

# Strategic actions of transnational migrant parents regarding birth registration for stay-behind children in Lombok, Indonesia

Leslie Butt<sup>1</sup>  | Jessica Ball<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria, Victoria, Canada

<sup>2</sup>School of Child & Youth Care, University of Victoria, Victoria, Canada

## Correspondence

Leslie Butt, Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria, 3800 Finnerty Road, Victoria, BC V8P 5C2, Canada.  
Email: lbutt@uvic.ca

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## Abstract

Challenges to birth registration for children whose parents migrate transnationally for work have been inadequately investigated. Often a prerequisite to accessing state resources such as education and child protection, birth registration may meaningfully indicate a family's capacities to provide for children's well-being. A multimethod qualitative study in 4 high-migration communities in East Lombok, Indonesia, explored the strategic actions migrant parents take regarding birth registration. Families register children based on priorities, capacities, understanding of entitlements, and labyrinthine application processes. Three case studies describe the strategic actions families take with regards to registration to allow some measure of control over their children's well-being: prioritising documents for adult migration; strictly conforming to registration requirements; and relying on false documentation. Findings suggest that parents' strategic actions result in limited family success in the context of weak state initiatives to link birth registration to valued resources for children and families.

## KEYWORDS

birth registration, civil registry, Indonesia, migrant families, strategic action

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper foregrounds the capacities, priorities, and strategic actions of migrant families when negotiating birth registration for their children while parents travel transnationally for work. Typically, birth registration is the first step towards establishing a child's ties to a nation and to state resources. The civil registry is the office where identity documents are obtained and is a focal institution in migrant parents' decision making about registering the birth of a child. To date, concerns about registration of children of transnational migrants focus on risks of children being denied citizenship as a result of not having official birth registration, or on the undocumented status of children who cross borders without authentic documentation (e.g., Bhabha, 2011; Lynch, 2010). Little policy or research attention has been directed at understanding the goals, capacities, and limits of migrant parents' decision making and strategic actions regarding birth registration for their children.

In migrant families, "stay-behind" children are children in families where at least one parent has departed to work outside of the country.

Often referred to in academic literature as "left-behind" children, we advocate the term stay-behind to avoid implying that parents have neglected or abandoned their children, and to emphasise the relatively sedentary circumstances of the children compared with their parents' mobility. The impacts of parental migration on stay-behind children have received growing attention internationally (e.g., Coe, 2011; Dreby, 2010; Leinaweaver, 2014; Mazzucato & Cebotari, 2016), including in Asia and the Pacific region (e.g., Alipio, Lu, & Yeoh, 2015; Choi, Yeoh, & Lam, 2018; Graham & Jordan, 2011; Graham, Jordan, Yeoh, Lam, & Asis, 2012; Murphy, Zhou, & Tao, 2016; Toyota, Yeoh, & Nguyen, 2007). However, largely neglected by investigators are the strategic actions of parents around registering stay-behind children in order to gain access to services and resources such as education, health care, or food subsidies. A study aimed at understanding the reasoning, experiences, and challenges that parents encounter when deciding whether and how to register their child's birth can serve to draw out the impacts of structural conditions, national institutions, and local cultural norms on actions taken by migrant parents to protect and care for their children.

The act of seeking or not seeking birth registration for a child is not solely an indicator of a migrant parent's personal agency, and it cannot be understood only at an individual level or as driven by rational intentionality. We view parents' agency as a socioculturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn, 2001). Political and cultural conditions shape parental capacity for action; however, these capacities are complex and relational. Nahar and Van der Geest (2014) argue that capacities can be understood as the ability to endure adverse circumstances in order to engage in a range of strategies so as to survive and thrive. Even the most disenfranchised migrant parents are not passive recipients of oppressive conditions. Migrant parent actions regarding birth registration do not result in automatic compliance or in overt acts of resistance, but rather allow for active context-specific responses to challenges—what we term *situated agency*—in ways that may advance a multiplicity of goals, only some of which may pertain to formal state reasons for registration. The agency of parents is inevitably situated, in other words, and invariably constrained by various, often intersecting local cultural factors, including the complex “semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of dealing with people and things” (Merlan, 2016, p. 393).

In contexts where family is accorded a high priority, we find that relations within migrant families significantly shape capacities regarding birth registration. Family is “a potent symbol and central part of lived experience” (Lambek, 2013, p. 243). Often mediated by ideas held within culture, family is also shaped by state institutions that recognise families as units that hold property and provide for care and welfare, especially of the young (Lambek, 2013, p. 243). Where family is valued, strategic action taken on behalf of family well-being is highly regarded. As Constable (2016) has argued, family becomes the predominant point of reliance, and the site where capacities are put to work, when the state retreats from social obligations typical of contemporary economic regimes.

When institutions like a civil registry assert requirements of families, registries become places that can enable and constrain parental decisions. In Indonesia, officials expect parents to register births, but because the state does not ensure birth registration leads to discernible and valued benefits, parents must negotiate strategically about whether to register children. Vandenaabee (2011) has argued that unless birth registration offers material benefits, where no other avenues to those benefits are available, people are not likely to register a child's birth. Indonesia's changing national registration policies have created chaotic, variable, and malleable registration procedures at local levels that do not readily link with state services. As a result, many persons born on Indonesian soil who are entitled to membership in the state lack official documents attesting to that right. This status occurs frequently: half of the world's children are not registered. In Indonesia, the prevalence is much higher: careful estimates in rural communities suggest that only 12% of rural Indonesian children have been registered at birth (Australian Indonesian Partnership for Justice, 2014). As Sadiq (2009) has suggested, many would-be citizens in Indonesia are born in Indonesia and feel they belong there as a result of family histories and established use of local land and resources, rather than by claiming attachment to the state through obtaining legal identity documents. These residents may choose not to participate fully in state institutions and may not register with state agencies despite

state campaign initiatives, in part because the state does not fully provide them with opportunities and entitlements that would make registration worthwhile, and because they value different, family-based ideas of belonging (see also Killias, 2014).

The migrant parents from East Lombok, Indonesia, whose stories we illustrate in this article are enmeshed within families and communities who primarily value local forms of belonging and who, by and large, do not register their children at birth and are not registered themselves. We argue that strategic actions taken by parents and other family members regarding birth registration occur primarily within a flexible family context. Unpacking family responses to birth registration campaigns in Lombok, Indonesia, highlights the particular challenges to the agency of families bound by poverty, indentured migration, mobility, and lack of resources in a province that only inconsistently provides resources and benefits (e.g., Ball, Butt, & Beazley, 2017; Jakimow, 2014). In these conditions, we show how families choose from several options around birth registration and may prioritise utilitarian goals as much as symbolic objectives. A parent may choose to accede to civil registry requirements, to manoeuvre around them, or to ignore them. Local values of belonging and incomplete state systems together create limited, situated, but flexible opportunities for families to manipulate identity documents for their own ends.

After contextualising conditions of migrant families in Lombok, Indonesia, we draw on data from participant observation research and in-depth family interviews to describe how families navigate a reformed civil registry.<sup>1</sup> We highlight how inconsistencies in protocol ensure ongoing barriers and incite searches for alternatives. We then present three case studies to illustrate parental capacities regarding birth registration for children. The first case profiles extreme poverty, infant death, a dearth of documents, and limited family agency. The second case describes a highly organised mother with a portfolio of laminated legal documents, where strategic agency for her means acceding to state expectations. The third case describes the nuanced, flexible agency parents can enact when they are able to manipulate the system to support their family goals. This close attention to everyday practice highlights the wide range of pragmatic, family-driven responses in rural Lombok, as well as signalling the ways institutions can inhibit family decisions to register stay-behind children and shape long-term outcomes.

## 2 | CHALLENGES TO BIRTH REGISTRATION IN LOMBOK

In contemporary Indonesia, increasing global demands for low-skilled labour, coupled with the promotion of transnational migration at a national level, have led to a rise of Indonesian workers seeking jobs overseas, with an accompanying surge in family fragmentation (Andrevski & Lyneham, 2014; International Organisation for Migration, 2010). Since the start of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the number of migrant workers leaving Indonesia through official and unofficial channels has risen sharply. Approximately 700,000 documented migrants left Indonesia in 2012. The Indonesian government promotes and facilitates overseas migration, and Indonesia ranks as the third-highest remittance-receiving country in Southeast Asia (World Bank,

2015). Although prior to the 1980s, mostly men migrated, often to work in palm oil plantations in Malaysia, increasingly, women migrate overseas, typically to the Middle East. For migrant parents working overseas, the physical distance, expense, legal obstacles, and risks involved in travelling back home are some of the reasons they have limited contact with their children and families.

Outmigration is unevenly distributed across Indonesia. The regency of East Lombok, in the province of West Nusa Tenggara, has had the third-highest outmigration rate for many years (International Organisation for Migration, 2010). Lombok migrants are typically Muslim of Sasak ethnicity. The island of Lombok is characterised by high population growth, low wages, low education and employment, a history of famine, food insecurity, and falling agricultural productivity (KOMPAK, 2016; Mantra, 1999). A cultural value of *merantau*, which means “to leave home voluntarily to seek knowledge and opportunity,” drives some migration from Lombok (Lindquist, 2009). In one village where we conducted research, over half of the households had at least one family member currently working out of the country.

Stay-behind children are common in migrant households in Lombok. An estimate at the start of the new millennium suggested around 1 million children in Indonesia stayed behind when their parents migrated overseas (Bryant, 2005). An unstated expectation behind Indonesia's promigration policy is that stay-behind children will be cared for by a remaining parent, older siblings, or extended family members in the child's home community (Butt, Beazley, & Ball, 2017). In rural East Lombok, stay-behind children typically live—at least nominally—within individual nuclear family households set within larger compounds made up of relatives, often married siblings, and under a patriarchal compound head. Because marriage is patrilineal and patrilocal among the Sasak, married women permanently relocate to their husband's compound and give birth typically in their husband's home, separated by distance from kin. If a parent leaves for work, responsibility for care of the child is negotiated within the father's family members first, but the maternal grandmother also often agrees to take the child into her home. A high degree of mobility between houses is a feature of many children's experiences (Beazley, Butt, & Ball, 2017).

One responsibility parents are expected to assume for stay-behind children is to register a child's birth. Responding to international pressure to improve civil registration systems and specifically to increase birth registration (UNICEF, 2013), the Indonesian government introduced Law No. 24 in 2013, marking a paradigm shift from holding registration as a civic duty (i.e., an individual's moral choice) to enshrining registration as a protected right (i.e., a state obligation to act through legal and regulatory frameworks; KOMPAK, 2016). The government introduced new policies reducing obstacles to birth registration, such as eliminating previously required evidence of legal marriage. The number of civil registry offices was increased, the complexity of the birth registration application process was somewhat simplified, the fee for registering children was eliminated within the first 60 days after birth (although fines for late registration remained in place), and computerised registration forms were introduced to make forged documents harder to produce. The national government also exhorted local institutions to enforce existing policies requiring proof of birth registration for children in order to access social protection, schooling, and other services (Lucet, 2013).

Although regional and provincial inconsistencies in national policy and program implementation have characterised Indonesian bureaucracy since independence in 1949, a deliberate move towards more decentralised systems since the fall of Suharto in 1998 has explicitly devolved power to provinces, districts, and subdistricts, reinforcing inconsistencies and making it difficult for the national government to implement policy reforms. Indonesia's civil registration system is widely acknowledged as under-resourced, fragmentary, overly complicated, and inconsistent across levels of government (Australian Indonesian Partnership for Justice, 2014). A shared common sentiment among officials is that the lack of birth registration is not caused by official procedures but simply by citizen noncompliance, attributed to the ignorance of families who neglect their parental and civic duty (KOMPAK, 2016).

To date, efforts to register births overwhelmingly favour Indonesians who are sedentary, urban, literate in the national language, and familiar with civil registration bureaucracy. Registration remains cumbersome, expensive, and hard to access for most low-income families (Ball et al., 2017). Efforts to reduce barriers to birth registration have been less successful in rural compared with urban areas, and especially in low-income rural communities with high outmigration, such as the communities in East Lombok where our research was based (Australian Indonesian Partnership for Justice, 2014). In theory, low registration will affect the distribution of recognised state membership and entitlements to resources and services, making these highly inequitable (UNICEF, 2015). However, in practice, even when registered, a birth certificate may not provide access to the state benefits it is supposed to. Even if the birth certificate did confer clear advantages, as Bhabha (2011, p. 1) points out, “legal identity does not guarantee a good life.”

It was in these conditions of high outmigration of parents and shifting expectations for child registration where we carried out a qualitative study in rural East Lombok of how parents who migrate for work view birth registration and how they act on it.

### 3 | METHODOLOGIES

Based in four rural villages in East Lombok, the authors conducted in-depth semistructured interviews in 2014 with 22 households where the child of a migrant was being cared for. We aimed where possible to interview nuclear family triads consisting of both biological parents and one child in a household. We also conducted 7 participatory focus groups consisting of 54 adults and children aged 9 to 14 years old. We conducted participant observation and interviewed stakeholders in homes and village centres and in nongovernment organisations providing migrant services and health facilities. We conducted systematic observations at two civil registry offices in East Lombok over the course of 2 weeks. We used qualitative ethnographic methods because they have been widely used in migration studies for their ability to elucidate the familial, and familiar, material, and social textures of everyday life (Dreby, 2010; Hess, 2010; Ho & Hatfield, 2010; Lindquist, 2009), especially among vulnerable populations (Liamputtong, 2007). Participant observation in four village settings and the multidimensional research design allowed us to move beyond assumptions and generalisations about migrant families to gain

glimpses into the perceptions, feelings, and strategies of parents and to situate their actions within the regional institutional and economic factors shaping the experiences of birth registration for migrant families.

Birth registration or other documentation was not a criterion for inclusion in the study. Interviews with migrant families were conducted in Indonesian with the occasional assistance of a local Sasak language interpreter. The interviews took place in or near each family's home, where they were comfortable and had ready access to identity documents. Asking interviewees to show any identity documents they claimed to have for themselves and their children created discussion about their documents, how documents were obtained, and how having the document impacted them. More comprehensively, the interviews asked each family member to describe and explain their decisions and actions to date about their children's birth registration, other forms of identity documentation, care arrangements, and issues of sustenance, belonging, access to services for children, and hopes for children's futures. Interviews were transcribed, and a coding system for qualitative data (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) was used to organise the data, including a simple classification system for family groupings, and to elaborate key themes, including capacity, provisioning, child wellness, reasoning about registration/nonregistration, and registration action. We coded responses to birth registration using respondent-identified reasons for nonregistration. We ranked the 22 families along a capacity continuum, which we defined as the strategic capacity to harness services and resources to meet the needs of stay-behind children. A family with married parents, with limited income but with the capacity to access sufficient institutional, familial, or affective resources to provide for children was ranked more highly than a family with higher income but with less ability to marshal resources. Families with histories associated with negative outcomes for children, including divorce or separation of parents, migration of mother, poor school record, or child behavioural problems, and families with few supportive family members were ranked lower (Hoang, Lam, Yeoh, & Graham, 2015; cf. Mazzucato & Cebotari, 2016). We produced a continuum of family provisioning for children. Although the depiction of the civil registry and the three case studies that follow cannot address the scope of stories we heard during our research, they nonetheless highlight how families take action flexibly, as a collective. By focusing on the messy realities of the civil registry office in East Lombok, and the strategic actions families take in relation to that office, we emphasise complex conditions and family collaboration in an economically difficult region of Indonesia.

## 4 | STRATEGIC PARENTS' EVERYDAY CHALLENGES

Migrant parents perceive the role of the civil registry, children's birth registration, and identity documents in the context of their mobility and their children's sedentary lives. Only 12% of parent respondents had obtained what appeared to be an authentic birth certificate for a child—approximately the same percentage of parents who had migrated with authentic identity and overseas worker permits. All participating parents had heard of birth registration through village-level promotions and had been told it was important to register births.

However, nearly all viewed birth registration as a last priority compared with more urgent issues needing attention. Reasons parents listed for not attempting to register their children include the following: (a) they did not receive a letter or completed confirmation of birth from a birth attendant when their child was born; (b) their marriage was not legally registered and they misunderstood this was required as part of the application; (c) they had no authentic identity documents for themselves; (d) one or both parents were out of the country during the 60 days following the birth of their child when registration is free, and now they cannot afford the late registration fee; (e) they anticipated hidden costs, such as "cigarette money" paid to brokers; (f) they only speak the indigenous Sasak language, whereas government employees speak Indonesian; (g) they are not literate and cannot read the application instructions or fill out the form; (h) they cannot afford to pay a broker to do the registration for them; and (i) they do not have the confidence to interact with civil registration officers.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most striking findings from our research was a pattern of pregnancy and childbirth precipitating migration for the male head of household among married migrant parents. In the 14 triad interviews we conducted, 8 of the 14 fathers had been away during their wives' pregnancy or immediately following the birth of their child, and 7 of these 8 husbands had migrated each time their wife had become pregnant. Many fathers remarked on their duty as head of household, even if away for work, to register the births of their children. Women noted that when their husbands were working out of the country, women were not typically permitted to venture beyond the family compound, and therefore could not undertake the journey alone to the public space of the civil registry office or engage in transactions with a local document broker. Thus, local gender, marital, and reproductive norms interacted with bureaucratic demands regarding the timing of registration, language competencies, and fining to result in low registration.

A second important finding emerged from our participant observation at civil registries. Despite simplified procedures, we observed a large number of obfuscatory practices that reduced the likelihood parents would choose to make the effort to register their child. These practices are profiled in the following section in order to show the quotidian nature of corruption and inefficiency and the extent of efforts required by families to make the choice to register.

### 4.1 | The civil registry

Systematic observations and interviews conducted at two civil registries in East Lombok reinforce the registry's role in sustaining differential access to resources and in shaping registration decisions of migrant parents. We observed multiple ways procedures that should be simple were rendered complex or daunting. At the registry, newly computerised registration systems have led to new forms of corruption making registration difficult. In one instance, we watched how an artificially created "shortage" of official numbered forms at the registry office prevented certificates from being processed, unless a bribe helped find a spare form. A registrant missing a document would get "fined" as a way to process the application without the document. Applicants were frequently asked to pay extra for an official signature on the new forms. Civil servants working the dockets acted out local moral

distinctions that discriminated against some applicants. For example, employees on moral grounds often refused to process birth registration applications that were not accompanied by a government marriage certificate, even though the certificate is no longer required by law.

Outside the registry building and in home villages, opportunistic helpers who do not hold government positions intervened in registration. Village volunteers or cadres increasingly offered to mediate between a family and the registry, lining up at the dockets and getting signatures on behalf of a family who may have no literate adult or parent in the country. Helpers may do this putatively in the name of community or religious service, but they typically command a fee and benefit personally from serving others. Also present at the civil registry were migrant brokers who offer to obtain birth registration and other documents such as identity cards for migrants, for a substantial fee. The brokers arranging the migration of one family member also often offered to acquire birth registration documents for other family members. However, they often kept the documents for the migrant in a "safe" place, which the migrant never sees (see also Lindquist, 2012).

The systems we observed at the registry allow for false documents to be procured and used as though they were official documents. Despite computerization, many of the identity documents held by migrants that we inspected were produced with false information or false supporting documents. False documents are widespread in Indonesia (Bubandt, 2009). Many documents we inspected are real documents in material terms, but the content of the documents or the conditions under which they were obtained are false. These attest to the ingenuity of migrant families to exploit system weaknesses or cultural norms to benefit children and families (see also Chiu & Choi, 2018). In one case, a respondent parent paid a bribe to a village head to write a letter testifying to the paternity of a child born out of wedlock to a migrant mother, which was used to obtain an official birth certificate. Another mother paid off a broker to add a "father's" name on a Family Card in order to access food subsidies, even though the paternity in both cases was fictitious (Butt, Ball, & Beazley, 2016).

As the following three cases illustrate, although barriers at the civil registry can obstruct parents' easy access to birth registration, different degrees of strategic action are evident in the ways migrant parents respond to these barriers. The case studies below show the everyday ways parents negotiate birth registration. Some parents ignore demands, others adhere strictly to requirements, and still others flexibly and creatively negotiate registration through nonlegal channels. Parents reason and take action in ways that emphasise the multiple constraints shaping their decisions but that also emphasise how values of family belonging shape the way they take strategic action. As the first case of Rendi and Issa shows, when a father is out of the country for work, multiple constraints limit his choices and make it difficult for him to ensure the well-being of his family and to obtain documentation for his children.

## 4.2 | Rendi and Issa: Strategic actions in order to survive

Rendi and Issa live in a small rattan-walled house off a narrow path 200 m from a main village road. Rendi and Issa's two-room house is

among the simplest in the village, with an outdoor cook pit, no plumbing, little furniture, and no luxuries.

Rendi and Issa married when Rendi was in his 20s and Issa was about 16. Both ended their education after primary school. As soon as Issa became pregnant with their first child, Rendi applied for work in Malaysia, and immediately after the child was born, he left to work in Malaysia for 3 years. Issa had relocated to her husband's natal village after her marriage and lived with her husband's younger sister while her husband was away. Both of Rendi's parents were deceased. Issa sadly described the outcome of Rendi's first trip:

*Author: How old was the baby when Rendi left?*

*Issa: One month. Yes, when the baby was one month old, he went to Malaysia.*

*Author: What happened to the baby?*

*Issa: He was sick for a week. My husband had left for Malaysia. This first child was sick all the time after that. I sought medication ... sought medication from a health provider. But, there was no change. He had a swollen belly, there is no cure for that. As nothing changed, he died.<sup>3</sup> Then, I called his father, "Look, your child has passed away." He said he was crying. He cried, cried over there, he wanted to go back home here.*

*Author: Did Rendi come back?*

*Issa: But ... he was not allowed to go back home. Yes, he loves his child who passed away. But he said, "I am not allowed to leave." So, he kept on living in Malaysia.*

When Rendi finally returned, he brought home only enough money to pay back the money he had borrowed to make the trip (USD300, at an exorbitant 100% interest rate). Shortly after Rendi's return, Issa became pregnant again. As with the first child, as soon as the infant was born, Rendi left for work, leaving his wife in the same home and with the same lack of social support. However, the second child thrived. After Rendi returned upon completing the contract, he left again, this time when his wife was 8 months pregnant. The third child has also thrived. Rendi returned after the third trip with enough surplus money to finally install electricity in their house. Issa felt conditions improved. Rendi is an engaged father, she said, the children are happier, she is happier, and he can take the children for afternoon walks and help with chores.

When asked to show the identity documents the family had in their possession, Rendi and Issa set out several pieces of ID. As a migrant who used the services of a broker for his last trip, Rendi had travelled once to Malaysia through official channels. He showed me the expired passport he had used, and an Indonesian identity card. Although Rendi said he had a birth certificate, he was unable to show it as it had been procured by the broker and was putatively still in the broker's care. Rendi had never seen it. Neither Issa nor her two children have ever had a birth certificate. When asked "Are there any risks if you do not have the birth certificate?" Issa replied: "No, no risk at all." When asked if she had been required to show a birth certificate to enrol her older child in school or obtain other services, Issa said "No, never."

This family epitomises a pattern we observed in young migrant families of pregnancy followed by fathers migrating for work. The

infant's tragic death when Issa did not have a husband or mother-in-law present to advocate with village leaders or obtain health care shows the importance of local family support in ensuring children's needs are met. The case also points to the scope of constraints the mother in a migrant family might experience regarding registering an infant within 60 days of birth, with the father unavailable to sign birth papers, travel to the registry, and navigate officials, brokers, and corruption. There is not enough financial support for basic needs to ensure the survival and wellness of the newborn, much less for obtaining a document from a faraway office. Both mother and father display little capacity for flexibility or choice about registration within these structural constraints. From this vantage point, birth registration for children appears an irrelevant luxury. Birth registration for the migrating parent, however, is a necessity. This family, near the bottom of the local socioeconomic hierarchy, is disadvantaged in their ability to access birth registration, but they nonetheless take action, albeit in a limited way, by spending scarce funds on identity documents to allow the father's migration.

The second case contrasts with Rendi's as it describes the unusual practices of a mother in a migrant family who explicitly adhered to requirements to register children legitimately, because for her, the perceived benefits to family warranted surmounting the considerable challenges of navigating the civil registry. This highly organised mother who obtained all required documents for all members of her nuclear family articulated a strong sense of self and talked of choice regarding registration. Explicit adherence to state registration goals illustrates another form of strategic action taken by some parents.

### 4.3 | Sira: Strategic actions in order to conform

Sira was signalled immediately to researchers as a desirable interview respondent when we began our research because a village employee expected we were only looking for "success stories" among migrant families compliant with village and state goals. For Sira, registering children was an important step in her larger objective of raising a modern and successful nuclear family. Sira combined working as a kindergarten teacher's aide, studying for an education certificate, and tutoring students in the evening alongside caring for her two young sons. Her husband Marius worked on a palm oil plantation in Malaysia on his third contract. Although her husband's first two contracts were completed without documentation, they agreed as a couple that for his third trip they would pay a broker to coordinate documentation. Simultaneously, they also took steps as a couple to obtain birth certificates for both their young children, paying a hefty fine and commission of Rp.150.000 (USD15) for delayed registration. They had not previously viewed birth registration as important, but Sira had been told by village officials that "registration would become important" for access to schooling. When asked about the demands of birth registration in the context of family separation and her challenging daily workload, Sira repeatedly invoked a local saying emphasising the importance of doing what one must do: "Want it, don't want it, you have to want it" (*Mau, tidak mau, harus mau*). Accepting challenge, sacrifice, and hard work, she suggested, was necessary to achieving life goals.

Sira recognised her life was made more challenging because she and her husband Marius had decided to spurn compound living with

Marius' "difficult" mother and instead used remittances to build a simple nuclear family home on leased land by a road. Living in a nuclear household with an absent husband, Sira had to do everything on her own. Sira's daily schedule was laminated and pasted onto the wall of her home, showing times for work, laundry, house cleaning, and supervising children's homework. Sitting erect in her scrupulously clean home, Sira was eager to show how well she managed her challenging life during our interview. When asked to see family members' birth certificates, Sira removed a tidy folder from a locked cabinet and proudly showed the contents. All of the family's identity documents had been laminated and were kept in the folder alongside other laminated documents she has saved throughout her life, including her graduation certificates from grade school and high school, and even her commendation certificates for participating in community development events. She categorically asserted that all of her documents were 100% real, and based on 100% real and correct information.

The file of certificates Sira kept locked up meshes with her practices about marriage, residence, education, and work, and symbolises her striving for recognition of competence and conformity to government ideals. She explained that her goal for her family—"want it, don't want it, you have to want it"—is to be accountable to standards for her children that are disseminated by the village government. As a teacher and tutor, Sira's success at the village level depends on her modelling success in her household. Her behaviour accords with national expectations and programs designed to encourage women to be striving, nuclear-family oriented, future-focused, and devoted to children (e.g., Newberry, 2010). In Hull's (2012, p. 22) terms, through birth registration, document lamination, and other acts of conformity, Sira "seek[s] to make [herself] into an object of the state's regard." Sira enhances personal capacity through strict conformity. In contrast with Rendi's family, in registering births, Sira believes she increases her local symbolic capital because she behaves as a model modern migrant wife and mother.

The third case, profiling an established family, shows how parents make use of social networks and creative manipulations to obtain birth registration papers for their children. This family takes strategic action around documents, where opportunity combines with perceived need, reflecting a fluid understanding and a strategic deployment of resources when necessary to ensure the family's well-being.

### 4.4 | Rinas: Flexible and enterprising strategic actions

Rinas courted and married Arnita when he was in his 20s and Arnita was 17. When Arnita became pregnant at age 18, Rinas left for Malaysia as an undocumented worker. Rinas was working illegally in Malaysia when he was caught, arrested, and jailed following a dramatic police chase. During her pregnancy, Arnita had returned home to live in her mother's house and she did not use government prenatal care in part due to the poor quality of birthing clinics. The baby was born at her mother's home, attended by a local midwife. It was a breech birth and the child was stillborn. Arnita was devastated:

*I was heartbroken: my husband was in jail and my child was born dead!*

She fell into a profound depression that lifted only when her husband returned 6 months later.

When Arnita became pregnant for the second time, Rinas again left for work in Malaysia, using false documents, including a false birth certificate for himself. As he noted:

*The documents were fake. There was no true information on any family documents, it was all fake.*

During this second trip, Rinas paid off all his debts. On his third trip, undertaken during Arnita's third pregnancy, he brought home money to help build a family home. Recently, Rinas became an employee at the village government office. As a village employee, Rinas is expected to adhere to government directives, so when programs were put in place to promote birth registration he got certificates for his children at the civil registry. However, Rinas used false documents acquired during his second trip to obtain birth certificates. As Rinas said, if you look closely, none of his family documents is legitimate:

*For a time [prior to the second trip] we thought of going to Malaysia as a family, and we needed birth certificates .... We made fake ID, because a broker sometimes asked information about it, so we just made it up. The data of parents and other relatives was changed. For example I called myself Jauhari. All of the children's names were made up. None of the information provided in our family ID is true. Jauhari, for example, is my child's name who had passed away, and I took that name for my own. We still use all this ID today.*

Rinas' literacy, obvious intelligence, and commitment to his family was not initially sufficient to prevent infant mortality or serious emotional challenges for his wife in the early migrating years of their marriage. However, Rinas' strategic attitude towards identity documents illustrates how junior civil servants who are aware of the obligation to register births may nonetheless take strategic action in a way that benefits them and their family. Rinas enacts a flexible agency when he conforms to directives, not for the sake of conformity itself, but because a situated, false conformity is sufficient, and allows Rinas to benefit his family by providing long-term stability without disrupting valued work and other social networks.

The three case studies offer different insights into the range of strategic actions parents enact. Although Sira stands out in our research as a rare case of a parent who prioritised correct registration on the basis of expected future need, the majority of our respondents, such as Rendi and Rinas, resourcefully and creatively made do through less legitimate means. Both Rinas and Sira are educated and well-positioned within local village life. Yet their differing responses to registration suggests education levels and affluence are less relevant to registration than local and personal values of belonging. With the notable exception of Sira, the range of our respondents' narratives regarding registration suggests that many migrant parents are disengaged from expectations of the state, even if they are employees of the state, partly because the state does not necessarily benefit them in clear and consistent ways. They use their competencies to enact and elaborate other forms of connectedness to family and to place, taking strategic

actions to protect their children through various means, only some of which are legal.

## 5 | CONCLUSION: EVERYDAY STRATEGIC RESPONSES

Our depiction of birth registration procedures and family vignettes points to multiple players, barriers, and shortcomings within the structures available in Indonesia to bring the children of migrant families into a legal relationship with the state. Government record-keeping does not reflect social realities. False documents are widespread and normalised. Corrupt employees and opportunistic "helpers" create additional costs and difficulties for the migrant family. Families respond to these significant on-the-ground challenges by making birth registration meaningful and worthwhile for them. By focusing on the mundane details of how registration works and on what types of actions three migrant families take at an everyday level about identity documents in one low-income, high-migration regency in Indonesia, we highlight the extent of barriers to successful registration and the ways in which parents take action within conditions that frequently limit capacities and opportunities. The family acts as a site of refuge during precarious family instabilities, and conditions may or may not lead to doing the "right thing" and registering children. Parents' strategic actions rely on documents being symbolic and flexible objects rather than documentary evidence of a social truth. Despite state efforts, documents are not vital in Indonesia, not even as a means to get out of conditions of insecurity. When they are attached to resources, documents should perform as a technology for "opening" avenues and opportunities (Street, 2014). Study respondents often expressed awareness of this, and saw how bureaucratic visibility might work as a form of personal empowerment for them. The strategies taken by Sira and Rinas to obtain documents offers a means to potential empowerment. For Rendi, who has never seen his birth registration documents, the "opening" offered was less appealing as the family remained focused on providing core necessities.

For all our respondents, however, the power of the document lies mostly in its symbolic potency for signalling success or for opening a door to getting a work permit. These benefits resonate more than any instrumental effectiveness—the birth certificate does not yet unlock access to new resources or opportunities that could not be obtained through other means. Thus, for many families involved in migration, obtaining birth registration is not, overall, an empowering act. On the contrary, many families display the situated nature of their agency when they describe and justify their decision to *not* adhere to birth registration norms because they continue to rely more on family than the state, and they value local, flexible, family forms of belonging over official ones. Families display a canny ability to assess the absence of meaningful incentives to move towards official and accurate registration.

Ideally, one of the primary functions of birth registration is to provide equitable access to resources for children. Yet the lack of resources that drives many rural families to work overseas prevents parents from even getting to the starting gate where birth registration might portend hopes for a better future for children who stay behind.

The qualitative accounts of everyday practice sketched in this paper are important because they emphasise that it is in the everyday realm of the family that vital strategic responses take place. The erstwhile family-focused responses to the civil registry system are unlikely to work as well, however, if state or local civil registry practices become more organised or try to stop forged or fraudulent documents. Families such as those who participated in our research will likely experience further limitations on their situated agency due to structural constraints and their itinerant circumstances, reinforcing conditions for persisting marginalisation for future generations.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion of this issue, see Ball et al., 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Infant and maternal mortality in Lombok has historically been among the highest in Indonesia. In 2015, maternal mortality was 113 deaths per 100,000 live births, and infant mortality was 57 deaths per 1,000 live births (Butt et al., 2017).

## ORCID

Leslie Butt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3601-6795>

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