

Walking With Balloons, Holding on to Hope

Every night, Endang Retno Salindri walks nearly 2.4 kilometers along Tangerang's sidewalks. In her 60s, she spends about three hours after dusk selling balloons— small symbols of hope she clings to while struggling to make ends meet.



Endang sells balloons earning barely enough to eat.

Born in Biltar in 1965, Endang now lives far from her hometown, in a small rented room with a lease due in just two days. Soon, she must find another place to rest her weary. Every evening after Magrib (around 6 P.M.), she steps out carrying 25 to 30 balloons, bracing herself for whatever night may bring.

“Sometimes I only sell two. Sometimes I only earn ten thousand rupiah,”



She sits and waits, to sell balloons

Her income is uncertain and never enough to cover rent, food, and medication. As her body weakens from acid reflux, shortness of breath, and lingering pain from her past illnesses, most of her income goes to medical costs. Leaving no choice but to keep working—unable to run a food stall or return to her old job as a gas station mascot, as whatever little she earns quickly slips away.

If a balloon pops before it's sold, Endang must replace it at full price. A reality for informal workers whose labor keeps the city moving but often unnoticed. Still, she keeps walking, trying, and praying.

She Wanted to Teach—Life Taught Her Instead.

Endang's past is stitched together by years of hardship, long before she could name them. She recalls her childhood as a “dark period”, when her parents lived for themselves and left her without guidance or protection.

Despite her limited formal education, she once dreamed of teaching young children. Driven by her love for children and wanting to be a figure of guidance and protection she once hoped for.

That absence of her parents' attention and care became the doorway to her earliest trauma. At the age of 15, she was taken to Surabaya and forced to work by her biological mother and stepfather as a prostitute. The experience was so brutal that she couldn't walk for two weeks afterwards. However, her pain and grief were ignored since she was their only source of income.

The trauma and emotional void left by neglect and exploitation pushed her toward drinking and troubled circles, she now regrets as a wasted youth.

Her dream of escaping poverty led her to Malaysia, only to spend nine months enduring daily abuse from her employer. Choosing silence simply to survive.

Eventually, years of neglect, abuse, and exhaustion pushed her to a breaking point, where she left behind her darkest chapter and began rebuilding her life through prayer.

What the City Promised, and What It Took

Determined to escape the chaos of her youth, Endang pursued a steadier life. Her first job came by chance, a friend showed her a mascot listing and she clung to it like a lifeline. For nearly six months, she danced and smiled inside the costume. Yet beneath the cheerful act was a harsh reality. Every day she had to pay Rp 50,000 for the costume and the room she slept in.

“I was suffocated by it, but the money never reached me.”



Illustration of a Costumed Street Performer. (source: identitas.co.id)

Before becoming a mascot, Endang tried selling fried snacks, but the business quickly failed. Even so, she pushed on believing she has to keep working no matter how little it paid.

A Single Dream Changed Everything

Her path toward independence began with a simple dream: a child laughing with a balloon in hand—which she took as Allah’s sign of a new beginning.

And with that she left her mascot job and took her first balloon stick from a fellow performer. Each balloon earned her just Rp 2,000. Yet she felt she was working for herself.



Before Tangerang became the city she paced each night to make ends meet, she spent two years in Bogor—selling balloons in gentler condition, a city she still calls more forgiving.

She moved to Tangerang with a hope of a better future, only to face a harsher routine: long walks through crowded streets, unpredictable buyers, and living costs that consumed nearly everything she earned.

Surviving Together

In Tangerang, she met Siti—another woman surviving day to day. Speaking only Javanese, she earns money by playing a simple instrument on the street. Their bond formed quickly. When Endang is too weak to work, Siti steps on to the street just to put food on the table.

“The most important thing is there’s enough money for food,” Siti said.



Siti, the person who takes care of Endang

Despite hours of walking, and with each balloon only earning her Rp 2,000—her income remains uncertain. She claimed to have never received social assistance, legal support for her divorce, or access to public services promised to people living in poverty.

“Yet the government still fails to see ordinary people like us.”

BPJS Third Class: Affordable— Yet Painful Sorrow Lingers

Her illness has sent her in and out of the hospitals, yet as a third class Social Insurance Administration Organization (BPJS), the care she receives feels far from comforting. She recalls lying in a hospital bed after surgery, each passing hour reminded her how easily poor patients are overlooked.

“The nurses often yell at us. If the infusion runs out, it takes forever to get it replaced,”

Although people have offered to help her upgrade, layers of administrative paperwork continue to stand in her way.

All She Asks— Somewhere at Last

From a painful childhood to years of labor at home and abroad, life has tested her endlessly. Though her body has grown frail, she still works for what little she can. In a city that never sleeps, she stands as a quiet measure of progress—not in steel or concrete, but in whether hope endures.

“We map our future, but God writes the ending,”

VIDEO LINK : https://youtu.be/BEY3AV_qLGk?si=ATctUSYJhZjLKpsW