

“My kids need me, but we need money too”: Female GOJEK drivers in Indonesia

All over the world, women play an essential role in curbing the spread of COVID-19, both in their paid work (such as in the health sector) and unpaid work (home schooling and caring for family and community). Due to the pandemic, unpaid work in the home has increased for women in Indonesia and elsewhere around the world, while opportunities for paid work have decreased. The pandemic has therefore reinforced pre-existing gender inequality, especially for poor urban women.

In Indonesia and elsewhere, significant gender inequality exists in the formal and informal labor markets, with women earning 35 percent less than men in 2017 in the formal sector; while in the informal sector women earn half that of men. The pandemic has hit the services sector particularly hard, with urban poor women in Indonesia at the centre of the economic struggle. Most of these women earn below the local wage standard (IDR 1.7 million, USD 116).

In the case of poor urban women who work as motorcycle-taxi drivers for a company called GOJEK, the twin burdens of care-giving and supplementing family income have intensified, particularly with school closures which have resulted in their children studying from home. GOJEK is the biggest ride-hailing company in Southeast Asia with 40 percent of the market. In Indonesia, GOJEK drivers form 1.5 percent of the workforce.

The pandemic has gendered and class dimensions: The poorer the women, the heavier their burden will be.

Understanding these women's experiences is important because it's an area of employment that's accessible for most urban women: all that's needed is a driver's license and a motorcycle, a common and accessible form of transportation. In other sectors of the informal economy such as street vendors, more economic capital is needed. In addition, being a GOJEK's driver is flexible and women can work at times when they're not needed for domestic and caring work.

We surveyed 99 women GOJEK drivers between June and July 2020. They were selected based on a previous survey we conducted in mid-May on all drivers (male

and female) on the impact of the pandemic on their welfare. We contacted female participants of that survey and ask them to connect us with other female drivers. The surveys completed in May were followed by 10 in-depth interviews exploring the women's daily balance of work and home commitments. The majority are located in Yogyakarta province, had worked for GOJEK for at least two years, and are part of GOJEK's services such as "GO-CLEAN" (a housecleaning service), "GO-GLAM" (a makeover service), and "GO-MASSAGE" (a massage service). About 40 percent were born between 1980-1990, and the vast majority were married (73 percent). Of those who were married, 75 percent had children and almost all their children were of school age. The majority of their spouses were also working as GOJEK drivers or in other informal sectors such as seasonal farm work, parking attendees or security staff.

The life of female GOJEK drivers in Yogyakarta

The days start at dawn, before the *shubuh* morning prayer call. Most women surveyed said they then clean their houses, do laundry, or prepare breakfast for the family:

"After I wake up very early in the morning, I do all of household [tasks], bathing kids and preparing breakfast for all of us. Before the pandemic, I left home earlier usually at 7am, after I dropped my kids at school. In pandemic, I switch on my [GOJEK] application at 10am. I can't leave them before all of their homework is sent to their teachers in the parents' WhatsApp Group through my mobile phone. Sometimes my kids missed assignments because the teachers sent the tasks while I am on the road. I went home late and my kid has already slept, and the assignment is due on the next day. If this is the case, I just tell her teachers it is my mistake that she missed it". Ibu Y (41 years old), interviewed 20 July 2020.

When asked whether her husband helped her with the children, Ibu Y said he focused on earning money and that "household issues are women's business, not men's".

For single mothers, the situation is particularly difficult. Ibu IR has been a GOJEK driver for more than four years and it has become her only source of income for her two children—one in high school and one at elementary school, and she wants to guide them during their study:

“I decided to cut my time [at work] per day during the pandemic. Usually, I am on the road for minimum 12 hours. My younger child needs me for her study. Sometimes I ask my older son to look after her while I am working. After being on the road fulfilling my daily target, I go home, chit chat with her while helping her to do her homework. As a single mother, I will make sure that my children have enough love from me.” Ibu IR (46 years old), interviewed 22 July 2020.

During the early phase of the pandemic in March 2020, orders for GOJEK drivers declined sharply and this impacted severely on the company and its drivers. More than 70 percent of all respondents said their income had declined by more than 75 percent. For most women, their spouse’s income is used by the family for major expenditure such as paying credit instalments for a motorcycle, while their own income is used for daily expenses, mostly food.

“Before the pandemic, I can bring home money IDR 4 million per month (USD 269) [USD 8.7 per day]. Now, if I already had IDR 50,000 (USD 3.4 per day), I am already very grateful”. Ibu SM (24 years old), interviewed 18 July 2020.

In response, the company has introduced a flat bonus system: all drivers who complete five trips in a day between 8am and 5pm will be entitled to a bonus of IDR 65,000 (USD 4.4). Before the pandemic, drivers needed 20 trips to get the bonus. Many drivers rely on this bonus for their daily income, but it is usually not enough to fulfill the family’s needs:

“At least I reach target to get the daily bonus, and after that I still searching for orders, though without bonus, so that I can earn some more.” Ibu W (38 years old), interviewed 27 July 2020.

Because their income from a usual day (even including the bonus) is not enough, some female drivers operate two accounts (popularly known as *Joki Account*) which means they can often do enough trips to get the bonus twice, but they must work very long hours.

“It is not enough for me to bring home money IDR 65,000. If I can bring home double, it can make us breath a bit (living with not too tight budget). This is good for our family income too. Sometimes I get home midnight [ngalong, like a bat staying awake at night] to just get extra income during this pandemics”. Ibu S (26 years old), interview 22 July 2020.

There is an informal community for female GOJEK drivers, called “*Srikandi*”, in

which members help each other by sharing information and collecting small amounts of money to help other members in need. However, during our online interviews, none mentioned *Srikandi's* role in facing their daily struggle.

Extra domestic expenses related to COVID-19

Children studying at home require high quality internet connections and mobile phones with good cameras, and this has added to the financial stress of poor urban families. Commonly, students will spend IDR 100,000 (USD 6.8) a week for their internet connection. Many reports have shown that Indonesians experience uneven access to the internet, and there is an inequality of access among millions of school children due to geographic and socio-economic factors. Although the urban poor live in areas with good infrastructure, many do not have the resources to access it:

“My mobile phone is not good. The camera does not work properly. While my kids need to be in Google Meet with their teachers, sometimes they need to have the camera on. I feel sorry for her, so I bought her a new mobile phone through credit scheme, and now I have to pay its instalments every month.” Ibu I (45 years old), interviewed 27 July 2020.

As mentioned, while expenses have risen, income has declined—not just in relation to GOJEK driving work, but also for other money-making projects the women may have, mostly seasonal work. To survive, 49 percent of our respondents ran small online businesses. Some sold food in front of their houses, others supplemented their income with work as couriers for market goods required before *shubuh* prayer at 3am, or provided washing and ironing services:

“At 8 o'clock in the morning, my husband will leave home. As I have to adjust my working time to take care our kids during this pandemic, I need to think to find sources of income. So I sell snacks with a small cart in front of our home. I guide my kids while preparing the food. Earlier I have switched on my application, just in case there are orders coming in. If there is one, I will take it, and told my kids that I need to work a bit and it won't be long till I get back. I ask my neighbour to keep eyes on them. I constantly juggling with all kind of works I have to do to keep our family survive. Ibu DR (47 years old), interviewed 24 July 2020.

Another female driver started running a catering business every Tuesday, so she

takes that day off from GOJEK work:

“I promote my catering service on WhatsApp groups and made orders by request. I made some extra money on this and it is good business, though it is very tiring to cook compared to being on the road”. Ibu IR (43 years old), interviewed 23 July 2020.

Another interviewee works as a GOJEK driver and a farm labourer in a rural area of Kulonprogo, in western Yogyakarta):

“After shubuh pray calling, me and my husband went to help our neighbour who need helps giving pesticides or cleaning their farms. I get home at 8am and rest a bit and leave at 9am. My husband is a GOJEK driver too, so we leave together. I am old already, but we still have one kid at university. I ask him to take a break from school during this pandemic, but he refused. So, last time when due date on his tuition fee approach, I work harder, sometime for 12 hours in a day, sometimes longer”. Ibu W (51 years old), interviewed 27 July 2020.

These stories show how women are juggling being income earners and care-givers. Most are constantly searching for ways to earn extra money, while also caring for their children and helping them with study. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased their paid and unpaid workload. This burden is disproportionately carried by poor urban women—meaning that the pandemic is gendered, but also has class dimensions: the poorer the women are, the heavier their burden during the pandemic. Existing gender inequality has been exacerbated, particularly among the urban poor in the informal sector. While resilience is clear at an individual level, collective action has not been sufficient yet to change structural inequality.

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