



## Challenges of working mothers among female civil servants in Jakarta and Bogor: An existentialism feminist analysis of Simone de Beauvoir

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History

Received October 10, 2023;

Revised December 1, 2023;

Accepted December 14, 2023

#### Keywords

Civil servant;  
Domestic work;  
Social construction of gender;  
Working mothers

### ABSTRACT

This research explores the experiences of female civil servants in Jakarta and Bogor regarding the social constructions that shape their roles as wives and mothers. This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations during October-November 2022 using Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism framework. This study found that female civil servants are still expected to bear the full burden of domestic work despite their role in the public sphere. As a result, women often experience a double burden and are hindered from getting promoted. This is due to the view that women's role in the public sphere is secondary, in line with the legacy of the "ibuism" ideology introduced during the new order era. This reinforces the precedent that women's primary career is in the domestic sphere. Based on these findings, a more equitable division of labor and support systems for female civil servants in the domestic sphere and the workplace are needed. Thus, female civil servants can optimally perform their duties and have the opportunity to be promoted equally with male civil servants. By demonstrating the gap between society's expectations and the professional realities experienced by these women, this research contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality in the bureaucratic system. This research can serve as a basis for developing policies and mechanisms to foster a more supportive environment for female civil servants.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the fall of the New Order, Indonesia has entered the Reformation era, characterized by the rise of civil society and the media as a counterweight to power and reduced state control over freedom of expression. Suryakusuma (2021) argues that women were controlled through state institutions during the New Order. Since the reformation period, Indonesia is no longer dominant in regulating and controlling women based on the interests of state ideology, as was the case during the new order. However, control over women, both through conservative regional regulations and the strengthening of gender norms that regulate women's behavior in public spaces, has increased. This can be seen, for example, in a study conducted by Nurcholis et al. (2021), showing that barriers for women to work are partly due to religious views defined as "Islamic." Another study by Hidayah (2021) shows that there is an understanding that mothers are the first school for their children, shaping their behavior and morality.

This research starts by observing the availability of strict regulations and policies related to women, such as curfews or the obligation to wear specific clothing styles. However, on the other hand, the demand for female labor continues to increase, including in the government sector, often

referred to as Civil Servants (*Pegawai Negeri Sipil* or PNS). This research will examine the life experiences of women working as PNS, juggling their roles as employees, wives, and mothers. In reality, although there are policies that support women in the workforce, they still need to be maximally effective. Furthermore, views and ideologies related to social norms, culture, and religious beliefs often create dilemmas for women when deciding to work.

Statistically, the Labour Force Participation Rate (TPAK) of women in Indonesia continues to increase yearly. In 2020, the TPAK for men was 82.41 percent, while for women, it was 53.13 percent (Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak Republik Indonesia, 2022). Data from 2020 shows that the number of female civil servants (PNS) is 2,176,588 people, 52 percent of the total number of civil servants in Indonesia (Badan Kepegawaian Negara Republik Indonesia, 2023). Historically, civil servants are an interesting group to study because, ideologically, they have followed the same doctrine since the new order era. This includes a strict pay system based on hierarchy and incentives and benefits based on status (Budiman et al., 2013).

Although statistically, there are more female civil servants than male civil servants, data from the 2018 National Labour Force Survey (Sakernas) shows a downward trend in female labor force participation after marriage and childbirth, especially among those aged 25-39 years. The data illustrates how, despite their role in the public sphere, women still bear the burden of domestic work. This construction is reinforced, among others, through the Marriage Law of the Republic of Indonesia, Article 31, paragraph 3, which states, "The husband is the head of the family, and the wife is a housewife." Rinaldo (2019) also explained that in gender discourse, women are allowed to work and pursue education, but these activities should not be carried out in a way that "threatens" the husband. This view primarily emerged during the new order era but continues influencing state interventions and initiatives. The state's gender ideology, the idealized pattern of gender roles in the household, gives men power over women (Elmhirst et al., 2017), thus creating unequal relationships.

In the context of female civil servants in Indonesia, traditional gender norms that shape stereotypes and cause discrimination against women are also frequently encountered. Regarding their career progression, the burden of caregiving can lead to the marginalization of women from strategic positions, lower wages than those of men, and also a double burden. Previous research on female PNS in Semarang indicated that it is challenging for women to achieve structural positions in the government because they must fulfill dual roles (as workers, wives, and mothers). Some stereotypes doubt women's ability to lead (Astuti, 2012). Lestari and Sudirman (2018), who conducted quantitative research on 3,919 married female PNS in Tabanan Regency, Bali, examined the factors influencing women's roles in family decision-making. The research revealed that the roles of wives and husbands in decision-making are still unequal, as women's contributions to decision-making usually revolve around children or their education. These findings indicate that men continue to dominate in making other important decisions within the household.

Other studies conducted by Soeters et al. (2021), Margret et al. (2022), and The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Indonesia (2010) have identified several challenges that women face in participating in the government sector. These challenges include socio-economic and cultural barriers related to patriarchal norms, policy, and institutional obstacles such as marginalization and the relative lack of gender-responsive policies, and psychological barriers whereby women identify themselves primarily with their reproductive and domestic duties. From a job perspective, women encounter other obstacles, such as men being more easily transferred to other regions, which enhances their promotion opportunities. In contrast, women find it difficult to be assigned to other regions, especially if they are already married. Additionally, Hsieh (2019) found that female civil servants receive fewer promotion opportunities as they are perceived as selfless, disinterested human beings, and it hinders them from advancing in their careers.

Based on this background, this research focuses on understanding the social construction of gender, which comes from social norms, culture, and religious views experienced by women in carrying out their roles. This research focuses on female civil servants who are married and have children to understand how they experience and reflect on these social constructions about their roles as workers, mothers, and wives. By exploring the complex challenges married female civil servants face in navigating societal expectations and their professional roles, this research offers insights that

can inform policies and initiatives to promote gender equality and inclusive work environments in the government sector.

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach is used because the study seeks to explore the complexity of the experiences of working mothers as civil servants (PNS) and how social constructs shape the values they practice in their households and workplaces. In addition to the relationship with their husbands, the dimension of childcare will also be extensively discussed in this study because, according to previous research, one of the reasons women experience feelings of guilt is having to leave their children or entrust them to others when they work. A qualitative approach will also allow us to capture the diversity and depth of women's lives.

A feminist perspective is also used in this research because it starts from and centers on women's experiences. This perspective is employed because we understand that the subjects – women – do not exist in a vacuum but rather live within social relationships that shape their knowledge and experiences. These relationships, related to women's experience of their roles as wives and mothers, are inseparable from the social, cultural, and religious values they have internalized throughout their lives. Although this research will focus exclusively on female subjects, it will explore the relationships between women and men/husbands and seek to understand the position of women as workers, wives, and mothers.

This research uses a qualitative approach using a case study method that involves in-depth interviews and observations. [Poerwandari \(2007\)](#) explains that case studies are useful when researchers need to understand a particular case deeply, an individual, a group with certain characteristics, or a unique situation. This definition is in line with the purpose of this research, which is to examine specific cases among female civil servants in Jakarta and Bogor related to the social construction of gender and its impact on their roles as wives and mothers.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, in-depth interviews were conducted remotely (virtually) with the research subjects. Additional interviews were conducted through text messaging to enrich the data. The online interviews were conducted as effectively as possible by enabling cameras and using a paid meeting application to facilitate recording the interview process. Before recording, we sought permission from the subjects to record the conversations. Observations were made during the interviews by examining the subjects' body language, facial expressions, and how they responded to our questions.

After conducting interviews with the subjects, the next step was to transcribe the interviews verbatim from the recordings. These verbatim transcripts allowed us to examine each conversation in its entirety. Due to ethical considerations, we have changed the subjects' names and any other identifying information that could easily be identified to ensure the data's confidentiality. Once the transcriptions were completed, the next step was coding by adding factual content and categorizing keywords. Finally, data analysis was conducted using the selected theoretical framework.

This research was conducted between October and November 2022. The main subjects of this study are two female civil servants (PNS) who reside in Jakarta and Bogor, namely Mila and Risa (not their real names).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Theoretical Framework: Existentialist Feminism, *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir**

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir argues that women are not only different and separate from men but also inferior ([Tong & Botts, 2018](#)). Due to societal constructs, women are made into objects or “the Other” because of the belief that men are the standard and the center of the universe. Since men are the standard, women must resolve this dichotomy by emphasizing that for a woman to change her condition, she must reframe herself as a subject. [De Beauvoir \(1949\)](#) also argues that in a patriarchal society, the position of women is not recognized as fully human; [de Beauvoir \(1949\)](#)

argues that to be a woman is to play the role of the other without reciprocity, rejecting all experiences that she is a subject, a human being. This subordinate position of women is exacerbated by existing myths that seek to generalize women's experiences. This, in turn, creates inappropriate myths about women.

In understanding women, men often perceive femininity as confusing; de Beauvoir (1949) refers to this as "strange incoherencies." This is illustrated by portraying women as always full of contradictions and ambivalence. For instance, women are often depicted as seductresses or bad women, but they are also portrayed as guardian angels. A mother is portrayed as sacred, yet a stepmother is depicted as evil. Men are curious about a woman's body, but they feel disgust toward menstrual blood. Men's ignorance of women is not seen as indifference to humanity; instead, men turn and blame women for being a "mystery" in themselves.

In their roles as wives and mothers, women are often placed in a discriminated position. On one hand, women are denied their right to occupy public spaces or are pushed into low and marginalized positions. However, on the other hand, they are burdened with the most significant task – raising children.

*"It is truly a paradox to deny women all public activity, ... and to nonetheless entrust to them the most delicate and most serious of all undertakings: the formation of a human being." (de Beauvoir, 1949)*

The depiction of being a mother is glorified as a noble and sacred duty for women, making women themselves aspire to be perfect figures for their families and children. However, these high expectations oppress women, as they are faced with expectations and myths that are impossible to achieve, leading them to feel frustrated because the things that they believe should bring happiness – taking care of children and the household – make them sad, impatient, and angry.

In the public sphere, men are seen as more masculine and valuable as they contribute more to the world through their work. Meanwhile, success and independence in women are considered contradictory to their femininity because

*"...to be a 'true woman' is to place oneself as an object, as the other." (de Beauvoir, 1949)*

As a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, fields of work began to open up for women, and women entered the productive labor market. However, women were increasingly pushed back into the home by men and anti-feminist groups who felt threatened:

*"...they want to give equality in difference to the other sex." (de Beauvoir, 1949)*

In Indonesia, these views can be attributed to the "ibuism" ideology nurtured during the new order era. Suryakusuma (2021) quotes Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis (1992), who defines ibuism as an ideology that supports every action taken by a mother who takes care of her family, group, class, company, or country. Hindu ideology places women unable to live as individuals because their identity and position are always related to something (family, society, country) or someone (children, husband, father).

*"...women are domesticated in the accumulation process, segregated in the development process, and depoliticized..." (Suryakusuma, 2021)*

Therefore, even when women work in the public sphere, their position is still considered subordinate because their main career is still considered to be in the home.

De Beauvoir's theoretical framework will be used to understand how the research subjects interpret and practice their roles as wives and mothers, given the high expectations (incompatible myths) of being good, pure, and highly dedicated mothers to their children and families. This will be closely related to their relations in decision-making, for if a woman's position is constantly subordinate to men, she will probably lack bargaining power in decision-making. On the other hand, as civil servants, they are also expected to be professionals in their workplaces. Therefore, de Beauvoir's theoretical framework assists us in analyzing the tensions between the demands placed on women in both the domestic and the public realms.

## General Profile of the Research Subjects

*"When I was still working as an auditor, I once told a friend, 'Yes, I want to become a civil servant so I can take care of the household, be a mother, pray Maghrib at home...'. The important thing is that I still have activities and can take care of my children."* (W1)

W1 used to work as an auditor at a public accounting firm. Back then, she felt she did not have a life because all her time was occupied by work. She often had to go to the office on weekends and work overtime late into the night. Mila eventually felt exhausted from being an auditor, so she took the Civil Servant Candidate (CPNS) exam. Her parents, especially her father, heavily influenced her decision to pursue a career as a civil servant. In 2019, W1 was finally accepted and placed in a government office in Jakarta. One of W1's considerations for wanting to be placed in Jakarta was that she would not have to be transferred to another city. This was related to W1's aspiration to build a family.

In 2020, W1 met a man who was introduced to her by one of her senior colleagues at the office. The man was divorced and already had a child from his previous marriage. Several months after getting to know each other, they were married. Just one month after their wedding, Mila became pregnant. Despite going through it during the pandemic, W1 joyfully embraced her pregnancy. At the interview, W1's son, E, was 18 months old.

Now, W1 finds her job as a civil servant (PNS) quite comfortable because it accommodates her during urgent family matters. However, on the other hand, W1 often receives unpleasant comments from her male colleagues who feel that she requests too much time off. E has been diagnosed with speech delay and requires therapy. He also needs careful attention to his diet due to Iron Deficiency Anemia (IDA). This situation requires Mila to prepare for E's therapy sessions three times a week. W1 is almost entirely responsible for caring for E because he often refuses to be looked after by his father.

In contrast, W2 has worked for 11 years as a civil servant in a deputy ministry office in Bogor. She previously worked as an IT staff, but in early 2022, she was transferred to the finance section. Before becoming a civil servant, W2 was a lecturer at a state institute. After two years of working as a lecturer, W2 applied to become a civil servant. Her reason was that even though, as a lecturer, she had been appointed as a permanent employee, she had yet to be appointed as a civil servant. Eventually, W2 applied to a ministry and was accepted.

When she first became a civil servant, W2 was posted to an office in Jakarta, meaning she had to commute by train daily. What often stressed W2 out were the sudden meetings that were often organized, such as a meeting scheduled at 4 pm when she should have already gone home. Since her children were still young, she always felt tired and said, "I finally got this day done, but what about tomorrow?" Only when her children started to grow up did W2 begin to feel a more relaxed rhythm in her role as a working mother. W2's two children are daughters named T and N.

The interview quotes with W1 at the beginning of this section emphasize that, in her view, working as a civil servant is a "relaxing" job compared to working in the private sector. Supporting this, W2 also mentioned that her job is not all about chasing targets, unlike a job in marketing. W2 admits there are certain days when she is busy and other days when she is not. This kind of work can be seen from a gender perspective, which shows that some types of work are considered more suitable for women, so they still have time to take care of children and households, such as civil servants.

## Women Civil Servants, Domestic Work, and Childcare

**De Beauvoir (1949)** states in her book *The Second Sex* that men believe they are the standard and center of the universe. Women live in a myth of incongruity because they use male standards to benefit men (**de Beauvoir, 1949**). Women are also associated with feminine characteristics, so being a good woman means being a strong, commendable, pure, and virtuous mother. We use de Beauvoir's theory to analyze W1 and W2's experiences as working wives and mothers and how their husbands or partners are involved in childcare and housework. This will also be linked to their demands as employees who still have to work well in the office.



De Beauvoir (1949) states that for women, becoming a mother means fulfilling their natural duty or nature. In the case of W1 and W2, they both became pregnant shortly after marriage. There was no prior discussion with their husbands regarding the decision to have children, as both assumed it would happen naturally as part of the marriage. Biologically, W1 and W2's pregnancy experiences were not pleasant. W1 experienced bleeding and had to be on bed rest, while W2 experienced hyperemesis gravidarum during both pregnancies, which caused her to vomit throughout the day. As De Beauvoir (1949) says in her book,

*"Although women want children desperately, their bodies rebel at first when they have to give birth."*

Besides the biological aspect, W1 faced other pressures from her social environment during her pregnancy. Because she became pregnant shortly after marriage, W1 was already five weeks pregnant when her marriage was only one month old. This is because, medically, gestational age is calculated from the date of the last menstrual period (LMP) that occurred before the date of her marriage. W1 quoted one of her relative's comments:

*"Be careful, Tante, you do not want people talking about it because you got pregnant right away. They will probably think that it happened out of wedlock. I married in August and gave birth in April, so it is not even nine months."* (W1)

Such comments were only directed at W1 due to the belief that being a good woman meant being pure and a virgin. However, unfavorable comments about sexuality were not directed at her husband.

De Beauvoir (1949) also states that a woman's attitude after childbirth depends on the situation and support system she has and her reaction to the birth of her child. Although W1 and W2 both work, the difference is seen in the burden they carry after they have children. Traditional gender attitudes and work situations that do not fully support an equal division of labor can influence work-family conflict (Koura et al., 2017). W2 had a good support system and a husband actively involved in childcare. Meanwhile, W1, when becoming a mother, had to bear most of the burden of childcare while still maintaining her professionalism at work. However, she felt that her position as a civil servant was more supportive in her childcare compared to her previous job as an auditor.

*"My life has completely changed, and I suddenly married. Immediately pregnant. I immediately became a mum. In the first year of marriage, I became a wife and mother. I felt very grateful to be a civil servant, especially with the option to work from home. I felt I could take care of E until she was almost a year old. Taking him for vaccinations, monitoring his food, and finding a doctor because his weight was unstable. Being a civil servant helps a lot. There is much flexibility."* (W1)

Her statement can be analyzed by seeing that ideologically, the government sector still adheres to the ideology of Hinduism/motherhood as in the new order era, which, according to Suryakusuma (2021), means that women must serve their husbands and children, and families, communities, and countries. The ideology of Hinduism domesticates the position of women who are tamed in the accumulation process, segregated in the development process, and depoliticized (Suryakusuma, 2021). Therefore, the belief that being a civil servant, according to W1, helps her in her role as a mother can be deconstructed through the ideology of ibuism, which assumes that a woman's main duty is to be a mother, even if she has a career outside the home. Based on this view, it is understandable that tolerance was given to W1.

W1 also felt that her duty as a mother was to take full responsibility for childcare. She accepts the fact that her husband is not actively involved in childcare. When asked about the division of roles in parenting their child, W1 replied,

*"Even when E was born, he [her husband] did not care. But he became closer when he saw that I was overwhelmed since E was one year old when all this started to show."* (W1)

For the husband, this was not his first experience of having children. The assumption is that he should already know more about parenting. However, in a society that still upholds traditional

gender roles, this experience has not brought about an equal division of labor in W1's family. The burden of childcare still automatically falls on W1. She even said:

*"He does not understand, like, "You are so involved with that kid." Sometimes, I tell him that we should read a book together, and I will show him, "This is the book that I am reading." It is not just because I want to, or I am following a trend or anything like that, but because there is already scientific evidence or research that supports it." (W1)*

W1's description of her husband as "clueless" in caring for their child suggests that men's inability to care for children is not natural but rather shaped by the environment; for example, assuming that the nurturing instinct is automatically present in women but not men. This is in line with previous research, which suggests that during the transition to parenthood, women's unpaid care work increases to 3 hours per day compared to men who dedicate only 40 minutes per day (Yavorsky et al., 2015). This implies that more responsibility for childcare and nurturing falls on women, as with W1. In addition, W1 lives with her mother-in-law, and many of her neighbors are from her husband's extended family. Despite rarely taking care of their children, W1's husband still receives support from his extended family. In contrast, W1, who struggled to care for their child alone, was often blamed and vilified by her mother-in-law and her husband's extended family.

*"When E was talked about, they said she was small, she often had colds even though her diet was well taken care of, why E had not grown up yet, that her mum was so dedicated to her when there was no need for that. If I am traumatized or tired, it is not because of when I gave birth or took care of E, but rather the environment; I feel like I am struggling alone." (W1)*

Expectations of healthy, growing, and well-developed children are always placed on women, while these demands rarely come to men. These pressures often stressed W1 out and caused her to experience vertigo and sleeplessness. Without realizing it, W1's stress also hurt E, making her sick. This is similar to what de Beauvoir (1949) said because women are so oppressed in their marriages they often suppress instincts and frustrations that can explode and negatively affect their children. W1's demands are also what de Beauvoir (1949) refers to as "the myth of the incompatible," as women are always expected to be perfect as mothers.

Meanwhile, W1 felt that her childcare needs were accommodated at work because she had a Field Duty (DL) allowance that she could use if her child were sick without reducing her annual leave entitlement. She tried her best to limit taking DL as she wanted to prove that she was a responsible worker. However, almost every month, W1 applied for DL because her child was sick or needed to be accompanied for therapy. This led to a comment from one of her male superiors,

*"I just approved your leave yesterday, and now you are applying for leave again." (W1)*

W1 also constantly compared herself to colleagues in the office who also had children or whose children often fell ill but could still come to the office and work professionally. Such demands put more pressure on W1 to prove that she is both a mother and a good worker. Previous research by Yu (2022) showed similar findings that although a work-life balance program was available in the office, a female manager was unwilling to take it up because the work culture disliked staff bringing family life into professional work.

For W1's husband, there are times when he also has to leave work, for example, when E needs medical treatment. However, W1's husband can still log in online without being in the office. He can return to the office the next day without reducing his leave. Male workers can often get this dispensation without any consequences. In contrast, women often have to follow procedures even for emergency leave and face unpleasant comments from superiors. De Beauvoir (1949) reveals,

*"For men, the more they contribute to the world through their work, the more they are considered masculine and valuable."*

Meanwhile, success and independence in women are considered contrary to their femininity. Motherhood continues to limit women's already limited freedom. This is reflected in W1's experience, where she always felt unsettled at work and with her child and tired of constantly balancing both roles. Previous research shows that when a woman becomes a mother, she is expected

to resign from her job and take full responsibility for childcare (Baxter et al., 2015). Although W1 did not quit her job, the pressure related to childcare expectations remained.

Conversely, W2 also admitted that in the early days of having a child, she felt overwhelmed as a new mum and worker, especially because she had to commute between Bogor and Jakarta. She often complained of sleep deprivation, having to prepare complementary foods, and preparing a breast pump to take to the office. However, W2 could share her burden with her husband and family, as she was still living with her parents at the time, and they were very helpful in taking care of her first child as a baby. W2's husband is also the type of husband who does not hesitate to help care for their child, so they are both preoccupied with childcare responsibilities. Sometimes, W2's parents make comments such as,

*"If it is a girl, do not let the father change the nappies," or "Is it okay if only the father goes with two children?" (W2)*

W2 sometimes felt that such comments did not make sense, as she felt that her husband was capable of caring for their children.

Looking at W2's family dynamics, the closeness of her two children to their father is partly accommodated by her husband's workplace, which implements a "work from home" policy, especially during the pandemic. However, this WFH policy will only make much difference with men's awareness and active participation. Chatot et al. (2023) found that even though women work full-time during the pandemic, they are still the ones who handle housework, childcare, and other household chores. Analyses from other studies show that childcare during lockdown is still dominated by women, requiring them to balance their dual roles (Cannito & Scavarda, 2020). Thus, we see the importance of husbands' active role in household and childcare responsibilities, including during emergencies such as the pandemic, so as not to cause oppression for women and frustration in caring for children, as de Beauvoir suggests.

Meanwhile, regarding her work, after W2 was transferred to Bogor, she finally felt a better quality of life because she no longer had to commute. If she does not leave her child in daycare, she often brings her child to the office, as her husband often has to work in Jakarta. The support from the W2 office for women with children is quite good. Even during meetings, W2 can leave her child with one of her colleagues. However, as W1 also felt, there were times when W2 felt uncomfortable or guilty when bringing her domestic work (childcare) into her work in the public sphere. However, as her children grew older, W2 began to feel more at ease as they became independent.

W2 often complained about her job and considered resigning when her child was still a toddler. For example, her supervisor recently rejected W2's leave request three times. On the one hand, she was annoyed, but on the other hand, she felt needed. Although she sometimes finds her boss annoying, W2 has colleagues in the office with whom she feels comfortable sharing her concerns. It was feelings like this that made W2 stay in her job. She decided against resigning because, upon reflection, she was satisfied with her daily routine. She believes that if she became a full-time stay-at-home mum, the role would only make her more stressed and less patient with her children. By working, she can have time for herself, and when she returns home, she can take care of her children with more peace of mind.

### **Working Women and Decision Making in the Domestic Space**

This section will focus on the decision-making and agreement between the subject and her spouse regarding childcare. In W1's case, she and her husband were not always on the same page regarding childcare. When W1's parenting style was questioned by her mother-in-law, her husband sometimes hesitated to intervene. This made W1 feel less supported by her husband, although she acknowledged that he had recently become more cooperative.

Instead, W2 and her husband maintained open communication about everything. After the pandemic restrictions were eased, W2 started traveling again, leaving her husband in charge of their two children at home. While out of town, W2 received news that her children were sick. Her husband made all the decisions about how to care for her sick children.

*"Like when I left my children in Lombok for five days, and then suddenly T was sick with a fever, and N was sick with a cold and cough. Then my husband said, "Well, they do not need to go to*



*school." I said, "Okay, I guess so. After all, I am in Lombok." So, it is okay that they do not go to school. She said they could stay home and play together because sending them to school could transmit their illness to others. We can monitor their condition better at home, so I agreed."* (W2)

With W1's husband, this may not have been possible. All decisions relating to their child's development or when the child is sick are left to W1. Even when W1 tried to take E to various doctors for a diagnosis, her husband was somewhat reluctant as he felt that childcare did not need to go "that far." All of E's daily needs were taken care of entirely by W1, with no interference from her husband. W1 seemed to want to "prove" that she was a responsible mother.

*"I am very stubborn when it comes to E. I want E to eat my homemade food. If I cannot make it, I have to look for it and know. The hard part is when I have to prepare his meals and snacks. Whether I like it, I must cook on Saturday and Sunday. On the one hand, I want to lie down. On the other hand, I want to play with E because I do not have time, and it is very inconvenient because I have to prepare his vitamins, breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks every morning. I could cook four or five dishes at once, not to mention the snacks. I am already exhausted on Sunday; the next day, I have the morning ceremony. I am not the type of person who expects others to understand. I have children, but that does not mean I can get away with my work at the office if something happens to E."* (W1)

As de Beauvoir points out, women entered the productive labor market due to the industrial revolution. However, women were increasingly pushed back into the home by men and anti-feminist groups who felt threatened. De Beauvoir (1949) adds that women want to provide equality in difference to the other sex. This is reflected in W1's experience, where there are norms that demand perfection from W1 in both her roles at home and in the office. Women only take a secondary role in the public sphere; in the private sphere, they are expected to give unreciprocated loyalty (de Beauvoir, 1949). The "unreciprocal" attitude towards W1 can be seen in how she tries to care for E with minimal support from her husband. Although W1 cared for the child and organized the household, she received almost nothing in return. Therefore, women are expected only to take up jobs that can compromise their role at home as wives and mothers (Batum, 2016).

In W1's case, the researcher suspects that she was driven to "prove" that she was a good mother because her mother-in-law often judged her. Several times, W1 mentioned that her mother-in-law often compared her parenting style with her husband's ex-wife and her husband's other children. W1 even shared that her mother-in-law once complained about her to W1's mother, causing tension in W1's relationship with her in-laws. Such demands further push a woman to strive to be perfect as a mother constantly. However, despite her efforts to be perfect, she is still deemed inadequate and is constantly in a position where she is blamed.

For W1, when we asked further about how decisions regarding their child were made, she responded like this:

*"I do not like it when people try to interrupt me in the middle of the road. I would feel that I know better. When I do this and that, I already have my reasons. If my husband says something, I will immediately refute his argument."* (W1)

From her statement, it is clear that W1 is the main decision-maker for everything related to their child. However, unfortunately, this decision-making did not necessarily put W1 on an equal footing with her husband; on the contrary, it was increasingly burdensome for her. She admits to having trouble sleeping, getting sick, and even contracting infections, all because she was physically and mentally exhausted. W1 not only bears the visible physical burden for her child, such as breastfeeding, preparing meals, fulfilling therapy needs, and so on, but also the invisible burden (mental burden), such as attending child development classes, learning about nutrition, and looking for references about childcare.

The situation faced by W1 was not only caused by a lack of support from her husband in childcare but also by a lack of support from her workplace, which still demanded that W1 work optimally. In a previous study conducted by Sekine et al. (2010), a person's health condition can be

affected by gender differences in the workplace, such as high work demands and lack of social support, thus increasing health risks, including mental health. Another study showed similar results, indicating that working hours and socioeconomic status impact mental and physical health (Sekine et al., 2009).

Actually, W2 also experienced such demands to be the perfect mother. However, W2 was better at negotiating it. Perhaps this was also because the demands came from W2's own parents, so she had a stronger negotiating position.

"Maybe my mum is the type of person who, whenever possible, does things on her own. I am the kind of person who thinks, why not accept help if it is available? However, we did many things from the beginning, probably because living with my mum meant we had to stick together and speak with one voice. Because whether living with your in-laws or even with your mum, there are bound to be incompatibilities, right? Maybe my mum worries when they go out together [husband and children] because my dad never does that. She worries, "Is it okay for Dad to go rollerblading with T and N? Is everything prepared?" "No need, they can find it themselves, Mum." Like that. It was more like she was worried, "Is it okay for Daddy to go with his two children?" (W2)

In addition, there are different perspectives on childcare between W2 and her mother. W2's mother believes that as a woman, she should be able to do everything herself. In contrast, W2 feels that if childcare can be shared with her husband, why should she do everything herself? She even said that her children are closer to their father than her, and she is not bothered by that fact. W2 also said that she prefers to organize and decorate the house rather than care for the children.

Career-wise, W2 is not very ambitious. When her children were toddlers, she considered quitting her job. However, as her children grew older and after eleven years as a civil servant, W2 was able to find a suitable rhythm in balancing her roles. She says she is different from the type of worker who chases promotions. She was once offered a promotion but turned it down because, in her words,

*"This is my job, not my career." (W2)*

According to her, having a job with a routine from 8 am to 4 pm is enough for her, with a salary, benefits, and a pension for her old age. W2's perspective on her job was quite similar to W1, who saw that being a civil servant was enough for her to have a job while caring for her family at home.

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Their opinions can be reflected in two aspects. Firstly, the ideology of motherhood places women in the role of mothers, regardless of whether they have a job outside the home. This ideology seems to be internalized in W1 and W2, so they choose a career as civil servants because of its stability, and this job is also considered suitable for women because of its "flexibility." Secondly, de Beauvoir's (1949) conceptual framework states that women's position in the public sphere is secondary, while the most honorable career for women is in the home. Therefore, it is important that when women work outside the home, gender relations and the gendered division of labor are renegotiated (Li, 2018) to change workplace relations and consider women's work outside the home as equally important as men's work.

W1 noted that if one is not a standout worker, it will be easier to get promoted if they are laid back and not interested in pursuing a career like W2. However, W1 wants this change as she feels she needs to learn to move up the career ladder. The term "stand out" mentioned by W1 should not be seen solely based on whether someone is "lazy" or "ordinary." Rather, one can be ambitious but hindered by other obstacles, as with W1. Thus, it can be seen not in terms of who is lazy or willing to work hard but rather in who has greater privilege to progress towards promotion. For W1,

who is burdened with additional household responsibilities, she may face difficulties in pursuing promotion, in what **Korzec (2009)** describes as the "mother lane."

### Decision Making and Women's Bodies

Another aspect of decision-making in the households of W1 and W2 can be illustrated through decisions relating to family planning and the number of children desired by W1 and W2. When their child was about one and a half years old, W1's husband already wanted a second child from her. However, W1 rejected the idea and was considering having just one child. Shortly after giving birth, W1 had an IUD inserted because her husband refused to use condoms during sexual intercourse.

*"Why should I be the one most bothered by this? My husband also refused to use contraceptives. Why should I be the one who has to bear it? I was already caring for my children and working, and I still had to think about this. In the end, I said, "Enough, I will put it in. If you do not want to accompany me, I will do it myself with my own money." (W1)*

**De Beauvoir (1949)** states that men do not feel the need to alleviate the pain and physiological burden experienced by women because it is considered natural. This can be seen from W1's story, where her husband rarely cared for E. However, he still wanted to have another child and did not seem to consider the increased burden that W1 would have to bear if she did not actively participate in childcare. Situations like this make women always weigh and compromise with their husband's comfort, as stated by **Joly (2017)**, who stated that married women find themselves weighing and balancing the extent to which they can push the boundaries of what is acceptable to people in the family.

W1's husband's refusal to use condoms can also be seen from the point of view of men who feel that sexual satisfaction is their right that must be fulfilled, but the same is not true for women. As **de Beauvoir (1949)** says,

*"Men use it (women's reproductive function) as an excuse to add to women's suffering, for example, by refusing to give women the right to sexual pleasure."*

W1 acknowledges that she experienced unpleasant side effects from using the IUD, such as abdominal cramps, irregular periods, and even infections in the first few months that required medical treatment. This shows that W1 was consistently in a position where she was the sacrificing party, including in terms of sexuality.

On the other hand, W1's husband, as **de Beauvoir** says, denied W1 the right to sexual pleasure because she was in constant discomfort. However, W1 also seems to view this as something that cannot be changed. He attributes it to the "natural" male ego, as he says, "Yes, it is normal, men have big egos" (W1). Meanwhile, W1 is a strong-willed woman. However, W1 was the one who had to adjust to her husband and said that she had to lower her ego to balance herself with her husband.

Another aspect related to the female body is breastfeeding. When W1 had to wake up in the middle of the night to breastfeed, her husband was confused to find her crying.

*"I still remember when I was crying, breastfeeding because of the pain. Maybe my husband was confused to see me crying because he could not help either. In the end, he snapped at me. I felt very lonely. When my nipples bled and tore and so on, I cried very much, even screamed. I was very afraid of being scolded by my husband because I remembered being scolded by him then." (W1)*

Understanding a woman's breastfeeding experience is not something that cannot be learned, but W1's husband seems unable to understand what W1 is going through. This is similar to what **de Beauvoir (1949)** stated, that men do not bother to understand the physiological burden borne by women, so the reaction from W1's husband is not sympathy but annoyance. **De Beauvoir (1949)** also observed that men regard their bodies as normal, while women are regarded as a hindrance or a prison because they are burdened by "strange" functions. On the other hand, there was something that always prevented W1 from being more open with her husband about her biological experiences, namely the fear of being scolded or yelled at by her husband, even though W1 had done nothing

wrong. This can also be seen as the internalization of the value that men are the "standard," which causes women themselves to be confused in explaining their breastfeeding experience.

W1 often mentioned that she felt lonely. The feeling of being "alone" that W1 experienced was largely due to the lack of support from her husband. Even when, for example, W1 was vilified by her husband's extended family, he asked her to understand rather than defend her. Based on these negative experiences, W1 once said that if they had another child, she wanted to move back to her parent's house so that someone could take care of her. In society, the role of a mother is often glorified as a noble occupation. This is in line with what [de Beauvoir \(1949\)](#) said, that being a mother is considered enough to fulfill a woman's life. However, many women who become mothers later feel unhappy, dissatisfied, and resentful.

Meanwhile, W2's experience differed somewhat from W1's, as she and her husband negotiated and agreed. Regarding family planning, W2 and her husband agreed that they would both use contraceptives. This agreement was reached after considering W2's pregnancy experience when she suffered from hyperemesis gravidarum, a condition that caused her to vomit repeatedly throughout the day during both of her pregnancies. W2 also felt much more tired in her second pregnancy at 28 years old than in her first pregnancy at 24. Now, at the age of 35, she feels unable to get pregnant again, a decision that her husband also supports.

The difference between the two is that W2's husband is much more cooperative with W2's choices about her body than W1's husband. Although, for example, W1 decided on her own to use an IUD, this was not a deliberate and conscious choice. Initially, W1 did not want to use an IUD and opted to use fertility testing, but she found this method more complicated. Besides, counting fertility cycles is not a reliable way to prevent pregnancy. Since she already had a lot to organize, W1 eventually "chose" the IUD as the most straightforward option among the options she had.

Decisions about family planning have a significant impact on their lives as working individuals. In W1's case, she wanted to have another child, but she could not bear to go through what she had gone through while raising E. Having one child had drained her energy and made her sick, with no one else to care for her but herself. In this case, W1 was firm enough to postpone having another child, considering the workload at home and outside the home.

In contrast, in W2's case, she had agreed with her husband not to have any more children. She considers her children to be old enough, and she feels more relaxed caring for them.

*"Children can now be left alone at home. Like yesterday, I was on a business trip. My two children were with the nanny, but the nanny had to buy groceries, so they were home alone. Then, when my husband or I come home late, the nanny does not bother to put them to bed or give them milk. The kids can even take a bath by themselves. As long as there are adults in the house, the important thing is that there are adults. That is how it is." (W2)*

For non-work matters, W2 also feels that she has more time for herself. For example, she can play badminton at 6.30 am or 5 pm after work. According to her, such activities would not be possible when her children are still toddlers, as she could not focus. As with the family planning issue described above, W2 emphasized that in their marriage and other aspects of life, she and her husband have always compromised and communicated openly about everything. According to W2, one of the reasons why she and her husband can work well together is because they already knew each other before they started dating and getting married. So, she believes that she and her husband are on the same page.

However, more than that, W2 and her husband proved that despite coming from a family that still adheres to the traditional division of labor, through communication and agreement - as well as the husband's willingness to share tasks in housework and childcare - a healthier relationship can be achieved in the household, both in work and decision-making.

Therefore, this study explores the experiences of female civil servants in navigating societal expectations and professional roles. While previous research has analyzed the barriers faced by women in the government sector ([Soeters et al., 2021](#); [United Nations Development Programme \(UNDP\) Indonesia, 2010](#)), little has focused on the specific experiences of female civil servants who are married and have young children. Previous quantitative research on female civil servants has



examined career development and family decision-making (Astuti, 2012; K. E. Lestari & Yudhanegara, 2018).

This research uses a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews centered on women's lived experiences and analyzes gender relations using Beauvoir's feminist existentialism framework. Insights around the division of domestic duties, decision-making processes, and women's control over their bodies highlight the complex challenges female civil servants face. By unraveling the tensions between societal expectations and professional demands these women face, this research can inform policy to create a more supportive and inclusive environment for female civil servants who have different roles at home and work.

## CONCLUSION

Mrs. Amsah's Dodol Betawi business, located in Semanan Kalideres, is a small business that is vulnerable to business competition, so its existence can be threatened by the growth of processed food innovations whose existence is increasingly unstoppable because it is supported by marketing through current digital marketing platforms. In the production of Dodol Betawi Bu Amsah, the volume depends on the number of orders, so the quantity is still very limited; this is because the promotion carried out is only by word of mouth due to limited labor and human resources, so the production of Dodol Betawi Bu Amsah runs as it is and without a touch of business management and marketing management that can support business existence. As a local food characteristic of the Betawi community that is important to preserve, the Betawi Dodol business should receive special attention from the government. As part of efforts to develop entrepreneurship based on local wisdom, Dodol Betawi must be developed and created like other processed foods by utilizing digital marketing platforms to reach a wider range of consumers.

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