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Barriers to Career Development for Early-Career Women: Evidence from Indonesia's Service Industry

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ABSTRACT ENGLISH:

Despite gender equality being a global goal (SDG 5), women continue to face systemic barriers in the workplace, particularly the "broken rung" phenomenon at the early career stage which limits their vertical mobility. This study aims to identify, rank, and analyse the career progression barriers perceived by entry-level female employees in the Indonesian service sector. This study employs a quantitative approach using a survey method. Data were collected from 382 female respondents aged 21-29 years working in the service sector via an online questionnaire. Data analysis was conducted using One-Sample T-test to test barrier significance, Kendall's *Coefficient of Concordance* for ranking, and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to group barrier dimensions. The results indicate that 14 out of the 20 tested factors are significant career barriers. The top three perceived barriers are a normalized culture of sexism, a mismatch between individual needs and organizational offers (needs-supply fit), and the demand for a proactive personality. Factor analysis grouped these barriers into two main dimensions: Organizational and Structural Barriers, and Individual and Dual Role Barriers. These findings indicate that cultural and structural barriers are more dominant than relational ones. Consequently, organizations are advised to implement zero-tolerance policies regarding sexism and provide flexible work arrangements to support the retention and career advancement of women in Indonesia.

Keywords: Career progression, Women, Service sector, Career barriers, Sexism, Broken rung, SDG 5

ABSTRACT INDONESIAN:

Kesetaraan gender merupakan tujuan global (SDG 5), namun perempuan masih menghadapi hambatan sistemik di tempat kerja, khususnya fenomena "broken rung" (anak tangga yang patah) pada tahap awal karier yang membatasi mobilitas vertikal mereka. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi, memeringkat, dan menganalisis hambatan kemajuan karier yang dirasakan oleh karyawan perempuan tingkat awal di sektor jasa Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan metode survei. Data dikumpulkan dari 382 responden perempuan berusia 21-29 tahun yang bekerja di sektor jasa melalui kuesioner daring. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan uji-t satu sampel (*One-Sample T-test*) untuk menguji signifikansi hambatan, *Koefisien Konkordansi Kendall* untuk pemeringkatan, dan *Analisis Faktor Eksploratori* (EFA) untuk mengelompokkan dimensi hambatan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa 14 dari 20 faktor yang diuji merupakan hambatan karier yang signifikan. Tiga hambatan utama yang dirasakan adalah budaya seksisme yang dinormalisasi, ketidaksesuaian antara kebutuhan individu dan penawaran organisasi (*needs-supply fit*), serta tuntutan akan kepribadian proaktif. Analisis faktor mengelompokkan hambatan-hambatan ini ke dalam dua dimensi utama: *Hambatan Organisasi dan Struktural*, serta *Hambatan Individu dan Peran Ganda*. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa hambatan budaya dan struktural lebih dominan dibandingkan hambatan relasional. Oleh karena itu, organisasi disarankan untuk menerapkan kebijakan toleransi nol terhadap seksisme dan menyediakan pengaturan kerja yang fleksibel guna mendukung retensi serta kemajuan karier perempuan di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: Kemajuan karier, Perempuan, Sektor jasa, Hambatan karir, Seksisme, Broken rung, SDG 5

Introduction

Gender equality is a fundamental element of sustainable development and a global priority through SDG 5 (Hepp et al., 2019). However, gender inequality in the workplace persists due to social norms, structural biases, and organizational practices that disadvantage women (Saenz et al., 2025). The "glass ceiling" phenomenon illustrates how invisible barriers limit women's access to managerial or leadership positions (Kokkranikal et al., 2024). Even when women's ambitions equal those of men, their expectations for achieving leadership roles tend to be lower due to the perception of structural barriers (Storvik & Abrahamsen, 2022).

In Indonesia, these challenges are amplified by patriarchal socio-cultural structures. The female labour force participation rate is only 54%, significantly lagging behind men at 83% (Susapto, 2024). Cultural norms and domestic expectations restrict women's mobility in developing their careers (Aspinall et al., 2021). Furthermore, discriminatory practices in recruitment still occur, including requirements related to age, gender, and physical appearance that disproportionately disadvantage women (Ningrum et al., 2020). Within the work environment, the dominance of male homosocial networks further narrows women's access to strategic information and promotion opportunities (McLaren et al., 2019). Discrimination regarding women's leadership capabilities also persists (Hilmiana & Alviani, 2023).

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) provides an essential framework for understanding how organizational practices shape career opportunities and barriers for employees. Based on the *Resource-Based View* (RBV) perspective, human capital is seen as a strategic asset capable of creating sustainable competitive advantage when managed inclusively and aligned with organizational goals (Barney, 1991; Collings et al., 2021). Research shows that SHRM practices not only affect organizational performance but also determine how equitably career opportunities are distributed among employee groups, including women who often face systemic barriers (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024; Patrick & Kumar, 2012). In Indonesia, the effectiveness of SHRM depends on the alignment of organizational culture and the quality of recruitment, training, and development processes (Jashari & Kutllovci, 2020; Kismono & Pradana Ramadista, 2020).

Conceptually, career development is understood as a continuous process influenced by skills, experience, and organizational support (Rachmad, 2026). However, in practice, access to these development opportunities remains uneven for certain demographic groups. In some developing country contexts, women are still perceived as less competent or less significant, thereby limiting their visibility in decision-making processes (Khalid et al., 2023). Ambiguity in career paths in many organizations further exacerbates this inequality, especially when supervisor support is inconsistently provided (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2017).

Gender equality in the workplace is a fundamental aspect of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which emphasizes the elimination of discrimination and the increase of female representation in decision-making positions (Valduga et al., 2023). However, structural barriers such as unpaid domestic work, limited access to leadership positions, and gender-based violence remain significant challenges in increasing female participation (Castro Núñez et al., 2020; Lima & Guedes, 2024). Traditional approaches like "fixing women," which blame

women's lack of ambition or confidence, have been criticized for ignoring systemic root causes embedded in masculine organizational cultures (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024).

Various studies have identified gender-based career barriers within organizational contexts. *Role Congruity Theory* explains that women are often considered unsuitable for leadership roles because social norms associate leadership with masculine traits (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Bias in performance evaluation, penalties for women with domestic responsibilities (motherhood penalty), and limited access to informal networks are factors hindering promotion opportunities (Rohim et al., 2024). A lack of role models and the "imposter syndrome" phenomenon further weaken women's career aspirations (Forson et al., 2025). More systemic barriers such as the "glass ceiling" and "prove-it-again bias" show that women are often required to prove their competence repeatedly despite having the same qualifications as men (Baiduri et al., 2023; Iradukunda et al., 2021).

A systematic empirical framework regarding female career barriers was developed by Agyekum et al. (2024), identifying 20 barrier factors grouped into five dimensions: leadership and human capital, discrimination, career planning, multiple role conflict, and recruitment challenges. This perspective is reinforced by Tabassum & Nayak (2021), who emphasize the role of gender stereotypes, and findings by Eshete & Birbirssa (2024), showing that gender bias is often embedded in HR practices themselves. In Indonesia, research by Tarigan et al., (2022) highlight that young workers in the service sector increasingly value self-development opportunities and supportive work environments, while Soekiman (2024) asserts the importance of digital competence as a new requirement for entry-level workers, which, if not facilitated, could create new forms of barriers for certain groups, including women.

While existing literature provides a strong theoretical and empirical basis, a clear research gap exists. Most studies focus on women at managerial levels or specific industries, while quantitative evidence regarding career barriers at the entry level in the Indonesian service sector remains limited. Yet, it is these early-stage barriers—often termed as "broken rung"—that heavily determine long-term career trajectories.

While research on female career barriers is abundant, most focuses on the "glass ceiling" or women at managerial levels and is dominated by qualitative approaches (Arzuliany & Abdullah, 2024; Iskandar, 2022) and also women's double burden to balance domestic and professional duties (Salsabila & Mubaroka, 2026). However, barriers at the early career stage, or the "broken rung," are critical factors that heavily determine future career trajectories (Septiana & Haryanti, 2023). Barriers such as stereotypes, domestic burdens, and limited access to self-development are highly influential at the entry level (Viratama et al., 2025). This research gap is increasingly relevant in the service sector, characterized by high demands for emotional labour. "Surface acting" practices have been proven to increase burnout and affect the career progression of women (Šadl & Osolnik, 2023). Moreover, career paths that are often less structured can slow vertical mobility. Quantitative studies capable of empirically mapping barriers at the entry level in this sector remain very limited.

Therefore, this study aims to identify and rank the factors hindering the career progression of entry-level female employees in the Indonesian service industry. By focusing on the early career stage, this research fills a vital gap in the literature and provides an

empirical foundation for organizations, HRM practitioners, and policymakers to design more effective and contextual interventions to support equal career opportunities for women. This study offers a novel contribution by extending the multidimensional framework of [Agyekum et al., \(2024\)](#) to a population and context that have received limited scholarly attention: entry-level female employees in Indonesia's service industry. Rather than examining career barriers in a general workforce context, this study specifically investigates and prioritizes the barriers encountered during the early career stage, thereby generating contextual insights that enhance the theoretical and practical understanding of women's career progression in developing economies.

Method

This study employed a quantitative research approach to collect and analyse numerical data to address the research objectives ([Ghozali, 2025](#)). Specifically, the study adopted a descriptive-exploratory design to identify and rank the career progression barriers experienced by entry-level female employees in the Indonesian service sector. The descriptive component enabled the systematic measurement of participants' perceptions regarding various career progression barriers, while the exploratory component facilitated the investigation of underlying factors within a relatively underexplored research context. This design provides a structured and objective approach to generating empirical evidence on the career advancement challenges faced by entry-level women in the Indonesian service industry. In addition, descriptive statistics were performed to describe respondent characteristics and the distribution of mean values for each barrier. Additionally, descriptive statistics were performed to describe respondent characteristics and the distribution of mean values for each barrier. The research variables consist of 20 career barrier factors adapted from [Agyekum et al., \(2024\)](#). Each factor is measured using a single Likert scale statement (1–5). The instrument was tested through validity testing (*Pearson Product Moment*) and reliability testing (Cronbach's Alpha ≥ 0.60).

The study population consists of women aged 21–29 working in entry-level positions in the Indonesian service sector. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling based on inclusion criteria (female, working in the service sector, ≤ 5 years of experience). The minimum sample size was calculated using the *Slovin formula* ($e = 0.05$), resulting in a requirement of at least 340 respondents, with a target of 370–400. Questionnaires were distributed via social media, corporate emails, and professional networks. Responses were downloaded in CSV format for cleaning, coding, and analysis in *Microsoft Excel* and *SPSS 30*.

The data analysis process consisted of three sequential stages to identify, prioritize, and classify career progression barriers experienced by entry-level female employees in the Indonesian service sector. In the first stage, a one-sample t-test was conducted to determine the statistical significance of each identified barrier using a test value of 3.5. Barriers were considered significant when the one-tailed significance value was below 0.05, and only those meeting this criterion were included in the subsequent analysis stages. In the second stage,

the significant barriers were ranked based on their mean scores to determine their relative level of importance. The degree of agreement among respondents regarding the ranking of barriers was further assessed using *Kendall's coefficient of concordance* (W), supported by the Chi-square statistics to determine whether the observed agreement was statistically significant. In the final stage, *Exploratory Factor Analysis* (EFA) was employed to identify the underlying dimensions of the 20 career progression barrier variables. The suitability of the dataset for factor analysis was first assessed through the *Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin* (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy, with values of ≥ 0.60 indicating acceptable factorability, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, which required a significant result ($p < 0.05$). Factor extraction was subsequently performed using *Principal Component Analysis* (PCA), followed by Varimax rotation to enhance interpretability and achieve a clearer factor structure.

Result and Discussion

This study successfully collected data from a total of 426 respondents. After a rigorous screening process based on inclusion criteria, 44 respondents were excluded, resulting in a final valid sample of 382 respondents ($N=382$). All respondents (100%) were female, consistent with the study's focus. The demographic characteristics show maturity and experience levels adequate for objectively assessing career barriers. The majority of respondents fall into the 25-29 age group (60.2%) and have a tenure of more than 3 years (32.5%). Further, descriptive analysis revealed that the average age of respondents is 25 years (Mean = 25; SD = 2.5), indicating they are in the early career stage. Meanwhile, the average tenure was recorded at 2.4 years (Mean = 2.4; SD = 1.3). The relatively small standard deviations indicate high data homogeneity, confirming that respondents have stable and relevant experience levels to identify structural career barriers.

Table 1. Barrier Significance Test

Items	Mean	Mean >3,5	Sig. One-Sided p	p<0,05	Significance
[B01] Lack of respect for females	3.468	No	0.317	No	Unsignificant
[B02] Discrimination during promotion	3.507	Yes	0.453	No	Unsignificant
[B03] Problems resulting from all forms of gender stereotypes	3.725	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant
[B04] Multiple role conflict	3.911	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant
[B05] No transparency during recruitment and selection	3.822	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant
[B06] Preclusion from formal and informal networks	3.549	Yes	0.216	No	Unsignificant
[B07] Working conditions purely masculine	3.541	Yes	0.264	No	Unsignificant
[B08] Discrimination during the allocation of positions	3.761	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant

[B09] Prevalent culture of sexism	3.979	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant
[B10] Inadequate recognition of work carried out	3.696	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant
[B11] Facing career penalties	3.832	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant
[B12] Individual's proactive personality	3.924	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant
[B13] Poor career aspirations	3.719	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant
[B14] Lack of career planning	3.379	No	0.041	Yes	Unsignificant
[B15] Lack of mentoring	3.751	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant
[B16] Lack of supervisor support	3.492	No	0.449	No	Unsignificant
[B17] Absence of women in leadership position	3.717	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant
[B18] Human capital factors	3.607	Yes	0.049	Yes	Significant
[B19] Person-Organisation fit	3.712	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant
[B20] Needs-supply fit	3.9607	Yes	<.001	Yes	Significant

Based on table 1, the results show that 14 out of the 20 factors are significant barriers. This indicates that most challenges identified in the literature are tangibly felt by the respondents. Conversely, 6 other factors were declared non-significant because (1) their mean values were below the threshold of 3.5 (e.g., "Lack of career planning" and "Lack of respect") or (2) their probability values ($p > 0.05$) did not meet statistical significance criteria despite means slightly above 3.5 (including "Blocked access to networks" and "Masculine work environment").

Agreement Test and *Barrier Ranking* in table 2 show the priority order of factors based on Mean Rank. Analysis reveals that managerial and structural aspects are primary concerns, with "Lack of career planning" (8.35) and "Lack of recruitment transparency" (8.28) appearing as top variables. This contrasts with internal individual factors such as "Proactive personality," which ranked lowest (6.88). To measure the consistency of respondent perceptions, Kendall's W was used, resulting in a value of 0.017 and Chi-Square = 82.397 ($p < 0.05$). While the small W value suggests weak agreement, the significant Chi-Square proves a systematic association in the rankings, meaning the priority order is not random.

Pre-requisite tests showed the data were highly suitable for analysis (KMO = 0.964, Bartlett's $p < 0.001$). Extraction using *Principal Component Analysis* (PCA) and Varimax rotation reduced the career barrier items into two significant main dimensions: *Organizational and Structural Barriers*. This consists of variables from the external environment, management policies, and corporate culture. The strongest indicators are [B10] *Inadequate recognition* (0.771), [B05] *Lack of recruitment transparency* (0.766), and [B08] *Task discrimination* (0.734).

Table 2. Agreement Test and Barrier Ranking

Criteria	Mean Rank
[B14] Lack of career planning	8.35
[B05] No transparency during recruitment and selection	8.28
[B19] Person-Organization fit	8.28
[B02] Discrimination during promotion	7.88
[B16] Lack of supervisor support	7.88
[B08] Discrimination during the allocation of positions	7.75
[B03] Problems resulting from all forms of gender stereotypes	7.74
[B17] Absence of women in leadership position	7.74
[B07] Working conditions purely masculine	7.59
[B04] Multiple role conflict	7.41
[B18] Human capital factors	7.41
[B01] Lack of respect for females	7.35
[B15] Lack of mentoring	7.35
[B13] Poor career aspirations	7.31
[B09] Prevalent culture of sexism	7.18
[B10] Inadequate recognition of work carried out	7.14
[B06] Preclusion from formal and informal networks	7.09
[B20] Needs-supply fit	7.09
[B11] Facing career sanctions	7.07
[B12] Individual's proactive personality	6.88

The *Exploratory Factor Analysis* (EFA) in table 3, identified two underlying dimensions of career progression barriers among entry-level female employees in the Indonesian service sector.

Table 3. Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis

Criteria	Component 1	Component 2
[B10] Inadequate recognition of work carried out	0.771	
[B05] No transparency during recruitment and selection	0.766	
[B08] Discrimination during the allocation of positions	0.734	
[B18] Human capital factors	0.729	
[B19] Person-Organisation fit	0.702	
[B03] Problems resulting from all forms of gender stereotypes	0.700	
[B20] Matching individual needs with the offerings of the organization	0.670	0.409
[B09] Prevalent culture of sexism	0.648	
[B17] Absence of women in leadership position	0.600	0.416
[B13] Poor career aspirations		0.767
[B12] Individual's proactive personality		0.763
[B15] Lack of mentoring	0.411	0.609
[B11] Facing career sanctions		0.539
[B04] Multiple role conflict	0.432	0.531

The first dimension, *Organizational and Structural Barriers*, which includes inadequate recognition, lack of recruitment transparency, and task discrimination as the strongest indicators, suggests that organizational practices exert a greater influence on women's career advancement than individual characteristics. This finding aligns with [Agyekum et al., \(2024\)](#), who proposed that organizational policies, workplace culture, and management practices constitute the primary external barriers limiting women's career progression. Likewise, previous studies argue that invisible organizational constraints, often conceptualized as the labyrinth and glass ceiling, continue to restrict women's access to career opportunities despite formal commitments to gender equality ([Ballakrishnen et al., 2019](#); [Khan et al., 2025](#)). In the Indonesian service sector, where hierarchical structures and managerial discretion remain prevalent, these organizational barriers may become more pronounced, emphasizing that career progression is shaped not only by individual capability but also by institutional conditions.

The second dimension, *Individual and Double Role Barriers*, encompasses poor career aspirations and proactive personality, reflecting the interaction between personal attributes and work–family role demands. This reflects internal challenges and role conflicts. This factor is dominated by psychological aspects and motivation, with high loadings on [B13] Poor career aspirations (0.767) and [B12] Proactive personality (0.763). While these factors may appear to originate from the individual, *Social Cognitive Career Theory* by [Lent et al., \(1994\)](#) suggest that career aspirations and proactive career behaviours are influenced by environmental support and barriers rather than solely by personal motivation. Similarly, *Role Conflict Theory* by [Kahn et al., \(1964\)](#) explain that competing demands between work and family responsibilities can constrain women's career development and reduce their willingness to pursue advancement opportunities. The emergence of this factor therefore indicates that individual-level barriers should not be interpreted independently of the organizational context. Instead, the findings suggest that organizational and structural constraints may indirectly weaken women's career aspirations and proactive behaviours, reinforcing the multidimensional perspective proposed by [Agyekum et al., \(2024\)](#). Consequently, effective interventions should address both organizational practices and individual career development to reduce career progression barriers for entry-level female employees.

Conclusion

This research successfully addresses the fundamental question of female career stagnation in Indonesia's service sector by proving that the "broken rung" phenomenon at the entry level is a systemic issue, not merely a deficit of individual competence. Statistical analysis confirms that a normalized culture of sexism and organizational facility mismatches (particularly work flexibility) are the most crucial obstacles limiting career progression. This emphasizes that even when women possess equal ambition and qualifications, rigid organizational structures and biased cultures remain "invisible walls." These findings shift the narrative from individual empowerment to the urgency of structural reform. Without interventions in organizational culture and work-life balance policies, progress toward achieving gender equality (SDG 5)

will remain slow. Therefore, this study recommends a managerial paradigm shift: from "fixing women" to "fixing the system." Concrete steps include zero-tolerance policies toward sexism, better career path transparency, and the provision of genuine flexible work options as solutions for the double role conflicts experienced by entry-level workers.

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