

Moral Agency under Legal Precarity: Islamic Ethical Resilience among Indonesian Muslim Women Migrant Workers in Taiwan

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Abstract: Indonesian Muslim women constitute a major segment of the migrant domestic workforce in Taiwan, where secular labor regulations offer limited accommodation for workers' moral and religious needs. Moving beyond dominant accounts that frame migrant women primarily as legally vulnerable subjects, this study examines how Indonesian Muslim women migrant workers actively negotiate Islamic ethical commitments—particularly marital fidelity—as forms of everyday moral agency under conditions of legal and social precarity. Based on qualitative in-depth interviews with six Indonesian Muslim women employed in Taiwan, the study employs an integrated analytical framework combining emotional geography and systemic functional linguistic transitivity analysis. This approach enables a detailed examination of how moral agency is spatially enacted across domestic, workplace, public, and digital environments, and how agency, responsibility, and self-discipline are linguistically constructed in participants' narratives. The findings demonstrate that participants engage in diverse strategies, including spatial avoidance, religious dress practices, peer-based moral regulation, ritualized religious observance, and digital religious engagement. These practices function not as passive adherence to religious norms but as active, situationally negotiated forms of ethical resilience. The study's primary contribution lies in conceptualizing Islamic ethical practice as a form of lived legal consciousness that operates alongside—and at times compensates for—the limitations of state law in transnational labor regimes. By foregrounding moral agency rather than victimhood, this study advances socio-legal debates on migrant precarity and offers a novel framework for understanding religion as an agentic resource within migration governance. Practically, it underscores the need for culturally and religiously responsive mechanisms in migrant protection policies beyond state-centric legal interventions.

Keywords: Moral Agency; Legal Consciousness; Migrant Domestic Workers; Islamic Ethics; Emotional Geography

Introduction

The moral experiences of Indonesian Muslim women migrant workers in Taiwan must be understood within intersecting conditions of legal, social, and religious precarity rather than as isolated instances of individual misconduct (Anam & Mu'allim, 2023). Operating within a predominantly secular legal order that offers limited institutional accommodation for Islamic religious life, these women often inhabit moral environments in which normative frameworks traditionally sustained by family, community, and religious institutions are fragmented or weakened (Handayani et al., 2023). Prolonged family separation, emotional isolation, and intensive labor demands intersect with the erosion of communal religious regulation, producing contexts in which moral decision-making becomes situational, relational, and continuously negotiated (Arabi, 2021; Atiyeh et al., 2008). Within such settings, Muslim

women are compelled to exercise moral agency under structural constraints that challenge both the internalization and everyday enactment of Islamic ethical norms, particularly in relation to intimate and affective relationships.

Existing scholarship on migrant women has extensively documented the structural vulnerabilities embedded in transnational labor regimes, including emotional dislocation, identity fragmentation, and the weakening of informal social control mechanisms (Parreñas, 2005; Silvey, 2007). Studies focusing on Indonesian migrant workers further highlight persistent public anxieties surrounding moral conduct and sexual vulnerability abroad, often framed through moral panic or deficit-based narratives (Robinson, 2003; Anam & Mu'allim, 2023). At the same time, research in Islamic moral education and religiosity emphasizes the role of faith practices and communal engagement as protective resources capable of sustaining ethical orientation in non-Muslim majority contexts (Ahmad & Kasim, 2021; Fatimah & Ismail, 2020). However, much of this literature remains either normative or policy-oriented, paying limited empirical attention to how Muslim women themselves interpret, negotiate, and actively sustain moral integrity within legally precarious and secular social environments. As a result, the intersection between moral agency, legal precarity, and Islamic ethical resilience remains insufficiently theorized.

This research addresses this gap by examining how Indonesian Muslim women migrant workers in Taiwan negotiate moral agency under conditions of legal and social precarity. It seeks to identify the socio-emotional and structural factors that generate moral vulnerability, explore the lived religious experiences of Muslim women in secular migration contexts, and analyze how religious, social, and transnational networks shape forms of ethical resilience. Employing a qualitative, interview-based approach, the study foregrounds migrant women's narratives to capture how faith, emotional needs, and spatially embedded social environments interact in everyday moral decision-making. In doing so, it moves beyond prescriptive moral discourse toward an empirically grounded account of Islamic ethics as lived practice.

This research contributes to interdisciplinary debates in Islamic studies, migration ethics, and gendered labor by reframing moral challenges faced by Muslim migrant women as processes of ethical negotiation rather than moral failure. Theoretically, it advances the concept of Islamic ethical resilience by situating it within lived experiences of legal precarity and transnational mobility. Practically, the findings offer insights for policymakers, religious organizations, and migrant advocacy groups seeking to develop context-sensitive moral support mechanisms that prioritize agency, compassion, and institutional collaboration. By centering moral agency and resilience, this study aligns Islamic ethical discourse with broader global discussions on human dignity, women's agency, and the ethical dimensions of contemporary labor migration.

Literature Review

Islamic Ethics, Moral Agency, and Legal Precarity

Within Islamic epistemology, morality (*akhlaq*) is inseparable from faith (*iman*), positioning ethical conduct as an embodied expression of religious belief rather than mere rule compliance (Yusron et al., 2025). Qur'anic injunctions emphasizing chastity, modesty, and self-restraint—most explicitly articulated in the prohibition of adultery (*zina*) in Qur'an 17:32—frame morality as both preventive and relational, warning not only against transgression but also against circumstances that cultivate moral vulnerability (Auda, 2022; Bakry et al., 2021). Classical scholars such as Al-Ghazali and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah further elaborate this ethical vision through concepts of *mujahadah al-nafs*, *ta'dib*, and *tazkiyah*, emphasizing moral discipline and self-regulation as central to preventing ethical decline (Amini, 2022; Cahyono et al., 2024).

In migration contexts, however, the enactment of Islamic ethics becomes entangled with conditions of legal and social precarity. The erosion of communal religious supervision—mosques, family structures, and collective moral regulation—creates what scholars describe as spiritual and moral displacement among Muslim diasporas (Anwar, n.d.; Rahman, 2021). Existing studies acknowledge religiosity as a protective factor (Ahmad & Kasim, 2021; Fatimah & Ismail, 2020), yet they rarely interrogate how moral agency is actively exercised and sustained by migrant women themselves within secular legal regimes.

Consequently, Islamic morality is often treated normatively rather than as a lived, negotiated practice shaped by structural constraints.

Migration, Gender, and Moral Vulnerability

Migration scholarship consistently demonstrates that transnational labor is not merely an economic process but a deeply emotional and moral experience that reshapes identity, intimacy, and ethical orientation (Alrasheed, 2015; Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2010). Feminist migration scholars highlight how women migrant workers, particularly those employed in domestic and care sectors, experience intensified isolation, emotional deprivation, and asymmetrical power relations within employers' households (Parreñas, 2005; Piper, 2008; De Tona & Lentin, 2011). For Indonesian women migrant workers in Taiwan, these conditions are exacerbated by live-in employment arrangements, limited mobility, and prolonged separation from families (Elo et al., 2025).

Within this context, moral transgressions such as adultery are frequently framed in public discourse as individual moral failure or cultural deficiency (Robinson, 2003; Anam & Mu'allim, 2023). However, sociological studies suggest that such behaviors are better understood as outcomes of emotional deprivation, weakened social bonds, and what Durkheim conceptualized as *anomie*—a state of moral deregulation produced by disrupted normative environments (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Fleury, 2016; Phizacklea, 2022). Media representations that sensationalize moral scandals involving Indonesian women abroad further reinforce stigma and moral panic, while obscuring the structural and emotional dimensions of migrant vulnerability (Platt, 2018; Saidah & Fahmi, 2023). This literature reveals a persistent gap between moral judgment and socio-structural analysis, leaving migrant women's moral agency largely unexplored.

Moral Regulation, Community Support, and Analytical Frameworks

Research on diaspora communities underscores the importance of collective moral infrastructures—mosques, religious associations, and informal study circles—in sustaining ethical conduct and social belonging (Ismail & Rahim, 2019; Goenka & Thomas, 2024). In Taiwan, however, access to such institutions remains uneven, particularly for domestic workers in residential or rural settings (Hsieh, 2020; Mettang et al., 2024). As a result, Muslim migrant workers increasingly rely on digital religious networks, online *pengajian*, and virtual *da'wah* as alternative sources of moral guidance (Fatimah & Ismail, 2020; Moos, 2024). While these platforms offer continuity of faith, scholars caution that digital religiosity alone cannot fully substitute embodied communal regulation and mentorship (Skog & Lundström, 2022).

Despite growing attention to community support and preventive moral education—such as *wiqayah*, *ta'dib*, and institutional moral empowerment (Al-Attas, 1999; Hashim, 2018; Daud, 2020)—empirical research remains limited in explaining *how* migrant women narrate, spatially manage, and linguistically construct moral resilience in everyday life. To address this gap, this study integrates emotional geography and transitivity analysis. Emotional geography illuminates how moral decision-making is shaped across domestic, workplace, public, and digital spaces (Hargreaves, 2001; Zembylas, 2015), while transitivity analysis reveals how agency, responsibility, and self-regulation are linguistically encoded in migrant women's narratives (Dunlap et al., 2022; Aceros et al., 2021). Together, these frameworks enable a nuanced analysis of Islamic ethical resilience as lived moral practice rather than abstract normativity.

Method

This study employs a qualitative, interview-based research design to examine the lived moral and religious experiences of Indonesian Muslim women migrant workers in Taiwan, with particular attention to how moral agency is enacted under conditions of legal and social precarity (Gerring, 2017). A qualitative approach is especially suited to capturing the subjective, contextual, and narrative dimensions of ethical decision-making that remain inaccessible through quantitative or policy-oriented methods. Data were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews with six Indonesian Muslim women who had been employed in Taiwan as domestic or care workers for periods ranging from two to four years. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, facilitated by a trusted gatekeeper within the migrant

community to ensure ethical sensitivity, cultural appropriateness, and participant safety (Ishtiaq, 2019). This recruitment strategy was particularly important given the vulnerability of migrant domestic workers and the moral sensitivity of the research topic. Interviews were conducted remotely via phone calls and WhatsApp, accommodating participants' work schedules and mobility constraints while also fostering a sense of familiarity and trust. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian to enable nuanced expression of moral and emotional experiences.

Data analysis followed a theoretically integrated analytical framework combining emotional geography and systemic functional linguistic transitivity analysis. Emotional geography was used to map how moral emotions, ethical boundaries, and decision-making processes are shaped across domestic, workplace, public, and digitally mediated spaces within transnational labor arrangements. This spatial-emotional lens enabled the identification of patterned moral responses linked to proximity, isolation, surveillance, and mobility. Complementing this approach, transitivity analysis was employed to examine how participants linguistically constructed agency, responsibility, and moral self-regulation within their narratives, focusing on process types, participant roles, and circumstantial elements (Vishnevskaya et al., 2021). The integration of these two analytical lenses allowed for a multi-layered interpretation of moral resilience, capturing both the spatial-emotional conditions of ethical negotiation and the discursive mechanisms through which Islamic ethical commitments are articulated and sustained. This methodological synthesis enhances analytical rigor and provides an empirically grounded account of Islamic moral agency as lived practice within legally precarious migration contexts.

Results

This section presents the findings through an integrated socio-legal analysis that combines emotional geography (EG) and systemic functional linguistic transitivity. Rather than treating participants' practices as isolated moral behaviors, the analysis conceptualizes them as forms of everyday moral and legal negotiation within conditions of legal precarity (Ali, 2007; Zainuri et al., 2023). The findings are organized into three interrelated analytical dimensions: (1) spatial regulation of morality, (2) linguistic construction of moral agency, and (3) community-based norm production beyond state law.

Spatial Regulation of Morality: Emotional Geographies of Ethical Safeguarding

Participants' narratives demonstrate that moral resilience is deeply structured by spatial arrangements produced through migration and labor regimes. As live-in domestic workers, participants experienced intensive spatial control within employers' households, restricted mobility, and blurred boundaries between private and professional domains. Within these constraints, participants actively reconfigured space as a moral resource rather than a neutral backdrop.

Several participants described deliberate practices of spatial avoidance, particularly in relation to public spaces perceived as ethically risky. One married participant (AA) explained:

"I avoid places where people drink or gather freely at night. Even on my day off, I prefer to stay near the mosque or with friends I trust."

From an emotional geography perspective, this strategy reflects the production of protective moral geographies, whereby spaces are affectively coded according to perceived ethical safety. Night markets and entertainment districts were narrated as zones of moral vulnerability, while mosques, shared Muslim households, and trusted peer environments were constructed as spaces of ethical security. This spatial differentiation functions as a preventive moral mechanism that compensates for the absence of formal religious or legal safeguards in migrants' everyday environments.

Importantly, the workplace itself emerged as a contested moral space. Constant proximity to employers and male household members required participants to negotiate informal spatial boundaries within the home, such as limiting movement, regulating visibility, and avoiding unnecessary interaction. These micro-spatial practices illustrate how moral regulation operates at the intimate level, revealing the limited reach of state labor law in governing domestic workspaces and affective relations.

Linguistic Construction of Moral Agency: Transitivity and Ethical Self-Governance

Transitivity analysis of interview narratives reveals that participants consistently positioned themselves as active moral subjects rather than passive recipients of religious norms. Material processes dominated their accounts, foregrounding intentional actions such as *avoiding*, *choosing*, *wearing*, and *restricting*. For example, an unmarried participant (CC) stated:

“I choose to wear my hijab tightly when I go out, because it reminds me who I am and what I must protect.”

The material process *choose* explicitly encodes agency, while the relational clause *who I am* constructs religious identity as an ethical anchor. The hijab thus functions not merely as a symbol of piety but as a performative moral boundary that regulates social interaction and reinforces self-discipline. From a socio-legal perspective, such identity performances operate as informal normative claims in public space, signaling ethical limits in contexts where formal regulation is absent.

Mental processes further reveal sustained moral deliberation. Participants frequently employed verbs such as *feel*, *remember*, and *fear*, indicating ongoing self-surveillance in morally ambiguous situations. One participant (DD) reflected:

“Sometimes I feel lonely, but I remember my responsibility to my family and to God.”

Here, emotional vulnerability is linguistically counterbalanced by moral reasoning, transforming affective states into sites of ethical decision-making. These narratives exemplify an internalized form of moral regulation that operates in the absence of enforceable legal standards governing intimacy and personal relationships.

Community-Based Norm Production beyond State Law

Beyond individual strategies, participants emphasized the central role of peer networks as informal regulatory structures. WhatsApp groups, weekend religious gatherings, and mosque-based communities functioned as spaces for collective norm production, offering moral reminders, emotional support, and subtle forms of social accountability. One participant (EE) noted:

“When one of us starts getting too close to someone, the others will remind her — not harshly, but as sisters.”

This interaction illustrates a form of non-state normative governance in which moral rules are negotiated and enforced through relational practices rather than legal institutions. Such dynamics align with socio-legal scholarship on legal pluralism, demonstrating how marginalized groups rely on alternative normative orders when state law is silent or insufficient.

Digital religious spaces further extended these moral geographies beyond physical constraints. Online religious lectures and virtual prayer groups enabled participants to sustain ethical commitments despite long working hours and restricted mobility. However, participants also acknowledged the limitations of digital religiosity, emphasizing that virtual support could not fully substitute embodied communal presence. This tension underscores the spatial limits of digital moral regulation in contexts of labor precarity.

Moral Resilience as Everyday Legal Consciousness

Synthesizing the emotional geography and transitivity analyses, the findings indicate that participants’ moral practices constitute a form of everyday legal consciousness. Rather than mobilizing formal legal mechanisms, participants navigated overlapping normative systems—Islamic ethics, employer authority, and Taiwanese secular law—through embodied, spatial, and linguistic practices.

Moral resilience, in this sense, emerges not as individual moral exceptionalism but as an adaptive response to structural exclusion from legal protection. The strategies identified reveal how migrant women actively govern their conduct within legally unregulated domains of intimacy and morality, challenging dominant portrayals of migrant domestic workers as passive victims.

From a law-and-society perspective, these findings expose the limitations of state-centered labor regulation in addressing the full spectrum of migrant well-being. While Taiwanese labor law regulates wages and working conditions, it remains largely silent on the moral, emotional, and religious dimensions of migrant life. In this regulatory gap, Islamic ethical frameworks and community-based norms emerge as critical sources of guidance and resilience. By integrating emotional geography and linguistic analysis, this

study advances socio-legal understandings of how morality, space, and language interact in the everyday lives of legally precarious migrants (Kodir, 2019).

Discussion

The strategies adopted by Muslim women migrant workers in Taiwan can be more comprehensively understood through the combined analytical lenses of emotional geography (EG) and transitivity, both of which offer a robust framework for unpacking lived religious experiences within transnational and minority contexts (Barkah et al., 2022). These approaches move beyond descriptive accounts by illuminating how emotional attachments, spatial negotiations, and linguistic representations of action intersect to produce resilience. In doing so, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that situates religious practice not merely as belief, but as an embodied, spatially situated, and agentic process (Marzuki & Diana, 2023).

From the perspective of emotional geography, the findings demonstrate that participants actively constructed emotional spaces that enabled them to sustain their Islamic identity amid structural and cultural marginalization. Personal geographies played a critical role, as emotional bonds with fellow Muslim migrant workers functioned as intimate networks of care and moral reinforcement. These networks mitigated alienation and psychological vulnerability, echoing previous studies that emphasize the protective role of religious communities in migrant well-being (Juddi et al., 2021). Rather than being passive recipients of support, participants strategically cultivated these relationships, highlighting emotional geography as a dynamic and agentic process.

Cultural and moral geographies further revealed how participants navigated value dissonance between Islamic norms and the dominant socio-cultural environment in Taiwan. Exposure to practices perceived as incongruent with Islamic teachings did not necessarily lead to assimilation; instead, it often intensified participants' moral reflexivity and commitment to religious observance. This finding supports Rosyidah's (2024) assertion that moral boundaries become more pronounced in minority contexts, where faith operates as a stabilizing identity marker. Public religious expressions – such as praying during breaks or wearing the hijab – served not only as acts of devotion but also as visible assertions of moral presence. These practices can be interpreted as forms of non-verbal *da'wah*, subtly communicating Islamic values while negotiating visibility and acceptance in public spaces (King-White & Giardina, 2023).

Professional geographies added another layer of complexity, illustrating how participants navigated workplaces that were often indifferent or unfamiliar with Islamic practices. Rather than framing this unfamiliarity as outright hostility, participants demonstrated adaptive resilience by integrating faith-based principles into professional conduct. Respect, patience, and ethical work behavior – rooted in religious teachings – became tools for negotiating professional legitimacy (Wijaya et al., 2015). This aligns with McDevitt et al. (2025), who argue that faith can function as an ethical compass enabling minority workers to maintain dignity and agency within asymmetric power relations.

The transitivity analysis of participants' narratives complements the emotional geography framework by revealing how agency, cognition, and relational positioning are linguistically constructed (Roberts & Butler, 2022). Material processes dominated participants' accounts, foregrounding concrete actions such as joining prayer groups, selectively avoiding environments deemed morally risky, and maintaining modest dress codes. These actions were not merely habitual but intentional strategies aimed at preserving religious integrity (Up-Paris, 2025; Lam, 2023). Such findings underscore that resilience is enacted through everyday practices rather than abstract belief alone.

Mental processes within the narratives exposed the internal dimensions of resilience, including moments of doubt, moral negotiation, and self-discipline. Participants' reflections illustrate the cognitive labor involved in sustaining faith under constant exposure to alternative value systems. This internal struggle, coupled with determination, highlights resilience as an ongoing psychological process rather than a fixed trait (Xu & Stahl, 2025). Meanwhile, relational processes illuminated how participants carefully managed interpersonal boundaries with coworkers and fellow migrants. By selectively engaging while

maintaining religious limits, participants demonstrated what Hamidi (2016) describes as “relational balancing,” a strategy crucial for survival in multicultural labor settings.

Central to these strategies is the internalization of Islamic teachings, particularly the concept of modesty (*haya*), which emerged as a foundational moral framework. Participants frequently referenced Quranic guidance, notably QS. An-Nur: 31, as a source of ethical clarity and behavioral guidance (Akan, 2015). These teachings not only shaped outward practices such as dress and interaction but also reinforced participants’ self-concept as Muslim women entrusted with moral responsibility (Kober et al., 2022). In line with Supri et al. (2020), the findings suggest that Islamic values function as a moral infrastructure that enables consistency and coherence in behavior, even within culturally incongruent environments. The sustained alignment between belief and action reflects a form of lived piety that is both adaptive and resilient (Riyanta et al., 2025).

This research advances scholarly understanding of Muslim women’s migration experiences by foregrounding the moral and emotional dimensions often overlooked in labor migration research. While much of the existing literature prioritizes economic precarity and structural exploitation, the present findings demonstrate that faith, emotion, and morality are equally central to migrant subjectivity. By integrating emotional geography and transitivity analysis, this study offers a nuanced account of how religious identity is actively negotiated and sustained in diasporic contexts. These insights hold significant implications for policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders in designing culturally sensitive support systems that acknowledge not only the material needs of migrant workers but also their moral and spiritual well-being. In this way, the study contributes to broader discussions on faith, migration, and resilience in an increasingly mobile and pluralistic world.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that Indonesian Muslim women migrant workers in Taiwan actively sustain their Islamic ethical commitments amid culturally non-Islamic and legally precarious environments through deliberate forms of moral agency. By integrating emotional geography and systemic functional linguistic transitivity analysis, the findings show that Islamic values—particularly the principle of modesty (*haya*)—are enacted across personal, cultural, and professional geographies, as well as through material, mental, and relational processes. These practices illustrate that faith operates not merely as belief or identity, but as a lived moral framework guiding everyday decisions, social interactions, and self-regulation. By foregrounding moral agency rather than vulnerability alone, this study contributes to migration and socio-legal scholarship by offering a nuanced understanding of how religion intersects with migration and morality in diasporic contexts.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its small sample size and its focus on a specific demographic group within a single national context. Future research could expand this inquiry through comparative studies across different cultural, legal, and occupational settings, or by examining the role of community networks, religious institutions, and institutional support mechanisms in fostering ethical resilience among Muslim migrant populations. Such research would deepen understanding of faith-based moral agency in transnational migration and inform the development of more inclusive, culturally responsive policies that address not only the legal but also the moral and spiritual dimensions of migrant workers’ lives.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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