

The gendered dynamics of women's work in Indonesia: Theorizing from Global South cases



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Like many majority Muslim

countries, Indonesia has experienced an Islamic revival over the past three decades, which has brought changes such as the widespread adoption of headscarves and clothing deemed “Islamic” for women, an emphasis on Islamic actors and ideas in the public sphere, a boom in Muslim educational institutions, and the institutionalization of the Islamic court system. The Islamic revival in Indonesia is multi-faceted in its impact on gender relations, encompassing the emergence of a dynamic Muslim feminist movement, but also Muslim actors who emphasize the domestic sphere as women’s primary responsibility (Rinaldo, 2013). More recently, some Indonesian women increasingly see marriage as a partnership and

have higher expectations for their husbands' involvement in family life than previous generations (Rinaldo and Fehr, in process). Yet many Indonesians are ambivalent about changes in gender norms and practices. Indeed, some women play down their careers by adhering to a gendered script of obedience to their husbands (Rinaldo, 2019). While Indonesian women's educational attainment and workforce participation are higher than most other majority Muslim countries, some research shows a decline in the age of first marriage, suggesting that the renewed emphasis on Muslim women's marriage and family obligations may be having an impact. Thus, Indonesians are navigating complex and contradictory trends related to

gender, family, and religion.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought challenges for women around the world because it dramatically increased the burden of unpaid carework for women. Mothers especially struggled with caring for children who were out of school or assisting children doing online school. Post-pandemic, it is unclear how the trend of remote work will impact mothers. Most of the research on the gendered consequences of the pandemic has been conducted in Europe and North America. This begs the question of how the pandemic and its aftermath is playing out in the Global South, especially in contexts where gender and social norms render women primarily responsible for domestic

labor. Given the recent social trends in Indonesia, it is an essential place to understand how women are negotiating work and family during and after the pandemic.



The research team – clockwise from left to right: Dr. Fina Itriyati, Hartmantyo Pradigto Utomo, Dinda Kamilia, and Dr. Rachel Rinaldo.

Between September 2022 and September 2023, my research collaborators (Dr. Fina Itriyati, Hartmantyo Pradigto Utomo, and Dinda Kamilia, all from the

Sociology department at Gadjah Mada University) and I conducted over 140 interviews and extensive observations with women and men working in a wide variety of occupations and economic sectors in Yogyakarta, Central Java. We recruited a diverse selection of interviewees, with an emphasis on mothers of children under 12, as research has shown that this demographic is most heavily impacted by the competing demands of work and family. We talked to them about their work and family lives, their experiences of the pandemic, their domestic division of labor, and much more.

We are just beginning to analyze this data, but a few findings already stand out. First, some

women who had not previously engaged in paid work, or who had only done a small amount of paid work, began to do so during the pandemic. Second, most women, whether they were doing paid work or not, continued to do the majority of unpaid work in the household, particularly taking care of children and preparing/cooking meals. Third, most women could not afford paid childcare, with most relying on family members to care for children if they were working outside the house when children were home.

Social scientists have found that women's workforce participation makes women more economically valuable to their families, results in improved health for women and

girls, and is correlated with increased political representation for women, among other benefits. Yet what we were seeing in Indonesia was that women were doing more paid work as well as unpaid domestic work. While a few women seemed unhappy with this situation, many embraced or saw it as normal. Thus, women's increased involvement in the workforce did not seem to be resulting in men taking on more domestic work, or in women's income earning being fully valued by their families or the society at large. Given how significant women's income is for many Indonesian families, and the fact that [surveys show that men in many countries are taking on more domestic labor or expressing the desire to do so](#), we wondered why things seemed so stuck

in Indonesia.



The research team interviewing women who have returned from working overseas as maids and nannies.

For example, Dewi is a 37 year old mother of three children. Her husband has a good job as a civil servant and they can live a middle class life on his income. Dewi used to work as an accountant, but her husband wanted her to stay home when they had children. She agreed, but she also missed her job, and she keeps a foot in the labor

market by doing freelance accounting work, usually from home. She is responsible for everything involving the household. As she commented wryly, "For my husband, apparently, I got a husband who doesn't really care about the household chores. So, the point is for domestic matters, taking care of the kids it's all my responsibilities, including picking up the kids to and from the school, if there's any meeting at school, parents meeting or something like that, it's all my responsibilities."

The pandemic seemed to have made Dewi interested in working more, and she spoke about returning to work in some capacity when her children are older. But for now,

she seems to have given up on hoping that her husband will help with the household: “If he can’t help then just let him be, we also can’t be demanding. I mean I’m the type of person who doesn’t like to fuss, so I just let things be since I don’t like debating.”

We identified two key processes that contribute to situations like that of Dewi.

First, women are increasingly doing paid work from home. This was particularly the case for educated middle class mothers similar to Dewi. They are increasingly earning income through home-based businesses, often relying on social media to advertise and sell their products. Some of these small businesses have become the primary

income for the family. Many women we interviewed sought out such paid work because it is compatible with the gendered division of labor that they believe is mandated by Islam. They can work from home and still take care of their children and household. This form of paid work may be partly what has accounted for the recent uptick in Indonesian women's labor force participation. It means that women are earning income and gaining work experience, but in a way that reproduces the cultural norm of women being responsible for domestic work.



**An employee of a ceramic shop in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.
Many women in the city work in service sector jobs in**

shops and restaurants.

Second, many working mothers rely on unpaid female caregivers. Indonesia has a very large informal economy, and many lower-class women have few employment options in the formal sector. We found that nearly all of the lower-class women we interviewed were engaging in paid work, mostly in the informal sector. Few of these women are able to work from home, and most of them continued working during the pandemic. An advantage of this kind of work for many women is flexibility. Most of the women we interviewed who worked in the informal sector tried to arrange their work around their children's school hours, and if this was not possible, they relied on their mothers, mothers-in-law, or other

female kin to babysit. We found that this was the case even when husbands were unemployed or working fewer hours due to the pandemic. Thus, the reliance on unpaid female caregivers means that the work of caring for children remains strongly associated with women, even when men are home.

What can we learn from this Indonesian case? Generalizing and theorizing from Global South cases such as Indonesia is a thorny issue for sociology. While canonical sociological theories have been rightly criticized for erasing imperialism and colonialism, there is nothing inherent in sociological theory that requires inattention to the Global South. Indeed, early sociologists such as Weber and

Durkheim were interested in non-Western societies, even if their analyses were problematic. But as sociology developed alongside its companion discipline of anthropology, a division of labor developed in which sociology became the study of “modern” societies while anthropology became the study of so-called “traditional” societies. In recent years, such binaries have been challenged but their legacy persists for sociology in the oft-repeated question – “How does this matter?”—which is less often applied to cases from within the Global North. This question embeds two assumptions: 1) that cases in the Global South, even if they concern a phenomenon that is not unique to the Global South, are not of interest to sociologists

because the Global South is fundamentally different, ie “not modern”; and 2) phenomena that are unique to a Global South context are not of interest because sociology is only interested in generalizable phenomena. The vast amount of sociological research on social dynamics particular to the US suggest that this second assumption mainly applies to research in the Global South.



**A woman selling drinks at a street kiosk in Yogyakarta.
The majority of Indonesian women work in the informal
sector.**

**Since the late 1990s, sociologists
have sought to theorize from Global
South cases. Burawoy's Extended
Case Method (1998) encourages
sociologists to use ethnography to
examine the dynamics of a local
setting and to understand how that**

setting is shaped by global forces. Transnational feminist sociology investigates global-local linkages and global power/inequalities related to sex/gender (Parrenas, 2015). More recently, postcolonial sociology (Go, 2016) aims to challenge Eurocentric social theories by rooting social theory in the experiences of people and societies at the bottom of the global social hierarchy, examining the interconnections between Global North/Global South, and emphasizing colonialism and imperialism as central dynamics in the development of modernity and capitalism. All of these approaches have generated compelling new research based on Global South cases. Rather than theories in and of themselves, they are frameworks for theorizing.

These frameworks lend themselves best to examining obviously transnational phenomena such as migration or global factories or social phenomena that highlight a crucial aspect of the global economy or global power relations. Yet given that many people's lives unfold within local and national social structures, such approaches risk overemphasizing the global and transnational. In an era of renewed nationalisms, it is essential to examine local and national asymmetries, inequalities, and power relations. Moreover, such emphasis on global economies and power relations risks neglecting culture and religion, aspects of social structure that are likely to be embedded within a nation-state.



A weekly women's prayer group meeting at a local mosque in Yogyakarta.

The recent calls for a more global sociology (Hanafi, 2020) demonstrate an interest in building on such predecessors but with a more eclectic approach to theory and an aim to understanding rather than assuming the relationship between micro and macro/local and

global. I would add that a global sociology should also value cases outside the West/Global North in and of themselves. Yet global sociology has not yet provided a method for how to generalize from cases.

In thinking about how to generalize from the case of women and work in Indonesia, I am inspired by recent methodological discussions in qualitative sociology. Such discussions are not so much focused on the geographic location of cases, but on how to generalize from qualitative cases. Recent methodological approaches such as Tavory and Timmermans (2012) "Abductive Analysis" as well as Small and Calarco's discussion of how to evaluate qualitative

research (2022) suggest a way forward. They suggest an approach to qualitative research and theorizing that mixes induction and deduction, toggling interactively between theory and data so that questions can be constantly revised to account for surprising findings. In particular, Small and Calarco propose that cases are always unique, but that processes, mechanisms, and relationships may be common to a variety of situations, and this provides a way to generalize.

Building on this, I propose that scholars studying the Global South seek a deep understanding of the local context in order to develop knowledge about local processes that may be found in a variety of

contexts. For example, the two key processes that I highlight from Indonesia – women doing paid work from home and reliance on unpaid female caregivers – can be found widely. In Indonesia, women's efforts to make paid work flexible often result in their continued responsibility for domestic work. In a place where cultural and religious pressures encourage women to see the domestic sphere as their responsibility, the double burden constrains women's ambitions, limits their options, and makes many women feel that they must choose between work and motherhood. Yet while the specific context of Indonesia is unique these processes and their outcome can be found in many places. Despite women's increased income earning, in many

societies they still bear the primary responsibility for the domestic sphere, and they are valued primarily as mothers and wives. Changing this situation will require efforts on many levels: revaluing the labor of care, redefining masculinity to include care work, and encouraging work flexibility for all people, not just women.

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