

Research: Masculine offices add to the burden of female office workers during COVID-19 pandemic

January 20 2021, by Kanti Pertiwi and Riani Rachmawati



Seorang pegawai perempuan mengenakan masker saat bekerja di Dinas Informasi Komunikasi dan Statistik Riau di Kota Pekanbaru. A woman office worker wearing mask while working in Riau Department of Information Communication and Statistics in Pekanbaru City. Credit: Riani Rachmawati

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of life, including the lives of female workers.

Several reports and [studies](#) have highlighted how the pandemic [put more pressure on female workers around the world](#) to balance work and domestic life.

My (Kanti Pertiwi) yet-to-be-published research shows Indonesian female workers have faced similar challenges. Interviews with 96 female office workers aged between 20 and 50, conducted over June, July and August last year, found the mental burden on working [women](#) grew during the pandemic.

The situation was worse for women working in masculine office cultures, where male perspectives were promoted and women's needs sidelined or ignored. These offices represent what we call [masculine organizations](#).

A growing mental burden

Nearly half of Indonesia's population are women but the female workforce participation rate is still low, at 53% in [2019](#). This means that of all women of working age, only half are actually working. Nearly [40% of female workers work in the formal sector](#), including office workers.

Most of the female office workers involved in the research project said their mental burden has increased during the pandemic due to the pressure of doing office work while [helping children study](#) from home. In addition, they have to deal with household chores.

Some women reported staying up late to fulfill requests from their superiors, who since the onset of the pandemic have increasingly stretched working hours.

Working from home now means working anytime, anywhere, almost without breaks. This is worsened by the assumption made by some employers that workers can be unproductive and lazy when working from home.

The situation for many female workers was complicated by the lack of a home office space, limited access to internet and not having the devices needed. Indonesia's labor policies provide options for mothers with children under five years of age to work from home, but not for fathers. This adds to the burden on women because they must care for children while working, while their husbands go to the office.

Even with these burdens, however, the majority of our respondents said they were quite happy to be able to work from home during the pandemic because it gives them more time with their children.

Spending more time with children can be a positive for many women, especially those who work in big cities like Jakarta. Most of the female office workers in Jakarta have to spend a lot of time commuting.

These seemingly contradictory facts—relatively high reported levels of happiness mixed with a great burden—underscores the importance of understanding [women's subjective experiences](#).

Some women didn't perceive this additional burden as a problem because it is in line with Indonesia's traditional gender ideology, which positions men as breadwinners and women as household managers.

Meanwhile, other women saw the value of negotiating the division of tasks at home and questioning traditional gender ideologies. Tina, one of the research participants, told us that "Women must not accept that house chores are their responsibility only."

Pressure from a masculine office

The burden women workers face gets harder when they have to work for masculine organizations or companies.

Some such organizations did not adjust expectations around workload and productivity during the pandemic. This puts women in a very difficult situation as they have to work while dealing with increased home and family responsibilities.

Many women feel under pressure to always look good on screen during video calls and maintain a professional image, and to multitask throughout the day.

Women have complained about [increased surveillance of their work performance](#), to an extent that it violates privacy while working from home. Workers, both women and men, have had to fill in online attendance sheets and activate their webcam to show their real-time location. The slightest technical obstacle can result in a reduction in income.

[Previous studies](#) reveal how masculine organizations and their repressive practices on women workers cannot be separated from the legacy of colonialism.

Colonialism has helped spread patriarchal ideas favoring men over women. Colonialism has since intertwined with [capitalism and it contributes to work practices that marginalize women](#).

Colonialism has also created classes among working women themselves. This had resulted in some women enjoying relatively better incomes and working conditions while others—categorized as low-skilled workers, such as factory workers—[tend to have the opposite fate](#).

The need for regulation

On paper, Indonesia has strict labor policies and has ratified [19 International Labor Organization \(ILO\) conventions](#).

Female [worker](#) protection is regulated under the [2003 Law on Manpower](#), under which the rights of women to get pregnant, access maternity leave, take leave for miscarriage, and to breastfeed are protected.

During the pandemic, unfortunately, the Indonesian government has not issued regulations addressing changed working conditions, both in the private sector and in the government sector, let alone a regulation protecting female workers.

The regulations issued so far are only related to workers' salaries and social securities during the [pandemic](#).

Meanwhile, policies related to the health and working conditions of workers during COVID-19 are not strictly regulated. Indonesia's Manpower Ministry has only issued a [recommendation letter](#) but its implementation has been limited, and strongly dependent on the company or the employer.

As a result, many workers' rights are not fulfilled, especially women workers.

Trade unions have a role to play here, as they exist to protect workers' rights in times of crisis.

However, the current trade union structure is still dominated by men. Therefore, we recommend female workers become more active in trade unions to convey their concerns and aspirations. If the organization

where women work does not have an union, they should start one.

At the level of policy makers, the government must make rules that can change masculine labor practices to be more sensitive to various issues faced by female workers.

This can be done by encouraging more studies to focus more on gender issues in the workplace. With comprehensive studies, the government can make evidence-based policy to protect [female workers](#).

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Research: Masculine offices add to the burden of female office workers during COVID-19 pandemic (2021, January 20) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-01-masculine-offices-burden-female-office.html>

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