

The Dynamics of Political Passivity: Political Engagement Preferences of Migrant Domestic Workers in Electoral Processes in Host Countries

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Manuscript Chronology: received on 31 July 2024, revised on 16 October 2024, accepted on 31 December 2024

Abstract

The enactment of Election Law Number 7 of 2017 outlines the requirements for voters, including Indonesian citizens (WNI) residing within the territory of the Republic of Indonesia or abroad. Focusing on migrant domestic workers, this paper seeks to analyse the political participation and engagement of migrant domestic workers in the political contestation of their homeland. The potential for political passivity among these workers is highly likely due to the restrictive nature of transnational caregiving work. This condition limits their freedom to engage in activities outside their work sphere, including participation in national elections. However, at the same time, they are able to identify personal barriers they face as a consequence of not participating in elections. Migrant domestic workers exhibit the characteristics of monitorial citizens, individuals who monitor and respond to election-related information amidst restrictive work patterns while also developing alternative forms of political participation outside of electoral processes.

Keywords: women, migrants, domestic workers, home country, elections, participation

Introduction

The holding of overseas elections has been a consistent practice of the Indonesian government since the declaration of Indonesian independence. Since 1955, the Indonesian government has implemented the right of Indonesian citizens abroad to elect members of the legislature through Election Law No. 7/1953 (Wall 2007). Overseas elections are held periodically with the assistance of the Embassy or Consulate General in each country having diplomatic relations with the Republic of Indonesia.

There have been several changes in Indonesia's political system, especially since the end of the New Order era. Since 2004, people have been able to vote directly for president and vice-president. Furthermore, the organisation of overseas elections, which had been carried out by embassies in countries with diplomatic relations with Indonesia, was transferred to a special, more independent election organiser, the PPLN (Overseas Elections Committee), established by the General Elections Commission (KPU) in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The KPU itself was established for the first time since the 1998 reform. Under Law No. 4/2000, KPU members are non-partisan.

The PPLN and the Overseas Election Supervisory Committee (Overseas Panwaslu) work together to form the Overseas Voting Organising Team (KPPSLN). The PPLN plays an important role in the implementation of overseas election phases, especially in updating overseas voter data, determining the organisation and location of polling stations (TPS), and processing ballots by mail or mobile ballot boxes. The KPPSLN is in charge of overseas polling stations on election day.

With a history of holding overseas elections consistently with structured and systematic institutional arrangements, it is expected that overseas elections can be conducted in accordance with the expectations of all parties. However, this expectation may not apply to migrant domestic workers. The reality is that the accessibility of elections for migrant domestic workers is still limited, and there are still barriers to the vulnerable work patterns of migrant domestic workers that severely limit their participation in elections.

From the perspective of hyper-precarious labour and political passivity, this paper seeks to examine the exploratory and vulnerable nature of transnational care work arrangements that may hinder their participation. Hyper-precarious labour conditions minimise the

fundamental rights of migrant workers, including their welfare (Lewis et al. 2014). Migrant domestic workers are included in hyper-precarious labour, a system of migration and work that creates temporary migration and contingent work with the consent of the employer (Piper 2022). This results in migrant domestic workers having limited mobility depending on the employer, including for activities outside the scope of their work in a private home.

Working conditions in the home for migrant domestic workers with live-in arrangements can increase the workload and the potential for exploitation. These isolated and vulnerable working conditions reinforce migrant domestic workers' passivity towards activities and freedoms to interact with the world outside their work, including voting in elections in their home country. The consistent holding of overseas elections and the establishment of structured institutions, including organising and monitoring bodies, have not been able to overcome the structural barriers that migrant domestic workers face in elections. On this basis, this paper seeks to answer two research questions. *First*, how do migrant workers' vulnerable conditions shape their preferences for political passivity? *Second*, how do migrant domestic workers negotiate political passivity into political engagement by actively monitoring and responding to electoral information in the midst of vulnerable working conditions and by developing political participation beyond formal voting in elections?

Research Methods

The research methodology used to write this paper is a narrative literature review. A narrative literature review is done by summarising and synthesising the available literature relevant to the research, and there are usually no set rules for writing this study (Gregory & Dennis 2018). The purpose of such a narrative literature review is to provide a detailed summary of a research topic with its interpretation using research evidence on a topic that is quite complex and broad in scope (Sukhera 2022). Specifically, this paper will use a critical review narrative synthesis, which is a literature study with an interpretive lens formed from previous theories, critical reviews, and perspectives from previous studies combined with the researcher's interpretive process (Sukhera 2022).

Some things to consider when writing an interpretive literature review are identifying relevant and significant literature in the study, discussing and evaluating the literature with a clear structure,

identifying some researchers who have done the study before, contextualising the research objectives, including literature that contradicts the findings of the study synthesis for a deeper dialogue, making points to logically justify the results of the analysis, discussing facts and opinions clearly, continuously including the latest literature in the narrative review process, and including full references of the narrative review (Saunders & Rojon 2011).

In this paper, the researcher uses several working processes to conduct a critical narrative review, namely defining the perspective or theory used and using the researcher's interpretive and dialogical lens to discuss the findings. This stage is used as a preliminary step before embarking on an empirical study of migrant domestic workers' participation in overseas elections. The perspectives of hyper-precarity labour and political passivity are used as an initial lens to examine this study. The concept shows the conditions of migrant domestic workers abroad and also how they navigate political participation in a highly precarious labour situation.

Hyper-Precarity Labour and Political Passivity

Hyper-precarity labour is a term that defines the intertwined conditions of market-regulated labour characterised by employer demand for flexible, low-wage workers. In the context of migration, these workers find themselves in a vulnerable position, with highly restrictive immigration policies that deprive migrant workers of their basic rights, such as the right to permanent residence and welfare benefits (Lewis et al. 2014). Under these conditions, workers are highly vulnerable, highly dependent on exploitative labour systems, and vulnerable to laws, employment protections, and social and civil rights (Zou 2015).

The conditions of Indonesian migrant domestic workers in various destination countries show similar hyper-precarity, and many labour migration processes in Asia are governed by temporary employment systems with ties to the employer (Piper 2022). Moreover, this process shows the operationalisation of the recruitment, remittance, and return (Rs) process that has become a global policy discussion on migration and development. This grand narrative serves as a justification for continuing the recruitment process of migrant domestic workers without considering safe migration. The precarious conditions of female migrant workers are produced by brokers and recruiters, migrant capacities, and migration institutions that actively structure formal and informal conditions to dynamically

shape vulnerable migration experiences (Wee et al. 2019).

The vulnerability that characterises migrant domestic workers is the marginalisation caused by their background based on gender, race, socio-economic conditions, migration status or country of origin. Marginalised conditions intertwined with migrant backgrounds and “use and discard migration regimes” create conditions of injustice that also limit workers’ mobility within their sphere of work (Kaur-Gill & Dutta 2022). In general, migrant domestic workers face a situation of vulnerability and restrictions both in their countries of destination and in their countries of origin. In destination countries, migrant domestic workers are vulnerable to closed working conditions, lack of recognition of labour rights, temporary and limited employment contracts, or even the threat of deportation in the immigration system. In countries of origin, migrant domestic workers face debt bondage prior to migration and experience financial problems when adapting to finding new livelihood opportunities upon return (Parreñas et al. 2019; Silvey & Parreñas 2020). In the process of working in the destination countries, employers also use ‘soft violence’ to negotiate power relations over migrant workers. This creates unequal relationships and reinforces power over workers - conditions that further increase the vulnerability of female migrant workers (Parreñas et al. 2021).

The conditions of vulnerability of migrant domestic workers may have implications for passive behaviour in negotiating agency or individual preferences. Due to the enormous social structures and expansions within individual migrant domestic workers, migrant workers tend not to have options to determine behavioural preferences or intentions, including in political matters. With vulnerable working conditions, such as being tied to employers, affected by power relations with employers, migrant institutions that support vulnerable situations, and conditions of financial, time, and job insecurity, migrant domestic workers orient their behaviour towards meeting economic needs rather than political ones. This situation has implications for the potential behaviour of political passivity. This has implications for the deep relationship between conditions of vulnerability and passivity. However, according to Garrau (2021), vulnerability and passivity are not always linked because an individual retains autonomy or freedom in relational terms, which includes one’s choices, including political choices, integrated into the individual’s choices linked to relationships and social contexts that shape his or her personal choices.

Political passivity is the result of apathetic behaviour. This behaviour is caused by the process of political alienation, which is the feeling of being ‘alien’ to politics. In fact, this process of political passivity is not only seen in apathetic behaviour towards politics and feelings of alienation, but also in how marginalised groups express their interests and political behaviour (Dahl et al. 2018).

Political participation and engagement are linked to feelings of belonging to a place and recognition of individuals. For example, in the context of migrant youth participation, youth groups want to participate in politics but do not feel that they can influence political decisions (Sime & Behrens 2023). Political passivity in voting is often seen as the opposite of political participation. Some arguments see this as harmful to democracy, while others see it not as a decline in democracy but as a process of individuals becoming ‘monitorial citizens’. In the process of post-modern societies, they remain interested in politics but tend to avoid traditional forms of political participation, such as voting, while at the same time building new patterns of political participation and staying informed about political issues as monitorial citizens (Amnå & Ekman 2014). The passive engagement of migrants in Italy, for example, is associated with gender, education, and age. Migrants also engage in political advocacy with trade unions in response to poor economic and housing conditions (Ortensi & Riniolo 2020).

At first glance, political passivity is a process in which individuals are not involved in political processes and decisions due to the process of alienation, feelings of belonging, and recognition of individuals that can shape one’s political behaviour, preferences, and expressions. This political passivity can be a new form of political participation. They are not fully involved in traditional political activities such as elections, but rather, they observe the political processes that take place and build new patterns of participation outside of formal political participation.

Precarious Working Conditions Linked to Political Passivity

The vulnerability of Indonesian migrant domestic workers is compounded by the stratification of migrant domestic workers, which leaves them with few resources in terms of time, money, and psychology to engage in the politics of their country. Migrant domestic workers are structured as low-paid workers, working long hours with no recognition of their labour rights and welfare. This suggests a situation of hyper-precarity with flexible

labour, low wages governed by liberal market logic, restrictive migration regimes, lack of recognition of workers' fundamental rights and exploitative labour systems (Lewis et al. 2014; Zou 2015).

In analysing the hyper-precarity of Indonesian migrant domestic workers and their decision to participate in the elections, there are at least two prepositions that reveal the connection between the two. *First*, the hyper-precarity conditions of migrant domestic workers in the form of exploitative recruitment conditions lead to economic insecurity for migrant domestic workers. Migrant domestic workers tend to allocate resources of time, money, and civic capacity to meeting economic needs rather than to politics, leading to potential political passivity. *Second*, the hyper-precarity conditions of migrant domestic workers, with isolated working conditions in employer power relations, make it difficult for migrant workers to access political information, including voter registration, postal voting, or travel to polling stations. This can lead to potential abstention due to structural barriers.

Relational structures are structures that relate to migrants developing relational interactions with migrant domestic worker recruitment agents. These agents or brokers are key actors in the process of sending migrant domestic workers to destination countries. This process is often highly exploitative as it seeks to maximise profits by offering recruitment services at a very high cost. This forces migrants to seek financial support from family or other financial institutions in the form of debt. Pre-departure debt bondage is common in the recruitment process of migrant workers.

Debt bondage, contract slavery, and trafficking are experiences of labour migration in the form of labour abuse and coercion (Johnson 2018). The recruitment of migrant domestic workers has become a grand narrative for relevant parties to continue to perpetuate this practice under the pretext of development, which, in fact, reinforces a labour system with binding employment relationships with employers without safe migration (Piper 2022). This process is also consistent with migration institutions and migrants' intentions, which shape vulnerable migration processes (Wee et al. 2019). This vulnerability persists until migrant domestic workers return to Indonesia in search of new livelihoods, where job insecurity and economic insecurity are major concerns (Parreñas et al. 2019; Silvey and Parreñas 2020).

In this process, the resources of migrant domestic workers to participate in politics, especially in national

elections, are constrained by economic insecurity. Based on the resource model of political participation, a person can participate in politics if they have the skills and time (Jeroense & Spierings 2023). Time resources are important here, as migrant domestic workers focus their time on economic needs rather than on politics. Time, money, and civic capacity are the resources needed to participate in politics (Brady et al. 1995). As conditions of hyper-precarity force migrant domestic workers to devote time, energy, and thought to economic needs, the political aspect is not their main concern.

Particularly in isolated labour processes, migrant domestic workers find it difficult to interact with people or communities outside their work environment at home. This also makes it difficult for them to access information or be exposed to political information about their country's electoral politics. Migrant domestic workers experience marginalisation and exploitation through their solitary, closed, and isolated employment status in private households, with the process of marginalisation more pronounced than for male workers (Kayako 2014). In the closed labour process, employers use 'soft violence' to negotiate power relations over migrant workers (Parreñas et al. 2021). This prevents migrant domestic workers from leaving their homes freely, including when they have to leave their homes to go to the polling station. In Hong Kong, migrant domestic workers' employment is so dependent on their employers that their passports or other identity documents are often held by their employers or employment agencies. This makes it difficult for them to prove their identity when they go to vote (Asano 2019).

This condition makes migrant domestic workers passive towards their country's political issues. Particularly in the case of closed political elections, access to information and participation is very limited. In the 2024 election in Malaysia, voters were not adequately informed about the voter registration process, the voting process or procedure, and how to exercise their right to vote at the polling station (Alhadjri 2024).

Given the isolated and closed conditions of migrant domestic workers, this means that access to information is a major obstacle to exercising their rights in elections. As a result, they may experience a process of alienation from the politics of their home country. This then leads to the potential for political passivity among migrant domestic workers. Dahl et al (2018) state that political passivity is caused by the process of political alienation,

a feeling of being 'alien' to politics, when this tendency shows apathetic behaviour towards politics.

Migrant domestic workers may also feel that the elections are part of an event only for the country's political elites, and that their contributions do not really change the current political conditions. Political engagement is related to feelings of belonging and recognition of individuals when feelings are not enough to shape political decisions in shaping political participation (Sime & Behrens 2023). Migrant domestic workers recognise that they are Indonesian citizens and, therefore, have a sense of belonging and love for the country. However, over time, the experience of vulnerable migration may also shape their perceptions of how difficult it is to achieve safe migrant facilities and protection from the state. This can also change the political choices of migrant domestic workers, making them apathetic towards elections.

Dahl et al. (2018) also state that political passivity is a form of self-expression and political interest. Similarly, migrant domestic workers who experience hyper-precarity in the recruitment process and in their work in the destination countries may exhibit political passivity in their voting behaviour. Vulnerable conditions and financial insecurity mean that migrant domestic workers' resources and capacities are devoted to the economic sphere rather than to politics. The lack of these resources means that their participation can also be very weak. The political passivity of migrant domestic workers is an expression of their hyper-precarity labour migration.

Political Passivity Does Not Always Indicate Weak Political Participation

Migrant domestic workers' expression of political passivity in elections does not mean that they are completely uninterested in political issues, especially the migration process. Migrant domestic workers learn a lot about labour policies in the destination countries. To some extent, they identify the political processes and power relations at work that are intertwined between workers and labour law. Therefore, politics may not be new to them.

The political passivity of migrant domestic workers in overseas elections is also accompanied by a willingness to stay informed about political issues in their country. They also continue to monitor the political election process in order to exercise their political rights. Migrant domestic workers also made efforts to follow the

elections in their countries of destination, especially for those who have special times like holidays, like in Hong Kong. Through this literature review, it is known that the process of staying informed with political information about the elections is seen in the emergence of migrant domestic workers' opinions about the candidates, actions to support one of the candidates in the elections, and the identification of various barriers to voting overseas.

In the vulnerable working conditions of migrant domestic workers in destination countries, they also develop collective work in the form of advocacy and empowerment. This is a response to the lack of recognition of migrant workers' rights. For example, with the availability of transnational advocacy networks and NGOs working on migrant issues in destination countries, migrant workers are beginning to recognise their rights. The recognition of the universality of human rights, including the right of migrant workers to participate fully in politics, increases the contribution of migrant workers to politics.

This participation is to ensure that migrant domestic workers have the same rights as other workers. This participation develops through latent patterns of participation, such as participation in migrant groups based on specific hobbies or interests in the destination country, as well as manifest patterns of participation, such as participation in trade unions, membership of political parties, or voting in elections in the home country. According to Ekman and Amnå (2012), there are several types of political participation, including latent participation in the form of civic engagement of an individual, community group based on specific interests or socio-political issues, while manifest participation is formal participation in elections, demonstrations, political party membership, or signing petitions.

This political participation is also carried out by migrant domestic workers as a manifestation of the recognition of their political rights. This participation is expected to be a process of involvement of migrant workers in decision-making on policies that apply to migrants themselves. In their country's elections, migrant domestic workers hope that elected candidates will shape migrant protection policies in destination countries.

Migrant domestic workers are able to express subjective opinions about potential leaders in Indonesia. Polarisation in the choice of presidential candidates was also evident in some migrant domestic

worker placements, for instance, during the 2014 election when many migrant domestic workers supported Joko Widodo (Jokowi) for president. Jokowi's presence attracted migrant domestic workers from their destination countries to participate in the election. Migrant domestic workers found the presidential candidate's vision and mission to be realistic and solution-oriented (Lestari 2014).

In the 2024 election, there were actions in migrant domestic workers' destination countries to declare their support for one of the candidates as a form of overseas political mobilisation (Kusumastuti 2024). During the voting process, migrant domestic workers also identified barriers, such as unclear information about the 2019 permanent voter registration process, which prevented migrant domestic workers from receiving sufficient information to participate in exercising their right to vote (Straitstimes 2019).

Election dates that did not coincide with public holidays in the destination countries of migrant domestic workers were also problematic. Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia all had Lunar New Year holidays, while the majority of migrant domestic workers continued to work. As a result, they were unlikely to get a day off. In Singapore, the postal option was also inconvenient as they had to leave the house to go to the post office, and their employers did not give permission (Migrant CARE 2024).

Migrant domestic workers note that the challenges of holding overseas elections, such as lack of socialisation and restrictions in their working situation, have prevented them from exercising their right to vote in elections. Although they tend not to exercise their right to vote in elections, they are still able to identify and assess the barriers they face, so choosing not to vote is the most rational choice for them. Rather than being passive voters, the passivity of migrant domestic workers is part of an individual's process of discovering, observing, and monitoring the electoral process abroad, and then reflecting on the obstacles they have experienced. Political passivity is not always harmful to democracy, but it can give rise to monitorial citizens, voters who avoid traditional forms of political participation such as voting, while at the same time developing new patterns of political participation and staying informed about political issues (Amnå & Ekman 2014).

Monitorial citizens tend to be alert and ready to respond to election issues in the midst of their busy

lives, especially on issues that affect their lives when personal issues become political issues (Graves 2017). Similarly, migrant domestic workers in destination countries may reflect, during election season, on the performance of the government in protecting them in destination countries and providing guarantees on their return. This is an attempt to reflect on the behaviours that affect their lives as migrant domestic workers. In case studies in the Nordic countries, for example, monitorial citizens tend not to participate in traditional political institutions, such as political parties (Hooghe & DeJaeghere 2007). Migrant domestic workers can be said to be interested in politics by reflecting on their personal experiences and the role of the state in protecting migrant workers abroad. This process shows political participation in expressing their opinions. This process of political participation is not always linked to participation in legal and formal political institutions.

The complexity of the overseas electoral process, which requires considerable effort on the part of migrant domestic workers to understand the process, makes them want to process the results of their electoral knowledge quickly. The emergence of electoral problems for migrant domestic workers, such as difficulty in getting days off and limited information, shows that migrant domestic workers are trying to be more perceptive and quicker to identify the problems they face directly during elections. According to van den Hoven (2005), monitorial citizens seek to minimise the information costs associated with their cognitive process of processing complex information about politics, as voters tend to make quick identifications rather than reading their information environment. Migrant domestic workers use the internet and social media to learn about and monitor the political situation in the country, especially as election information is remote and 'soundproofed'.

Another feature of monitorial citizens is the involvement of migrant workers in political advocacy with trade unions in response to poor economic and living conditions (Ortensi & Riniolo 2020). This shows how their political participation can go beyond formal participation, such as in trade unions, and is an attempt to circumvent traditional forms of political participation.

The involvement of migrant domestic workers in labour rights advocacy can be seen in their participation in promoting advocacy for the Domestic Workers Protection Act since 2010 through Jala PRT (National Network for Domestic Workers Advocacy). Domestic

workers are also involved in various civic and political activities, such as participating in the commemoration of Labour Day and National and International Domestic Workers' Day (Gastaldi et al. 20-22).

At the same time, there are many forms of political participation in the advocacy of migrant workers' rights in destination countries. In Hong Kong, there are Indonesian migrant institutions such as Persatuan Buruh Migran Indonesia Tolak Overcharging (PILAR) Hong Kong, which initiated the Movement Against Overcharging in collaboration with twenty-three migrant organisations from different religious and cultural backgrounds (Rother 2017). The Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) and Migrant CARE are trying to implement a rights-based approach to advocacy for migrant workers in Hong Kong through various strategies (Amalia 2020). Migrant domestic workers in Malaysia, under the auspices of several NGOs, have successfully advocated for the fulfilment of workers' fundamental rights in the destination country, demonstrating their role as members of a transnational community (Khurun'in 2017).

Migrant domestic workers' political participation varies from formal participation in the form of voting in elections (electoral politics) to participation in advocacy for migrant workers' rights in the form of extra-electoral politics (Kusumastuti 2023). Their participation in elections can be seen in the phenomenon of workers queuing at the Kaifong Welfare Association polling station in Tsim Sa Tsui, Hong Kong, during the 2019 election (Asano 2019), although some experienced problems and were unable to exercise their right to vote. Engaging in labour rights advocacy in the destination country demonstrates civic participation as part of a transnational society.

The dynamic of migrant domestic workers' political passivity in elections can be transformed into active citizenship in monitoring elections and accessing political information as monitorial citizens. This process occurs when some migrant domestic workers are able to identify the root causes of migrants' absence from elections and the exercise of their right to vote. This shows their ability to identify and be informed about the political issues of the country. By staying informed, migrant domestic workers can develop dialogue and analytical skills beyond the passive tendency of some of them in overseas elections. In addition, migrant domestic workers also develop a high level of political participation outside of formal political participation,

such as in elections. In this case, they develop civic participation in social movements that advocate for migrant workers' rights.

Closing

By synthesising the available literature on the conditions of migrant domestic workers in destination countries and their political participation, this narrative review produces three main findings. First, the hyper-precarious and isolated working conditions of migrant domestic workers may shape their ability to focus on economic rather than political needs, increasing the likelihood of political passivity. However, this political passivity does not necessarily threaten democratic processes and their engagement in the politics of their home country.

Second, with some effort, migrant domestic workers recognise the problem of difficulty in accessing political information or exercising their right to vote. This shows the process of individual reflection on structural barriers to voting. This reflection is a migratory process that shows the characteristics of the monitorial citizen.

Third, monitorial citizens reveal the preferences of migrant domestic workers in politics. They can find, recognise, and identify the root of migrant domestic workers' problems in terms of their reasons and tendencies to be passive in their country's electoral contest. They seek to monitor election information and identify personal barriers to highly restrictive working conditions overseas that do not necessarily lead to formal participation in elections. They are also willing to take time out of their busy schedules to respond to election issues. In the process, migrant domestic workers also develop alternatives to political participation beyond voting in elections, such as lobbying for a Domestic Workers Protection Act in their home country since 2010 and advocating for migrant workers' rights in destination countries through trade unions and migrant organisations.

The vulnerability of migrant domestic workers' working conditions in destination countries can shape the potential for passive political behaviour in electoral contests at home. However, this political passivity is dynamic. Behind the non-participation in formal politics, migrant domestic workers are also able to identify structural barriers in the electoral process in their home country that make them passive while at the same time staying informed about electoral developments. On the other hand, migrant domestic

workers also develop political participation outside of formal political participation, such as civic engagement in advocating for migrant workers' rights.

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