

Re-imagining freedom as elderly female porters: A study of *buruh gendong* at Beringharjo traditional market of Yogyakarta

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ABSTRACT

This paper expects to reveal the struggle of elderly female porters or *buruh gendong* who mostly had a historical background of working in industrial production (factory) but ended up being self-employed at Beringharjo traditional market of Yogyakarta. They used to work as factory workers. However, most factories collapsed in the aftermath of the 1997 economic crisis, especially in Southeast Asia. These older people from peri-urban (and rural) areas with lower-class status ended up in urban areas to be self-employed and became precarious workers. Therefore, the research questions are how they cope with the income uncertainties only to meet their daily needs and still desire their children to have a better living condition. Observations and interviews were done with 25 elderly female traditional porters as the research methods from 2020. They are primarily in the age range of late 50-80 years old. The results show that income uncertainties and social insecurity bring about precariousness. *Buruh gendong* have to work every day only to make ends meet. However, these conditions could also open up alternative perspectives that they often found themselves liberated from the control of industrial production. They do not work for capital owners or bosses; they work for themselves (self-employed). They are free or more flexible on working hours, but, at the same time, they have to accept their insecure employment. *Buruh gendong* also have desires for their children to be able to achieve a higher education level. Eventually, the desires are mostly unfulfilled; their children get unfortunate work and still live barely.

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Introduction

In general, ageing is associated with physical decline and illness (Cruikshank, 2013, p. 35). The elderly is not considered economically productive or valuable and are often put into nursing homes (Cruikshank, 2013, p. 161). These attitudes about the bodily decline and elderly productivity reflect Western cultural "individualism" (Cruikshank, 2013, p. 11). Studies have shown that the elderly in nursing homes suffer more from psychological conditions than medical conditions (Power, 2010, p. 14). In contrast, the Orientalist perspective emphasizes the importance of solidarity amongst the family members (Said, 2003, pp. 48, 230). So, both parents and children live under the same roof as their children and take care of each other. Older adults get emotional support through family networks (Kreager & Schröder-Butterfill, 2007, p. 1).

At around 13% (older adults aged 60+), Yogyakarta would be one of the provinces in Java, reaching the most populous ageing society in Indonesia (UNFPA, 2014, pp. 28, 30). It would be interesting to see that the older people of Indonesia and countries in Southeast Asia commonly show that they have been supported and taken care of by their relatives, especially their children (Kreager & Schröder-Butterfill, 2007, p. 11). It provides such emotional necessities for older people. The elderly tends to feel oppressed if they are going to be put by their relatives in a nursing home (Cruikshank, 2013, p. 12). Other research has also shown that multigenerational families living in "one the same roof" is the ideal form of Chinese parents (Zeng, 2018, p. 1). However, this state of affairs does not work with the older people living barely or having economic hardship as low-income workers.

Research result concerning the elderly and their adult children who live together through economic burden have shown the

struggle of adult children economically to look after their parents (Nortey, et al, 2017). The old parents also have difficult times caring for the household members (Han, 2012). Maintaining intergenerational reciprocity among its members is quite challenging for people of low-class status. That makes the elders decide to take employment so that they can make their earnings.

In the aftermath of 1997, the economic crisis happened, especially in Southeast Asia (Ahn, 2000). The government generally provided such social protection as pensions for the elderly, but only for people working in the formal sector (Cook & Pincus, 2014, p. 6). Meanwhile, neoliberal principles are going along with the formalization of the economy (Gago, 2017, p. 7). So, the elderly who live barely as low-income workers expecting retirement benefits are beyond their reach since they work in the informal sector. Their adult children are not able to help the elder because they are in economic distress as well. This complicated phenomenon also happens to the poor older women working as *buruh gendong* or traditional female porter at Beringharjo traditional market of Yogyakarta. Therefore, our research questions are how they cope with the income uncertainties only to meet their daily needs and still desire their children to have a better living condition.

This state of affairs shows that *buruh gendong* is precarious labor. The term "precarious" means that the majority of working people do not have secure employment or steady income, especially people who are considered to be marginalized, poor (lower-class status), and disadvantaged ones facing economic uncertainty and necessary migration (Kasmir, 2018, p. 2). Most of the *buruh gendong* have the experience of working in industrial production or as factory workers. However, after the 1997 economic crisis, they worked in the informal sector with precarious conditions. Although working as

a female porter is not similar to working in factories, and they have to work every day to meet their basic needs, they tend to enjoy their work as *buruh gendong*.

By using a term of “paradoxes of freedom” from (Sopranzetti, 2018, p. 130), it is clear that in a neoliberal period, elderly female traditional porters are experiencing deregulation and flexibilization of labor, meaning that they often see themselves liberated from the control of industrial production, while also taking them into precariousness. “Freedom”, according to (Sopranzetti, 2018, p. 129), is a liberation from the orders of their previous pressure of industrial employment, which makes them now self-employed. They do not work for capital owners or bosses; they work for themselves. It seems they are free or more flexible on working hours, but, at the same time, they have to accept their insecure employment with no social security at all. So, they have to work every day (no day-off). It is an urgent problem since *buruh gendong* presumably represents the informal sector and precarious works, and it is an important case in the era of post-Fordism in Indonesia.

Buruh gendong are from rural areas of Kulonprogo and Bantul regencies. The relations between rural (peri-urban) and urban areas, in Erik Harms sense, are “productive binaries”, meaning that there are oppositions between country and city or inside and outside the city tend to create spatial inequality and differences (Harms, 2011, p. 221). Rural migrants had come to think of better access to such resources as health care, education, and commodities to make a good quality of life in the city (Harms, 2011, p. 2; Sopranzetti, 2012, p. 369). Country or rural area is not always related to the concept of marginality, but something that Harms said as “social edginess” -- people in the country tend to feel “edginess”, meaning that their position is on the “outside of the networks of power and opportunity associated with the

economic development” (Harms, 2011, p. 2). The elderly female porters coming from the country sides migrate to Yogyakarta City to expect a better economic life.

Method

The qualitative approach was carried out for ethnographic research. This ethnography research was used to see the people’s lives in an everyday context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3). Observations and several interviews as our tools for collecting data were done with 25 traditional elderly female porters called *endong-endong* (Javanese term for women porters or *buruh gendong*) as our methods from the beginning of 2020. Even though there are also male porters called *manol* (Javanese term for male porter laborers), the researchers decided to focus on the female ones since they presumably have tendencies of marginalization over the male because the male porters have stamina twice more compared to them (Melianingsih, et al, 2008, p. 43) that they could potentially take over female livelihoods.

The researchers made both structured and unstructured interviews, which means that the first was used to answer the main research questions. So, the researchers made a list of questions to keep them on the right track about what answers to look for according to research questions. At the same time, the latter one was used to open up the possibilities of the collected data that can support the arguments according to our research design that has been built from the start (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3).

Ethnography is also considered as a method that participatory observations become prominent as a methodological approach. Nevertheless, in this case, the researchers decided to collaborate this participatory observation by dividing it into two categories, namely, *participant-as-observer* and *observer-as-participant*

(Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 82). It was realized that the researchers were not ‘complete participants’ in every activity the researchers observed and participated in. Therefore, this critical method clarifies the positionality between ‘internal’ as the people and ‘external’ as the researchers. For instance, when *buruh gendong* were doing their work, the researchers did not participate in their works but only observed what they were working on. However, when they have other occupations, such as sorting plastic bottles, the researchers can participate in their business with their permission.

In the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in the early February to the end of May 2021, it was pretty challenging to research with *buruh gendong*, so the researchers decided to manage time periodically when precisely the researchers were able to do fieldwork. Field research considerations were also tied to “stay at home” policies enacted by the local government; when the local government had already enacted such policies, the researchers could not move around freely. *Buruh gendong* were also not used to bringing or having any communication devices, such as cellphones, so the researchers had to go to the Beringharjo market to meet and make conversations with them.

However, interestingly, there is no day-off for *buruh gendong* since they have to meet their daily needs every day so that the researchers still can maintain the relationship. They usually arrive at Beringharjo traditional market in the early morning at around 3 - 4 a.m. They start to work from 4 a.m. – 3 p.m. Then, they will leave in the evening for their home located in peri-urban (rural) areas, such as Kulonprogo and Bantul regencies. If they cannot meet their daily needs, they often end up staying near the traditional market and sleeping in front of the parking lot or small stores so that they can work the following morning again. Our results are presented in descriptive texts

to illustrate their everyday lives as elderly female porters and their intentions and projections toward their children to have better living conditions.

After collecting the data, the researchers moved to the section of analyzing the collected data. According to (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 158), the process of analysis is “in which theory is developed out of data analysis, and subsequent data collection is guided strategically by emergent theory”. It means that our collected data is being abstracted and going beyond the data itself to develop ideas that can illuminate them. However, before analyzing the data, the researchers categorized the data based on the topics. Then, after categorizing the topics, researchers ordered the data according to chronological history to see the subjects’ historical experiences (*buruh gendong*). After that, the researchers looked for the proper theory that fits research subjects by taking the meaning of “freedom” according to them. The way of anthropological research theorizing or analyzing the data is based on empirical evidence. Therefore, ethnography remains at this descriptive level. Then, the researchers developed descriptions by narrowing the focus and processing the abstraction to make sense of the social phenomenon.

Results and Discussion

The making of buruh gendong, the precarious workers: The root of neoliberalism in Indonesia

Indonesia has a long history of making free-trade policies during the colonial period. The making of free-trade policies is forced by the idea of economic liberalism, which means a doctrine that economic activities in every part of the world are just similar (H. A. Kadir, 2017). Therefore, there is a homogenization process of the global networks in the political and economic

setting (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 44). Through economic liberalism, Indonesia has been influenced by the colonial empire regarding economic liberalization through free-trade policies. J. S. Furnivall, in his book, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (1948), examines the process of economic liberalization within two separate countries located in Southeast Asia, namely Burma (Myanmar) Indonesia. In Indonesia, which the researchers focus on, the Dutch-colonial government first imposed the process (Furnivall, 1948, p. 225). Historically, at the beginning of the 1830s, Javanese people were forced to grow such cash crops as coffee and sugar (cane) under the *Cultuurstelsel* (meaning “cultivation system” in Dutch). These two commodities became significant export crops of Dutch colonial (Wolf, 2010, p. 334). The imperial ruins of sugar factories (mills) can still now be seen in Central Java as historical evidence of the “petrified life” of Javanese people (Stoler, 2013, p. 24).

The researchers argue that the idea of economic liberalism brought by the colonial government is a starting point for Indonesians entering the neoliberal era. The process of economic liberalization mostly happened in the lowlands of Indonesia, especially in rural Java. However, it also occurred in some highlands, especially in Central Sulawesi, where local people (Lauje) did swidden farming (Li, 2002, p. 422). However, when they recognized such global commodities for the first time as tobacco brought by the colonial government in the 1820s, they changed their landscape into global commodities (Li, 2002, pp. 418–421). Given the shifting cultivation system, women played essential roles in swidden farming, starting from production, nursery, harvesting, and crop distribution to the market (Kadir & Mahadika, 2019, p. 24).

After the fall of the colonial period, Indonesians continued to grow global

commodities as it happened in Sulawesi, which gradually dismantled the customary-land-sharing system. People then started losing their land because of the enclosure of capitalist relations by the indigenous community itself (Li, 2014, p. 20). Despite all the facts, the agricultural sector was the colonial government’s major target for prosperity, and rural areas had a long history as a central unit of administration and strategy of consolidation by the colonial government. Indonesians were adaptable and then relied on the global market even after the colonial period. Nevertheless, things started to change when rural areas were no longer the state’s significant attention and, on the contrary, urban areas were the focus of rapid development and industrialization in the late 1950s and early 1960s, marked by the decline of rice production, especially in Java (Elson, 1997, p. 61).

Under the New Order regime, in the 1960s, Soeharto’s government faced an uncomfortable inheritance of hyperinflation, debt, and infrastructure collapse (Hadiz & Robison, 2005, p. 221). Given this situation, the rise of the Soeharto regime, the authoritarian rule, was welcomed by Western governments to provide Soeharto with foreign aids and loans, not in order to recover from inflation, but actually to extend his authoritarian rule and state capitalism (Hadiz & Robison, 2005, p. 223). This national economic problem was assisted by international agencies, such as IMF (International Monetary Fund) and World Bank on behalf of ‘The stabilization program (Booth, 1998, p. 178). The Soeharto government then decided to replace nationalist policies (from Soekarno’s legacies) to fiscal and monetary discipline along with the second wave of market reform in trade and finance as a way of eliminating state monopolies, while Indonesia’s foreign revenues came under a threat because of the dramatic collapse of oil prices in 1982 and 1986 (Booth, 1998, p. 199; Hadiz & Robison,

2005, p. 221). When oil prices collapsed in the 1980s, the New Order regime took a series of economic reform packages to turn public works into private entries (Hadiz & Robison, 2005, p. 224). These cases reflected the cronyism (of capitalism) done by the New Order regime, for example, the Andromeda bank, which was privately owned by the second son of Soeharto (Ahn, 2000, p. 99). These attempts by the regime were known as lessening state regulations on the economy to move towards the international economy and foreign exchange to pursue free-market agendas (Booth, 1998, p. 178; Hadiz & Robison, 2005, p. 223).

The financial crisis began to spread to other countries in Asia (South Korea) and also Southeast Asia in 1997 (Ahn, 2000, p. 89), which left the Soeharto government with no choice but to agree to IMF-imposed reforms by deregulating and introducing institutional reforms in banking and public management (Hadiz & Robison, 2005, pp. 221–222). Soeharto did not choose because he wanted to save Indonesia's corporate moguls (Soeharto's cronies), who only had a little option to sustain their business (Hadiz & Robison, 2005, p. 225). Soeharto decided to deal with the state of affairs imposed by the IMF in return for its US\$43 billion bailouts (*ibid*). This kind of Indonesia's reform project broadly supported the neoliberal agenda endorsed by the IMF through restructuring the economy (neoliberal reforms) and the making of political decentralization (Hadiz & Robison, 2005, pp. 226, 230). Unfortunately, the bailout has to be repaid, not by the dictator (Soeharto) and his cronies themselves, but by the people of Indonesia in the following generation (Graeber, 2011, pp. 2–3).

After the 1997 economic crisis, there was a massive lay-off toward industrial workers and, eventually, many factories collapsed (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 69). Therefore, the workers often decided to

look for opportunities by returning to the agricultural sector, offering a security net of incomes during the recession or toward more precarious and informal employment (Sopranzetti, 2018, p. 115). During the neoliberal era, employment is mainly in the informal sector. This process of informalizing could also go along with precaritizing of their everyday life, seeing themselves as free economic subjects rather than laborers.

Our case concerns *buruh gendong* or female porter labors working in the informal sector with precarious conditions at Beringharjo traditional market of Yogyakarta. They were used to work at the factories, but in the aftermath of the 1997 economic crisis, they could no longer depend on working at factories. They also did not choose to go back to their homeland to work in the agricultural sector. Instead, they opted to work even more precarious employment as porter labor. Their decisions to be porters were not voluntarily. They knew that depending on their livelihoods in the agricultural sector was insufficient to provide enough income for their family. So, they migrated to the inner city, hoping to get better incomes and living conditions.

Migration is an option for them since it provides them hope (N. Kleist, 2017, p. 7) and economic-rationality motives providing *buruh gendong* opportunity to gain a better living condition in the urban areas. Therefore, *buruh gendong* are considered as rural migrants working precariously in the city of Yogyakarta. Hope comes to be an analytical framework that implies both the potentiality and uncertainty of employment. However, it focuses more on possible manner, which means how the hoping subject deals with the uncertainties by migrating to urban areas and creating a sense of anticipation in precarious situations.

Besides, there are paradoxes of mobility in migration, meaning that people (or migrants) can face a failure for upward mobility, even

if there is still hope. For instance, they were challenged to look for secured employment in the aftermath of the economic crisis. They could no longer depend on steady incomes, but, on the contrary, they were forced to be flexible laborers in neoliberal logic. Economic or financial crisis can also be considered the critique of capitalism, which means that crisis always occurs because of capitalist sense and global market (Žižek, 2010). Meanwhile, every nation-state needs to depend on changing global market. Therefore, the process of flexibilization of labor becomes prevalent in the neoliberal era (Standing, 2011, p. 6). So do *buruh gendong*, that they experience the flexibilization of labor. Before working as porters, they worked at the factories. However, during the Asia financial crisis, the factories collapsed, making them precarious workers as porter laborers at the traditional market.

From industrial production to precarious labor: Paradoxes of freedom as elderly female porter

Both can simply explain the ‘anatomy’ or configurations of Beringharjo traditional market in architectural design or the people as ‘moving architecture’. For instance, one of the articles written by (Rosid & Nareswari, 2020) shows space configurations by looking at the people movements in the Beringharjo market. It shows higher people’s movements circulating in the main gate located in the eastern part of Malioboro street than the other gates. One of the reasons behind the crowded main gate is because this place is so effective for the people if they want to go back to the main street of Malioboro. *Buruh gendong* can usually be found in the backside of the market since it is a quiet area where they can take a break after work.

AbdouMaliq Simone, in his article entitled, *People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg* (2004), provides a helpful reflection that people can also

be considered as one of the parts of ‘infrastructure’-building, which means that they also contribute to the process of remaking and reproducing the urban spaces. Such *buruh gendong* as rural migrants experience marginalization from the urban life since they are considered the lower-class status and because of their existence of living precariously. Interestingly, no one else but *buruh gendong* provides this service and keeps the economic activities circulating in the Beringharjo market. Hence, *buruh gendong* can also be considered infrastructure since they get involved in the precarious remaking and reproducing of the Beringharjo market. So, in this regard, *buruh gendong* cannot be seen only as a livelihood, but they also:

... engages in such complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become an infrastructure—a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city (Simone, 2004, p. 408).

So, *buruh gendong* are also a part of broader conjunctions that can remake the city of Yogyakarta in general and the Beringharjo market in particular. Their existence is the representation of the urban community’s needs in order to keep the economy circulating very well in the market. Nevertheless, at the same time, their livelihoods are seemingly also marginalized from the urban infrastructure shown from the market’s infrastructure and its impacts on their health capacities. Indeed, this *buruh gendong* usually faces employment risk because of carrying loaded stuff on their backs so that it can create unbalanced postures of their body (Parwati & Simanjuntak, 2011). Therefore, working as porter labor is considered to be having more injury risk, and this precarious working condition can also reflect their economic activities turned out to be marginalized and immiserated by the poor urban infrastructure.

This case of *buruh gendong* is not similar to Sopranzetti's case about the motor-taxi drivers in Bangkok that they are often perceived as undesirable employment, and also have a negative stigma for the urban middle-class, such as labelling them as buffaloes, lazy youngsters, and attached to theft activities and drug dealers (Sopranzetti, 2018, p. 7). On the contrary, *buruh gendong* or porter laborers do not gain negative stigma around their neighborhood or the people surrounding them. The people socially accept them, especially those from the same homeland (Melianingsih, et al, 2008, p. 44) or the rural and peri-urban of Yogyakarta, namely, Bantul and Kulonprogo.

On 28 November 2020, early in the morning, the authors headed to the Beringharjo traditional market of Yogyakarta. At around 6.30, the authors arrived, and most of the kiosks were still closed. In general, the market area is divided into two sub-areas; the front sub-area is for clothing items, and the rear is for food-related stuff (vegetables, meats, fruits and so on). At 7.30, the authors saw some *buruh gendong* at the latter area, walking around and carrying things on their back for their customers (sellers and buyers

in the market). According to a *buruh gendong*, there is no day-off for *buruh gendong* that they have to make ends meet every day.

The authors met a *buruh gendong* called Yani who was taking a break (Figure 1). The authors made a conversation with her. She was in her late 50s and had working experience in another sector before being a *buruh gendong*. She once worked at a furniture company located in Bantul regency, and it was before she got married. However, suddenly the company fell into bankruptcy, that she had no job afterwards. Then she decided to be *buruh gendong* as her mother had done long before her, and Yani just followed her mother's track in the market. Now Yani has a son who is in junior high school. She hoped he would have better employment. "*Ya iyalah harus lebih baik, wong dia ya sekolah. Harus lebih baik* (Of course, he must be better, he is now in Junior High School. He has to be better)," she said. Yani did not finish elementary school, and she did expect that her son could have better employment in the future. She enjoys more working as a *buruh gendong* compared to working in the former company:



Figure 1. *Buruh gendong* carrying thing on her back

“Kalau kerja enak di sini, gak ada yang ngawasi. Kalau kerja di pabrik kan kerjanya diawasi terus dari jam 8 pagi sampe jam 4 sore. Bahkan, kalau saya migrain pun kadang-kadang masih disuruh bekerja. Kalau di sini saya tinggal oper ke teman jika saya migrain. (I worked more enjoyably here since no one controlled me. When I worked in the former company, my foreman kept controlling me from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Even when I got a migraine, sometimes I was ordered to keep working. But here, in the market, I just asked my friend to take over my job when I got a migraine),” said Yani.

She currently also has side jobs in her neighborhood, such as doing laundry and sorting plastic waste. (Millar, 2014, p. 47) has written about *catadores* usually collecting dump for a living. In Yani’s case, it indicates that flexibility as *buruh gendong* could fulfil her desire to take care of her son and easily come to work and leave it as she liked. For *buruh gendong* in general, they are already interconnected and create a form of social belonging within them. Besides, these side jobs are also pretty common in rural areas. In Java, especially in rural households, people tend to have more occupations than depending only on one (agricultural) sector. More occupations are often known as ‘occupational multiplicity’ (Elson, 1997, p. 175; Rigg & Vandergeest, 2012, p. 30). Nevertheless, this “occupational multiplicity” also indicates that rural households will gradually leave the agricultural sector and look for another job in the non-agricultural sector.

On 15 December 2020, at around 9.30, the authors met another *buruh gendong* who was still carrying a basket made of bamboos. Her name is Sukiyem, and she is in her 50s. The authors approached her and asked about her living conditions. Long before working as *buruh gendong*, she used to be farm labor in the 1980s. She then started working at a mushroom factory in her hometown to get additional income. Her son and daughter

were born in 1992 and 1993, respectively. When her children started their elementary school and junior high school, she could afford their education fees. In 1997 during the economic crisis in Asia (South Korea) and Southeast Asia (Ahn, 2000, p. 89), unfortunately, the factory where she worked also fell into bankruptcy. So, she had to find another job in the city. She then worked as a *buruh gendong* to support their children to continue studying at senior high school. *“Pabrik bangkrut terus saya ke sini biar bisa bayar sekolah anak (The factory went bankrupt and then I came here [working as buruh gendong to make money] in order to pay for my children’s school tuition fee,”* Sukiyem said. She works as *buruh gendong*, while her husband works as farm labor in Sentolo of Kulonprogo, their hometown:

“Nek kerjo ning pabrik iku kudu tepat waktu, dan target harus diselesaikan. Kalau di pabrik itu diawasi, diatur, gak bisa sembarangan. Tapi kerja di sini, saya lebih bebas. Kalo saya capek, saya bisa istirahat (Working in the factory, everything had to be on time, and target had to be achieved. In the factory, everything was controlled, disciplined. But here [working as buruh gendong], I have more freedom. When I am tired, I can take a break),” Sukiyem said.

To her, working as a *buruh gendong* gives working-hour flexibility. She can be so flexible that she can decide whether to finish her job early or late.

“Kalau saya mau pulang cepet bisa, kalo saya mau pulang siang juga bisa (If I want to go home earlier, I can just do it, as well as if I want to go home late),” she said.

When Sukiyem worked at a mushroom factory, the company provided her with Jamsostek (a kind of labor social security insurance known as *BPJS-Ketenagakerjaan*). However, there is no social security or protection for *buruh gendong*. Every risk she

takes depends on herself. For example, when she has an accident, she is not covered by the insurance scheme. She has to deal with it by herself. “*Ya ditanggung dhewe kabeh* (I have to cover it all by myself),” she said. She also has to work every day or no day-off for her to make ends meet. If they do not work enough to gain money, they cannot return to their homeland in the rural areas. “*yo mboten mantuk yen duit mboten cukup nggo nge-bis*” (I cannot go back home when I do not get enough money for public transport). So, she ended up sleeping rough in front of the store (Progo Store) or the store parking lot with other *buruh gendong*. Sleeping close to the traditional Beringharjo market also makes them easier to start working the following morning again. Therefore, this phenomenon shows the contradiction of freedom from *buruh gendong* that they feel free since they work for nobody. They also presumably hate the system of capital-labor relations, routine, taxes, and so on (Tsing, 2009, p. 169), so they decided to be self-employed as working as *buruh gendong*. However, at the same time, they work in precarious conditions by only gaining minimum incomes to cover their needs to get by.

Interestingly, there is a foundation in Yogyakarta that supports *buruh gendong*, that is Yasanti (*Yayasan Annisa Swasti/Annisa Swasti Foundation*). This foundation provides some aids to *buruh gendong*, such as staple foods. However, according to Sukiyem, this kind of aid program is only a small aid because it only helps *buruh gendong* get by. “*Biasane mung sembako dan bantuan kecil lainnya. Seperti paguyuban, urunan sukarela. Tidak membantu banyak* (The aid is only for staple foods and other small aids. It is like a loose association, voluntary dues, and it does not help much). So, *buruh gendong* cannot rely on this foundation because it only helps them voluntarily and does not cover social security.

Even in this time of uncertainty of neoliberalism, many growing business models do not cover or provide social protection to their workers. It presumably can be the business of outsourcing, which means that the workers do not work directly for the core company but the third party (Tsing, 2009, p. 149). The third company often does not follow such rules of proper labor standards as apparel industry (subcontracted sweatshops) that there is not much labor union success (*Ibid*, p. 159). Another case also happens in Indonesia, such as the emerging of the “partnership” business model. For instance, Go-Jek Indonesia corporation only sees their worker (motor-taxi driver) as *mitra kerja* (working partner), not the worker or labor. It means that the company does not provide such labor protections, health insurance, retirement benefits, the rule of daily working hours, etc. (Chadijah et al., 2019, pp. 621, 623). Using the “working partner” rhetoric, the company indirectly lower labor regulations and the drivers become semi-flexible laborers. Therefore, during the neoliberal period, the companies try to limit the market risk and still maximize profits by lowering labor regulations.

It seems the structure of companies is more likely to bring back the idea of plain Marxism regarding primitive accumulation, which means concentrating and exploiting the laborers (Federici, 2004, p. 63) with no social security and politics of labor movement. Besides, *buruh gendong* felt that when they worked for the company, they only enriched the capitalists or bosses themselves. The bosses also exploited them. Nevertheless, now, they realize that working for nobody provides them with a sense of ‘freedom’. They are now considered ‘free labor’ that liberate themselves from the control, pressure, and exploitation of industrial production (capital-labor relations).

From this case, we can see that there is not much difference between working for the company and oneself in the neoliberal period. Working for a company that does not provide social security can be considered a precarious entrepreneurial model (Stensrud, 2017) since the company itself needs to adapt continuously to the uncertainty and fluctuation of the global market. Bringing back the idea of exploitation in a plain Marxist sense becomes apparent in the economy of neoliberalism. Meanwhile, the case of *buruh gendong* is then an excellent example of liberating from the exploiting companies. They are now free. However, at the same time, they have to accept their insecure employment that they have to work every day with no retirement benefits, health insurance, and any other labor protections.

Therefore, from *the buruh gendong case*, we can actually find that there are emancipation and limitation (oppression). *Buruh gendong* often express their feelings of liberation away from working in the factories (capital-labor relations). They shift their working from capital-labor relations to be self-employed as porter labors. The discourse of 'bebas' or freedom then emerges for reconciliation desire and their aspirations amid the changing structural relations between capital and labor after the 1997 economic crisis in Indonesia. The idea of paradoxes of freedom is viewed as motivations for liberation and oppression in conditions of deregulation, flexibilization of labor, and precarity in the contemporary world (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 70).

As Marx said in his exploration of the introduction of constitutional rights to liberty, "man was not freed from religion, he received religious freedom. He was not freed from the property; he received freedom to own property. He was not freed from the egoism of business; he received freedom to engage in business . . . they are not freed from their exploitation but instead

given the freedom to exploit themselves by becoming their own bosses—entrepreneurial subjects who accept unstable and insecure employment (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 40).

Dreaming of freedom can be considered as agenda of neoliberalism. Karl Marx, in this sense, proposes the meaning of freedom as a tool for exploitation that replaces oppressive tendencies into individual choice. Instead of being exploited by the companies or bosses that do not provide social security to their workers, *buruh gendong* choose to exploit themselves, be free, and be self-employed. This freedom of working for nobody also consequently provides them insecure employment, such as no social security (or protection) when they get accident (hurt). Therefore, the meaning of freedom is liberated from the control of industrial production, but at the same time, they have to accept their insecure employment.

"Waiting for dew drops": Facing economic uncertainties and the failure of desire

The authors were already at Beringharjo market at around 5 a.m. on 24 November 2020, and it was Tuesday Wage. It is a day for the Beringharjo people to take a day off (especially whose kiosks are in the front part of the market located on Malioboro street) since it is a cleaning day occurring once a month. Nevertheless, *buruh gendong* are still on their business. The authors saw two *buruh gendong* sitting in front of the south gate of the market. One of them was Mbah Siyem, and she was in her 60s. When the researchers tried to approach her to make a conversation, suddenly a customer needed her help to carry such things as vegetables. The authors did not want to interrupt her, and the authors just followed her where she went. Mbah Siyem walked upstairs, and she took her basket made of bamboos. Then, she approached the assorted vegetables she



Figure 2. *Buruh gendong* putting down stuff

was ordered to carry and put them into her basket. Then, she carried the basket on her back (Figure 2). It looked so hard that she had to bend down. Still, the authors did not want to interrupt her and only saw her as strong in her age, carrying the heavy burden.

Mbah Siyem has already been a *buruh gendong* since 1982. She has two daughters. Both were already married and had children. The oldest one is no longer living with Mbah Siyem, and she lives with her husband and two children. Mbah Siyem lives with her youngest daughter, her daughter's husband and her three grandchildren. "*Ngenteni tetesing embun*" (waiting for dew drops)," said Mbah Siyem. On the one hand, it implies uncertainty, meaning that she has to wait for orders from others to earn money; on the other hand, it also implies her surrender to God regarding the sustenance of every human being. She also said that she was not able to predict the number of customers she got. Therefore, she was willing to get as many customers as possible to earn more money. Even in this pandemic crisis, it is getting worse, and she only gets very low incomes compared to normal days before

the pandemic. "*Yen dinten biasa kula saged oleh duit seket sampek suwidak ewu, nek saiki sithik banget* (on the normal days, I can get fifty to sixty thousand rupiahs (\pm US\$4,5), but I only get little up to this day)," said Mbah Siyem. Every time she carries such stuff as vegetables and clothing items, she earns between three thousand to five thousand rupiahs according to the amount of weight she carries. She needs around 25,000 rupiahs for the round-trip (Kulonprogo-Beringharjo-Kulonprogo). She can get around 12 orders on normal days, but in this pandemic, she only gets fewer. However, Mbah Siyem can still go back home because her second daughter still supports her with money. "*Duitku niku dinggo bareng, yo nggo bayar listrik, bayar air, nggo mangan* (we always share incomes together, to cover electricity bill, water bill, and meals)," Mbah Siyem said.

She had been through an economic hardship after her husband passed away when her daughters were still five/six years old. Then, she decided to let her daughters be taken care of by her mother, and Mbah Siyem has been *buruh gendong* ever since. She also utilizes her own family's lands (600

m² & 800 m²) to grow corn, rice, and water spinach. In this regard, Mbah Siyem had once two jobs, being *buruh gendong* in Beringharjo traditional market of Yogyakarta and a peasant in her household. Her food crops were used to fulfil the family's subsistence, and if there were any leftovers, she sold them to gain additional income. However, her second daughter now takes over the planting business, and Mbah Siyem only works as a *buruh gendong*. Compared to Sopranzetti's (2018: 58) cases, many rural migrants rely on the agricultural sector, but they also make an additional income by working informally in Bangkok. They take migration to the city as an opening up village economy.

Every day Mbah Siyem leaves her house in the village of Kulonprogo for Beringharjo before 5 a.m. The authors asked her why she had to work as a *buruh gendong* while her daughter, together with her husband, supported Mbah Siyem if she needed anything. Mbah Siyem said, "*Teng griya nggih ngapa, malah awake lara kabeh* (I don't feel good when I do nothing at home)." Mbah Siyem now lives with her youngest daughter. The daughters support Mbah Siyem but, of course, not fully since they have to fulfil their own family's needs. It is essential to know that Mbah Siyem's daughter and her spouse who live with her are temporary workers such as carpenters, bag handicraft workers based on orders and construction workers. These kinds of employment are considered to have an unstable income. Nevertheless, Mbah Siyem still had a desire that her children would have a better life. She does not want her children to end up like her as a traditional porter.

On 15 December 2020, the authors met a *buruh gendong* sitting on stairs on the rear side of the market. Her name is Rubikem or Mbah Rubikem who is in her 70s. She is from Sentolo of Kulonprogo, where she lives with her husband, daughter, son-in-law, and grandchild. Her husband had recently

had prostate surgery. The surgery cost was already covered by "BPJS-Kesehatan" (a kind of healthcare insurance provided by the government). However, she needed some money for transportation since her house was far from the hospital. The cost was still high for her because she could not work (to get some money) while accompanying her husband to the hospital. "*La nggih abot banget to, wis ora duwe duwit, bojone kudu operasi* (It was so hard that we had no money while my husband had to have surgery)," said Mbah Rubikem. After the surgery, her husband had to stay at home and was not able to work. It made her work harder.

She as *buruh gendong* has objectives. She has to get money for round-trip transport from home to the traditional market, minimally IDR 17,000. Mbah Rubikem expects more than that in order to meet her daily needs at home. Apart from living barely, she was also less fortunate in her education. She did not finish elementary school. She dropped out in her second grade.

Nevertheless, she did expect that her only daughter could achieve a higher level of education to live a better life. Her daughter finished her senior high school. Mbah Rubikem expected her daughter to continue her studies at the university. Unfortunately, she had no money to pay for the tuition fee. It means that Mbah Rubikem's desire was unfulfilled. "*Wis SMA thok, biayane mboten enten, dos pundi malih* (She only got her education for senior high school. What should I do? I had no money to pay for her university tuition fee)," she said. Now, her daughter and her son-in-law with their child live barely as well. Her son-in-law currently does artisanal sand mining, and her daughter takes orders to make *melinjo* chips (a traditional snack). They support their mother but, of course, not entirely, since they have to fulfil their own family's needs. Mbah Rubikem and her own family are currently living precariously.

People usually put their “desire” when working in urban areas. These commodities (clothes, school uniforms, etc.) materialize their struggles to always carry on with the rapid urban development and claim their participation in it (Sopranzetti, 2018, p. 170). In Marxist’s sense, this term “desire” does not refer to and is associated with sexual categories or commodity fetishism. However, according to Sopranzetti, desire is an awareness that often comes out from the lower class to express their political demands for social justice, equality, and better representation (Sopranzetti, 2012, p. 362, 2018, p. 183). Desire is not to own commodities, but people become aware of the impossibility of their socio-economic position to ever owning one (Sopranzetti, 2018, p. 184), and it often takes place in the world of people who live in their everyday struggles only to meet their daily needs. This case is just as the same as Yani, Sukiyem, Siyem and Mbah Rubikem. They desired their children to have a better education and a better life, but the desire was unfulfilled. Even their children had a better education, but they still lived barely.

Conclusion

Buruh gendong are from rural areas who migrate to urban areas to make a living at Beringharjo traditional market of Yogyakarta. They are self-employed and also work in the informal sector. Income uncertainties and social insecurity bring about precariousness. They still prefer to be *buruh gendong*, however, due to its flexibility compared to industrial workers. Using the concept of paradoxes of freedom, it is clear that they experience deregulation and flexibilization of labor in the neoliberal period. It also means that they liberate themselves from industrial production (capital-labor relations). They do not work for capital owners or bosses; they work for themselves. Their working hours

are more flexible since every *buruh gendong* has free options when she starts working, takes a break, finishes working and goes back home (in rural areas). However, at the same time, they have to accept their insecure employment as well. *Buruh gendong* also have desires for their children to be able to achieve a higher education level. *Buruh gendong*’s awareness to send their children to higher education level can be seen in their unceasing efforts to cope with their income uncertainties and social insecurity. In addition, there is no day-off for them. Here, desire implies *buruh gendong*’s awareness of social injustice and inequality. Eventually, the desires are mostly unfulfilled; their children get unfortunate work and still live barely.

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Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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