Jurnal Perempuan
untuk pencerahan dan kesetaraan
Vol. 30 No. 1, 2025, 89—100

DDC: 305

Between High Jump and Severe Injuries: A Lesson from the Early *Solidaritas Perempuan* Movement for Women Migrant Workers

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Manuscript Chronology: accepted 28 June 2025, revised 21 September 2025, approved 28 September 2025

Abstract

The situation of female migrant workers from Indonesia is closely linked to the conditions in their home villages. The green revolution initially established Indonesia as a nation capable of ensuring food security for its population, but this status lasted only five years. Subsequently, the agricultural land could no longer sustain the farmers' livelihoods. For women in rural areas, finding employment overseas has become a necessity. There are almost no alternatives. Sadly, the nation perceives migrant workers merely as sources of foreign currency, and their susceptibility to the challenges of working abroad is not met with an adequate protective framework. Consequently, many fall victim to extortion and violence, resulting in serious injuries. *Solidaritas Perempuan* is the pioneering organisation focused on advocating for female migrant workers through a feminist and human rights lens, specifically by challenging the patriarchal gender system and holding the state accountable for ensuring the human rights of its citizens. This article employs a feminist autoethnographic approach to trace these dynamics through lived experience and activist engagement. By situating personal reflections alongside structural analysis, the study reveals how state policies, patriarchal systems, and the global labour market reshape women's intimate lives in rural communities.

Keywords: migrant workers, green revolution, livelihood of farmers, *Solidaritas Perempuan*

Introduction

The phenomenon of Indonesian female migrant workers is one of the most visible consequences of the destruction of development under the New Order. Although the state boasts about the success of the Green Revolution and its achievement of food self-sufficiency, villages have suffered ecological, social, and economic damage, forcing young women to leave their homeland. In these circumstances, migration has become an almost inevitable "leap" for rural women, even though this often results in severe trauma, such as exploitation, violence, and alienation in a foreign land.

This article is based on my personal experience as someone from the village of Karawang who witnessed the disappearance of women's work in agriculture, and who then became directly involved in advocacy with *Solidaritas Perempuan* in the early 1990s. Using the feminist autoethnography method, I draw on my experience as a gateway to understanding the broader power structures that shape the vulnerability of female migrant workers, namely the state, agrarian capitalism, and the global labour market. The idea that "the personal is political" asserts that personal stories are not just private narratives, but part of political dynamics that require critical and collective analysis.

Furthermore, this article traces the early phases of the movement to defend female migrant workers, which was initiated by *Solidaritas Perempuan*. The organisation was formed in response to the realisation that the state viewed migrant workers merely as foreign currency earners, rather than as citizens who must be protected. Adopting a feminist and human rights perspective, *Solidaritas Perempuan* seeks to dismantle patriarchal power relations that oppress women, while holding the state to account.

This article is divided into several main sections. First, the author describes the village's socio-economic background and the impact of the Green Revolution on women. Secondly, the article discusses personal experiences and encounters with female migrant workers for reflection purposes. Thirdly, the paper highlights the establishment of *Solidaritas Perempuan* (Women's Solidarity) and the initial strategies of the migrant worker advocacy movement. Fourthly, the article reflects on the lessons learned from this advocacy work in the context of critical feminism and human rights. Thus, this article not only contributes to the historical documentation of the women's movement but also to the theoretical analysis of how the experiences of rural women are connected to the global struggle for social justice.

Research Methodology

This paper adopts a critical feminist perspective to examine the experiences of Indonesian female migrant workers in relation to New Order development policies. Critical feminism emphasises the interconnectedness of personal experiences and broader political and economic structures. The idea that "the personal is political" asserts that women's individual experiences cannot be separated from the political context of the state and the global economic system.

The phenomenon of Indonesian female migrant workers can be interpreted through the lens of Global South theory, which highlights the unequal position of post-colonial countries and their societies within the world order. According to this theory, although formal colonialism has ended, global power relations continue to reproduce inequality, particularly through economic mechanisms, labour migration, and international politics (Connell 2007; Santos 2014).

In the Indonesian context, rural women migrating abroad is not merely an individual desire to work overseas, but part of an exploitative pattern of cheap labour from the Global South that supports the economies of Global North countries and more developed Asian countries. This migration pattern illustrates how women are positioned within the global labour chain as undervalued domestic and care workers, in line with the logic of the coloniality of labour. Furthermore, Global Southern epistemologies, such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), emphasise the importance of "epistemologies of the South", offering an alternative perspective on the world from the viewpoint of victims of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. Using feminist autoethnography, this article attempts to give a voice to women marginalised from national and global development narratives.

Thus, Global South theory demonstrates that the experiences of Indonesian female migrant workers are part of a broader phenomenon: the forced migration of citizens from Southern countries, while the state remains negligent in providing protection. *Solidaritas Perempuan* then emerges as a form of resistance that connects local experiences with transnational advocacy — a practice characteristic of Global South feminism that combines grassroots struggles with cross-border solidarity.

The methodology employed is feminist autoethnography, a technique that emphasises personal reflection to expose oppressive social structures. Several autoethnographic texts were used for this paper, including those of Yoko Arisaka. In her article *"Becoming a Feminist: A Reflection on Life in Three Places"* (2024), Arisaka uses reflective autoethnography to trace her life journey in three different contexts: Japan, Germany, and the United States. She emphasises that autoethnography is not merely a personal record, but a philosophical and feminist approach to understanding how individual experiences are shaped by various cultural, historical, and political contexts. I also draw on Robin R. Griffin's (2012) approach, which builds on the concept of Black feminist autoethnography as a means of asserting one's voice, resisting silencing, and producing knowledge from women's life experiences. Griffin asserts that emotions such as disappointment and anger are legitimate sources of knowledge and can be strategies of resistance. Thus, autoethnography is a feminist practice that connects individual experiences to broader structures of patriarchy, racism, and social injustice, rather than merely a personal narrative. As Griffin (2012, p. 139) asserts, feminist autoethnography enables "voice, resistance, and survival through storytelling". In other words, it turns women's experiences into a form of resistance. This allows me to link my life experiences in the village of Karawang, my involvement in *Solidaritas Perempuan*, and my advocacy work for migrant workers to a feminist and human rights analytical framework.

The data sources used in this article are as follows: (1) The author's personal reflections on growing up in Karawang, West Java; (2) The documentation and archives of the *Solidaritas Perempuan* movement (1990-2000); and (3) Literature reviews related to feminism, the Green Revolution, and state policies on migrant workers. The article, therefore, presents personal experiences and connects them to the structures of patriarchy and global capitalism.

Jumpalitan

I think '*jumpalitan*' is the word that best describes the lives of the people in my village, which is located not far from the capital city of Jakarta. It is only about 70 kilometres away. It is called Pasir Awi and is located in Karawang Regency, an area once known as the rice barn of West Java. In my opinion, the *phrase 'gemah ripah loh jinawi'* (abundant in food and wealth) only exists in books and fairy tales, not in reality. I started observing my village closely when I decided to continue my education quite far from the city. My grandmother, who was both illiterate and physically blind due to prolonged

eye disease and possibly incorrect treatment, asked me why I was continuing my education. It was a classic question from someone trapped in a patriarchal culture: "Why does a woman need to study so hard? Why doesn't she just get married?" However, behind that irritating question lay her good intentions: my grandmother realised that my family could not afford to send their children to university, especially outside the city, and she did not want me to struggle to balance studying with work. My mother just smiled, perhaps because she knew her eldest child was stubborn. Meanwhile, my father remained silent, as if he did not care.

I was 20 years old at the time. Most of my female friends in the village got married after graduating from primary or secondary school, between the ages of 13 and 16. They threw lavish parties and said it was because the bride was a virgin. To me, it seemed more like a rush than a celebration. On average, families who married off their children borrowed money here and there to pay for the party. Some mortgaged their rice fields, and their close relatives had to contribute. Traffic was congested because part of the road was used as an entertainment stage, and people sold goods along the side of the road. Small children clamoured to be bought plastic toys. In my opinion, all this hustle and bustle surrounding wedding parties does nothing to strengthen the foundations of marriages. I have seen many of my friends from childhood get married and then divorced within a short time; some remarried quickly, some divorced again and then remarried, while others remained single. Most of those who remained single tried to earn a living independently, either by opening small shops or by working in factories outside the city. Others secretly become sex workers. Life is very complicated.

When I returned to the village after completing my psychology degree in 1986, my mother hugged me with relief, and my grandmother reminded me again to get married soon, adding the phrase, "don't go too far." It turned out that this last remark was related to her story about friends in the village who had left to work in Saudi Arabia. The story I heard was very incomplete. I had so many questions: How did they manage to work abroad when they hardly ever even went to the district capital, which was less than 10 kilometres from the village? Which city did they work in? Saudi Arabia is so vast and far away. What kind of work did they do? Were they safe? If there were any problems, who would help them? As a childhood friend, I missed them. My studies at university and my social circle gave me no insight into the lives of my friends from the village, who were really struggling. They married young, became mothers, divorced, remarried, divorced again, did odd jobs, then flew far away to become migrant workers.

Compared to the Philippines and India, Indonesia can be considered a relatively latecomer to the international labour market. Indonesia's entry into the international labour market occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, particularly in sectors such as domestic work for destinations like Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. Indonesia used a comparative advantage strategy to capture this market. This strategy promoted Indonesian workers as obedient, unorganised, and willing to accept low wages. This strategy clearly perpetuated the subordinate position of women. Furthermore, the government exploited religious similarities with destination countries (both being Muslim-majority) to replace the Philippines and India as a source of labour.

Table 1.

The Development of the Number of Indonesian Migrant Workers and the Composition of Destination Countries for Indonesian Migrant Workers from 1974 to 1999

Destination Country	1974-79	1979-84	1984-89	1989-95	1995-99*)
1. Middle East					
Saudi Arabia	3,817	55,976	223,573	268,858	267,191
Other Middle Eastern Countries	1,235	5,349	3,428	5,145	16,071
2. Southeast Asia & East Malaysia & Brunei	536	11,441	38,705	130,735	392,512
Singapore & Hong Kong	3,729	6,768	12,272	38,071	80,222
3. East Asia: Korea, Taiwan, & Japan	451	920	573	6,153	45,259
4. Other Countries	7,274	15,956	13,711	17,010	13,100
TOTAL	17,042	96,410	292,262	456,927	814,352

Source: Adapted from Hugo 1995: 279 from unpublished statistics at the Indonesian Ministry of Manpower

*data as of March 1997

Hidden Damage

Since the mid-1980s, the number of young women leaving their villages to work in Saudi Arabia has steadily increased.[1] Is this a sign of progress or regression? I doubt it is progress. For me, the village was no longer the place described in L. Manik's song, "Desaku yang Kucinta" (My Beloved Village). My relatives had left the village. Many things had disappeared from the village, and many others were left unused, eventually becoming damaged and wasted. I no longer saw carts passing through the village roads, carrying crops to the city market. The cattle and buffalo pens were empty. There was no longer the sound of pestles pounding rice. Rusted sickles, used for harvesting rice, hung covered in dust in people's kitchens. Even sadder was the fact that it was difficult to find rice barns belonging to the villagers. If there were any, they looked dull and unused. Meanwhile, newspapers and television were reporting on various harvest events, including those in Karawang. The harvest was reported to be abundant. But where were the harvesters? My friends, who had only finished primary school or dropped out of secondary school, had to seek their fortune abroad.

On 14 November 1985, President Soeharto was invited to deliver a speech at the 23rd Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) conference in Rome, Italy. This was a significant moment for Indonesia, marking its progress in achieving food self-sufficiency, particularly with regard to rice production, and highlighting its international recognition. Soeharto was presented with the FAO gold medal by the FAO Director-General, Edouard Saouma, at Bina Graha in Jakarta. To me, a villager who nearly dropped out of college that year due to unaffordable tuition fees, this event was like a luxurious carpet covering up the damage to the local economy. The contrast was striking. Leo Kristi's 1985 song *"Salam Dari Desa"* (Greetings from the Village) captured my feelings, especially the line "But it's not ours."

> "If you go to the city tomorrow morning... convey my longing; tell them the rice has blossomed. The fields stretch as far as the eye can see; the mill wheels turn day and night. But it's not ours..."

The Green Revolution, or agricultural modernisation, was a development policy implemented by the New Order government to double agricultural yields (Novitri 2021).[2] Karawang was designated as one of the main centres for implementing the Green Revolution. This agricultural modernisation was carried out through a process of intensification known as "Panca Usaha Tani" (Five Farming Practices), which included the following: 1) The use of high-quality seeds[3]; 2) The use of chemical fertilisers; 3) Pest control using insecticides, rodenticides, fungicides, and herbicides; 4) Agricultural irrigation, whereby water is regularly brought to rice fields or farms so that farmers do not have to rely on the rainy season; and 5) The cultivation of agricultural land using modern technology, such as tractors. While the positive aspects of these practices were widely recognised, I would like to shed light on some of the hidden aspects of the Green Revolution's implementation in my village.

High-Yield Rice Seeds and Detention Centres

During the implementation of the Green Revolution in the 1970s and 1980s, farmers were required to plant high-yield rice seeds provided by the government (Swastika et al. 2022)[4] and abandon all the rice seeds they had developed themselves. My uncle remained loyal to his own rice seeds, however, and refused to plant the high-yield variety. The authorities somehow found out about this and took him to the sub-district office, where he was interrogated and imprisoned in a "detention centre" for violating the rules, hindering development, or being a PKI sympathiser. The accusation of being a PKI sympathiser took a heavy toll on the family, especially as rumours spread with no clear source, and the authorities constantly summoned my uncle. His family finally gave in and agreed to use high-yield seeds. He asked all his relatives not to discuss the matter any further. The incident involving my uncle's defiance and detention had to be kept secret and was not to be discussed. I was scolded when I tried to find out about it. My grandmother no longer went to the fields as she had gone blind. She was upset that she could not confront the security officers who had imprisoned her son. "My eyes are closed; now I must also close my mouth," she protested. She felt isolated. Nobody wanted to talk about my uncle's detention.

Buffaloes and Cows Displaced—Birds Killed

In addition to leaving behind their own rice seeds, the villagers had lost their cows and buffaloes. These animals had always helped my family and the other farmers prepare the land before the planting season. Tractors had replaced them. Before the Green Revolution, we used to hear cattle lowing as they walked slowly to the rice fields or pulled carts into the city. Do you remember the novel Max Havelaar (Multatuli, 1860)? Although not as heroic as Saijah being saved from a tiger attack by his

buffalo in the novel, I often witnessed the strong bond between farmers and their cattle. They were friends who benefited each other. Farmers brought them fresh grass to eat. In return, the animals provided manure, which was the best fertiliser for soil fertility, as well as urine, which could be processed into a pest repellent. By the 1980s, there were no longer any buffalo or cow pens in my village. Farmers no longer made their own fertiliser; instead, they bought factory-made fertiliser. The most famous brand was PT Kujang, complete with its distinctive West Javanese dagger logo.

In the 1980s, factory-made insecticides (pesticides) were also readily available and distributed by the Department of Agriculture through PPL (field agricultural officers), who encouraged farmers to spray the toxic liquid on their fields. PPL continuously reminded farmers that high-yield seeds, urea fertiliser, and pesticides were inseparable. They were a single unit. High-yield seeds required prepared fertiliser, namely urea and TSP, and protection from pests so they could grow undisturbed. I remember, in the 1970s, aeroplanes flying low over the rice fields and spraying pesticides on a massive scale. My mother forbade me from going outside, saying it was dangerous. The farmhands working on our family's rice fields told me that they found many dead birds after the planes had sprayed the pesticides.

Mortars and Pestles Are Now Just Memories

When I was little, I used to watch my grandmother skilfully use the mortar, a wooden rice-pounding tool. It was used not only to husk rice but also as a means of communication and a musical instrument. In the cool dawn, my grandmother would play the distinctive rhythm of the pestle on the mortar. The soft notes would float through the air, announcing that my grandmother's family would be planting rice seeds (*tandur*) that day. Neighbouring women who heard this would come to her rice field. Planting rice was a joyful communal activity. They usually took turns; one day it would be *Ibu* A's rice field, the next *Ibu* B's, and so on. Similarly, when it was time to harvest, my grandmother would beat the mortar again with a lively rhythm to let the neighbours know that the rice was ready to be cut. As dawn broke over the eastern horizon, the cheerful greetings of the women going to help with the harvest could be heard throughout the neighbourhood.

During the school holidays, I would accompany my grandmother to the rice fields and join the women, who wore colourful kebayas and bamboo hats. They carried sickles in their hands. Their hands were so deft at cutting each grain of rice. In the evening, my grandmother would beat the mortar again, but not alone. She would play with her friends, who would line up around a large wooden mortar about 4 metres long. With pestles in their hands, around twenty female farmers would pound the mortar, creating an even livelier rhythm as they called out to each other. Their laughter accompanied the young men as they stacked the yellow rice from the harvest into piles in the yard.

Since the late 1970s, my grandmother has not used a mortar and pestle, not because of her eyesight, but because they, like the "*ani-ani*, were no longer used in my village. The rice grown from the high-yield seeds mandated by the Green Revolution was different; it was shorter and was no longer harvested with *ani-ani*, but with sickles or scythes. Harvesting was no longer the work of female farmers, but of male farmers. The harvested rice was no longer piled up in the yard, but went straight into sacks. Some was even sold directly in the fields and transported by car to the city. The barns were empty, containing no rice. Grain was no longer pounded in mortars, but milled in factories to become rice. Barns and mortars slowly disappeared from the village.

Rural women lost their jobs in agriculture. They migrated to the city to become domestic or factory workers. They experienced wage discrimination due to the stigma that women are weak, uneducated, and unskilled. The striking wage gap within the country, coupled with the increasing demand for migrant workers abroad, has encouraged a massive exodus of female workers.

Contradiction

Despite the celebrations surrounding the harvest and the international recognition of the phenomenal increase in rice production at the end of the 1980s, I actually felt a void in the village. First, my childhood friends left to work abroad. Then I realised that the elements of village identity that had been intertwined with the lives of residents for generations had disappeared. Female farmers had disappeared from the fields at harvest time, and the knowledge and skills required for traditional agricultural management were no longer needed. Various traditional agricultural tools, including ploughs, cows, buffalo, *ani-ani*, mortars, and rice barns, had also vanished. They were replaced by tractors, hulling machines, sacks of urea fertiliser, and packets of IR and PB rice seeds.

In 1984, I took a break from university due to a lack of funds and worked in North Lombok for a Dutch humanitarian organisation called HIVOS, which provided aid to communities affected by the 1979 earthquake (Wirayudha 2018).[5] The organisation helped earthquake victims (fishermen, farmers, men, and women), rebuilt their homes, and restored their economic activities based on the concept of rebuilding traditional villages complete with *berugaks*, which are *bale-bale* used by the Sasak tribe for family gatherings, receiving guests, and conducting other socio-cultural activities. I learned how deeply this institution respected the traditional values that shaped the history and lives of the communities it assisted. It was sad to remember what happened in my own village: the destruction of traditional agriculture. It felt as if there had been an invisible "earthquake", a shock that destroyed rice barns, broke *ani-ani* (traditional rice threshing tools), and took away the jobs of female farmers. Who paid attention to this issue? These issues were not as visible as the earthquake in Lombok that destroyed hundreds of homes.

The lessons learned from my time working in Lombok with HIVOS and my personal concerns about developments in my own village regarding "hidden destruction" have strengthened my determination to continue being deeply involved in resistance movements led by both students and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In the 1980s, post-NKK/BKK student movements began to emerge. Rather than originating in campus organisations, these movements emerged from student action fronts that accompanied land or labour disputes. I joined the KSBH (*Kelompok Studi dan Bantuan Hukum*/Legal Aid and Study Group) in Yogyakarta in 1980. My discussion partners at KSBH came from a variety of disciplines, including law, philosophy, literature, psychology, sociology, agriculture, and music. The structural legal aid developed and implemented by KSBH was part of an effort to dismantle fragmented, compartmentalised, biased, and oppressive ways of thinking. KSBH actively provided structural legal aid to eviction victims in Kedung Ombo, Karanganyar, and the area around Borobudur Temple, adopting an approach based on raising awareness and organising. It was through KSBH that I became acquainted with critical thinkers and activists such as Henny Supolo, Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, Buyung Nasution, Todung Mulya Lubis, Mulyana W. Kusumah, and Fauzi Abdullah. I also met Tjita Andang Sedjati, a women's rights activist from Bina Desa; Ratna Saptari, a critical thinker who founded Kalyanamitra organisation; and Myra Diarsi, another critical thinker. During this period, networks of activists began to form between cities and even islands.

After graduating from university, I left Yogyakarta and KSBH, but did not abandon activism. Together with human rights and student activists from various cities, I investigated and defended cases of land grabbing in Badega, West Java; Pulau Panggung, Lampung; and Sugapa-Sianipar, North Sumatra. These three areas were just a small sample of the hundreds of cases of land grabbing and seizure of livelihoods that occurred during that period, stretching from Sumatra to Papua.[6] Through interacting with local residents, I realised that power in this country is based on large capital, which employs repressive, militaristic, and oppressive methods. This power acts arbitrarily, exploits nature recklessly — including deforestation — disregards local knowledge and wisdom, and benefits capital owners and those in power at the expense of human rights. This kind of development only benefits a handful of people, causing suffering for the majority, especially rural communities, Indigenous peoples, and women.

There have been countless victims. Clearly, my village was not the only one to have been devastated by development and agricultural industrialisation. It was not just my childhood friends who were displaced from their birthplace. Many victims have fought to defend their rights, but too many have been overpowered by military force, silenced by violence, or tricked by various forms of propaganda, monopolised interpretations, and ideologisation.

I am also increasingly aware of the complexities of women's position at the grassroots level. As victims of capitalist, militaristic, and patriarchal development processes, women bear a heavier burden, experience more discrimination, and are more vulnerable to violence. Nevertheless, it is women who persist in defending their livelihoods by caring for children and older people, fetching water, providing food, and in some places becoming the most persistent fighters against land grabbing. Women's suffering and their double burden are often ignored. Generally, women are considered second-class citizens who must be submissive, obedient, and powerless. They are often subjugated through either violence or insincere flattery (such as being called 'patient', a 'pillar of the state', or having 'heaven at their feet'). Conditions that humiliate and exploit people, especially women, must stop. These unjust relationships, particularly the hidden injustices, must be dismantled and resisted.

Solidaritas Perempuan (SP)

In response, Ati Nurbaiti, Gracia Tjita Andang Sedjati, Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, and Tati Krisnawaty agreed to set up a women's organisation called *Solidaritas Perempuan* (Women's Solidarity). In the white paper of this organisation, we stated that the tyranny created by the New Order regime had given rise to solidarity. We hoped that, through this organisation, we could move forward collectively, systematically, and measurably. We adopted a feminist approach to analysing issues and based our search for solutions on universal human rights principles. Therefore, we named the organisation "Women's Solidarity for Human Rights".

In its early stages, SP was a task force that emerged spontaneously and voluntarily, with a simple structure. Its activities included collecting field data and facts, staging street protests, visiting state institutions, and accompanying victims of agrarian criminalisation to court. The Women's Solidarity Group's (*Kelompok Solidaritas Perempuan*/KSP) main agenda was to strengthen people's efforts to reclaim their farmland.

The 1990s marked the peak of the authoritarian New Order regime. The rulers viewed the ideals of a democratic, egalitarian, and emancipatory society as the most dangerous subversive thoughts. During the visit of Jan Pieter Pronk, the Dutch Minister for Cooperation and Development and Chair of the IGGI (Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia), to Indonesia in April 1990, a number of activists from various regions invited him to a dialogue at the SKEPHI office in Tebet. During the dialogue, these activists raised various issues, such as forest destruction, labour exploitation, freedom of expression, and land grabbing. KSP was present at the meeting and presented three cases of land grabbing (Badega, Pulau Panggung, and Sugapa-Sianipar) to illustrate state violence, impoverishing development, and human rights violations, including violations of women's rights. After Pronk had left, officials visited the SKEPHI office and interrogated us as though we were criminals caught red-handed.

They did not want to acknowledge that dialogue was part of the freedom of expression protected by the Constitution. They did not care that the activists had accurate data. In fact, our findings were almost the opposite of those presented by the World Bank at the IGGI meeting at the time (Mangkusuwondo & Mulyono 1990).[7] I felt intimidated by the security forces' attitude, even though they were wearing batik uniforms. They interrogated us until late at night, shouting at us, accusing us of things, banging on the table, and asking irrelevant questions. However, I did not know what made my fellow activists and me immune. We did not back down; we persisted.

KSP joined forces with *Kelompok Perempuan untuk Solidaritas Badega* (KPSB) to stage demonstrations and submit a petition to the Indonesian House of Representatives. We held a hearing with the Speaker of the House of Representatives and asked him to take responsibility for the HGU cases that had deprived people of their land rights in the Badega Mountain area of Garut in West Java. We also reported on the trial of thirteen Badega farmers who were criminalised for defending their rights. One of the farmers was a woman. Although the number of participants in the protest was very small — fewer than could be counted on one hand — it succeeded in attracting the attention of the media. We were in the news for days. Perhaps this was because the number of security personnel far outnumbered us, creating a striking contrast. It may also have been because this was the first action taken by a women's group during the highly repressive and militaristic New Order era. At that time, almost no women's groups openly criticised development and demanded accountability from the state. We shape public opinion (YLBHI 1990)[8]. All of the above activities were carried out on a voluntary basis.

Feminists and Feminism

As a women's organisation, SP is sensitive to power relations that are unfair to women. In addition to social analysis, we incorporate feminist analysis into our approach. In the early 1990s, we rejected the term 'gender analysis' because it was widely used (or misused) to complement development programmes. The concept of development implemented in Indonesia was patriarchal and centralised, causing suffering to many people, especially women. We also felt that, at that time, gender analysis was overly technical, disregarding historical dimensions and the connection between the present and the past. The term 'gender' often confuses its users and how it is used. Sometimes it was simply used as another word for 'women'. Therefore, *Solidaritas Perempuan* chose to use the analysis method employed by the feminist movement. We realise that feminism itself is not a singular concept; it is diverse and dynamic, evolving over time and from one place to another. This diversity did not present a problem, but rather brought SP closer to understanding the reality of women's oppression and their diverse struggles. For SP,

feminism provides a set of values drawn from women's experiences of fighting injustice.

Meanwhile, those who disliked feminism interpreted the word very differently. They accused it of promoting a Western lifestyle that does not align with Eastern norms, of destroying households, and of promoting free sex, among other things. SP remained steadfast, refusing to be distracted by negative opinions. It continued to champion women's liberation from oppressive relationships while learning from various social movements around them and tracing the footsteps of women's movements in various places, both individually and collectively.

By the end of 1990, SP was fortunate to receive financial support, enabling the organisation to rent a house for its office. SP activists also had the opportunity to intern at *Gabriella*, a progressive and powerful feminist organisation in the Philippines. SP also continued to participate in discussion forums organised by independent women's organisations, such as *Kalyanamitra* and *Yayasan Perempuan Mardika* in Jakarta, *FDPY* and *Annisa Swasti* in Yogyakarta, and *Hapsari* in North Sumatra. SP also established close cooperation with the labour movement, learning alongside figures such as Ari Sunaryati, Aris Merdeka Sirait, Fauzi Abdullah, Hemasari, Yudha, Arif, Kacik, and Krisman from *Yayasan Arek Surabaya*. We learned organisational and facilitation methods from Nur Fauzi Rahman, Boy Fido, and Galuh Wandita. Our social analysis was sharpened by Arif Budiman, Toeti Heraty, Kamala Chandrakirana, Wiladi Budiharga, Wilarsa, and Wardah Hafidz. We also exchanged ideas with environmental organisations such as *WALHI* and *SKEPHI*, as well as legal aid organisations, in various cities.

Solidaritas Perempuan strives to synthesise the meaning and understanding of feminism from the diverse experiences of the social movements around it. SP does not wish to be bound by a single formulation, let alone dogma. This process unfolds naturally and skilfully utilising available opportunities and continuously learning, seeking, testing, and applying.

Three Spearheads

Following an initial period of enthusiastic volunteer work, *Solidaritas Perempuan* began developing more fundamental, long-term activities. These activities were systematically designed to spearhead efforts to develop the women's movement. These activities were: 1) training in feminism; 2) research into women's organisations under the New Order regime, and 3) advocacy for female migrant workers.

The first activity aimed to examine, understand, and disseminate the values, principles, and methods of the feminist movement, while also increasing the number of supporters. This activity began with the preparation of a feminist training module. SP received valuable critical and creative input from several individuals outside the organisation, including Kamala Chandrakirana, Galuh Wandita, Dudi Salam, Saskia Wierenga, and Cecilia Ng. Feminist training was provided to all SP activists, organisations involved in migrant worker advocacy activities, and women's organisations that requested it.

Drawing on feminist principles from the history of the women's movement in Indonesia and abroad, we built cross-issue and cross-city movement networks. SP advocated for press freedom by establishing the Women's Group for Press Freedom (*Kelompok Perempuan untuk Kebebasan Pers/KPKP*), which campaigned on behalf of activists and journalists criminalised for protesting the bans on *Detik*, *Editor*, and *TEMPO* magazines. SP activist Ati Nurbaiti, who was also a journalist, was active in the Independent Journalists Alliance (*Aliansi Jurnalis Independen/AJI*). In the Marsinah case, SP joined the women's movement in viewing the case as not only a labour issue, but also an instance of state violence against women. SP presented the case to an international audience alongside a team of Indonesian NGOs attending the Human Rights Conference in Vienna in 1993, including Nori Andriyani, Sandra Moniaga, Paskah Irianto, Hendardi, and Baskara Wardana. In the lead-up to the 1995 Beijing Conference, SP consolidated the inter-city women's movement (*Forum SETARA, KSGS,* and *KKGJT*). SP also initiated and coordinated the 1997 Interfaith Prayer event, which opposed the government's identity politics that were dividing society.

The second activity aimed to gain a more complete understanding of how independent women's organisations operated under the New Order regime. At that time, we were fortunate to have read Julia Suryakusuma's book *State Ibuism* (2011) in full. This book highlights organisations formed by the New Order government that subjugated women under patriarchal ideology, political stability, national security, and economic growth targets. Through this research, we hoped to identify institutions that are free from state co-optation and authentic and independent. This research was carried out by SP activists Yanti Muchtar and Yuniyanti Chuzaifah.

The third activity, defending female migrant workers, was intended to bring SP closer to grassroots women. It was a way for the SP to connect with the lower classes, particularly rural women. A large team within the SP supported it. Apart from Tati Krisnawaty, other notable figures involved included Faiza Mardzoeki, Misiyah, Rusdi Tagaroa, Salma Safitri, Veronica Indriyani, and Wahyu Susilo. In the 1990s, the countries that employed the most Indonesian female migrant workers were Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Singapore. A small number of Indonesian female migrant workers also found employment in Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan.[9] We travelled to these countries, except Saudi Arabia, to establish cooperation with local NGOs and handle cases. SP's advocacy work for Indonesian female migrant workers expanded to the regional and international levels. SP held demonstrations and interventions at the OIC,[10] APEC[11], and the UN Human Rights Council's annual sessions. SP became an active member of both the APWLD (Asia Pacific for Women, Law and Development)[12] and CARAM Asia[13]. SP was the first organisation in Indonesia to initiate international advocacy for migrant workers by launching a campaign to ratify the Migrant Workers Convention and to translate it into Indonesian. This was an important milestone in the migrant workers' advocacy movement.

Table 2.

Indonesian Migrant Workers by Gender in Six Countries, 1994-1997

Destination Country	1994-95*)	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98**)	TOTAL
	Male Female	Male Female	Male Female	Male Female	Male Female total
Middle East:					
- Saudi Arabia	8,105 88,428	5,015 38,506	7,850 119,287	1,608 24,807	22,578 271,028 293,606
South Asia & East Asia:					
- Malaysia ***)	14,584 26,854	8,088 15,821	194,343 127,413	2,623 6,435	219,912 176,523 396,435
- Singapore	6,363 9,315	7,109 15,873	5,124 26,111	1,145 7,299	19,741 58,598 78,339
- Hong Kong	382 2,924	19 3,859	38 3,105	4 279	443 10,167 10,610
Far East Asia:					
- South Korea	2,679 615	7,913 1,228	8,342 1,267	2,016 417	20,950 3,527 24,477
- Taiwan	2,729 694	3,949 868	7,513 2,022	2,459 499	16,650 4,038 20,733
Total	35,11 128,830	32,094 76,165	223,210 179,205	10,855 39,636	300,247 532,926 824,200

Source: Compiled by *Solidaritas Perempuan* from data from the Evaluation and Reporting Section of the Indonesian Ministry of Manpower

*) Data from 1 April 1984 to 1997

**) Data from 30 June 1997

***) Malaysia includes Sabah, Sarawak, and the amnesty programme

Conclusion

Over the course of a decade (1990-2000), *Solidaritas Perempuan* gained valuable insights into the lives of female migrant workers by taking a feminist approach to our work with them. We learned, at the very least, about the significant role played by female migrant workers for their families in rural areas, state policies that neglect to protect migrant workers, and the sacrifices made by female migrant workers. We have witnessed the significant progress made by female migrant workers, who have moved from a position of oppression within patriarchal structures and cultures in rural areas to becoming the saviours of their families. We have also witnessed the deep suffering endured by female migrant workers due to the state's failure to establish a system that protects their human rights. They have been targeted for exploitation by many parties, including employers, placement agencies, family members (especially husbands), and public transport services.

Perhaps the significant role of Indonesian female migrant workers can be quantified by the amount of foreign exchange they generate while working abroad. The Indonesian government should be able to provide this data. Individually, their impact can be seen in their villages of origin. In my village, for instance, farming families would have collapsed long ago without family members working as migrant workers abroad. Farmland damaged by "modern" farming methods did not generate sufficient income to support farming families. Pests attacked uncontrollably, irrigation systems were inadequate for the rice fields' needs, and the price of rice at harvest time was so low that it could not be negotiated. With agriculture in a state of bankruptcy, it was only natural that young people in villages did not see farming as a viable livelihood option. Who would then feed the farming families, pay for repairs to their homes, and cover the costs of medical treatment and education for their children? The significant role played by female migrant workers was truly remarkable. They were the saviours of families in rural areas. They worked hard to secure livelihoods for their relatives in the village. They shattered the myth that men are the breadwinners and women are dependent housewives.

They not only supported their families in their villages, but also the countries in which they worked. Even Asian countries that have declared an "economic miracle" depended on low-wage migrant workers (both female and male) to fill heavy, dangerous, and unpleasant jobs (Jones 2000).

This significant role does not receive the recognition it deserves. The government has awarded them the title of "foreign exchange heroes". But what does this mean? It does not align with the government's efforts to develop a protection system. Activists in the agrarian reform movement have accused female migrant workers of undermining the militancy of the peasant resistance movement. The income sent home regularly, in amounts far greater than those earned from agriculture, has prevented farmers from developing a critical attitude towards agricultural issues. The truth of this accusation requires further study. SP itself argues that female migrant workers have saved their fellow villagers from absolute poverty.

The second learning is the government's negligence in providing protection mechanisms for Indonesian female migrant workers. Cases of fraud, extortion, unpaid wages, and repeated harassment occur in various countries where migrant workers are employed. For example, data compiled by SP during one year of that period (1997-1998) shows that around 24,375 migrant workers were deported, three were threatened with the death penalty, 18 died at work, 26 experienced violence, 35 faced labour disputes, 1,359 lacked documents, and five went missing.[14] The root of the problem lies in poor preparation for becoming a migrant worker and the lack of a protection system for female migrant workers. Although there have been policy changes over time, the Indonesian government, particularly the Ministry of Manpower, essentially views migrant workers as a means of generating foreign exchange. Migrant workers are nothing more than money machines. The state has not moved from its patriarchal position of control rather than service. In response to this issue, SP has initiated discussions on the urgent need for specific regulations to protect migrant workers and is pushing for the formation of a national Indonesian Migrant Workers' Defence Consortium network.

The third learning is the heavy sacrifices made by female migrant workers. With minimal protection, they are vulnerable to exploitation and violence. Those who exploit migrant workers include not only employers, but also migrant worker placement agencies and family members. Once again, those who position themselves as "masters", who are stronger and more decisive, both culturally and structurally, will exploit them for their own gain, disregarding their rights and dignity. In these conditions, migrant workers become objects riddled with traces of exploitation. They are severely hurt. *Solidaritas Perempuan* has handled many cases, including death penalty cases faced by migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates, rape, death, and unpaid wages in several countries, such as Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia.

Autoethnography provides a platform for marginalised voices in the broader narrative of development by incorporating the author's personal experiences — as a child from Karawang, an activist with *Solidaritas Perempuan*, and a witness to social change — into the analysis. Empowering female migrant workers requires dismantling patriarchal power relations in all areas and embracing the feminist principle that 'the personal is political'. There must be no dualism, double standards, or hypocrisy. Together, we can achieve true justice for all, both within and outside the home, and within both domestic institutions and state bodies. It is shameful that the state is negligent and only profits from the hard work and vulnerability of female migrant workers. The state must take responsibility by adopting a holistic and accountable approach.[15]

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Footnotes

1 At the national level, statistical data from the Indonesian Ministry of Manpower shows that the number of female and male migrant workers increased drastically from the early 1980s (1979-1984) to the mid-1980s (1984-1989), growing from thousands to tens of thousands and then to hundreds of thousands of people. See the statistical data in Table 1.

2 See the article 'History of the Green Revolution and Its Impact to Date' by Novitri (2021).

3 The Green Revolution involved the breeding of high-yield seeds, which are plant varieties that have been developed to produce high yields. These seeds are developed through research and plant breeding, often involving modern technologies such as biotechnology, to produce varieties with desirable traits such as high yields, short maturity periods, and resistance to environmental conditions, including pests.

4 Various types of high-yield varieties have been bred at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines and Indonesia. This diversity results from breeding for specific purposes, such as pest resistance and improved taste. See, for example, the Agro-Economic Research Forum on the Historical Review of Superior Variety Technology and Intensification Programmes in the Improvement of Sustainable Rice Productivity.

5 The island of Lombok in West Nusa Tenggara is prone to earthquakes. One such earthquake occurred in May 1979. According to BMKG records, it had a magnitude of 6.1. This earthquake reportedly destroyed around 295 houses, leaving nine people with serious injuries and 98 with minor injuries.

6 Well-known cases include the Kedung Ombo dam case, the Cimacan case, the customary land case in Langkat, Sumatra, the PT Yamaker case in Kalbar Jaya, the Padanggalak Beach reclamation case in Kesiman, Bali, the Bali Nirwana Resort case, the Dompu NTB case, the Besipae NTT case, the Enrekang and Bulukumba cases in South Sulawesi, and the massive expansion of oil palm plantations by PTPN II in Arso and Prafi, Manokwari. This resulted in the loss of thousands of hectares of customary land without adequate compensation. Thirty-seven people were killed.

7 The World Bank report for the IGGI meeting, entitled 'Foundation for Sustained Growth', describes how Indonesia made considerable progress in diversifying its economy during the adjustment period of 1983-1988. This included becoming less dependent on oil, gas, and raw materials, and significantly reducing poverty. Thus, as the 1990s began, Indonesia had laid the foundations for achieving sustained growth. See, among others, Mangkusuwondo & Mulyono (1990) at https://www.lpem.org/repec/lpe/efijnl/199006.pdf.

8 See YLBHI (1990). This book is an independent annual report highlighting human rights violations at the end of the New Order era.

9 Statistics on the distribution of Indonesian migrant workers from 1994 to 1997 are shown in Table 2.

10 The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (formerly the Organisation of the Islamic Conference) currently comprises 57 member states with Muslim-majority populations, although some members do not have such populations. In 1997, *Solidaritas Perempuan (SP)* launched a petition and held a demonstration at the Jakarta Convention Centre, where the OIC was meeting. The petition urged the OIC to address the issue of migrant workers, most of whom are Muslim and come from and work in OIC member countries. SP also demanded that the issue of migrant workers be included in the meeting agenda, citing the case of Nasiroh, a female migrant worker from Cianjur facing the death penalty in Saudi Arabia.

11 APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation). APEC is an economic forum comprising 21 countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The Forum aims to facilitate trade, investment, and economic cooperation in the region. SP criticises the impact of the trade

liberalisation promoted by APEC because of its potential to exacerbate gender inequality and increase the exploitation of women, particularly those working in the informal sector and as migrant workers.

12 SP was active as Chair of the Labour and Migration Task Force from 2001 to 2006. During this time, it organised training, research, and advocacy on human rights for female migrant workers.

13 CARAM Asia is a regional network of 42 organisations that support migrant workers from eight Asian countries, including the Middle East. It was established in 1997. Based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, this non-profit NGO organises educational activities and provides assistance and research to promote the rights of migrant workers, with a particular focus on HIV/AIDS and reproductive and sexual rights.

14 For more information, see https://www.mail-archive.com/siarlist@minipostgresql.org/msg00140.html.

15 I would like to thank Wahyu Susilo for his valuable input on this article. Wahyu and I are both activists with *Solidaritas Perempuan*, an organisation that focused on building a movement to defend migrant workers between 1990 and 2000.