



INVISIBLE PEOPLE

POVERTY AND EMPOWERMENT
IN INDONESIA

presented by PNPM Mandiri —
Indonesia's National Program for Community Empowerment

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Singkawang, West Kalimantan

SEX WORKERS: TO MAKE MONEY

Singkawang is a small city in West Kalimantan. With its vast forests and coconut and oil plantations, sparsely populated West Kalimantan has always attracted migrants looking for work. In addition to the indigenous Dayak population, many Madurese, Bugis, and Javanese live in the area. In the past, coolies were brought in from China to labor in the plantations. Their descendants continue to live throughout the region, working as farmers, traders, and laborers. In Singkawang, this group comprises the largest single ethnic group, making up a total of 45% of the population.

Singkawang has a large sex industry. Many women work in small coffee shops, or *warung kopi*. Men come to the coffee shops and pay inflated prices for coffee and beer. While they drink, the women keep them company. Many of the women are available for paid sex at nearby short-time hotels. In addition, there are brothels in the city and nearby villages. Some prostitutes work from the streets and markets. Still others can be contacted by mobile telephone, either directly or through pimps. The women come from across the region and beyond, particularly from certain specific regions and districts in Java.

With the large sex industry, Singkawang has become notorious as a center for the trafficking of women. There have been a number of media reports on the export of Chinese-descended women as mail-order brides for marriages in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Apparently, men from these countries pay large fees for introductions to women from Singkawang. The reports claim that the exported brides are often badly treated in their new countries.

Many women from the region work abroad as contract workers, usually as domestic servants. Mostly they work in the Middle East, Singapore, and Malaysia. Some travel with work permits organized by agents. Many work illegally, particularly in Malaysia, which shares a land border with Kalimantan. Many succeed in making good money in countries where salaries are much higher than in Indonesia. However, with little legal or other protection, these women are vulnerable to many kinds of abuse. Women working overseas have been raped, tortured, and beaten. There have also been claims that women contract workers are forced to work in the sex industry, often with little pay.

It is probably true that some Indonesian women are forced to work in the sex industry, both in Singkawang, elsewhere across Indonesia, and abroad. However, it is far too easy to conflate the term "trafficking" and "sex work," as though they are one and the same thing. People often have strong moral views about sex work. If those who hate the very idea of prostitution don't resort to the belief that the women who do it are morally depraved, they may prefer to see them as innocent victims. One way to see them as innocent victims is to believe that they have been forced into sex work against their will. Thus, the media and anti-prostitution activists often pay disproportionate attention to cases where women claim to have been forced into sex work against their will.

None of the women working in the brothels in Singkawang who were interviewed for this book say they are working under compulsion. This is not to say that they enjoy their work or that they are happy with their current circumstances. Almost all talked about the dangers of disease and the difficulty of dealing with troublesome customers. Some lied to family and friends and worked far away from home because of the stigma of being known as a prostitute in their home town. Many came to sex work after terrible abuse as children, mostly from family members. Others had gone through bad marriages followed by divorce or widowhood. Almost all had children whom they were supporting without the help of partners. Almost all the women said they wanted to leave their brothel to find other work. Most wanted to get married and run their own businesses, usually as traders or stall-holders. Despite their dissatisfaction and distaste for their work, however, they all work voluntarily in the sex industry.

Women work in the sex industry for one, simple reason: to make money. With the nearly complete absence of social welfare programs in Indonesia, sex work can be a means for divorced and single women to cope with poverty, unemployment, and family obligations.

The women in these profiles worked in the sex industry for one simple reason: to make money. With the nearly complete absence of social welfare programs, most of them regard sex work as a means of coping with poverty, unemployment, failed marriages, and family obligations. In the brothels on Jalan Happy in Singkawang, women get paid Rp 40,000, or about four dollars, for fifteen minutes of sex in a back room. To those living on the average wage in a developed country, this sounds appalling. Indeed, in absolute terms, it is not much – just a bit more than a bottle of beer at the *warung kopi* where they work. However, it is more than twice the minimum daily wage in the region. Put simply, sex work is usually better paid than any other option available to young, uneducated women.

According to a report published by the International Labor Organization, between 140,000 and 230,000 women in Indonesia work in the sex industry. The sex industry accounts for between 0.8% to 2.4% of Gross Domestic Product.

Selling sex is not technically a criminal act, although soliciting, pimping, and procuring are illegal. Brothels such as those in Jalan Happy in Singkawang are often regulated by regional authorities. Often, brothels are tolerated on the grounds that their purpose is to facilitate the rehabilitation of sex workers through compulsory education, skills training, and psychological and social counseling.

A disproportionately large number of sex workers come from certain specific locations. These include certain villages in Indramayu, West Java, and Wonogiri, Central Java. As the anthropologist Hanna Papanek states, the strong degree of regional specialization in certain easy-entry occupations such as prostitution can be explained in terms of “the preference given by those already employed or in a position to give jobs to relatives, friends, and others from the same group; the information provided to newcomers by established acquaintances; and the greater ease of allocating work or territories in a group with a common background.”

A brothel district... Five to ten women work in each house with almost all of these women being divorcées or single mothers.



U'un

I work in one of the brothels in Jalan Happy. There are six or eight women in my brothel. We sit with the men and keep them company while they drink. If they want, they can take us to a room at the back. They pay Rp 35,000 for a bottle of beer. The boss makes Rp 17,000 per bottle. We don't get a cut from that. We only get paid if a man takes us into one of the rooms. It doesn't usually take long, maybe ten or fifteen minutes. The men pay us Rp 50,000. Out of that, we have to give the boss Rp 10,000. If we spend too long in the room with the guy, then we have to pay double for the room. The boss makes more money from selling the beer than from the girls. The girls are just there to get the men to drink. The boss gets bad-tempered if the men don't drink beer.

I started working here after I got divorced. I was married when I was fifteen. I stayed with my husband for seven years. When I was with him, I worked as a cook in Jakarta. I asked my husband for a divorce because he wouldn't work. He was a cripple. He had polio when he was young, so his legs were shriveled. Even so, he could have worked if he'd wanted to. He could have looked after a stall. Instead, he just felt sorry for himself. He wanted me to look after him and do all the work.

I knew what kind of work I was going to be doing before I came here. I came with a friend from my village in West Java. She'd worked here before. She was coming back and invited me to come with her. A lot of girls from my village do this type of work. All the girls in my brothel come from my village. My family knows what I do. They didn't force me to come. Sometimes they call me and ask me to send them money. They're happy that I work far from home in Kalimantan. None of the girls from my village does sex work in West Java. It would be embarrassing if people we knew saw us. But I meet a lot of other women doing the same work when I go home for Idul Fitri holidays.

Sometimes the men are spoiled and difficult. If they feel that you aren't giving them good service, they don't want to pay. Last night, we had some trouble. A bunch of drunk guys turned up. They were being difficult. One of them took a girl into a room, but he couldn't come. After fifteen minutes, the girl told him that his time was up. He got angry and started calling her names. He said he wasn't going to pay. She told him he had to pay. She said it wasn't her fault that he couldn't come. The boss's husband had to step in. He's a Bugis from Singkawang. He made the guy pay up. It was lucky the boss was there. If a guy walks out without paying for his drinks, the girl he was sitting with is responsible.

The young men are more difficult than the older ones. The young guys often come in groups. They just hang out without spending much. They want to sit next to you and touch you. They don't want to pay to take you into a room. The older men are usually more to the point. They just choose a girl and then take her into the room. There's nothing worse than guys who waste your time. If a guy is sitting with you, no one else is going to come near you. You can't waste time with someone who isn't going to go into a room.

Most of the guys wear condoms. We make them wear condoms. We have a policy of "no condom, no sex." The health agency provides free condoms to the women in the brothel. They're Family Planning brand. They aren't good quality and burst easily. If you want to be really safe, you put on two. Sometimes the men complain that they can't feel anything if they wear a condom. I tell them if they get AIDS, they'll suffer for years just because they think it feels better without a condom. Sometimes they moan about it, but we don't service men who don't wear condoms. I'm always glad if right at the start, a guy says "Hey, sister, have you got a condom?"

"Most of the guys wear condoms. We make them wear condoms. We have a policy of 'no condom, no sex'."



I know about HIV and AIDS, that it's spread through exchange of bodily fluids like sperm and blood. I know that it can be spread through unprotected sex or by sharing needles or by blood transfusions. I know that you can reduce spreading it by wearing condoms. I know that anal sex is very risky. The most dangerous activity is sharing needles.

I did a five-day training course at the Hotel Mitra Tanjung about HIV and AIDS. There were fifteen people in the class: five sex workers, five *waria*, and five injecting drug users. Before the course I'd heard of AIDS, but I didn't really know anything about it. I didn't know how it was spread. I'd see some posters up on the wall that had warnings about it, but I didn't really understand. In the course, the instructors told us about the risk. They showed us how to put condoms on properly. They asked us about how we dealt with difficult customers, and we talked about it together.

The course trained the participants to be outreach workers. After the course was finished, each of us had to promise to bring friends to the health center for testing and counseling. We were each given a target. I have to bring in nine friends every month for testing and counseling. If I don't bring in nine people one month, then I have to bring an extra one the next month. I get paid Rp 300,000 per month, plus money for transport. I arrange a time for a group of girls to come to the clinic together. I rent a van to take them all in. The transport money that the clinic gives me is enough to cover the cost of the van. Some of the women would be too nervous to go to the clinic by themselves for the first time. They don't know where it is or how to get there.

The clinic is pushing me to start working as a counselor. That's a more responsible position than being an outreach worker. A lay counselor gets Rp 500,000 per month. I'm a bit nervous about it. Being a counselor means I have to talk to women who are HIV-positive. I have to talk to them about taking their medicine and give them advice. I think a woman who was HIV-positive herself would serve better as a counselor, because she'd know about the medicine and everything else. I know a bit, but not as much as someone who has experienced it herself.

Some of my friends did the same course, but they didn't keep up their commitment to bringing in other sex workers. They dropped out and stopped participating. Mostly, they stopped coming because they said that the women they knew either didn't want to come or that they had already come in by themselves. But if a girl sticks to it for a few months, she gets more confident. She gets better at talking to her friends. The ones who stick with it for a few months usually continue as outreach workers.

It's easier for me to meet the women and talk to them than for an outsider. Most of the women I bring in come from the brothels on Jalan Happy. I don't know the women who work on the streets so well. But if you got someone who worked on the streets to be an outreach worker, they would know the other girls there. Sex workers aren't hard to find.

Ninot

“I don’t care if people call me a whore. I don’t care if other women hate me for taking their husbands’ money. I’m only afraid that my daughters will find out what I do and be ashamed of me.”

I make more money working in a brothel than I can doing any other work. That’s why I do it. I do it to make money to look after my children. When my husband died, I thought about other types of work as well. I thought I could take in laundry. I could charge Rp 300,000 to do the laundry for one household. If I did the laundry for three households, that would add up to Rp 900,000 per month. That’s not such a bad income. But it’s not as much as I make as sex worker.

I don’t know exactly how much I make each month. Some months it’s more than others. It’s quiet this month, because it’s Ramadan. The police make the brothels shut down at midnight. In a normal month, we can stay open until dawn. But I still have regular clients. I managed to send Rp 750,000 to pay for my youngest girl’s kindergarten fees a couple of weeks ago, and I made a Rp 600,000 payment on my motorbike. I sent back another few hundred thousand rupiah to my mother for the household expenses. I’ve still got enough money to go home at Idul Fitri and take presents for my children. I send money for my daughters at least once a week.

I don’t chase any client who walks into the brothel the way some of the women do. If I don’t like the look of a guy, I don’t serve him. I pick a customer that I think is a nice guy, and generous. I treat him properly so that he comes back. Some girls are sweet to a guy while they’re talking to him outside. Then, as soon as he takes her into one of the rooms, she tells him to get it over with as quickly as possible. Some girls won’t even take their bras off. They just tell the guy, “That’s not the part you’re looking for. The part you want to use is lower down.” But if a man wants to take my bra off and touch my tits, I don’t charge him extra. I just tell him that if he’s good to me, I’ll be good to him. If a guy wants, I sit and talk to him afterwards. I leave it up to them how big a tip they leave.



I make more money by picking my clients carefully than by serving anyone who walks in. A couple of weeks ago, I needed money to make my motorbike payment. I called up one of my regulars. I told him I missed him. He came and gave me the money. Sometimes that guy comes by and gives me money without having sex. He just sits and talks. Last night, I had a new customer, a Chinese man. He was a good man, too. He only gave me Rp 50,000 last night. He said straight out that that was all he had, but he'd give me more next time if I was nice to him. Then he sat and talked with me. He asked me if I drank alcohol. I told him the truth, that I don't like alcohol. Then I lit a cigarette. He took it from me and put it out. He told me that nice women don't smoke. So I promised him I wouldn't smoke anymore. I'll just smoke when he isn't there. I'll put the cigarettes under the mattress when he comes. I asked him to bring me some gold earrings next time he came. He promised he would.

My mother doesn't know what I do. Neither do my daughters. No one in my town knows that I'm a sex worker except one or two friends whom I really trust. I tell everyone I work in a coffee stall. I'm not worried about what other people think about me. I don't care who knows what I do. I don't care if people call me a whore or whatever. I don't care if other women hate me for taking their husband's money. I'm only afraid that my daughters will find out what I do and be ashamed of me.

My older daughter is really clever. When my husband was still alive, she always came in first or second in her class. He was really strict about education. He was really good about sitting down with our daughters and helping them with their homework. Since my husband died, my oldest daughter hasn't been doing quite so well. My mother looks after her, but she doesn't check to see that she's doing her homework. Even so, my daughter is always in the top half of her class.

Ever since my daughter was young, she said she wanted to be a doctor when she grew up. It breaks my heart when she says that. I don't know if I'll be able to afford even to send her to high school, let alone medical school. I really, really hope so. I told her the last time I saw her that I didn't like leaving her with her grandmother, but I needed to go away to work. I told her that I was working so that she could go to school. I told her that I'd work hard to look after her now, but she had to promise to look after me when I'm old and can't work anymore. She just looked at me and nodded her head.

Sometimes I'm afraid she'll realize what I'm doing when she gets older. She notices what's going on around her. I had my nose pierced before I went home. I had a gold stud put in. When my daughter saw me, she looked at my nose stud and touched it. She told me that good women don't wear rings in their nose, they only wear them in their ears. She said that I was a good mom. She said she didn't like my nose stud because it might make people think I'm a bad woman.

If one day she finds out what I did to send her to school, I hope she isn't ashamed of me. I hope she understands why I did this kind of work. I don't care what anyone thinks about me except my daughters.

Ana

“I’ve been working in Jalan Happy for almost ten years. I’d like to do something else. I’d like to set up my own business.”

I got pregnant when I was fifteen. My sister was heavily in debt to a Chinese man. She gave me to him to pay off her debt. That was how I lost my virginity. My sister let him use me for a week. I stayed in a hotel room with him for a week. That was how I got pregnant. After that, I started working in a brothel.

I haven’t seen the child since he was born. I gave him away to a married couple who didn’t have children. I know where my child lives, but his new parents don’t want me to come anywhere near. They don’t want the child to know about me.

I’ve been working in Jalan Happy for almost ten years. I’d like to do something else. I’d like to set up my own business. I don’t have any savings. I did save up to buy some land. It wasn’t much, just five *are*. I sold it to pay for the funeral when my father died.

I don’t know how I’m going to get the money to set up a business. Perhaps I’ll meet a rich man and he’ll marry me. Perhaps he’ll give me money to set up a business of my own.



Sri

It's Ramadan at the moment, so business is quiet. I had one customer last night. The night before that I had two. In a normal month, I usually get three or four, or maybe more on a Saturday night. After I've paid the brothel Rp 10,000 for the room, I get to keep Rp 40,000 for each client I service. We don't have to pay for the room we sleep in, but we have to buy our own food.

All the clients use condoms. We make them wear condoms. Sometimes they don't like it. They get offended. They think we're being snotty. The other night, a man got angry. He said he wasn't sick, so why was I trying to make him wear a condom. He said I was the one who was having sex with hundreds of men every night, so I was the one who was likely to be sick, not him.

I knew what kind of work I was going to be doing when I got here. I talked about it with a friend of mine. I'm from Tegal, Central Java. She's from a village near Indramayu. She introduced me to the boss here. All the other girls are from the same village. Before I came to Kalimantan, I worked in Jakarta, making clothes. I got paid according to how much I produced. If I worked fast, I could do quite well. I could make one or two million rupes a month. I think that's more than I make now. I'd rather do that kind of work than sex work. The factory I worked in closed, and I couldn't find another job.

I'm sick of working in Jalan Happy. I don't make that much money. Sometimes I only get one guest in an evening. Sometimes a few days go by without a client. I'd like to set up some kind of business. I'd like to set up a business selling cakes. I've already done a skills training course. It was good, but the government only offers three types of courses. You can study sewing, cooking, or hairdressing. I'd like to learn business skills. I'd like to learn how to keep books and records of expenditures. I'd also be more interested in doing one of the Education Department's "Packet B" home-study programs to get a junior high school equivalency certificate. I'd like to do a course like that in a class with other sex workers, so we could support and help each other.

Most of all, to run a business I'd need some capital. I don't have any savings. I don't have a bank account. I've heard of credit cooperatives and savings groups, but I don't think they would work here. It would be hard to get a group of women who could trust each other. You'd need to have someone you could trust to look after the money. When we tried to set up an *arisan*, a revolving savings scheme, in Jalan Happy, it didn't work well. It fell apart because after women received the funds from the group, they didn't keep contributing.

"I don't make that much money. Sometimes I only get one guest in an evening. Sometimes a few days go by without a client. I'd like to set up a business selling cakes."



Nur Hayati

I am really sick of this line of work. It's boring. It's dangerous. I don't make enough money doing it. The guys are supposed to pay Rp 50,000. A lot of times, they try to bargain. They offer Rp 30,000 or Rp 40,000. They don't like to wear condoms. I try to make them, but sometimes they refuse. Sometimes, instead of getting the men to wear condoms, I just take antibiotics to stop myself getting sick. I know that antibiotics don't prevent infection from AIDS. But they work for the other infectious diseases. If you take antibiotics regularly, you don't get sick.

I first came to Jalan Happy in 2001. I ran away from my husband. I told him I was going to get a job in Malaysia as a domestic worker. Instead, I came to Jalan Happy and started working here. My husband found out almost straight away. He tracked me down in my brothel. He said that a *dukun* told him that I was working as a sex worker here.

My husband was a bastard. He used to hit me. He liked hurting women. In front of other people he was sweet and polite, but he had a demon inside him. When he found me in Jalan Happy, he tied me to a tree and gagged me. He whipped me and threatened to stick a piece of wood up my vagina. He burned my thighs with cigarettes. He didn't make me leave the brothel. He came around every night at closing time and took the money I'd made that day. He kept on beating me and hurting me.

In the end, it got so bad that a policeman at the guard post in the market near Jalan Happy came to talk to me. He said I should report my husband to the police. In 2002, my husband was arrested. He was taken to court and sentenced to four months in prison. He was evil. I never want to see him again.

I've done various vocational skills programs while I've been working at Jalan Happy. I did a hair-styling and beauty skills course in 2004. I did a cake-making course in 2005. I don't have any natural talent with hair-styling. I was better at making cakes. In 2006, I left Jalan Happy to try to set up a business selling cakes in my home town. I started with a capital of several hundred thousand rupiah. I just saved the money and kept it in my cupboard. I didn't have a savings account.

The business failed. There weren't enough customers. Maybe I shouldn't have tried to do business in my home town. It's too small. Maybe I should try again in Pontianak. Maybe I would do better in a big town. When I save up the money, I'll try and set up another business.

I'm back in Jalan Happy. I'm not really serving guests. I don't often go into a room with them, I just sit with them while they drink. The boss is good. She lets me stay in a room without paying anything. I'm making some money by selling roast peanuts. I cook them behind the brothel. I also make some money making decorations out of recycled playing cards. I mostly sell them to the other girls in the brothels here.

I've got a boyfriend. He's a policeman. He already has a wife, but he might marry me as his second wife. He's a good man. He doesn't take my money from me. He gives me money sometimes, when he can afford it. He doesn't like me serving guests.

What do I want now? First, I want a place to live. I don't want to stay at Jalan Happy anymore. I want to get married. Then I want to set up my own business.

“My husband was a bastard. When he found me in Jalan Happy, he tied me to a tree and gagged me. He didn't make me leave the brothel. He came around every night at closing time and took the money I'd made that day.”



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This book was sponsored by the PNPM Mandiri program. The goal of PNPM Mandiri, Indonesia's National Program for Community Empowerment, is to reduce poverty. PNPM Mandiri was established by the Indonesian government in 2007 to act as an umbrella for a number of pre-existing community-driven development programs, including the Urban Poverty Program and the Kecamatan Development Program, as well as a number of other community-based programs that were managed by nineteen technical ministries. By 2009, PNPM Mandiri was operating in every subdistrict in Indonesia.

PNPM Mandiri is committed to increasing the participation of all community members in the development process, including the poor, women's groups, indigenous communities, and other groups that have not been fully involved in the development process. *Invisible People* is one way that PNPM Mandiri can reflect on ways to better include marginalized and excluded groups in development.

Bilateral and multilateral assistance for the PNPM Mandiri program has been forthcoming from a number of donor agencies. The PNPM Support Facility (PSF) was established by the Indonesian government as a means of facilitating the contributions of international donors that support PNPM Mandiri. Contributors to the PSF currently include Australia, Denmark, the European Community, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. PSF provided financial and other support for the publication of *Invisible People*, in order to raise awareness of the special needs and aspirations of marginalized and excluded groups.

We would like to thank the people who sat down to tell their stories and put their lives on public display for the publication of this book. Across the country, the people who were approached were amazingly open about the most personal details of their lives, their problems, their hopes, and their aspirations.

When they collected these stories, Irfan Kortschak and Poriaman Sitanggang explained the purpose of the project and sought the consent of all subjects. The subjects told their stories, often over several days and during several meetings, after which Irfan attempted to recreate their words in a first-person account that conveyed the individual's ideas, feelings, and voice. In a few cases, subjects wrote their own stories in their own words, which were then edited with the subject and translated. When possible, Irfan provided a written account to the subject so that he or she could check and reconfirm that the account was an accurate representation. Otherwise, he discussed it with them. Subjects were reminded that their accounts would be published and asked to be certain that they had no objection to this. Irfan apologizes if despite this process, inaccuracies or misrepresentations have slipped into the text.

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