The Factors Causing Discrimination Against Indonesian Women in the Workplace, Mapping of Problems from 2012 to 2022

Verdico Arief*, Magdalena Depriyani, Asri Hidayati
Politeknik Negeri Pontianak, Indonesia
Email: verdico.arief@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Indonesia, one of the world's most populous nations with a significant female population, continues to face workplace gender discrimination despite legislative frameworks and improving gender equality rankings. Although Indonesia rose to 92nd globally in 2022 (from 99th in 2021), gaps between policy and practice remain, especially regarding women's participation and advancement in employment. This study fills a critical research gap by systematically mapping factors behind workplace discrimination against Indonesian women. A search across four major databases (ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, Sage, and Taylor & Francis) for "discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace" yielded 5,605 results. After filtering, 38 peer-reviewed empirical studies from 2012 to 2022 focused on this issue were included. The research identified multiple discrimination factors: cultural beliefs, inability to do heavy or fieldwork, sexual harassment, religion, low education levels, domestic conflict, mistrust, fear of competition, bureaucracy, withholding worker documents, disability, sexism, neoliberalism, virginity stigma, marital status, racial and ethnic differences, LGBT issues, egocentrism, feminism, workforce age, communication, lookism, and lack of community support. Culture was the leading factor (22% of studies), followed by perceptions of physical capability (10%), sexual harassment (8%), and educational barriers (8%). These findings show how Indonesian workplace discrimination results from the complex interplay of traditional gender norms, institutional structures, and economic pressures.

INTRODUCTION

Gender sensitivity is currently becoming a major issue in society, especially concerning discrimination. Achieving gender equality in Indonesia is not easy; even decades ago, the problem of gender inequality in the workplace already existed (Kartini, 2017). Although many cases of discrimination against women in the workplace have been reported, many people consider it not fatal (Afifah, 2017; Indaryani, 2018; Rosida, 2018; Sumadi, 2017). Moreover, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the gender gap in Indonesia has increased (Ministry of Child and Women's Protection of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022). The large number of female workers who are used as objects of sexuality also worsens the conditions of discrimination for Indonesian women in the workplace (West Jawa Provincial Government, 2023).

The urgency of addressing workplace gender discrimination in Indonesia extends beyond social justice concerns to encompass significant economic and developmental implications. The World Bank (2020) estimates that gender gaps in labor force participation cost the Asia-Pacific region approximately USD 89 billion annually in lost productivity. In Indonesia specifically, women's economic participation remains substantially below potential: despite comprising approximately 50% of the population, women represent only 39% of the formal labor force, with even lower representation in leadership positions (BPS, 2022). This underutilization of human capital constrains economic growth, perpetuates poverty cycles, and

undermines Indonesia's competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-based global economy. Furthermore, workplace discrimination has cascading effects on women's health, family well-being, and intergenerational educational outcomes, making its resolution a critical developmental priority. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, with Indonesian women experiencing disproportionate job losses, increased unpaid care burdens, and reduced access to economic opportunities—reversing years of incremental progress toward gender equality (ILO, 2021).

Indonesia already has legal regulations regarding gender equality, such as Law Number 7 of 1984 concerning the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, Law Number 21 of 1999 concerning the prohibition of discrimination in employment and position, and Law Number 6 of 2015 concerning women's empowerment and child protection, along with various other regulations issued in the form of directives from the President or Ministers. These legal frameworks were established by the Indonesian government to protect women so they can have equal rights and obligations and to provide a sense of security. However, not all of these regulations can be implemented comprehensively.

Even though Indonesia faces many problems regarding gender discrimination, international gender survey institutions state that Indonesia is one of the countries considered successful in reducing the level of discrimination against gender, because in 2021 gender equality in Indonesia was ranked 99th (World Economic Forum, 2021), and in 2022 it rose to 92nd place (World Economic Forum, 2022). In the Asia Pacific region, Indonesia is seen as a country that has reduced gender inequality quite well. Indonesia outperforms developed countries such as South Korea, China, and even Japan. In 2021 and 2022, Indonesia ranked 10th for the best gender equality in Asia Pacific (World Economic Forum, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2022). However, even though Indonesia's gender equality ranking globally is considered good, incidents of gender discrimination against women, especially in the workplace, are still quite common (Dedees, 2016; Hannah, 2017). This phenomenon warrants attention; therefore, a study needs to be carried out to address this gap.

Despite growing scholarly attention to gender discrimination in Indonesian contexts, existing research remains fragmented across disciplines (sociology, economics, public health, organizational studies) and sectors (manufacturing, services, agriculture, public administration), limiting comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Previous studies have typically focused on single factors (e.g., cultural norms, sexual harassment, educational gaps) or specific industries, lacking systematic integration across the multidimensional nature of workplace discrimination. Furthermore, much existing literature relies on Western theoretical frameworks that may not adequately capture the unique intersections of Islam, adat (customary law), patriarchy, and rapid economic modernization that characterize Indonesian gender dynamics. This study addresses these gaps by systematically reviewing and synthesizing peer-reviewed research published over a decade (2012–2022), a period encompassing significant political, economic, and social transformations in Indonesia, including the rise of religious conservatism, digital economic expansion, and the COVID-19 pandemic's gendered impacts.

The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive mapping approach that identifies, categorizes, and analyzes the full spectrum of discrimination factors documented in rigorous empirical studies, moving beyond anecdotal evidence or single-factor analyses to provide an

integrated framework. By synthesizing findings across diverse methodologies (quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, mixed methods), industry sectors, and geographic regions within Indonesia, this study reveals both common patterns and context-specific manifestations of workplace discrimination. Additionally, the temporal scope (2012–2022) enables identification of emerging factors (such as digital platform economy dynamics, neoliberal meritocracy pressures, and COVID-19 impacts) alongside persistent traditional barriers, offering insights into how discrimination evolves amid rapid social change. This systematic approach produces an evidence-based taxonomy of discrimination factors that can inform more targeted, multi-level interventions by policymakers, employers, civil society organizations, and international development agencies.

Based on this phenomenon, the author is interested in researching gender sensitivity and has limited the research focus on various factors that have caused discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace over the last ten years starting from 2012 to 2022. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) systematically identify and categorize the diverse factors contributing to workplace discrimination against Indonesian women as documented in peer-reviewed literature; (2) analyze the relative prevalence and interconnections among these factors; (3) examine how discrimination factors vary across sectors, regions, and time periods; and (4) provide an evidence-based framework to inform policy development, organizational practices, and advocacy strategies for advancing workplace gender equality in Indonesia. The findings are expected to contribute to both academic understanding of gender discrimination in developing country contexts and practical efforts to create more equitable workplaces, ultimately supporting Indonesia's broader development goals and international commitments to gender equality. It is expected that the results of this research can be used as a reference for stakeholders who can help implement gender equality in Indonesia.

METHOD

This research used literature review techniques to map gender issues scientifically (McLaren, Star, and Widianingsih, 2019; Arief et al., 2022). Document analysis, a qualitative method (Wolff, 2017), was applied because documents provide rich data sources (Woolgar, 1980; Knorr-Cetina, 1981). This systematic literature review followed a structured, transparent, and replicable methodology to identify, select, and analyze relevant scholarly articles, based on established protocols for qualitative evidence synthesis (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

International journals indexed by Scopus were selected due to their quality control through peer review, international recognition, and adherence to academic standards. Using Scopus-indexed publications ensured access to studies with diverse methodologies and theoretical frameworks, which helped contextualize Indonesian workplace gender discrimination within global scholarship. These publications also typically included comprehensive methodological details, enabling critical appraisal of study quality.

Data were collected from four major databases indexing Scopus journals: ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis, and Sage. These databases were chosen for their comprehensive coverage of social sciences, gender studies, labor economics, and development research, areas closely related to workplace discrimination scholarship. The author searched using the keyword "discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace" to retrieve relevant literature.
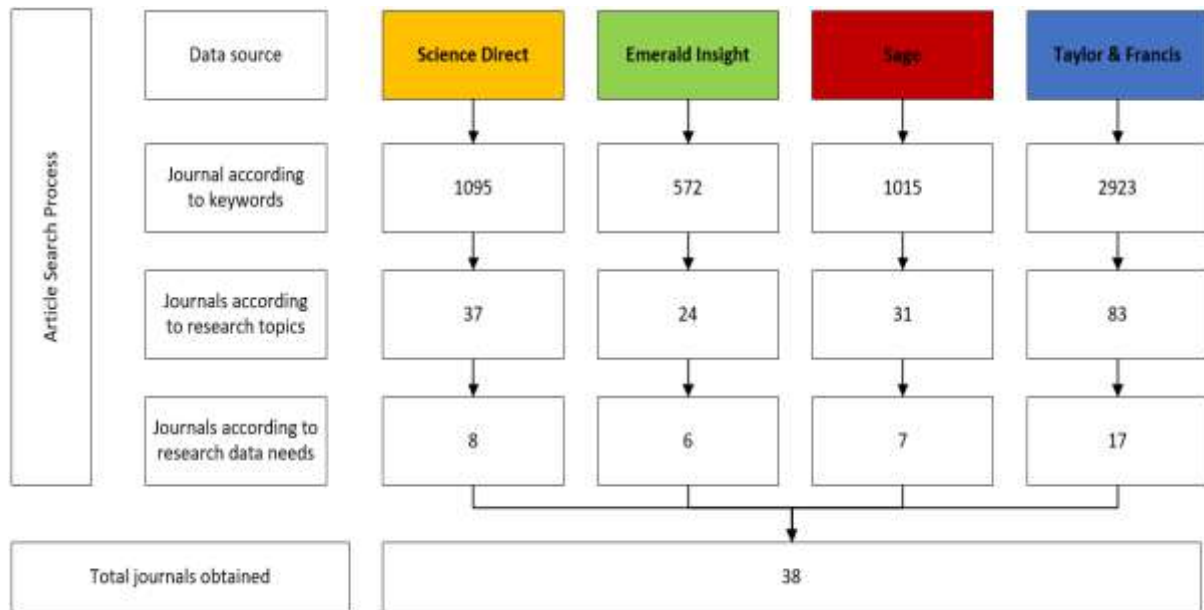
Figure 1. Data Collection Process
(Source: Research, 2023)

In the ScienceDirect database, 1095 articles match the keywords, however, out of the 1095 articles, there were only 37 articles related to the research topic. The author read the 37 articles to find out whether they matched the research data needs or not. After carrying out the analysis, out of the 37 articles, 8 articles were very suitable for the research data needs. In the Emerald Insight database, 572 articles matched the keywords, however, only 24 articles matched the research topic. The author carried out an analysis of the 24 articles, and the results of the analysis found that only 6 articles were very suitable for the research data needs. In the Sage database, 1015 articles matched the keywords, however, out of the 1015 articles there were only 31 articles that matched the research topic. The author carried out an analysis of the 31 articles, from the results of the analysis it turned out that there were only 7 articles that met the research data requirements. In the Taylor and Francis database, 2923 articles matched the keywords. Then, of the 2923 articles, 83 articles were appropriate to the research topic. The author carried out an analysis of the 83 articles, and from the results of this analysis, 17 articles were obtained that were very suitable for the research data needs.

From the data mining process carried out by the author, a total of 38 articles were obtained which were used as primary data in the research on factors of discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace. 8 articles were taken from the ScienceDirect database, 6 articles from Emerald Insight, 7 articles from Sage, and 17 articles from Taylor and Francis. The articles taken were articles published from 2012 to 2022 which contained cases of discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace. A total of 38 articles were analyzed thoroughly. In-depth analysis was carried out by reading all the contents of the article manuscript repeatedly so that the author got the essence of the message conveyed in the article about discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace.

Data analysis used the concepts of miles and huberman (Miles and Huberman, 1992). Specifically, data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework of data reduction

(systematically coding and categorizing factors), data display (creating matrices and frequency tables), and conclusion drawing/verification (identifying patterns, confirming through re-reading, and triangulating across studies). Quality assurance measures included maintaining an audit trail of analytical decisions, reflexive journaling about potential researcher biases, and member checking by sharing preliminary findings with Indonesian gender researchers for feedback on interpretative validity.

The timeframe of 2012-2022 was selected to capture a significant period of socioeconomic and political transformation in Indonesia. This decade encompasses the consolidation of democratic governance under Presidents Yudhoyono and Jokowi; rapid economic development and urbanization; expansion of digital technologies and the platform economy; rising religious conservatism and associated pressures on women's public roles; the enactment of significant gender-related legislation; and the unprecedented disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-present). By spanning this transformative period, the study can identify both persistent structural factors and emerging contemporary challenges in workplace gender discrimination, offering insights into how discrimination evolves amid rapid social change.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From the results of this research, the factors that cause discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace have been obtained. These factors were obtained from the results of a literature review of 38 articles that were published in various Scopus-indexed international journal databases such as Emerald Insight, ScienceDirect, Sage, and Taylor and Francis. One journal recommends at least one factor of discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace, some journals recommend more than one-factor causing discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace. From the 38 journals, the author found 24 factors that cause discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace, including cultural factors, not being able to do heavy and fieldwork, sexual harassment, religion, low level of education, domestic conflict, not being trusted, fear of competition, bureaucracy, withholding important documents of workers, disability, sexism, neoliberalism, virginity stigma, marital status, racial differences, LGBT, egocentrism, feminism, workforce age, communication, ethnicity, lookism, and community support.

Table 1. Categorization of Discrimination Factors by Theme

Thematic Category	Specific Factors	Number of Studies	Percentage
Cultural-Ideological	Culture, Religion, Sexism, Feminism backlash, Egocentrism	17	35%
Physical-Capability Perceptions	Unable to do heavy/fieldwork, Disability, Workforce age	8	16%
Interpersonal-Relational	Sexual harassment, Not being trusted, Communication barriers, Lookism	10	19%
Structural-Institutional	Bureaucracy, Fear of competition, Neoliberalism, Marital status, Document withholding	11	21%
Socioeconomic-Educational	Low education level, Domestic conflict, Community support deficits	7	15%

Thematic Category	Specific Factors	Number of Studies	Percentage
Identity-Based	Ethnicity, Racial differences, LGBT discrimination, Virginity stigma	6	11%

Note: Some studies identified factors across multiple categories; percentages reflect proportion of total 38 studies mentioning factors in each category.

The culture was found to be the highest factor causing discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace with a percentage of 22% (Arquisola et al., 2019; Yulianto et al., 2022; Noor and Shaker, 2017; Miranti, Sulistyaningrum, and Mulyaningsih 2022; Mee, 2015; Prajuli, Yustikaningrum, and Amurwanti, 2021; Simorangkir, 2015; Soeters et al., 2021; Wang and Huang, 2020; Poerwandari, Munti and Viemilawati, 2018, Kuntjara and Hoon, 2020), then the factor of incapable of doing heavy and fieldwork was the second factor of woman discrimination with a percentage of 10% (Ford and Kawashima, 2016; Osterreich, 2020; Fiantis et al., 2022; Alam, Mahalle, and Suwarto, 2023). Sexual harassment (Platt et al., 2016; Davis, 2018; Perdana and Mardiana, 2018; Simorangkir, 2020) and the low level of education of Indonesian women (Noor and Shake, 2017; Poerwandari, Munti and Viemilawati, 2018; Miranti, Sulistyaningrum, and Mulyaningsih, 2022; Tandos, Zhu, and Krever, 2022) were the next factors causing discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace with a percentage value of 8%. The religious factor was also the factor of discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace (Halimatusa'diyah, 2013; Poerwandari, Munti and Viemilawati, 2018; Arquisola et al., 2019) with a percentage value of 6%.
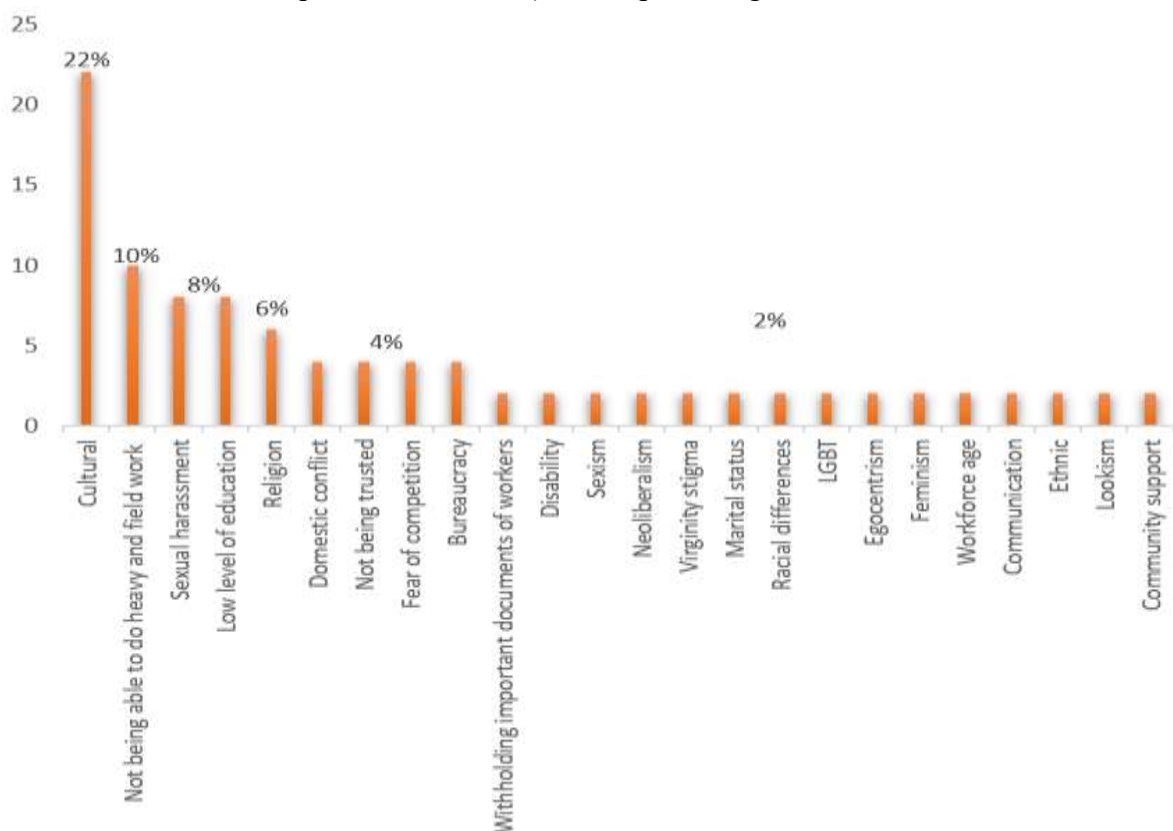

Figure 2. Percentage of Discrimination Factors against Women in the Workplace
(Source: Research, 2023)

The next factors that cause discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace were domestic conflict (Afrianty, Burgess, and Issa, 2015; Miranti, Sulistyaningrum, and Mulyaningsih, 2022), fear of competition (Hermawati et al., 2023; Choi, Li, and Ogawa, 2023), not being trusted (Petraki and Ramayanti, 2018; Winarnita et al., 2020) and bureaucracy (Poerwandari, Munti and Viemilawati, 2018; Noer, Chadijah, and Rudiatin, 2021) with a percentage of 4%. Several factors of discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace with the lowest percentage should not be left unnoticed namely withholding important documents of workers (Arisman and Jaya, 2021), disability (Caron, 2020), sexism (Tjahjadi and Adhariani, 2022), neoliberalism (Mulya and Sakhiyya, 2020), virginity stigma (Davis, 2018), marital status (Parker, 2015), racial differences (Soeters et al., 2021), LGBT (Lai, 2021), egocentrism (Nilan et al., 2014), feminism (Savirani et al., 2021), workforce age (Tjandraningsih, 2012), communication (Mee, 2015), ethnicity (Kuntjara and Hoon, 2020), lookism (Simorangkir, 2013), and community support (Hamdani et al., 2023) with a percentage value of 2%.

Discussion

Culture has become the major factor causing discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace. Indonesia has a unique culture where men and women often differentiate in every way, not only in the field of work but also in other life sectors. Men are considered to be in a higher position than women. Besides culture, another factor causing discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace is a stigma in the work environment in Indonesia which considers women as a less prioritized group of workers as they are deemed unable to carry out heavy field work which is usually often done by men. Therefore, many workplaces with heavy work do not want to recruit and use the services of female workers.

Apart from that, sexual harassment is also a cause of discrimination against women in the workplace, because there are still many workplaces that do not provide a sense of security for women. Therefore, women feel threatened and afraid to work in this field of work. Women are also sometimes considered to be a group that has a lower level of education than men. However, this is not the case, because according to the Central Statistics Agency of the Republic of Indonesia, on average, Indonesian women have the same level of education as men. In fact (Central Statistics Agency of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022; Databoks, 2022), the number of women with higher education is greater than men.

The religious factor cannot be put aside as one of the reasons many women in Indonesia experience discrimination. In Indonesia, several fields of work still assume that if there are men, they should be given priority over women. Moreover, there is still a stigma that it is haram to make women leaders in a field of work because this is considered to be contrary to religious rules. As a result, Indonesian women do not have the same rights as men in employment in Indonesia.

Related to domestic conflict factors, some workplaces in Indonesia often bring up female workers' domestic problems, thus making female workers feel uncomfortable when working, and affecting their performance. Regarding not being trusted factors, many workplaces are unsure of the quality of women's work, making it difficult to get work. Fear of competition factor, workplaces where the majority of officials are men often avoid the presence of officials who are women. They are afraid of competition in their work so when women want

to occupy strategic positions, men will look for reasons to prevent it. Bureaucracy, Indonesian laws are still considered unable to cover women from all aspects of life, thus opening the opportunity for women to experience discrimination in the workplace.

Apart from the abovementioned major factors causing discrimination against women in the workplace, there are also minor factors that become the reasons women often experience discrimination. The factor of withholding workers' important documents means that female workers must be able and willing to do any work to get their documents back. Disability, this factor is also a factor in discrimination against women in the workplace. Disabled conditions often become the subject of ridicule from colleagues, making people with disabilities feel uncomfortable at work. Sexism is a factor that causes women to experience discrimination. Sexism often arises because of gender roles and stereotypes, negative assessments of a person because that person is a woman.

Neoliberal meritocracy is a factor that causes women to experience discrimination, if their workplace does not like the character of these women, it will affect career development. The stigma of virginity also often becomes gossip and makes women uncomfortable when working. Then there is also the factor of racial differences, someone will receive unfair treatment if they come from a certain racial group, because the office where the woman works has hatred towards a certain race. Women's marital status is often used as material to bully women. If there are women who are old enough and not yet married, this will be used as material for bullying women, and ultimately make women uncomfortable at work.

LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) is also one of the factors that cause women to experience discrimination in the workplace. If women have different views from the majority about LGBT, for example, they are pro-LGBT or anti-LGBT, while the environment around their workplace is against this view then they will suffer discrimination. Egocentric, some men often blame women in the workplace without logical reasons and are only based on egocentrism. The factor of feminism or feminist issues is a problem of discrimination for Indonesian women, especially in the world of politics. By using the issue of feminism, political competitors against female legislator candidates can influence their political mass base so that they do not vote for female political candidates. It causes the female legislator candidate to lose the election.

The age of the workforce is one of the factors of discrimination against women in the workplace. Workers who are above the proportional age often face discrimination because they are deemed unable to work optimally, thus making women uncomfortable working in that environment and situation. Communication can also be a cause of discrimination against women in the workplace. The differences in the meaning of communication messages conveyed by men and women cause miscommunication and affect worker productivity in a work environment.

Discrimination against women in the workplace can also be caused by ethnic factors. For example, determining the place and position of a work position by ethnicity the worker comes from. If they come from the majority ethnic group then they will be placed in a strategic position, but if they come from ethnic minorities will be given less strategic jobs. Discrimination can also be caused by the lookism factor. If the woman has an attractive appearance then her career will be good, if the woman does not have an attractive appearance then her career will not be good. Whether a person's career is good or not is determined by how

good-looking he is, the better-looking he looks, the better the career path opportunities he will receive. Community support cannot be separated from the factor of discrimination against women in the workplace, society must be willing to change the paradigm regarding the presence of women at work. Women must be able to take part in all sectors of work, society must support women to work. If the environment does not support women's work, then women in Indonesia will never achieve gender equality.

CONCLUSION

The primary factor driving discrimination against Indonesian women in the workplace is cultural bias, where women are often undervalued as human resources. Many employers' prefer male workers, believing women are incapable of heavy or field labor. Additionally, inadequate workplace protections against sexual harassment limit women's job choices and career freedom. Despite comparable or higher education levels, women frequently face barriers to career advancement due to persistent stereotypes. Religious beliefs also contribute, with some viewing female leadership as taboo, further restricting women's professional opportunities. Future research should explore effective strategies to challenge these deep-rooted cultural and religious biases and promote inclusive workplace policies that enhance safety, equity, and career development for women in Indonesia.

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