

# Understanding the Nature of Rural Change: The Benefits of Migration and the (Re)creation of Precarity for Men and Women in Rural Central Java, Indonesia

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## Abstract

*During the last two decades, rural-urban migration and government programs have improved livelihood conditions in Javanese villages and brought down levels of poverty considerably. This article, based on two extended surveys in nine villages in Central Java, aims to understand the nature of change in rural Java by focusing on gender and precarity. As a result of migration, old forms of precarity have not completely disappeared: Families without children, elderly and people unable to work continue to live precarious lives. For those who work in the cities, dependence on single-source, low incomes, predominantly earned by men who work in construction, continues to keep families and especially women vulnerable for livelihood shocks and stresses. Increasingly, women from poor families work in low-paid agricultural jobs or keep the family farm running.*

*Migration to the cities makes it possible for many families to stay in the village and live the ‘good’ village life. The village is generally perceived, socially and ideologically, as a ‘better’ place. The flip-side of this preference is a reproduction of traditional family values and limited room to maneuver for women. Very few interesting and suitable jobs for educated women exist in rural areas. Women from poorer families need to work in agriculture. Their dependence on working men with single sources of income, continues the risk to end up or fall back into living precarious lives.*

**KEYWORDS:** Precarity, Gender, Rural Urban Migration, Rural Change, Central Java

## INTRODUCTION

### Wunut, Bantul

AT DAWN, THE ROAD out of Wunut village looks like a one-way street, as dozens of motorbikes sputter down the road, carrying one or two men leaving the village in the direction of Bantul, Sleman, or Yogyakarta city. Some carry carpentry tools to work in construction projects; others work as factory workers or as security guards. Occasionally, a single woman can be spotted: a vegetable seller, a young nurse, a teacher, a civil servant, and a few young women

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working in the cigarette factories of Bantul. At six a.m., three yellow trucks depart, packed with men and some women from Wunut and adjacent hamlets willing to work for a low salary in the sugarcane fields of Yogyakarta's sultan-owned sugar factories.

After six a.m., children and youngsters appear in bright red and white uniforms, or blue, grey, and pale brown, depending on the school. The poorer kids depart early and bike to their high schools, whereas those from slightly better-off families use motorbikes. Young children walk or bike to the primary school nearby.

At seven a.m., the village looks deserted; two-thirds of all the men have left the village. Wunut has become the domain of women, children, and the elderly. Out of 100 families, only eleven men derive their main source of income from village resources or work in the village: Four villagers farm and/or trade in farming products from the village; two men work as civil servants; one works as a teacher; one is the village head; two villagers make furniture on a full-time basis; and three villagers make charcoal. All other men are involved in jobs outside the village. By contrast, only a dozen women out of the 100 families work outside the village – mostly young, unmarried women, or women without children.

About 20% of these villagers live in Jakarta or Surabaya for a couple of months at a time. Others commute to their jobs on a daily or weekly basis. Women, returned migrants, and the elderly manage the agricultural tasks: checking and weeding the few paddy fields; carrying fodder for cows and goats; collecting and drying firewood; drying groundnuts or paddy on the road; and chasing chickens. Men join these activities when they come home in the late afternoon, in between construction jobs, or if they take a day off.

Although the majority of the villagers now live above the Indonesian poverty line, precarious livelihoods are found among those families who do not have a family member working in Jakarta, among returned migrants without children who provide care, and – increasingly – among women living alone.

The picture of Wunut presented above is not exceptional. It reflects the changing village life, new work opportunities, and rural-urban connections of many places in Java. Indeed, Wunut is representative of Javanese villages within a one-hour or one-and-a-half-hour drive from one of the large or medium-sized cities – which is the case for over two-thirds of rural Java (Rigg 2013).<sup>2</sup> This paper explores how we are to understand rural change in relation to rural-urban migration and the proliferation of old and new forms of precarity, for men and women and for different generations in Java.

This article is based on fieldwork covering 1570 households in two districts in Central Java (seven villages in the former Comal district and two villages in

<sup>2</sup>This does not include villages with large numbers of overseas workers. The sample did not contain villages in which dozens or more overseas workers could be found.

Bantul district). The above description of early-morning Wunut illustrates the interconnectedness of villages and cities in many regions in rural Java where rural livelihoods are increasingly sustained by urban incomes. As seen in other areas in Southeast Asia, this connectedness has led to major changes in rural areas, such as increased incomes and improved livelihoods, but also to new forms of precarity (Li 2014; Rigg 2013, 2015).

To analyse current changes in rural Java, in the following, first some conceptual notes will be made on migration and gender in relation to rural change, after which the issue of precarity and the research findings will be discussed.

### RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION, GENDER AND PRECARIETY

In line with the World Bank report (2008) and De Janvry and Sadoulet (2000), Delgado-Wise and Veltmeyer (2016: 43) summarise the dominant consensus in the agrarian debate of the new millennium as follows. Peasants basically have two options – combine agriculture with wage work, or leave rural areas and search for jobs outside agriculture. As a result of this trend, agricultural labour tends to feminise and rural areas to depopulate (Gartaula *et al.* 2011; Kelkar 2006). The future of agriculture is perceived as gloomy, a view that tends to be superimposed upon rural areas in general (Rigg 2013, 2015; World Bank 2008).

This dominant perception of the gloomy future of agriculture in the global South has met with considerable criticism (Li 2014; McCarthy *et al.* 2012; Rigg *et al.* 2016; Van der Ploeg 2008, 2010; White 2000). These authors criticise the idea that cities offer decent labour opportunities for the massive reserve of surplus labour from rural areas. In the areas under study, migration does offer a way out of agriculture. At the same time, however, the studies show that wage labour outside agriculture does not lead to abandoning peasant agriculture. A recent article by Peluso and Purwanto (2017) illustrates this process by showing how the (transnational) labour migration of marginalised women from a Javanese village leads to investment in rural resources from all the remittances they send back. Female labour migration enables husbands and sons to stay in the villages, thereby leading to a general ‘regendering’ and ‘remake’ of the forest (Peluso and Purwanto 2017: 6). For West Bengal, Schenk-Sandbergen (2018: 47) shows that women do stay in villages but do not work in agriculture anymore, as waged jobs are scarce and non-agricultural sources of income largely absent.

In the areas under study in Bantul and Comal, the situation is comparable in the sense that having (male) members working outside the village enables families to continue their rural livelihood. However, here it is the women and elderly who keep agriculture running. Large numbers of rural people work in cities, but these households stay engaged in agriculture or at least attached to rural life and village networks. Increasingly, in rural areas, non-agricultural labour opportunities are emerging. The majority of migrants are male, but most unmarried

women, or young women without children, also work in the city. The question that emerges is whether we need a new perspective by which to understand the nature of change in rural Java. And to what extent does migration support the ability to keep living in a village? How do urban and rural livelihoods relate to each other? Before going into those questions, we first discuss the issue of poverty and precarity in a rural-urban migration context.

## PRECARITY

Today, the word ‘precarity’ is often used as a synonym for marginality, or in general, to refer to the social consequences of poverty, such as insecurity and vulnerability. It has regained popularity, becoming a kind of buzzword in globalisation and development studies (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Rist 2013). Buzzwords are often used to overcome worn-out and eroded concepts that have lost meaning and analytical power. New terms and buzzwords are powerful means to attract research, policy attention, and resources, although they often fail to tackle the sensitive and political dimensions of old and persistent problems of poverty and social exclusion (Nooteboom and Rutten 2012).

In its original meaning, precarity refers to Marxist analyses of ‘marginality’ of labour. In the 1960s, the term was used in Latin America, as Munck (2013: 748) explains, “to account for the vast number of under-employed internal migrants who surrounded the main cities with their makeshift dwellings, and who appeared to be in all senses ‘marginal’ to the capitalist system”. Delgado-Wise and Veltmeyer (2016: 45–46) note: “According to Marx’s theory of the general law of capital accumulation, the process of capitalist development and proletarianisation hinges on the formation of a floating and stagnant army of surplus labour that is absorbed when, where and as needed for the expansion of capital”. Breman (1996) speaks of footloose labour in the context of India and work in the informal sector. In this understanding, precarity is produced through the spread of (global) capitalism and the exploitation of labourers who have lost access to the means of production. Migration then enables the continuous availability of a flexible labour pool, and as such it suppresses wages and reproduces marginality and precarity.

Munck (2013: 747) argues that this understanding of “the concept is highly questionable both as an adequate sociology of work in the North and insofar as it elides the experience of the South in an openly Eurocentric manner”. In both the North and the South, precarity does emerge in less exploitative settings as livelihood insecurity and in cases where labourers do have (some) access to capital yet are confronted by a lack of control over labour conditions and steady incomes due to processes of structural inequality and economic change. As such, it refers not only to the production of precarity through processes of alienation and labour exploitation but also to livelihood insecurity

itself through the lack of stable incomes and social welfare when times get rough.

Although today the concept has lost most of its ideological content, it remains useful as an analytical tool, for it brings together and enables both attention to livelihood insecurity and the structural dimensions of changing labour conditions and capital in a migration context. In this study of labour migration and rural change, the concept of precarity is used for the analysis of insecurities and inequalities inherent in the labour migration process, not only for the workers and migrants themselves but also for family members, household livelihood, and village life. In this article, precarity is understood in its more general sense, referring to the social consequences of poverty and migration, most notably, insecurity and vulnerability in relation to gender differences (Kaag *et al.* 2004; Nooteboom 2015). In other words, it is understood here as “a condition experienced by workers whose day-to-day existence is characterised by insecurity and instability” (Eberle and Holliday 2011: 372).

## UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF RURAL CHANGE

The migration and precarity literature presented above is highly relevant for the analysis of labour migration and gender in rural Java. Some authors argue that a large share of the labour force has become redundant as a result of global capitalism, as they have been ousted from agriculture and are unable to find a job in industrial centres of production. Tania Li (2009) speaks in this respect of ‘surplus people’ or, in the case of upland Sulawesi, of “a great many people [who] have no part to play in production organised on the basis of profit. They are not heading toward the proletarian futures transition thinking maps out for them, because no such futures are in place, nor are they on the horizon” (Li 2014: 4). In contrast to this conceptualisation, which refers to remote places, the situation in rural Java is different. Java, a place marked by long-standing inequalities in land ownership and a surplus of rural labour (Geertz 1963; Hart *et al.* 1989; Hüsken 1989; White 1991), also has a long tradition of being connected to urban centres (Breman 1987, 1995; Nooteboom 2015).

Considering the long history of migration and of migrants supplementing their rural incomes, the key question is, did this rural-urban migration improve rural livelihoods in a structural way, and if so, in what way did it reduce insecurity, vulnerability, and precarity as predicted by neoliberal models of rural change?<sup>3</sup> In the following, we describe the two research areas through a historical comparative perspective, as both areas are characterised by a long migration history and a long history of social science research.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. The 2008 World Bank *World Development Report: Agriculture for Development* which speaks of ‘Pathways out of Poverty’, Kanó *et al.* (2001), and Rigg (2013), who represent a kind of deagrarianisation thesis in which rural areas are expected to become dependent on urban growth.

## RESEARCH LOCATIONS THROUGH A HISTORICAL COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Wunut and Bantul are situated between the hills in the south (Gunung Kidul) and the fertile rice plain heading towards the Indian Ocean. Comal is situated in the flat area between the central mountains and the Java Sea in the north. Both areas have been major rice-producing regions throughout history. Until the 1990s, the villagers of Wunut lived from the production and consumption of rice that they cultivated on the tiny rice fields along the river or sharecropped or harvested in the plains of lower Wunut and Bantul, supplemented by maize and cassava cultivated in the barren hills (Singarimbun 1996; Singarimbun and Penny 1973). Local production was never enough to make ends meet, and poverty was mounting. In Comal, the situation was slightly better, as easy connections with the outside world made labour migration and trade easier. Government-induced sugarcane production took lands out of food production, offering meagre rents and wages in return (Hüsken 2001). Also in Comal, land ownership was concentrated in the hands of a few people, sharecropping and rural labour was the dominant agricultural activity for the majority of the rural population, and poverty was massive. In 1992, the poverty rate was over 40% (Kanó *et al.* 2001).

In both areas, long-term studies have been carried out involving researchers from Gajah Mada University Yogyakarta, from Kyoto University, and from the University of Amsterdam. In Wunut, studies go back as far as 1973 (Singarimbun 1996; Singarimbun and Penny 1973), with a restudy by Pande Made Kutanegara in 1998 and 2003 (Kutanegara 2017; Kutanegara and Nooteboom 2002). The former Comal district has been closely studied for over a century.<sup>4</sup> Between 2012 and 2014, an extended survey (N = 1500), aimed at restudying issues of labour, livelihood, migration, and rural change, was carried out in the former Comal district. Between 2014 and 2018, a similar survey was carried out in Bantul (N = 120). In addition, case studies have been conducted with the help of students and research assistants to collect additional survey data and to conduct qualitative research in 2012, 2014–2015, 2016, and 2018.

Absolute population numbers in the area did not decline since the studies in the 1990s, which enables us to draw some rough comparisons between past and

<sup>4</sup>Currently, the Comal district is part of the *kabupaten* (regency) of Comal, central Java. Between 1903 and 1905, the Dutch researcher Van Moll conducted research in this area, and in 1914 he published (with H. Jacob's) the book *De Desa-volkshuishouding in Cijfers* (The Village People's Economy in Figures). This two-volume book provides detailed information about 2889 households living in 24 villages in the former Comal district. From 1990 to 1992, a restudy was carried out in Comal involving researchers from three different countries – Indonesia, Japan, and the Netherlands. They studied 500 households in six villages of the former Comal district. Among others, Kanó, Mizuno, Koning, Hüsken, and Van Schaik were involved, leading to several publications. Finally, in 2012, another restudy was conducted in the same six villages of the former Comal district. In this last research, 1000 households were interviewed. This research was supplemented by in-depth case study research.



present. Moreover, all surveys covered comparable issues such as migration, livelihood, land ownership, labour, education, and gender.<sup>5</sup> Below, the major findings of these research projects will be presented, showing major changes taking place in the areas in and around the two study areas in central Java.

## LABOUR MIGRATION THROUGH A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

During the last two decades, migration and government programmes have improved standards of living in the village. All houses have electricity now, all families have access to a mobile phone, and the majority of families own, or have access to, a motorbike. In Wunut, where labour opportunities lie almost entirely outside the village and where no public transport exists, motorbikes are essential to be able to work and pursue higher education. Seventy-five per cent of the households have at least one motorbike: 35% have one motorbike, and 40% have more than one. The poorest families, the elderly, and poor households headed by single women or widows generally do not have a motorbike, which excludes them from labour opportunities outside the village.

In Comal, migration to Jakarta is a part of everyday life. There are more families who have a relative working in Jakarta than those who do not. Remittances have become the main driver of the local economy, boosting house construction, trade, transport, and small-scale services.

Today, people emigrate from the villages for various reasons. Some say that they cannot find work in the area and are forced to move, while others simply seek higher wages or the excitement of city life. Migration takes place at all levels of society; both rich and poor, highly skilled and unskilled, pack their bags to move away. Jakarta is the most popular destination. The cities surrounding Comal, like Pekalongan, Semarang, and Surabaya, are targeted as well, but to a far lesser extent (Woensdregt 2014: 1). The majority of these migrants are male.

Workers who work in the city regularly send remittances home to their families. These are used to buy motorbikes, cars, and houses. The money that is made in Jakarta is generally not enough to purchase arable land, which has seen a steep rise in price over the last decade, peaking at 600 million rupiah (37,500 euros) per hectare (2016 prices). Today, most excess money goes into home construction, while only a few families are able to save.

One-third of all the labourers found in the Comal survey of 2012 (376 out of 1017) are temporary migrants. According to Kanó (2015: 29), “Among these 376 out-migrants, 219 persons work in Jakarta and its suburbs and 137 persons are

<sup>5</sup>It turned out to be very hard to get exact and comparable migration figures out of village surveys comparing the 1990s with today, as the later surveys may be missing information for complete migrant families who have been absent for many years. For this reason, the survey results present a view of the rural situation – applying a rural perspective and concerning people living in or still having ties with rural areas.

construction workers". This means, a third of all migrants in the Comal area engage in a form of seasonal or cyclical migration. In Wunut, the number is even higher, almost two-thirds of all the labourers from Wunut are temporal migrants. Fifty-nine per cent of these migrants are male, and 41% are female. The average age is 29, and slightly more than half of the migrants are married. The majority work in the informal sector, while the garment and automobile factories are a second large employer. Only 20 work overseas. Just over half (51%) of the migrants send remittances home; the majority send an average of 324,971 rupiah (20 euro) monthly to their families in the former Comal district.

In Wunut, two-thirds of the households have a family member working outside the village, often the husband or a son aged over sixteen. Half of these part-time migrants work at least five or six months per year outside the village. Places mentioned for migration are Yogyakarta, Jakarta, East Java, Bandung, and, increasingly, the same district. Besides labour migration, in Comal (and to a lesser extent in the area of Wunut), there has been a clear increase in non-farm regional labour opportunities. In Comal, two garment factories recently opened, and some areas have a great deal of home industry or shops and trade. Here, women work for rural entrepreneurs who produce new and labour-intensive cash crops such as onions and vegetables. As a result, a great deal of work is still available in and around the village for women who prefer to stay in the village and who are not opposed to doing agricultural work.

### Gender and Education

In the early 1990s, Koning carried out extensive research on migrating women in one village in the Comal region. Most of these young women migrated to Jakarta. About 12% of the migrants from a village in Comal were young women (Koning 2005: 165). Of the young women, who made up one-quarter of all those migrating for reasons of labour, 53% worked as domestic servants, and 34% found work in factories. The rest were engaged as babysitters, shop assistants, or traders. The majority of the female migrants were young girls aged 12–24. At around the age of 20, however, the pressure from the home front to return to the village in order to get married was stepped up considerably (Koning 2005: 166).

Two decades later, this situation has changed. In the same village, the majority of young women below 20 are still at school. Eighteen per cent of all women, with an average age of 25, are working in Jakarta, and slightly more than half of them are married. Today, their occupations have changed. Almost nobody works as a domestic labourer anymore – young women work in factories, shops, and in trade and services. In Jakarta, they earn twice as much as in Comal, but expenditures are much higher as well. In Comal, rural poverty is on the decline, but minimum wages, in both industry and agriculture, remain very low (between 1,000,000 and 1,500,000 rupiah a month, which was 80–120 euros in 2016). Women usually earn less than men (on average, two-thirds of a male salary).



In rural Wunut, education levels are somewhat lower than in Comal, but the same pattern is visible: There is a strong rise in the education of the rural youth, where girls are becoming more educated than boys. In Wunut, in general, schooling levels are lower due to very low schooling levels in the past, but the same trends are visible as in Comal: Fewer pupils are dropping out than before, and no one under the age of 40 is working in agriculture.

Both surveys show that the educational level has improved tremendously over the last century. At the beginning of the 20th century, only a few young men were educated. In the 1990s, primary education was common, and now almost all villagers continue until senior high school, with girls doing better than boys.

Today, in the case of the youngest generation – aged 35 and younger – only 2% are completely uneducated, whereas that percentage for the oldest generation – aged 65 and older – is 36%. A handful of the boys and girls have even moved on to college and university. Among these changes, probably the fact that girls stay longer at school than boys and much longer than in the past (until they are 18 or older) has led to the most significant changes – such as the age of marriage, the age at the birth of one's first child, and the kinds of jobs potentially open to women. Whereas in the past, young migrant girls worked as domestic labourers, now jobs in shops and factories are available. Some also become teachers or nurses, or make it into white-collar office jobs, but they also continue to live in the village.

In 1990, Koning claimed that young women 'chose to be in Jakarta' out of a longing for a better life. She spoke of 'life choices' (Koning 2005: 165). Now, looking from the perspective of the next generation, the question arises how much freedom of choice is involved in the decision to go to Jakarta and to return. Looking at the larger picture of rural-urban migration, it might instead be that strong structures are reproducing an old pattern where women can travel and work outside the village when they are young, but need to come home and become 'dutiful wives and mothers' once their children are born (Chan 2018: 100). To this day, very few women 'escape' from the village and from these traditional marriage norms; almost all women return to the village after their children are born. Higher education and sometimes owning a business seems to be the only way to escape the pressure of becoming a 'dutiful wife' who takes care of the children, the house, and household matters.<sup>6</sup> For men, however, this is the ideal: to earn enough to allow your wife not to have to work, and to instead live a good life in the village. The women we talked to generally reproduced this narrative, referring in most cases to village values, Islam, and the village being a safe and good place to raise a family.

<sup>6</sup>Of course, this does not apply only to rural Java. Similar trends are visible in rural India, where the 'good woman' ideology and patriarchal notions seem to be on the rise, undermining the life, work, and freedom of poor rural women (cf. Schenk-Sandbergen 2018: 49).

### Livelihood Changes

During the Comal research in the 1990s, 43% of the surveyed population was still entirely dependent on income from farming, 29% combined agricultural work with non-agricultural occupations, and the remaining 28% relied on non-agricultural occupations (Kanó *et al.* 2001: 221). In 2012, a generation later, the picture has reversed. Less than 30% of the household heads identify their main occupation as agricultural, 56% identify their main occupation as non-agricultural, and the remaining 13% are not working (mostly elderly). In total, 77% of the households in 2012 have one or more members with non-agricultural occupations. Of the household heads aged between 20 and 50, less than a fifth claim to be dependent on agriculture. Dependency on farming as a primary source of income has thus been halved in the last two decades. The average age of farmers is rising; in central Java (Comal and Wunut), it is rising even faster than the overall Indonesian average (age 50 in 2012).<sup>7</sup>

In 1992, 69% of the non-agricultural workers were employed within the Comal district, compared to 63% in 2012. Young men between 21 and 45 years of age are almost completely absent in Comal. They work in Jakarta in construction, services (including trade and street vending), and the automobile factories (on temporary contracts). Most of these labourers return home regularly, e. g. at elections and after Ramadan, partly due to being unable to secure housing or a permanent job in the city.

With these changes in rural areas, inequalities have also been growing: incomes are more unequal than in the past. The unequal villages in the past (in terms of land ownership) are now more egalitarian (see Kanó *et al.* 2001), because of the fact that landless villagers engage much more in urban off-farm labour opportunities. Kanó (2015: 33) notes that the “income disparity among sample households has not diminished, but its principal cause has shifted from the gap in the possession of agrarian resources to the gap in access to the income earning opportunity in non-agricultural activities”.

The changes in income and orientation to agriculture have an effect on the environment. Both in Comal and Wunut, marginal lands have been taken out of food production, and trees have been planted. On fields often belonging to the old local elites that had previously been sharecropped by poor villagers, local landowners find it profitable to plant trees. This tree planting might be a sign of a general stability in land rights and property (i.e. tree crops are considered a safe investment, and landowners expect to reap the benefits of tree planting after 10 years and up to as long as 40 years). The shift from perennial crops to tree crops involves a changing timeframe and might be a sign of increased property security and trust. It marks a break with the past that reflects a general

<sup>7</sup>In the case of female heads of household, this phenomenon is less clearly discernible because of the fact that, unlike in the past, widows are seen as heads of households but do not always call themselves farmers or even mention being dependent on farming.

decline in dependence on food production and an increase in dependence on other sources of income. Until the early 2000s, landless farmers were able to grow food crops under sharecropping arrangements, but now land is becoming the site of speculation and accumulation, the means to produce tree crops to be harvested by the landowner whenever needed. Although reforestation has ecological benefits and is heralded by the government and NGOs as an environmental success, tree planting can actually be seen as a case of adverse incorporation, excluding weaker members of society from access to food and local resources and ultimately making them even more dependent on the market.

### Labour

The proportion of agricultural workers (rural labourers) declined from 40–60% in 1992 to 20–25% or sometimes even lower in the surveys of 2012 and 2014. The changes in Wunut are even more pronounced. In Wunut today, less than 15% of the rural working-age people are engaged as rural labourers as their main occupation (as compared to figures as high as 80% in 1973). The average age of farmers (landowners and agricultural workers alike) in Comal has risen from 48 to 55 since 1992. There is an average age difference of eleven years for men with agricultural vs. non-agricultural occupations.

As a result of the massive number of migrants, large employers such as sugarcane factories, vegetable producers, and landlords all notice the shortage of labour and mention the need for mechanisation to replace the absent male workers at peak times. The decrease in (male) labour availability also leads to a decrease of cooperation and coordination (i.e. social security). This might also relate to a general rise in agricultural pests (e.g. rats) and the emergence of an ecological crisis as blowback from years of high-chemical-input agriculture.

### (Re)feminisation of Agriculture

The increased mobility marks a general trend of (re)feminisation in agriculture. In both Comal and Wunut, women of poorer households are taking on more agricultural tasks than before, and they are doing a larger share of the work. This finding contrasts with recent findings by Peluso and Purwanto (2017), who did research in an area with high numbers of women working abroad as domestic workers.<sup>8</sup> For rural India, Schenk-Sandbergen (2018: 47) found that women tend to stay in the village when men migrate, but that for women, labour opportunities in agriculture do not increase. In both rural India and Java, women earn less than men (on average, two-thirds of a male salary). In Java, however, we found that more women work in agriculture, which offers inherently lower wages than other occupations. In 2012, in Comal, the percentage of women with non-agricultural main occupations was more than twice as low as the

<sup>8</sup>In both Comal and Wunut, the number of women working abroad is very low (less than 1% of all migrants).

percentage of men with non-agricultural main occupations (up to 77% in some villages). However, the percentage of women not working at all is also considerably higher than that of unemployed men (in the case of higher and middle incomes). Especially in middle- and higher-income classes, women are not working (and not willing to work) in agriculture.

The amount of rural labour in agriculture sharply decreased (halved in one generation between the 1990s and 2012/14). There are several indicators that proportionally, more women are starting to work as agricultural labourers. The percentage of non-familial female labour has changed drastically, especially in the case of rice production, which was covered in both the 1990 and 2012/14 surveys. Tasks which were previously performed mostly by men are now partly or fully carried out by women. Examples are getting and transporting seedlings (77% done by women), fertilising (37%), cutting paddy (58%), threshing paddy (43%), and transporting the harvest (30%) – traditionally all tasks that were almost solely the domain of male labourers.<sup>9</sup>

Today, the percentage of female-headed households whose main occupation is agriculture is almost twice as high as the percentage of male-headed households. This also underpins the general picture that today, proportionally, more women are left to work in agriculture.

## POVERTY AND PRECARIETY

Rural poverty is on the decline, but minimum wages in both industry and agriculture remain very low (1,000,000–1,500,000 rupiah a month, which was 75–100 euros at 2014 rates) with 1,200,000 rupiah a month being the (very low) regional poverty line in both districts. At the same time, government poverty relief and social welfare is growing in importance. Of the 40 respondents, thirteen mentioned receiving government support of some sort. This basically concerns small-scale food aid (Raskin<sup>10</sup>), conditional cash transfers (PKH<sup>11</sup>), incidental help for the improvement of living conditions, sanitation, or food-for-work programmes.

Whereas land and farm incomes were the primary means of income differentiation in the past, now education and (urban) wage differences are much more important. In general, those who stayed in agriculture and those above 50 are at the lower earning end. However, precarious families and individuals are also to be

<sup>9</sup>There are several phases that are still dominated by men: preparation of the land (83% performed by men, of which 55% is performed by family labour), ploughing and levelling (95%, but now almost always carried out by hired labourers and tractors), and making dykes (60%). Traditionally, sowing was a male task, and today as well the majority of the labour force for this task is provided by male labour. However, quite a few women – also from outside the family, as hired labour – perform this task nowadays (21%).

<sup>10</sup>Raskin combines the words *Beras* (rice) and *Miskin* (poor); rice for the poor. It concerns the delivery of cheap (subsidised) rice packages (usually 10 kgs.) to poor families.

<sup>11</sup>*Program Keluarga Harapan* (lit. hope for families programme).

found among landless couples without children (or with migrated children who do not [often] send money), among single- (women-) headed households with children below or at school age, among elderly widows without children to care for them, and among couples or individuals who can no longer work outside the village. Access to a family member with a regular cash income proves to be crucial.

In sum, poverty and insecurity in Comal and Wunut today can be found among four kinds of people: 1) widows, the ill, and the handicapped; 2) families without assets or stable incomes; 3) outcasts; and 4) people dependent on low-paid, single sources of income. This constitutes the majority of the village population. Structural inequalities in access to land and resources, and the structure of unprotected and less stable jobs in the city, as well as the prospect of retirement without an income, often make life precarious for these categories.

The first and most obvious category comprises people who are poor, ill, and often insecure, such as widows (*janda cerai*, *janda migran*, *janda mati*) without children to care for them and without savings, assets, or pensions.

The second category consists of couples without many assets, without children, or with children who are unable or unwilling to care for them. It can be divided into two subcategories: 1) young couples without inherited land, with young children, dependent on a single source of income. Often, incomes are irregular if the husband is still young or unable to secure a stable income and is unwilling or unable to work in Jakarta or Surabaya for long periods of time; 2) older couples, over 55, too old to work outside the village, without proper assets, without children or with children unable or unwilling to support them.

The third category consists of those referred to as 'notorious' (*orang nakal*): people involved in gambling, speculative trade, drinking, promiscuous relationships, criminality, and so on, as well as the mentally ill. These people are unable to save or accumulate money, are excluded from society, and are often involved in dangerous, conspicuous, or risky behaviour that can quickly deplete family resources and lead to poverty. This was fairly uncommon in the research areas, but in each village we encountered a couple of cases and a large number of stories circulating around them. The worst cases of the *orang nakal* are pushed out of the social fabric and forced to leave the village.

The fourth and last category of people consists of people who are not seen as poor at the moment, but who are potentially at risk because of being dependent on a single source of income. Entire family networks can be dependent on one individual working in irregular jobs in construction, small trade, or at plantations.

This simple typology shows that ownership and control over local resources such as land, trees, and cattle remain an important factor in resilience, unless households have sufficiently diversified their incomes (i.e. multiple incomes of husband and wife, savings [gold, assets, etc.], a small pension, a little shop or trade, living with or having supportive children with a reasonably good income, etc.). In the event of the misfortune, illness, or death of a family member, these families can cover their financial problems via their own means and

usually have sufficient social networks or assets to recover. In the following, we take a closer look at the sources of wealth and poverty of the four categories of poor and vulnerable people in an attempt to analyse sources of precarity.

A huge diversity exists among widows. Being poor (and being seen as poor) depends to a large extent on whether they live with children or grandchildren, if they still have access to sources of income (including savings or rent), if they are still able to work, or if they receive some form of social assistance. Among the most precarious cases we found are women whose husbands had migrated without maintaining contact, or who (re)married outside the village and who never received any money. These *janda migran* (migration widows) had to raise children on their own and manage their tiny farms with ever-declining returns. Others had to sell all assets to cover their husband's debts, and still others live from the sparse earnings of children who have had to drop out of high school in order to work.

Another category of widows living precarious lives are old widows who do not have children in the village, who do not own land, and who receive little to no support from relatives or government programmes. Just by virtue of being disconnected, they have no family members or children who are benefitting from the new and abundant wage labour opportunities in the city. This includes couples who are *de facto* childless, or couples with young or handicapped children who cannot engage in urban wage labour.

*De facto* childless couples are widows or couples without children or with 'notorious children' (*anak nakal*), or couples who fostered children, but whose attempts at adoption failed.<sup>12</sup> Although they sometimes live with other relatives, these widows or couples depend greatly on support from the neighbourhood. Other categories of precarious households are households with disabled children who keep parents at home, and households that have fallen into poverty because of misfortune or an accident that rendered them unable to work or forced them to sell assets.

In three cases of the Wunut survey, children were engaging in deviant behaviour and were thus not (yet) able or not willing to care for their parents. In two other cases in the Wunut survey, a childless couple had adopted a son who ultimately did not support them.<sup>13</sup> Although, in general, livelihoods have improved compared to that of the previous generation, villagers often remain dependent on low-paid, irregular jobs, which keeps them precarious.

## **ANALYSIS: INCREASING RURAL-URBAN ENTANGLEMENT AND NEW FORMS OF PRECARIETY**

The ties between rural and urban areas, especially Jakarta, have increased over the years. Boundaries between the two worlds are increasingly blurred by

<sup>12</sup>See Nooteboom (2015: 121–123) for a discussion of *de facto* childlessness in East Java.

<sup>13</sup>Both cases called *nakal*, *main perempuan*, *judi*, *peminum*, *pemabuk*, etc.



trade networks, chain migration, and networks of finding jobs. Villagers are no longer dependent on agriculture, but agriculture remains important and one of the primary employers. It is particularly important for low-educated people, women, and elderly men who are no longer able to compete for jobs in the city. Crop failure no longer leads to hunger and hardship, as most people and households have numerous sources of income to fall back upon. If harvests fail, even more family members are inclined to find a job outside the village.

In contrast to the expansion of low-skill jobs in construction and new labour opportunities in the city, land concentration is not taking place. We see no significant concentration of land ownership taking place and no emergence of a rural proletariat as compared to Tania Li's 2014 study in Sulawesi. People with land who find work elsewhere tend not to sell their (meagre) landholdings and by all means want to stay part of village society. If urban jobs are stable or if villagers need to stay for longer periods in the city, the land is rented out. Often farming has become a part-time or female occupation. When men get to be over 45–50 years of age, it becomes harder to find jobs in the city, so they return to the village and often engage in agriculture again. However, especially in Wunut, rural labour opportunities are under pressure. In Wunut, large parts of the infertile hilly lands (*tegal*) have been taken out of food production and planted with trees. One result of this aforementioned trend in Wunut is that the elderly and landless poor, unable to work in construction or in the cities, become excluded from agriculture. In the rice plains of Comal, this development is also taking place, albeit not at the same rate.

Very few of the poor families are ever able to climb the social ladder into higher classes. The old, land-based village elites are still important, but their wealth is no longer based on agriculture, and their land is often taken out of production or leased out. They plant tree crops on their fields and let their children study or start a trade. However, the old, landed elites are no longer the sole and dominant power holders in the village. New rich have emerged from those few who obtained higher education, established successful business, or got a job abroad. These new rich sometimes invest in land and accumulate savings, but more often they invest in business opportunities outside the village, such as in real estate, houses, cars, prestigious education for their children, and consumption goods.

In Comal, the majority of land is tilled by women and/or by elderly men, and large landowners who are no longer dependent on their farming incomes tend to rent out their land to sugar factories or for commercial vegetable and onion production. The future opportunities for landless migrants in Jakarta to return to the village and engage in sharecropping are therefore declining. Moreover, in the villages, there is not much they can fall back upon if things go wrong. Increasingly, households depend on one source of income. These families were able to rise above the poverty line, but they are not very far from it, and they could fall back into poverty if any difficulties or disasters occur.

On average, 14% of the households are headed by women. The majority of the single-household heads are women whose husbands have passed away, while the others are divorced. Combined with increased mobility and the absence of a large proportion of the (male) productive labour force (20–50 years of age), there is a breakdown in village institutions crucial for pest control, joint harvests, house construction, and so on. Traditional systems of mutual help in house construction have almost disappeared; sharecropping and harvest-sharing has declined in favour of cash payments; and coordination in agriculture (i.e. planting together and at the same time) has become difficult. Collective labour activities are more challenging to organise, as people are not always present at the same time, people have different occupations, land ownership is unequal, village officials' priorities are not only agricultural, and some landowners are not that interested in the produce of the fields. At the same time, new solutions (following old reciprocal models) do emerge, such as the 'saving in neighbours' initiative, a system of loaning money to neighbours for construction supplies, organising hospital visits, as well as initiatives for raising collections and donations for defraying medical expenses, are also increasing.

The majority of the young women working in Jakarta now work in factories, in the garment industry, or in the service sector, but they work there only for a couple of years. Many more jobs are also now available regionally: for instance, as a helper in or owner of a shop or a salon, in local and regional government, or at a local bank. Women are staying in school longer than men and are therefore increasingly able to find their way into white-collar jobs, although numbers remain low. Other changes include choosing one's own spouse, as more men and women from neighbouring villages meet in the city or at the workplace. Increasingly, husband and wife stay together in Jakarta for a couple of years, after which the wife returns home to give birth to their first child.

The research shows that the migration cycle of the 1990s is now being reproduced, but in different jobs, combined with a general adherence to similar dominant values. Young women do still work in Jakarta for a while, but they still return to marry, and after marriage and/or when pregnant, they settle in the village. Although women marry later, are more highly educated, and have children at a later age, they still end up in the village to raise their family, unable to find good jobs and sometimes living precarious lives due to dependence on others or low salaries in agriculture. Because of economic differences between city and village (life is expensive in the city; affordable housing is not available), the old pattern keeps being reproduced.

The village remains the place to raise a family: "Once we have a husband and children, our life is in the village". People generally cherish the cultural values and ideas about the village being the best place to live with the right (Islamic) values. The essence of the pattern of mobility has also not changed (young women return to the village to marry and to settle down; men work in the city and support their wives and children at home). If remittances are low, women

are often forced to engage in agricultural tasks and wage labour. If the family owns land or cattle, the wife is expected to run the farm.

The ideal for many (men and women) is to have time for the children and for the household and to earn enough money in the city to raise a prosperous family in the 'safe', 'good', and 'cheap' environment of the village. At the same time, those who stay in the village (especially the 'preferred children' who are going to inherit land and the 'dutiful daughters' who stay to care for the parents) are seen as, and feel like, losers. It is in this double-edged development that precarity evolves. Often husbands do not earn enough to sustain their family in the village; marriage and family life suffer from the long absence of spouses; and women, who live the idealised life in the village, feel frustrated, caged, and bored.

## CONCLUSION

Based on an extended survey in nine villages, we found that massive changes have taken place in rural Java in the last three decades. Migration has become an essential part of the village economy, and it does offer a way out of agriculture. In many respects, these findings reflect general patterns of change in well-connected rural areas all over Southeast Asia (Rigg 2013; Rigg and Vandergeest 2012). However, at the same time, studies show that wage labour outside agriculture does not lead to abandoning peasant agriculture.

In the nine villages under study, large numbers of men, as well as smaller numbers of women, work in cities, but their households stay engaged in agriculture or at least remain attached to rural life and village networks. Although living in rural areas is increasingly seen as a positive option, working in agriculture is less often seen this way. In 1990, a number of young men still worked in cultivated fields, but in 2012 almost all young and middle-aged men had a job outside agriculture, and the remaining agricultural workers were middle-aged and elderly. Young couples who are better educated – and almost all of the youngsters we interviewed – are not interested in farming, nor are they able to farm, as inheritances of land are increasingly postponed. Parents stick to their rice fields until they are no longer able to work them, and only then pass them on to their children. As a result, an increasing number of families, even those with grown-up children, do not control or have access to any land.

In contrast to agricultural work, living in a village is increasingly seen as a positive option. The village provides a crucial lifeline and an important frame of identification, both culturally as well as socially. Rural migrants often do not find themselves a foothold in the cities but remain dependent on urban incomes for household survival. Moreover, people working in the city keep on planning to return to the villages and stay connected to village life. In precarious cases resulting from economic crises or shocks and stresses such as illness, disability, and old age, the village offers important social networks to fall back upon (Kutanegara and Nooteboom 2002).

Migration to the cities makes it possible for many families to stay in the village and live the 'good' village life. Because of economic growth and rising levels of welfare, for a large proportion of the villagers, village life has become much better than before – much more pleasant, much less isolated. The village is generally perceived, socially and ideologically, as a 'better' place. Life in the village is attractive: it promotes 'the right values', it is pleasant, it is cheap, it is 'relaxing', and it is a good place 'to keep your wife' and to raise children. At the same time, this dominant (male) discourse and this image of the good life limits opportunities for women. Although women are more highly educated than most of the men, few women work independently after marriage when they have children. Young girls reported that they no longer dream of a life in the city. Instead they envision an independent life in the village, with a job, a motorbike, and enough money to sustain a family. In short, they dream of living a good, luxurious life. Such a life is no longer solely imagined as being necessarily urban. The rural is not agricultural anymore (Schenk-Sandbergen 2018: 47). The urban-rural division has thus become artificial but still remains a significant cultural marker.

Although the majority of migrants are male, a large proportion of young women also work in the city. Many of these young women are not yet married. After giving birth, women stay in the village and raise their children there. This repeats an old pattern, where young women work for a few years in the city before returning to the village to raise a family. In the past, these women's education levels were quite low, and they worked as domestic helpers; now they finish at least high school and tend to work in factories.

The changes in work and livelihoods in rural Java do affect women. Compared with the past, despite all improvements in livelihood and education, there is a continuity in traditional family values, although they are supported and increasingly reformulated in a context of a rise in Islamic discourse (or at least more reference to Islam was made as a moral or ethical source/guide of behaviour). The village has become a place to raise children; it is considered 'safe' for children and mothers, and the village has become a place to retire. Patriarchal values and cultural and religious notions of the 'dutiful' or 'good woman' considerably limit the freedom of movement, work, and labour.

The increase in migration and wage labour opportunities in urban areas did eradicate a large proportion of rural poverty, but it did not eradicate all precarity. This is especially the case for women, as not all women benefit from higher education and mobility. Very few interesting and suitable jobs for women exist in rural areas. Increasingly, women from poor families work in low-paid agricultural jobs or, at best, start their own business. Women from poorer families need to work in agriculture. Almost a sixth of the households are female-headed. The migration for low-paid jobs instead produces new forms of precarity, while some of the old forms remain. There are few alternative sources of income, and when people lose jobs, have accidents, or fall ill, very few resources are left. Moreover, for women forced to stay in the village both economically and

on a social and emotional level (morally), tasks and duties have increased. Aside from their responsibilities to raise a family, care for parents, run the small farm and sometimes tend the animals, their dependence on working men with single sources of income continues the risk of ending up or falling back into living precarious lives.

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