



Image by Giri Wijayanto

Women have always been relatively economically active in Indonesia. In recent decades, moreover, successive governments have encouraged women to assume both productive and reproductive roles. However, social norms continue to demand that women (as wives, mothers and daughters) remain first and foremost committed to caring for their husbands, children and parents.

Women in the family

Gendered beliefs about the role of men and women in families and in society are the primary social norm constraining women's economic empowerment. Even where a woman earns the larger share of household income she is likely to see herself – and be seen by others – as a secondary earner.

Many studies of women's entrepreneurship draw similar conclusions about the relative priority women give to their families and businesses. An Asia Foundation study concluded that women business owners saw their primary role as that of wife and mother rather than as a business woman.

Notably, though, according to a World Bank study, found men are far more supportive of women working in their own businesses than in private companies owned by other people.

The distribution of unpaid care work

In the absence of strong institutional systems, Indonesian households carry a heavy care burden. Indonesian children of pre-school age are relatively unlikely to spend time in any kind of institutional childcare. Indeed, if children in the first year of primary school are excluded, the gross enrolment rate of children aged six or under in early childhood educational services in 2014 was just 8%.

Similarly, while an increasing number of elderly Indonesians are cared for in institutions, the majority of eldercare continues to take the form of informal care provided by the household without support or advice from professional care-givers.

The provision of this care is highly gendered. According to the World Bank, women spend more than twice as much time on childcare than men.

It is important to note, however, that the gendered nature of care work has class-specific consequences for the distribution of unpaid care work, since high levels of economic inequality mean that wealthier Indonesians can afford to engage live-in household help. By contrast, working-class women are likely to bear a heavy double burden of paid work or other economic activity on the one hand and unpaid care work on the other.

Balancing work and care

The heavy weight of care work, particularly in poorer households, explains why Indonesian women have a high chance of dropping out of the labour force after bearing children than women in other countries in the region. According to an analysis of data from the Indonesian Family Life Survey 1996–2007, work interruption is generally a consequence of marriage and motherhood.

The absence of flexible workplace practices in waged employment also affects women of different socio-economic backgrounds differently. Professional women who return to work tend to move into roles that allow greater flexibility but that have fewer leadership opportunities. Working-class women formerly in formal-sector employment have fewer opportunities to do so, and thus tend to leave their formal-sector jobs for work in the informal sector, which offers them more flexibility in terms of time.

Policy challenges

There is no doubt that gendered assumptions about the role of men and women in the public and private sphere constitute the primary socio-cultural barrier to women's economic empowerment. These assumptions have implications for everyday practices within the household, but also for the practice of governments and businesses.

The barriers these gendered assumptions present are sustained and reinforced by the failure of regulatory institutions to implement and enforce legal provisions promoting gender equality in society, the workplace, and in business. Indonesia's Constitution states that all citizens have equal status, that each citizen is entitled to work and a reasonable standard of living, and to be free from discriminatory treatment.

Current policies include the 'national vision' on women's empowerment, a Master Plan for Women's Empowerment, which includes the flagship 3Ends Program which aims to end violence against women and trafficking of women and girls, but also to economic justice for women through, for example,

training entrepreneurs and improving access to business financing and facilities. In addition, gender equality goals have been advanced by new policy initiatives, for example the National Medium Term Development Plan for the period from 2015 to 2019. The government is also working on a national strategy for the acceleration of gender mainstreaming through gender-responsive budgeting, led by the Ministry of National Development Planning. However, progress on women-friendly legislation remains slow, as evidenced by the fact that the draft Law on Gender Equality has been languishing in the House of Representatives since 2012.

Another area where legal reform has been slow is in relation to the nation's millions of domestic workers. Domestic workers are not covered by the national Manpower Law, and attempts to establish a national law on domestic work have to date failed. There is significant resistance to extending legal coverage, in part because of cultural attitudes that frame domestic workers as helpers rather than workers. The absence of legal coverage also reflects a recognition by government of the pivotal role domestic workers play in providing reproductive labour in a context where families receive little state support.

Coalitions of progressive business leaders have a part to play, speaking publicly on the need for gender equality in the workplace and changing expectations within their businesses with regard to the way that men and women work and are treated. However, this approach alone will not be enough to effect change. It also requires strategic intervention to encourage women's groups that take a broader policy interest to engage among their membership and in the public sphere on issues of gender and work at all levels of the public and private sectors.

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