Long-Distance Parenting and Family Resilience Strategies of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Taiwan

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Abstract

This study examines the resilience of Indonesian Migrant Worker (PMI) families in Taiwan and the strategies they apply in long-distance parenting. Using Henry's family resilience model, it analyzes family risks, vulnerabilities, protection, adaptation, and socio-ecological factors. Data were collected through interviews with 25 PMIs in Taiwan, 25 left-behind children and 25 caregivers in Indonesia. The findings show that migration-related family risks are rooted in structural poverty, gendered labor regimes, and marital disruption, while vulnerability is shaped by low educational attainment, weak communication, and limited caregiving capacity. Religion emerges as a crucial protective resource in transnational family life. Beyond emotional coping, religious values provide moral guidance, sustain parental authority, shape caregiving practices, and support meaning-making across distance through practices such as religious instruction, pesantren-based care, and faith-informed role modeling. Family adaptation depends not only on individual agency but also on socio-ecological support, including faith-based organizations and migrant networks. The study extends family resilience theory by demonstrating how religion strengthens resilience processes in transnational families and highlights the importance of culturally grounded interventions for migrant family welfare

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is among the top 15 countries with the highest number of migrant workers. The World Population Review (2023) reports around 4.6 million Indonesians work abroad, excluding undocumented migrants. The World Bank (2017) estimates this number could reach 9 million. Migrant workers significantly contribute to Indonesia's development. The Indonesian Ministry of Migrant Worker Protection (BPM2I, 2022) states most PMIs work in Malaysia (31.22%), Hong Kong (27.45%), and Taiwan (21.6%). Of the 297,434 PMIs deployed between January and December 2024, 63% left their families behind. According to KPAI (2016), at least 11.2 million children have one or both parents working abroad.

Parental migration has direct and indirect impacts, especially on children. This has led to a new family model called transnational families, where members are geographically separated yet maintain emotional and material connections (Bryceson, 2019). Prior studies focus on how these families preserve kinship ties despite physical separation (Shih, 2016).

PMIs, particularly women, face dilemmas as they leave their own families to care for others abroad. Living with employers and enduring long working hours, they find it hard to stay emotionally connected to their families (Laltoog, 2024). Studies (Susilowati et al., 2017; Simoni & Voirol, 2020; Höckel & Stohr, 2018) show migration does not always alleviate poverty due to mismanaged remittances. While remittances support nutrition and healthcare, they cannot replace maternal presence. Migration is associated with poor academic performance (Ayumi, 2015; Malamassam, 2014), unhealthy diets (Rizky et al., 2017),

substance abuse (Sukamdi & Wattie, 2013), delinquency (Antia, 2020; Umami & Turnip, 2019), and abuse (Yue et al., 2020). Given these negative outcomes, the key question is: how resilient are these families?

Family resilience goes beyond survival; it involves transformation, growth, and strengthened relationships amid adversity (Walsh, 2016). Psychologically, it refers to competence-based, strength-oriented responses enabling families to adapt and restore function in the face of crises. This study investigates how Indonesian migrant families in Taiwan develop resilience. Taiwan, the second most common PMI destination, hosts 273,178 Indonesian workers—67% of whom are women, mostly in industrial and caregiving sectors. This research examines both maternal and paternal migration and explores how families sustain long-distance parenting and build resilience under difficult circumstances.

According to Walsh (2016), family resilience involves three key stages: a multilayered process, environmental influences, and the ability to adapt. The multilayered process refers to dynamic, reciprocal interactions within the family system, where changes in one area affect others, and members support resilience through their relationships. This highlights resilience as a collective, relational process, not just an individual trait. Environmental factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural values, and community support also shape how families respond to adversity.

Furthermore, Henry et al. (2015) explain that family resilience emerges when the challenges and difficulties faced by a family interact with the family's protective factors and vulnerabilities, leading to both short-term and long-term adaptive capacities. To activate these protective factors and vulnerabilities, a family must go through four fundamental stages of family resilience: 1) The presence of a problem or challenge that the family must confront; 2) The emergence of family protection through support from family members, which helps the family restore balance between demands and capabilities after experiencing risks and serves as a safeguard against similar risks in the future; 3) Family vulnerability, which increases the likelihood of encountering significant challenges or accumulating risks; 4) Rapid adjustment and long-term adaptation, ensuring that the family can respond effectively and sustain resilience over time. The details of this process can be seen in Figure 1.
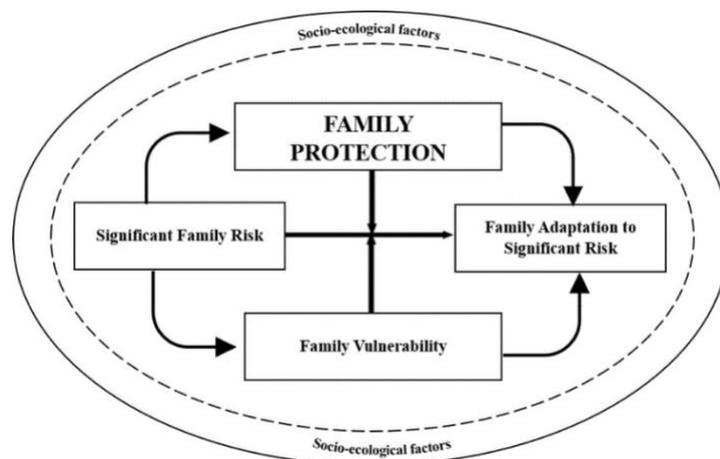

Figure 1. Family Protection Process (Henry et al., 2015)

METHODS
Design
This study adopted a qualitative design to explore the experiences of migrant parents (PMIs), left-behind children, and their caregivers. Data were generated through a combination of in-depth interviews and long-term participant observation to capture both retrospective

accounts and naturally occurring interactions across settings. Interviews were conducted in stages between 2023 and 2024 to allow iterative exploration of emerging themes, while observational data collected between 2017 and 2024 provided longitudinal contextual insight into family routines, communication practices, and coping processes across transnational family arrangements.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with direct experience of transnational family separation. A total of 25 PMIs were interviewed (60% women, 40% men), residing across multiple regions in Taiwan, including Taipei, New Taipei City, Yangmei, Taoyuan, Dayuan, Changhua, Taichung, and Chiayi. Length of stay ranged from 3 to 13 years. Most participants were married (57%), while 33% were single parents. Participants had between one and four children living in Indonesia under the care of spouses, siblings, or maternal grandmothers. Educational attainment varied, with most completing junior or senior high school. Male participants were primarily employed in industrial sectors, whereas female participants commonly worked as elderly caregivers or in nursing homes.

A total of 25 left-behind children participated (8 boys, 13 girls; aged 7–20 years), with an average parental separation duration of 8.7 years. In most cases, the mother had migrated overseas, while in one case both parents were working abroad. Migration destinations included Taiwan (52%), Malaysia (15%), Saudi Arabia (12%), Hong Kong (9%), Singapore (8%), and Qatar (4%). Most children experienced parental separation at an early age (approximately 2–7 years).

Caregivers were predominantly maternal grandmothers (48%), followed by siblings (24%), fathers (12%), paternal grandmothers (8%), aunts (4%), and older siblings acting as primary caregivers (4%). Caregiving duration ranged from 4 to 15 years. Most caregivers had completed elementary or junior high school, and some had limited literacy. Caregiving roles ranged from meeting daily basic needs to supporting children's schooling and discipline.

Data Collection

This study was approved by Indonesia's National Research and Innovation Agency (No. 566/KE.01/SK/08/2023). Structured interviews using open-ended questions were initially conducted to obtain broad contextual insights. These were followed by unstructured interviews that enabled participants to elaborate on salient issues and lived experiences. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized using participant codes: OT (parents), AN (children), and PA (caregivers).

Participant observation was conducted to complement interview data by systematically documenting behaviours and interactions within natural settings. Observations were undertaken during PMI community activities in Taiwan, including parenting seminars and empowerment workshops, and during community and family gatherings involving left-behind families in Indramayu, Indonesia. Field notes focused on everyday routines, communication patterns, caregiving dynamics, and adaptive coping practices.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and field notes were analysed using thematic analysis. Coding was conducted iteratively, moving between inductive identification of patterns within the data and refinement of themes across participant groups. Analytical attention focused on identifying shared experiences, contextual influences, and variations in caregiving arrangements, family communication, and adaptation to long-term separation. Findings were interpreted through constant comparison across data sources (interviews and observations) to strengthen analytic depth and contextual interpretation.

RESULTS

The Long-Distance Parenting and Family Resilience Model Among Indonesian Migrant Workers in Taiwan can be described in Figure 2.
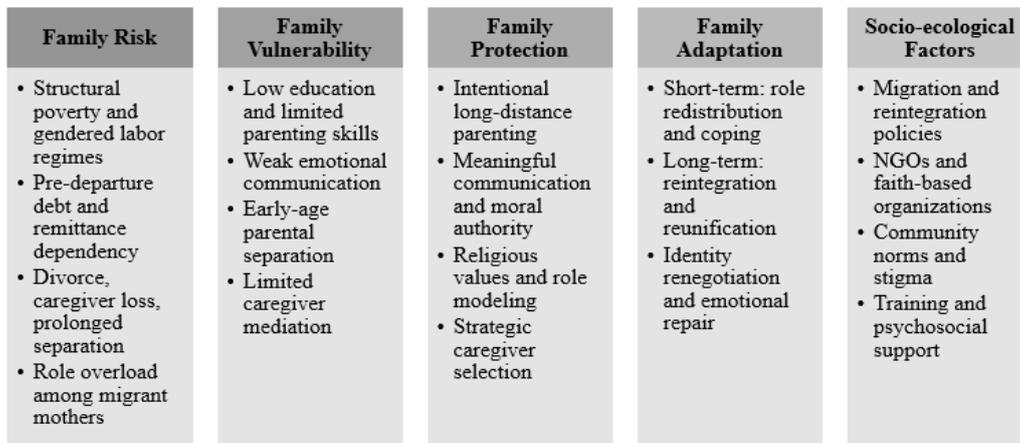
Family Risk	Family Vulnerability	Family Protection	Family Adaptation	Socio-ecological Factors
• Structural poverty and gendered labor regimes • Pre-departure debt and remittance dependency • Divorce, caregiver loss, prolonged separation • Role overload among migrant mothers	• Low education and limited parenting skills • Weak emotional communication • Early-age parental separation • Limited caregiver mediation	• Intentional long-distance parenting • Meaningful communication and moral authority • Religious values and role modeling • Strategic caregiver selection	• Short-term: role redistribution and coping • Long-term: reintegration and reunification • Identity renegotiation and emotional repair	• Migration and reintegration policies • NGOs and faith-based organizations • Community norms and stigma • Training and psychosocial support

Figure 2. Model of Long-Distance Parenting and Family Resilience Among Indonesian Migrant Workers in Taiwan

Family Risk

Migration is often viewed as economic solution yet frequently fails. Pre-departure debt, weak financial management, and consumerism hinder improvement (Gusman, 2023). Respondent OT-25 stated:

"My husband is a religious teacher, but his salary is not enough to support our two children. That's why I decided to become a PMI. After completing two work contracts, we were able to build a rental house. But somehow, the house remains vacant. Eventually, my employer bought my husband a pickup truck so he could work transporting goods or agricultural products. The condition was that I had to extend my contract. Now I am in my third contract, with only one year left. I don't know whether I will extend it for another two years or go home. But if I return home, I don't know what kind of job I could do. Even though my husband works in transporting goods, our living expenses have been supported by my remittances every month. If we rely only on his earnings from transporting goods, it is not enough" (OT-25, Taipei, 47 years old).

The story of OT-25 reflects a common pattern among PMIs trapped in repeated migration due to unresolved economic problems. Although caregivers report that remittances usually cover daily needs, many PMIs face heavy debt during their first two years because 80–90% of wages are deducted, leaving families in Indonesia indebted. Remittances are also used for assets and extended family expenses.

Another challenge is role shifts when mothers migrate, assuming simultaneous roles as breadwinners, mothers, and wives. Migrant parents struggle to provide guidance and affection, miss important moments, religious celebrations, and birthdays, weakening bonds with their children.

"I feel lonely when my mother works abroad and envy friends with present mothers. No one attends school meetings for me. My aunt once replaced her, caring for me

and guiding my studies. After she passed away, I now care for my younger siblings and have taken on a mother's role" (AN-15, Indramayu, 20 years old)

Weakened bonding affects children and spouses alike. Physical separation creates emotional distance, misunderstandings, and marital conflict, sometimes leading to infidelity or divorce. Long-term separation increases risks of emotional and psychological distress, developmental problems in children, and social or cultural vulnerability, including discrimination toward migrant workers' families.

Family Vulnerability

In migrant families, static factors such as low education, poverty, and health problems and dynamic processes like communication and coping strategies dominate. Low educational attainment among PMIs and caregivers hinders caregiving quality, conflict resolution, and family emotional dynamics.

Communication between migrant parents and their children is often inconsistent and unengaging. While 32% of PMI respondents reported daily contact, others called less frequently due to restrictive work schedules or children's limited availability particularly those in Islamic boarding schools. Female PMIs, in particular, face long work hours (18–20 hours/day), often leaving them too fatigued for meaningful interaction. Male PMIs generally have more flexibility but face similar engagement challenges. These communication issues make it difficult not just to nurture their children, but also to supervise their Islamic practices.

Children often show indifference during calls with migrant parents; only 24% respond enthusiastically, while most find conversations repetitive and emotionally distant, and some refuse contact. Many PMIs struggle to build closeness and initiate meaningful dialogue. Children separated at age seven or older tend to be more understanding and responsive.

"My mother left for Taiwan when I was two, and I have lived with my grandmother ever since. I am close to her, not to my mother. We often argue, whether she is abroad or home. I told her to stay in Taiwan and just send money, because I am happy living only with my grandmother." (AN-6, Indramayu, 15 years old)

AN-6 reported no emotional bond with her mother, who left when she was very young, viewing her grandmother as her real parent, which often caused conflict. In contrast, AN-12 understood her mother's migration at age seven, maintained communication, and preserved their relationship through phone and video calls.

Caregivers, especially non-spouses, often play limited communication roles, avoiding family conflicts and deferring discipline to parents. Their focus is mainly on children's basic needs, while emotional and developmental support is neglected. Caregiver selection is rarely prioritized, as families seek availability rather than qualifications, weakening support systems for migrant families.

Family Protection

Most PMI families in Taiwan lack strong family protection systems. They struggle to understand their challenges, recognize strengths, and develop effective strategies for present and future problems. Unresolved issues become latent risks with serious consequences for families and communities, contributing to bullying, social stigma, and ongoing psychosocial vulnerability among migrant families.

OT-17 carefully selected her younger sibling as caregiver before migrating to Taiwan, believing them more capable than her parents or ex-husband, though both still assisted. Having

previously supported her sibling's education, she ensured reliable care. Her children grew into high achievers and maintained strong communication with her.

> *"I entrusted my children to my younger sister, not my parents or ex-husband, because she is a teacher and her husband an ustadz. I believed they would educate my children well. Alhamdulillah, both daughters finished high school and entered local universities, which makes me deeply grateful and happy." (OT-17, 41 years old, Yunlin)*

The stories of OT-1 and OT-17 highlight that long-distance parenting is a process that requires careful preparation before departure, during migration, and upon returning home. A strong support system is essential, as it serves as a valuable resource in building family resilience.

Family Adaptation

Short-term adaptation begins when parents migrate, involving changes in roles, communication, and parenting, yet PMIs rarely prepare adequate strategies. This weak preparation affects long-term adaptation upon return. Lacking job plans, market knowledge, and networks, many fail in business attempts and eventually remigrate, repeating the cycle of labor migration.

> *"My mother has been working abroad for 19 years. She first worked in Saudi Arabia when I was a child, and now she is in Hong Kong. At first, I was taken care of by my aunt, but now my younger siblings are entrusted to me." (AN-15, Indramayu, 20 years old)*

Psychological problems from parental absence complicate family reunification. Parents feel like strangers, children struggle to readjust, and weak bonding and poor communication create emotional distance, especially after early separation. Reunification requires emotional support, patience, and sometimes counseling, yet most migrant families undertake no preventive preparation, increasing the risk of prolonged adjustment difficulties and fragile family relationships.

Socio-ecological Factors

Socio-ecological support is vital for family resilience. Families rely on governments, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), faith-based organizations, and communities. Indonesia's Productive Migrant Town (Desmigratif) program underdevelops community parenting, offering mainly material aid with limited training. In contrast, Taiwan, with NGOs and NCCU–UNIMIG, provides long-distance parenting training to strengthen migrant family resilience. OT-2 shared their thoughts on this initiative:

> *"In my eight years in Taiwan, this is the first time I have attended training on how to properly care for children from a distance. If only this kind of training had existed earlier, my relationship with my children could have been much better. While working abroad, my mind is never at ease—I constantly worry about the children I left behind. My husband is taking care of them, but it feels so difficult to communicate with him." (OT-2, Chiayi, 38 years old)*

Inadequate and poorly coordinated external support limits PMIs' access to resources needed for family resilience. Supportive communities and cultural or religious institutions

provide emotional and practical assistance, including childcare, education, and healthcare. Socio-ecological factors are vital in transnational parenting, and integrated systems are essential to strengthen cohesion, child development, and migrant parents' caregiving roles across distance.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings demonstrate that migration family separation in the case of PMIs simultaneously generates structural risks, relational disruptions, and adaptive possibilities, producing uneven resilience trajectories across migrant households. At the core lies interaction between chronic family risks and life-course disruptions. Following Henry et al. (2015), PMIs face vertical and horizontal stressors rooted in inequality, limited jobs, gendered labor, and remittance dependence. Prolonged migration entrenches reliance through debt and deductions, critiques remittances stabilize consumption without transformation (UNDESA, 2024).

Horizontal risks arise from disruptive events such as divorce, caregiver loss, remarriage, and prolonged parental absence during critical developmental periods. Narratives of left-behind children show destabilized emotional security and premature adult responsibilities. Migration reshapes family roles and caregiving structures, echoing findings that early separation weakens attachment and heightens insecurity (Merry et al., 2023).

Family outcomes vary widely despite similar risks, highlighting vulnerability as a mediating process. According to Henry et al. (2015), vulnerability reflects differential capacity to manage stress based on resources and relational processes. Many PMI families face low education, weak communication, limited parenting knowledge, and poor caregiving plans, turning migration into resentment and emotional disengagement.

Children's reactions to long-distance communication reveal vulnerability processes. Many view calls as repetitive and emotionally shallow, especially when separated young, reflecting weak pre-migration bonds. Older children show greater understanding of migration motives. Limited caregiver involvement in emotional mediation further increases vulnerability, as care focuses mainly on physical needs rather than affective or disciplinary support.

Despite widespread vulnerability, some families develop protection mechanisms. Within Henry et al.'s framework, family protection involves resources and processes buffering risk and supporting recovery. A small number practice intentional long-distance parenting through meaningful communication, moral guidance, strategic caregiver selection, and institutional care such as pesantren to strengthen structure, discipline, and religious socialization.

Some migrant parents redefine distant parenting as moral leadership and role modeling rather than financial provision. Through education, skill development, and framing migration as temporary sacrifice, they maintain symbolic authority and emotional relevance. This aligns with Walsh's (2016) emphasis on belief systems and role clarity, with religion sustaining parental legitimacy across geographic separation.

Family adaptation reflects the temporal dimension of resilience, covering short-term coping during separation and long-term adjustment during reunification. PMI families often migrate with little planning, leading to reactive adaptations such as role redistribution, altered communication, and substitute caregiving. Without reintegration strategies, reunification frequently brings significant relational and practical difficulties.

Returned migrant parents often experience alienation, identity confusion, and reduced authority in families adapted to their absence. Children bonded with alternative caregivers may resist control or view parents as outsiders. Adaptation is cumulative and non-linear, shaped by past relations. Failed reintegration drives renewed migration, reinforcing *"permanent temporariness"* in family life (Birger, 2024).

Beyond households, socio-ecological factors shape resilience within institutional, cultural, and policy contexts (Henry et al., 2015). Although Indonesia and Taiwan provide

migrant support, systems remain fragmented and neglect emotional needs. Desmigratif prioritizes economics over caregiver training and psychosocial support. NGO-led programs in Taiwan improve communication and emotional confidence, supporting Ungar's (2011) view that resilience depends on resource access. These findings extend Henry et al.'s model to transnational migration, showing resilience as negotiated across distance, time, and institutions, requiring systemic recognition of long-distance parenting.

CONCLUSION

Family resilience depends on managing risks, vulnerabilities, and protective factors shaping short- and long-term adaptation. Indonesian migrant families face economic pressure, communication barriers, parental absence, and marital strain. Low education among parents and caregivers increases vulnerability, limiting opportunities and caregiving quality, while weak long-distance communication undermines bonding and wellbeing. Compounded risks hinder effective family protection, as many families struggle to preserve emotional ties, cultural identity, flexible roles, and external support. Although support systems exist, structural barriers, stigma, limited legal awareness, and fragmented coordination among agencies, NGOs, and community organizations reduce their effectiveness in strengthening migrant family resilience. Further research is needed to identify support types that effectively strengthen migrant family resilience and long-distance parenting. As global demand for migrant labor continues, resilience becomes essential. Migration should not only meet economic goals but also protect family well-being and generate positive outcomes for both sending and receiving societies.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

MI contributed to research design, data analysis, writing, editing, and proofreading. YG contributed to research design, data collection, data processing, analysis, and writing. Both authors made substantial contributions across all stages of the study.

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