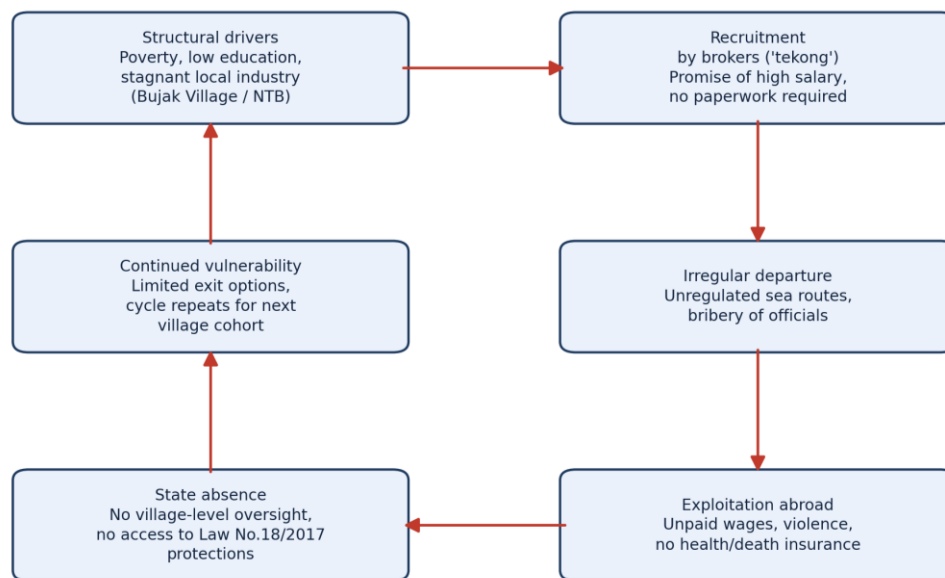


Fig. 1. The cycle of irregular labour migration and exploitation among migrant workers from Bujak Village

This section presents the experiences of three Indonesian migrant workers from Bujak Village who worked in Malaysia under different employment statuses. Although each participant had a distinct migration trajectory, their narratives reveal common patterns regarding the motivations for migration, recruitment mechanisms, working conditions, and the challenges encountered while working abroad. The first account comes from participant "H", whose experience illustrates the circumstances that led him to become an undocumented migrant worker and the consequences of working without legal protection.

An Indonesian migrant worker named "H" is 53 years old with a junior high school education background. To become a migrant worker, a minimum education certificate of high school is required (Prusinski, 2016). The level of education of migrant workers can significantly influence their career path and income (Setijaningrum et al., 2023). Education plays an important role in determining the initial income of migrant workers (Risberg & Romani, 2022). "H" has economic limitations so he cannot cover the costs of administrative matters and is then forced to become an illegal migrant worker. Economic and time limitations in managing administration, as well as pressure from his family to immediately meet needs, are the main factors in becoming an illegal migrant worker (Sunam et al., 2021).

Before becoming an illegal migrant worker, "H" worked informally in Lombok as a construction worker. As a craftsman in Sumbawa, he was paid only 5,000 rupiah per day. His meager income was insufficient to meet his family's daily needs.

Becoming an illegal migrant worker is more practical, instant, and very easy. "H" was invited by a *Tekong*, an intermediary or broker from a Malaysian company who looks for prospective workers who want to work (Wahyudi, 2018), who was looking for workers who wanted to work in Malaysia. "H" was promised that if he worked in Malaysia, he would earn over five million. Given his family's situation, "H" decided to immediately leave for Malaysia and work as an illegal migrant worker. At that time, the *Tekong* came to Bujak Village, specifically in Montong Geria Hamlet where "H" lived. The *Tekong* went around the hamlet looking for workers. "H" said, "The *Tekong* can easily get workers because he is one of the local residents' relatives." *Tekong* often has connections in the area where he is looking for workers, such as family, friends, etc. (Amri & Prianto, 2025). "H" and twenty residents of Montong Geria Hamlet left for work in Malaysia. In 1990, upon departure, these illegal migrant workers were not charged transportation, food, and accommodation costs from their country of origin to their place of work. However, these accommodation costs would be deducted from their salaries after they were paid for the first time (Amri & Prianto, 2025).

"H" works for a palm oil company. His duties include maintaining the plantation, such as spraying fertilizer and pesticides, weeding, and even harvesting and climbing oil palms. *His job description* is unclear, so he is forced to comply with all of *Tokey's* orders and duties.

Upon arrival in Malaysia, these illegal migrant workers, accompanied by a captain, will be welcomed and provided with accommodation by *Tokey*, another name for the boss or company where illegal migrant workers work. *Tokey* provides accommodation but does not provide other accommodations (transportation, meals, etc.) or health or death insurance. *Tokey* provides a daily salary, with a fixed monthly payment. Therefore, if "H" is absent from work due to illness or religious obligations, *Tokey* is not obligated to pay their salary.

"H" sometimes takes Fridays off to perform Friday prayers, but *Tokey* considers praying time-consuming and not getting him any work done. "H" is forced to work all week to get the maximum salary from *Tokey*. On his journey to Malaysia, "H" used a boat for transportation. He and 20 other people, along with a captain, departed by boat. The captain must have bribed officials and security personnel to ensure the illegal migrant workers could arrive in Malaysia without any problems. Captains often bribe immigration or security personnel to ensure a smooth journey (Amri & Prianto, 2025). "H" said that the trip from West Nusa Tenggara by boat was one of his worst travel experiences.

"The journey from here to Malaysia was the most unpleasant experience of my life. On the boat, my friends and I couldn't sleep comfortably; it was very dirty, dusty, and dark. We also couldn't eat comfortably; our dining area was dirty, and there were lots of cockroaches running around. But what can I do? I have an obligation to earn a living and support my family. I have to be strong to face this journey. This is just the journey, not to mention when I'll be working there. I have to be strong to face all the challenges because I have no other choice but to work here." (H)

For five years, "H" worked as an illegal Indonesian migrant worker. However, from 1996 to 1998, he returned to work on a palm oil plantation legally, holding a work permit and visa. He resumed his work as a legal migrant worker in 2001, working as a construction worker. "H" expressed some of how he felt and compared being an illegal Indonesian migrant worker with being a legal one.

"There's a difference between being an illegal migrant worker and a legal one. When I was an illegal migrant worker, I became very paranoid, constantly haunted by the thought that the police might come to my work or residential area at any time and check all the workers. When I was an illegal migrant worker, I didn't get a decent place to live, just a bed and a toilet. I even lived with 2-3 other people in one house. My salary was often late or even less than what I should have been paid. But I also couldn't complain and leave because I didn't have connections to work at another company. The difference between being an illegal migrant worker and a legal migrant worker is that my life is more comfortable, safe, and worry-free. I have a work permit and other documents that state I am legally working as a migrant worker. I have a decent place to live and health insurance. However, as a legal migrant worker, I have to pay income tax. I also often work outside of working hours because my boss wants me to continue working in order to meet daily targets. The overtime pay I get is also small. When I ask permission to pray Friday prayers, the company assumes I am not working. So I didn't get my daily payment on that day." (H)

Illegal migrant workers lack protection while working, so if they become ill or have an accident while on the job, the company is not liable. Even when an accident results in death, the company is not liable and pretends to be unaware of the death.

"While I was still working as an illegal worker, when I got sick, I had to seek treatment on my own, and the company refused to take responsibility or provide assistance. I could only hope to recover by seeking treatment at home and getting enough rest. When I was working, there was an accident where one of the illegal Indonesian workers was struck by

lightning and died. The company took no responsibility and didn't provide any money to repatriate the body to Indonesia. So, we Indonesian workers had to contribute to the repatriation of the body." (H)

The local government had no connection to "H"'s departure to Malaysia as an illegal migrant worker. "H" deliberately avoided informing the government.

"When I left for Malaysia I did not notify the village government of my departure. The village government also did not come to my family to ask where I went and worked. The government has nothing to do with my leaving as a migrant worker" (H)

The Bujak Village government was unaware of "H"'s departure to Malaysia as an illegal migrant worker. The government should have intervened to allow "H" to work as a legal migrant worker by providing them with information on the procedures for becoming a legal migrant worker.

While participant "H" primarily described the experiences of undocumented migration, participant "A" provides a different perspective by having experienced both documented and undocumented employment in Malaysia. This dual experience offers valuable insights into the contrasts between the two employment statuses, particularly in terms of legal protection, employment rights, and access to social security. The following narrative highlights how changes in employment status influenced the participant's working conditions and overall well-being.

43-year-old "A" also experienced what "H" experienced. After graduating from high school, "A" planned to continue her education. However, her parents couldn't afford her studies, so she was forced to work for a living. In November 2004, "A" was also offered a job in Malaysia by the *Tekong*. He was also promised a substantial income working in Malaysia. He then proceeded to arrange the paperwork for his departure to Malaysia. "A" departed as a legal migrant worker by preparing the necessary documents and obtaining a passport, work visa, and work *permit*.

"At that time, I was working in Malaysia through a company called PT Jasa Tama. Here, PT Jasa Tama acted as a broker for palm oil companies in Malaysia. PT Jasa Tama provided training and helped me with my administration when I wanted to work in Malaysia. I worked for PT Pelda and I worked in the plantation area, I was responsible for watering and exterminating pests in the palm oil plantation area. I only worked at the company for four months and was not under a contract. Then I worked as a construction worker for 2.5 years. During my time as a construction worker, I did not have a permit to work as a construction worker." (A)

"A" had a unique journey as a migrant worker in Malaysia. He had documents like a passport, a work visa, and a *permit* to work as a watering and pest control worker on a palm oil plantation at PT Pelda. However, he had other plans: he worked as a construction worker, and throughout his time as an illegal migrant worker because he lacked a work *permit*. "A" initially traveled to Malaysia by plane because he had a passport, a work visa, and a work *permit*, so the company covered his accommodation costs. However, the situation was different when he worked as a construction worker, as he didn't have a *permit*.

"When I first left for Malaysia, I was a legal migrant worker. I had already prepared my passport, work visa, permit, and all the necessary documents. I flew to Malaysia and went straight to Kuala Lumpur. After working on the plantation, I worked as a construction worker. The most obvious differences between illegal and legal workers are health insurance and working hours. Legal migrant workers can apply for sick leave and receive financial assistance from their company if they get sick. When I was working as an illegal worker and I got sick, I couldn't ask the company for medical treatment, and on days I was absent due to illness, I didn't get paid that day. But how else could I work? I knew my chances of getting a well-paid job were in Malaysia. The Bujak Village government didn't

warn me when I wanted to work in Malaysia. The difficulty of working there made me want to support my children so they could go to college, so they wouldn't have the same fate as me." (A)

"A" has a unique experience compared to "H." "A" has worked as both a legal and illegal migrant worker. "A"'s testimony can serve as a comparison between legal and illegal work. The difficulty of working in Malaysia as a migrant worker led "A" to forbid her child from working abroad.

The experiences of participant "NS" further reinforce the patterns identified in the previous narratives while introducing additional evidence regarding occupational safety and long-term health consequences. Unlike the previous participants, "NS" entered Malaysia through a personal network rather than a labor broker. His account demonstrates how the absence of legal protection and workplace safety measures exposed undocumented migrant workers to severe occupational risks with lasting impacts on their livelihoods.

"NS," a 43-year-old Indonesian migrant worker, works as a construction worker. In 1998, "NS" departed for Malaysia as an illegal Indonesian migrant worker. He worked for seven years as a construction worker. "NS" departed by ship, and like "H," he experienced a very uncomfortable journey. Unlike "H" and "A," "NS" was not offered a job by a *Tekong* but by his own friend, who also had experience working as a laborer in Malaysia. His friend invited "NS" to work for the company where he also worked.

"I left for Malaysia as a construction worker in 1998. I remember it was the time when Suharto fell. I worked there illegally because I didn't have a passport, visa, or even a permit to work for a company. The entire trip on the boat to Malaysia was very uncomfortable. I couldn't sleep well and ate very little. Working illegally does have its advantages: you can use your salary to its full potential without taxes. However, you have to pay for food, housing, and healthcare yourself. I eat with my daily salary, and I share a house with three of my friends. Especially if I get sick, I have to pay for my own treatment, and the company won't cover it." (NS)

While "NS" was in Malaysia, he experienced some bad luck. "NS" had an accident that resulted in permanent injuries.

"I had an accident there while working, and the company didn't provide me with insurance or financial assistance for treatment. I'm a construction worker, so I often work without proper tools and clothing, so I wasn't properly protected. While I was working, laying bricks for a wall, there was a slab that wasn't fully covered with cement, and there was concrete sticking out of it. I was sitting on a platform laying bricks when I tripped and fell. I fell toward the slab, hitting my back on the protruding concrete. My back was bleeding, and the muscles and joints in my back were torn. The company didn't provide financial assistance or insurance to help with my treatment. Now I can't work properly anymore because even moving my shoulder hurts." (NS)

"NS" suffered a permanent injury where his shoulder could not be used for work; in fact, his shoulder could not be used as before and could not be moved freely.

3.1 Human security lens

This section interprets the findings presented above through the lens of human security, a framework that identifies protection of individuals across economic, personal, health, and political/institutional dimensions as a basic condition of a dignified life (UNDP, 1994). Reading the experiences of H, A, and NS through this framework clarifies how the exploitation they faced is not incidental to illegal migration but a structural consequence of the absence of state protection at multiple levels.

3.1.1 Economic security

Human security requires assurance of a basic, protected livelihood, free from arbitrary deprivation (Probosambodo et al., 2025). This dimension is directly implicated in the experiences of H, A, and NS, whose accounts of unpaid or withheld wages, and the broader pattern of wage disparity described in relation to brokered ('*Tekong*') labor arrangements, indicate a systemic failure to secure basic economic protections for undocumented migrant workers.

The structural unenforceability of wage protections for undocumented workers is rooted in a specific bind. The very channel through which a worker might seek redress of unpaid wages, exploitation or even violence (filing a report with police) is the same channel that would expose their undocumented status and trigger deportation. For H, A, and NS, this meant that formal legal recourse was not simply difficult to access, but actively self-defeating, especially to report their employer for their exploitation or abuse was to risk losing the ability to work at all.

This dynamic reveals that economic security for migrant workers not simply a matter of whether protective laws exist, but of whether a worker can safely invoke them without triggering the consequence (risk of deportation) that protection is meant to prevent. For A's experience illustrates this contrast directly, during brief period as a documented worker, his employer bore formal responsibility for his welfare, including health issues coverage in the event of workplace accidents. That accountability structure entirely absent once he transitioned to undocumented construction work, where any accident or dispute was hers alone to bear, unreportable without consequence.

The same employer relationship, in other words, carried fundamentally different labour security implications depending solely on documentation status, not on the nature or difficulty of the work performed. This suggests that legal status functions less as a bureaucratic formality than as the actual gatekeeping mechanism determining who can access the protective apparatus of the state at all. The implication is not that the state bears responsibility for extending protective attention to citizens already working abroad without documentation, creating pathways for them to regularize their status and access protections, rather than leaving them trapped in a cycle where the act of seeking help is itself the danger.

3.1.2 Personal security

Personal security concerns protection from physical violence, whether from the state, other actors, or the household and workplace (Yanto et al., 2023). The case of Siti Hajar, alongside any experiences of physical harm described by H, A, or NS, illustrates the acute vulnerability of undocumented workers to violence without institutional recourse. Personal security follows the same structural logic already identified in the economic and health domains. For H, A, and NS, reporting workplace-abuse to authorities carried the same risk as reporting exploitations which is exposure of undocumented status and the threat of deportation. Notably, this fear operated independently of any direct coercion by employers or brokers, none of three informants described explicit threats or confiscated documents used to enforce their silence.

The deterrent was structural rather than interpersonal, the mere existence of an immigration enforcement apparatus tied to routine police contact was sufficient to suppress reporting, regardless of whether any individual employer actively threatened them. This distinction matters analytically, because it locates the failure of personal security not in the malice of individual employers alone, but in the design of the state's enforcement architecture itself, which any contact with law enforcement, for any purpose carries the same consequences for illegal migrant worker. Workplace-abuse of which experienced by H, A, and NS therefore unnoticed not because no law existed to prohibit it, but because the mechanism that law was structurally identical to the mechanism for their own deportation. Personal security was thus foreclosed not by an absence of legal protection on paper, but

by the impossibility of accessing it without triggering the very harm that protection was meant to prevent.

3.1.3 Health security

Health security requires protection from disease, injury, and unsafe living and working conditions, along with access to basic healthcare (Rustam et al., 2022). NS's permanent workplace injury, sustained without insurance or employer-provided medical assistance, exemplifies the absence of this dimension of protection for undocumented migrant workers.

As with economic security, the barrier to health security for undocumented migrant workers is not simply the absence of insurance coverage, but the same structural bind that prevents access to any formal system, such as hospitals and clinics. These formal health facilities required identification exposes an undocumented worker's status authorities who can initiate deportation. For NS, whose workplace injury went untreated by any for medical provider, this meant that seeking care carried the same risk as seeking legal redress, the institution meant to help was simultaneously a point of exposure.

This is not solely a market failure, in which employers simply decline to provide insurance to cut costs nor solely a state failure, in which no legal requirement compels coverage for undocumented workers. It is better understood as a compounding failure, even where a worker might independently seek care and pay out of pocket, the identification requirement built into formal healthcare access closes off that option entirely for anyone without legal status. The result is that undocumented migrant workers face injury and illness with no viable path to formal treatment, whether employer-funded or self-funded, because the healthcare system's basic requirements is itself compatible with their status as undocumented workers. This reinforces the broader pattern across economic and health security alike: the institutions designed to protect citizens function, for illegal workers, as instruments of exposure rather than protection. This state discourages the exact help-seeking behavior that would otherwise mitigate harm.

3.1.4 Political and protection security

Political security concerns the protection of basic human rights by state institutions. The findings indicate a consistent gap between the protections guaranteed to Indonesian migrant workers under Law No. 18 of 2017 and the lived reality of H, A, and NS, whose migration was neither monitored nor protected by village-level government at any stage of the process. Political and protection security points to a complementary opportunity, strengthening state presence before that bond forms ever. The Bujak Village government held some awareness that residents were departing to work in Malaysia through informal channels, though a systematic mechanism to track, monitor or engage with these departures had not yet been established, reflecting broader resources and infrastructure constraints common to village-level governance rather than any singular institutional shortcoming. In the researcher's view, this points toward an important opportunity for improvement; protection for migrant workers is most effective when it begins at the level closest to residents' actual migration decisions.

The village government, given its direct and routine contact with residents, is arguably best positioned to help identify prospective migrants before departure, share information about safer and more informed migration options and connect those already working abroad informally with pathways toward more secure and documented work. A role that could be strengthened considerably with adequate support and resources from district and national government. This suggests that the most promising path forward lies not in assigning blame but in building stronger coordination between different levels of government and the villages they serve. Such an approach would be valuable precisely because it would not depend on individual workers coming forward and risking exposure by reporting workplace abuses, injury and exploitation. It would instead extend protective

attention proactively, addressing the same vulnerabilities identified across economic, health, and personal security without requiring migrants to risk their own status to receive it. Strengthening this Bujak Village government presence, with support from higher levels of government, represents one of the clearest recommendation arising from this study for improving the protection of Indonesian migrant workers.

4. Conclusions

The main driving factors for the residents of Bujak Village and West Nusa Tenggara are poverty, low education levels, and the failure of local governments to provide jobs due to stagnant industry. The demands of a patriarchal culture, where men or husbands are obligated to earn a living, make becoming an illegal migrant worker the most rational choice for survival and family support. The absence of state involvement also occurs within the village government. The Bujak Village Government was shown to be unaware of and to have failed to intervene in the illegal departure of its residents and to have failed to provide education on the procedures for becoming a legal migrant worker. It was found that the majority of migrant workers from Bujak Village, 80% male, chose to travel to Malaysia through illegal routes. There were three reasons: (1) avoiding administrative costs and bureaucracy; legal procedures are considered expensive and time-consuming, (2) insufficient qualifications; many residents of Bujak Village consider themselves to not have sufficient qualifications to become legal migrant workers, (3) dream of a full salary; being a legal PMI means getting a salary that is deducted by taxes.

This lack of protection is exploited by transnational criminal networks involving brokers or "*Tekong*." The "*Tekong*"—often relatives or friends from the same village—actively recruit illegal migrant workers because they are much cheaper and easier to threaten and extort. This has consequences where illegal migrant workers from Bujak Village in particular lose all protection rights guaranteed by Law No. 18 of 2017. Findings from in-depth interviews prove the forms of violence and exploitation experienced: (1) inhumane conditions: travel on unseaworthy ships - frequent accidents due to ships breaking down mid-journey - and inadequate accommodation; (2) no health insurance: illegal migrant workers lack health or mental health insurance. If they become ill, they must cover their own medical expenses, (3) no death insurance: the company was not responsible for repatriating him to Indonesia, so Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) formed a solidarity fund and contributed to repatriating his body to Indonesia, (4) work exploitation, illegal migrant workers are forced to work continuously and have their salaries deducted if they cannot work full time. The violence experienced by illegal migrant workers from Bujak Village is not just a casual incident, but rather a structural and systemic form of violence resulting from the failure of the state's legal system to implement its policies. Loose oversight at the local and national levels has allowed illegal networks to flourish and placed citizens in a highly vulnerable position. The Indonesian government should devote greater attention to the concerns of these immigrant workers. The Indonesian government should ensure the protection for immigrant workers, which also involves developing a preventive system to address the illegal departure of migrant workers.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest for this research.

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