

Research article

When Culture Promotes Justice, but Women Workers Face Challenges: A Case Study in Makassar, Indonesia

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Abstract

This research investigates how workplace gender inequality is perpetuated in Makassar through the integration of Bugis–Makassar cultural values within organizational frameworks. It looks into how moral concepts such as *sipakatau* (mutual respect), *sipakainge* (reminding each other), *sipakalebbi* (honoring others), and *siri' na pacce* (dignity and empathy) are reinterpreted to reinforce gender hierarchies. Instead of serving as equalizing factors, these values are frequently utilized to promote women's obedience, resilience, and restraint, transforming moral virtues into tools that justify inequality. This study utilizes a multiple-case approach involving thirty-eight women from various sectors, including education, health, administration, and services in Makassar, Indonesia. Data was gathered through open-ended questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and unstructured observations, and were analyzed employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The results indicate that cultural expressions are ingrained in managerial practices that prioritize compliance and symbolic acknowledgment over genuine equality. Institutional frameworks such as *pangngaderreng* have progressively become more discretionary, where rights are redefined as personal favors, and career progression is influenced by patron–client relationships and informal "chemistry" with leaders. The study illustrates that inequality manifests through normalized expectations of modesty, loyalty, and emotional labor, reinforced by microaggressions and moral scrutiny. Nonetheless, these cultural values possess a transformative potential if reinterpreted as collective and institutional responsibilities. Merging local ethical principles with gender equality initiatives presents a culturally relevant approach to promoting justice, where equality is perceived not as a challenge to culture but as its ethical fulfillment.

Keywords: gender inequality; organizational justice; Bugis; Makassar; women workers.

1. Introduction

Workplaces are frequently depicted as merit-based environments where fairness is maintained through rules, contracts, and the prevailing organizational culture. However, research continually reveals that these assertions of impartiality mask ongoing gender-based disparities. In numerous situations, women still face obstacles that stem not only from personal bias but are ingrained within organizational practices, informal networks, and societal expectations. These workplace challenges often coexist with women's dual responsibilities in the occupational and domestic spheres, making their psychological well-being an increasingly important concern in organizational research (Hapsari et al., 2025). Recent research on organizational justice indicates that inconsistent procedures, inadequate accountability, and discretionary power can heighten psychological distress and diminish employees' sense of acknowledgment, particularly when individuals hold structurally vulnerable roles (Kobayashi & Kondo, 2019; Sun et al., 2023). These dynamics suggest that workplace justice is not merely a matter of formal procedure, but a field of power where rules, authority, and everyday interaction determine whose rights become enforceable and whose rights remain negotiable (Bapuji et al., 2020). Similarly, recent studies on the paradox of meritocracy reveal that systems designed to reward ability may still reproduce gendered inequalities through apparently neutral selection, evaluation, and promotion criteria. Meritocratic procedures may appear objective while continuing to disadvantage women through gendered assumptions about suitability, commitment, mobility, and professional fit (Beasley et al., 2019). These studies suggest that merit is not simply measured through neutral criteria but is interpreted within organizational norms that often privilege masculine career trajectories.

Research on organizational justice and gender inequality has indicated that discretionary processes, informal power structures, and meritocratic narratives frequently perpetuate unequal results for women. Recent research has also emphasized that organizational culture, including its emotional dimensions, plays an important role in shaping employees' organizational experiences and outcomes (Faisal & Salendu, 2024). However, a significant portion of this literature has considered culture primarily as a background factor or a normative resource, instead of exploring how culturally significant expressions are used in everyday organizational contexts. Consequently, our understanding of how local moral values are selectively reinterpreted in workplace environments to justify, negotiate, or challenge gendered inequalities is limited. This study aims to fill that void



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by investigating how Bugis–Makassar cultural principles are integrated into organizational practices and the implications for women’s experiences of justice, recognition, and exclusion.

This study explores the intersection of feminist organization theory and critical cultural studies, using critical discourse analysis as the main analytical method. It views organizational justice not just as fair procedures or fair distribution of outcomes but as a discursive and institutional space where power is exercised through everyday language, moral judgments, and culturally significant norms. This perspective allows an examination of how local cultural values can serve as organizational resources to promote gender justice, while also being potentially used selectively to reinforce hierarchy, conformity, and exclusion.

Indonesia offers a strong example for this inquiry because formal labour protections do not always ensure real justice for women workers. Recent research indicates that while policies on menstrual leave, maternity protection, and anti-harassment measures are officially acknowledged in Indonesian labour laws, their enforcement is often uneven. Challenges such as unclear procedures, limited institutional backing, workplace stigma, and managerial discretion hinder effective implementation (Amriyati et al., 2023; Ilaa & Agustin, 2026; Putri & Mediawati, 2024; Tobing, 2020). The difference between legal rights and actual practice highlights a broader discursive landscape where law, culture, religion, and organizational authority intersect in daily workplace interactions. In Bugis–Makassar communities, values like *sipakatau* (respect for humanity), *sipakainge* (mutual reminder), *sipakalebbi* (honoring), and *siri’ na pacce* (dignity and empathy) are recognized as ethical principles that uphold social harmony, mutual respect, and moral responsibility (Gani & Gani, 2024; Hamzah et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2022; Zubair et al., 2022).

Recent studies on Buginese–Makassarese migrant students reveal that *siri’ na pacce* continue to influence social identity, empathy, mutual support, self-concept, and psychological well-being. This suggests that these cultural expressions maintain significant moral and emotional authority even outside their original context (Hasanuddin et al., 2025). However, these idioms do not become fixed moral codes in modern workplaces. Once part of organizational culture, they can be reinterpreted through managerial ideas of loyalty, performance, and compliance. For example, *siri’* can be used to promote endurance and sacrifice, *sipakainge* to justify discretionary supervision, and *sipakalebbi* to maintain symbolic recognition without real access to rights or advancement. As a result, a contested discursive space develops where cultural pride is not only a source of ethical unity but also a language that reproduces gendered compliance under the guise of respect and harmony.

This study’s initial concern arose from informal exploratory talks with women workers in various sectors, facilitated by the author’s social proximity and shared gender. Such informal conversations offer valuable contextual and naturalistic insights in qualitative research. However, feminist reflexivity highlights that researchers’ access to participants’ experiences is influenced by their positionality, gender, and relational proximity (Shen, 2024; Swain & King, 2022). Although these exchanges were not part of the formal data collection, they provided initial insights into how workplace inequality is experienced, interpreted, and normalized daily in organizations. Early findings from these conversations indicated that moral idioms might be involved in maintaining unequal workplace relations. Some women viewed formally recognized rights not as secure entitlements but as concessions granted at the discretion of supervisors. Others highlighted the role of informal networks, exclusionary interaction spaces, and gendered humor in creating an environment where women’s participation and authority are subtly limited. These patterns align with recent research showing how organizational culture can perpetuate gender microaggressions through alienation, denial of opportunities, invisible restrictions, and sexual innuendos, as well as with studies on masculinity contest cultures and workplace sexism (Glick et al., 2018a; Karami et al., 2024). These observations are presented here not as conclusive results, but as initial empirical clues that contributed to formulating the research problem of this study.

This study aims to reshape the conversation about gender equity in Indonesian workplaces by examining local cultural discourses. Most international research on workplace gender equity has been conducted in settings where standardized labor laws, formal HR systems, and institutionalized equality policies are typically considered the main focus of analysis (Hideg & Krstic, 2021). While such scholarship has been important in identifying patterns of bias, discrimination, and exclusion, recent studies have also emphasized the need to examine how gender equality is shaped by specific sociohistorical, cultural, and institutional contexts beyond dominant Western frameworks (Zhu et al., 2022). In the Bugis–Makassar context, organizational justice cannot be fully understood through formal rules or universal equality language alone, as perceptions of fairness are also shaped by moral idioms like *sipakatau*, *sipakainge*, *sipakalebbi*, and *siri’ na pacce*. While these values are often celebrated as ethical social foundations, in workplace relations they can be

selectively used to discipline workers, promote loyalty, and limit women's claims to rights and authority. This aligns with recent feminist organizational research indicating that gender inequality persists not only through explicit discrimination but also via everyday practices, informal networks, hierarchical cultures, and discourses of merit, loyalty, and organizational neutrality (Bourabain, 2024; Grzelec, 2024; Um, 2023). Placing organizational justice within Bugis–Makassar cultural contexts shows that culture isn't just a moral tool for harmony but also a battleground where gendered power can be reinforced through symbolic respect, selective acknowledgment, and culturally sanctioned conformity.

The conflicting nature of these cultural values opens up possibilities for different interpretations. Global feminist scholarship has called for re-engaging politics in workplace justice by exposing how seemingly neutral structures tend to favor masculinity (Acker, 1990). Likewise, local cultural idioms can be reframed as counter-discourses. For instance, *sipakatau* might be seen as a normative rule that obliges institutions to maintain dignity; *sipakainge* as a systemic mechanism for accountability; and *siri' na pacce* as an institutional sense of shame when rights are infringed. The key challenge is to translate these values into practical, enforceable actions while preserving their meaning and avoiding their manipulation by managerial powers. Critical discourse analysis proves especially useful here, as it helps trace how cultural language circulates, is adopted, faces resistance, or is reinterpreted in the pursuit of gender justice.

This research aims to redefine the conversation on gender equity in Indonesian workplaces by framing it within local cultural narratives. Although global studies on gender equality often rely on Western paradigms, this work highlights how Bugis–Makassar cultural values influence views on fairness, hierarchy, and justice. It specifically explores three connected questions: (1) how moral idioms are employed in managerial and peer interactions, (2) how these idioms help uphold or challenge gender hierarchies, and (3) how institutional practices affect the evolving meanings of these idioms.

2. Research Methods

This study uses a multiple qualitative case study approach to investigate how Bugis–Makassar cultural values are integrated into organizational practices and influence gender inequality in Makassar, Indonesia. It also explores variations both within and across cases. Employing a multiple case study design allows researchers to identify commonalities and differences, gather diverse experiences, and develop a comprehensive understanding of the broader phenomenon while maintaining each case's uniqueness (Thomas, 2011). Researchers analyze various bounded cases to uncover both individual and cross-case patterns. Their approach involves assembling a coordinated research team, deliberately selecting cases, examining each within its real-life context, gathering comparable data across all cases, and using within-case triangulation to enhance credibility and understanding (Stake, 2006).

This study focused on the organization as the unit of analysis, with each participating organization considered a separate case. Organizations were deliberately chosen to represent diverse workplace environments within a shared socio-cultural context in Makassar. Female employees served as key informants to offer perspectives on how organizational practices embodied Bugis–Makassar cultural values and influenced gender inequality experiences.

The study included 38 women from different sectors in Makassar, Indonesia, such as education, health, retail, and manufacturing (see Table 1). Four of these women participated in in-depth interviews, while another 34 completed open-ended survey questions. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling to ensure they had first-hand experience with organizational practices that embody gendered power relations. This method provided a diverse range of occupational backgrounds and employment statuses.

All names in this study are pseudonyms. The four interviewees include Ana (30) and Dita (30), who are permanent employees in the hospitality sector; Manda (26), a public health general practitioner; and Hawa (55), a senior lecturer at a private university. The remaining 34 survey participants mainly identified as Buginese, with some also identifying as Makassarese, Buginese-Makassarese, Javanese, Mandarese, Torajan, Ambonese, and Buginese–Minang. They worked in diverse roles such as sales, medical practice, staff, civil service, teaching, marketing, administration, entrepreneurship, finance, customer service, and HR. Most were temporary workers; others held permanent roles or were on probation. This variety offers valuable insights into how cultural norms and gender expectations shape experiences across different occupational and social settings in Makassar, Indonesia.

Table 1. Participant's characteristics

Data collection	Number of participants	Age range	Company's sector	Occupation
In-depth interview	4	26 - 55 y.o	Private sector Public sector	HR staff Doctor Lecturer
Open-ended survey	34	23 - 55 y.o	Private sector Public sector State-owned enterprise	Sales & marketing staff Finance staff CS staff Admin staff Doctor Civil servant Dentist Entrepreneur Lecturer HR staff
Total	38			

Methodologically, this study considers women workers' narratives as contextual knowledge. Based on recent feminist psychological research in Indonesia, it emphasizes women's lived experiences as a vital way to uncover exclusion, agency, and negotiated understandings of justice that are often hidden within institutional narratives (Setyawan, 2025).

Given the exploratory nature of the research and its focus on non-invasive data collection, this study was categorized as lower risk research (The University of Queensland, 2018). Throughout the research, ethical considerations were meticulously upheld to ensure participants could share their experiences safely, respectfully, and voluntarily. The study adhered to core ethical principles, with all participants receiving informed consent that outlined the study's purpose and procedures, emphasizing voluntary involvement without any coercion. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly preserved, and great care was taken to protect participants' well-being during data collection and analysis.

To ensure credibility and depth, data triangulation was applied by integrating interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, and observational notes. This approach allowed for cross-validation of findings and a richer understanding of how linguistic patterns connect with broader organizational power structures (Stake, 2006). Data collection was conducted between 2024 and 2025 in three stages using open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and workplace observations.

Four participants engaged in semi-structured, in-depth interviews, each lasting about 60 minutes and conducted online. All participants were interviewed once, except Ana, who was interviewed twice. The interview guide was based on organizational justice theory and culturally specific notions of fairness within Bugis–Makassar settings. Questions aimed to uncover participants' personal experiences with workplace fairness, discrimination, and gendered organizational practices, while allowing them to share their stories in their own words. Probing questions encouraged deeper reflection on how fairness is understood and experienced within organizational and cultural contexts.

Secondly, a survey was given to 34 women working across different sectors in Makassar, Indonesia. The questionnaire collected their general thoughts on fairness, discrimination, and workplace rights fulfillment. Unlike the interviews, this survey aimed for broader, more straightforward answers without deep probing, allowing women to share their views in a structured written response. For example, they were asked: "What do you think about the fulfillment of your rights at your current job? Please tell why you believe your rights have or haven't been fulfilled fairly."

The study also incorporated the researcher's field reflections and observations from her time working as a woman in Makassar, Indonesia. These insights stemmed from daily workplace interactions, communication styles, informal chats, and recurring stories shared by colleagues and other female workers, rather than from a single event or group. She recorded these observations in reflective memos, which served as contextual data to deepen the interpretation of questionnaire and interview results.

The data were examined through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically utilizing Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach. This method views discourse not as a neutral mirror of reality but as a battleground where text, discursive practice, and broader social practice are deeply interconnected (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). This framework was chosen inten-

tionally because the study aims to see Bugis–Makassar cultural idioms not just as harmless language expressions or unchanging local traditions. Instead, it views them as active social practices: they serve as discursive tools that legitimize organizational authority, reinforce gender expectations, and shape debates over workplace justice—both supporting and challenging these claims. The analytical approach was a critical inquiry rather than simple theme extraction, conducted in multiple interconnected stages: (1) multiple readings of interview transcripts, open-ended questionnaires, and observational notes to explore the discursive landscape; (2) textual analysis examining lexical choices, evaluative language, modality, metaphors, presuppositions, and silences to understand how language constructs notions of agency, responsibility, and legitimacy (Machin & Mayr, 2023); (3) shifting to a discursive-practice level to analyze how cultural idioms are invoked, reinterpreted, or resisted across various data sources; and (4) connecting these patterns to broader social practices, such as gendered organizational culture, Bugis–Makassar moral frameworks, patron–client relations, and Indonesian workplace norms.

This study has some limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. Firstly, it focused only on women’s views and experiences regarding organizational justice and gender inequality. Consequently, it did not explore how male employees view their interactions with female colleagues, whether they see these practices as fair, or if certain gender inequalities go unnoticed by those who create or benefit from them. Secondly, although participants came from various occupational backgrounds, the study was based on a limited number of in-depth interviews, which might not reflect the full spectrum of women’s workplace experiences. Future research should include perspectives from male employees and leaders to gain a clearer understanding of how cultural values influence perceptions of fairness and gender dynamics within different organizational groups.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Co-opting cultural values in work relationships: rereading *sipakatau*, *sipakainge*, *sipakalebba*, and *siri’ na pacce*

The values of *sipakatau*, *sipakainge*, *sipakalebba*, and *siri’ na pacce* are often cited as ethical bases for respectful, caring, and harmonious work relationships. In Bugis–Makassar cultural stories, these values are celebrated as moral resources that humanize social interactions and support reciprocity. However, the research indicates that these values do not exist outside of power structures. Rather than being inherently emancipatory, they are part of a contested discursive space where their meanings are selectively used, negotiated, and reshaped within organizational hierarchies. In this setting, cultural values can be invoked to promote justice, but they can also be appropriated to enforce obedience, normalize sacrifice, and suppress criticism.

This ambivalence is evident in how most participants described workplace justice. Questionnaire responses often described justice using legal and procedural language, such as “*everything is in accordance with the employment agreement*,” “*fair to the rights and obligations of each party*,” or “*job descriptions align with the field and competencies*.” These responses suggest that fairness is mainly seen as adherence to formal rules and contracts. However, this view also limits justice to what is administratively visible, hiding how inequality can be maintained through everyday organizational practices. The same data revealed issues like non-transparent salary deductions, men using women’s restrooms, and menstrual leave that is officially regulated but inconsistently applied. These contradictions show that simply having formal recognition of rights does not guarantee justice; rights are vulnerable when filtered through informal power structures. The interviews add more depth to this contradiction by illustrating how formal rights can become unstable in daily institutional practice. Ana, a 30-year-old HR staff member, explained that menstrual leave was officially available in the company system.

“In our office system, the HRIS, when we apply for leave, there is menstrual leave. So the company actually provides one day of menstrual leave every month. Sometimes there is one day during menstruation when we really cannot move or have difficulty. But actually, it goes back to the superior. If the superior allows it, then it can be taken. But if it is not allowed, or if there is an urgent situation, we may have to use another type of leave.”

Ana’s account is important not because it reveals the absence of recognition, but because it shows how recognition is made contingent. In discourse analytic terms, the phrase “*it goes back to the superior*” repositions the supervisor as the final authority over what should have been an impersonal right. What is officially defined as entitlement is thus reframed as permission, only granted

through hierarchical approval. The problem is not just the inconsistent granting of menstrual leave but that women's bodily needs are subordinated to managerial discretion. Under this system, *sipakainge's* critical potential diminishes. If *sipakainge* is seen as mutual reminding and ethical correction, it should allow workers to remind institutions of their obligations. However, Ana's account shows that the right to remind itself is constrained by deference, urgency, and acceptability to authority. Responsibility is shifted from the institution to the worker, who must handle her bodily condition and the proper way to request recognition. This aligns with feminist organizational research indicating that equality policies often fail when informal hierarchy and managerial discretion override formal gender justice commitments (Grzelec, 2024). Under these conditions, cultural values not only support fairness but can also function as moral languages. These encourage women to ask politely, wait patiently, and accept unequal enforcement as just part of organizational order.

A similar pattern emerges in Hawa's discussion of symbolic respect and structural exclusion. Hawa, a 55-year-old lecturer, noted that women are honored in the classroom as maternal figures, but this respect does not translate into access to positions of authority. She stated, "*Cultural values are indeed upheld, but they stop at symbols. When it comes to structural positions, access remains limited.*" This illustrates how *sipakalebbi*, often seen as honoring others, can be reduced to a symbolic act that maintains hierarchy. In this context, respect does not grant power but acts as a substitute for it. Women are recognized and symbolically elevated, yet within boundaries that uphold male dominance in leadership and decision-making. Thus, symbolic differences subtly function as a form of exclusion. A similar pattern has been observed elsewhere, where highly educated women face a glass ceiling not because of a lack of competence, but due to persistent gender stereotypes that perceive them as less fit for managerial roles (Li, 2013). What matters, then, is not only whether women are respected, but how respect itself is organized discursively. In this case, *sipakalebbi* functions less as a pathway to justice than as a cultural idiom that beautifies inequality.

The contradiction is more evident with *siri' na pacce*, traditionally linked to empathy, solidarity, and shared moral responsibility. Several respondents reported long mandatory shifts without pay and the practice of deducting menstrual leave from annual leave. These findings indicate that solidarity is not always used to shield workers from exploitation. Instead, it is often invoked as a moral obligation for endurance, prompting women to sacrifice comfort, time, and rights for the benefit of the team or institution. In such cases, *siri' na pacce* loses its protective ethical meaning and becomes a discourse of false solidarity that moralizes self-sacrifice while hiding the unequal burden distribution. Moral and religious workplace practices reveal another aspect of this dynamic. Most respondents noted restrictions on wearing the hijab at certain workplaces, while Ana described an opposite but equally disciplinary practice: during *Ramadan*, all women, including non-Muslims, were required to wear the hijab to foster "*Ramadan vibes*." This is not just about dress code inconsistency but shows how women's bodies become a medium for displaying organizational morality publicly. One respondent described this as "burdensome for non-Muslim colleagues," highlighting how diversity is subordinated to an aestheticized norm of corporate piety. Here, *sipakatau*, which should recognize others' dignity and difference, is reduced to a superficial respect that does not safeguard religious diversity. Instead, women are disciplined into performing bodily signs of an approved moral order.

If these cultural values are genuinely positioned as ethical foundations of organizational life, then they should function as institutional guarantees of procedural justice and equal treatment (Hamzah et al., 2023). The results reveal a different picture: rules are still negotiable through figures of authority, speech is often subordinate to etiquette, and policy enforcement varies. Respect usually remains at a symbolic level. In this context, culture functions less as a foundation of justice and more as a moral veneer that mitigates and legitimizes unequal arrangements. From a critical discourse standpoint, the key issue isn't whether local cultural values exist in the workplace, but how they are interpreted, by whom, and with what consequences. In the cases studied—*sipakatau*, *sipakainge*, *sipakalebbi*, and *siri' na pacce*—these values don't just serve as ethical remedies to inequality. Instead, they act as discursive tools that make inequality appear moral, familiar, and harder to challenge.

3.2. Pangngaderreng: between rights, discretion, and procedures that fail to guarantee justice

Pangngaderreng in Bugis-Makassar historical values consist of *ade'*, *bicara*, *rapang*, *wari'*, and *sara'*, which are positioned as an institutional framework to ensure that working relationships are

fair (Akil et al., 2014; Hamzah et al., 2023). However, participants' experiences show that in the workplace, this framework is flexible and often favors authority figures over procedural clarity. *Ade'*, meant to be an impersonal barrier, has become a door with the boss holding the key. A right meant to be universal is confined to a space of discretion, leading workers to learn to 'read the mood' of their leaders instead of relying on clear rules. This discretionary nature of rights is clearly illustrated in Dita's account of leave procedures. While she described her workplace as relatively fair, her explanation reveals that formal entitlements are still heavily dependent on documentation, coordination, and the pursuit of productivity:

"In the labor law, there are rights to maternity leave and menstrual leave. In B, the company is open to this. If there is a female employee taking maternity leave, her rights will definitely be given. The same applies to menstrual leave. But for menstrual leave, it is better if there is a doctor's diagnosis. If it is about leave, it is not blocked or limited, as long as there is someone who can handle the work. There should be someone who can back up the work. Before taking leave, maybe the employee will be asked what tasks are pending or urgent, so it can be discussed with other co-workers."

This account shows that procedural rights are not outright denied but are made dependent on evidence, replacement, and avoiding organizational disruption. From a CDA view, words like "doctor's diagnosis," "backup," "handle," "pending," and "urgent" reveal an underlying ideological operation: the discourse on care and bodily autonomy is subordinated to neoliberal priorities of continuity and efficiency. The procedure not only safeguards the organization but also shifts responsibility onto women workers, making their reproductive rights conditional on their bodily needs being administratively credible and organizationally unobtrusive. In earlier discussion, menstrual leave exemplifies the boss's audacity regarding worker reproduction. This highlights how procedural injustice impacts women, leading to decreased job satisfaction and commitment when rules are inconsistent and reliant on discretionary performance (Choi, 2011).

Moreover, what should be a clear channel for accountability (*bicara*) has transformed into a privatized space of communication that assesses the politeness and status of the speaker rather than the actual content of the grievance. Manda, a contract medical doctor, explains how her insecure employment status inherently diminishes her voice.

"...if the risk of fairness can be measured, maybe six [out of ten]. It is lower than the private sector because the private sector is freer to express opinions..."

The position of a contract worker is marginalized due to its lack of institutional influence, making their complaints vulnerable to being ignored. Questionnaire data supports this systemic silence: many participants observed that women's contributions are often dismissed in meetings but are acknowledged when voiced by male colleagues. Without its original egalitarian purpose, the communication channel becomes a selective power tool that decides who has the legitimacy to be heard. This dynamic is best understood through the framework of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). Subtle, everyday discursive biases might seem insignificant but gradually undermine women's self-confidence and professional recognition. Research shows that these microaggressions often have a more harmful psychological effect than overt discrimination because they are insidious, persistent, and seamlessly woven into daily organizational routines (Solorzano et al., 2000).

The system that would establish institutional precedents (*rapang*) seems to be missing. Participants noted patronage, with claims that *"only staff close to leadership receive more incentives."* Without a standard system, key decisions are made individually, leading to inconsistencies that are viewed as normal. Meanwhile, *sara'*, meant as an ethical-religious safeguard, often acts as a means to regulate workers' bodies. Many female workers stated formal rights exist, but their enforcement is inconsistent. Some believe their rights are respected, yet others report issues like unmet menstrual leave, non-transparent salary deductions, or women's toilets being used by men. Some respondents even considered this normal, remarking "there is no discrimination," implying the lack of clear procedures is often accepted. Routine sexism and subtle injustices become routine, causing women to accept bias as normal (Veelen et al., 2019). This clarifies why *pangngaderreng*, if seen only as an ethical-institutional framework, cannot stay at the level of moral principle. *Ade'* and *bicara* need to be translated into clear, impersonal, and consistently applied procedures. On the surface, everything seems "fine"; however, the lack of precedent makes outcomes unpredictable and unequal. This situation often correlates with lower satisfaction or commitment and increased psychological stress among female workers, as shown in many studies (Choi, 2011; Kobayashi & Kondo, 2019).

3.3. Power relations and social mechanisms that reproduce gender inequality

Although cultural values and official rules suggest fairness, people's experiences uncover the hidden systems that control opportunities, recognition, and access. These mechanisms function quietly, via patronage, the use of "chemistry" in hiring and promotions, masculine social environments, and body standards that decide who deserves to be visible in the workplace.

Participants' accounts show that incentives and promotions are often linked to proximity to superiors rather than performance alone. Earlier discussions also suggest that incentives depend on one's closeness to leadership. This pattern echoes the *punggawa-sawi* system from South Sulawesi's history, where patrons serve as access providers and followers stay loyal in return for services (Hasbi et al., 2022). In modern organizations, the rule of law in HR has shifted to the rule of ties: while procedures exist, the final decisions rely heavily on personal relationships. This impact on women is twofold—they must be competent and also appear "worthy" to patrons whose standards are often masculine and adaptable. Such hidden filtering is clear in hiring, where the meritocracy narrative is often undermined behind the scenes. Ana, an HR staff member, highlights how gender-neutral policies are often compromised by operational biases.

"Sometimes users ask us to prefer women or men. For fieldwork, users usually prefer men. But in recruitment, I never state that the vacancy is only for men... The sorting comes later... Some users ask for someone unmarried. Usually the consideration is that if someone is married, it is more difficult for them to work overtime... Those who are still single are usually more relaxed. It is not a strict written rule, only a user request."

This account illustrates how gender bias subtly operates by avoiding explicit exclusion. Although the vacancy appears gender-neutral and creates an illusion of fairness, the actual sorting process subtly reintroduces gendered assumptions, cloaked as practical reasons such as field risk, endurance, and efficiency. Additionally, marital status is used as a stand-in for availability, framing the "ideal worker" as someone without reproductive or caregiving responsibilities. From a feminist organizational view, this perspective considers women not just as workers, but also as potential wives and mothers, with assumed domestic duties that naturally lessen their organizational commitment (Correll et al., 2007). This bias is further legitimized through the language of "chemistry." When superiors prefer candidates, they feel personally compatible with, "chemistry" acts as a sanitizing vocabulary for discretionary selection. It allows subjective, often gendered preferences—favoring those who are "easy to manage" or align with masculine norms of leadership—to operate without being named as bias (Um, 2023). Consequently, meritocracy is reduced to rhetoric; identical performance is routinely devalued when delivered by a woman (Castilla & Benard, 2010), and women who exhibit agentic traits to overcome this are frequently penalized as "unpleasant" (Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Aside from recruitment, the masculine atmosphere in the workplace physically and discursively restricts informal access for women. Participants described "male hangout spaces," like smoking areas, as the primary networking hubs where soft power—the organization's real currency—is exchanged. Women who cannot participate in these arenas are systematically disadvantaged (Charman & O'Connor, 2023; Lease et al., 2020). This exclusion is reinforced by the normalization of sexist humor, as Ana recounted regarding female sales staff:

"Sometimes the men in the office would tease them, like saying, 'If there is an older male customer, ask her to go forward, it will definitely close.' And they would respond jokingly, 'Okay, how many buttons should I open?' It became a kind of dark joke for them."

The other participants, Hawa said, "Sexual banter is normalized as joking, even though it can make female students or colleagues feel uncomfortable." The normalization of these interactions is essential from an analytical perspective. It acts as a "reverse immune system," safeguarding the masculine hierarchy instead of workers' dignity. When sexualized comments are dismissed as "just jokes," women find themselves in a difficult position: resisting them labels them as overly sensitive, while accepting them sustains the environment that permits microaggressions (Glick et al., 2018; Sue et al., 2007). In the Indonesian workplace context, harmful behavior cannot be reduced to individual temperament. A systematic review shows that work stress, workload, interpersonal conflict, and organizational culture contribute to harmful work climates (Setyawan & Asmoro, 2024). Thus, gendered humor, sexualized joking, and subtle verbal aggression should be read as part of an organizational atmosphere that normalizes unequal treatment.

Finally, these dynamics are compounded by regulations that dictate who is deemed "appropriate" for the public stage. The imposition of religious attire, such as mandatory hijab even for non-Muslims during Ramadan, transforms spirituality into corporate policy and a marker of institutional compliance (Pirmasari, 2021). Women face two main consequences: the emotional labor of maintaining propriety and the risk of exclusion if they do not conform to societal codes. In some organizations, this also influences who are placed in front-office or aesthetic roles, while strategic positions remain male-dominated. These four interconnected mechanisms—patronage, chemistry, bonding, and body regulations—create a complex system. Patronage facilitates connections, which are strengthened through bonding in masculine spaces and body regulations that determine visibility. This results in not only limited opportunities but also psychosocial pressure. When verbal abuse or discomfort occurs, formal channels are seldom used due to social sanctions and reliance on patronage networks. Laws like Indonesia's Minister of Manpower Decree No. 88 of 2023 and Minister of Women's Empowerment Regulation No. 1 of 2020 promote safe, inclusive workplaces.

3.4. Body, time, and profit logic: negated social reproduction

While workplace justice is frequently seen as about rules and compliance, participants reveal that the core issue is how women's reproductive labor is privatized—locked into their bodies and schedules—and then dismissed, driven by profit motives that focus on hours, targets, and mobility without adequate compensation. The Bugis-Makassar moral economy (*sipakatau, sipakainge, sipakalebbi, and siri' na pacce*) should offer an ethical framework promoting dignity, empathy, and respect. Yet, in reality, these values are often used as cultural slogans that fail to influence organizational policies.

The narratives from the questionnaire confirm these contradictions, such as: *"We are required to work long shifts if targets are not met, without additional pay,"* wrote one private sector worker, while another complained that *"work that should be done by men has to be done by women."* This contrast between ethical language and profit calculations is evidence that women's bodies, along with their reproductive work, remain a hidden pillar of productivity (Hamzah et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2022). Research reveals a simple but striking fact: women who work full-time still spend an average of 12 hours more per week on domestic work than men (Moyser & Burlock, 2018). This double pressure is not just a statistic, but is reflected in burnout, psychological distress, and lower job satisfaction (Allen et al., 2000). This disconnect between ethics and profit is also evident in the insufficient or missing basic facilities. Some respondents cited poor lactation rooms, unsegregated restrooms that made "women uncomfortable," or the hazards of fieldwork without proper safety measures. Prioritizing profit while ignoring reproductive needs not only breaches the *siri' na pacce* ethic but also fosters a form of accumulation that physically impacts women. The absence of formal support—and the mixed feelings about organizational "care"—are well illustrated by Ana, an HR staff member, who described her company's stance on mothers:

"One reason older employees stay is that the office is very permissive if they have children. For example, 'Sir, my child needs immunization,' or 'Can I bring my child to the office because no one can take care of them?' The office is permissive... That is why many women who are already married remain loyal... [But] Maybe more facilities are needed. For example... a daycare, or maybe a lactation room. My friends who are breastfeeding use an apron. I feel sorry for them... Because if children are brought to the office every day, some co-workers may feel uncomfortable."

This narrative highlights a hidden form of structural violence masked as benevolence. Managerial "permissiveness" acts as a disciplinary tool: it maintains worker loyalty and compliance while shifting the entire social reproduction burden onto individuals. An example illustrating social reproduction theory is a worker breastfeeding behind an apron in an office without a dedicated lactation room. This organization depends on reproductive labor to sustain its workforce but treats these needs as private inconveniences rather than institutional duties. Care remains informal, situational, and relies on interpersonal tolerance, yet it doesn't have to stay that way. Hawa, a university lecturer, demonstrates a contrasting case where reproductive needs are structurally supported.

"In our campus, we manage a PAUD [Early Childhood Education] inside the campus. It is not only for employees or lecturers, but also for people from outside whose workplaces are near the campus. Each faculty also has a room that can be used like a place for breastfeeding, feeding children, or giving comfort to children while"

their mothers are teaching. There is cooperation among women lecturers. For example, if one lecturer is teaching and her child is sleeping, another lecturer will help look after the child."

This contrast holds analytical importance as it shows that reproductive needs can be embedded within institutional structures instead of relying on individual negotiations. From the Bugis–Makassar moral viewpoint, *siri' na pacce* (shame and empathy) needs a fundamental redefinition. It should extend beyond interpersonal empathy to foster institutional shame when women's bodily and caregiving needs are ignored in personal improvisation. Without institutionalization, empathy stays purely emotional and lacks structural support.

At the macro-policy level, the framework of state protection continues to implicitly support this negation. Laws like Law No. 13 of 2003 and the Omnibus Law (Law No. 11 of 2020) promote labor market flexibility, which, without social safeguards, mainly benefits capital extraction rather than worker protection. The ongoing lack of the Domestic Workers Protection Bill further shows how care work remains hidden in the informal sector's exploitative shadows. To address this, legal reforms must establish clear, non-negotiable standards—such as automatic protections for menstrual or lactation leave—removing managerial discretion. Complaint systems should be officially documented as required by Minister of Manpower Decree No. 88 of 2023, and minutes must be kept for all promotions to facilitate thorough gender bias audits (Castilla & Benard, 2010).

The Bugis-Makassar moral economy is more than just a cultural symbol; it can serve as a mechanism to balance profit motives. *Sipakatau* upholds dignity as a guiding policy principle, while *sipakainge* encourages feedback that fosters structural improvements, not just evaluating manners. Meanwhile, *sipakalebbi* promotes appreciation through value sharing and support for reproductive needs, like daycare, lactation rooms, and flexible schedules. Without integrating these practices, rights risk remaining superficial, with women quietly shouldering hidden costs of productivity. The Bugis-Makassar moral economy should be recognized for its potential to support fairer economic and social outcomes, rather than regarded only as cultural tradition.

3.5. Translating nable values into institutional practice

Attempts to resolve the deadlock between noble values and office practices must go beyond merely adding equality jargon to SOPs or policies on paper. The culturally respected values of *sipakatau*, *sipakainge*, and *sipakalebbi* in Makassar, Indonesia, should be transformed into concrete operational standards that can be measured, assessed, and held accountable (Bumbungan et al., 2022). First, treat *sipakatau*, *sipakainge*, and *sipakalebbi* as specific metrics rather than broad teachings. Measure how many workers utilize menstrual or maternity leave, lactation breaks, and flexible hours; regularly announce follow-up actions to address complaints; allocate a clear budget for care facilities like lactation rooms and cross-company daycare. Second, elevate *siri' na pacce* to an institutional value, not just worker politeness. Organizations should feel ashamed, not workers who are expected to be understanding, when overtime remains unpaid or deductions lack transparency. Genuine solidarity depends on rules that enable workers to take emergency family leave without risking negative impacts on their performance (Rahman et al., 2022).

Third, *pangngaderreng* should be implemented as a governance framework. *Ade'* functions as an automatic trigger for rights such as 3+3 months of maternity leave, lactation, and post-miscarriage rest, without needing approval from 'superiors'. *Bicara* provides a safe channel for complaints and is linked to RP3 and anti-violence SOPs. *Rapang* is shown through written precedents for recruitment, placement, and promotion. *Wari'* is demonstrated by management's courage to address favoritism. Meanwhile, *sara'* is protected as freedom of religion, though not expressed through religious uniforms. Fourth, the paradox of meritocracy must be addressed practically. Preferences like 'better if male' or 'female as long as unmarried' should be replaced with ability-based criteria such as mobility, certification, or safety equipment support. Recruitment and promotion processes need to be data-driven audits, so that 'chemistry' is no longer used to conceal bias (Beasley et al., 2019). Supervisors also need to be trained to ensure that women's voices are heard in forums, rather than only being taken seriously when repeated by male colleagues.

However, local values can lead to real change when they are embedded in institutional structures. Hawa's account is particularly significant because it shows that gender justice becomes more apparent when women's leadership, care infrastructure, and peer solidarity support and strengthen each other. As she explained,

"Almost seventy-five percent of our employees and lecturers are women, so the enthusiasm to cooperate and help one another is motivated by support from leadership, which at that

time was also female. At present, our foundation chair is also female. So, it is not too difficult to fight for these things because many of the leaders on our campus are women, and women's rights have already been taken into account."

This account illustrates that organizational culture is not merely an abstract moral climate; it is influenced by those who hold authority, whose concerns are recognized, and whether care is considered structurally important. Hawa's second account also highlights that in her institution, leadership opportunities are based on competence rather than gender essentialism.

"In my campus, I have never seen that kind of difference. It is more about competence between women and men. If the woman is more competent, then the woman is recommended. In my campus, for four periods, the Rector was a woman. Only recently was leadership transferred to a male leader. In our university, what matters is ability. If a woman is capable, then she is chosen; if a man is capable, then he is chosen."

Analytically, this does not imply that the organization is devoid of power; rather, it indicates that local values are neither inherently oppressive nor emancipatory. Their impact relies on how they are expressed through institutional procedures, leadership, and daily practices.

Fifth, therefore, patronage must be broken down structurally. Conflicts of interest in evaluations should be banned, assessment panels rotated, and incentives openly disclosed based on performance metrics, not favoritism. Networking spaces should also be restructured: pantries should be smoke-free, and informal access should no longer be based on masculine circles or after-hours bonding (Charman & O'Connor, 2023).

Finally, the global concept of 'gender equality' should be connected to local idioms. For instance, the Buginese proverb *mallempa uruwane'e majjujung mangkuraiyye* and the Makassarese *al-lembara burannea ajjujung baineyya* both suggest that men carry responsibilities while women support them. This highlights the complementary roles of men and women, making policies feel more familiar and easier to adopt (Wardihan et al., 2020). However, as feminist organizational literature shows, organizations are not fundamentally gender neutral; structures, processes, and work cultures often favor masculinity by placing more value on competitive-assertive traits, while discrediting the collaborative and empathetic traits associated with women (Calas & Smircich, 2006). By incorporating local idioms that emphasize role balance, policies can counteract these structural biases without losing cultural resonance.

4. Conclusion

This article explores how four Bugis–Makassar cultural values—*sipakatau*, *sipakainge*, *sipakalebbi*, and *siri'na pacce*—are used in modern work settings. Instead of acting as fixed morals, they serve as contested discourses. We observed that rather than ensuring fairness, these values are often adapted by managers to emphasize compliance, sacrifice, and symbolic recognition over real equality. The traditional institutional framework—*pangngaderreng*, *ade'*, *bicara*, *rapang*, *wari'*, and *sara'*—which once protected justice, has become less firm and is increasingly influenced by the authority of superiors. These findings show that cultural values, when taken out of their institutional context, can unintentionally reinforce the inequalities they were meant to challenge.

We contend that the challenges faced by women in Makassar's workplaces—such as limited access to maternity leave, daily microaggressions, promotion practices influenced by patron-client logics, and restrictions on women's bodies and schedules—should not be viewed as isolated issues. Instead, they reflect a broader discursive environment where gendered hierarchies are normalized. This aligns with wider research on microaggressions, meritocracy paradoxes, and the glass ceiling, which show how seemingly neutral systems are shaped by societal norms of masculinity and femininity. In the Bugis–Makassar context, a distinctive aspect is how local moral values are simultaneously celebrated as cultural pride and used to justify unequal practices.

This discursive analysis presents three key points. First, efforts to advance gender equality must be intertwined with the socio-cultural factors influencing institutional practices. Instead of adopting vague global policies, reforms should articulate gender justice through culturally meaningful expressions like *sipakatau* or *mallempa uruwane'e majjujung mangkuraiyye*, making equality feel like a moral duty rooted in shared values rather than an external mandate. Second, workplace justice needs to be re-politicized: gender disparities are not just about individual mindsets or organizational dynamics but involve power structures embedded in procedures, ranks, and daily interactions. Viewing women as both compliant employees and agents facing systemic obstacles could turn symbolic change into genuine structural reform. Third, existing resources—such as cultural norms of solidarity, fairness principles, or new institutional tools like RP3 and anti-harassment policies—can be leveraged as alternative discourses to oppose the normalization of inequality.

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AI Declaration

The authors used ChatGPT and Scite.ai to assist with language editing and literature exploration during manuscript preparation. All final interpretations, analyses, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, investigation, and writing—original draft preparation: ASH; methodology and formal analysis: JS. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Framing workplace justice this way, we support scholarships that avoid reducing gender equity to mere technical solutions. Instead, we show how the interplay between global gender equality narratives and local cultural expressions can create different visions of fairness-ones that acknowledge women's labor and also hold institutions accountable to their declared values

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