

# “I can’t do anything but wait”: The lived experiences of children of transnational migrants in Lombok, Indonesia<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article contributes to debates about the temporal and affective implications of migration in Southeast Asia by presenting child-focused research concerned with children in rural Lombok, Indonesia who have been ‘left behind’ by their transnational migrating parents. The paper explores the unpredictability of the temporality of migration, and how parental absence can be indefinite or permanent, especially for parents who follow undocumented channels of migration. The paper explores children’s lived experiences of waiting for their parents to return, often with no contact, and how multiple modes of waiting have become a distinctive part of children’s lives within transnational migrant communities.

**Key words:** migration, child-centred, rural childhoods, temporarily, waiting, Southeast Asia, Temporality, Waiting

*Waiting is not something that takes place in suspended time or outside of doing things.. Instead it is an active and intentional process... And a significant shaping of the lived life (Conlon 2011: 356).*

## Introduction

Over the last two decades, neoliberal economic forces have led to a rise in transnational labour from Indonesia, with an accompanying surge in family fragmentation. In this era of intensified geographical mobility, however, there have also been increased and sustained experiences of immobility. In particular, children and young people who have been ‘left behind’ by their migrating parents are expected to wait for them to return home, sometimes for years at a time.<sup>1</sup> The fact that these stay-behind children are compelled to wait for their parents, often with no contact, has become an acceptable social norm and aspect of family relations in many Indonesian communities. This article first summarizes the context of transnational migration in Indonesia, before providing an overview of the literature related to children left behind by their migrant parents, and recent scholarship on the temporalities of migration. The analysis of stay-behind children’s lived experiences draws on child-focused research with children and young people living in out-migration communities in rural Lombok, Eastern Indonesia. The findings reveal the unpredictability of the temporality of migration, especially for children of parents who follow informal transnational flows, and the enduring temporal uncertainties that are produced. The analysis explores the ways that children respond to their parents’ protracted absences and how the experience of waiting has become a significant aspect of their everyday lives.

Elsewhere research has explored children’s emotional responses to parental migration in Lombok and how enmeshed they are in communal emotional economies of transnational migration, specifically the embodied, collectively shared and socialized emotion of *malu*, or shame (Beazley Butt and Ball 2017). In this paper the analysis of communal emotional

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<sup>1</sup> Article to appear in Positions, 2022, 30(2).

economies is continued by focusing on children's responses to their parents' sustained absence for unspecified periods of time, and the associated everyday temporalities of waiting that are mediated by family and community obligations. By concentrating on the lived experiences of the children who stay behind in high migration communities the paper contributes to debates about the temporal implications of migration, and the micropolitics of immobility for the youngest members of migrant societies.

### **Transnational Migration from Indonesia**

The lives of children in migrant- sending communities in Indonesia are significantly shaped by a rapid growth in transnational labour migration. In the past two decades the numbers of Indonesian workers migrating overseas has risen sharply (World Bank 2015). Approximately 700,000 documented male and female migrants left Indonesia in 2012, the majority of whom went to work on plantations or factories in Malaysia, or as construction workers or maids in the Middle East (ILO 2013). Many people secure false travel documents to complete the journey through official channels (Ball Butt and Beazley 2017). It is also widely recognized that labour migration without legal work documents is up to four times higher than official migration figures (ILO 2013).

Prior to the 1970s, overseas Indonesian migrants were mostly men, leaving to work in palm oil plantations in Malaysia. Increasingly there has been a feminization of transnational migration, and women now make up 76 percent of overseas migrants, working as domestic servants in Saudi Arabia and Hong Kong, or in factories in Malaysia (Andrevski and Lyneham 2014). Migration is not a single event, as migrants renew short-term (two year) contracts, perhaps several times. This ongoing practice of repeated transnational migration has been described by Graham and Jordan (2011) as 'serial migration'. For undocumented migrants, however, the physical distance, expense and legal risks are overwhelming obstacles for those wishing to return home to see their families. In other cases migrants renew their contracts while overseas or stay on without formal contracts. Many others have their passports taken from them by their employers and are unable to leave. All these experiences can result in migrants having limited contact with their families and children for many years, even decades, at a time (Beazley, Butt, and Ball, 2018; Zentgraf and Stoltz Chinchilla 2012).

The Indonesian government actively promotes and facilitates temporary overseas migration by both men and women workers through agreements with foreign governments and recruitment agencies (Graham and Jordan 2011; World Bank 2015). Migrants traveling from Indonesia to Malaysia make up the second largest stream of transnational migrants globally (after Mexico- USA), and Indonesia is the third highest remittance-receiving country in Southeast Asia (World Bank 2017). Indonesian women are particularly encouraged to migrate overseas and are celebrated nationally as 'heroes of development' because of the remittances they send home to pay for their children's education, to build concrete houses, and to improve their families' living conditions (Chan 2014; Beazley et. al. 2017). As a result of the official support for temporary overseas migration a culture of migration has evolved in many low-income communities. Mothers and fathers feel compelled to work overseas to enhance the education and wellbeing of their children, while new generations also aspire to seek employment abroad (Beazley 2015; 2007; Graham and Jordan 2011).

A consequence of accelerated migration flows is that approximately one million children stay- behind in Indonesia while one or both parents work overseas (SMERU Research Institute 2014). In Lombok a child's mother and father will typically work in separate countries; the husband in Malaysia and the wife in Saudi Arabia. It is assumed that local communities will assume responsibility for the care of migrant's children, although families receive no support from the government for the care of the children while their parents are away (Butt Ball and Beazley 2017; SMERU 2014). Consequently, established traditions of fostering by grandparents and other family members are eroded, with older siblings, grandparents, extended family members and neighbours caring for the children, often for years at a time (Butt, et al. 2017). This is because the migrant parents often-undocumented legal status does not allow them to freely move back and forth to Indonesia, to visit their children left behind.

### **Theoretical Context: Temporalities of Migration and Waiting**

This study is situated within the sub-discipline of children's geographies and the intersection between children's geographies, migration and mobility studies, and the temporalities of migration (Creswell 2011; Barker et al 2009; Acedera and Yeoh 2018). Within children's geographies migration has predominantly been viewed as a spatial process, with more recent research focussing on the agency, identity and emotions of the migrant, or stay-behind child (Beazley 2015; Beazley et al 2017; Punch 2012; McKay 2007). Theoretically the study follows Dobson (2009 pp. 356) who renounces portrayals of children as 'objects' and 'non-persons lacking both feelings and agency of their own' within migration studies, and contributes to discussions concerning children's agency and how that agency is cast within migration literature (Hashim and Thorsen 2011; Punch 2007; Ansell and van Blerk 2007; Beazley 2015; Beazley et al 2017). The paper explores children's everyday lives while they wait for their parents to return to illustrate how such experiences need to figure more prominently in explanations about the impact of transnational migration in local communities (Parrenas 2005; Graham et al. 2012; Hoang et al 2014).

Studies of children of migrants elsewhere in Southeast Asia have examined the economic impact of transnational migration on children's lives, arguing that the material benefits from migrant parent's remittances have a positive bearing on families, with many children experiencing an improved quality of life (Lam Hoang and Yeoh 2013; McKay, 2007). Within this literature, children of migrant parents are often portrayed as resilient, well looked after, and better off when cared for by others than living in poverty with their unemployed parents (McKay 2007). Studies in Indonesia, however, have revealed the risks connected with out-migration in low income families and single parent or no-parent households, including high rates of infant mortality, domestic violence, early school leaving, child neglect and child abandonment (Allerton 2014; SMERU, 2014; Graham and Jordan 2011). A recent study has revealed how children in Indonesia who stay behind when their mothers migrate for work are more likely to be neglected in terms of physical and mental health and access to education than when their fathers migrate (SMERU, 2014). Behaviour problems and increased risk-taking behaviour are also found to be more likely when both parents are working overseas (Graham and Jordan 2011: 769; Beazley et al. 2017).

Building on the above research, the aim of this paper is to contribute to current discussions focussed on the agency and well-being of children of transnational migrants, by interrogating the temporalities of migration as experienced by stay-behind children. The paper discusses how children who stay behind are caught up in the geopolitics of migration by being static, immobile and in a state of ‘protracted motility’ (Gray 2011). It then explores how these children spend their time, while ‘stuck’ in remote rural areas, waiting for their parents to return (Allerton 2016).

The relationship between time and space has been theorised by many prominent geographers (Harvey 1990; Lefebvre 2004; Massey 1992; May and Thrift 2003), including children’s geographers (Ansell et al 2014; Harker 2005). Further, the sociologist Zerubavel (1977) has argued that time is inter-subjective and felt at the individual level, as well as at the community level. As Harvey (2015) points out, however, there have been very few attempts to document how different communities make sense of, or how they spend, their time. Specifically, waiting as a topic for social analysis within studies of time has remained under-theorised in different social contexts. According to Harvey (2015: 541), this may be because the experience of waiting as a social phenomena is considered so mundane and banal that it has gone largely unnoticed:

The remarkable inattention to waiting... is most likely due to the perception that waiting is empty time; that it is void of meaning, wasted, like negative space.

Recent research, however, has started to explore how people experience the temporalities of migration across different cultural contexts (Griffiths Rogers and Anderson 2013; Griffiths 2014; Acedera and Yeoh 2018). This new research includes a focus on the experiences of waiting and immobilities, especially for refugees in the global south and asylum seekers in the global north (Conlon 2011). Griffiths (2014), for example, suggests time is a social phenomenon that offers valuable insights into migration practices, including for refugees who are forced to wait for extended periods of time (see also Olson 2015). Alison Mountz (2011) has also theorised how temporality is often conceptualised as waiting and being in limbo for asylum seekers held in detention. Associated with the concept of time, therefore, a specific focus on the experience of waiting has begun to gain attention in the mobility literature, and as a crucial feature of migrant (im)mobility (Hee Kwon 2015). In particular Conlon’s (2011) edited special issue on Migration and Waiting has drawn our attention to the:

various spatial and temporal dimensions of migrants’ encounters with waiting as a significant facet of (im)mobility [which are] actively produced, embodied, experienced, encountered and resisted in everyday migrant spaces (Conlon, 2011: 355).

Conlon (2011: 355) argues that waiting is socially produced and can be understood as a ‘distinct spatial and temporal dimension of *statis* for migrants’. As in the literature on time and mobility, however, waiting is theorised in a diversity of ways. Specifically, the social and political implications of waiting, and being forced to wait, have been explored, including the ways space and waiting come together to produce and maintain potentially abusive arrangements of power and inequalities (Auyero 2012; Mountz 2011; Olson 2015; Harvey 2015; Jeffery 2008). This literature claims that the significance of waiting has increased within different societies in response to the development of neo-liberal economies, especially for those who are considered to be ‘surplus’ to the system (Olson 2015: 518). Asylum seekers, for example, wait endlessly in limbo, longing for an end to the waiting and temporal uncertainty enforced on them by the techniques of power (Griffiths et al, 2013; Griffiths

2014; Mountz 2011). While in Argentina Auyero (2012) describes how waiting is a modal experience for the destitute living in shanty towns, who suffer as they wait to ‘prove their worth’ (Auyero 2012: 9). Similarly, in China Hee Kwon (2015: 495) explores the ‘work of waiting’ of spouses who have migrated to Korea for work, and how such ‘spousal waiting’ is often unappreciated and largely unrewarded affective work.

Gray (2011) also interrogates the socially produced spaces created by waiting, claiming that to understand the temporality and experience of waiting in migrant communities, it is important to consider how it has been shaped by traditions and cultural norms. In her research with men and women who remained behind in 1950’s Ireland, Gray identifies how waiting for migrant family members provoked disharmony between the lived-experiences and the individual expectations associated with the passing of time. She describes waiting as an ‘in between experience’, pervaded by anticipation, uncertainty and hope, and how: ‘waiting can be experienced as an extended or suspended present, thus significantly shaping the lived life’ (2011: 421).

There are distinct parallels in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century Lombok with Gray’s (2011) study of 1950s Ireland, where emigration was also an economic necessity, and waiting for the return of family members was also constructed as a social norm. For these reasons her study is very useful in helping to analyse migrant (im)mobility in rural Lombok. In particular, Gray (2011: 421) developed three functional and distinct modes of active waiting to understand the experiences of those who stayed behind: waiting for opportunity; waiting for return; waiting for an absence to be filled. In each of these modes of waiting Gray sees waiting as being integrated into everyday life, and as an active and intentional process experienced by everyone in the community. Below the method of data collection for this study is described before turning to the research findings, which are framed within Gray’s three types of waiting. The paper ends with some brief conclusions about the importance of understanding the temporalities of migration for children within children’s geographies and migration studies.

## **Method**

The research for this paper adopted a child-focused approach recognising child participants as active agents, respecting children’s opinions throughout the research process, and using appropriate methods so children could express themselves (Bessell Beazley and Waterson 2016). Research was conducted in two poor high out- migration villages in East Lombok, in 2014 and 2016. One objective of the research – part of a larger study on birth registration of children of overseas migrants in rural Lombok (Ball et al. 2017) – was to explore the lived experiences of children where one or both parents had migrated for work (Beazley et al. 2017).

The research team conducted semi-structured interviews with eight family groups consisting of adult caregivers and their children, and seven focus groups with young people aged twelve to seventeen years. Interviews were in Indonesian with local translators providing translations of the local Sasak dialect when required. Focus groups were held with groups of young people whose parents had migrated overseas, including adolescent girls, a mix of adolescent

girls and boys, and a group of boys. During discussions participants were asked to talk about: (1) their experiences of their parents' migration including the impact it had on them; (2) their coping strategies during the absence of parents and (3) their aspirations for the future. Participants' accounts were contextualised through observation and informal unstructured interviews with young people in the villages. Local government officials, teachers in a primary school and adult care givers, including grandmothers, aunts, fathers, other family members and neighbours were also interviewed. The names of respondents have been changed to protect their identity.

The research location, East Lombok, was identified as an ideal site for the research as it has a strong local culture of migration, and is one of the highest 'sending areas' of overseas migrants in Indonesia (Beazley 2007; Khoo Platt Yeoh and Lam, 2014; Lindquist 2010). The research sites, and many of the adult research participants, were also known to the first author who has had a relationship with the community for over a decade. The sites of this study are not identified due to the vulnerability of the children and the sensitivities of some cases discussed.

## **Research Findings**

East Lombok is a parched and impoverished district on the island of Lombok in Eastern Indonesia. It is characterized by high population growth, low wages, low education and employment, food insecurity, falling agricultural productivity, poor communications and poor health, including much higher rates of infant mortality than the national average (Ball et al 2015). The villages where the research took place are extremely isolated, situated in the foothills of the volcano Mount Rinjani, and next to dense forest. The area is subject to flash floods, and characterized by poverty, low education, poor community access to health and other services, no public transport, and no secondary school. The villages lack sanitation and have only recently been provided with access to clean running water and electricity. There is no internet and no one has a television or a computer. Mobile phone coverage has recently been provided, and most adults have basic mobile phones which they use to communicate with family members overseas. The people in this area call themselves *orang-hutan* ('people of the forest'), as that is where they spend most of their time, gathering resources (firewood, leaves, grass, birds, fruit, and wild plants) to survive.

An estimated 100,000 people per year migrate overseas from Lombok through formal routes, and at least 200,000 through irregular, undocumented channels, especially from low income families (ILO, 2013). The cultural tradition of *merantau* (wandering) is important in Lombok when traditionally young men migrate to other islands to find work and return as a 'success'; which means being able to build a concrete house and provide for their families on their return. In the locations where the research was conducted communities are highly transient, with adults constantly moving to other islands and overseas in search of work. In the past two decades overseas migration has particularly been seen as a reliable source of income in the research locations, for both men and women, due to the lack of income earning opportunities elsewhere and high levels of poverty. Almost every household had a family member who had worked or was currently working away. These mobile practices have led to high rates of divorce and fragmented families, and children being separated from their parents for extended periods of time (Beazley 2007; Beazley et al. 2017)

In the villages where the research was conducted there were so many adults were away that child- parent separation was socially constructed as normal, and family fragmentation as a necessary and unavoidable part of the migration process. During interviews provincial and local government officials made light of the impact parental migration had on children, saying they were ‘tough’ and ‘they will be fine’. Local government officials interviewed said children were well-cared for by their remaining parent or extended family, and that parents’ remittances ensured their children’s survival. It was assumed that the children had the same desires as their parents, whom they were expected to obey.

The true benefits of parental migration, however, depended on many intersecting factors, including: whether one or both parents had migrated; whether the child could be properly cared for while their parent(s) were away; whether a child had a birth certificate to enrol in school and access welfare supplements; if the parent(s) had migrated through official channels; whether parent(s) had skilled or low-skilled employment; whether remittances were reliable; whether the family were able pay off recruitment debts; how long the parent(s) were away; and whether the parent(s) were able to communicate with their child(ren) during their separation (Beazley et al 2017).

During focus group discussions and individual interviews the main difficulties faced by children and young people as a result of their parents’ absence were articulated as: an increase in household tasks and other responsibilities; pressure to earn an income, especially for boys; an increase in school drop-outs, especially for girls; and a decline in health. Children also reported feelings of loneliness and of missing their parents, and other family members. A prominent concern that emerged were feelings of having to continually wait in some sort of limbo, feeling that they did not belong anywhere, or to anyone.

### *Waiting for Return*

Within the social context described above, the experience of protracted waiting is an active and intentional practice which is negotiated and incorporated into everyday lives by everyone in the community. Some children explained how their parents migrated with a plan for a specific time away and a scheduled return. Once gone, however, the time was often extended beyond initial expectations. Short-term seasonal migration became long term, or a regular occurrence instead of a one-time occasion, while longer term stays became indefinite or permanent. Other children said that their parents didn’t tell them how long they were going for, or when they were coming back.

“I don’t know how long my parents have gone for or when they will come back”.  
(Adi, 13).

“I don’t know when my mother is coming home. I can’t do anything by wait. I am always waiting (*tunggu terus*)”. (Rini, 15).

One child told how she didn’t know her mother was going away, and only found out from her grandmother when she woke up to find she had left for *Saudi* (Saudi Arabia).

In spite of the intense uncertainty that such ambiguous absence creates, strong cultural values shape children's affective experiences, enforcing norm-complaint behaviour where they are expected to respond in a particular way to the sustained absence of their parents. While they wait for their parents to return children are expected to perform resilience, hiding their negative emotions about their parents' absence (see also Beazley et al., 2017). They are socialised to suppress intense emotions of anger, sadness, resentment or abandonment, and to wait for extended periods of time without complaining (Beazley et al., 2017).

“Like it don't like it , you have to like it” (Tuti, 14)

“I do mind my parents have left but I have to agree. I don't show that I mind” (Ratna, 13)

In spite of the necessary suppression of their feelings, however, the collective experience of waiting in the village is palpable. Everybody is waiting. They are waiting for a phone call or a text, waiting for money to arrive, waiting for a loved one to return, waiting for an absence to be filled, waiting for something to happen. A form of emotional support during this waiting time is regular communication with migrant loved ones via mobile phones and texting. As Acedera and Yeoh (2018, 250) have noted in their research with Filipino migrant workers in Singapore:

‘doing family’ across distance is centrally facilitated through the affordances of communication technologies to create rhythms and manage ruptures. These technologies are crucial in (re)making domestic family time in the transnational household.

In recent years, since the introduction of mobile phones, long-distance communication has become a normalised feature of migration and transnational relationships in rural Lombok. It has greatly facilitated the sending of remittances via Western Union or direct bank transfers, whereas in the past remittances were sent home via letter to the village head (Beazley 2007). However, the frequency of contact children in this study had with their migrant parents varied considerably, and long-distance communication between different family members was not always smooth or equal. For example, one child never spoke with his parents who were both working overseas, while another spoke with her mother by phone every week.

Unlike other studies (Peng and Wong 2013; McKay 2007; Acedera and Yeoh 2018) of transnational relationships where regular communication has enabled emotional ties and kept absent loved ones ‘virtually present’, most children in the study had inadequate or erratic communication with their absent parent(s). With no internet available in the study location, children were not able to Skype or Facebook their parents and instead relied on mobile phones (cf. McKay 2016). However, none of the children owned their own mobile phone which were regarded in the community as ‘tools of power’ (Acedera and Yeoh 2018, 251). Instead, they were required to communicate with their absent parents through a relative or the village headman's mobile phone, resulting in the children's channels of communication with their absent parents being ‘embedded in power geometries’ (Acedera and Yeoh 2018, 251). The children were therefore forced to rely on another person, and to wait for their parents to text or call them, seeking emotional validation via distance, and ‘displays of caring from abroad’ (Mackay, 2007, 178).

*Waiting for an Absence to be filled*

Children in this study were often forced to wait in a transitional liminal state, between separation and reunification; a lived experience which has been described by Allerton (2016) as ‘stuckness’. Many children who participated in the research had not seen one or both of their parents for years, and they longed to see them again. They were excited about their return and the anticipation of what gifts they would bring when they came:

“I felt happy when he came home and brought me gifts, including a towel”  
(Dewi ,14).

As well as learning to express culturally- appropriate emotions about their parents’ absence, children have been socialised to have strong feelings of obligation towards their absent parents. Some boys talked about learning how to recite the Quran, and girls talked about having to do well at school while their parents were away. They knew their parents were working to pay for their schooling, and they had intense feelings of obligation and ‘duty’ to work hard and learn the Quran while they waited for their return. Boys also talked about the pressure they felt to earn money to supplement the family income while their parents were away. Some children explained how they could not wait to see their parents to show them how responsible they had been and what they have learnt while they were away, and what a good child they had been during their absence. As well as fulfilling feelings of obligation, these activities also helped to fill the children’s time while they waited. As Gray (2011: 425) has noted:

Waiting is also structured by affect and morally inflected familial relations, so that personal longings and desires... are ultimately shaped by affective relationships to family ‘home’ and security.

Other children were not able to fill their parents’ absence with study. This was particularly true of girls who had to help with household tasks, helping their mothers while the father was away, or performing their mothers’ household duties while she was away. In East Lombok girls whose mother or both parents were overseas often drop out of school at the end of primary school (aged eleven) to care for their younger siblings, and boys drop out to seek work to bring money home for the family. One local income activity boys engaged in was collecting sand and rocks from the river bed and carrying it up the road to sell to construction companies who bought it to use for cement. Girls were also engaged in this activity, and one ten-year old girl had dropped out of school to collect sand with her mother, as her father was away and never sent money home.

Other boys reported that they felt ‘*malas*’ (unmotivated) to go to school because of their parents’ absence. This feeling of apathy was also reported by teachers in the local primary school who said that children of parents who had both migrated were often ‘sluggish’, less attentive and emotionally disturbed, due to prolonged parental absence. Responses to parental absence also included very high non-attendance, high volatility and suddenly crying or shouting out in class. One boy, aged nine, started screaming in class for no apparent reason. When asked why he was screaming, he replied, ‘I miss my mother and I want to see her’. These children were also described by the teachers as socially isolated ‘daydreamers’ who failed to engage with other children at play time.

This form of ‘daydreaming’ can be understood as a way of as a way of passing time, escaping the present, coping with the negative aspects of parental absence, and as a mode of waiting. In their study exploring how daydreaming and happiness relate, Mar, Mason and Litvak (2012: 406) found a negative relation between daydreaming and happiness, with daydreaming

providing a helpful means to ease boredom and pass the time, and to alleviate emotional stress, conflict, and pain (Mar et al., 2012, p.402). The study also found that daydreaming about people with whom one cannot be close with has a negative relation with well-being, often characterized by loneliness and less social support, with child loneliness predicting a proneness to daydreaming (Mar et al., 2012, p. 402). Further, when exploring the links between imagination and waiting in young children, Singer (1961: 399) found that ‘an important behavioural consequence of the development of daydreaming tendencies in children may manifest in their waiting ability’.

### *Waiting for Opportunity*

During these acutely uncertain periods of waiting for their parents to return and an absence to be filled, children described how they negotiated their immobility by waiting for an opportunity or until they were old enough to be independently mobile themselves. While they wait the children of transnational migrants are therefore in an enforced state of stasis- ‘a state of protracted motility’ (Gray, 2011).

*Sasak* culture, the dominant culture in Lombok, is a male-dominated society and the experience of stasis and protracted motility is highly gendered in the villages, with unmarried girls having much less opportunity to be mobile than boys. In Lombok being skilled in housework is considered as a benefit to girls when they marry (Bennett 2005). Girls are also responsible for working in the fields, looking after younger siblings and cooking and cleaning at home. They are not permitted to go far from home. Boys’ tasks include looking after livestock, hoeing in the gardens, cutting grass, and collecting firewood, grass, and birds from the forest. They also look for opportunities to go to the village centre, to earn money, to visit friends or holy graves on the island, or to visit the seaside resort town of Senggigi for the weekend. These are all activities which girls are not permitted to do.

The research found that stay-behind boys actively respond to their marginalized and restricted position by developing a repertoire of strategies in order to survive and fill their time. One strategy involves dropping out of school and roaming around the village and in the forest with other children, looking for food to eat and things to do. These children were described by teachers and other adults as having been ‘neglected’ by their parents and caregivers and as running ‘wild’ (*liar*) in the forest. The village head said these children faced discrimination and social stigma in the community, and some left the village to go to the local market to scavenge, beg, busk, or shine shoes, which is acceptable for boys, but not for girls. Others go further afield and live on the streets in the provincial capital city of Mataram, or they travel to the nearby islands of Sumbawa, Bali, or Java. In 2006 a street children NGO in Lombok conducted a study of 200 street children who had dropped out of school and left home. Most of the children were boys aged nine to fifteen years old, whose parents had migrated overseas (Fetter 2006). An additional reason for leaving home was that the boys’ mother had remarried because their father had not returned from overseas, but the child was not accepted by the stepfather and was subsequently rejected or neglected.

Focus group discussions with adolescent girls revealed that some had been forced to drop out of school to care for their siblings, and to help at home with household chores, especially if their mother was overseas. These girls talked about feelings of boredom in the village,

particularly once they had completed primary school and there was no nearby secondary school to go to. Once they reached puberty these girls were not permitted to leave the family compound unless they were accompanied by a male sibling or family member. Girls reported how they felt bored with nothing to do, and they found it hard to fill their time. Their restricted mobility had further decreased since water has been piped into the village a few years before, which meant that they no longer had a reason to walk down to the river four times a day to collect water, and to combine play with work (Punch 2007).

The promise of an increased income and material well being meant that most children we spoke to considered overseas migration as a life option, and many articulated their aspiration to migrate overseas as soon as they could or were old enough. A group of adolescent boys described their overseas migration plans, saying it was necessary because of the lack of income opportunities in Indonesia: ‘we can get jobs in Sumatra, Bali or Kalimantan but it is not much money’ (Agus, 16). The boys were motivated by a desire to build a concrete house, to start a family, and to improve their lives: ‘But we have to build a house first before we can marry’, which would mean working overseas, Untung (17) explained.

Some girls also aspired to go overseas and talked about their plans of going: ‘I can’t wait until I am old enough to go overseas and earn money for my family. I want to go to Taiwan’. Feelings of filial duty therefore also contributed to their desire to migrate. For example, 15-year old Witri was raised by her mother, while her father worked overseas. When he did not return her mother also went away to work, and Witri stayed with a neighbour. Witri said that soon she would also seek work overseas: ‘Our family is very poor. We need to go away to save enough money to build a concrete house and to pay for better food and for school for my little brothers. It is my duty to go. I am just waiting until I have enough money to leave’. As a 15 year, Witri would need to pay an agent to falsify the necessary documents. However, recent Indonesian government policy aiming to tighten migration legislation to prevent undocumented migration has resulted in it becoming harder (and more expensive) for underage children to go overseas to work.

A reported unexpected consequence of the tighter legislation, however, has been an increase in early marriage for adolescent girls. Since the laws on migration were enforced, making it harder to migrate overseas for work without genuine documents, it was reported by provincial government officials in Lombok that in some districts girls and young women are getting married and having children instead. This may be because they see marriage and having babies as a better option to school, or migration, and because there was ‘nothing else to do’. During discussions with grandparents about adolescent girls it was also reported that girls of migrant parents were often married off young, sometimes as young as fifteen, as with no parents around there is ‘no one responsible to take care of her’. It was felt by these grandparents that they could not manage to look after their female grandchildren, as they were too old to control their behaviour while the parents were away. It was considered safer to marry a girl into an arranged marriage than try and protect her honour, which if lost would bring shame on the whole family (Bennett 2005).

These experiences of raising a family by young girls whose parents have gone can also be understood as a mode of waiting by occupying the space of the village through relationships

to people and place, thus remaking the self, place and feelings of belonging (Gray 2011, p. 426). Such a way of negotiating their own motility may also be understood as a form of compensation for the loss of loved ones, and the impact of migration of their lives. This situation is similar to what Gray (Gray 2011: 426) found in 1950s Ireland:

the temporalities of family and reproductive life are sometimes in tension with the temporalities of productive life...as for many women at the time the capitalist separation of domesticity and paid labour time meant a stark choice between one and the other.

The difference between 1950s Ireland and Lombok in the early 21st Century, however, is that once the young women are old enough, they may also leave their babies with family members and migrate overseas themselves, to earn money to pay for a home and the child's future. In recent years, however, the option to migrate overseas has been regarded as less appealing for some young people in Indonesia, especially young educated women, with more women opting to stay behind rather than migrate for work (Somaiah et al 2019, Chan 2016). This has been due to tighter legislation and control on undocumented migration, a recent ban by the Indonesian government on transnational migration to the Middle East (Chan 2016), and as an 'informed resistance' to the 'social risks' that transnational migration has brought to families (Somaiah et al, 2010).

Similar to Somaiah et al's (2019) research in East Java, a reduction in transnational migration by young women in East Lombok has been due to the stigma that is attached to migrant women when they return home from Saudi Arabia, and the negative experiences (of sexual abuse and mistreatment) reported by the Indonesian press and migrant women who have returned home to their village. During the research one girl, Mutiara, 15, said she had heard these stories and did not want to migrate away from her family; instead she wanted to stay in school and become a teacher to make her parents happy. Most of the girls who participated in the research knew their parents went overseas to pay for their schooling and improve their lives. They were happy to go to school and had intense feelings of obligation and 'duty' to work hard at school, to make their parents happy. These findings align with Somaiah et al's study (2019: 7), where young women were choosing to stay behind to make something of their education, so that their parents' sacrifices to put them through school were not wasted. The problem for young educated women in East Lombok, however, is the lack of opportunities to find well paid work after finishing school, without leaving home. On a return trip to the research site eighteen months later, Mutiara had dropped out of school, married and had a baby. She was living with her mother in law, taking care of her baby and her husband's younger siblings, while her husband had left to work in the plantations, in Malaysia.

## **Conclusion**

This paper offers a response to Auyero's (2012) appeal for further exploration into the temporal experience of marginalized people; what Harvey (2015) terms as the 'tempography of hyper-marginalisation'. The research location for this study was an impoverished and hyper-marginalised community in East Lombok, characterized by low wages, low education and employment, food insecurity and high levels of out migration. The research findings also contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of transnational migration on the well-being of children who stay behind, and to debates on the temporalities of migration and immobility. In particular the paper has explored how children who stay behind while their

parents are overseas make use of their time, and how waiting is a lived experience that is integrated into every aspect of their lives.

As described by Auyero (2012) and Hardy (2015), waiting is often a shared social experience amongst the poor, but it is not a homogenous experience. In rural Lombok waiting is a shared social experience as everyone is waiting for a loved one to return and, as has been found elsewhere, for remittances to be sent (Hee Kwon 2015). Children, however, have different trajectories to adults while they wait, which are influenced by their gender and household responsibilities, as well as which parent is away (which impacts their lived experience). Lombok is an Islamic and patriarchal society and the gendered patterns of mobility in rural East Lombok lead to different opportunities for girls and boys, including experiences of protracted motility, especially for unmarried girls.

The research has revealed that within migrant communities the experiences of immobility and waiting are just as important to survival as migration and mobility. Waiting is actively experienced in the villages of East Lombok, as young people wait years for their parents to return, while many simultaneously aspire to migrate as soon as they are old enough to do so. Children waiting for their migrant parents to return are thus caught up in the geopolitics of migration precisely because of their age. The findings highlight how the micropolitics and practices of migration create movement and stasis (Hannam Sheller and Urry, 2006; Gray, 2011), with the focus of this study on children who are '*moored*' within an otherwise highly mobile society (Conlon 2011). The paper has, therefore, explored the lived experiences of the children of migrants in Lombok and contributes to debates about the micropolitics of mobility and immobility that impact most on the youngest members of society. Results of the research provide new data about a population of children who have received less attention in the literature regarding transnational migration in Indonesia.

In impoverished rural Lombok transnational migration and the protracted periods of waiting for those left behind has become a social norm, which is collectively shared and shaped by customs and cultural practices. Further, the cultural norm of transnational migration in rural Lombok has both shaped and been reproduced by gendered expectations of family obligations, work and care. For these children waiting has become an active community practice, embodied and experienced, and sometimes resisted, either by choosing to leave the village to seek work and survive elsewhere, or by falsifying documents so they can migrate overseas themselves. Early marriage and having a baby was also identified by some adolescent girls as a way of alleviating monotony and negotiating their motility.

Finally, the research validates claims by a growing number of scholars within migration studies that child-centred research is vital to understand how children respond to their parents' sustained absence, instead of believing the positive discourse that is imbued in government rhetoric about the impact of migration of local communities in Indonesia. It is imperative that the specific social and cultural conditions that shape children's circumstances are considered in all policy formation and child protection strategies, and that children's views are included in policies of migration, to ensure policies are implemented in the best interests of the child.

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<sup>i</sup> The ‘children’ who participated in this research were aged between 12-17 years of age. Their names have been changed to protect their identities.