

Patriarchal Hegemony in the Workplace: A Qualitative Analysis of Wage Inequality and Verbal Abuse as Barriers to Women's Career Mobility

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the dynamics of gender inequality in the workplace, particularly as manifested in wage inequality and verbal abuse. Despite the increasing participation of women in the workforce, the reality on the ground shows that there is task segregation and a work culture that normalizes symbolic violence. Using qualitative methods with a case study approach, data was collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and photo documentation to validate the physical conditions of the work environment. The results of the study show that wage inequality is often the result of gender-biased job segregation, where women are placed in administrative sectors that are considered lower in economic value than technical positions dominated by men. In addition, verbal harassment was found to be a mechanism of social control that perpetuates the subordination of women.

Keywords: Wage inequality, Verbal abuse, Workplace, Gender.

Introduction

Women's participation in the economic and public sectors in Indonesia continues to show a significant upward trend, but this phenomenon often hides the grim reality of the quality of the work environment they face. The increase in female labor force participation is often not directly proportional to the psychological well-being and economic equality they receive. Behind the improved participation figures, there is a social structure that still places women in subordinate positions, both in the formal and informal sectors. Crucial issues that are often overlooked or considered a cultural norm are the gender pay gap and verbal harassment. These two issues are not merely industrial relations problems; rather, they are a reflection of the patriarchal culture that is deeply rooted in society and carried over into the professional sphere (No et al., 2024)

The pay gap does not always manifest itself in the form of explicit differences in basic wages, but rather in task segregation that limits women's access to bonuses or strategic positions. Meanwhile, verbal harassment is often considered mere banter, even though it has a destructive impact on the productivity and confidence of female workers. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of risk management in companies that specifically target gender-based protection, so that violence in the workplace continues to recur without adequate handling (Kastanya, 2025) . This article aims to dissect these mechanisms through a sociological lens, looking at how organizational structures and individual agency interact in perpetuating this injustice.

Method

This study employs a qualitative method with a case study approach to explore the deeper meanings of the subjective experiences of female workers. The qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to understand social phenomena from the participants' perspective holistically (Creswell, n.d.) . The research subjects consisted of female workers in various sectors, ranging from labor-intensive industries to the public service sector, who were selected using purposive sampling techniques to obtain informants with relevant experiences regarding the issues of wage inequality and harassment.

Data collection was carried out using three main techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore personal narratives about the informants' experiences of discrimination and harassment. Second, participatory observation was carried out in the work environment to directly observe social interactions, task distribution, and working conditions. Third, documentation in the form of photographs

was used as supporting data to visualize physical working conditions. Data validity was tested using source and method triangulation, as recommended in Miles and Huberman's qualitative research methodology literature (Milesandhuberman1994.Pdf, n.d.) , by comparing interview results with visual evidence and field observations.

Results and Discussion

Findings in the field show that wage inequality between men and women still exists. In the public service sector, such as gas stations, for example, women tend to be placed in administrative or operator positions that are considered lighter, while men are given technical or field responsibilities that have greater risk incentives and overtime opportunities (Mas, 2024) . A similar pattern is found in industry, where women are restricted from becoming machine operators due to stereotypes that they are physically weak and unable to handle heavy equipment, even though these positions offer better career paths and salaries (Pekerja & Kimia, n.d.) . As a result, women are trapped in positions with stagnant wages and no clear vertical mobility, a condition that reflects real structural marginalization.

This is experienced by one informant, NE, who works in a bread factory, where she still experiences wage inequality between female and male workers. As a result, these female workers often feel dissatisfied with their wages.

"Yes, our salaries are very different from the men here. Their weekly salary is 600 thousand rupiah, and that's only for new employees, not to mention those who have been working there for a long time. As for us women, we only get 360 thousand rupiah a week. Even if we take a day off, we don't get paid; we have to wait until the following week to get double pay." (NE, author's interview transcript, 2025).

From the interview regarding wage inequality among workers, it can be observed that there is a desire to receive a fair and appropriate wage, but due to circumstances, female workers have no choice but to work with wages that are sometimes unsatisfactory.

Figure 1. Female workers taking a break



Source: Author's documentation, 2025

In addition to economic aspects, this study also reveals a high prevalence of verbal harassment as a form of social control in the workplace. Verbal harassment, which is often disguised as sexist jokes or comments about physical appearance, creates an intimidating work environment. In some areas, this harassment even escalates into threats related to job security or social sanctions if the victim dares to report it (Kastanya, 2025) . Ironically, many female workers choose to remain silent or even internalize this treatment as part of the risks of the job because they are afraid of losing their livelihood, and must be professional at work, especially when dealing directly with customers (Pekerja & Kimia, n.d.) . This indicates the presence of self-limiting beliefs or personal barriers formed due to the pressure of patriarchal social structures (Publicuho et al., 2025) .

This verbal harassment is sometimes experienced from customers and even coworkers, as experienced by the two informants with the initials NK and RS. When they want to work professionally because they deal directly with consumers, it is precisely this sense of professionalism that sometimes becomes an opportunity for men to engage in verbal harassment.

“Sometimes when serving customers, like when they want to order food or drinks? They sometimes flirt like that. It’s not too bad occasionally, but if it happens often, it does feel uncomfortable. But what can I do? I have to act professionally so it doesn’t affect the workplace.” (NK, author’s interview transcript, 2025).

Figure 2. NK taking an order



Source: Author's documentation, 2025

Even workplaces that are exclusively staffed by women can still be places where perpetrators of harassment carry out their actions.

"We also don't want our male colleagues to enter our room without a clear purpose. They just say they want to borrow this or that, but sometimes they also flirt with us women here, and we know that they are just making excuses to get a chance." (RS, author's interview transcript, 2025).

Figure 3. Special workroom for women



Source: Author's documentation, 2025

Working professionally cannot even guarantee that female workers will be free from verbal harassment from male workers who still adhere to patriarchal structures. And even though the workplace has been separated between female and male workers, verbal harassment still often occurs.

Therefore, factors that often prevent female workers from working to their full potential, such as wage inequality and verbal harassment, disrupt the career mobility of female workers, as this has a direct impact on their psychological well-being. Whereas, based on findings regarding high levels of workplace violence and its impact on productivity, companies must view harassment and wage inequality not only as ethical issues but also as operational and financial risks.

Conclusion

Wage inequality and verbal abuse in the workplace are not isolated phenomena, but manifestations of the patriarchal structure that still dominates organizational culture in Indonesia. Wage inequality is perpetuated through tasks that limit women's access to strategic and high-paying positions, while verbal abuse serves as a mechanism to maintain masculine dominance in the workplace. To overcome this, an approach that goes beyond mere compliance with formal regulations is needed. Companies need to adopt inclusive risk management strategies that place gender equality and psychological safety as key performance indicators. Without decisive structural intervention and organizational cultural change, women will continue to pay a high social cost for their economic participation.

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