

From Authorised Mobility to Conditional Empowerment: A Relational Framework of Gendered Household Power in Women's International Labour Migration

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Abstract

Despite the feminization of international labour migration and women's growing contribution to household welfare, economic gains from migration do not necessarily translate into equivalent changes in gendered household power. Existing research has examined migration decision-making, remittances, transnational family relations and women's empowerment largely as separate domains, leaving limited understanding of how household power is negotiated and reproduced across the migration trajectory. This study examines how gendered household power shapes women's international labour migration before departure, during transnational employment and after economic gains are realized. Drawing on qualitative interviews with migrant women, husbands and household members in Kebonsari Village, Madiun Regency, East Java, Indonesia, the study employs thematic analysis to trace how household authority is negotiated across different stages of migration. The findings reveal a persistent paradox: women's mobility may expand through household authorisation, while their economic contributions do not necessarily translate into equivalent decision-making authority. Mobility is authorised through household negotiation, economic gains are governed through transnational remittance practices and empowerment emerges as conditional rather than transformative. Building on these findings, the study develops the Conditional Mobility Framework, which integrates authorised mobility, transnational household governance and conditional empowerment to explain how gendered household power persists and adapts across time and borders. The framework contributes to migration, gender and development scholarship by demonstrating that women's economic incorporation through migration can coexist with and in some circumstances reinforce, enduring gendered structures of household authority.

Keywords: Conditional Mobility, Gendered Household Power, International Labour Migration, Transnational Household Governance, Women's Empowerment.

Introduction

International labour migration has become a major force reshaping household livelihoods and gender relations, with women increasingly participating in transnational labour markets across labour-sending countries. Through migration and remittances, women contribute substantially to household welfare, education, healthcare, housing and investment, while also expanding their economic capacity and geographical mobility (1–4). Yet these gains do not necessarily translate into greater household authority. Although migration may increase women's access to income and resources, gendered decision-making, patriarchal expectations and unequal household power may persist or be reorganised across the migration process. This creates a central paradox: women

may become economically more mobile while remaining relationally constrained within households that continue to shape and regulate their migration.

This paradox is reflected in existing empirical evidence. Studies show that international migration can improve household welfare, remittance capacity and women's labour participation (5–7). Other research demonstrates the persistence of unequal household authority, gendered decision-making and patriarchal expectations despite women's economic contributions (8–10). Socio-cultural perspectives on rural Indonesian communities further provide a contextual lens for understanding household dynamics as embedded within broader social and institutional settings,

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including pre-existing social values, traditional customs and seasonal livelihood characteristics alongside domestic resource management (11). Existing studies have also identified labour-market constraints, education, economic position and gendered family responsibilities as important factors shaping women's migration (12-14). However, these factors are rarely examined in relation to household authority across the migration trajectory. The central problem, therefore, is not simply whether migration empowers women or reproduces inequality, but how economic participation coexists with persistent, gendered household power.

This empirical puzzle also reveals a broader fragmentation within migration scholarship. Existing studies have examined migration decision-making, household bargaining, remittance practices, transnational family relations and women's empowerment, but these dimensions have predominantly been treated as separate analytical domains (5, 8, 9, 15, 16). Consequently, migration is often conceptualized as a series of separate episodes—departure, employment, remittance transfer, or empowerment—rather than as a continuous social process structured by household power. What remains insufficiently explained is how gendered household authority authorises women's mobility before departure, regulates their transnational participation during migration and conditions whether economic gains translate into empowerment after migration. This relational gap constitutes the central research problem addressed by this article.

Existing theoretical perspectives have substantially advanced understanding of women's international labour migration, yet no single perspective adequately explains how household power structures women's mobility across the entire migration trajectory. The New Economics of Labour Migration conceptualizes migration as a household strategy for managing livelihood risks (5). Household bargaining theory highlights unequal distributions of authority in family decision-making (8). Transnational family scholarship explains the persistence of care, obligations and relationships across borders (15, 16). Empowerment perspectives emphasize how access to resources may expand women's agency and strategic choices (9). Gender scholarship further demonstrates that household authority is

reproduced through everyday gender norms and expectations, while local cultural values shape how these relations are interpreted and negotiated (17, 18). Complementing these perspectives, sociological scholarship from migrant-sending regions highlights the socio-cultural dimensions of household life, including family expectations, social positioning and shared community values (19). Thus, household power cannot be understood through women's economic contribution alone. Together, these perspectives illuminate important dimensions of migration but remain theoretically fragmented. They provide limited explanation of how household power simultaneously authorises mobility, operates through transnational governance and conditions the conversion of economic gains into empowerment. This theoretical discontinuity provides the conceptual foundation for the Conditional Mobility Framework developed in this study.

Against this background, this study investigates how gendered household power shapes women's international labour migration before departure, throughout transnational employment and after economic gains are achieved. Drawing upon qualitative evidence from migrant households in Kebonsari Village, Madiun Regency, East Java, Indonesia, the study conceptualizes migration as a continuous relational trajectory rather than an isolated episode of labour mobility. It focuses on three interconnected processes: authorised mobility, transnational household governance and conditional empowerment.

Accordingly, the study addresses three research questions:

RQ1: How does gendered household power shape women's mobility decisions before international migration?

RQ2: How is household authority reproduced or renegotiated through transnational household governance during women's overseas employment? and

RQ3: Under what conditions are women's economic gains associated with empowerment rather than reinforcing existing gendered household power?

This article makes an original contribution to migration scholarship in three interrelated ways. First, it reconceptualises women's international labour migration as a negotiated household

process in which mobility is socially authorised through gendered household power rather than exercised solely as an individual livelihood strategy. Second, it demonstrates that household authority is not suspended by geographical mobility but reorganised across transnational space through remittance governance, moral accountability and financial regulation. Third, it develops the Conditional Mobility Framework, which integrates household authorisation, transnational governance and conditional empowerment into a single explanatory model. By connecting these previously fragmented dimensions, the framework advances existing knowledge by shifting migration analysis from isolated outcomes toward a continuous relational trajectory in which household power is reproduced, negotiated and potentially transformed across migration stages. The article therefore conceptualizes women's international labour migration as an evolving process of negotiated mobility rather than a discrete episode of geographical and economic movement.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design to examine how gendered household power shapes women's international labour migration across the migration trajectory. Rather than viewing migration as a discrete labour episode, the study conceptualized it as a continuous relational process. In this process, household authority is negotiated, reproduced and transformed before departure, during transnational employment and after economic gains. The study adopted an abductive analytical logic (20). This approach allowed empirical evidence and theory to inform each other iteratively. Drawing on the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) (5), household bargaining theory (8), transnational family scholarship (15, 16) and women's empowerment perspectives (9), the analysis developed the Conditional Mobility Framework. The framework integrates authorised mobility, transnational household governance and conditional empowerment into a relational account of women's migration.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in three rural villages in

Madiun Regency, East Java, Indonesia: Kebonsari Village (7°44'02"S, 111°29'24"E), Segulung Village (7°45'06"S, 111°36'18"E) and Lembah Village (7°47'14"S, 111°30'03"E). These villages were purposively selected as labour-sending communities where women's international labour migration is closely embedded in household livelihoods and family life. The sites provided a relevant context for examining migration as a socially embedded household process rather than as an isolated episode of labour mobility. In these communities, migration decisions, spousal negotiations, remittance management, childcare and post-migration responsibilities are closely interconnected. This provided a relevant context for examining how household authority shapes women's mobility before departure, during transnational employment and after migration. Accordingly, the research setting served not merely as the location of fieldwork but as the empirical context through which the Conditional Mobility Framework was developed.

Participants

Participants were recruited from 30 migrant households in Kebonsari Village, Madiun Regency, East Java, Indonesia. The household served as the principal unit of analysis because the study conceptualised women's international labour migration as a relational process shaped by gendered household power. The participating households varied in household composition and migration experiences. This variation included household size, family roles, migration duration and involvement in remittance management and household decision-making. Returned women migrant workers served as the primary informants. Husbands and adult household members were also included when they had participated in migration-related decisions, remittance management, childcare arrangements, or the redistribution of household responsibilities during and after migration. Including multiple household perspectives enabled the study to examine how authority, negotiation and accountability operated across the migration trajectory. These accounts provided the empirical basis for analysing authorised mobility, transnational household governance and conditional empowerment within the Conditional Mobility Framework.

Sampling Strategy

A criterion-based purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit households capable of providing information-rich accounts of women's international labour migration as a relational household process. The inclusion criteria required households to be located in Kebonsari Village and to have at least one woman with experience of international labour migration. Eligible households also included adult family members who had directly participated in migration-related decisions, remittance management, childcare, or the reorganisation of household responsibilities. Participants were required to provide informed consent. Households were excluded if the woman migrant had no direct involvement in migration-related household decision-making. Households were also excluded if the available information was insufficient to reconstruct experiences across the migration trajectory. Recruitment proceeded iteratively through local community networks until no substantively new relational patterns emerged. The final sample comprised 30 migrant households.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with members of the selected migrant households. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian by Mustika Arif Jayanti and lasted approximately 60–90 minutes. Women migrant workers and other household members were interviewed separately to provide participants with sufficient privacy to express their experiences and perspectives. To manage potential power dynamics within the household, interviews were conducted in a private setting without other household members present and participants were given the opportunity to respond freely without interference or pressure from other family members. The interview guide covered three stages of the migration trajectory: household negotiations before departure, remittance practices and transnational household governance during overseas employment and changes in household authority after return (21). Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and supplemented by field notes.

Following each interview, the recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked against the original audio to ensure completeness and accuracy. Transcripts were anonymised and

organised by household and migration stage before being prepared for qualitative analysis. Relevant statements concerning mobility decisions, authority, remittance control, family responsibilities and post-migration changes were extracted and systematically compared across cases. Recurrent meanings and relational patterns were then synthesised across households to identify convergent and divergent accounts (22). Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively until no substantively new conceptual insights emerged. This process provided the empirical foundation for examining how gendered household power authorises mobility, operates across borders and conditions women's empowerment within the Conditional Mobility Framework.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following established procedures (23, 24). The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to facilitate familiarisation with the data. Relevant statements were then identified and inductively coded according to their meanings and relevance to women's mobility, household authority, remittance practices, family responsibilities and post-migration changes. Codes were iteratively compared within and across households and across the three stages of the migration trajectory: before departure, during transnational employment and after migration. Related codes were progressively grouped into broader patterns and reviewed against the empirical data to identify similarities, differences and relationships among emerging patterns.

Through this iterative process, the broader patterns were synthesised into higher-order themes. Particular attention was given to tracing the relational continuity of household power across the migration trajectory and to examining how authority was reproduced, negotiated, or transformed across migration stages. The analysis generated three interconnected analytical themes: authorised mobility, transnational household governance and conditional empowerment. These themes were subsequently interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical perspectives and informed the development of the Conditional Mobility Framework as a relational explanation of how gendered household power structures

women's international labour migration across the migration trajectory.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigour of the study, trustworthiness was established through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (25). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged field engagement, in-depth interviews with participants occupying different positions within migrant households and continuous comparison of emerging themes throughout the analysis. Transferability was supported by providing a rich description of the research setting and participants. This enabled readers to assess the applicability of the findings to comparable contexts. Dependability was ensured through transparent documentation of participant selection, data collection and analytical procedures. Confirmability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail and grounding all interpretations in participants' accounts. These procedures supported the development of the Conditional Mobility Framework from the empirical evidence.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were maintained throughout the research process to protect participants' rights and wellbeing. Participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded by removing personal identifiers, using pseudonyms when reporting quotations and securely storing research data. Recruitment and data collection were conducted without coercion or undue influence. This ensured that participants could share their experiences freely and with confidence.

Results

Authorising Women's Mobility:

Migration as a Household-approved Process

Women's international labour migration did not begin with the act of departure itself. Across the thirty households interviewed in Kebonsari, Segulung and Lembah villages in Madiun Regency, overseas employment emerged as a process that first required recognition within the household. Women frequently identified economic pressures, limited local employment opportunities and the

need to improve household conditions as reasons for considering migration. These circumstances, however, did not automatically translate into the ability to migrate. The decision to work abroad was shaped through household negotiations in which husbands' approval remained a central condition for women's mobility.

Women's accounts revealed that migration planning commonly began through informal discussions with husbands before any administrative preparation took place. Participants described conversations concerning household financial difficulties, employment opportunities and the feasibility of leaving home for overseas work. Women often initiated the idea of migration after recognising the limitations of local livelihoods, yet their intentions were generally presented for consideration rather than treated as an independent decision. Husbands occupied a central position in these negotiations because their agreement was widely understood as necessary before migration arrangements could proceed.

A returned migrant worker explained, "Before I left, my husband had to agree. People asked him first, not me." Another participant stated, "I wanted to work abroad because our income was not enough, but I waited until my husband agreed before processing the documents." These accounts demonstrate that husbands' approval represented more than personal support or marital consultation. Approval marked the point at which women's mobility became recognized as acceptable within the household. The ability to migrate was therefore shaped not only by women's willingness to work abroad or by economic necessity, but also by whether their movement received acknowledgement from existing household authority structures.

The authority surrounding husbands' approval was rarely expressed through direct prohibition. Instead, it operated through everyday expectations regarding marital roles, household leadership and appropriate decision-making responsibilities. Participants generally described consultation with husbands as a normal and expected part of migration planning. The process did not eliminate women's agency; many women actively sought information, explored migration opportunities and negotiated their departure. Their agency, however, operated within a social environment where mobility required validation from household

authorities before it could become a legitimate course of action.

Migration decisions also involved extended family members, particularly when questions arose regarding childcare arrangements, household responsibilities and the consequences of women's absence. Family discussions provided a broader context for evaluating whether migration could proceed, with relatives sometimes contributing advice, approval, or practical support. These interactions indicate that migration was embedded within collective household deliberation

rather than constructed as an individual decision detached from family relations.

The involvement of husbands and family members demonstrates that women's overseas employment was governed through a process of household authorisation. Women could pursue migration opportunities, yet their movement remained dependent on recognition from those positioned as legitimate decision-makers within the household. Mobility was therefore socially authorised through unequal household authority rather than exercised as an individual right.

Table 1: Analytical Framework of Conditional Mobility in Gendered Household Power

Analytical Stage	Core Proposition	Gendered Household Process	Implications for Women's Mobility	Theoretical Contribution
Authorising Mobility	Women's migration is enabled through negotiated household approval rather than autonomous individual choice.	Husbands' symbolic authority regulates women's access to overseas employment through spousal consent and family deliberation.	Women's mobility is relationally authorised and contingent upon household approval.	International labour migration should be understood as a gendered household process rather than an individual livelihood decision.
Legitimising Mobility	Migration becomes socially acceptable only when framed as sacrifice for family welfare.	Moral discourses of care, motherhood and family responsibility transform wage labour into a legitimate feminine obligation.	Women's personal aspirations are subordinated to collective moral expectations.	Mobility derives legitimacy from gendered moral obligation rather than economic rationality alone.
Governing Mobility	Household authority persists throughout migration instead of ending once women leave home.	Everyday monitoring of remittances, behaviour and financial decisions reproduces patriarchal governance across transnational space.	Women's autonomy remains continuously regulated despite geographical mobility.	Household power operates as an ongoing transnational governance system.
Evaluating Mobility	Women's migration is judged through the fulfilment of gendered obligations rather than income generation alone.	Remittances become moral performances through which women's worth as wives and mothers is continuously assessed.	Continued mobility depends upon maintaining financial and moral accountability.	Remittances function simultaneously as economic resources and mechanisms of moral regulation.
Producing Conditional Empowerment	Migration improves household welfare without fundamentally redistributing gendered authority.	Material gains coexist with persistent patriarchal bargaining structures and unequal decision-making power.	Women's agency expands economically but remains socially constrained.	Female labour migration produces conditional empowerment, demonstrating that economic contribution alone cannot transform gendered household power.

Table 1 demonstrates that women's international labour migration was produced through a process of household authorisation rather than individual mobility alone. The findings indicate that migration emerged through a negotiated arrangement in

which economic necessity, marital expectations and household authority intersected to determine the conditions of women's movement. Mobility was therefore not simply granted through approval; it was structured through social

relations that defined when, why and under what circumstances women could leave the household for overseas employment.

Household approval functioned as both an enabling and regulating mechanism. It enabled women to access international labour markets while simultaneously maintaining the authority of husbands and family members over the legitimacy of that movement. Women's migration decisions reflected an active negotiation of opportunity and constraint, demonstrating that agency existed but operated within gendered boundaries of household recognition.

The central finding is that geographical movement did not automatically produce social autonomy. Migration expanded women's economic participation and created new possibilities for household survival, yet the authority governing mobility remained embedded within existing gender relations. Women's overseas employment was therefore not a transition from dependence to independence, but a negotiated form of mobility shaped by unequal household power relations.

Governing Mobility Across Borders: Remittances as a Mechanism of Household Control

Women's migration did not mark the end of household authority. The accounts of migrant women revealed that although overseas employment expanded their physical mobility and economic participation, their everyday lives remained closely connected to household expectations established before departure. Remittances became one of the primary channels through which these relationships were maintained, allowing husbands and family members to continue influencing women's responsibilities, financial priorities and decisions despite geographical separation. Migration therefore transformed the spatial arrangement of household relations without removing the authority structures that shaped women's mobility.

Participants described that sending money home was not simply an economic practice but an expected responsibility attached to their position as wives and mothers. Regular remittance transfers were considered evidence of commitment to family welfare, while delays, reductions, or alternative uses of income could generate questions regarding women's responsibility

toward the household. Women explained that their earnings were primarily directed toward children's education, daily household expenses, housing improvements, debt repayment and other collective needs. Personal financial priorities were often considered secondary to maintaining family stability and fulfilling expectations associated with their migrant role.

A returned migrant worker explained, "Sending money every month was expected. If I was late, they thought I was not taking care of my family, even when my salary was delayed." Another participant stated, "Most of my earnings went to the children and the house. I could not decide freely because the money was considered for the family." These accounts demonstrate that remittances operated beyond the transfer of financial resources. They became a means through which women's commitment, responsibility and moral position within the household were continuously assessed.

Household involvement also extended to financial decisions after migration. Several participants reported that although they contributed substantially to household income, major decisions regarding savings, investments, property, or large expenditures continued to involve husbands or senior family members. Women's economic contribution increased household resources, yet it did not necessarily translate into greater authority over how those resources were managed. Economic participation and decision-making power therefore developed unevenly within migrant households.

The continuation of household monitoring across national borders illustrates that migration did not separate women from existing gendered expectations. Instead, mobility created new spaces in which household authority was reproduced through financial accountability and ongoing communication. Women's movement across borders was accompanied by continued obligations to demonstrate commitment through remittances and compliance with household priorities.

Table 2 presents the mechanisms through which conditional mobility was reproduced after migration. The findings demonstrate that entering international labour markets did not release women from household authority; instead, it transformed the ways in which that authority

operated across geographical boundaries. Through remittance practices, financial expectations and ongoing household evaluations, migrant women's mobility became connected to new forms of accountability that continued to shape their

position within family relations. The table therefore illustrates that migration expanded women's economic participation while simultaneously embedding their mobility within transnational systems of household governance.

Table 2: Mechanisms Reproducing Conditional Mobility Through Remittance Governance

Mechanism of Power Reproduction	How Gendered Household Power Operates	How Conditional Mobility is Produced	Empirical Manifestation	Theoretical Insight
Governing Mobility Across Borders	Household authority continues after migration through monitoring of remittances, communication, financial decisions and everyday conduct.	Physical movement does not automatically generate social autonomy because household governance extends across national borders.	Husbands and relatives routinely monitor remittance transfers, spending decisions and women's behaviour abroad.	Migration relocates rather than dissolves patriarchal authority, revealing the transnational nature of household governance.
Moralising Remittance Practices	Remittances are interpreted as evidence of women's commitment, responsibility and moral worth within the family.	Women's continued acceptance as migrant workers depend upon fulfilling expected financial obligations.	Regular transfers are praised, while delayed or reduced remittances are interpreted as insufficient commitment.	Remittances operate as moral mechanisms through which gendered obligations are maintained.
Disciplining Economic Contribution	Women's earnings are incorporated into household welfare priorities while their control over income remains limited.	Increased economic participation expands resources without necessarily transforming bargaining power.	Income is allocated primarily to children's education, housing, debt repayment and household consumption.	Economic contribution strengthens household survival but does not automatically redistribute authority.
Restricting Financial Autonomy	Major financial decisions remain subject to consultation with husbands or senior family members despite women's income contribution.	Women's economic agency remains conditional upon existing household decision-making structures.	Women report continued dependence on husbands regarding major purchases and investments.	Migration produces economic participation without full financial autonomy.

Table 2 demonstrates that migration did not remove women from the influence of household authority; instead, it reshaped the ways in which that authority was exercised across geographical boundaries. The findings reveal that remittances became a central mechanism through which migrant women's responsibilities were monitored, evaluated and regulated. Although overseas employment increased women's contribution to household income, their economic participation remained embedded within expectations regarding family obligation, financial responsibility and appropriate feminine behaviour.

The continued involvement of husbands and family members in financial decisions indicates

that geographical distance did not necessarily weaken household power relations. Women's earnings generated important improvements in household welfare, including education, housing and daily economic security, yet control over the meaning and use of those earnings remained strongly connected to collective household priorities. Economic contribution therefore expanded women's role as providers without automatically transforming their authority within household decision-making processes.

The findings further demonstrate a tension at the centre of female labour migration. Women crossed national borders and became important economic actors, but their mobility remained tied to

obligations that travelled with them. Remittances functioned simultaneously as resources for household improvement and as instruments through which women's commitment was continuously assessed. The same financial practices that enabled women to support their families also reproduced expectations that limited their economic autonomy.

Women's mobility across borders was therefore sustained through a form of transnational household governance in which expanded movement coexisted with continued social regulation. Migration enabled women to become significant economic contributors to household survival, yet the obligations attached to remittance practices ensured that their mobility remained connected to expectations of care, responsibility and financial accountability. The central finding is that migration transformed the location of women's labour without fundamentally transforming the gendered relations through which that labour was valued, monitored and controlled.

Conditional Empowerment: Welfare Without Redistribution of Household Power

Women's migration generated significant improvements in household welfare, yet these economic gains did not necessarily translate into a fundamental transformation of gendered household relations. Participants consistently described overseas employment as improving household conditions through increased income, better housing, children's education, healthcare access and greater financial security. These changes represented significant outcomes of women's labour migration and demonstrated their central contribution to household survival. However, increased economic participation did not automatically produce greater authority over household decisions or fundamentally reshape existing relations of power.

Women's narratives revealed a persistent distinction between becoming an important economic provider and gaining decision-making authority within the household. Although many participants became major contributors to household income, their influence over strategic financial and family decisions remained limited. Decisions concerning property ownership,

savings, investments and major expenditures frequently continued to involve husbands or senior family members. Women's earnings strengthened household resources and improved family welfare, yet the authority to determine how those resources were prioritized, allocated and managed remained embedded within established household power structures.

A returned migrant worker explained, "Even after working abroad for years, I still have to ask my husband before making important decisions." Another participant reflected, "My work helped improve our house and support my children's education, but decisions about important matters are still discussed with my husband first." These accounts illustrate the unequal relationship between economic contribution and household authority. Women acquired greater capacity to provide for their families and influence household welfare, yet their expanded economic role did not necessarily challenge the decision-making structures through which gender relations were organised.

The findings further demonstrate that migration produced a form of empowerment that was meaningful but conditional. Overseas employment expanded women's economic agency by increasing their ability to generate income, secure family resources and contribute to long-term household development. At the same time, these achievements remained embedded within expectations of gendered responsibility, caregiving obligations and established household hierarchies. Economic improvement therefore occurred alongside the persistence of unequal authority relations rather than replacing them.

Table 3 provides empirical validation of conditional empowerment by demonstrating how women increased economic participation coexisted with the persistence of gendered household power relations. The findings show that migration created new opportunities for women while simultaneously reproducing social conditions that limited the capacity of those opportunities to transform household authority. Women's migration therefore produced economic empowerment without a corresponding redistribution of decision-making power, revealing the limits of economic empowerment as a pathway toward gender transformation.

Table 3: Conditional Empowerment: Economic Gains Without Redistribution of Household Power

Core Proposition	Illustrative Evidence	Empirical Pattern	Mechanism of Gendered Power	Contribution to the Conditional Empowerment Argument
Women's economic empowerment remains conditional because increased income does not automatically transform household decision-making authority.	"Even after working abroad for years, I still have to ask my husband before making important decisions." (Returned migrant worker)	Women contribute substantially to household income, yet major decisions regarding savings, investments, property and expenditure continue to involve husbands or senior family members.	Economic contribution increases women's responsibilities as providers without necessarily increasing their authority over household decisions.	Demonstrates that migration produces economic empowerment without full redistribution of household power.
Improvements in household welfare coexist with the continuation of gendered expectations of care and responsibility.	"Most of my earnings went to the children and the house. Improving our living conditions was my priority." (Returned migrant worker)	Migrant women's earnings are primarily directed toward children's education, housing improvements, debt repayment and household needs.	Women's economic contributions are incorporated into existing expectations of feminine care and family responsibility.	Shows that women's labour improves family welfare while remaining embedded within gendered obligations.
Becoming an important economic contributor does not necessarily reposition women as equal household decision-makers.	"My income helped my family a lot, but important matters are still discussed with my husband first." (Returned migrant worker)	Women gain recognition for their financial contribution but continue to experience limited authority over strategic household choices.	Household bargaining power remains structured by gender norms that privilege male authority despite women's economic importance.	Reveals the gap between economic contribution and social authority within migrant households.
Migration expands women's agency while simultaneously reproducing conditions that limit its transformative potential.	"Working abroad changed our life, but it did not change everything inside the family." (Returned migrant worker)	Migration creates opportunities for income generation, personal capability and household improvement, while existing power relations remain persistent.	Agency develops within, rather than outside, established structures of gendered household power.	Establishes conditional empowerment as a form of partial transformation rather than complete emancipation.

Table 3 demonstrates that women's migration produced a complex form of empowerment in which economic advancement coexisted with persistent gendered limitations. The findings indicate that migrant women were not merely passive recipients of household expectations; they actively contributed to family survival, improved living conditions and expanded household economic capacity. Their labour abroad created meaningful changes in material welfare and strengthened their position as economic contributors within the family. However, these economic achievements did not fundamentally alter the distribution of authority within migrant households. The continued

involvement of husbands and senior family members in major decisions reveals that financial contribution and decision-making power remained separate dimensions of household status. Women's increased ability to earn income enhanced their practical agency, yet their strategic authority continued to be shaped by existing gender norms and relational expectations. The central implication of these findings is that migration should not be understood as a linear pathway from economic participation to gender equality. Overseas employment expanded women's opportunities and strengthened their capacity to support household welfare, but the transformation of household power remained

constrained by social arrangements that continued to privilege male authority. Empowerment therefore emerged as conditional: women gained economic influence while operating within enduring structures of gendered household governance.

Taken together, the findings reveal a broader pattern across the migration experience. Women's mobility was first authorised through household negotiation, subsequently governed through transnational remittance practices and ultimately translated into a form of empowerment that improved welfare without fully redistributing power. Female labour migration therefore represents a negotiated transformation in which women gain greater economic capacity without a corresponding transformation of the gendered authority structures that continue to organize household life.

Taken together, the findings show that women's mobility was authorised through household negotiation, governed through transnational remittance practices and translated into conditional empowerment. Although migration expanded women's economic agency and improved household welfare, it did not necessarily redistribute gendered decision-making power. Rather than a linear transition from dependence to autonomy, migration produced a negotiated transformation in which women's economic capacity expanded while household authority remained persistent. These findings provide the empirical basis for the Conditional Mobility Framework, linking authorised mobility, transnational household governance and conditional empowerment.

Discussion

Debates on female labour migration have often associated international mobility with greater autonomy, stronger bargaining positions and gender transformation (7, 9, 10). The findings complicate this interpretation by showing that mobility and empowerment do not necessarily advance in parallel. Rather than a linear transition from dependence to independence, women's migration emerged as a negotiated process in which mobility was authorised, governed and only conditionally translated into empowerment. Household power therefore operated not merely as a context of migration but as the mechanism

through which mobility gained legitimacy, remained regulated and shaped women's transformation within the household. This shifts analytical attention from migration as an individual livelihood strategy towards migration as a relational process through which gendered household power is continuously produced and reproduced across the migration trajectory.

Existing scholarship within the NELM explains how households mobilise migration to diversify income, manage risks and improve collective welfare (5). Household bargaining perspectives demonstrate how migration outcomes are shaped by unequal resources, bargaining positions and intra-household authority (8). However, less attention has been given to how household power determines who is permitted to become mobile before migration occurs. The findings demonstrate that mobility is not shaped solely by economic rationality but also by processes of social recognition and gendered legitimacy. Household negotiations therefore operate not only as mechanisms of resource allocation but also as sites where gendered authority determines the acceptability of women's migration. Extending household bargaining perspectives, this study shows that mobility is embedded within broader structures of gendered power and legitimacy (26, 27). The concept of authorised mobility consequently reframes the household not merely as an economic decision-making unit, but as the primary site where women's mobility is socially legitimised.

A similar theoretical contribution emerges from the findings on remittance practices. Studies of transnational families have shown how migration reorganizes care, communication and family relationships across borders while maintaining emotional and economic connections between migrants and their households (15, 16). However, less attention has been given to how household authority itself travels across borders. The findings demonstrate that remittances function not only as financial transfers but also as forms of moral accountability through which women's responsibility, commitment and legitimacy are evaluated. The use of remittances for housing, consumption and other material needs can be situated within broader discussions of material resources and social positioning in local communities (28). These practices reflect gendered

transnational relations in which migration may transform the spatial organization of family life while reproducing unequal forms of authority and control (7, 29). Household governance therefore becomes deterritorialised rather than diminished, allowing patriarchal authority to persist despite geographical separation. This extends transnational migration scholarship by showing that mobility can relocate household power while preserving its social authority through everyday practices of financial monitoring, communication and moral surveillance.

The findings concerning household welfare and decision-making contribute to debates on women's empowerment by challenging the assumption that economic advancement necessarily produces greater household authority. Drawing on the conceptualization of empowerment as the expansion of resources, agency and achievements (9). These gains enhanced women's capacity as household providers, yet strategic authority over property, investments, savings and long-term decisions remained embedded within gendered hierarchies. Economic capability and decision-making power therefore evolved unevenly. The concept of conditional empowerment developed here extends empowerment scholarship by demonstrating that material advancement may coexist with persistent structures of household authority, requiring not only greater resources but also transformation in relational power.

Taken together, these findings suggest that existing migration theories explain important dimensions of women's labour migration but remain incomplete when considered independently. This study advances a broader conceptual framework in which mobility is understood as a continuous process structured by household power rather than a discrete labour migration event. Mobility is enabled through authorised mobility, sustained through transnational household governance and translated into conditional empowerment, where economic gains improve household welfare without necessarily transforming strategic authority. Together, these processes constitute the Conditional Mobility Framework, which explains how gendered household power shapes women's mobility before migration, during migration and after economic gains are achieved.

The implications of this framework extend beyond migration studies to broader debates on gender, family and development. While migration outcomes are often assessed through indicators such as income, remittances, poverty reduction and material wellbeing, these measures capture only part of the migration experience by overlooking how authority over resources is negotiated and legitimised within households. Migration may therefore improve household welfare without transforming gendered structures of power. Evaluating migration success requires attention not only to economic redistribution but also to changes in decision-making power, social legitimacy and relational authority. Conditional mobility provides a broader analytical lens for explaining why substantial economic gains may coexist with only partial transformation of gendered household relations.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. It is based on qualitative evidence from a single migrant-sending community in Kebonsari Village, East Java and therefore seeks analytical rather than statistical generalization. The Conditional Mobility Framework developed here should be examined across diverse migration systems, socio-cultural settings and institutional contexts to assess its transferability and refine its explanatory capacity. Comparative research may further reveal how variations in household norms, migration governance and destination-country conditions shape the relationships among authorised mobility, transnational household governance and conditional empowerment.

Taken together, this study demonstrates that women's international labour migration should not be understood as a linear pathway from mobility to empowerment. Rather, women's mobility is authorised through household negotiation, governed through transnational practices and translated into forms of empowerment that remain conditional on gendered household authority. The Conditional Mobility Framework captures this relational process by showing how household power persists, adapts and is renegotiated across the migration trajectory. The study therefore shifts attention from whether migration empowers women to how, under what conditions and through which household relations empowerment is produced and constrained.

Conclusion

This study investigated how gendered household power shapes women's international labour migration before departure, throughout transnational employment and after economic gains are achieved. The findings demonstrate that migration is not an autonomous pathway to empowerment but a relational household process in which mobility is authorised through household negotiation, governed through transnational remittance practices and translated into empowerment that remains conditional upon enduring household authority. Although women's migration strengthens household welfare and expands their economic roles, it does not automatically redistribute gendered decision-making power. Household power therefore functions not merely as a contextual influence but as the organizing mechanism shaping the entire migration trajectory.

Building on these findings, the study advances the Conditional Mobility Framework as its principal theoretical contribution. By integrating authorised mobility, transnational household governance and conditional empowerment within a single relational framework, the study demonstrates that migration is better understood as a continuous process organised through gendered household power than as a series of separate decisions, remittance practices, or empowerment outcomes. This framework extends existing migration scholarship by explaining the relational continuity linking women's mobility before departure, during overseas employment and after return.

The findings also carry important implications for migration governance and gender-responsive policy. Programmes supporting migrant women should move beyond economic indicators such as remittances and household income to address the household power relations that shape migration decisions, financial governance and post-migration authority. Strengthening shared household decision-making alongside economic participation may enhance both migrant wellbeing and the long-term social outcomes of international labour migration.

Finally, the Conditional Mobility Framework provides a foundation for future comparative and longitudinal research across different migration contexts. Examining how authorised mobility, transnational governance and conditional

empowerment operate under diverse institutional and cultural settings would further refine understanding of the relationship between mobility, household authority and gender transformation.

Abbreviations

NELM: New Economics of Labour Migration.

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Author Contributions

Mustika Arif Jayanti: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing—Original Draft, Visualization, Project Administration, Singgih Susilo: Supervision, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing—Review and Editing, Validation, Sugeng Utaya: Supervision, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing—Review and Editing, Validation, Overall Research Oversight, Syafrida Selfiardy: Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Validation, Writing—Review and Editing, Sri Agustina: Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Validation, Writing—Review and Editing. All authors read, revised and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests or conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, analysis, interpretation of the findings, or publication of this article.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available because they contain

confidential qualitative interview data that could compromise participants' privacy. De-identified data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical approval, participant confidentiality and informed consent.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

Artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools were used solely to improve the language and clarity of this manuscript. All research activities, including the study design, data analysis, interpretation of the findings and final manuscript preparation, were carried out exclusively by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of this article.

Ethics Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for social science research. As it involved competent adult participants and qualitative interviews without medical intervention, experimental procedures, or the collection of sensitive clinical data, formal institutional ethics approval was not required under the applicable institutional and national research guidelines. Prior to data collection, all participants received a clear explanation of the study's objectives and procedures and provided informed consent. Participation was entirely voluntary and participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. These ethical principles were maintained throughout the research process.

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