The Feminization of Migration and Indonesia's Protection Diplomacy for Female Migrant Workers in Malaysia Following the 2022 MoU

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Abstract

Indonesian female migrant workers continue to experience structural vulnerabilities, particularly in domestic and informal sectors where legal protection remains limited. These conditions are closely associated with the feminization of migration, which places women in undervalued care and domestic work shaped by gender inequality and uneven labor governance. In response to persistent protection challenges, Indonesia and Malaysia signed the 2022 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Domestic Migrant Workers, introducing institutional mechanisms such as the One Channel System (OCS). This study examines Indonesia's protection diplomacy toward female migrant workers in Malaysia in the post-MoU period (2022–2025). Adopting a qualitative research design informed by a post-positivist perspective, the study employs document and content analysis of bilateral policy documents, official reports and statistics from the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI), and relevant academic literature on gendered migration and labor vulnerability. The findings show that while the 2022 MoU and OCS signal a formal commitment to improving protection, their implementation remains constrained by structural factors. Persistent reliance on non-procedural migration channels, weak legal recognition of domestic work in the host country, and limited enforcement capacity continue to expose female migrant workers to exploitation, unpaid wages, and restricted access to justice. At the same time, migration also enables women to exercise agency as primary breadwinners, illustrating a duality in which empowerment and vulnerability coexist. The study argues that protection diplomacy centered primarily on procedural regulation is insufficient to address the gendered and structural dimensions of migrant vulnerability. More effective protection requires policy frameworks that integrate gender-sensitive approaches, recognize domestic work as formal labor, and address the broader political–economic conditions underpinning feminized labor migration.

Keywords: *Feminization; Migration; Female; Migrant Workers; Protection Diplomacy*

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A. Introduction

Indonesian female migrant workers continue to face persistent problems, including isolation, subordination, and various forms of exploitation. These vulnerabilities are closely linked to gender inequality, limited access to education, and structural conditions surrounding migrant domestic work. Since 2004, the Indonesian government has promoted overseas migrant labor placement as a response to

unemployment and poverty, while women's motivations to migrate commonly include higher wages, household welfare improvement, debt repayment, and the pursuit of work experience abroad (Anggara et al., 2024). However, the decision to migrate does not necessarily guarantee long-term security, as return migration often reproduces economic and social precarity (Chan & Piper, 2024). This condition reflects broader gender inequality in Indonesia, which continues to constrain women's choices and position migration as a survival strategy (Cameron, 2023).

Protection gaps remain evident within Indonesian migration governance. Policies frequently fail to adequately safeguard women's rights, while moral and gendered discourses—often amplified through media narratives of violence—shape public perceptions and state responses to women's migration. At the same time, migrant domestic workers have increasingly organized themselves to negotiate identity, challenge gender roles, and mobilize transnational advocacy aimed at reducing exploitation and strengthening collective bargaining power (Rother, 2017). These dynamics indicate that feminized labor migration is not merely an economic phenomenon but also a political and discursive process in which protection is unevenly constructed and implemented.

In Southeast Asia, women constitute a dominant group in cross-border labor migration, particularly in domestic and informal sectors characterized by lower wages and weaker regulatory oversight. The concept of the feminization of migration captures both the increasing participation of women in transnational labor markets and their concentration in undervalued care and domestic work, where protection remains limited (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; ASEAN Secretariat, 2022). In the Indonesia–Malaysia migration corridor, this pattern intersects with informal recruitment practices and bilateral governance arrangements.

Empirical data further illustrate these conditions. BP2MI reports that migrant worker remittances reached IDR 227.3 trillion in 2023 and were projected to increase to IDR 251.1–253.3 trillion in 2024 (BP2MI, 2024). Placement data show that women constitute the majority of Indonesian migrant workers, with 167,863 female placements (61%) compared to 107,102 male placements (39%) in 2023, while Malaysia remains one of the primary destination countries, particularly for informal domestic work (BP2MI, 2024). Complaint data reveal persistent protection challenges: during January–December 2023, BP2MI recorded 1,616 complaints related to non-procedural migration (81%) compared to 381 complaints related to procedural placements (19%), with Malaysia among the top destination countries associated with complaints (BP2MI, 2024). These complaints include unpaid wages, death cases, overstaying, and exploitation, reflecting structural vulnerabilities among female migrant workers in informal sectors (Novia & Djelantik, 2024).

In response to these issues, Indonesia and Malaysia signed the April 2022 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Domestic Migrant Workers. The MoU represents a diplomatic effort to regulate recruitment mechanisms and strengthen protection for migrant workers. However, recurring complaints and continued reliance on non-procedural channels indicate a

persistent gap between formal policy commitments and reported protection outcomes. While existing studies on feminization of migration explain women's structural vulnerability, fewer analyses examine how bilateral protection frameworks operate within these conditions. Therefore, this study analyzes Indonesia's diplomacy toward female migrant workers in Malaysia in the post-MoU period (2022–2025), focusing on how policy mechanisms, gendered labor structures, and reported protection challenges intersect.

B.   Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by a post-positivist perspective to analyze Indonesia's diplomacy for the protection of female migrant workers in Malaysia following the 2022 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). A post-positivist approach is employed to acknowledge that social reality is complex and shaped by structural conditions, institutional power, and contested meanings, requiring interpretive analysis rather than purely positivist measurement (Weedon, 1987; Lather, 1991). The study relies on qualitative document analysis. Primary data consist of official bilateral policy documents, particularly the 2022 MoU on the placement and protection of Indonesian domestic migrant workers in Malaysia. Secondary data include reports and statistical publications from the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI), as well as relevant academic literature on feminization of migration, gendered labor vulnerability, and migration governance.

Data analysis was conducted through qualitative content analysis. Policy documents and reports were examined iteratively to identify recurring themes related to recruitment mechanisms, protection provisions, complaint patterns, and implementation challenges. These themes were interpreted in relation to broader structural conditions that shape women's vulnerability in domestic and informal migration sectors. This approach allows the study to connect institutional arrangements and policy discourse with reported protection issues in the post-MoU period (2022–2025). To enhance analytical credibility, findings were supported through comparison between policy commitments outlined in the MoU, official BP2MI complaint and placement data, and existing scholarly interpretations.

C. Results and Discussion
1.   The Feminization of Indonesian Migrant Workers to Malaysia

The global trend of the feminization of migration is particularly pronounced in the context of labor flows from Indonesia, which is one of the largest sending countries of female migrant workers in Southeast Asia. Data from the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Board (BP2MI) substantiates this. For instance, in 2023 alone, BP2MI recorded a total of 274,965 official placements. Data covering the 2021–2023 period further highlights the gender disparity, showing that female migrant worker placements (353,872) significantly outnumbered male placements (194,519), with women accounting for approximately 64.5% of the total during that timeframe (Grace Nevia & Arsenius

Wisnu Aji Patria Perkasa, 2024). This pattern is not just a demographic shift but is deeply rooted in the nation's socio-economic and cultural landscape. The decision for women to work abroad is a complex phenomenon shaped by structural inequalities, household survival strategies, and a specific set of pressures that disproportionately affect women. Understanding these underlying factors is key to explaining the motivations and vulnerabilities that become driving factors of their migration journey.

This migration pattern is deeply embedded within the framework of global capitalism, which fundamentally views labor as a commodity to be moved and utilized in the pursuit of economic efficiency and profit. Within this system, the disparities between nations are not accidental but structural. The "push" factors of poverty and unemployment in countries like Indonesia create a surplus labor pool, or a reserve army of labor, which is then attracted by the "pull" factors of labor demand in more developed economies like Malaysia. Global capitalism thrives on this imbalance, sourcing low-cost, flexible workers to fill gaps in key sectors. Domestic care is one of the sectors that is essential for the host country's workforce to function but is often undervalued. BP2MI data confirms this focus; statistics from 2024 show that three of the top five most common jobs for Indonesian migrant workers were house maid, caregiver, and domestic worker, primarily in destination countries like Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia (BP2MI, 2024). Consequently, the individual migrant woman is often stripped of her holistic identity. She is reframed as a unit of labor, whose value is measured primarily by her contribution to the economy, making her vulnerable to exploitation when her rights conflict with economic interests.

Economic needs are the main driver for Indonesian women to migrate, due to limited job opportunities and rising living costs in their home country (Anggara et al., 2024; Hanim et al., 2019). Discourse surrounding Indonesian migrant women often portrays them as national heroes who contribute to national development and as victims of labor exploitation (C. Chan, 2017). Limited employment opportunities, poverty, and family responsibilities drive women to seek work abroad. In addition, in Indonesia, women with low levels of education tend to migrate because economic pressures disproportionately affect women with low levels of education (Hanim et al., 2019). Indonesian female workers migrate to Malaysia to work as domestic workers, driven by poverty and lack of employment opportunities in Indonesia (Orange et al., 2012). Indonesian female migrant workers in Malaysia also face economic and legal risks due to inadequate social and legal protection caused by undocumented work status (Santosa, 2024). Indonesian migrant workers' vulnerability is also reinforced by structural constraints and policy gaps that limit protection and bargaining power, particularly for women in domestic work (Kosat et al., 2024).

Indonesian politics is still vulnerable in protecting migrant workers compared to receiving countries. Indonesia is among ASEAN countries whose political stance on migrant worker protection policies is categorized as a follower country (Dwi Eriyanti et al., 2022). In host countries, such as Singapore, protection for domestic migrant workers is uneven and uncertain (Yeoh et al., 2020). Indonesia is one of the countries that benefits

financially from remittances; however, migrant workers continue to be in a vulnerable position (Maksum, 2021). Therefore, there is an urgent need for gender-responsive labor policies and social security interventions to protect women in the informal sector and ensure access to basic rights and services (Piper, 2004). Comprehensive and inclusive policies that address the challenges faced by migrant women can support their protection and empowerment (Uroko & Nwaoga, 2022). The Indonesian government has signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers in Malaysia, which formalizes bilateral commitments related to rights and protection mechanisms (Prianto et al., 2023).

The Memorandum of Understanding aims to protect Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia by creating a "one channel system" for worker recruitment and simplifying and regulating the recruitment process (Prianto et al., 2023). The MoU also highlights the need for health services for migrant workers regardless of their legal status (Loganathan et al., 2020; Loganathan et al., 2025). One such service is vaccination for migrant workers, which, despite facing obstacles, has been largely successful (Loganathan et al., 2020). Meanwhile, in understanding the education of migrant workers' children, there are still difficulties in funding, facilities, curriculum development, and resources, while Indonesian diplomacy has not yet sufficiently empowered these initiatives (Maksum, 2021).

2. **Implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Placement and Protection of Indonesian and Malaysian Migrant Workers (2022–2025)**

The implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Indonesian and Malaysian governments on the Placement and Protection of Domestic Migrant Workers, agreed upon in April 2022, has brought significant changes to the mechanism for sending and protecting migrant workers. One of the important points in this MoU is that Indonesia demands Malaysia to abolish the System Maid Online (SMO), which leads to direct hiring, thereby making migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation. The existence of the SMO has made it difficult for the Indonesian government to track and monitor migrant workers. As a solution, the **One Channel System (OCS)** has been implemented to ensure that the entire process of recruitment, placement, and repatriation of migrant workers is carried out through a single integrated official channel. The main objectives of this system are to increase transparency, protect migrant workers from illegal practices, and facilitate coordination and tracking by both countries (Afiya et al., 2024).

However, in practice, the implementation of the One Channel System has not been fully effective. The lack of socialization and education regarding official procedures and the rights of migrant workers has caused many prospective workers to choose unofficial channels. As a result, prospective migrant workers in rural areas are often in the most vulnerable position and do not have adequate access to information. This information gap creates opportunities for non-official actors to lure prospective migrant workers into non-procedural channels. This situation emphasizes that placement policies must be accompanied by massive safe migration literacy campaigns down to the village level.

Ineffective coordination between the central and regional governments and weak law enforcement against illegal recruitment agencies also contribute to the high number of migrant workers who use non-procedural channels. In addition, migration management that is still highly centralistic has resulted in the potential and readiness at the provincial and local government levels not being optimally utilized (Fauziah et al., 2024). The non-procedural status of PMI opens the door to transnational crimes such as smuggling and human trafficking, which often disrupt the orderly placement and protection process. Inadequate border security and weak enforcement against perpetrators of migration crimes further increase the risk of female migrant workers becoming victims of exploitation and human rights violations.

The "Skilled to Care, Forced to Work?" report published in June 2023 by the International Labour Organisation indicates that around 29% or nearly one-third of migrant domestic workers in Malaysia experience analogous forced labour conditions, which is significantly higher than the domestic forced labour rates in Singapore and Thailand at 7% and 4%, respectively (International Labour Organization, 2023). A *New Straits Times* article states that in the last three years, Indonesian domestic workers have claimed RM 6.72 million (USD 1.4 million) in unpaid wages to their embassy in Malaysia (*New Straits Times*, 2023).

In that period, 95% of the 374 unpaid wage complaints submitted to the embassy concerned domestic workers. In response to a question regarding the success of bilateral negotiations in safeguarding domestic workers, Alex Ong, Migrant Care's country representative, expressed that they are mostly ineffective, as Labour Department officials frequently assert that their actions are limited to the provisions of the Employment Act or official Ministerial decrees (New Naratif, 2023). Migrant Care is a leading organization advocating for domestic workers in Indonesia.

One case of torture experienced by a female migrant worker in Malaysia was suffered by Meriance Kabu in 2014, while she was working as a domestic worker in Malaysia. Meriance suffered various forms of severe violence from her employer, including beatings and torture using household appliances that caused permanent injuries. However, the legal process against the perpetrator only resumed in earnest in 2024 after being suspended for several years. In July 2024, a Malaysian court found Meriance's employer guilty of human trafficking (TPPO) and immigration violations, although charges related to torture and attempted murder were dropped due to lack of strong evidence (BBC News, 2024). In addition, Malaysia, as a destination country, still has weak regulations governing the protection of domestic workers, who constitute the majority of Indonesian migrant women.

The case of Meriance Kabu, which was only processed after 10 years, illustrates long-standing structural vulnerabilities and weak enforcement affecting migrant domestic workers in Malaysia, vulnerabilities that the 2022 MoU and its One Channel System (OCS) have not yet been able to eliminate. Although this system aims to tighten supervision and legal placement of migrant workers, in reality many migrant workers like Meriance still enter Malaysia through non-procedural channels, making them vulnerable

to exploitation and violence without adequate legal protection. The inconsistent implementation of the One Channel System suggests that severe cases of violence are not detected or dealt with quickly, while the Malaysian courts, which tend to favor employers, can also slow down the process of restoring justice for victims. This underscores that without strengthening the implementation of the placement system and enforcing the law rigorously, female migrant workers like Meriance will continue to be victims of exploitation and inhumane treatment.

The One Channel System policy has proven to lack the legal force to effectively protect workers' rights in Malaysia. Although the 2022 MoU attempts to regulate basic rights such as holidays and minimum wages, many migrant workers, especially in the domestic sector, still find it difficult to access complaint mechanisms and justice when faced with problems. The legal framework in Malaysia, which does not fully recognize domestic workers as formal workers, is a major legal obstacle that weakens the bargaining position of migrant workers. This has caused the MoU, despite being formally established, to face persistent difficulty in fulfilling its main objectives.

Based on data from the Badan Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia on Indonesian Migrant Worker Cases from January to December 2024, there were 142 cases of migrant worker complaints in December 2024, showing a significant increase of 79.75% compared to the previous year. Most of these complaints originated from Malaysia, Congo, and Saudi Arabia, with the main reporting method being done directly (BP2MI, 2024). Based on case categories, the most common complaints were unpaid wages, uncontracted work, human trafficking, overstaying, and prostitution. This data indicates an escalation of problems faced by migrant workers. The significant increase in the number of complaints **suggests** that the implementation of the MoU has not been optimal and that it has not consistently functioned as a protective instrument against recurrent risks of rights violations (BP2MI, 2024).

3.   The Duality of Migration: How Exploitation and Empowerment Coexist

An analysis of the phenomenon of the feminization of migration and the implementation of the 2022 MoU on the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers in the Domestic Sector in Malaysia reveals a fundamental paradox: a policy designed to provide protection has not fully addressed the root causes of vulnerability (Trentin et al., 2023). The failure of the One Channel System is not merely a technical or administrative issue, such as a lack of socialization and weak coordination (Priyansyah, 2023). It is a conceptual failure of a gender-blind policy framework in responding to this issue with a gender dimension. The 2022 MoU and One Channel System treat migration as a transactional and logistical process, while the migration of Indonesian domestic workers is a socio-economic phenomenon shaped by power inequalities, gender norms, and structural vulnerabilities specifically experienced by women.

The protection of migrant workers through the One Channel System has failed to provide a sense of security to Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia, especially when faced with the rapid flow of global capitalism that has created massive demand for a low-wage "female labor market" in Malaysia. The theory of the feminization of migration

explains that women are no longer accompanying migrants, but rather primary breadwinners who are driven by economic urgency. When the One Channel System as the official channel proved to be slow and difficult to access, and the demand or supply of jobs did not stop, many chose faster, non-procedural channels. The One Channel System failed because it was not designed to counter the forces of the global market that systematically target women, but rather as a bureaucracy that could be easily bypassed by illegal networks.

To understand why this paradox persists, the post-positivist lens used in this study is helpful because it links structural forces, contextual institutions, and women's agency within a single explanatory frame (Bhaskar, 1989; Archer, 2003). At the macro level, the feminization of migration is closely connected to the Global Care Chain and the global restructuring of reproductive labor, which creates gender-selective demand for domestic and care work while simultaneously pushing women from the Global South to migrate under conditions of economic pressure (Hochschild, 2000; Sassen, 2000; Oishi, 2005).

In this setting, women's labor becomes structurally undervalued, and domestic work remains positioned outside robust labor protections, intensifying exposure to wage theft, abuse, and limited access to justice (Laksono, 2017; Susanti et al., 2020; Kosat et al., 2024). At the contextual level, protection diplomacy through the MoU and the OCS operates within immigration regimes and labor market arrangements that are themselves gendered. Migration governance often produces sector-specific pathways that segregate women into feminized jobs such as domestic service, thereby reproducing inequality even when the policy objective is protection (Piper, 2004).

Moreover, the persistence of social and recruitment networks—formal and informal—can funnel women into the same vulnerable sectors and normalize non-procedural routes when official channels are perceived as costly, slow, or difficult to access (Curran & Rivero-Fuentes, 2003). This explains why an agreement that focuses heavily on procedural control may still coexist with high vulnerability: formal mechanisms may improve administrative order, yet they may not neutralize the structural incentives and network dynamics that sustain informal placement.

At the micro level, the duality of migration is also evident because exploitation can coexist with women's agency and perceived empowerment. Women often migrate independently to become primary providers, and migration can reshape gender roles and generate increased autonomy and self-esteem, even when the work environment remains exploitative (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Parreñas, 2001). In post-positivist terms, this does not negate vulnerability; rather, it highlights that women navigate constraints through everyday choices and forms of resistance that reflect human capacity to act within, and sometimes against, structural limitations (Archer, 2003). Thus, the coexistence of exploitation and empowerment should not be read as contradiction in women's experiences, but as an indicator that protection frameworks must address both structural risks and the realities of women's agency.

Accordingly, the central implication for Indonesia's protection diplomacy is that protection cannot be reduced to procedural fixes. When a bilateral framework is grounded

mainly in administrative control—while domestic work remains weakly recognized and gendered vulnerabilities are treated as secondary—the result may become a performative protection arrangement: it signals commitment yet struggles to alter the underlying conditions that reproduce exploitation. This is why the paradox persists in the post-MoU period: women remain economically compelled to migrate and may even gain household status as breadwinners, but they continue to face risk concentration in sectors that are structurally exposed to abuse and limited legal recourse (International Labour Organization, 2023; Laksono, 2017).

D. Conclusion

This study shows that the feminization of Indonesian labour migration to Malaysia is shaped by gendered labour segmentation in domestic and care sectors, where protection remains structurally weak. In the post-MoU period (2022–2025), the 2022 MoU and the One Channel System (OCS) represent Indonesia's formal protection diplomacy to improve recruitment governance and reduce irregular placement. However, the findings indicate persistent gaps between policy commitments and reported protection outcomes. Continued reliance on non-procedural migration channels, limited legal recognition of domestic work in the host country, and uneven enforcement capacity continue to expose female migrant workers to exploitation, unpaid wages, and restricted access to justice.

The study also highlights the duality of migration in which vulnerability coexists with women's agency and perceived empowerment as primary breadwinners. This implies that protection diplomacy cannot be reduced to procedural regulation alone. More effective protection requires gender-sensitive frameworks that strengthen enforcement, improve access to complaint mechanisms, and address structural conditions underpinning feminized domestic labour migration. Future research may extend this analysis through field-based evidence and stakeholder perspectives to assess how policy implementation is experienced by migrant workers and front-line service providers.

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