

The Challenges of Indonesian Female Academics during the Pandemic and Possible Solutions

Risa Fitria¹, Ani Pujiastuti², Grace Amialia Neolaka³, Maria Yus Trinity Irsan⁴

^{1,2,3}Pendidikan Guru Sekolah Dasar, Fakultas Humaniora, Universitas Presiden

⁴Aktuaria Sains, Fakultas Bisnis, Universitas Presiden

ani.pujiastuti@president.ac.id

ABSTRAK

Kegiatan pengabdian kepada masyarakat ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi tantangan akademisi perempuan selama pandemi dan untuk berdiskusi mengenai solusi untuk mengatasinya. Dosen perempuan dari berbagai daerah di Indonesia diundang untuk bergabung dalam sebuah forum webinar yang diadakan secara virtual melalui platform Zoom. Kegiatan diawali dengan sesi yang disampaikan oleh keynote speaker mengenai isu dan tantangan yang dihadapi akademisi perempuan di perguruan tinggi. Pembicara menyebutkan beberapa faktor seperti budaya sosial dan organisasi telah mempengaruhi pengembangan profesional perempuan. Kemudian, para peserta diajak untuk berbagi pengalaman terkait pekerjaan profesional dan pengasuhan anak dalam konteks pandemi. Beberapa solusi ditawarkan untuk menghadapi tantangan yang dihadapi para peserta. Webinar ini mendapat sambutan dan tanggapan positif dari para peserta. Disimpulkan bahwa meskipun masalah tersebut tidak dapat segera diatasi, dorongan dan dukungan positif dari perempuan kepada perempuan sangat dianjurkan.

Kata kunci: Akademisi Perempuan, Pengembangan Profesional, Pandemi.

ABSTRACT

This community development aimed to explore female academics' challenges during the coronavirus pandemic and to discuss solutions to overcome them. Female lecturers from different areas in Indonesia were invited to join a webinar held virtually through Zoom platform. The activity began with a session delivered by a keynote speaker regarding the issues and challenges that female academics dealt with in higher education. The speaker mentioned several factors such as social and organizational cultures have influenced women's professional development. Then, the participants were invited to share their experiences related with professional work and childcare in the context of the pandemic. Several solutions were offered to deal with the challenges faced by the participants. The webinar received positive reception and feedback from the participants. It was concluded that even though the issues cannot be immediately addressed, positive encouragement and support from women to women were highly recommended.

Keywords: Female Academics; Professional Development; Pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Amid the coronavirus outbreak, many studies (Aldossary & Chaudhry, 2021; Minello, Martucci, & Manzo, 2021; Parlak, Cakiroglu, & Ferid, 2021; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2021), have reported that the pandemic has widened the gender gap and massively affected more female lecturers than male in higher education institutions. Female academics have been reported to have fewer opportunities to publish scholarly articles. Prior to the pandemic, they were also reported to have had problems pursuing career advancement, held more non-strategic positions and carried out more

teaching and service tasks (Toyibah, 2020). Meanwhile, in order to meet academic career advancement, besides teaching assignments, Indonesian lecturers are still required to conduct and produce research. Coupled with the Indonesian government's encouragement to produce more internationally acknowledged publications, this seems to be far-fetched, particularly for female academics.

In the context of the pandemic, work-personal life balance has been the main contributing factor in decreasing female academics' work performance. Women are culturally considered to be family caretakers

leading to the difficulty of balancing time between family and work (Marchetti et al., 2020; Toyibah, 2020). The mobilization of teaching duty from campus to home has caused difficulties for women to divide between work and home tasks without intervening with each other. Female academics have to prepare academic duties as well as maintain house chores. Even though both women and men spent time on childcare and domestic work during the pandemic, women did the latter more compared to men (Del Boca, Oggero, & Profeta, 2020). In her article, Grose (2020) mentions that when mothers are working at home, children will go to their mother first when they are in need of something. This, of course, interrupts female academics' duties as a lecturer either when teaching or doing research. Writing a piece of scholarly work can be done in a calm and quiet state without distractions from other things. As a result, women academics do not have as much time to write scholar articles as men and must choose priorities between family and career (Fazackerley, 2020). In brief, the pandemic has made female academics work extra which can give an impact on their mental health in the long run.

Juggling work with family duties at home, working women experience more stress psychologically and physically compared to men during the pandemic. Working mothers are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and stress and fear of the future. The work of taking care of children, which was previously handed over to schools or day cares when the mother worked, must be transferred to the mother during the lockdown. As a result, the mother experiences what is called parental burnout that can cause mothers to experience depression, anxiety, and stress impacting on their work performance (Marchetti et al., 2020). For female academics, poor work performance is related with the decrease in scholarly work publishing and teaching quality. This experience has made them fear for the future of their careers (Minello et al., 2021). In addition, women also face physical stress due to the prolonged quarantine and physical disengagement with friends and family. Mattioli et al. (2021) stated that mothers feel alone which leads them to start having unhealthy lifestyles such as smoking, alcohol consumption, and lack of physical activities which in the long term have bad effects on their health. Mothers are important pillars in children's growth and development, but it will

influence children's well being if the feelings continue to happen. Therefore, helping these female lecturers to ease their burdens during the pandemic is necessary.

All in all, this community development activity was designed to explore the challenges faced by Indonesian female academics by sharing their experiences as well as to support female academics during the ongoing pandemic. Besides, little is known how Indonesia's female academics are dealing with the pandemic. It is believed that sharing problems and strategies to deal with problems among women facing a similar situation can be effective to reduce stress (USC Marshall School of Business, 2014). Lastly, it is hoped that the results of the discussion can give informed decisions to related parties regarding future activities that are more supportive and responsive towards the needs of female lecturers.

Based on the aforementioned background, this community service in a form of a webinar was initiated to explore challenges that Indonesian female lecturers are dealing with and possible strategies to overcome them.

METHODS

The community service was organized by a team that consists of faculty members from two programs: the Primary School Teacher Education and the Actuarial Science Programs. Collaboration across programs was encouraged to allow the members to share diverse research practices and academic experiences. Several steps were taken to prepare the community service and to ensure the effectiveness of this event. The following stages were applied in preparing the event:

1. Pre-activity

Before the webinar was held, the team conducted informal interviews with the prospective participants: This event can be held on the advice of several female lecturers at several campuses in Indonesia. The faculty members generally shared about the academic problems during the global pandemic. They suggested holding a forum where they could share stories and find solutions together to develop their career.

2. During activity

This community service activity was conducted through a webinar platform to accommodate a more friendly discussion and to create a comfortable and safe atmosphere so that participants can share their experiences and opinions without feeling ashamed, afraid, or

threatened. This discussion was an open discussion with several topics given by the speaker, without limiting the possibility of new topics that of course were still related to the theme of the community service. The purpose of the discussion was to listen to, and to provide reinforcement from the speaker to the participants, and even among the participants. The event was attended by 27 participants from different regions in Indonesia. The discussion was designed in the form of multi-way communication guided by an online moderator using the Zoom application. The team allocated 2 hours for the entire activities which include speeches from the invited experts and an open discussion session led by the moderator.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Challenges faced by the participants and the solutions offered

The purpose of conducting the community service through this webinar was to provide knowledge and answer the concerns of women working in academia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the discussion showed that female academics have the same challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to the challenges faced by the academic mothers in the Covid-19, the webinar also discussed gender inequality that the participants are dealing with in their professional life.

The first issue was the overloaded role that the participants had during the pandemic. Because the position of women in a patriarchal culture is considered more inferior than their male counterparts, women are left with more domestic work in addition to their academic productivity. In fact, according to the participants in Murniati's (2012) study, they chose to be an academia, for the profession is ideal for them who want to make work-life balance. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the female academics felt that their burdens were doubling or tripling. Besides having to complete household chores, they must be responsible for doing scholar work such as teaching, researching, and community service at home. Before the Covid-19, they were able to handle various activities in different places. However, in the current situation, they must be able to do all things simultaneously, for all of the activities were virtually conducted. As a consequence, the participants felt that they were overwhelmed with all the work because all happened at the same time. They said that all of

them appear to have equal demands and, therefore, needs to be prioritized.

Next, because they were inundated with labor both at home and at work, their working time became longer and exhausting which resulted in their anxiety about their scholarly work. One of the participants mentioned that she experienced sleep deprivation since she had to prepare teaching materials and her research publication late at night. During this time, she could concentrate more because her children already went to sleep. The similar experience has been told by Minello (2020) where she had to wait for conducive time that was during the night when his son already slept in order to focus on her academic work. In addition, because most of the participants were academic mothers, they also had to take care of the children at home due to the school closures. Those academic mothers felt overwhelmed because of the additional work that was accompanying their children to join online learning (Minello et al., 2020). Because of this struggle, the female academics in the webinar admitted that they frequently felt anxious and unable to complete all the academic assignments.

The discussion was also concerned about single female academics. Unlike academic mothers, their single and childless status were commonly considered as having less work-family conflict. Even though women with children were suffering more difficulties during the pandemic, single female academics are also argued to have their own personal issues such as the feeling of loneliness and stress due to the uncertainty of the future (Gao & Sai, 2020; Utoft, 2020). One of the participants mentioned that besides the academic responsibilities she was also assigned more administrative work by her supervisor work on the grounds that she must tolerate with the hardships faced by her married with children colleagues in the pandemic. She further argued that everyone had their job responsibilities regardless of their relationship status. She understood that the condition of academic mothers were difficult in balancing their family and work life, but this does not mean that all work was delegated to those who are not married. In her perspective, there should be an understanding from both parties to help and support each other during this difficult situation.

The purpose of this webinar was to find out female academics' experience as well as solutions to the problems discussed above. The

first solution is social and cultural transformation. The view of a woman in society is a social and cultural issue. Therefore, the most ideal way to handle such situations is going through major changes in social and cultural stances. In doing so, this cannot be alone. There needs to be interconnection with many related parties, especially community leaders or people who have power and authority. Change will take a long time, but it will have a bigger impact.

Secondly, women need to stay connected with other people. To prevent all women from feeling alone, heavy laden, and overwhelmed by the many emotions they are currently dealing with, keeping in contact with their closed ones or colleagues might be a good solution. When talking to other people, it reduces feelings of heaviness, and lifts our burdens a little. Friendship can be a channel to make our emotions become healthier.

Women should stay active by finding other activities that will be a means of releasing emotions, such as exercising, gardening, moving freely every 2 hours, listening to music, and so on. Any activities can be done with the aim of releasing stress and distracting from all the house and academic tasks.

Lastly, women need to support each other, so a program that helps female academics might be needed. Having the right community is a good solution. The participants can find other women who can be a safe place to share feelings and motivate each other to increase work productivity. Togetherness and collaboration can make the situation better, and it can take us faster than doing it alone.

3.2. Future proposed engagements

Through this webinar, each participant seemed very interested in conducting further discussions related to the similar matter. Among the topics that emerged for the next webinar topics were discussions of both qualitative and quantitative research methodology and strategies for dividing time between work and personal. The discussion is expected to open their minds to new things about improving their quality of life as female academics.

CONCLUSION

The community development activity that involved Indonesian female academics was conducted to explore the challenges during the coronavirus pandemic. This meeting was attended by some female academics coming

from different parts of Indonesia. The invited speaker for the webinar shared insights on the contributions of female academics to the educational institutions and beyond, and challenges that women in general face in actualizing their professional identities. Subsequently, the participants shared their struggles to balance work-family life due to the quarantine.

The findings showed that both single and married female academics experienced challenges during the pandemic. To overcome them, one of the possible solutions is to build up a good relationship or friendship among the participants that can be helpful to ease their extra burdens. For this reason, the participants initiated to conduct events that can promote academic collaboration among female academics in the future.

REFERENCES

- Del Boca, D., Oggero, N., & Profeta, P. (2020). Women's and men's work, housework and childcare, before and during COVID-19. *Rev Econ Household*, 18, 1001-1012. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-020-09502-1>
- Fazackerley, A. (2020). Women's research plummets over lockdown-but articles from men increase. *The Guardian* May, 12.
- Gao, G., & Sai, L. (2020). Towards a 'virtual' world: Social isolation and struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic as single women living alone. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 27(5), 754-762. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12468>
- Marchetti, D., Fontanesi, L., Mazza, C., Di Giandomenico, S., Roma, P., & Verrocchio, M.C. (2020). Parenting-Related Exhaustion During the Italian COVID-19 Lockdown. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 45(10), 1114-1123. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpepsy/jsaa093>
- Mattioli, A. V., Sciomer, S., Maffei, S., & Gallina, S. (2021). Lifestyle and Stress Management in Women During COVID-19 Pandemic: Impact on Cardiovascular Risk Burden. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, 15(3), 356-359. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1559827620981014>
- Minello, A. (2020). The pandemic and the female academic. *Nature*. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-01135-9>. Retrieved from, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01135-9>

- Minello, A., Martucci, S., & Manzo, L.K.C. (2020). The pandemic and the academic mothers: present hardships and future perspectives. *European Societies*, 23(1), 1-3.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1809690>
- Murniati, C. T. (2012). Career advancement of women senior academic administrators in Indonesia: supports and challenges. Doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa. Retrieved from <http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/3358>
- Toyibah, D. (2020). Gender inequality in academia: A comparison of New Zealand and Indonesia. *New Zealand Sociology*, 35(1), 25.