Resilience in transition: Experiences of Indonesian migrant workers repatriated from the United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

Repatriation is often assumed to be a simple process. But in reality, it brings complex psychological, social, and structural challenges. This study aims to explore how Indonesian migrant workers returning from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) experienced and made sense of resilience during their repatriation journey. We conducted a qualitative phenomenological design using in-depth, open-ended semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to narrate their lived experiences. Five male participants who have worked in the energy sector were selected through purposive sampling. The analysis used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and identified three overlapping aspects of resilience. First, protective foundations including family connections, resource readiness, and transformative development served as buffers that provided initial stability during uncertainty. Second, adaptive processes reflected the ways participants adjusted to reduced income, re-entered the labor market, rebuilt interpersonal relationships, and handled bureaucratic demands. Finally, inner strengths including spiritual beliefs and personal interpretation of resilience helped the returnees sustain in the long term. These findings portray resilience as dynamic, multi-layered, and offer insights to guide reintegration support for returning migrants to their home country

Introduction

In recent decades, nearly nine million Indonesians—approximately 7% of the national labor force—have pursued work opportunities abroad (World Bank, 2017). These opportunities are widely perceived as a means to secure better living conditions, including improved economic stability and family welfare (Anggara et al., 2024). One of the main destinations for Indonesian migrants is the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The country is believed to have promising prospects and employment opportunities (Okasha, 2020). It is supported by data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020) that more than 300,000 Indonesian migrants currently reside in the UAE. This number illustrates how migration to a developed country is frequently associated with improved social, economic, and psychological well-being (Elshahat et al., 2022). Furthermore, a study from Neto et al. (2019) also suggests that migrants who spend longer periods in host countries are associated with higher levels of well-being through sociocultural adaptation and satisfaction with life abroad.

Despite these perceived advantages, some migrants eventually decide to return to their home country for various reasons—a process known as repatriation. Nguyen (2023) describes repatriates as those who return to their country of origin after having lived abroad for at least one year. While often perceived simply as "going back home", repatriation in fact is a complicated process. It involves readjusting to cultural norms, workplace environments, and social expectations in everyday life (Muthiah & Santosh, 2017).

Although returning home may initially bring comfort, unresolved experiences abroad can resurface in the form of stress or emotional strain (Ndreka, 2021). Alongside this, returning migrant workers often face challenges such as reverse culture shock, identity shifts, and unmet career expectations during the repatriation process (Andreason & Kinneer, 2005). These layered difficulties have been shown to increase psychological distress, including feelings of disorientation, discomfort, and prolonged stress (Zavala-Barajas et al., 2022). Moreover, repatriates frequently struggle to rebuild social networks and reintegrate into communities that no longer feel familiar upon return (Ndreka, 2021). At this point, resilience emerges as a critical resource that potentially helps buffer psychological strain and supports individuals in navigating the emotional and adjustment-related challenges of repatriation.

Because repatriation is inherently difficult and demanding, resilience among returning migrants needs further research. Repatriates often face limited resources and operational constraints upon their arrival (Köppen, 2018). This condition is exacerbated by complex legal and administrative requirements that they must navigate (Scioldo-Zürcher, 2016). Dantzer et al. (2018) define resilience as the individual's ability to adapt effectively to stress and adversity. It relies on constructive responses to environmental challenges and resistance to the negative effects of stress. Similarly, Kumpfer (2002) conceptualizes resilience as a dynamic, transactional process that involves the interaction between internal capacities and external supports such as family and community. In the context of migrant workers' repatriation, resilience becomes particularly relevant as returnees are required to simultaneously adjust to economic changes, altered social roles, and shifting cultural expectations upon returning to their home country (Dziekońska, 2024; Langović et al., 2024). Previous studies have shown that resilience enables migrants to manage reverse culture shock, rebuild social networks, and reestablish meaningful life structures after prolonged absence abroad (Estrada, 2020; Szilasi et al., 2025).

Protective factors at the individual, family, and community levels can buffer against risks and stressors. Lindert et al. (2023) highlight the importance of protective elements for repatriates, such as access to employment opportunities, supportive social connections, and a sense of hope and a positive outlook. By contrast, risk factors include housing and employment difficulties as well as challenges in adapting to cultural contexts that may hinder resilience (Brunnet et al., 2020). When protective factors succeed in balancing risks, positive outcomes such as emotional well-being and social competence are more likely to emerge. Thus, resilience is not something static but develops across the lifespan. In this sense, resilience is strengthened by social support networks and the ability to find effective coping strategies (Siriwardhana & Stewart, 2013). Preliminary findings from exploratory online interviews with two Indonesian migrants in the UAE support the explanation. They revealed that financial preparedness and strong social support are crucial aspects to consider before returning to Indonesia. Financial preparedness refers to the need to adjust expectations around income and lifestyle, while strong social support highlights the importance of family communication and community connections.

Given the psychological, social, and economic challenges associated with repatriation and limited empirical attention to post-return resilience, there is a need to understand how returning migrant workers experience and interpret resilience, particularly to inform more responsive support during reintegration. This study aims to explore how Indonesian migrant

workers experience and interpret resilience throughout their repatriation journey from the UAE to Indonesia. The research question guiding this study is: "How do migrant workers experience and interpret resilience during their repatriation from the UAE to Indonesia?" The novelty of this research lies in its focus on resilience from the perspective of repatriates after returning to their home country—an angle less explored in previous studies, which have predominantly examined resilience among migrants in host countries. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader literature on migrant worker resilience and inform advocacy efforts concerning the well-being of repatriates in their country of origin.

Method

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to capture the essence of resilience from repatriated migrant workers' experiences after returning from the United Arab Emirates to Indonesia.

Participants

A total of five male participants (see Table 1) were recruited through purposive sampling. All participants had worked in the United Arab Emirates energy sector for four to ten years, were between 38 and 52 years old, and were married with children. This duration of overseas employment allowed participants to accumulate prolonged and meaningful experiences, which is particularly important in phenomenological research that seeks to capture in-depth reflections on lived experiences during major life transitions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). In line with the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2024) classification, all participants had worked abroad for more than six months, fulfilling the criteria for international migrant workers. No strict inclusion criteria were applied regarding the duration since returning to Indonesia, as phenomenological inquiry emphasizes how experiences are remembered, interpreted, and given meaning over time rather than their temporal proximity. This variation enabled the study to capture both relatively immediate and longer-term processes of resilience and reintegration following repatriation. Furthermore, the number of participants aligns with the recommendations of Creswell & Creswell (2018) for phenomenological research, which is typically between 3 and 20 participants.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

	I	G	R	M	Y
Sex	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Education	Master's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Associate's Degree	High School Diploma	Bachelor's Degree
Family Status	Married with 3 children	Married with 2 children	Married with 5 children	Married with 2 children	Married with 2 children
Working Sector	Energy Sector	Energy Sector	Energy Sector	Energy Sector	Energy Sector
Duration of Work Abroad (Years)	6	4	6	10	10
Career in Indonesia	Lecturer	Energy Sector Employee	Entrepreneur	Entrepreneur	Energy Sector Employee
Year since Returning to Indonesia	5	11	5	2	5

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via an online platform from September 2024 to December 2024. All interviews were recorded with consent to ensure data accuracy. The interview guide was developed from a phenomenological perspective, with open-ended

questions designed to explore participants lived experiences of repatriation. The three main questions were formulated based on the aim of the study and functioned as broad entry points rather than theory-driven questions, allowing participants to lead the direction of the interviews while the researcher followed the flow with probing questions as needed (see Table 2).

Table 2
List of Interview Questions

Main Questions	Following-up Questions
Could you describe your experience of returning to your home country after living abroad and the difficulties that come with it?	Could you elaborate on any specific cultural or social adjustments you had to make upon your return that were particularly challenging?
What strategies did you find most helpful in dealing with the difficulties of repatriation? Could you provide specific examples of how you used these strategies?	How did you determine which strategies would be most effective for you, and were there any strategies that didn't work as well as you had hoped?
What challenges did you face in adjusting to the professional environment after repatriation?	Were there any unexpected professional challenges that arose upon your return, and how did you address them?

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). According to Willig (2008), the analytic process involved several iterative stages: (1) transcription of audio recordings, (2) repeated readings of the transcripts, (3) adding exploratory comments, (4) coding to identify emerging patterns, (5) clustering into sub-themes, and (6) abstraction into superordinate themes. Manual coding was conducted using Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel. The researcher's interpretive role was acknowledged and findings were developed through a dialogical process that engaged both participants' accounts and the researchers' reflexivity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility of findings, researchers applied multiple strategies. Peer debriefing was conducted with supervisors and examiners, who provided critical feedback throughout the research process. Informal discussions with fellow students were also utilized to cross-check the interpretations. Finally, data source triangulation was conducted by comparing and cross-checking interview data across the five participants to identify converging patterns and shared meanings, thereby strengthening the analytical rigor of the study (Carter et al., 2014; Patton, 1999).

Researcher Reflexivity

All the researchers did not share the same migratory background as the participants. To minimize potential bias, bracketing was applied by reflecting on researchers' assumptions and prioritizing participants' lived experiences, in line with established phenomenological practices (Gearing, 2004; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Reflexivity was further supported through deliberate examination of researcher positionality throughout the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

Ethical Considerations

This research was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Gadjah Mada with number 8385/UN1/FPSi.1.3/SD/PT.01.04/2024. Informed consent was obtained from all

participants. Confidentiality was guaranteed by anonymizing data and securing digital files (recording and transcription).

Results

Based on the IPA procedure, the interview transcripts were analyzed using iterative reading, exploratory commenting, emerging coding, and thematic clustering. Through this analytic process, three core themes were constructed to represent shared patterns of meaning across participants lived experiences of repatriation from the UAE to Indonesia. The identified themes are: (1) protective foundations of resilience, (2) adaptive processes of resilience, and (3) inner strengths of resilience.

Protective Foundations of Resilience

Repatriation is a decision that migrant workers must carefully consider. In this study, participants described different personal reasons for undertaking repatriation. However, the researcher identified a common pattern emphasizing protective foundations that strengthened the decision to return, including preparing themselves to face various challenges after returning from the UAE to Indonesia.

Family Connections

Family emerged as the primary reason for most migrant workers to repatriate. Participant M highlighted this, emphasizing the importance of reuniting with family after spending a significant period abroad.
"The first reason to return to Indonesia must be family, right? Because I have been away from them for about 10 years, although within those 10 years I did go home occasionally."
(M. Line 5-8)

Furthermore, Participant R explained that he could not bear to let his spouse shoulder household responsibilities alone. His physical presence was deemed crucial to rebuilding emotional closeness, fostering mutual support, and fulfilling moral responsibility.
"Finally, I decided to come back because… the desire to be with my family was so strong and overwhelming, and what do you call it, I also felt sorry for my wife if she had to handle everything on her own." (R. Line 9-12)

In addition, some participants returned because they were physically present to monitor their children's growth and development, which was considered part of fulfilling their parental role.
"So, the reason for going back to Indonesia was more for the children." (Y. Line 45)
"The biggest reason was family. So, thank God, at that time we already had three children, and they were still quite young." (R. Line 4-8)

Thus, family connections—particularly with spouses and children—served as a protective foundation that strengthened participants' resilience, as they could rediscover the meaning of togetherness within the nuclear family and fulfill their ideal roles as partners and parents.

Resource Readiness

Resource readiness was also identified as an important foundation that reinforced participants' resilience during the repatriation process. Through careful planning, participants felt more prepared to face uncertainties upon returning to Indonesia. This

readiness included financial planning, job security, and the utilization of existing social and professional networks.

Before deciding to resign and return to Indonesia, some participants had already calculated their monthly expenses to cover the cost of living. This calculation was done to minimize risks and ensure stability through investments made while still working in the UAE, such as rental properties.

"So indeed, before I resigned or stopped working, I had already thought about it—like, how much is the minimum expense when living in Indonesia? I calculated, oh, maybe 5 million, or let us say 10 million. If my wife works and earns 5 million, then I just must find the remaining 5 million. So, while I was still there, I also invested, for example, in rental houses." (I. Line 67-73)

In addition to ensuring financial matters, some participants also sought to secure career opportunities, such as contacting acquaintances before returning to Indonesia, as a protective measure to avoid unemployment.

"Luckily, by the time I came back, I already had a job secured… that is why I could return smoothly. So, there was already a good job in Batang, Central Java. I took the initiative to return because I had many connections here, colleagues who had long been involved in developing the Batang power plant." (Y. Line 10-17)

Thus, resource readiness played a crucial protective role in strengthening repatriates' resilience in navigating life dynamics after returning from the UAE.

Transformative Development

For participants, repatriation was also understood as a moment that could open opportunities for personal and professional change. It provided a chance to realign career plans and pursue delayed aspirations. Some participants viewed repatriation as a turning point in their pursuit of new career paths. For example, Participant I had long aspired to become a lecturer, while Participant M wanted to become an entrepreneur.

"I came back hoping to become a private university lecturer…" (I. Line 104-105)
"…in the end, I decided to start my own business." (M. Line 10-11)

Additionally, Participant G shared that the experience of working in the UAE became valuable capital for his professional career in Indonesia. He believed that intercultural interactions and educational background helped broaden his perspective and enhance his competitiveness in the local job market.

"…by working abroad, at least we can step out of our comfort zone… interact with various professionals… and that also drives us to identify our weaknesses and how to develop ourselves, especially in terms of professionalism." (G. Line 9-20)
"…when I came back with the experience I had gained overseas, it felt as though everything became more welcoming in Indonesia. Doors opened wide, and many opportunities were offered to me." (G. Line 142-145)

Therefore, repatriation was not merely understood as a return, but also as a transformative developmental moment that strengthened resilience through career restructuring and self-capacity enhancement.

Adaptive Processes of Resilience

The repatriation process does not always run smoothly for every migrant worker. This uncertainty occurs because they are confronted with various pragmatic and psychological challenges upon returning to Indonesia. However, the participants in this study employed a series of adaptive strategies that reflect resilience in facing their new realities.

Financial Management

Changes in income levels emerged as the main challenge faced by most participants. While working in the UAE, their fixed earnings were relatively high and provided a sense of sufficiency. However, upon returning to Indonesia, their income dropped drastically and became unstable. Some participants described this transition as challenging, requiring them to adopt a frugal and selective lifestyle.

"We previously had a stable income, but then we were faced with an uncertain situation… So, we really have to be smart in managing it, because if we keep carrying our old habits of abundance, fulfilling every desire… we will only make things harder for ourselves." (R. Line 47-57)

This frugality and selectivity were reflected in decisions such as transferring children from private elite schools to public schools, relying on government health insurance for medical care, moving out of luxury housing, and reducing unnecessary expenses like eating out.

"I moved my child from SDIT [an Islamic private elementary school] to a public school. For medical treatment, I now use BPJS [national health insurance] to reduce costs." (I. Line 24-31)

"Of course, the kids are now enrolled in regular schools, not international schools, because that would cost too much… We are also no longer live in elite housing like in the UAE—just ordinary housing now." (Y. Line 71-78)

"Before, everything was easily fulfilled, but now we must hold back. Back then, I could eat out every day, but now it has been reduced." (R. Line 116-120)

Despite these limitations, some participants pursued long-term strategies to regain financial stability, including shifting to new career paths.

"I fought to make a change, from being a private lecturer to taking the civil servant selection exam. Alhamdulillah, I succeeded, and now things are much better." (I. Line 105-111)

Career Adaptation

Repatriation required participants to adapt their professional careers to the Indonesian context. This process included adjusting to new job expectations, workplace dynamics, and differences in systems and standards. Participants I and M shared that their new professions in Indonesia turned out to be more complex than initially imagined.

"We had made plans, but it turns out the academic world is not that easy either. Still, Alhamdulillah, God helped." (I. Line 310-313)

"We entered a new field… we had to start from scratch, learning everything again." (M. Line 122-126)

Meanwhile, participants R and G noted that their experiences in the UAE helped them secure higher-level positions in Indonesia. This position brought new responsibilities, such as managing subordinates and navigating relationships with long-standing employees. *"Since I started from the lowest position before, I didn't really have subordinates to manage. Here, on the other hand, there are several people I need to supervise. Now this is a whole new experience." (R. Line 181-185)*
"It is natural for there to be some friction when a newcomer suddenly holds a high position." (G. Line 408-412)

Participant Y added that work practices in Indonesia significantly differed from the international standards he experienced in the UAE.
"In the UAE, work standards were good, based on international benchmarks. But upon returning, the standards here were different." (Y. Line 129-134)

Interpersonal Relationships

Repatriation also brought challenges in rebuilding interpersonal relationships. Changes in socio-economic status and the decision to return often triggered mixed reactions from the community. Participant I shared that his decision to come home was frequently questioned and even mocked.
"There was a sort of cultural bullying, like… 'why did you quit?' It was quite a lot of pressure." (I. Line 40-43)

Nevertheless, participants viewed repatriation positively, as it strengthened family togetherness. Although financial support for families had to be reduced, this was addressed through open communication.
"The biggest challenge is adjusting from working in the UAE, where income was stable and company-provided, to earning independently. Income is now uncertain, and trading or entrepreneurship inevitably involves fluctuations. That is the main challenge." (M. Line 14–19). When later probed about his strategies with the question, *"Hmm, so what strategies did you use … communicating with your family?"* He responded with, *"Yes, that's right." (M. Line 154)*
"We also had to explain to the family that we could no longer give as much, whether to parents or siblings." (I. Line 93-95)

Beyond strengthening family ties, participants also saw repatriation as part of a natural adjustment process. R emphasized that adaptation felt relatively easy because of cultural familiarity.
"In terms of culture, it is easier here because I was raised here since childhood, so Insha Allah adaptation is easier." (R. Line 41-45)
"… living through what I have received… and then returning here, at first it was not well accepted, so I had to adapt. But it is just part of the process… normal." (Y. Line 243-249)
Additionally, participants G and R highlighted the importance of social skills and emotional intelligence in building relationships, including controlling one's ego and avoiding conflict.
"As long as we can set aside our ego, we can socialize anywhere." (G. Line 171-172)
"When dealing with people, we should avoid disturbing others… and if things do not go our way, then that is okay. Just be patient." (R. Line 157-160)

Systemic and Bureaucratic Challenges

Beyond personal and professional adjustments, repatriates also encountered obstacles in dealing with Indonesian systems, procedures, and bureaucracy, which were often perceived as more complicated than in the UAE. For example, participants M and R noted that regulations in the UAE were clearer and more organized.

"In the UAE, everything was structured, the rules were clear… here, it is more arbitrary." (M. Line 50-53)

"Here, the rules are unclear… while over there, nothing could be convoluted—everything was well-regulated." (R. Line 128-132)

Meanwhile, Y felt that Indonesian regulations—especially in the energy and education sectors—were overly complex. He explained that power plant regulations were unnecessarily bureaucratic, and enrolling his child in school involved layers of administrative hurdles.

"We cannot expect things to be ideal… so we must adapt to Indonesia's regulations. Power plant regulations, for example, are still extremely complicated to this day." (Y. Line 137-144)

"The biggest challenge was finding a school. It was easier to transfer from here to the UAE than from the UAE back to Indonesia, because of the bureaucracy at the Education Office." (Y. Line 29-32)

Participant I also described experiencing unequal treatment in work facilities and career development, such as being denied meal allowances and laundry services, as well as facing difficulties in career advancement.

"In Indonesia, I have to do my laundry." (I. Line 234-238)

"Career-wise, it is difficult to move up because my degree is not linear with my field. So, we lose out." (I. Line 157-160)

"I felt discriminated against—why wasn't I given meals?" (I. Line 291-293)

Inner Strengths of Resilience

To facilitate adapting to a new reality, participants emphasized the importance of inner strength as a foundation for perseverance and persistence in navigating life changes. Such inner strength was often rooted in spiritual beliefs, which fostered gratitude and framed resilience as a process of personal growth.

Spiritual Beliefs

For several participants, spirituality—particularly faith in Islamic teachings—served as a guiding principle for patience, sincerity, and trust in God's plan. This faith provided a sense of peace and calm during the repatriation process. Participant G highlighted that the teachings of Islam, brought by Prophet Muhammad, offer comprehensive guidance for addressing life's challenges.

"Our religion is already complete. If we return to it, to Islam, life will never feel difficult; there is no need to complain—everything already has a solution." (G. Line 221-224)

Furthermore, participant G believed that God guarantees sustenance. He also noted that when confronted with something wrong, individuals should act to the best of their ability.

"We must be confident that when we return to religion, worldly matters will become lighter and easier to manage. Sustenance will flow—that is certain. I have experienced this, and God's promise is indeed real. That is what matters most." (G. Line 237-243)
"Our religion clearly teaches that when you witness wrongdoing, correct it with your hands… if unable, then with your heart; and if not even that, then that is the weakest of faith." (G. Line 384-389)

Meanwhile, participants R and M explained that destiny does not always align with personal desires. Thus, the best approach is to pray, make efforts, and pursue what is possible with sincere intentions.
"Sometimes it depends on God. Destiny does not always align with what we want. What matters is that we try—try to do our best." (R. Line 151-157)
"Do not forget, when making choices, it is best to first seek guidance from God, so whatever we face later will be the best for us, God willing." (R. Line 223-226)
"But since I had already made the intention from the beginning, Bismillah, I continue to live with whatever the outcome may be." (M. Line 19-21)

Meaning of Resilience

For participants, resilience was not defined uniformly but rather interpreted in diverse ways depending on everyone's repatriation experience. Participant I described resilience as the ability to maintain economic stability by ensuring that basic needs are met, regardless of changes in job type or location.
"Resilience, or toughness, is when we can meet minimum expenses—then, no matter where we work, economically we are fine. It just depends on what kind of job we want to do." (I. Line 248-251)

In contrast, participant G framed resilience as career capital—an asset that enriches skills, perspectives, and serves as a valuable resource for advancing a career after returning to Indonesia.
"Experiences abroad… become a powerful weapon for building a career back home, that is how I see it." (G. Line 534-536)
Participant R, meanwhile, interpreted resilience as the capacity to adapt to new environments, including social interactions and understanding local culture.
"For me… it is the ability to adapt to a new environment—new place, new people, new culture." (R. Line 207-210)

In agreement with participants, I and R, participant M viewed resilience as the strength to confront life's realities, particularly adapting to shifts in income and living conditions. For M, resilience required a change in mindset—from being a salaried worker to becoming self-reliant in generating income:
"Being strong in facing reality, because income changes, and so does the environment. So our mindset must shift. We are no longer people who receive money every month; instead, we must move and earn it ourselves." (M. Line 171-175)

Finally, participant Y introduced a different perspective by emphasizing resilience as integrity. For him, resilience was not only about adjustment but also about holding firmly to one's principles despite external pressures:

"Resilience means adapting to a new environment while still upholding my life principles… entering a new place without changing what I believe is right. That, for me, is resilience." (Y. Line 264-276)

The varied subjective meanings shared by participants illustrate that resilience in the context of repatriation is inherently complex. It can be understood as an economic strategy, career and social capital, adaptive capacity, or a commitment to personal values. These varied meanings show that resilience is more than just enduring hardships and also reflects how returnees interpret and respond to the challenges of the repatriation process.

Discussion

This study revealed how resilience takes shape in the lives of Indonesian migrant workers returning from the UAE. The analysis showed three interrelated themes that continuously interact throughout the repatriation journey: (1) protective foundations, (2) adaptive processes, and (3) inner strengths (see Figure 1). These themes are not separate, but overlap and reinforce each other, shaping how returnees face uncertainty and rebuild their lives in their home country.

Protective Foundations of Resilience

This theme captures the basic support that helped returning migrants manage the difficulties of repatriation. In this study, these protective foundations took the form of emotional bonds with family, the availability of resources, and hopes for a better future. For many participants, these elements provided an initial sense of grounding after return by offering emotional reassurance and a degree of practical stability amid the uncertainties of reintegration. Rather than eliminating challenges, these foundations appeared to reduce feelings of vulnerability and loss that often accompany repatriation (Weine et al., 2014). This interpretation aligns with Sharma et al. (2019) who describe protective foundations as early buffers that help individuals stabilize themselves when facing heightened risks and stressors during major life transitions.
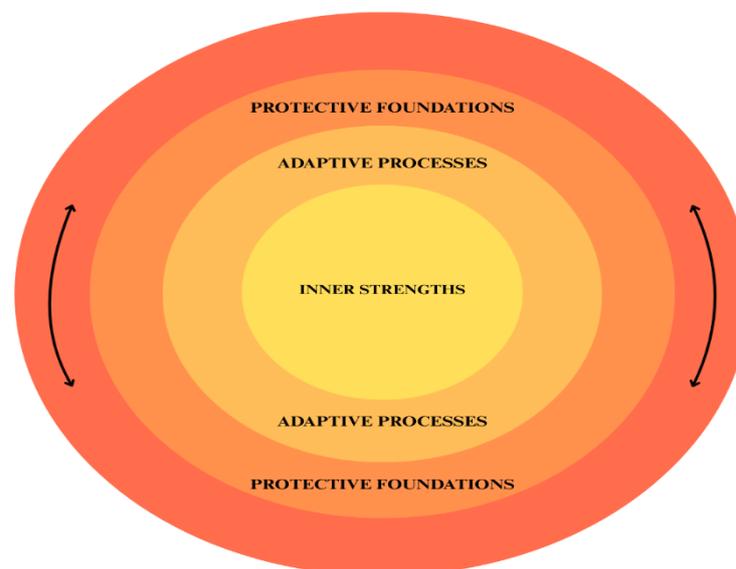
From a psychological perspective, repatriation can be understood as a major life transition that is often associated with the loss of roles, income, social status, and familiar daily routines (Chiang et al., 2018). Such transitions function as significant stressors that activate resilience processes rather than simply revealing resilience as a fixed personal trait (Egan et al., 2024; Hill et al., 2025). In line with this process-oriented view, Kumpfer (2002) conceptualizes resilience as a dynamic interaction between risk factors and protective factors that unfolds over time. Moreover, resilience is also closely tied to meaningfulness, perseverance, and emotional balance, particularly under conditions of prolonged uncertainty (Wagnild & Young, 1993). In the repatriation context, these dimensions became evident as participants actively mobilized protective foundations—such as family connections, resource readiness, and transformative development—to regain a sense of purpose, continuity, and control while navigating social, economic, and emotional challenges (Gao et al., 2023; Hodes & Hussain, 2020; Olcese et al., 2025). Overall, these findings argue that resilience emerges through an ongoing interaction between returning migrants and the demands of repatriation, rather than as a stable attribute possessed prior to return.

One subtheme of protective foundations identified in this study is the emotional bond with family. Participants consistently expressed a strong desire to reunite with their families—particularly spouses and children—after prolonged periods of employment in the UAE. This desire was not only driven by emotional longing, but also by an effort to restore

a sense of responsibility, belonging, and relational continuity that had been disrupted during migration (Atay & Bayraktaroglu, 2025). Within this context, the nuclear family functioned as an immediate source of emotional security and meaning during the early stages of repatriation, operating within Bronfenbrenner's microsystem as the closest social environment shaping individual adjustment and resilience (Kang et al., 2022; Tong & An, 2024). Walsh (2012) similarly highlights family cohesion as a key factor in facilitating psychological recovery during periods of socio-economic stress and transition. In line with these perspectives, the findings of this study suggest that family relationships played an active role in helping returnees emotionally stabilize themselves and re-anchor their identities following return. Consequently, family considerations often emerged as a powerful motivator for migrants to return home and face the uncertainties of reintegration (Al Masud et al., 2022; OECD, 2024).

Figure 1

Resilience Processes in the Repatriation Journey of Indonesian Migrant Workers

Beyond family support, the preparedness of resources also emerged as a crucial protective foundation in the repatriation process. This finding aligns with Ungar (2013) socio-ecological perspective, which emphasizes that resilience is shaped by individual capacities and access to various resources (economic, social, and institutional) within one's environment. For returning migrants, such resource readiness appeared to reduce uncertainty and enhance their perceived sense of control during a major life transition (MacDonald & Arthur, 2005). Participants' accounts illustrate how different forms of resource preparedness functioned as stabilizing mechanisms. Participant I engaged in systematic financial planning and secured rental property. Participant G and participant Y obtained permanent employment through professional networks, while participant R returned from Abu Dhabi with sufficient capital to establish a business. These actions extended beyond short-term survival strategies and reflected deliberate efforts to reconstruct stability and autonomy after return. At a psychological level, access to tangible resources supported confidence, future planning, and sense of direction, thereby buffering the stress associated with repatriation (Arman, 2009).Through this process, resource readiness enabled returnees to actively manage challenges rather than remain vulnerable to them.

The final protective foundation identified in this study is transformative development, which refers to participants' capacity to reinterpret repatriation as a turning point for personal growth rather than merely a return to pre-migration conditions. From a psychological perspective, this aligns with Masten's et al. (2023) view of resilience as a dynamic developmental process, in which individuals draw on future-oriented goals and growth motivations to maintain purpose during periods of uncertainty. These future-oriented aspirations were evident in participants' concrete decisions and life trajectories. Participant I, for example, chose to leave a discriminatory workplace to pursue his long-standing aspiration of becoming a lecturer. Participant M sought independence through entrepreneurship, while participant G viewed his international work experience as a strategic asset for future competitiveness. On the other hand, participant Y and his wife prioritized their children's education for their brighter future. Psychologically, these narratives reflect a meaning-making process in which adversity is reframed as an opportunity for transformation. Such reframing supports the conceptualization of resilience as an evolving psychological process, in which individuals actively reconstruct meaning and orient themselves toward future possibilities (Park, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Adaptive Processes of Resilience

Although protective foundations offered returnees an important starting point, they did not eliminate the challenges of returning to their home country. Instead, these foundations enabled returnees to navigate new realities in Indonesia through ongoing adjustment across economic, career, social, and bureaucratic domains. From this perspective, resilience is better understood as an adaptive process that develops through repeated interactions between individuals and their environments, rather than as a fixed personal trait (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Masten, 2014; Masten et al., 2021, 2023; Ungar, 2013). This explanation contrasts with trait-based approaches to resilience, which conceptualize resilience as a stable internal characteristic, by emphasizing how adaptive strategies are continuously recalibrated in response to changing economic, social, and institutional demands (Hamid et al., 2023; Salignac et al., 2019).

Most participants experienced a significant decline or instability in income after their return. To cope with these changes, they adjusted their lifestyles by enrolling their children in public schools instead of international or exclusive private schools. In addition, some participants moved to more affordable housing and limited family recreational expenses. These adjustments indicate that financial adaptation developed gradually through re-prioritization of needs rather than through immediate economic recovery (Hamid et al., 2023; Salignac et al., 2019). Thus, participants' experiences portray financial management not as a means of avoiding hardship, but as an ongoing process of psychological endurance and adaptation to sustained economic pressures.

Beyond financial issues, career adaptation often became one of the most difficult aspects of repatriation. Participant I, for example, attempted to enter the academic field and soon realized that it required new competencies in research, publication, and classroom management—areas he had not yet fully mastered. Participant R described running a business in Indonesia as more demanding than having formal employment abroad. Meanwhile, participant G and participant Y compared their local workplaces with those in the UAE and perceived that local systems were less efficient, requiring them to recalibrate their professional standards. Taken together, these stories suggest that repatriation involves a steep process of learning in which returnees must acquire new skills and reinterpret their overseas experience to fit the local context (Akkan et al., 2018). This process often entails skill adjustment and requirement of professional identity following repatriation.

To adapt with the local context, returnees also had to navigate changes in their interpersonal relationships within their social environment (Doma et al., 2022; Loayza-Rivas & Fernández-Castro, 2020). For some participants, returning home strengthened family closeness. Participant M, for instance, expressed gratitude for being able to spend more time with his children after years of separation. Similarly, participant R noted that his familiarity with local cultural norms helped ease social interactions and facilitated a smoother transition. However, not all social experiences were supportive. Participant I reported receiving critical remarks from peers and relatives who questioned his decision to return, which he experienced as socially discouraging and emotionally taxing. These findings illustrate that interpersonal relationships can function both as sources of emotional support and as stressors that complicate the adaptation process during repatriation (Ozbay et al., 2007).

Alongside interpersonal adjustments, participants described a range of challenges embedded within institutional and bureaucratic contexts. Several participants highlighted how inconsistent road traffic conditions and regulations disrupted their daily routines. Participant R, for example, described difficulties adapting to local commuting conditions, while participant M reported similar challenges in managing everyday mobility. Participant Y pointed to complicated procedures within the energy and infrastructure sectors that slowed down his professional activities. Moreover, participant I experienced administrative difficulties when enrolling his children in public schools. These experiences indicate that repatriation requires engagement not only with personal and social environments, but also with govermental systems that may lack clarity and efficiency. Previous research has noted that bureaucratic and infrastructural constraints often shape the reintegration experiences of returning migrants (Setrana & Tonah, 2016). More recent studies further explain that persistent institutional barriers can delay socio-economic reintegration and require returnees to develop additional adaptive strategies over time (Canedo, 2025; Majidi et al., 2023).

Inner Strengths of Resilience
Another key dimension of resilience that emerged from participants' narratives was inner strengths. From a psychological viewpoint, these inner strengths can be understood as intrapersonal resources that support emotional regulation, meaning-making, and cognitive endurance, particularly when external support systems are limited (Masten, 2014; Masten et al., 2021, 2023; Ungar, 2013). While protective foundations provided initial grounding and adaptive processes captured daily adjustments, inner strengths referred to the personal capacities that sustained returnees internally during prolonged uncertainty.

One of the most consistent forms of participants' inner strengths was spirituality. Participant G drew on Islamic teachings to manage his emotions. Participant R placed trust in the divine plan. Meanwhile, participant M emphasized the importance of intention and *tawakkul* (trustful surrender). For them, faith was both a source of comfort and a compass for navigating uncertainty, helping regulate emotional distress and restore a sense of meaning and control amid unpredictable circumstances. This finding aligns with Manning et al. (2019), who highlighted the role of faith as an anchor during difficult situations. Other studies also justified spirituality as a form of religious coping and a pathway for finding meaning in stressful contexts (Pargament, 1997; Park, 2010; Xu, 2016). In this way, spiritual beliefs were not just psychological supports but transformative guides that shaped how participants understood and approached their repatriation journey.

Beyond spirituality, participants described resilience in ways that reflected their own personal meanings. Conceptually, this finding aligns with a meaning-making view of resilience, which emphasizes individuals' capacity to construct purpose, coherence, and direction in the face of adversity (Park, 2010). For participant I, resilience was understood

as the ability to maintain financial stability. Conversely, participant G associated resilience with personal growth that he gained from international experiences. On the other hand, participant R, participant M, and participant Y described resilience as the capacity to adjust to new environments. Furthermore, participant Y emphasized the importance of maintaining principles and integrity while adapting. These diverse interpretations highlight that resilience is not experienced similarly, but is shaped by subjective values and life priorities (Wagnild & Young, 1993).

Overall, inner strengths not only provided sources of emotional or spiritual comfort but also functioned as psychological frameworks through which participants made sense of adversity and rebuilt their lives after returning home. Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. First, all participants were male migrant workers, which may limit the transferability of the findings to female returnees who may experience repatriation differently. Second, all participants were employed in the energy sector, a context that involves specific work structures and resources that may not reflect the conditions faced by migrant workers in other sectors. Third, participants varied considerably in their length of employment in the UAE as well as in the duration since their return to Indonesia, which may have shaped how resilience was experienced and interpreted over time. These contextual boundaries suggest that the findings should be understood as situated within gendered, occupational, and temporal experiences. Therefore, future research is strongly encouraged to explore resilience among returning migrant workers across more diverse groups, particularly female workers, and those employed in other sectors such as domestic work, shipping, or hospitality. Such studies would help broaden and deepen the understanding of resilience during repatriation and further enrich the literature on migrant workers' post-return experiences.

Conclusion

This study shows that resilience among Indonesian migrant workers returning from the UAE is not a fixed capacity, but a process that continues to evolve across different areas of life. Based on the participants' narratives, resilience was built from their family connections, access to resources, and aspirations for the future. Then, it was tested through the uncertain income, career shifts, social relationships, and bureaucratic systems. Finally, it was sustained by spirituality and the meanings they attached to their experiences. Taken together, these findings suggest that repatriation should not be seen simply as "going back." Instead, it represents a new phase of migration that brings challenges and requires practical adjustments with inner strength.Not only theoretical, the insights of this study also point to practical implications. Support for returning migrants should not rest only on their individual capacity. Financial literacy programs, assistance in navigating administrative systems, and initiatives that ease community reintegration could reduce the pressures of return. Just as important are psychosocial supports that acknowledge the role of family, faith, and meaning-making in sustaining well-being. Finally, resilience in repatriation is both personal and collective. By understanding its many layers, we can move closer to supporting returning migrants in building lives that are stable, purposeful, and fulfilling.

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Declarations

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