

Circular Migration and the Informal Labor Trap: Integrating Migration Theory and Islamic Economics among Madurese Stall Workers

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ABSTRACT

Keyword

Migrasi Sirkuler,
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Migrasi sirkuler pekerja informal menjadi fenomena yang terus berkembang akibat keterbatasan kesempatan kerja di daerah asal. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis faktor pendorong migrasi sirkuler, karakteristik pekerjaan, pengelolaan pendapatan, serta potensi terjadinya informal labour trap pada pekerja penjaga warung asal Madura. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif-interpretatif dengan melibatkan tujuh informan yang dipilih melalui teknik purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan dianalisis menggunakan thematic analysis berbantuan NVivo 15. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa migrasi sirkuler didorong oleh rendahnya peluang kerja dan pendapatan di daerah asal, kebutuhan ekonomi keluarga, serta pengaruh jaringan sosial perantau. Akses pekerjaan umumnya diperoleh melalui teman, saudara, dan komunitas perantau Madura. Pekerjaan sebagai penjaga warung ditandai oleh jam kerja panjang, minim perlindungan kerja, dan hubungan kerja yang berbasis kepercayaan. Pendapatan yang diperoleh sebagian besar digunakan untuk memenuhi kebutuhan keluarga, remitansi, tabungan, dan investasi sederhana. Migrasi memberikan dampak positif terhadap kesejahteraan keluarga melalui peningkatan pendapatan dan stabilitas ekonomi. Namun, keterbatasan mobilitas ke sektor formal dan ketergantungan pada pekerjaan informal menunjukkan adanya indikasi informal labour trap. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa migrasi sirkuler menjadi strategi ekonomi yang efektif dalam meningkatkan kesejahteraan keluarga, tetapi belum sepenuhnya mampu menciptakan transformasi ekonomi yang berkelanjutan.

ABSTRAK

Kata Kunci:

Circular Migration,
Informal Migration,
Economic Well-
Being, Informal

Circular migration among informal workers is a growing phenomenon due to limited employment opportunities in their regions of origin. This study aims to analyze the driving factors of circular migration, job characteristics, income management, and the potential for an informal labor trap among small shop attendants from Madura. The study employs a descriptive-interpretive qualitative approach, involving seven informants selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis with the assistance of NVivo 15. The results indicate that circular migration is driven by limited job opportunities and low income in their regions of origin, family economic needs, and the influence of migrants' social networks. Access to employment is generally obtained through friends, relatives, and the Madurese migrant community. Work as a shop attendant is characterized by long working hours, minimal labor protections, and employment relationships based on trust. The income earned is largely used to meet family needs, for remittances, savings, and simple investments. Migration has a positive impact on family well-being through increased income and economic stability. However, limited mobility into the formal sector and dependence on informal work indicate the presence of an informal labor trap. This study concludes that circular migration is an effective economic strategy for improving family well-being but has not yet been fully capable of creating sustainable economic transformation.



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INTRODUCTION

In developing countries, urbanization and rural-to-urban migration continue to increase as part of broader processes of economic structural transformation (Ayyubi, 2025). In Indonesia, the proportion of the urban population has exceeded 57% of the total population, reflecting the continuing shift of economic activity and employment toward urban areas (Badan Pusat Statistik [BPS], 2024). This transformation is closely associated with structural disparities between rural and urban regions, particularly differences in employment opportunities and income prospects that encourage workers to move in search of better livelihoods (Kuncoro, 2021). In the Indonesian context, substantial domestic migration originates from regions where productive employment opportunities remain limited, including Madura, Nusa Tenggara, and parts of Sulawesi (Fauziyah, 2022). Migration, therefore, is not merely a movement of population but also a livelihood strategy shaped by unequal economic opportunities between places of origin and destination.

The economic rationale for such mobility can be understood through the Todaro Migration Model, which explains migration decisions in terms of differences in expected income between origin and destination regions (Morsky, 2025). Individuals are more likely to migrate when the expected economic benefits of moving are perceived to outweigh the costs and risks associated with relocation. Yet, higher expected income does not necessarily lead to access to stable or protected employment. The limited capacity of the formal sector to absorb additional workers means that many migrants enter informal employment, where entry barriers are relatively low but employment conditions are often less secure (Ngadi, 2025). In Indonesia, approximately 58–60% of the workforce has remained engaged in the informal sector in recent years (Badan Pusat Statistik [BPS], 2024). The informal sector consequently constitutes an important destination for workers whose access to formal employment is constrained, including internal migrants.

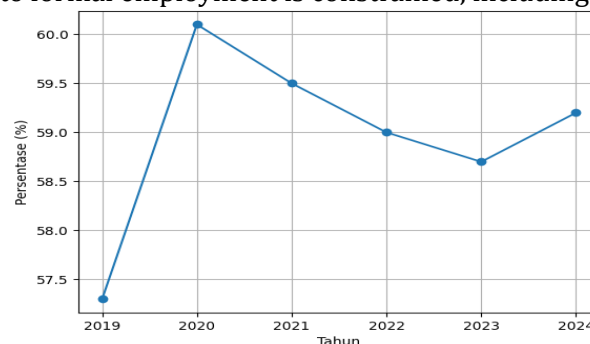


Figure 1. Percentage of the Workforce in the Informal Sector in Indonesia
(Source: BPS, 2024)

The informal sector provides an accessible source of employment, particularly for workers with limited education and skills (Desanta & Aisyah, 2025). At the same time, informal employment is commonly associated with relatively low wages, long working hours, limited social protection, and unstable working conditions (Muhammed & Musa, 2025). These characteristics can increase economic vulnerability and restrict workers' opportunities to improve their long-term well-being (Ayyubi, 2025). The issue, therefore, is not simply whether migration provides access to employment, but whether the employment obtained through migration enables workers and their families to move beyond economic vulnerability.

This condition can be observed among Madurese workers who migrate to major cities such as Jakarta to work as shop attendants in the informal sector (Muzayyana, 2026). These jobs are typically characterized by long working hours, informal employment arrangements, and minimal labor protection (Desanta & Aisyah, 2025). After their employment period ends, workers tend to return to their home regions; however, limited economic opportunities in their villages may encourage them to migrate again when additional income is needed (Pratama, 2025). This repeated movement between the region of origin and destination reflects a pattern of circular migration. Although migration can increase income in the short term, repeated dependence on informal employment may prevent workers from achieving sustained economic mobility. Income

generated through migration may improve immediate household conditions without necessarily producing sufficient productive assets or alternative livelihoods that could reduce dependence on migration.

This condition highlights an important limitation in understanding the relationship between migration and economic well-being. The Todaro Migration Model explains why workers move in response to differences in expected income between origin and destination regions (Morsky, 2025). However, the experience of migrant workers also demonstrates that higher income at the destination does not automatically translate into sustainable economic improvement. Structural constraints within the informal sector may continue to restrict occupational mobility and access to more secure employment (Muhammed & Musa, 2025). This situation points to the possibility of an *informal labor trap*, in which workers remain dependent on informal employment without achieving meaningful economic mobility. The phenomenon can be further understood through Dual Labor Market Theory, which distinguishes between a primary labor market characterized by stability and protection and a secondary labor market marked by insecure employment, limited protection, and restricted opportunities for advancement (Ngadi, 2025).

Several studies have examined the relationship between migration and well-being, although much of the existing literature focuses either on the general consequences of migration or on formal and informal employment as separate issues (Huang et al., 2023; Németh et al., 2022). Research specifically addressing circular migration within the domestic informal sector, particularly among micro-scale informal workers such as small shop attendants, remains relatively limited (Grüneisl, 2025; Katta et al., 2024). Furthermore, studies examining the relationship between circular migration and the potential emergence of an *informal labor trap* in the context of internal migration in Indonesia are still scarce. This gap is important because repeated migration may simultaneously improve household income and reproduce workers' dependence on vulnerable forms of employment.

The economic dimensions of circular migration, however, do not fully capture the meaning of livelihood decisions among Muslim workers. Circular migration may also be understood through religious values concerning work, family responsibility, lawful income, and the pursuit of well-being. This consideration is particularly relevant in the context of Madurese communities, where religious values are closely connected with social and economic life (Al Humaidy et al., 2024). The decision to migrate may therefore be influenced not only by economic opportunities but also by values associated with striving, responsibility for family welfare, and efforts to achieve sustainable well-being (Jauzi & Ceasar, 2025). An Islamic economic perspective provides an important basis for examining whether the economic benefits generated through migration contribute to broader and more sustainable forms of welfare.

In Islam, work is closely connected with human responsibility and the pursuit of lawful livelihood. Allah states in Surah Al-Jumu'ah [62]:10:

"When the prayer has been performed, then disperse throughout the land and seek the bounty of Allah..."

The verse places the pursuit of livelihood within a framework of lawful effort. Seeking employment, including through migration, can therefore be understood as a form of *ikhtiar* when it is directed toward obtaining lawful income and fulfilling legitimate responsibilities. For workers living in regions with limited employment opportunities, circular migration may represent an effort to secure a livelihood while fulfilling responsibility toward family members.

A similar meaning is conveyed in Surah Al-Mulk [67]:15:

"It is He who has made the earth easy for you, so travel through its regions and eat of His provision..."

The verse emphasizes human movement in seeking sustenance and utilizing the opportunities available on earth. In the context of this study, the migration of Madurese workers

to urban areas can be understood as an expression of *ikhtiar* in responding to differences in employment opportunities between their regions of origin and destination. Nevertheless, the Islamic understanding of economic activity extends beyond the acquisition of income. Work and income are expected to contribute to *maslahah* and ultimately support the achievement of *falah*.

Islamic economics conceptualizes *falah* as a broader form of well-being that encompasses material and non-material dimensions of human life. Economic activity is therefore not evaluated solely according to the amount of income obtained but also according to its contribution to *maslahah*, sustainable family livelihoods, fairness in economic relations, and the preservation of human dignity (Rusmiyati et al., 2025; Hananiyah et al., 2025). This distinction is particularly important in examining circular migration. An increase in income may represent an immediate economic benefit, but it does not necessarily indicate the achievement of sustainable well-being when workers remain dependent on insecure employment, face limited labor protection, and have restricted opportunities for economic mobility.

The integration of migration theory and Islamic economics therefore provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding circular migration among informal workers. Migration theory explains the economic rationale behind migration and the labor-market conditions that may sustain workers' dependence on informal employment. Islamic economics adds a normative dimension by examining whether these livelihood strategies contribute to *ikhtiar*, *maslahah*, and *falah*. Through this integration, circular migration can be understood simultaneously as a rational response to unequal economic opportunities and as an effort to fulfill family responsibilities through lawful employment. At the same time, continued dependence on informal employment raises an important question about whether the economic benefits of migration are sufficient to transform short-term improvements in household welfare into sustainable economic independence.

Based on this discussion, this study examines circular migration among Madurese stall workers by integrating migration theory and Islamic economics. Specifically, the study analyzes the factors driving circular migration, the characteristics of informal employment, workers' income management strategies, and the factors that sustain repeated mobility. It further examines the potential emergence of an *informal labor trap* and its implications for long-term family well-being. The findings are interpreted through the Islamic economic concepts of *ikhtiar*, *maslahah*, and *falah* to examine whether circular migration functions primarily as a short-term livelihood strategy or can contribute to sustainable economic transformation.

This study contributes to the discussion of internal migration and informal employment by bringing these issues into dialogue with Islamic economics. Rather than treating Islamic values merely as an additional interpretation of migration behavior, the study integrates them into the analysis of economic well-being and livelihood sustainability. In this way, the study examines not only whether circular migration increases income, but also whether income, remittances, savings, and other economic gains generated through migration can contribute to sustainable family welfare, economic independence, and human dignity. The study thus seeks to extend the discussion of circular migration from the question of why workers migrate toward a broader question of whether migration enables them to achieve sustainable well-being within the objectives of Islamic economics.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretive design to examine the experiences and meanings associated with circular migration among Madurese stall workers in the urban informal sector. A qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring social experiences, perceptions, and meanings within their natural contexts, particularly when the phenomenon involves complex interactions between individual experiences and broader social and economic conditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The descriptive-interpretive design was used to understand how migrant workers perceive their decisions to migrate, their employment conditions, income management practices, and future economic aspirations.

Data source

The study involved Madurese migrant workers who currently or previously worked as stall attendants in several destination areas on the island of Java, including Tangerang, Solo, Yogyakarta, Sidoarjo, Banten, Semarang, and Surakarta. These locations were selected based on the presence of Madurese migrant workers engaged in informal trade activities, particularly in small-scale stall businesses. Informants were selected through purposive sampling, which allows researchers to deliberately select participants who possess experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three criteria were applied: informants had to be from Madura, have at least three months of experience working as a stall attendant, and have experienced or currently experience circular migration. Based on these criteria, seven informants participated in the study.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and supporting documentation. The interviews explored the factors driving migration, access to employment, working conditions, income management, patterns of circular mobility, economic changes following migration, and future aspirations. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online according to the circumstances and availability of the informants. The semi-structured format provided a consistent set of topics while allowing informants to describe their experiences and interpretations in greater depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with transcription and repeated reading of the interview data to develop familiarity with the participants' experiences. The researchers then conducted initial coding to identify meaningful information relevant to the research objectives. Related codes were subsequently compared and grouped into broader categories and themes. Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying and interpreting recurring patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis generated several central themes, including migration drivers, access to employment, working conditions, income management, economic impacts of migration, circular mobility, factors sustaining migration, and future aspirations. These themes were initially interpreted through the Todaro Migration Model, Dual Labor Market Theory, and the concept of the *informal labor trap* to explain the economic and labor-market dimensions of circular migration. The findings were then examined through Islamic economic concepts, particularly *ikhthiar*, *masalah*, and *falah*, to understand how migration-generated income and livelihood strategies relate to family well-being and sustainable economic mobility.

NVivo 15 was used to support the organization, coding, and visualization of the qualitative data. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis can facilitate systematic coding, organization, comparison, and visualization of qualitative materials while retaining the interpretive role of the researcher (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). In this study, NVivo was used for word-frequency analysis, hierarchy charts, matrix coding queries, and cluster analysis. These procedures supported the identification of relationships among themes and strengthened the systematic organization of the analytical process. The interpretation of findings, however, remained grounded in the interview data and the researchers' analytical judgment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from in-depth interviews with seven Madurese migrant workers who work as stall attendants in several migration destinations on Java. The data were analyzed thematically with the assistance of NVivo 15. The analysis identified several interconnected themes: migration drivers, access to employment, working conditions, income

management, economic impacts, circular mobility, factors sustaining migration, and future aspirations.

Characteristics of Informants

The study involved seven informants from Sumenep Regency who had migrated to different destinations and worked as Madurese stall attendants. Informants were selected purposively based on their direct experience with migration and employment in the stall sector. Their characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Research Informants

<i>Code</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Place of Origin</i>	<i>Migration Destination</i>	<i>Length of Migration (Months)</i>
101	Male	23	Lenteng	Tangerang	3
102	Male	27	Gili Genteng	Solo	5
103	Male	24	Sumenep kota	Yogyakarta	6
104	Female	27	Poreh	Sidoarjo	9
105	Female	30	Gutoguh	Banten	6
106	Female	24	Bluto	Semarang	10
107	Female	31	Ganding	Surakarta	9

Source: Primary data, processed by the authors

The seven informants consisted of three men and four women, aged 23–31 years, and originated from different subdistricts of Sumenep. Their migration destinations included Tangerang, Solo, Yogyakarta, Sidoarjo, Banten, Semarang, and Surakarta, with migration durations ranging from 3 to 10 months. The diversity of destinations illustrates the reach of Madurese migrant networks across Java. The temporary nature of these movements is consistent with the concept of circular migration, which refers to repeated mobility between places of origin and destination while maintaining social and household ties with the place of origin (Skeldon, 1997).

The informants' experiences also provide an important basis for understanding circular migration as more than a one-time movement for employment. Their repeated mobility, continued connection with their families, and reliance on destination-area employment indicate that migration functions as an ongoing livelihood strategy.

Word Frequency Analysis

Word frequency analysis was conducted using NVivo 15 to identify the terms most frequently appearing in the interview transcripts. Following Bazeley and Jackson (2013), this analysis was used as an initial analytical aid to identify dominant topics rather than as a basis for drawing conclusions independently. The results were visualized through a word cloud and treemap.

A. Word Cloud



Figure 2. Word Cloud Results
Source: Processed by the authors, 2026

The word cloud shows that terms such as *warung*, *work/job*, *merantau* (migration), *income*, and *earnings* dominate the interview narratives. The prominence of *warung* and *work* reflects the central role of informal employment in the migrants' experiences, while the frequent occurrence of *merantau* indicates that mobility itself is a recurring part of their livelihood strategies. The words *month*, *time*, and *day* further reflect the temporary and cyclical nature of their employment.

The frequent appearance of *income*, *earnings*, and *needs* shows that economic improvement is a central motivation for migration. Informants generally perceived income from working at stalls as more promising than the opportunities available in their home regions. Their earnings were allocated to daily needs, family support, savings, and preparation for future business activities. The recurring words *family* and *hometown* further demonstrate that migration decisions were closely connected to family responsibilities rather than individual economic interests alone. Overall, the word-frequency results point to three interconnected dimensions of circular migration: employment at the destination, income improvement, and responsibility toward the family. These dimensions provide the initial empirical basis for understanding migration as a household livelihood strategy rather than merely an individual decision.

B. Word Frequency Treemap

stall	work	having	economy	income	reason	member	increase	approach	origin	period	desire
		earnings	look for	compared to	condition	when	told	to	memorial	store	stable
work	job	keep	time	business	owner	trader	get	freedom	savings	nature	control
		according	month	myself	friend	return	salary	given	now	ongoing	once
	day	day				system	so that	other	usually	ready	interested
		job	village	return	region	manage	difficult	easy	work on	healthy	starting
migration	work	during	feel	decide	family	people	recommend	remember	time	choose	gain
						city					

Figure 3. Word Frequency Treemap
Source: Processed by the authors, 2026

The treemap provides a proportional visualization of word frequency and reinforces the patterns identified in the word cloud. The largest blocks represent stall, employment, and migration, indicating that the informants' narratives largely center on mobility undertaken to obtain employment in the micro-retail sector. Other prominent terms, including working, income, managing, day, and needs, reflect the daily demands of this occupation and its close connection to household economic needs.

The prominence of terms such as *economy*, *seeking*, *month*, *hometown*, *income*, *comparison*, *business*, *return*, and *independently* further suggests that informants compare employment opportunities and income levels between their destinations and places of origin. The recurring combination of *month*, *hometown*, and *return* also indicates the cyclical nature of their mobility. Meanwhile, terms such as *friends*, *owner*, *family*, and *returning home* highlight the importance of social networks, employment relationships, and family ties in sustaining migration practices. Taken together, the word cloud and treemap indicate that circular migration among Madurese stall workers is closely associated with limited economic opportunities in places of origin, access to informal employment at destinations, income generation, social networks, and household welfare. These patterns provide a foundation for the thematic analysis presented in the following section.

Push Factors of Circular Migration

The thematic analysis identified four main reasons for circular migration: limited employment opportunities in the region of origin, the desire to improve economic conditions, low income, and growing family needs. Among the seven informants, the lack of suitable work and

insufficient income in the hometown were the most frequently mentioned reasons for seeking employment elsewhere. For most informants, migration was seen as a practical option for obtaining a more reliable source of income. One informant explained:

“There’s no work in the village. The rice fields aren’t mine what kind of work could I do? If I waited for wages back home, it wouldn’t be enough to eat. So, in the end, I followed a friend here to work as a shop attendant.” (I01)

Family needs were also an important consideration. As one informant stated:

“Back in the village, my income wasn’t enough, especially since I have a wife and children to support. I thought it over, and the most sensible thing to do was to migrate so I could send money home every month.” (I04)

For some informants, migration was also encouraged by what they saw among friends and other migrants. Seeing people who had migrated and later managed to buy motorcycles, build houses, or improve their families’ living conditions strengthened the belief that working outside the hometown could provide better opportunities.

The findings are in line with Lee’s (1966) push-pull theory. Limited employment and low income at the place of origin push workers to leave, while better earning opportunities at the destination encourage them to move. The findings also reflect the New Economics of Labor Migration, which views migration as a household strategy for diversifying income and responding to economic uncertainty (Stark & Bloom, 1985). In this case, migration is closely tied to the needs of the household, particularly the responsibility to support family members. The fact that workers repeatedly return to the destination suggests that these economic pressures do not disappear after the first migration.

Circular Migration as *Ikhtiar* and Family Responsibility

The economic reasons for migration are closely connected with how the informants understand their responsibility toward their families. Working outside the hometown is not simply a way to earn more money; it is also an effort to meet family needs. In this sense, migration can be understood as *ikhtiar*, or an effort to seek lawful livelihood. The Qur’anic command to seek the bounty of Allah after prayer, discussed in the Introduction, provides a relevant basis for understanding such efforts.

This interpretation is consistent with Ceasar et al. (2025), who show that the decisions of migrant workers are connected not only to economic considerations but also to family welfare and Islamic economic values. Ibrahim (2025) similarly discusses *ikhtiar*, *amanah*, *tawakal*, and family responsibility in relation to household economic well-being. Saputra et al. (2025) also found that migration within Muslim communities can be associated with productive work, family provision, and efforts to improve collective welfare.

The experiences of the informants therefore bring economic and religious considerations together. They migrate because employment and income opportunities are more promising elsewhere, but the income they seek is largely intended to meet family obligations. This is also consistent with Setijaningrum et al. (2023), Adihartono (2023), and Roshania et al. (2023), who describe migration as a livelihood strategy through which households respond to limited economic opportunities and use migration income to support their welfare.

The Role of Social Networks in Securing Employment

Finding work at the destination was rarely a completely independent process. Friends, relatives, and other Madurese migrants often provided information about available jobs or introduced workers to stall owners. This made social networks an important part of the migration process, particularly because employment in this sector is generally not accessed through formal recruitment channels. One informant explained:

“I got this job through a recommendation from a friend who had previously worked at this warung. My friend told me there was a need for workers, so I contacted the warung owner and was eventually hired.” (I01)

Another informant described a similar experience:

“I got a job working at a warung through various means. Sometimes I got information from relatives... and sometimes friends offered me a job working at a warung.” (I02)

These connections make the search for work easier and reduce the uncertainty faced by new migrants. For stall owners, recommendations also provide a degree of assurance because workers are often responsible for handling stock, sales, and other daily operations. Trust and personal reputation consequently become important considerations in employment decisions.

This pattern reflects Putnam’s (2000) concept of social capital, particularly the role of networks and trust in facilitating access to resources and opportunities. In the present study, however, social networks are not limited to helping migrants find work. They also help maintain access to the same type of employment when workers return to the destination.

The relationships can also be understood in terms of *ukhuwah*, *amanah*, and *ta’awun*. Recommending a friend or relative for employment may be viewed as a form of mutual assistance in seeking a lawful livelihood, while the trust placed in workers reflects *amanah* in economic relations. Studies by Afdawaiza et al. (2025), Khairani et al. (2025), and Sinulingga (2024) similarly highlight trust, networks, and shared values as important elements of Islamic social capital. Thus, social networks have a double role in the migration experience. They make employment more accessible and provide support within the migrant community, but they can also make it easier for workers to return to the same informal sector. This helps explain why migration may continue even after workers have already experienced improvements in their household economic conditions.

Characteristics of Stall Attendant Jobs

The analysis identified six characteristics of stall-attendant work: long working hours, shift systems, the absence of fixed days off, profit-sharing arrangements, trust-based employment relationships, and substantial responsibility for daily stall operations. These characteristics indicate that the occupation requires considerable flexibility and responsibility despite its informal nature. Most informants reported working approximately 10–12 hours per day, with longer hours when coworkers were absent or customer demand increased. Work was generally organized into shifts to maintain continuous stall operations, while days off were not fixed and depended on the needs of the business. One informant stated:

“On average, I work about 12 hours a day. If it’s busy or a coworker is off, it can be longer. Days off aren’t fixed either it depends on the shop’s situation.” (I01)

The responsibilities also extended beyond serving customers. Workers were involved in checking inventory, receiving goods, recording sales, and maintaining the security of the stall.

“My job isn’t just serving customers. I also have to check inventory, receive incoming goods, count sales revenue, and make sure the shop stays secure while I’m on duty.” (I05)

These findings illustrate a flexible but demanding employment structure. Although written contracts are generally absent, employment relationships may continue because workers and stall owners develop mutual trust. This arrangement allows owners to delegate substantial business responsibilities without constant supervision.

The conditions correspond closely with the secondary labor market described by Dual Labor Market Theory (Piore, 1979). The secondary sector is characterized by employment instability, limited protection, and fewer opportunities for advancement. The work conditions experienced by the informants—including long working hours, informal employment arrangements, and the absence of formal labor protection—place stall-attendant employment closer to this secondary segment.

The Islamic economic interpretation adds an important dimension to this finding. The responsibilities entrusted to the workers reflect *amanah*, particularly because they manage inventory, transactions, and business operations on behalf of stall owners. Faizah et al. (2024) emphasize that trust, honesty, responsibility, and fair treatment are important elements of Islamic work ethics. In this context, the durability of the employment relationship reflects not only economic convenience but also a degree of mutual trust between workers and employers.

At the same time, trust alone does not eliminate the need for justice. Long working hours, the absence of written contracts, and limited labor protection raise concerns regarding *‘adl* (justice) in employment relations. Islamic principles require not only that workers fulfill their responsibilities honestly but also that employers respect workers' rights and provide fair treatment (Ikhsan et al., 2024). Thus, the findings reveal a tension within informal employment: *amanah* may sustain the employment relationship, but *amanah* cannot substitute for fair labor conditions.

This finding is consistent with Huang et al. (2024), who found that informal migrant workers commonly experience long working hours, high job demands, and limited labor protection. Singh et al. (2024) similarly showed that temporary migrant workers may accept difficult working conditions because the income obtained remains more attractive than available opportunities in their regions of origin. The same trade-off appears among the Madurese stall workers: difficult working conditions are tolerated because the employment provides a relatively more reliable source of income.

This tension is important for understanding the *informal labor trap*. Employment in the informal sector provides an immediate livelihood and may improve household income, but limited protection and mobility can make it difficult for workers to transition toward more secure employment. The same job that provides short-term *maslahah* may therefore become a constraint on longer-term economic mobility.

Management of Remittances and the Economic Impact of Migration

The themes of income management and economic impact are closely connected. Income earned from stall work is allocated not only to daily consumption but also to remittances, savings, debt repayment, and simple investment, particularly through gold. These practices indicate that migration income contributes to both immediate household needs and longer-term financial resilience.

Most informants prioritized sending money to parents, spouses, or children in their home regions. Some subsequently allocated part of their income to savings or debt repayment, while others purchased gold as a form of accessible long-term saving. One informant stated:

“Every month, I definitely send money to my mother back home. That’s number one I have to do it. The rest is for my needs here, and whatever’s left over goes into savings if there’s any extra.” (I05)

Another explained:

“I’m paying off debts first. Back when my father was sick, the family borrowed money from neighbors. Now I can make installment payments from my income here. Thank God, it’s almost paid off.” (I06)

An informant who invested in gold explained:

“I invest in gold, sir. I buy gold little by little. You don’t really notice it when you save gold, but its value keeps going up. It’s for the future.” (I04)

These patterns are consistent with the Sustainable Livelihood Framework, which views households as combining different livelihood assets and strategies to manage economic risks (Ellis, 2000). Remittances, savings, debt repayment, and investment represent different ways of converting migration income into household financial assets. The findings also support the NELM

perspective, which understands migration as a household strategy for diversifying income and reducing economic vulnerability (Stark & Bloom, 1985).

From the perspective of Islamic economics, these practices can be understood through *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, particularly *ḥifẓ al-māl* (preservation of wealth). The informants did not primarily use migration income for individual consumption. Instead, income was directed toward family needs, debt repayment, savings, and investment. Such practices reflect an orientation toward preserving and strengthening household resources rather than maximizing immediate consumption.

This interpretation is supported by Haris et al. (2026), who argue that financial planning among Muslim families is influenced by *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*. Isnani et al. (2025) similarly emphasize the role of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* in strengthening household financial resilience through an appropriate balance between consumption, savings, investment, and emergency funds. Nisa et al. (2025) further show that *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*-based financial management encourages families to prioritize essential needs, education, Sharia-compliant investment, and long-term resilience.

The economic effects reported by the informants were also tangible. Several described improvements in their families' ability to meet daily needs, finance education, access healthcare, purchase assets, and prepare for future expenses. One informant stated:

"Now our family's situation back in the village is much better. My mother can buy daily necessities without having to go into debt at the local store. My father is also able to receive regular medical care at the community health center." (I01)

Another explained:

"Compared to before I migrated, our family's finances are now more stable. I've been able to buy a motorcycle outright and am currently saving for wedding expenses." (I02)

These findings are consistent with As'ad and Ekananda (2024), who found that remittances contribute to household economic resilience through consumption, savings, and investment. Azahra et al. (2024) similarly reported that migrant households allocate part of their income toward productive assets to manage future uncertainty. Ratha (2024) further identifies remittances as an important contributor to household well-being through consumption, investment, and economic resilience, while the International Organization for Migration (IOM) recognizes remittances as one of the most tangible economic benefits of migration.

The findings therefore show that circular migration generates clear short-term and intermediate economic benefits. However, these benefits should not automatically be equated with sustainable economic transformation. The ability to meet immediate needs, repay debts, save, or purchase assets demonstrates *maslahah*, but whether these gains are sufficient to achieve lasting economic independence remains a separate question. This distinction becomes clearer in the analysis of circular mobility and the factors that sustain it.

Circular Mobility and Resilience Factors

The analysis shows that circular mobility among the informants is shaped by a combination of economic necessity, family considerations, and the limited availability of employment in their regions of origin. Migration is generally not viewed as a permanent relocation. Instead, workers return to their hometowns after completing a period of employment and may migrate again when economic needs arise. This pattern demonstrates that migration functions as a continuing livelihood strategy rather than a single mobility decision. One informant explained:

"Usually, after working for a while, I go back home. But if I'm back home and there's no work, I come back here again. It's like that every year." (I03)

Another informant described a similar pattern:

"I actually want to work closer to home, but there isn't much work there. If I find a job, the salary is small. So, if I need money again, I have to migrate." (I06)

These experiences indicate that circular migration is sustained by a persistent difference between the economic opportunities available at the destination and those available in the region of origin. Returning home does not necessarily represent the end of migration. Instead, it can become one stage within a repeated cycle of mobility.

The findings are consistent with the concept of circular migration described by Skeldon (1997), in which migrants maintain connections with their places of origin while moving repeatedly between origin and destination. They also support the NELM perspective, which views migration as a strategy for managing household economic risk and diversifying income sources (Stark & Bloom, 1985). In the present study, however, the continued need to migrate also reflects the limited capacity of the local economy to provide stable alternatives.

The resilience generated through migration is therefore both real and conditional. Income earned in destination areas allows families to meet daily needs, repay debts, save, and acquire assets. These economic gains increase households' ability to respond to financial pressures. Yet, this resilience remains dependent on continued access to informal employment at the destination. When employment ends or income declines, workers may need to migrate again.

This finding is important because it distinguishes economic resilience from economic transformation. Circular migration can strengthen a household's short-term capacity to cope with economic difficulties without necessarily changing the structural conditions that produce those difficulties. In this sense, migration may reduce vulnerability without fully eliminating its underlying causes.

From the perspective of Islamic economics, the repeated effort to obtain lawful income can be understood as a continuing form of *ikhtiar*. Workers actively seek opportunities to fulfill family responsibilities rather than remaining dependent on limited opportunities in their hometowns. However, *ikhtiar* should also be considered together with the broader objective of *maslahah*. If a livelihood strategy continuously requires workers to return to the same insecure employment without creating greater economic independence, its contribution to long-term welfare remains limited.

The distinction between immediate benefit and sustainable welfare is particularly relevant to the concept of *falah*. The economic improvements reported by the informants demonstrate that migration can generate *maslahah* through increased income, family support, debt repayment, and savings. Nevertheless, *falah* implies a broader and more sustainable condition of well-being. It therefore requires consideration of whether workers can gradually strengthen their economic position and reduce their dependence on vulnerable employment.

Factors Sustaining Circular Migration

The thematic analysis identified several factors that sustain circular migration: limited employment opportunities in the hometown, differences in income between origin and destination, family responsibilities, established social networks, and familiarity with the destination labor market. These factors reinforce one another and make repeated migration a rational and accessible livelihood strategy for the informants.

Limited employment opportunities in the hometown were repeatedly mentioned as the main reason for returning to the destination. Even when workers preferred to remain close to their families, the absence of suitable employment and the relatively low wages available locally made migration financially more attractive. One informant stated:

"If there were a job in the village with the same income as here, I would rather stay at home. But there isn't. That's why I keep coming back here." (I02)

Another explained:

"At home, there are jobs, but the income is not enough. Here, at least I know what I can earn each month, so when I need money, I come back." (I05)

The persistence of this pattern is consistent with Todaro's Migration Model, which emphasizes the role of expected income differences in shaping migration decisions (Morsky, 2025). The destination continues to provide an economic advantage even when the employment available there is informal and relatively demanding. As long as the expected economic return remains higher than the alternatives available in the hometown, migration remains an attractive option.

Social networks further reduce the costs associated with repeated migration. Workers who have already established relationships with stall owners, friends, or fellow Madurese migrants can return to familiar workplaces or obtain information about new opportunities with relatively little uncertainty. This creates a form of cumulative advantage: previous migration experience increases access to future employment, which in turn makes subsequent migration easier.

This pattern is consistent with Putnam's (2000) understanding of social capital, in which networks and trust facilitate access to resources and opportunities. In the context of informal employment, these networks are particularly important because recruitment is rarely conducted through formal institutional channels. Social connections therefore help sustain the migration cycle by reducing the costs and risks of searching for employment. Family responsibility is another important factor. Migration income is frequently used to support parents, spouses, children, and other household members. Consequently, the decision to migrate is not determined solely by the worker's own economic needs. It is embedded in broader household obligations.

This finding is consistent with the New Economics of Labor Migration, which views migration as a household-level strategy for income diversification and risk management (Stark & Bloom, 1985). It also corresponds with the Islamic economic understanding of family provision as an important dimension of economic responsibility. The continued effort to obtain lawful income for family members can therefore be understood as part of *ikhtiar* and *amanah*.

However, these same factors can also contribute to the persistence of informal employment. Because workers already possess social connections and experience in the stall sector, returning to familiar informal employment may be easier than investing time and resources in acquiring qualifications for formal employment. The social network that initially facilitates economic mobility may therefore unintentionally reinforce dependence on the same occupational segment.

The Emergence of an Informal Labor Trap

The findings suggest that the informants experience several characteristics associated with an informal labor trap. These include repeated employment in the same type of informal occupation, limited access to formal employment, long working hours, weak labor protection, and continued dependence on migration as a source of income. Circular migration provides an effective mechanism for obtaining income, but it does not necessarily provide a pathway toward occupational mobility.

The pattern can be summarized as follows: limited employment opportunities in the hometown encourage migration; migration provides access to informal employment; informal employment generates higher income than many available local alternatives; income improves household welfare; but the absence of meaningful occupational mobility requires workers to migrate again when employment or income is needed. This creates a cycle in which migration solves an immediate economic problem without fully transforming the structural conditions underlying that problem.

The findings correspond with Dual Labor Market Theory, particularly the distinction between primary and secondary labor markets (Piore, 1979). Workers in the secondary labor market often experience unstable employment, lower protection, and limited prospects for advancement. The informants' experiences reflect several of these characteristics. Their

employment provides income but offers limited evidence of a pathway toward formal employment or higher occupational status.

The concept of the informal labor trap therefore helps explain why increased income does not automatically result in long-term economic mobility. The informants may experience an improvement in their standard of living while remaining structurally dependent on informal employment. Their economic position is better than before migration, but the mechanism through which that improvement is achieved remains vulnerable.

This finding also helps explain why circular migration persists despite its demanding working conditions. The question is not simply whether informal employment is desirable. For the informants, it is often more accessible and economically rewarding than the alternatives available in their hometowns. Migration therefore remains rational at the individual and household levels, even when it does not lead to structural economic transformation. From the perspective of Islamic economics, this condition creates an important distinction between *maslahah* and *falah*. The income generated through migration clearly produces *maslahah* when it enables families to meet essential needs, repay debts, save, finance education, and improve their living conditions. These benefits should not be underestimated.

However, *maslahah* in the short term does not necessarily mean that *falah* has been fully achieved. *Falah* implies a broader condition of sustainable well-being that includes economic security, dignity, justice, and the ability to maintain a stable livelihood. When workers remain dependent on repeated informal employment and lack meaningful opportunities for occupational advancement, their economic gains remain vulnerable.

The findings concerning working conditions also raise the issue of 'adl. Informal employment based on trust can function effectively when both parties fulfill their responsibilities, but trust cannot replace fair treatment. Long working hours, uncertain days off, and limited labor protection may create an imbalance between the responsibilities borne by workers and the protections available to them. From an Islamic economic standpoint, sustainable livelihood should therefore involve not only the availability of work but also fairness and dignity within the employment relationship.

This interpretation strengthens the concept of the informal labor trap. The trap is not simply the absence of formal employment. It is the condition in which workers repeatedly depend on informal employment because it provides immediate economic benefits while offering insufficient opportunities to build a more secure and independent livelihood.

Future Aspirations and the Possibility of Economic Mobility

Despite the persistence of informal employment, the informants did not generally perceive their current occupations as permanent. Most expressed aspirations to establish their own businesses, obtain more stable employment, accumulate savings, or eventually return home with sufficient resources to develop alternative livelihoods. One informant stated:

"I don't want to work at the warung forever. If I can save enough, I want to open a small business back home so I don't have to migrate anymore." (I04)

Another explained:

"For now, I'm still working here because I need the money. But my goal is to save enough capital so I can start a business at home." (I07)

These aspirations are significant because they demonstrate that migrant workers do not necessarily regard circular migration as the final stage of their economic trajectory. Instead, migration is perceived as a means of accumulating financial resources that may eventually support independent economic activity.

From the perspective of livelihood theory, this reflects an attempt to convert income generated through migration into productive assets and alternative livelihood strategies (Ellis, 2000). From the NELM perspective, it also reflects the use of migration income as a mechanism for household investment and risk reduction (Stark & Bloom, 1985).

Within Islamic economics, these aspirations are consistent with the broader objective of achieving *maslahah* and *falah*. Savings and productive investment can strengthen household economic capacity and reduce dependence on uncertain employment. The intention to establish a business in the hometown also suggests that migration may serve as a transitional strategy toward greater economic independence.

Nevertheless, the findings indicate that this transition has not yet occurred for most informants. Their aspirations remain future-oriented, while their present livelihoods continue to depend on informal employment and repeated migration. This distinction is central to understanding the findings of the study: circular migration has generated meaningful economic benefits, but its capacity to produce sustainable economic transformation remains limited.

Overall, the findings indicate that circular migration among Madurese stall workers operates simultaneously as a livelihood strategy, a mechanism of family support, and a response to structural differences in employment opportunities. Migration generates income and contributes to household resilience, while social networks and family responsibilities sustain repeated mobility. Yet, continued dependence on informal employment, limited labor protection, and weak occupational mobility create conditions associated with an informal labor trap.

From an Islamic economic perspective, these outcomes demonstrate that migration can constitute *ikhtiar* and generate *maslahah* without necessarily resulting in full *falah*. The central issue is therefore not whether migration is economically beneficial—it clearly is for these households—but whether the benefits generated through migration can eventually be converted into more secure, independent, and sustainable livelihoods. This distinction provides the basis for the final discussion and conclusion of the study.

Analysis of Relationships Among Themes

To examine the relationships among the themes identified through thematic analysis, a cluster analysis was conducted using the Word Similarity feature in NVivo 15. The analysis was used as a supporting technique to visualize semantic relationships among themes based on similarities in word usage within the interview data. It was not treated as the basis for drawing independent conclusions but as a means of strengthening the interpretation of relationships identified through the coding process (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

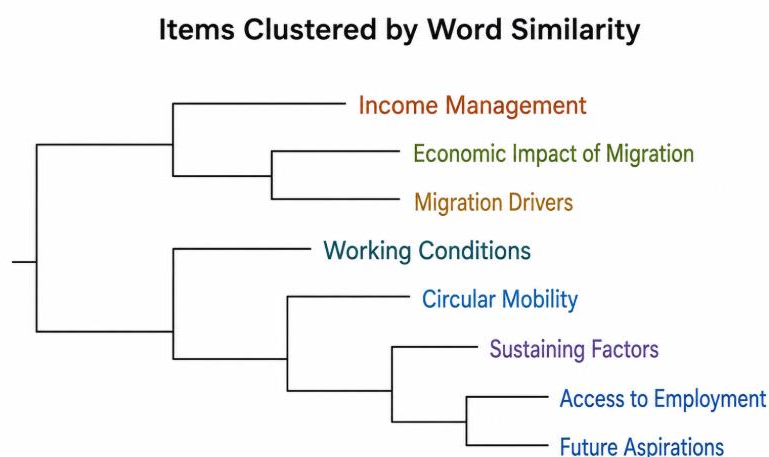


Figure 4. Dendrogram Cluster Analysis Based on Word Similarity (NVivo)

The cluster analysis produced two broad dimensions that explain the dynamics of circular migration among Madurese stall workers. The first represents the economic dimension, linking migration drivers, income management, and the economic impacts of migration. The second represents the employment and mobility dimension, linking access to employment, working conditions, circular mobility, factors sustaining migration, and future aspirations.

The first cluster shows a clear sequence from economic pressure to migration and then to household economic improvement. Limited employment opportunities and low income in the regions of origin encourage workers to migrate. Once employment is obtained at the destination, income is allocated to household needs, remittances, savings, debt repayment, and simple investments. These practices contribute to improved family welfare and, in turn, reinforce the economic rationale for continuing migration.

This pattern is consistent with the New Economics of Labor Migration, which views migration as a household strategy for diversifying income and managing economic risks (Stark & Bloom, 1985). The findings indicate that migration is not simply an individual response to wage differences but part of a broader household strategy in which income generated at the destination is converted into resources for family welfare.

The second cluster highlights the conditions that sustain the migration process. Access to employment is facilitated by social networks and trust-based relationships, while the characteristics of informal employment shape workers' continued mobility. Familiarity with the destination, established relationships with stall owners, and limited employment alternatives in the hometown make returning to informal employment relatively easier than entering a new occupational sector. At the same time, the informants' future aspirations indicate that they do not necessarily regard migration as a permanent way of life.

Most informants expressed aspirations to accumulate sufficient capital to establish their own businesses, build homes, or return permanently to their hometowns. Migration is therefore viewed as a means toward economic independence rather than an end in itself. However, limited capital, continuing household needs, and insufficient economic opportunities in the regions of origin make it difficult for these aspirations to be realized. The result is a continuing cycle in which migration generates resources for future independence while the lack of sufficient resources simultaneously requires further migration. This finding reflects the gap between livelihood improvement and structural economic transformation.

From the perspective of Islamic economics, the two clusters reveal a connected process of economic effort, family responsibility, and the pursuit of sustainable well-being. Migration represents *ikhtiar* in seeking lawful livelihood, while social networks based on *amanah* and *ta'awun* facilitate access to employment. The management of migration income through family support, debt repayment, savings, and investment reflects efforts to preserve household wealth (*ḥifẓ al-māl*) and generate *maslahah*. The aspirations for independent business activity and a more secure livelihood, meanwhile, indicate that the desired outcome extends beyond income toward *falah*.

The overall relationship among the themes can therefore be understood as a process:

Limited economic opportunities at origin → circular migration → access to informal employment → income generation → household welfare improvement → continued dependence on informal employment → repeated migration → aspiration for economic independence.

This sequence captures the central tension identified in the study. Circular migration produces meaningful economic benefits, but these benefits have not yet consistently translated into sustainable economic independence. The same employment that generates income and family welfare also remains the basis for repeated migration.

The cluster analysis therefore reinforces the main finding that circular migration among Madurese stall workers is a multidimensional livelihood strategy shaped by economic pressures, social networks, informal employment, household financial management, and aspirations for a better future. From the perspective of Islamic economics, the process reflects *ikhtiar* and generates *maslahah*, but the persistence of informal employment and repeated migration indicates that the broader objective of *falah* has not yet been fully achieved.

From Livelihood Strategy to Informal Labor Trap

The findings show that circular migration provides real economic benefits for Madurese stall workers, but these benefits do not automatically lead to greater economic independence. Limited employment opportunities and low income in the regions of origin encourage migration,

while social networks and trust-based relationships make informal employment at the destination relatively accessible. Income from this work improves household welfare through remittances, debt repayment, savings, and investment. In this sense, migration functions as an important livelihood strategy and provides meaningful *maslahah* for migrant households.

However, the same process also sustains dependence on informal employment. Long working hours, limited labor protection, and restricted occupational mobility make it difficult for workers to move into more secure forms of employment. As a result, workers may return repeatedly to the same type of work whenever economic needs arise. This condition reflects the informal labor trap: migration improves short-term welfare while leaving the underlying limitations of employment opportunities largely unchanged.

From the perspective of Islamic economics, this pattern can be understood through the relationship between *ikhtiar*, *maslahah*, and *falah*. Migration represents *ikhtiar* in seeking lawful income and fulfilling family responsibilities, while the economic benefits generated through migration contribute to *maslahah*. Yet, the continued dependence on vulnerable informal employment suggests that *falah* has not been fully achieved. Sustainable well-being requires not only higher income but also greater economic security, dignity, and independence. Circular migration therefore remains both a source of household resilience and a potential mechanism of continued economic dependence.

This finding suggests that the main challenge is not migration itself, but the limited capacity to transform migration income into sustainable economic mobility. The aspirations of informants to save capital, establish businesses, and eventually return home indicate that migration is viewed as a means toward greater independence. Strengthening skills, entrepreneurship, financial capacity, social protection, and employment opportunities in the regions of origin could help turn circular migration from a recurring livelihood strategy into a pathway toward sustainable economic well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that circular migration among Madurese stall workers functions primarily as a household livelihood strategy in response to limited employment opportunities and low incomes in the regions of origin. Migration is shaped by economic pressures, family responsibilities, and social networks that facilitate access to informal employment. Although stall work provides relatively stable income compared with available opportunities in the hometowns, it is characterized by long working hours, limited labor protection, and trust-based employment relationships. Migration income contributes to household welfare through remittances, daily needs, debt repayment, savings, and simple investments, generating meaningful economic benefits and strengthening household resilience.

At the same time, the findings indicate conditions associated with an informal labor trap. Limited employment opportunities at origin, restricted access to formal employment, dependence on social networks, and limited occupational mobility encourage workers to return repeatedly to informal employment. From the perspective of Islamic economics, migration represents *ikhtiar* to obtain lawful livelihood and fulfill family responsibilities, while the resulting income contributes to *maslahah* through improved household resources and financial security. However, continued dependence on vulnerable informal employment suggests that *falah* has not yet been fully achieved, as sustainable well-being requires not only higher income but also economic security, dignity, fairness, and greater livelihood independence.

The findings suggest that the challenge is not to discourage circular migration but to strengthen its potential as a pathway toward sustainable economic mobility. Improving employment opportunities in migrants' regions of origin, strengthening skills and financial capability, expanding social protection, and supporting entrepreneurship could help workers convert migration income and experience into productive assets and more independent livelihoods. The integration of migration theory and Islamic economics therefore shows that circular migration is simultaneously an economic response, a family responsibility, and an

expression of *ikhtiar*. For the Madurese stall workers in this study, migration has generated meaningful *maslahah*, but overcoming the informal labor trap requires a transition from repeated income-seeking mobility toward sustainable economic independence and the broader attainment of *falah*.

Future research could compare circular migration across various regions and informal sectors, as well as assess the impact of remittances on well-being, economic mobility, and the attainment of *falah*. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine opportunities for transitioning toward economic independence, entrepreneurship, and more protected forms of employment, while simultaneously verifying the effectiveness of training, financial literacy, social protection, and business support in reducing reliance on informal work and strengthening *maslahah* and sustainable welfare.

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