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The battle of female chefs in facing dominant social norms

INTAN YUSAN SEPTIANI and MIA SISCWATI

ABSTRACT
Many traditions in the world require women to master cooking at an early age. Cooking in a traditional kitchen (domestic area) – always attached to women – is often interpreted as an obligation and a form of women’s service to their families, spouses, children, and other people in their lives. Hence, cooking in the domestic space is an undefined job. When these activities shift to a public space, it becomes a profession, with a professional work area, and the workers are predicated professional chefs. Ironically, the professional kitchen, which people assume, could easily be run by women, is controlled and dominated by men. This study focuses on the experience of female chefs in professional kitchens, noting the problems they face and often hinder their career paths, explaining their low numbers. This qualitative study is a feminist perspective with data collection methods from in-depth interviews with female chefs in professional kitchens. The analysis of the primary data was conducted by applying the theory of gender at work developed by Aruna Rao. Our research shows that female chefs face multiple barriers working in professional kitchens: both subtle and overt discrimination, various types of oppression, conscious or otherwise, influencing their decisions when choosing between work and family. This study shows that during their careers female chefs frequently face various gender-based obstacles arising from ability, resources and support, social norms, and deep structures, as well as rules and policy.

KEYWORDS:
Cooking, professional kitchens, female chefs, gender at work.

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1. INTRODUCTION

For many people, women cooking and attending to culinary duties in the kitchen is an everyday assumption. No wonder women are referred to as the “queen” of the domestic kitchen, which we refer to as the traditional kitchen. However, this assumption tends to be eclipsed when women’s culinary endeavours are carried out in a professional kitchen (public domain). It is men who dominate the professional kitchen.

Women experience many problems when they become chefs in professional kitchens, and hence they are still a minority in this sphere. This is reinforced by the statements of many male chefs who work in a professional kitchen that it is often considered a difficult place for women. The opinions of professional male chefs reveal that women are considered uncompetitive and unable to match the physical stamina of men in professional kitchens. Women are thought unlikely to be able to work a dozen hours at a stretch in a professional kitchen. They are considered be unable to lift heavy cooking equipment (pots, pans, and various other kitchen utensils). Women, as long as they are socially constructed and stigmatized as weak and passive figures, are also considered unsuitable to work in a professional kitchen dominated by an image of violence, rudeness, pressure, and a high risk of work accidents.

This opinion is reflected in the fact that there are far fewer women than men in the world of the professional kitchen. The dominance of male chefs is not only numerical. It is also visible in the non-involvement of female chefs in many national and international culinary activities, the achievements of female chefs in various cooking competitions held at home and abroad, and in the achievement of strategic positions or positions based on career paths in the world of work or in professional organizations.

The stark difference in the number of female and male chefs is mentioned globally in the article “Why are there so few women chefs?”. In this article, the Office of National Statistics states that, out of 250,000 professional chefs in the UK, only 18.5 percent or around 46,000 are women (Suze Olbrich 2016). In Indonesia, based on data from the largest domestic chef organization, the Indonesian Chef Association (ICA), up to the end of 2020, there were around 4,300 ICA members (active and passive) consisting of professional chefs, teaching staff in the culinary fields, hotels, culinary entrepreneurs, and culinary observers, of whom male members formed 80 percent; therefore female members represent less than 20 percent. According to the ICA Vice-President for Organization and Membership (2017-2022 period), Chef Hari, it is still very rare for female chefs to occupy strategic positions or positions in the largest chef organization in Indonesia.\(^1\)

\(^1\) This article was developed from the MA thesis of Intan Yusan Septiani entitled “The Dilemma of Female Chefs in Professional Kitchens: A Study of the Experiences of Female Chefs in Building Capabilities and Support to Face Social Norms and Deep Social Structures that Hinder Career Development”, examined at the School of Strategic and Global Studies, Universitas Indonesia in 2021. The thesis can be accessed at https://lib.ui.ac.id/detail?id=20522281&lokasi=lokal.

\(^2\) Interview with Chef Hari, June 2020.
Other data have been obtained from a different chef organization in Indonesia, the ACP (Association of Culinary Professionals) Indonesia. In quite a few international-scale culinary events, the number of female chefs acting as judges in cooking competitions, for instance, SIAL Interfood, was only seven; the other 24 being male chefs. The same anomaly was found at the Ubud Food Festival culinary event in Bali and the Jakarta Culinary Festival in Jakarta. Presenters or resource persons who are female culinary figures in international culinary events amount to only one-third (Patresia Kirnandita 2017).

Another reason for the low number of female chefs involved in the world of professional kitchen work was noted in the article “The reason for more male chefs than females” (Windratie 2015). Many female chefs who were originally very successful in the culinary world, eventually had to capitulate and surrender to their gender and their domestic responsibilities. This condition is often imposed on women by social constructions, especially after they marry and have children (Windratie 2015).

2. Literature review

The gender roles of women and men, which are socially interchangeable, do not automatically free women from oppression, discrimination, marginalization, stigmatization, and subordination in the workplace. One of gender roles which has been attached to women for a long time relates to activities in domestic area or traditional kitchens, including cooking and baking.

In the domestic sphere, the purpose of a woman’s cooking is often believed to service to the entire family (if not or unmarried), husband (if married), children (if they have children), and often other people who visit the house. In other words, cooking is considered a non-prestigious household task. This is reinforced by the location of the kitchen is at the back of the entire house. Activities in traditional kitchens are always considered dirty, smelly, messy, and unfit for public display.

From feminist sociological paradigm, the emphasis on “cooking” as a domestic activity attached to women tends to be positioned as a job often debated in the sexual division of labour theory (Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr 1988). In many studies, women are positioned as providers of food for others, despite having difficult connections with the meaning of enjoying their own cooked food (Charles and Kerr 1988).

The extent to which women cook, what is cooked, and what they eat is included in forms of service (Joanne Hollows 2003). As a result, women in traditional (domestic) kitchens rarely cook to please themselves, but rather to perform a service for others, especially their families (Hollows 2003). Many women deny that one of their personal pleasures is preparing food for others. Other statements claim that women are fundamentally cooking especially for (pleasing) men (Charles and Kerr 1988).

Some did express denial and still tried to please themselves when cooking in a traditional kitchen (Hollows 2003). This pleasure derived from cooking by women shows a sense of caring for others, which Marjorie DeVault (1991) has categorized as a relationship between cooking and caring (for others), which
has strengthened the relationship between cooking and femininity, namely a
service which is an undefined, unrecognized activity, but is central to women’s
identity (Hollows 2003).

Meanwhile, when cooking moves into public sphere, it is seen as a more
prestigious, professional, and male-dominated type of work. A general belief
and the results of numerous sociological studies agree that women’s cooking
is not for display, but is a (routine) activity carried out in the house or a
traditional kitchen (Kate Cairns, Josée Johnston, Shyon Baumann 2010). Men’s
relationship to cooking is often defined as ranging from a hobby (Coxon in
Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann 2010), just lending a hand on certain special
occasions (DeVault 1991), to a serious profession requiring certain talents and
skills owned and in public domain (Fine in Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann
2010).

Recent studies of cooking activities show that, if men are involved
in cooking activities, they are not invariably lumbered with traditional
connections. Hence, the responsibility assigned to him when serving the food
he has cooked to others is free of the assumption that a women’s cooking is
always very closely tied to the food they process as a form of service, femininity,
and obligation (Aarseth and Olsen in Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann 2010).

In other words, all types of professions in the public sphere, including
professional kitchens, are considered “men’s territory”. Under Indonesian law,
men are explicitly stated to be the head of the family and the main breadwinner,
as stated in Law (UU) No. 1 of 1974 on Marriage, Chapter IV concerning the
Rights and Duties of Husband and Wife, Article 31 Paragraph (3), which reads:
“The husband is the head of the family and the wife is the housewife.” This
can have a deleterious effect women’s opportunities to develop their potential
in achieving higher career paths in professional kitchens.

In the professional kitchen, Deborah A. Harris and Patti A. Giuffre (2010)
have documented how sociologists view women working in male-dominated
fields as experiencing discrimination, both subtle and overt, derived from
gender stereotypes. Harris and Giuffre (2010) point to essentialist gender
rhetoric to portray female chefs as (working) better than male colleagues.
This rhetoric appears to support stereotypes, which emphasize the existence
of “natural” differences between men and women in the workplace. These
two researchers suggest that female chefs reframe previous discourses into
“feminine power” rhetoric. Gender differences do in fact benefit women’s
careers in the workplace. Despite the implications of these findings, there are
still gender inequalities in the workplace.

Harris and Giuffre (2015) also look at the dilemmas, which can confront
female chefs in the wake of their choice to continue working rather than
focusing on family, as an important research mechanism. Gender factors
certainly underlie women’s lower representation in male-dominated
occupations. Male-dominated professions hinder women because of the
dilemma of striking a balance between work and family responsibilities. This
conflict often arises when female chefs work very long hours; one reason many
(female) chefs want to quit their jobs (Harris and Giuffre 2015).
Referring to previous studies it seems many factors lurk behind female chefs having to fight harder in professional kitchens in order to continue their professional careers. Armed with a theory developed by Aruna Rao et al. (2016), namely “gender at work” which maps gender inequality in the workplace into four quadrants, related to consciousness and individual capabilities; resources and access; social norms and deep social structures; as well as rules and policies, we have conducted this study to fill the gaps in previous research.

3. Research problem and methods

Based on a selection of previous studies, we have found numerous opinions and views, especially among professional chefs, reiterating that a professional kitchen, dominated by male chefs, is not considered an ideal workplace for women. Furthermore, women who have traditionally been assigned to cooking activities in traditional kitchens have to face multiple barriers when entering the world of professional kitchen work.

Not a few female chefs have dreams of being able to conquer a professional kitchen and attain high-flying careers as male chefs do. But eventually, many female chefs must bury their dreams when faced with the dilemmatic choice between continuing to work or focusing on family, alongside the various other obstacles confronting them in the world of work. These arguments led us to focus on digging deeper into the experiences of female chefs in their work in professional kitchens. Although socially constructed women are often referred to as “traditional kitchen queens”, it is actually difficult for them to compete with men when working together in professional kitchens.

To uncover the subordination and marginalization faced by female chefs in professional kitchens, in June and July 2021 we conducted interviews with four female chefs from Lampung, Bandung, Jakarta, and Surabaya as our research subjects. We selected these four female chefs because they had been able to compete in the world of work dominated by male chefs and reach the highest rungs on the career ladder in professional kitchens in Indonesia. Their long tenure enables them to share their experiences of working in a male-dominated professional kitchen, including how they have responded to various obstacles confronted in their world of work.

Furthermore, to understand the process of subordination and marginalization in the world of professional kitchen work more acutely, we approached the theory of gender at work developed by Rao et al. (2016) through four components: a) awareness and capability; b) resources; c) social norms and deep social structures; and d) rules and policies. We have formulated this into one research question, namely how do female chefs build their own capabilities in the workplace, while confronting the social norms and deep social structures which often hinder their career development and by so doing acquire the resources and support to overcome these barriers?

To find answers to these research questions, we used a qualitative approach to the experiences of women chefs while working in professional
kitchens. We have analysed this research from a feminist perspective, using a case study method based on the personal experiences of four professional female chefs who work in hotel and restaurant kitchens, in an effort to build personal awareness of equality in the workplace and how they get support from resources, respond to rules and policies, as well as the social norms and deep social structures which often hinder career development for women chefs in general.

4. Result
In this section, we present the research findings obtained from interviews with our four research subjects, our female professional chefs who work as executive chefs in the professional kitchens of well-known hotels and restaurants in Lampung, Bandung, Jakarta, and Surabaya.

Their average age is over forty and they have followed their career paths for more than a decade. They shared their experiences as female chefs, describing their career journeys while working in professional kitchens, and their responses to the challenges they faced.

4.1 Chef Susi: At some point women chefs face a dilemma
After graduating from SMEA in 1998, Chef Susi, who loves to cook, immediately decided to work in the pastry kitchen of a hotel in Semarang. While working in this hotel kitchen, she experienced being in a minority. In the pastry team, she worked with four other professional chefs, against only two female chefs including herself. Over time, Chef Susi was promoted to chef de partie. She moved to a hot kitchen with a team of seven, among whom she was the only woman. Chef Susi had a long career in the hot kitchen before succeeding in becoming a sous-chef (assistant executive chef).

At the beginning of her job, she was often haunted by such thoughts as, “Why, am I the only woman working on my own?” She was worried about being bullied by her colleagues. In fact, she often had to rethink and question her abilities, asking herself whether she had made the right decision to have a career in a professional kitchen, which turned out to be dominated by men. Chef Susi experienced first-hand working very long hours, in an atmosphere seething with violence and insults, and having to lift heavy cooking utensils. Hotel kitchens tend to process very large amounts of ingredients, so the utensils used are large and consequently very heavy. This, according to Chef Susi, often is difficult for many female chefs to adjust to when working in a professional kitchen, alongside a host of other problems which hinder the career path of women chefs, especially when they are married.

Chef Susi has also experienced these. She claims that at some point women, especially when they marry, will inevitably experience a dilemma between continuing a career in a professional kitchen and focusing on a family. After working in a hotel kitchen for eighteen years, she finally chose to focus on her household, although now she is still involved in culinary activities, as she runs a catering business in Lampung.
4.2 Chef Shan: depends on personal choice and says “family support is a key”

Chef Shan comes from a catering business family, so it is not surprising she is interested in the culinary field. She began her career at the lowest level in a hotel, as a waitress. As her experience grew, she changed jobs and rose to the position of demi-chef at a legendary restaurant lodging facilities in Bandung.

Now, she has become an executive chef staff (corporate), overseeing five outlets and the company’s catering division. Chef Shan is also active in the ICA professional association and, since 2018, has served as Secretary of Administration for the Central ICA Membership Division.

Chef Shan admits that female chefs in Indonesia are still in a minority in professional kitchens. Of the total number of ICA members, now 4,463, only 10-20 percent of ICA members and administrators are female chefs.

Chef Shan thinks that, when working in a professional kitchen, the treatment meted out is no different for men and women. However, she confirmed that, when women marry, most face the dilemma of choosing between work and family. Unfortunately, many of her co-workers have been female chefs who decided to stop working and chose to focus on family after marriage, even though many of them did want to continue to pursue their careers as chefs.

Chef Shan concludes that the reason female chefs are a minority in professional kitchens is largely the result of their own the personal choices and the attitudes of their families.

After having a family, Chef Shan admitted that she personally did not have to face this dilemma. Instead, she was fully supported by her husband and family in her pursuit of achieving the highest position possible in her chosen profession. Communication and a husband’s support have been key in Chef Shan’s being able to choose to build a career in a professional kitchen, unlike other female chef colleagues.

4.3 Chef Tri: when the soul calls to be a chef, family is number two

Ever since her schooldays, Chef Tri has had an interest in the culinary field. She had no hesitation in pursuing her studies in the hospitality industry. Chef Tri has now had a career as a quite respected female chef in East Java for more than twenty years. She is the only female executive chef in Surabaya where she works in charge of a team of twelve people, the majority of whom are male, with only one female chef in the pastry kitchen.

Although her career as a female chef has tended to run smoothly, this does not mean she has never encountered obstacles. She is often considered “weird” and does raise doubts among hotel guests because the executive chef in the hotel kitchen is usually a man. In addition, the indiscipline of the male chefs in her team is often a problem for her.

As a female leader, Chef Tri admits that she needs a few tricks up her sleeve when she dealing with her subordinates, the majority of whom are men older than she is. Chef Tri usually encourages them to talk more sympathetically, using a “motherly” or feminine approach, which, she believes is missing among male leaders. She says that male leaders in professional kitchens do tend to
use violence. No wonder therefore that the image of a professional kitchen is still synonymous with violence.

As a female chef, it seems that Chef Tri is an anomaly among other female chefs who often find themselves in a dilemma when pushed to choose between career and family. Chef Tri stated firmly, “For me, working in the kitchen is number one and family is number two.” Even the hot kitchen area, which is often avoided by female chefs, has become an ideal place for her to work in for decades.

4.4 Chef Dita: “Women often have difficulty in a professional kitchen, but this does not mean you can’t.”

Chef Dita began her career in a professional kitchen rather late, commencing when she was 38. However, she admits that this has been quite beneficial because she feels she has “finished” with household and family problems. Her five daughters are grown up and independent, and her husband has always supported her, even when she decided to take a short cooking course at a certified culinary institution.

Chef Dita began her career as a member of the opening team in a professional kitchen franchise restaurant owned by an Australian chef offering a semi-fine dining experience. She has sensed and even witnessed first-hand the atmosphere of working in a professional kitchen. The image of a professional kitchen fraught with insults, violence, and pressure, is not strange to her. She also often finds her boss throwing plates, napkins, and rudely pointing out when his subordinates have made mistakes. Chef Dita was even discriminated against by her subordinates when she was promoted to assistant head chef. “One of my team, a man, openly refuses to follow my orders regarding work. The reason is because I am a woman. He claims that women do not deserve to be leaders in the workplace.”

Another thing Chef Dita has also realized during her six years working in a professional kitchen is that the number of female chefs has proved to be very small. In the hot kitchen area in which she works, there are only two women including herself. In the pastry kitchen area, there are three to four female chefs, out of a total of thirty, the majority of whom are male.

“In professional kitchen conditions like mine, women seem to find it difficult. But that doesn’t mean they can’t,” said Chef Dita, who has managed to prove that she has been able to survive and reach the highest echelon as a head chef, even though her career journey was somewhat tougher as it is not as easy to be a male chef’s co-worker.

4.5 Individual consciousness and perception of a female chef’s capabilities in the workplace

The four female chefs we interviewed as the subjects of this study stated that, while working in a professional kitchen, they tended never to experience gender differences. They stated that their treatment in professional kitchens as female chefs is much of a muchness as that received by male colleagues.
They even claimed that they were never given special treatment just because they were women. They feel everything, which happens while working in a professional kitchen could happen in any workplace.

As a chef who has worked in a professional kitchen for more than twenty years and is often the only female chef in her workplace, in fact the only female executive chef in Surabaya, Chef Tri admits that she has never faced particular obstacles during her career in a professional kitchen, such as being humiliated or harassed. As an executive chef, Chef Tri’s performance is often appreciated positively by hotel guests. According to guests, it is very rare for hotel executive chefs to be female. In their previous experiences, the guests have only encountered male hotel executive chefs.

It has been a different story for Chef Dita who has been humiliated by male colleagues. She has been considered to lack refined cooking skills because she had no previous experience of working in a professional kitchen, even though she graduated from a well-respected culinary institution. She has also been considered to rely on her English language capital, making it easier to be accepted to work in a restaurant where the head of the kitchen is an expatriate. In fact, when Chef Dita managed to be promoted faster than other colleagues, another problem arose. Just because she was a woman, the male team members always retaliated when reprimanded. Even openly saying they did not want to listen to the reprimands of a female superior.

What Chef Dita experienced in a professional kitchen would not have happened if the male chef team members who worked with female chefs had a proper awareness of the equality and capabilities of their co-workers. Individual consciousness of equality in the world of work, according to Rao et al. (2016), refers to an awareness, which is a collection of experiences, values, and knowledge which influence the perception of gender relations. The changing times, continued Rao et al. (2016), should also lead to changes in professional kitchens, so that workplaces of these chefs will feel more equal, safe, and comfortable to work in, for both female chefs and male chefs.

Referring to changes in individual consciousness, Rao et al. (2016) state that this can be achieved by observing and introducing changes in the attitudes of men in the organization and in the “equality” behaviour manifested between men and women. This is related to the participatory nature which gives women the opportunity to raise issues never brought into the open before. This, continued Rao et al. (2016), appears to be a transformational learning for individuals and communities, in which numerous basic attitudes about gender, which might emerge in the context of the community, are altered. The hypothesis is that change is based on the participatory and emancipatory aspects of all parties involved, in this case men and women (Rao et al. 2016).

4.6. SOCIAL NORMS AND DEEP SOCIAL STRUCTURES: FEMALE CHEFS’ CAREER BARRIERS

Based on data from the two largest chef associations in Indonesia, the ICA and the ACP, female chefs have always been a minority in professional kitchens, not only in terms of numbers but also in their involvement in many culinary
competitions held both nationally and internationally and attaining strategic positions and positions based on career paths in professional kitchens, still very rarely held by female chefs. Why does this happen?

Chef Stef, executive chef of a semi-fine dining restaurant specializing in French menus in Jakarta, offers a physical explanation, the female body. Women are smaller than men, socially constructed to be weak, and considered unable to lift heavy loads, including cooking utensils in professional kitchens.

Chef Hari, deputy-chairman of the Central ICA and executive chef of an organic restaurant, also admitted that working in a professional kitchen tends to be physically very demanding. More physical strength is seen as the main factor for working in a professional kitchen, cooking very large quantities in a short time. Hence, his view is that men are physically more likely to work in professional kitchens than women.

In fact, the opinions of Chef Stef and Chef Hari regarding women’s physique, weak, and unable to undertake heavy work, can be directly refuted by Chef Dita, who since commencing her career has chosen to work in a male-dominated hot kitchen. As a woman, Chef Dita with all her feminine advantages has proved able to conquer the “hot kitchen” area, just like a male chef.

Regarding the overcoming of patriarchal norms which might be dominant in an organization, as experienced by Chef Dita, Rao et al. (2016) see that social norms and deep social structures rarely seep into individual values, so that individuals can use their own resources to fight or change them. Kabeer (in Rao et al. 2016) states, “In some societies, the rules and practices that shape gender relations are relatively flexible, leaving room for multiple interpretations.”

4.6.1 The concept of “male breadwinners” burying female chefs’ careers

Discriminatory social norms and deep structures of inequality, say Rao et al. (2016), manifest themselves in various ways. Deep social norms and structures are a set of expectations about behaviour, which women must constantly negotiate and resist. Within organizations, these social norms and deep social structures take the form of informal, sometimes hidden rules, which determine who gets what, who does what, and who decides what. These patriarchal values and attitudes invariably impinge on the decision making of a hierarchical organization (Rao et al. 2016).

These social norms and deep social structures often sabotage the goodwill of planned efforts to bring about social change. Some are open to change but others are highly resilient. Rao et al. (2016) argue that these social norms and deep social structures in society remain stubbornly inherent. One is the concept of “the main breadwinner is male” which has never become outdated.

In a patriarchal system, when a man has become a husband or father it seems as if he has the right to bury his wife’s dreams of achieving a high-flying career in the workplace, including being a female chef in a professional kitchen. Chef Stef said that many female chefs cannot continue their careers in professional kitchens when their husbands do not allow them to continue working. Unfortunately, neither superiors nor the companies seem to be
compelled to help negotiate the interests of those female chefs who want to continue their careers; as if the husband’s decree is a ukase which no one can oppose.

Furthermore, the notion of “housewife” which is always attached to women who are married and have children also perpetuates the understanding that the main task of women is not working in the public sphere, but in the domestic sphere, caring for and serving the family. Based on various previous studies, like other activities in domestic spaces or traditional kitchens, cooking is deemed an obligation and a form of women’s service. Meanwhile, cooking in a professional kitchen is the domain of men, as the main breadwinners.

In the world of work, “employers” (bosses) will always assume that men will place their careers above their families because men are seen as being less biologically attached to children (Kristen R. Ghodsee 2020). It does not matter if a man decides to stay at home with their children, or if a woman chooses to sterilize herself to overcome the challenge of balancing work and family. This is because gender stereotypes of how to be male and female are rooted in the idea of a “natural” link between biological sex and how this in turn informs women’s subsequent life choices (Ghodsee 2020).

4.6.2 *Dichotomy of hot kitchen and cold kitchen in the professional kitchen*

Rao et al. (2016) have stated that in communities and societies around the world the rules and values embodied in social norms and deep social structures generally incorporate rules and values which sustain women’s subordinate position, such as the division of labour based on gender, [...] household chores.

Referring to the testimonies of the four chefs we interviewed as research subjects, the main kitchen area or hot kitchen has long projected an image full of violence and rudeness, so it is considered unsuitable for women. When deciding to make a career in a professional kitchen, instead of being motivated to conquer the hot kitchen area, female chefs have tended to be directed to avoid the “hot kitchen” area, and choose to work in areas which tend to be unrelated to cooking activities. Many female chefs choose to work in the pastry kitchen or in the *garde manger* (salad station) in the cold kitchen area. The kitchen area is cool and comfortable, so it is often considered a more suitable workplace for women.

Chef Tri said that, while undergoing job training in country S, she was once not allowed to enter the hot kitchen area: the preserve of male chefs. Chef Tri was told by the HR of the hotel, the risks to women of working in a hot kitchen were very high consisting of the noise, the heat from the stoves, the heavy implements, and all the sharp objects at hand. The hotel management does not want to run the risk of accidents happening, especially to female chefs. In addition, women are prohibited from being rostered on the night shift for safety reasons and are slotted only for the morning shift, middle/afternoon shift, or a safer work schedule.

As experienced by Chef Tri and the other female chefs, even today there are still many companies and hotel or restaurant managements, determining and dividing type of work based on the gender of their employees (Christine
Zmroczek and Beryl Madoc-Jones 1996). Ann Oakley (1982 in Zmroczek and Madoc-Jones 1996) says that the sexual division of labour applied in many workplaces is a social construction not based on the natural sex of humans, which is indeed different. Moreover, the form of male domination over women in the world of work can differ between different classes and racial groups, in different ways. But all of them illustrate the inequality of relations between men and women in the world of work (Oakley 1982 in Zmroczek and Madoc-Jones 1996).

Undoubtedly, there has been a gendered division of labour in the workplace which distinguishes the types of work to be done by female and male chefs and our four research subjects tended to think that this was normal in the workplace. It was assumed to be closely related either to the personal choices of women themselves, or to efforts to maintain the safety and well-being of the female staff who work in professional kitchens. Professional chefs also seem to find it difficult to realize the situation which has prevailed in professional kitchens so far has indirectly marginalized the women who work in them. These include female chefs who still think that the division of labour based on gender time honoured because it has long been considered synonymous with working situations in professional kitchens. Among the lurking evils are throwing implements and swearing and obscenities, and other forms of violence which are considered normal and have become a culture in many professional kitchens.

As a female chef, Chef Dita agrees with the general opinion among chefs which states that female chefs are more suited to working in the pastry kitchen/cold kitchen/garde manger (salad station) rather than the hot kitchen. In addition to being able to enjoy a cooler, more comfortable working area, she thinks that female chefs who work in cold kitchens can still manage to maintain a neat, well-groomed appearance without having to worry about their make-up running in the hot temperatures. As well as specific fields of science in medical science, one point Chef Dita did underline, was that the pastry field is one specialization in a chef’s repertoire which requires very high creativity. A chef can learn the science of patisserie (making various creations of cakes and desserts with unique shapes demanding a high level of difficulty) by following a separate curriculum, which costs more than studying basic culinary skills. So not just any chef can do this.

The specialization and expertise in the pastry field brings its own prestige, as evidenced by the high costs incurred to study it in more depth. The pastry chef’s ability to master his/her field of expertise, requiring a very high work creativity and artistic talent, can be seen as a distinct advantage whose quality and skills can be mastered more readily by a woman than the men who have so far dominated hot kitchens, which tend to focus only on the physical strength required.

4.6.3 Female chefs respond to reproductive function

Because of their reproductive function, women are often considered “unprofessional” in workplace, especially when they are menstruating. Chef Tri argues when the female team members are on their period, their
performance is very different to that on other days when they are not menstruating.

Chef Tri even said that one of her subordinates who worked in the pastry kitchen often seemed to change her work ethic when menstruating. Her level of creativity diminishes and she is moodier. The upshot is her work performance is less than satisfactory.

However, in contrast, Chef Dita and Chef Shan claim never to have experienced mood swings during menstruation. Both firmly said that they had never had problems working in a professional kitchen during menstruation.

In addition to menstruation, breastfeeding while working is often an obstacle for female chefs, as was experienced by Chef Susi. After maternity leave, she decided to keep working in a professional kitchen.

She was adamant that leaving her baby who was only a month old and still breastfeeding was the hardest period in her life. She has often even had to endure pain when her breasts were swollen with milk, but struggled to pump milk at work.

Working in a professional kitchen with breastfeeding conditions as experienced by Chef Susi, is termed by Ghodsee (2020) a “perception of comparative inferiority” of working women, which is closely related to their biological capacity to give birth and raise children, as well as the concurrent social expectation that women will automatically become primary caregivers for infants and young children.

4.7 Relationships, support, and resources of female chefs

The experience of female chefs working in professional kitchens certainly has an impact on their relationships. Besides their relationships with their families, of course female chefs also have other relationships with parties beyond the family circle. These relationships might either contribute to the career development of female chefs in professional kitchens or create obstacles to their career development. Good relations between female chefs and various other parties will certainly have a positive impact on their career development in the workplace; equally bad relationships can have a negative impact on the careers of female chefs.

The forms of relationships built by female chefs who were the subject of our research are not explained in the theory developed by Rao et al. (2016). The various forms of relationships built and owned by these female chefs are the research findings which we have obtained from the results of in-depth interviews with them. The forms of relationships built and owned by these female chefs have ultimately affected their career development in professional kitchens.

Good and positive relationships can create opportunities for female chefs to have a greater chance to pursue their careers to a higher level, to become leaders displaying a typical female leadership style which prioritizes excellence as women. These skills include solving problems or settling conflicts in the workplace without resorting to verbal or physical violence, which has often
been represented in professional kitchens by a male-dominated work style.

From the point of view of the resources discussed by Rao et al. (2016), the four female chefs, the subjects of our research, are women who have the advantage of living as whole women. They have the support of their spouses, families, and other parties to gain access to various resources, such as an education to enhance their careers, the chance to seize many opportunities, including wider options to reach a higher career path, to follow various trainings in their pursuit of promotion in the professional kitchen.

Some of our research subjects have even chosen to be active in professional associations, achieving highly respected positions. Comparing themselves to their fellow female chefs, they say that these women have ultimately been forced to bury their career dreams and give up on choices based not purely on their desires, but rather on the suggestions or wishes of their partners, especially after having a family.

### 4.8 The Female Chefs’ Responses to Workplace Rules and Policies

In addition to written rules stipulated by the companies which oversee the professional kitchens in which the chefs work, in the day-to-day work situation, the direct supervisor or manager usually makes an unwritten policy, the aim of which is to expedite the daily work operations. Among these rules and policies enforced in the workplace a number do not favour of female chefs.

Chef Tri, an executive chef, admitted that she did not apply for menstrual leave, as regulated by UU Ketenagakerjaan (Employment Law). Her reason was that the number of female chefs is relatively very few or almost non-existent. She considers menstrual leave to be irrelevant and unnecessary. However, if there are female chefs in her team who feel in need of it because of pain during menstruation, as a leader, Chef Tri is certainly ready to be flexible about leave.

Unwritten rules which apply in professional kitchens are apparently sufficient to cover the needs of female chefs, including permission not to work when their child or husband is sick and permission for female chefs who feel uncomfortable working when menstruating, have unfortunately not been matched by the policies of their companies, both hotels and restaurants. Evidently, there are still a large number of hotels and restaurants in which female chefs work which do not provide private/special breastfeeding rooms, which can be used as safe, comfortable places to pump breast-milk. Nor do they provide free day-care facilities for female staff who often have problems with childcare if they do not have help in the house.

This is acknowledged by Chef Tri, Chef Shan, and Chef Susi who have personally experienced how difficult it is to find private place for them to pump their milk, especially when their breasts are engorged. Some female chefs have often taken the initiative to turn the locker- or changing-room at their work into a room for pumping breast milk. The locker rooms for male and female employees are usually separate, allowing female chefs sufficient privacy to pump breast-milk, rather than doing then in a lavatory cubicle.
where cleanliness is not guaranteed.

The struggle to eliminate gender discrimination has long been identified with battleground between rule-making and rule-breaking (Rao et al. 2016). In an investigation, it is imperative to frame whether a policy is in line with or challenges the dominant culture in an organization. Policies which are aligned with the dominant culture might have a greater chance of being approved and implemented, but can fail in terms of changing deep social structures which perpetuate gender inequality. Policies which challenge the gender division of labour or gender power relations, might face much greater resistance on all levels, but might still produce long-term results in challenging gender inequalities (Marion Iris Young 1981). However, as Rao et al. (2016) point out that there is never a definite, umbrella “recipe”, which can be applied to all organizations.

5. Conclusion

Many traditions in the world require women to be good at cooking in traditional kitchens. Hence, it is not surprising that many of us believe that women can easily conquer professional kitchens. In reality this is not so. The level of involvement of female chefs in the world of work is still very low. The largest professional chef associations in Indonesia, the ICA and the ACP, have revealed that the number of female chefs in the professional kitchen world of work is still very much a minority, making the involvement of female chefs in these associations a priority.³

There are many factors hampering women from entering the world of professional kitchen work. Even though many female chefs manage to enter and work in professional kitchens, over time it is very rare for them to be able to survive and attain the highest rung on the career ladders in professional kitchens. According to ICA data, the current number of female executive chefs in professional kitchens in Indonesia is still below 20 percent,⁴ very different to male chefs, the majority of whom are able to have a more flexible career before reaching the highest positions in professional kitchens.

From the small number of female chefs who have achieved the highest rung on the career ladder in professional kitchens, four are the subjects of our research. Reflecting on their experiences during their careers as professional chefs, we found an answer to the ongoing discrimination against female chefs in the workplace, by referring to four components based on the theory of gender in work developed by Rao et al. (2016).

First, individual awareness, even though the four female chefs, the subjects of our research, said that they had never experienced gender differences in the world of work directly or indirectly, we must admit that basically they did not have a very deep understanding of what constituted forms of the forms of discrimination, especially very subtle forms, which still occur in professional kitchens.

³ Interview with Chef Hari, June 2020.
⁴ Interview with Chef Hari, June 2020.
This is evidenced by the regular occurrence of a sexual division of labour or a division of labour based on gender, which is marked by the dichotomy between still very male dominated hot kitchens, while cold kitchens are more likely to be occupied by women and are considered more suitable workplaces for female chefs because the area is more spacious, cool, comfortable, and requires accuracy in the working process compared to hot kitchens. In communities and societies around the world, the rules and values embodied in social norms and deep social structures generally incorporate rules and values which maintain women’s subordinate position, such as the gender division of labour and the devaluation of domestic work (Rao et al. 2016: 142).

Importantly, we see that the cold kitchen area, which contains the pastry chef workforce, requires more specific skills. If women are judged to be more suitable to work in this area, this value can be actually used as an opportunity as well as a strategy for female chefs to show their abilities and advantages which are considered above those of the average male chef. The superior values of women who are more thorough, detailed, as well as more creative in making garnishes or food decorations, demand a higher artistic talent. This could be an answer for female chefs to validate their superiority when working in a professional kitchen, scoring off male chefs who are only able to work in hot kitchens and do not require any specific skills other than relying on their physical strength.

Second, the hot kitchen atmosphere, which has a hard, rude, stressful image, with very long working hours compared to other professions and requiring the use of heavy work utensils, is always considered an unsuitable work environment for women is now being challenged and even refuted by four female professional chefs, the subjects of our study. They are convinced that the “face” of a hot kitchen as a representation of a professional kitchen and the main site in which professional chefs work must be changed to one based on more gender-sensitive principles in this millennial era. It should be replaced by an image of a professional kitchen which is safer, more comfortable, friendly, offering a level playing field for all the chefs who work in it, both women and men.

The efforts of chefs, both female and male chefs to change the image or face of the professional kitchen to that of an increasingly gender sensitive space could motivate and increase women’s involvement in the world of professional kitchen work. Regarding individual awareness of equality in the world of work, Rao et al. (2016: 41) remark that awareness is a collection of experiences, values, and knowledge, which influences how we see gender relations. Changing times should also create room to make changes in the world of work in professional kitchens, making the main sites for these chefs a more equal, safe, and comfortable space in which to operate, for both female chefs and male chefs (Rao et al. 2016: 41).

In their book, Rao et al. (2016) explain that changes in individual awareness can be set in motion by observing and afterwards involving changes in the attitudes of men in an organization, as well as raising the degree of the “equality” behaviour between men and women. This is related to the
participatory nature which gives women the opportunity to raise issues never before voiced. This appears to be a transformational lesson for individuals and communities, in which some basic attitudes about gender are altered by changes which emerge within a community context. The hypothesis is that the change is based on the participatory and emancipatory aspects of all the parties involved, in this case men and women (Rao et al. 2016: 65).

Third, this relates to the access to resources and support offered female chefs, based on the experiences of the four female chefs, so as they can build the various relationships they have with their partners, families, co-workers (bosses or subordinates), communities (friends, neighbours, neighbourhood), and work-related associations. Professional chefs’ organizations, institutions or companies in which professional chefs work are an important key factor for female chefs in developing a career, as well as a strategy to eliminate the dilemma of work versus family choices. The more positive the relationship female chefs have with various parties, the better the impact on their career development.

The theory developed by Rao et al. (2016) offers no explanation for the forms of relationships which our four female chefs have built. The various forms of relationships built and owned by these female chefs are the results derived from the research findings we have obtained from the results of in-depth interviews with them. These have ultimately had a positive impact on their career development in professional kitchens. One of them is creating opportunities for female chefs to become leaders with their own distinctive leadership style and prioritize their excellence as women. These qualities include resolving problems or conflicts arising in the workplace resorting to any forms of verbal or physical violence, as has often been represented by a work-style identical to violence in a male-dominated professional kitchen.

It stands to reason that, if the relationship which is built is not positive, it will become an inhibiting factor in the career development of female chefs. Certainly, it is not uncommon for female chefs to have to face their own dilemmas, especially arising from the choice to continue their career or focus on their family. The four female chefs are all women who have succeeded in building and maintaining good relationships with various parties. In this way, they have been able to overcome various layered obstacles which could have interfered with their career paths.

Turning to the problems caused by reproductive functions (menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding), based on the experience of our research subjects, these can indeed present an obstacle for female chefs in developing careers in professional kitchens. They often cause female chefs to lag behind male chefs in their careers. However, the four female subjects of our study have proved to be able to cope well with their reproductive function. Nevertheless, this success cannot be separated from the forms of relationships and support which they have built up and own, thereby making it easier for them to develop a career in a professional kitchen.

Fourth, social norms and deep social structures which are still firmly entrenched in society, as experienced by our research subjects, contribute to
the low involvement of female chefs in the world of work. This can be seen in the entrenched concept of men as the main breadwinners, meaning female chefs are often forced to bury their dreams and stop their careers when asked not to continue working by their spouses, especially after marriage and having children.

One of the arguments of Rao et al. (2016) pertaining to social norms and deep social structures still inherent in society is the concept that “the main breadwinner is male” has never become outdated. A justification always used in the patriarchal system is that when a man becomes a husband or father he has the right to bury his wife’s dreams of achieving the pinnacle of her career in the workplace, in this case female chefs in professional kitchens.

Finally, asked about present rules and policies, the four female executive chefs agreed to make non-standard (flexible) rules or policies which can affirm the status of female chefs. They admit that their places of work do not acknowledge menstrual leave, as regulated by the Manpower Act. As the number of female chefs working in professional kitchens is relatively very few, or often non-existent, menstrual leave is considered less relevant and unnecessary. However, if there are female chefs in the team who feel they need to make use of the regulation when they have complaints arising from menstrual pain, as leaders, they agree to be flexible in granting permission. Over and above this, they often even give female team members permission when their married female staff have sick children or husbands.

Unfortunately, the affirmative action of these female chefs has not been matched by the companies, such as hotels or restaurants, which employ female chefs. So far, it seems that there are still no hotels or restaurants which have considered providing special private rooms for female chefs who breastfeed, for example, in which to feel safer and more comfortable pumping breast milk at work, or providing free day care facilities in the area near professional kitchens, a move which would also support the career development of female chefs, who have always lagged behind in their careers from male chefs in the world of work.

Policies aligned with the dominant culture, according to Rao et al. (2016: 107), might now have a greater chance of being approved and implemented, but could fail to change the deep social structures which perpetuate gender inequality. The struggle to eliminate gender discrimination has long been identified with the battleground between rule-making and rule-breaking (Rao et al. 2016: 107). This is also related to the efforts of various parties, especially hotels and restaurants employing female chefs, to participate in building personal awareness among professional chefs about equality in the workplace, to affirming the needs and interests of female chefs to support their career development in the world of work (Rao et al. 2016).
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ABSTRACT

In this study, we critically analyze the experiences of female chefs in professional kitchens, focusing on the gender dynamics and challenges they face. By drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Jakarta, we explore how these women navigate the male-dominated culinary world. Our findings reveal that despite facing numerous obstacles, female chefs are actively shaping the traditional kitchen space and challenging conventional gender norms. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender and work in the culinary industry, advocating for inclusive and equitable practices.

KEYWORDS

Female chefs, gender dynamics, professional kitchens, culinary industry, gender equality.