



Dynamics of Social Stratification and Vertical Mobility in the Transformation of Contemporary Indonesian Urban Society

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of social stratification and vertical mobility within the context of contemporary urban Indonesian society transformation. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data from 847 respondents across three major Indonesian cities (Jakarta, Surabaya, and Makassar) with qualitative in-depth interviews of 45 individuals representing various socioeconomic backgrounds, this research investigates how urbanization, educational expansion, and economic restructuring influence social class positioning and mobility patterns. The findings reveal a complex stratification system characterized by increasing polarization between upper-middle and lower classes, with a shrinking traditional middle class. Intergenerational mobility analysis demonstrates that while educational attainment remains the primary mechanism for upward mobility, structural barriers including geographic origin, family capital, and network access significantly constrain mobility opportunities for lower-class individuals. Furthermore, the study identifies emerging patterns of 'horizontal stratification' within class categories, particularly evident in the proliferation of informal sector workers with varying degrees of economic security and social recognition. These findings contribute to understanding social inequality dynamics in rapidly transforming Southeast Asian urban contexts and highlight the need for comprehensive social policies addressing structural mobility barriers.

Keywords: Social stratification, vertical mobility, urban transformation, inequality, Indonesia



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INTRODUCTION

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." — Karl Marx, The Communist Manifesto (1848)

Marx's foundational observation regarding class struggles remains profoundly relevant in contemporary urban Indonesia, albeit manifesting through distinctly modern configurations. While Marx articulated his analysis within the context of industrial European capitalism, the fundamental dynamics of social stratification and class mobility continue to shape societal transformations in developing economies. The contemporary Indonesian urban landscape, characterized by rapid modernization, economic restructuring, and demographic shifts, presents a complex terrain where traditional hierarchies intersect with emergent class formations, creating novel patterns of social

differentiation and mobility opportunities that both affirm and challenge classical sociological theories.

Indonesia's urban transformation over the past three decades has been nothing short of remarkable. The urbanization rate has accelerated from approximately 30% in 1990 to over 56% in 2024, with projections indicating that nearly 68% of Indonesia's population will reside in urban areas by 2035 (World Bank, 2024). This demographic shift has coincided with substantial economic growth, structural transformation of labor markets, and the expansion of educational opportunities, all of which have profound implications for social stratification systems and mobility patterns (Jones & Pratomo, 2023). The Indonesian urban middle class has expanded significantly, yet this expansion has been accompanied by persistent inequalities and the emergence of new forms of social differentiation that complicate traditional understandings of class structure.

Theoretical frameworks for understanding social stratification have evolved considerably since Marx's initial formulations. Weber (1922) expanded the analysis beyond purely economic determinants to incorporate status and power dimensions, while Bourdieu (1984) introduced the concept of cultural capital, highlighting how non-economic resources contribute to social reproduction and mobility. Contemporary scholars have further refined these approaches to account for the specific dynamics of developing economies, where formal and informal sectors coexist, traditional status hierarchies persist alongside modern class structures, and global economic integration creates both opportunities and constraints for social mobility (Standing, 2011; Harriss-White, 2020).

Within the Indonesian context, several scholars have examined various dimensions of social stratification and mobility. Aspinall (2014) documented the political implications of middle-class expansion, while Nilan et al. (2011) explored how young Indonesians navigate educational and occupational pathways in pursuit of upward mobility. Recent work by Ford and Parker (2021) has highlighted the precarious nature of employment for many urban workers, suggesting that apparent upward mobility may mask underlying economic insecurity. However, comprehensive empirical investigations examining the interplay between structural transformation, educational expansion, and mobility patterns across diverse urban settings remain limited.

This study addresses this gap by examining three interconnected research questions: (1) How has the structure of social stratification evolved in major Indonesian urban centers over the past two decades? (2) What mechanisms and barriers shape vertical mobility opportunities for individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds? (3) To what extent do educational attainment, family background, and social networks differentially influence mobility trajectories? By addressing these questions through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative mobility analyses with qualitative narrative accounts, this research contributes to both theoretical understanding of stratification dynamics in

transitional economies and practical knowledge relevant to policy interventions aimed at promoting more equitable mobility opportunities.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously to provide a comprehensive understanding of social stratification and mobility dynamics (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The quantitative component utilized structured survey methodology to examine patterns of intergenerational and intragenerational mobility across a large sample, while the qualitative component employed in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and strategies individuals employ in navigating class structures.

Sampling and Participants

The quantitative sample comprised 847 respondents aged 25-60 years residing in three major Indonesian cities: Jakarta (n=312), Surabaya (n=289), and Makassar (n=246). These cities were selected to represent diverse regional contexts while maintaining sufficient urban development to observe contemporary stratification patterns. A stratified random sampling approach was employed, with stratification based on residential area characteristics (categorized as upper, middle, and lower-income neighborhoods according to local property values and infrastructure quality) to ensure representation across socioeconomic strata.

For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was utilized to select 45 participants representing diverse mobility trajectories: 15 individuals who experienced significant upward mobility, 15 who remained in their origin class, and 15 who experienced downward mobility. Participants were recruited through community organizations, educational institutions, and snowball referrals to capture varied experiences across different mobility paths.

Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through face-to-face surveys conducted between March and August 2024. The survey instrument included sections on: (1) demographic characteristics; (2) current occupational status, income, and educational attainment; (3) parental occupation, education, and economic status during respondent's childhood; (4) educational history and credentials; (5) employment history and career progression; and (6) social network characteristics and resource access. Occupational data were coded using the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) and subsequently aggregated into class categories following the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP) class schema adapted for Indonesian context (Goldthorpe, 2000).

Qualitative interviews, lasting 60-90 minutes, were conducted between April and September 2024. The semi-structured interview protocol explored participants' life histories, focusing on educational experiences, occupational transitions, perceived barriers and facilitators to mobility, family and social network influences, and subjective perceptions of class identity and position. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim in Indonesian, with selected quotations translated to English for publication.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analyses were performed using SPSS version 28 and R version 4.3. Intergenerational mobility was assessed through cross-tabulation of parental and respondent class positions, with mobility rates calculated as absolute mobility (percentage changing class) and relative mobility (odds ratios comparing mobility chances across origin classes). Logistic regression models were constructed to identify predictors of upward mobility, with independent variables including parental education, parental occupation, respondent education, geographic origin, gender, and ethnicity. Model fit was evaluated using pseudo-R² and Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit tests.

Qualitative data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. Initial coding was conducted inductively, identifying patterns in participants' narratives regarding mobility experiences. These codes were then organized into broader themes through iterative comparison and refinement. The analysis team, consisting of three researchers, independently coded a subset of transcripts and met regularly to discuss coding decisions, resolve discrepancies, and develop a shared understanding of emerging themes. NVivo 14 software was used to facilitate coding and theme organization.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Protocol No. E.5.a/158/UMM/III/2024). All participants provided written informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study's purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits. Participants were assured of confidentiality, with all identifying information removed from transcripts and publications. Pseudonyms are used for all qualitative data presented in this article.

RESULTS

Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample

Table 1 presents the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of survey respondents. The sample demonstrated reasonable gender balance (51.8% male, 48.2% female) and age distribution across the target range. Educational attainment varied substantially, with 28.3% having completed only primary or junior secondary education, 38.7% having completed senior secondary education, and 33.0% holding tertiary degrees. Current occupational distribution revealed 24.6% in

professional/managerial positions, 31.4% in routine non-manual work, 19.8% in skilled manual work, and 24.2% in semi-skilled or unskilled positions.

Characteristic	N (%)
Gender	
Male	439 (51.8%)
Female	408 (48.2%)
Educational Attainment	
Primary/Junior Secondary	240 (28.3%)
Senior Secondary	328 (38.7%)
Tertiary	279 (33.0%)
Current Occupation Class	
Professional/Managerial	208 (24.6%)
Routine Non-Manual	266 (31.4%)
Skilled Manual	168 (19.8%)
Semi/Unskilled	205 (24.2%)

Table 1. Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N=847)

Patterns of Intergenerational Mobility

Analysis of intergenerational mobility patterns revealed substantial movement between parental and respondent class positions, with 58.7% of respondents occupying a different class than their parents. However, this absolute mobility figure masks significant variation in the direction and magnitude of movement across origin classes. Upward mobility was most common among respondents from working-class origins (47.3%), while those from professional/managerial backgrounds exhibited high rates of class reproduction (72.1% remaining in the same class).

Examination of relative mobility chances through odds ratios indicated persistent inequality in mobility opportunities. Respondents from professional/managerial family backgrounds were 4.8 times more likely to attain professional/managerial positions themselves compared to those from semi/unskilled backgrounds (OR=4.83, 95% CI: 3.21-7.26, $p < 0.001$), even after controlling for educational attainment. This finding suggests that parental class position influences occupational outcomes through mechanisms beyond simply facilitating educational access.

Downward mobility, while less common overall (18.4% of the sample), was notably concentrated among individuals from middle-class backgrounds who entered the labor market during periods of economic instability (particularly the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2008 global financial crisis). Qualitative interviews with these individuals revealed that economic shocks during critical career establishment phases created lasting disadvantages that proved difficult to overcome, even with subsequent economic recovery.

Educational Pathways and Credentialism

Education emerged as the single most powerful predictor of upward mobility in regression analyses. Tertiary education increased the odds of achieving professional/managerial status by 8.3 times compared to primary education only (OR=8.32, 95% CI: 5.47-12.66, $p < 0.001$). However, the relationship between education and mobility proved more complex than simple credentialism. Qualitative data revealed that educational institution prestige, field of study, and the social networks developed during education all substantially influenced post-graduation opportunities.

Participants from lower-class backgrounds who achieved upward mobility through education consistently emphasized the importance of attending well-regarded universities, often describing how they strategically pursued admission to prestigious institutions despite financial hardships. As one participant explained: "I knew that graduating from a state university would open doors that a private university degree couldn't. So I studied extremely hard for the entrance exam, even though my family couldn't afford tutoring like wealthier students had" (Budi, male, 34, son of street vendor, now corporate manager).

Nevertheless, education alone did not guarantee mobility. Several participants with tertiary credentials described experiencing prolonged unemployment or underemployment, particularly those from less prestigious institutions or without family connections to facilitate job placement. This credential inflation phenomenon appeared particularly acute in Jakarta, where competition for formal sector positions has intensified as tertiary education has expanded without proportionate employment growth in professional occupations.

The Role of Social Capital and Networks

Social networks and connections emerged as crucial facilitators of both mobility and class reproduction. Survey respondents who reported having professional contacts through family connections were significantly more likely to secure professional employment (OR=3.12, 95% CI: 2.18-4.47, $p < 0.001$). Qualitative interviews illuminated the mechanisms through which social capital operates, with participants describing how family connections provided information about job opportunities, recommendations to employers, and insider knowledge about organizational cultures and expectations.

The absence of such networks created significant challenges for mobility aspirants from working-class backgrounds. Several participants described their initial ignorance of professional workplace norms and expectations, learning through trial and error rather than familial guidance. One participant reflected: "When I got my first office job, I didn't know how to dress properly, how to write professional emails, or even how to network with colleagues. I had to figure it all out myself because no one in my family had ever worked in an office" (Siti, female, 31, daughter of agricultural laborer, now junior accountant).

DISCUSSION

This study's findings illuminate the complex and multifaceted nature of social stratification and mobility in contemporary urban Indonesia. While substantial absolute mobility exists—reflecting the structural transformations accompanying Indonesia's economic development—patterns of relative mobility reveal persistent inequalities in mobility chances across class origins. These results resonate with broader scholarly debates regarding whether modernization necessarily reduces social inequality or whether new forms of stratification emerge to replace traditional hierarchies (Goldthorpe, 2016; Hout & DiPrete, 2006).

The identification of significant upward mobility alongside pronounced class reproduction suggests that Indonesian urban society exhibits characteristics of both openness and closure. Education's role as the primary mobility mechanism aligns with human capital theory's predictions and with findings from other developing economies (Narayan et al., 2018). However, the persistent advantages enjoyed by individuals from privileged backgrounds—even controlling for education—indicates that family resources extend beyond facilitating educational access to include cultural capital, social networks, and material resources that shape occupational opportunities and career trajectories.

The finding that educational institution prestige significantly influences mobility outcomes highlights how credentialism operates in stratified educational systems (Collins, 1979; Brown, 2001). Indonesian higher education exhibits substantial quality variation, with elite state universities conferring both superior skills and valuable social connections compared to lower-tier institutions. This stratification within the educational system potentially reinforces rather than reduces social inequality, as privileged families can leverage their resources to secure admission to elite institutions for their children, thereby reproducing their class advantages across generations.

The prominence of social capital in facilitating mobility and class reproduction aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) theorization of capital forms and Lin's (2001) network-based approach to social capital. The study's qualitative findings particularly underscore how social networks provide not merely instrumental assistance (job information, recommendations) but also cultural knowledge about professional workplace expectations and norms. This cultural dimension of network advantage suggests that mobility aspirants from disadvantaged backgrounds face not only structural barriers but also cultural obstacles in navigating professional employment contexts.

The observed polarization between upper-middle and lower classes, with a shrinking traditional middle class, reflects trends documented in other middle-income countries experiencing rapid economic transformation (Kharas & Hamel, 2018). This polarization likely results from technological change, labor market restructuring, and globalization's differential impacts across occupations and sectors. The growth of informal sector employment, while providing income opportunities for many,

often offers limited economic security or upward mobility prospects, potentially creating a two-tiered labor market that reinforces class divisions.

These findings carry important policy implications. While educational expansion has demonstrably created mobility opportunities, policies must address quality disparities within the educational system to prevent credentialism from reinforcing inequality. Efforts to improve educational quality in less prestigious institutions, provide merit-based access to elite universities for disadvantaged students, and recognize credentials from diverse institutions in hiring could enhance educational equity. Additionally, programs facilitating professional network development and workplace cultural capital acquisition for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds might help level the playing field in employment markets.

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference; while observed associations suggest mechanisms of mobility and reproduction, longitudinal data would provide stronger evidence. Second, the focus on three major cities may not represent experiences in smaller urban centers or rural areas, where different mobility dynamics might operate. Third, subjective class identification was not systematically measured, yet individuals' class consciousness and identity might influence their mobility strategies and outcomes. Future research addressing these limitations would enrich understanding of Indonesian stratification dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the dynamics of social stratification and vertical mobility in contemporary urban Indonesia, revealing a complex picture of opportunity and constraint. Substantial absolute mobility exists, driven primarily by educational expansion and structural economic transformation. However, this openness coexists with persistent inequalities in relative mobility chances, as advantaged families successfully transmit their privileges to the next generation through educational quality differentiation, social network resources, and cultural capital transmission.

The findings highlight education's dual role as both a mobility mechanism and a site of class reproduction. While educational credentials remain essential for upward mobility, the stratification within the educational system and the importance of non-academic resources (networks, cultural knowledge) mean that education alone cannot equalize mobility opportunities. Addressing structural mobility barriers requires comprehensive policy approaches that promote educational equity, facilitate network development for disadvantaged youth, and combat credentialism in employment markets.

As Indonesian society continues its urban transformation, understanding and addressing these stratification dynamics becomes increasingly urgent. The emerging polarization between upper-middle and lower classes, if left unaddressed, threatens social cohesion and democratic stability. Creating more equitable mobility opportunities requires not only economic growth but also targeted

interventions addressing the mechanisms through which class advantages are reproduced. Only through such comprehensive efforts can Indonesian society realize the democratic promise of equal opportunity regardless of family background.

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