

Women's Domestic Workers' Narratives on Their Work

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ABSTRACT

For some working women, becoming a domestic worker is the only way for them to support their families. When they choose to work as domestic, they automatically become associated with negative stereotypes from the community. Through in-depth interviews conducted with three female domestic workers as informants, this study presents narratives related to their experiences working as domestics. The narratives from these three women who work as domestics showed that they were able to explain clearly the job that they do, and that they have positive associations to their profession, even though they realized that they are doing a job that is considered dirty and lowly by the community. A good relationship with the employer, as well as a comfortable working atmosphere, is one of the factors that determined the construction of meaning related to the job. Narratives from women domestic workers in this study showed that they are able to create positive meaning related to a job associated with negative stereotypes because they have a good relationship with their employer and family.

Keywords: *Domestic Workers, Work, Meaning, Women, Experience*

1. INTRODUCTION

Working women have a double burden in their family, as mothers and as workers. As mothers, women have the responsibility of caring for their family. But sometimes women are also forced to take responsibility as the main breadwinner in the family. Providing a decent life for the family also becomes the main responsibility for women. For women who come from rural areas with poor economic conditions, working as a domestic is one of the appropriate decisions they may make to be able to provide for their family. Women with low levels of education and limited skills are most likely to do domestic work.

To date, there are at least 53 million domestic workers, not including children. Eighty percent of domestic workers in the world are women. This number continues to increase in developed and developing countries. Of the 53 million workers, 41 percent are in Asia, in particular Indonesia and the Philippines. The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2016) states that there are 10 million domestic workers in Indonesia, with 90 percent being women. A related study also shows that domestic work is considered worthless work, is not regulated by legislation, and is associated with long

working hours, low salaries, and a lack of protections (ILO, 2010).

Women domestic workers also may have negative stereotypes applied to them from the community related to the work they do. Jobs such as house cleaning, cooking, washing, and ironing are assumed to be jobs that are part of the nature of women. So women who work as domestics tend to receive the lowest form of respect because they are seen as only carrying out simple tasks that are thought as of women's responsibility.

Due to the variety of functions and the high level of responsibilities involved in this job, domestic workers are often called "household managers." However, in many countries domestic workers are still considered "unskilled," and are not even seen as holding a job because they work within private homes and their duties are an extension of traditional women's domestic work, which is usually unpaid. In many countries, including Indonesia, their employment relations are not recognized in national labor regulations or other regulations (ILO, 2010).

The increasing number of domestic workers suggests that their presence is needed, and that this is becoming a field that absorbs many workers, especially women (Pelupessi, 2017, h. 102). However, because these women work for a family, their existence may become

invisible, and their voices are also not heard. Even their contribution to the family economy seems to be forgotten.

Finally, women who work as domestics are positioned as marginalized. For domestic workers who live with the employer (live-in), their bedrooms are often located in a corner of the house that is hidden. Sometimes they are also prohibited from using the same bathroom as other family members, even though the task of cleaning the bathroom is one of the mandatory tasks of these workers.

This explanation shows that women who work as domestics are in fact needed, and that it is important to recognize domestic workers as a profession.

The notion of women domestic workers as ignorant and uneducated lower-class workers can have a negative impact on them (Bosmans et al., 2016). Many women who work as domestics are ashamed to admit their profession because it might cause their status to become lower in the community, even though this profession is beneficial in improving their family's economic condition (Abrantes, 2013).

In contrast, the portrayal of successful women workers and housewives usually only applies to women from the upper and middle classes who work in formal industry. However, women who come from the lower class and have jobs in the field of informal work are rarely seen as successful workers and housewives (Kuperberg and Stone, 2008). Therefore, women who work in the informal sector as domestics are often shown as failing to function as exemplary housewives because they are seen as neglecting their own family.

This condition puts women domestic workers in a marginalized position. They are subordinated and positioned at the lowest level of the community (Pelupessy, 2017). As women who work far away from their family, they are assumed to be unable to function as mothers and housewives as a whole, because they are physically distant and cannot directly take care of their family members. The work that they do is also considered worthless, because many people still think that domestic jobs "should" be done by women, and that carrying out domestic work does not require special skills.

Negative assumptions about women who work as domestics also sometimes arise from family members and communities. They may question the decision made by women to leave their families and take care of other people's families and children. But in fact, for these women, working as domestics and leaving their family is the most difficult thing to do.

The depiction of women domestic workers in Indonesia suggests many weaknesses in these women. For example, among other things, they are not seen as

contributing to society because the work they do does not produce economic value. They are often called "helpers," not workers. These women are also not considered workers by their families. The women may feel they are not respected like other family members who work as factory workers, for example (Jordhus-Lier, 2017). This then results in the reluctance of some women to work as domestics because by doing this work, they will automatically experience a declining social status in the community. They are also associated with various negative stereotypes that are inherent to domestic work. To overcome this problem, women who work as domestics try to build narratives and present themselves in a different way so that when they are associated with jobs with a low social status, they can display a more positive image.

2. AIM

Women whose jobs are always carry negative associations in the media and in society may construct certain meanings related to the work they do. In addition, the actions and symbols they use will relate to that meaning. Therefore, this study discusses the narratives of three women domestic workers in urban areas in order to identify and understand the meaning that they construct about their work. Employing a symbolic interactionist perspective, this study discusses how individuals use language to construct meaning; how they create and present themselves; and how they use symbols that are created in society. The basic assumption of symbolic interactionism is that individuals will behave based on the meaning they give to certain situations. When individuals are associated with jobs that have negative stereotypes, a meaning is attached to the work and it influences perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009). In addition, this study also provides an overview of how domestic workers build meaning related to their work.

2.1. Symbolic Interactionism

The theory of symbolic interactionism can be used to show the formation of meaning for individuals. The basic assumption behind this theory is that the symbolic communication process creates and changes our entire social reality. We create meaning and modify our behavior through verbal and nonverbal messages and interactions with others. Then we try to see ourselves through the eyes of others. This process suggests that the formation of a self- concept is based on other people's perspectives (Lysack and Seipke, 2002).

In this approach, meaning is created and maintained through interaction in social groups. Interaction forms, maintains, and changes certain agreements, including roles, norms, rules, and meanings in a social or cultural group. This agreement then defines the reality of the culture (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009).

Meaning will arise through interactions with others; therefore, meaning is a result of interaction between humans. Meaning also enables us to construct reality (Aksan, Kısac, Aydın and Demirbuken, 2009).

Symbolic interaction examines the meanings that emerge from the interaction of individuals within the social environment. This theory focuses on the symbols and meanings that emerge from the interaction between people. People then develop their attitudes according to the meanings that come from social interaction. As time goes by, however, these meanings can also change (Aksan et al., 2009).

2.2. Meaning of Work

Each person works to fulfill his or her basic needs. The need for survival, such as shelter, food, and clothing, is the most basic need for each person. But along with developments in society, people also do work to meet other needs. Education, social status, and power are some of the factors that are important for people and can be fulfilled by doing certain jobs. Blustein (2006) also explained that by working, people can meet their needs to relate socially and build strong social bonds with others (Allan, Autin and Duffy, 2013).

The role of others in the construction of the meaning of work is an important one, and others are key contributors to the process in which the meaning of work is created or destroyed. The meaning of work is then created based on cues derived from interactions with others (Wrzesniewski, Dutton and Debebe, 2003)

Blustein (2006) explains that subjective experience in a person's work experience has significance for that person. Valuable work experience has been proven to have a positive effect on a person's life. Valuable work experience is obtained by doing work in accordance with a person's self-identity, doing work in which they feel valued, and doing work in which there is a harmonious working relationship with other parties. In addition, people also believe that the work they do will be good for others (Allan et al., 2013). Some studies show that social class has an effect on the meaning of work for each person. Employment for lower-class workers is often a job that does not require a lot of skills, so workers cannot empower themselves. Lower-class workers have limitations in choosing jobs and may find it difficult to find a job that suits their interests. In addition, the salary they receive is also relatively low. However, these studies also showed that lower-class workers are stronger at facing work pressure (Allan et al., 2013)

The meaning of work can be seen through narratives that each person creates. Personal involvement with work that is meaningful contributes to physical and mental health. Conversely, unpleasant work experience can have a negative effect on one's health (Avrech Bar, Forwell and Backman, 2016).

2.3. Domestic Work As Women's Work

A domestic worker is someone who does a variety of household tasks in a family for a certain period of time, and she is entitled to receive compensation from the work. Research conducted by the ILO, shows that about 92 percent of domestic workers are women, and most of them are between 13 and 30 years old, come from rural areas, and have low education (ILO, 2009)

The work carried out by women domestics is largely household work, which is related to personal matters of their employers. Domestic workers witness everything that occurs in the employer's family, and sometimes even become the employer's confidant. Through work such as cleaning the house, cooking meals, and washing clothes, domestic workers observe and know everything that their employers do, experience, or hide.

Because most domestic workers are women, they are sometimes given additional assignments that are related to care work. Some domestic workers, for example, have the added task of taking care of elderly people. They have to position themselves as a caregiver who accompanies the elderly and provides emotional support for them. They are also obligated to assist the elderly with their daily activities.

Also, domestic workers often act as a babysitter for the employer's children. In this case, they have to take care of all the children's needs while still performing the household tasks. This role often makes them tend to have compassion for the people who employ them, because they feel as if they are a part of the employer's family (Burnham and Theodore, 2012).

Domestic work is work that seems to be invisible, because in the end there are no products or objects that have been created or distributed, and there is also no capital flow or accumulation of profits from the work. In a capital-oriented world, work that does not appear to produce value or the lead to the exchange of buying and selling comes to be seen as degrading and is considered invisible to the public.

2.4. Stereotypes of Women Domestic Workers

Women who work as domestics, most of whom come from rural areas and who are generally low educated, often receive negative stereotypes from the media and society. The community still commonly uses the word "maid" for domestic workers. This reflects the view of people who consider domestic workers a complementary group without the need for recognition as workers like other formal workers (ILO, 2015).

Women domestic workers are frequently stereotyped as weak, inferior, poor, and uneducated people. This stereotype eventually leads some women to be ashamed to admit that they work as domestics, and makes some

reluctant to become a domestic worker. However, this work is actually a kind of work that requires special expertise and is increasingly needed, especially for families in urban areas.

The media frequently portrays women as those who do domestic work and depend on men. Women are also described as having a responsibility to take care of their families. The role of women as “housekeepers” is reinforced by various media reports. Different news stories related to the achievement of women in professional fields are always associated with their success as mothers and wives, and with different aspects of the traditional roles prescribed for women (Wood, 2009).

Therefore, women who work as domestics are rarely shown as figures of successful workers because they are considered to do insignificant work. Even on many television shows, the profession of domestic worker is often used as joke material. The cast members who play domestic workers are also characterized according to stereotypes that exist in the community.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach to obtain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the experiences and conditions of informants who are frequently positioned as lower-class members of society, marginalized and attached to certain stereotypes. Therefore, the selected informants were three women who work as domestics in urban areas, with a minimum work period of two years. Two people are live-in workers, and one is a live-out worker. The researcher also chose diverse background information in terms of age, to show the various perspectives that each woman has. In this study, data collection was conducted through interviews with informants to obtain a thorough description and understanding of the informants, as well as through observation and a review of the literature.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Defining Domestic Worker

Domestic work is often done by uneducated lower-class women. This image is frequently portrayed in various media and is considered common in society. The present study presents narratives from three domestic workers in an urban area, Siti, Pia, and Tuminah. Pia and Tuminah are live-in workers, whereas Siti is a live-out worker.

These three women had the same opinion as the general presumption that applies in society. For them, domestic work is engaged in by women with limited abilities, who have no skills other than cleaning a house. This was explained by Siti when she revealed that in working as a domestic, most of the tasks given to her are

cleaning and helping in the home. For her, however, working as a domestic is better than not working at all. Tuminah stated that the wage she receives from domestic work can help support her family and improve their life back in the village. While related to employment as a domestic worker, Pia indicated that the most important thing is to get a legal job and be able to earn enough wages to support herself and her family. The only work she can do is domestic work, and this is also a legal job, so she chooses to work as a domestic. All three women agreed that as a domestic worker, they need to show their inferiority and may not display pride. As Siti explains: *“As a maid, your job is to clean the bathroom, to do the laundry, sometimes we also cook. So don’t talk as high as the office workers.”*

The women’s narratives show that the type of work carried out by domestic workers is categorized as a low occupation, such as cleaning the bathroom. So women who do this job must have an attitude that accords with the type of work they do. They must always present themselves accordingly in order to be regarded as a good domestic worker. Slightly different from Siti, Pia, who is the youngest of the three women, said that a domestic worker must have great courage because this work requires women to leave their homes and hometowns and work in the homes of other people whom they don’t know at all. This means not all village women can do this. For Pia, her courage helped her become a domestic worker for quite a long time and she worked well at her employer’s house.

4.2. Working as Domestic

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, our entire social reality is created, sustained, and changed through the process of symbolic communication. Through spoken and unspoken messages, and conversations with others as well as ourselves, we collectively come to modify our behavior (Lysack and Seipke, 2002). The reality formed by women who work as domestics builds on interactions and communication with other people, one of whom is their employer. The employer is a significant person who has a major influence in determining the informants’ satisfaction in working as domestics. Tuminah, who has worked for her employer for more than ten years, said that the relationship she had with her employer is very good, so she did not feel embarrassed or afraid to ask about or discuss the job with her employer. This also made her not want to move to another family to work, because from her previous experience, she felt that this employer has treated her the best among all her other employers. She is also afraid that a new employer would not treat her well, although perhaps she could ask for a higher salary. Furthermore, Tuminah explained that she had worked for this family from the time they had their first child until today, when they have three children. She also said that all the employer’s children consider her like

their own grandmother. Slightly different from Tuminah's situation, the relationship between Siti and her employer is more formal. As a live-out worker, she indicated that the employer rarely invites her to chat. The employer only gives instructions on what to do and never comments on her work. But Siti is satisfied with her relationship with her employer because this makes it easier for her to carry out the job. Also, the salary she receives is sufficient for her. Siti said, even though there was no kinship relationship shown by her employer, she did not want to move to another employer, because she worried that a new one might not allow her the same freedom she has now. In the case of Pia, she works at her current employer because she was referred to them by a family member who had previously worked there. This places a burden on her because she has to work well in order to maintain her family member's good reputation. She said that her employer is the type of person who is quite talkative and is always commenting on her work. Even so, she said her employer is a good person, because she taught Pia how to clean the house properly, use the washing machine, bake cakes using the oven, and do other things that she had never done back in the village. She does not think about possibly resigning from her employer even if someone else offers her a higher salary, because her main consideration when she decided to work was to earn enough money to support her family in the village.

From the narratives of the three women related to their work experience as domestics, it appears that good relations and a pleasant working atmosphere play a role in determining their decision to work as domestics. They work not only for financial rewards, even though this is important. But also the feeling of being accepted by the employer, and having freedom and a good relationship and receiving good treatment from the employer are equally important.

4.3. Job Meanings for Informants

As explained earlier, the women had a good relationship with their employers and stated that they were quite satisfied with the salary and treatment they received from their employers. Therefore, these three informants stated that they did not feel ashamed to work as domestics. When asked about the work that she does, Tuminah replied that she is a "maid." A maid's job is cleaning a house, including the bathroom. Tuminah claimed that she had never concealed her job identity as a domestic worker from her family back home. But in addition, she said that she is doing a favor for her employer. She further added that she chose to work a domestic because she felt sorry for her employer as she had no one to help her do the housework. Siti always associated domestic workers with lowly jobs, but even so, she is never ashamed of doing this work, because for her the important thing is the work can provide halal

sustenance. She claimed that she is sociable and has never felt embarrassed when spending her free time chatting and interacting with her neighbors. Siti said that she did not understand the thinking of other women who were ashamed to admit their work as domestics and instead claimed to be office workers. For Siti, this is strange, because for her any work is a good job as long as it is halal. In the case of Pia, she interpreted domestic workers as household "assistants." She felt that she is suitable to be an assistant because she is smart and a fast learner. She can understand the instructions given by the employer, so her employer entrusts her with using various electronic devices. She has never hidden the work she does from other people, especially her family back in the village. She has also never felt embarrassed or afraid of being associated with the stereotypes inherent to domestic workers. For Pia, the most important thing is that she earns money to help her family and pay for her brother's school tuition. From the three narratives given by these women, it can be seen that all of them were able to assign a positive meaning to the work they do. In the formation of this meaning, other parties such as employers play an important role in the process of forming meaning by informants. Tuminah and Siti admitted that they are domestic workers and are sometimes associated with a lowly job, but they use different narratives to explore the positive meaning of this job for them. In contrast, Pia chose to narrate her own admirable characteristics that make her different from other domestic workers.

4.4. Women Workers and Families

For working women, negative opinions about their work often arise within the community and the surrounding environment. Even though they help improve the family's economic condition by working, they are considered as ignoring their families, especially their husbands and children. For the women in this study, their narratives showed that domestic work is indeed recognized as helping the economy of their families, but it is undeniable that being away from their family makes them sometimes feel sad and lonely. Tuminah revealed that she worked because her family needed the money. Although her husband worked as a farm laborer, the couple felt that his income is insufficient to meet their daily needs. It was her husband who encouraged her to work as a domestic in the city, because there were no jobs that provided decent wages in the village. Tuminah said that sometimes she felt sad when she heard her family was sick, because she could not go back to the village to take care of them. Although she has sent money for their medical expenses, she feels that this cannot replace her presence in the family.

For Siti, the conditions she experienced were not much different from those of Tuminah. Although she initially moved to Jakarta because she followed her

husband there, she has always had a feeling of guilt for being away from her family and unable to return home at any time. With her savings, she is always able to visit her parents in the village every two or three months. Even so, she felt that the intensity of seeing her parents was still insufficient. She said that her parents are very old, and that they could become ill at any time. Despite her desire to be near her parents, this is not possible, because there is no job in her hometown that provides sufficient financial rewards.

As for Pia, her situation is quite different. Her parents migrated to Malaysia to become plantation workers. The only family member who still lives in her hometown is her younger brother, who was entrusted to her grandmother. Pia felt that she does not need to return to her hometown every year, because she cannot visit her parents there. But she always tries to send enough money for the living expenses of her grandmother and her brother. Pia said she would try to return to her hometown for her brother's graduation ceremony and will take care of his enrollment in high school. The narratives of the three women show that the traditional duties and responsibilities assigned to women cannot be easily forgotten even though they have taken over the main task of men in earning a living. They still feel that they need to be there and take care of their families. They even feel guilty if they cannot be close to them. This then becomes an obstacle when they have to work far away from their family. In addition, the narratives of the informants show the heavy burden that must be borne by women domestic workers who work away their families.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper showed that through the narratives of the experience of three women domestic workers, women who work as domestics are often associated with negative stereotypes, such as their being weak, inferior, poor, and uneducated. These stereotypes can influence the meaning that women domestic workers construct regarding their work. However, in this study, the three women were able to show and provide positive meanings for the work that they do. This happens due to several factors. One party who plays an important role in the formation of meaning for women domestic workers is the employer. A good relationship between women domestic workers and employers can help these women have respect for themselves and the work that they do. Good working relationships also make the work environment comfortable so that domestic women workers are at ease working with their employers. These conditions may lead women domestic workers to associate the work that they do with more positive notions, regardless of the nature of their work, which is typically categorized as dirty and lowly. The three women domestic workers in this study could explain clearly the work that they were doing, although they tended to display modest attitudes when discussing the

job. Overall, however, they did not feel embarrassed describing themselves as a domestic worker. However, women who work as domestics still cannot escape social expectations regarding the characteristics typically assigned to these workers. The informants believe that domestic workers must possess certain characteristics if they want to be perceived as good domestic workers, such as being obedient, quiet, and passive, but also diligent in doing their work. The women said that domestic workers who did not possess these traits were arrogant and did not know their place. In the context of working women and their families, taking the role of breadwinner in the family has not been able to release them from feelings of guilt due to their not being able to meet their obligations as women in their own household. These women felt that even though they provided financial support for their families, they were neglecting their responsibilities at home to be close and take care of their families. As a policy implication, the narrations presented here show that the recognition of domestic workers as a profession is an important issue. Despite the increasing demand for domestic workers, there is not a commensurate availability of domestic workers. If there were clear regulations regarding this profession, then slowly the stereotypes attached to the domestic worker could be eliminated. Domestic work could then be a promising job opportunity for women.

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