



Navigating Urban Belonging: Identity Fragmentation and Resilience Among Female Economic Migrants in Southeast Asian Cities

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ABSTRACT

Urban multiculturalism increasingly shapes the lived experiences of female economic migrants, who navigate complex processes of identity, belonging, and adaptation in metropolitan settings. This study examines how migrant women negotiate cultural identity in urban environments that are both diverse and subtly assimilationist. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research involved in-depth interview with ten female migrants aged 23–46, residing in Jakarta and Surabaya, and originating from five different cultural backgrounds (Javanese, Batak, Minang, Sundanese, and Eastern Indonesian ethnic groups).

Findings reveal that participants experience cultural fragmentation, emotional labor, and identity concealment in response to societal expectations and urban anonymity. Many reported internal conflicts, public invisibility, and pressures to conform, leading to shifts in self-perception and emotional fatigue. Despite these challenges, women found empowerment through informal community support, religious gatherings, culinary practices, and cultural rituals, which provided emotional anchoring and a sense of reconstructed belonging.

The study suggests that for female migrants, cultural identity is not a linear trajectory of integration or resistance, but a fluid, emotionally charged negotiation shaped by everyday experiences. These insights point to the need for inclusive urban policies and culturally sensitive mental health services that address the specific needs of women migrants. By centering the affective dimensions of adaptation, this research contributes to migration studies and urban sociology, highlighting how resilience is embedded in ordinary acts of cultural affirmation.



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INTRODUCTION

In an era of intensified global mobility, female economic migration has become increasingly prominent in shaping urban life, particularly in multicultural metropolitan settings (Dejene dkk., 2024). Among the most significant shifts has been the increasing presence of female economic migrants in metropolitan centers worldwide, contributing not only as workers but also as agents of cultural transformation. These women navigate complex intersections of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status as they move across borders and adapt to host societies.

Despite the growing visibility of female migrants, their lived experiences—especially concerning cultural identity—remain underexplored in both research and policy (García-Rojas dkk., 2023; Kräft dkk., 2024). While globalization fosters multicultural coexistence, it simultaneously imposes subtle demands for assimilation and conformity. As a result, many female migrants find themselves negotiating the fragile balance between preserving their cultural roots and adapting to dominant norms. This tension often manifests not only in public spaces but also in deeply personal encounters—affecting how they see themselves, how they are perceived by others, and how they make sense of belonging in unfamiliar environments.

Understanding this phenomenon is essential in a world where belonging and exclusion coexist in complex ways (Machado dkk., 2024; Tabatabaei dkk., 2024). The subjective dimension of

migration—how individuals experience and interpret their displacement, adaptation, and identity—is especially critical to uncovering the hidden emotional and psychological layers of integration (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024). In contexts where xenophobia, cultural stereotyping, and structural marginalization persist, female migrants' stories offer valuable insights into the human cost and resilience involved in cultural navigation.

Given the richness and complexity of these lived experiences, a phenomenological approach is particularly suited to capture the essence of what it means to be a migrant woman negotiating identity in urban multicultural societies. Such exploration provides not only academic insight but also ethical and social relevance by giving voice to those often positioned at the margins of mainstream narratives.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals—particularly in contexts marked by migration, identity negotiation, and cultural adaptation—has emerged as a vital domain within the social sciences and humanities (Padua dkk., 2021; Pearce dkk., 2024). In recent years, scholarly attention has increasingly turned to how migrant populations interpret their everyday realities and navigate the affective and symbolic boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Foresheew & Al-Jawad, 2022). Among these, the experiences of female economic migrants stand out due to the multilayered challenges they face at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and mobility.

However, much of the existing literature has relied heavily on quantitative frameworks or policy-driven analyses that, while valuable, often overlook the nuanced meanings embedded in personal narratives (Khanam & Parihar, 2024; Olitsky dkk., 2020). Surveys and statistical models may capture broad patterns of integration or discrimination but are limited in their ability to reflect the internal processes through which migrants make sense of their social world. As a result, these approaches may fail to illuminate the subtle emotional labor, cultural dissonance, and identity negotiations that constitute the core of the migrant experience.

This methodological gap underscores the need for phenomenological inquiry, which seeks to uncover the essence of human experience through deep engagement with subjective meaning (Hou & Liu, 2024; Potdevin dkk., 2021). The complexities of identity formation, especially in metropolitan multicultural environments, cannot be fully understood without engaging the voices and perspectives of those who live through these tensions daily. By centering individual narratives and prioritizing the interpretation of lived experience, phenomenology offers a critical corrective to prevailing approaches that tend to abstract or generalize the migrant condition.

In addressing the challenges faced by female economic migrants, much of the prevailing discourse has relied on pragmatic solutions—such as integration programs, legal frameworks, or employment support systems—geared toward improving measurable outcomes like job placement, language acquisition, or civic participation (Hauser, 2021). While these interventions are undoubtedly valuable, they often rest on assumptions of universal applicability and overlook the intricate layers of personal meaning and identity negotiation that underlie migrants' lived experiences.

These practical approaches, typically informed by quantitative methods, tend to treat migrants as a homogenous group and reduce complex experiences to broad indicators (Atlam dkk., 2022; McMullan dkk., 2020). As a consequence, they fall short of capturing the rich emotional, symbolic, and relational dimensions of cultural adaptation and identity reconstruction. For instance, they may document the frequency of xenophobic encounters but fail to address how such encounters shape a woman's sense of self, belonging, and agency over time.

This gap highlights the urgent need for a methodological shift—one that places the subjective voice at the center of inquiry (Liu dkk., 2024; Zewude dkk., 2025). Phenomenology offers a powerful alternative by enabling the exploration of personal meaning, situated context, and emotional nuance in ways that quantitative models cannot. Through a phenomenological lens, it becomes possible to understand how female migrants interpret, internalize, and respond to the cultural forces they encounter in metropolitan environments, thereby revealing the essence of their experiences with greater depth and authenticity.

Previous research on migrant identity has highlighted the complex interplay between cultural integration, gender, and belonging. Scholars such as (Lambert dkk., 2022) have emphasized intersectionality and the translocational dimensions of migrant experience. However, many studies still prioritize structural or policy-level analysis, often at the expense of capturing personal meanings. There is limited work that fully explores how migrant women experience and interpret cultural pressures in their everyday lives. This study addresses that gap by focusing on lived experiences from the perspective of the migrants themselves.

This article uses an interpretative phenomenological approach to uncover how female economic migrants make sense of their cultural identities in urban multicultural contexts. This method was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of subjective meaning and emotional complexity. It responds directly to the limitations of prior approaches by centering the participants' voices and lived realities. By examining these narratives, the study offers new insights into how identity is shaped through both internal negotiation and external societal pressures. Phenomenology provides a holistic lens for understanding the essence of such deeply personal experiences.

The article is structured as follows. It begins with an introduction to the broader context of female migration and identity (Mendenhall dkk., 2019). This is followed by a description of the methodological approach, including the use of in-depth interviews and interpretative analysis. The results section presents key themes supported by narrative data from participants. The discussion then explores the implications of the findings, and the article concludes by highlighting contributions to theory and policy.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of female economic migrants navigating cultural identity within a multicultural metropolitan context (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Phenomenology was selected as a suitable framework because it focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences (Na dkk., 2024). The interpretative orientation, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, was deemed appropriate for capturing the nuanced interplay between personal identity and broader sociocultural dynamics. This approach enabled a rich, in-depth exploration of the meanings that participants assign to their interactions, adaptations, and expressions of identity within urban environments shaped by diversity and implicit assimilation pressures.

Participants

Participants consisted of female economic migrants residing in Jakarta, Indonesia—a metropolitan area selected for its high cultural heterogeneity, rapid urbanization, and significance as a regional economic hub. Jakarta serves as a destination for internal and transnational migration and offers a layered cultural terrain where cosmopolitanism intersects with persistent structural inequalities (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Purposive sampling was employed to identify individuals who had lived in the host city for at least two years and had direct experience engaging with dominant cultural structures while maintaining ties to their cultural origin. Inclusion criteria included adult women aged 25–45, originating from non-Western cultural backgrounds, and involved in formal or informal employment sectors (Nagaraj & Thebora, 2024). Exclusion criteria involved individuals with less than one year of residence or those unwilling to discuss their cultural identity experiences. A total of 10 participants were involved in the study, representing diverse linguistic, religious, and regional origins, thereby enriching the contextual depth of the data.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an open-ended protocol designed to elicit detailed narratives of cultural identity negotiation (Iosifides, 2011; Longhofer dkk., 2012). Interviews were conducted in a private setting, either in participants' homes or in a mutually agreed neutral space, to ensure a comfortable and secure environment. Each session

lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. Interviews were conducted in either English or the participants' native language, facilitated by an interpreter when necessary, to preserve the authenticity of expressions (Patchen dkk., 2024). The interview guide was developed based on themes from existing literature and refined after a pilot test to enhance clarity and responsiveness to participants' contexts.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a structured and iterative process (Daly, 2007; Murphy & Dingwall, 2017). Transcripts were first reviewed multiple times to immerse in the content and identify significant statements. These statements were coded into meaning units, which were then organized into emergent themes reflecting the essence of participants' experiences. The analysis proceeded through a series of reduction and abstraction steps, maintaining fidelity to the participants' original expressions while uncovering deeper interpretative layers (Pollack, 2020). ATLAS.ti software was used to facilitate the organization and visualization of codes and themes. The analysis aimed to construct thematic narratives that captured both individual meanings and shared experiential patterns across the participant group.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection (Clair, 2003; Fenton & Baxter, 2016). Written informed consent was secured from all participants after providing comprehensive information about the study's aims, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any point (Perez-Brumer dkk., 2021). All data were anonymized to protect participant identity, and pseudonyms were used in the reporting of findings. Confidentiality was strictly maintained through secure storage of digital and physical data. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant local regulatory frameworks for research involving human participants.

RESULTS

The Fragmentation of Cultural Identity in Urban Spaces

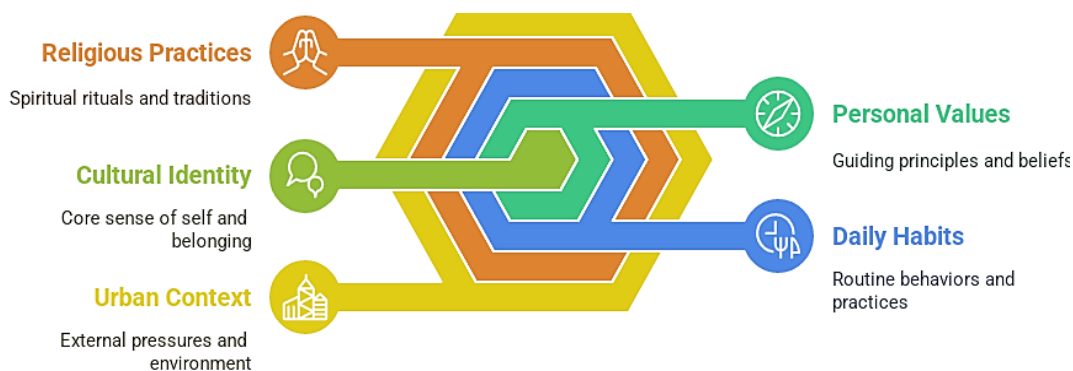
Participants consistently described the experience of identity fragmentation as a response to implicit pressures to assimilate in the host culture. This fragmentation was not only linguistic or behavioral but extended into core aspects of selfhood—values, faith, and memory.

“They told me that my name is too difficult to pronounce, so I started using a nickname. But with every introduction, I feel like I am losing a piece of who I am.” (Participant 3)

This quote illustrates the existential tension between visibility and erasure. Adapting to be legible in public spaces required participants to edit themselves, often at the cost of their cultural continuity. Although many lived in a diverse urban setting, they reported that public acceptance was contingent on suppressing ethnic markers. This paradox—being both hyper-visible and socially invisible—was central to the experience of cultural dislocation.

Such dissonance confirms that urban multiculturalism, while appearing inclusive, can perpetuate homogenizing norms that obscure migrant identities.

Cultural Identity Fragmentation



Negotiating Belonging through Performance and Concealment

To navigate xenophobia and social exclusion, participants developed strategies of adaptation that included cultural performance—intentionally highlighting or downplaying aspects of their identity based on context. Some described altering their dress, accent, or behavior to be more “acceptable” or “less foreign.”

“When I wear my traditional clothes, I get stares. So now I only wear them at home or on special days. I want to be proud, but I also want to feel safe.” (Participant 6)

Such acts of concealment were not devoid of emotional cost. They often came with feelings of shame, guilt, or internal conflict, as participants grappled with the authenticity of their self-representation.

Emotional Labor and the Silent Burden of Adaptation

A recurring thread across narratives was the emotional toll of constant adaptation. Participants spoke of fatigue from code-switching, hyper-vigilance in public spaces, and the pressure to prove their “worthiness” in both professional and social contexts.

“Every day, I feel like I’m being tested. I need to speak perfect language, behave correctly, smile politely—even when I’m tired. I don’t want to confirm their stereotypes.” (Participant 2)

This emotional labor was described as invisible yet exhausting, especially in environments where support systems were lacking or minimal. The absence of culturally sensitive mental health services further intensified the burden.

Resilience and Reclamation of Cultural Identity

Despite these challenges, several participants described moments of empowerment and self-affirmation. Through community spaces, religious gatherings, and cultural events, they found avenues to reconnect with their heritage and assert their identity with pride.

“I joined a women’s group where we speak our language and cook our food together. It reminds me that I still belong somewhere, even if it’s not where I live now.” (Participant 5)

These spaces provided more than nostalgia—they served as critical platforms for resilience, resistance, and identity negotiation. Participants reframed their migrant experience not only as one of loss but also as a process of cultural growth and transformation.

The experiences of female economic migrants navigating cultural identity in urban multicultural environments are marked by complex emotional landscapes—oscillating between alienation and resilience, concealment and expression. While the urban context presents opportunities for cultural exchange, it also reinforces exclusionary pressures that challenge the authenticity and continuity of personal identity. These findings illuminate the nuanced and dynamic ways in which migrant women experience, negotiate, and reconstruct their sense of self amid systemic and everyday encounters with otherness.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that female economic migrants experience cultural identity as a dynamic and often conflicted process, marked by fragmentation, emotional labor, and resilience (Riley & Mensah, 2024). These insights directly respond to the central research question by illuminating how migrant women interpret, navigate, and reconfigure their sense of self within metropolitan contexts shaped simultaneously by multiculturalism and subtle pressures toward assimilation.

By centering the subjective voices of participants, this study provides a nuanced understanding of cultural identity as lived and felt, rather than imposed or externally defined. It highlights how acts of concealment, performance, and cultural reclamation are not merely coping strategies, but deeply embedded expressions of agency and meaning-making. These insights extend the conceptual boundaries of integration by shifting the focus from policy outcomes to personal narratives. The study contributes uniquely by bringing to light the emotional and relational dimensions often absent in dominant migration discourse, thus offering a richer, more human-centered view of cultural adaptation.

These findings resonate with and expand upon earlier work by (Santillan-Rosas & González-Nieto, 2020) on intersectional identity and belonging, and by (Shaikh, 2024), who emphasized migrant women's agency in redefining citizenship. While past research has addressed structural aspects of migration and identity, this study underscores the intimate, affective negotiations that occur beneath those structures. The theme of emotional labor aligns with recent discussions in feminist migration literature about invisible burdens (Shelton dkk., 2021), while the experience of fragmentation supports (Tandon & Srinivasan, 2024) notion of translocational positionality. However, the emphasis on resilience through collective spaces and cultural rituals adds a novel perspective that affirms the importance of community-based belonging in identity reconstruction.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. From a scholarly perspective, the findings enrich our understanding of how identity is constructed and contested in migratory contexts through subjective, everyday experiences. Socially and culturally, the narratives reveal that identity negotiation among female migrants is not an isolated psychological process but one that is relational, situated, and deeply shaped by systemic dynamics such as gender norms and cultural exclusion. Practically, the study highlights the need for host societies, particularly in urban multicultural settings, to design more culturally sensitive programs that acknowledge and support the emotional and identity-related challenges faced by migrant women. These insights are relevant not only for policymakers and social workers, but also for educators, employers, and mental health professionals working within increasingly diverse communities.

Despite the richness of the findings, the study has certain limitations. The sample was limited to a small group of participants from a specific metropolitan area, which may restrict the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Furthermore, while the interpretative phenomenological approach allows for depth and nuance, it is inherently subjective and shaped by the context of the interaction between participant and researcher. The emphasis on lived experience limits the capacity for generalization and makes replication across broader populations difficult. These limitations are not weaknesses, but rather inherent features of phenomenological inquiry that point to the need for complementary studies using varied methods and contexts.

Future research could build upon these findings by exploring similar identity negotiation processes among different migrant populations, including men, youth, or refugees, to understand how intersectional factors alter experiences of cultural belonging. Comparative studies across different host cities or cultural regions could also reveal how local norms and integration models influence identity construction. Additionally, longitudinal designs might uncover how identity evolves over time and how resilience is sustained or transformed. These future directions hold promise for further advancing theoretical frameworks in migration studies and for informing inclusive, human-centered policy and practice.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how female economic migrants construct and negotiate their cultural identities within multicultural metropolitan environments. The findings revealed four key experiential themes: identity fragmentation, emotional labor, cultural concealment, and resilient self-reclamation. These experiential patterns offer insight into how integration is not merely a structural or policy process, but a subjective and affective negotiation involving daily acts of adaptation, silence, and resistance.

Theoretically, the study contributes to migration and identity literature by foregrounding the intersection of gender, emotion, and cultural meaning-making in translocational contexts. It challenges assimilationist models that neglect internal experiences and expands existing frameworks by integrating phenomenological insights into how identity is felt, contested, and redefined. This reinforces the need to understand migration not just as relocation, but as continuous identity reconstruction shaped by systemic, symbolic, and interpersonal forces.

In practical terms, the findings highlight the urgent need for culturally responsive urban programs and services—particularly mental health, social support, and integration initiatives—that account for the emotional and symbolic dimensions of migration. Policymakers and practitioners should prioritize the creation of safe communal spaces where migrant women can engage in cultural expression without fear of marginalization. Schools, workplaces, and healthcare institutions should receive training in intercultural sensitivity to reduce implicit pressures toward conformity and foster inclusive belonging.

Future studies could extend these findings by comparing identity negotiation across diverse migrant demographics, such as undocumented women, refugee populations, or second-generation migrants. Longitudinal research would also be valuable in capturing how resilience and self-concept evolve over time, particularly in response to shifting social, legal, and political environments. Such work will be essential in building intersectional, human-centered migration policies that move beyond economic metrics and center lived realities.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All funding sources and institutional affiliations have been disclosed, and no financial or personal relationships have influenced the outcomes of this research.

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