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Doing Gender: Gender Practices and Negotiations among Student Interns in Pekanbaru

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how gender is enacted and negotiated in the internship experiences of university students at the Secretariat of the Riau Provincial Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) and the Pekanbaru City General Election Commission (KPU). Using a qualitative descriptive-exploratory approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions (FGDs). The data were analyzed thematically through West and Zimmerman's Doing Gender perspective, particularly the concept of accountability. The findings indicate that task allocation was generally perceived by student interns to be based on work requirements and individual competencies rather than gender. However, informants also recognized gender expectations concerning appearance, communication styles, assertiveness, and confidence in the workplace. Their responses involved observing organizational practices, adjusting to workplace norms, and considering how and when to express their opinions. These responses were shaped by their position as interns within hierarchical organizational structures, which limited their scope for action. This study demonstrates that internship experiences constitute a space for social learning in which students encounter and interpret the relationship between gender expectations, professionalism, and organizational culture.

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INTRODUCTION

The transition from higher education to the world of work (school-to-work transition) is an important phase in which students not only apply the knowledge they have acquired at university but also learn the norms, professional culture, and patterns of social relations in the workplace. Internship programs provide one such transitional space because students engage directly with organizational structures, divisions of labor, communication patterns, and relationships with employees and supervisors. Internship experiences are therefore not limited to the acquisition of technical skills; they also involve learning about and adapting to formal rules and informal expectations that emerge through everyday interactions.

One important dimension to consider in internship experiences is gender. Gender expectations may emerge through assumptions about which jobs are considered appropriate for men or women, how opinions should be expressed, and what forms of conduct are regarded as appropriate in professional settings. Such expectations are not always stated in organizational rules, yet they may influence how individuals perform their tasks and how their behavior is evaluated. Nevertheless, differences in tasks or treatment do not automatically demonstrate gender inequality, as they may also be related to competence, work requirements, and authority structures. Gender practices should therefore be examined through concrete experiences and interactions, distinguishing between professional rules that apply generally and expectations specifically attached to gender categories.

West and Zimmerman's (1987) Doing Gender perspective provides a framework for understanding this process. From this perspective, gender is not merely an individual attribute but a social accomplishment that is continually enacted and assessed through interaction. The concept of accountability explains how individuals' actions may be evaluated against normative expectations concerning how men and women should behave. Meanwhile, West and Fenstermaker's (1995) Doing Difference perspective helps explain how social differences are produced through interactional practices, while Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations directs attention to the relationship between everyday practices, the division of labor, and organizational structures. This framework makes it possible to examine gender without assuming in advance that every difference in experience or task assignment constitutes discrimination.

Previous studies have shown that gender practices and expectations can operate through role allocation, participation, and social evaluation within organizations. Laila and Ridwan (2025), for example, examined the social practices of women active in campus organizations and highlighted the importance of cultural context, organizational structure, and access to strategic positions. In the context of student organizations, Dewanti et al. (2025) discussed experiences related to sexism, including gender stereotypes, derogatory comments, barriers to participation, and dominance in decision-making. Hisyam et al. (2025), meanwhile, examined gender-based social control and expectations in the phenomenon of overachievement among university students. Taken together, these studies show that gender is related not only to the formal division of roles but also to social demands and evaluations of how individuals present themselves. However, student organizations differ from professional workplaces, which have distinct procedures, work demands, and authority relations.

Students' entry into the workplace should also be understood in relation to the gender stereotypes and expectations that develop within society and organizations. Kinanti et al. (2021) show that perceptions of particular types of work remain associated with assumptions about masculine and feminine characteristics. In the context of student organizations, Haerullah et al. (2024) examine issues of gender equality in organizational participation, while Pasaribu and Hidir (2024) illustrate how perceptions of assertiveness and leadership capacity are associated with the representation of men and women in student organizations at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau. Meanwhile, Sukandi (2025) discusses gender bias through organizational processes and practices. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that gender dynamics are not solely related to the formal division of roles, but also involve the perceptions, norms, and social expectations that develop within organizational life. In the context of the transition from higher education to the world of work, internships provide an important space for students to recognize and understand professional expectations as well as gender relations. Barnett (2012) highlights the importance of understanding the socially constructed work realities experienced by student interns, including the gap between their expectations and their actual workplace experiences. Carian and Johnson (2026) likewise identify the transition from college to career as an important phase in the formation and transformation of gender beliefs. Similarly, Smith and Gayles (2018) demonstrate that women's academic and professional experiences can be shaped by gender expectations that develop in educational and workplace settings. Thus, internships can be understood not merely as a process of applying academic skills, but also as a space for social learning in which students encounter the norms, expectations, and gender practices operating within workplace organizations.

Studies of internship experiences provide a closer point of comparison for the present research. Nauman (2023) examined the lived experiences of female interns in a male-dominated business environment in Pakistan, while Zulkarnain et al. (2026) discussed experiences of sexual harassment during internships in Indonesia. These studies affirm the relevance of gender to internship experiences, although their focus and contexts differ from those of the present study. This research does not restrict its attention to explicit experiences of discrimination or harassment. Instead, it examines how gender expectations are recognized and interpreted in everyday interactions, including how students understand task allocation, communication styles, assertiveness, and the possibility of expressing disagreement. Previous studies thus provide a foundation for examining gender practices in internships without assuming that all students or organizations have uniform experiences.

This study focuses on the experiences of interns at the Secretariat of the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) of Riau Province and the Pekanbaru City General Election Commission (KPU). These two public institutions have different functions and institutional contexts: the DPRD

Secretariat is associated with legislative functions, protocol arrangements, and official hierarchies, whereas the KPU carries out administrative and technical functions related to election administration. These contextual differences are used to interpret variations in students' experiences, rather than to assume from the outset that either institution is more or less gender-equal. The analysis focuses on how students interpret the division of labor, the evaluation of communication and professional conduct, and their responses to gender expectations in their relationships with employees and supervisors.

The research gap addressed in this study concerns the need to understand how interns—as temporary participants learning to enter the world of work and possessing limited authority—enact and negotiate gender through interactions in public organizations. Unlike studies focusing on student organizations or specifically on experiences of harassment, this study brings together three aspects: students' perceptions of the basis for task allocation, their awareness of gender stereotypes in the evaluation of behavior, and the room they have to respond to such expectations. The analytical contribution lies in examining the tension between the perception that task allocation is relatively equitable and the continued presence of stereotypes in the interpretation of behavior, as well as how interns' hierarchical position shapes or constrains the possibilities for negotiation. This is an analytical focus, not an assumption that institutional discrimination has occurred at either site.

Based on this background, the study asks: how do interns enact and negotiate gender through everyday interactions at the Secretariat of the Riau Provincial DPRD and the Pekanbaru City KPU? It aims to analyze gender practices in the division of labor and the evaluation of professional behavior, and to examine how students adjust to and negotiate gender expectations during their internships. Theoretically, the study is expected to contribute to the sociology of gender and the sociology of organizations by applying the Doing Gender perspective to internship experiences. Empirically, it is expected to provide a more detailed understanding of the relationship between gender expectations, students' positions within organizational hierarchies, and their room to express opinions in the workplace.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive-exploratory design to understand gender practices and negotiations in internship experiences. West and Zimmerman's (1987) Doing Gender perspective was used to examine how normative expectations concerning men's and women's behavior emerge, are interpreted, and are negotiated in workplace interactions. The analysis also considered organizational context, hierarchy, and task allocation so that differences in experience would not automatically be attributed to gender. The research was conducted at the Secretariat of the Riau Provincial DPRD and the Pekanbaru City KPU. Informants were purposively selected and consisted of four Sociology students who had completed internships lasting approximately 30–60 working days: two women and two men, with two informants at each site. The informants were assigned the codes ZSM (male, 22 years old), IR (male, 20 years old), AQR (female, 20 years old), and AM (female, 20 years old) to protect their identities. Given the small number of informants, the findings are treated as an exploration of their experiences rather than a statistical representation or a comprehensive account of either institution.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Data collection focused on work experiences, relationships with employees and supervisors, communication patterns, the division of labor, and interpretations of gender expectations. Data trustworthiness was assessed through technique and source triangulation as well as member checking, by comparing narratives and confirming relevant transcript excerpts or summaries of interpretations with the informants. The data were analyzed thematically through repeated reading, coding, theme development, comparison across informants, and theoretical interpretation. The codes and themes covered task allocation, communication, evaluations of professional behavior, gender expectations, and students' responses and negotiations. The themes were then interpreted using the Doing Gender perspective, particularly the concept of accountability, while distinguishing between experiences reported by informants, their interpretations, and the researcher's interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender Practices in the Division of Labor and the Evaluation of Professionalism

The internship experiences at the Secretariat of the Riau Provincial DPRD and the Pekanbaru City KPU show that gender practices are related not only to the division of work but also to how behavior and competence are interpreted in professional interactions. Informants generally viewed task assignments as ideally based on organizational needs, supervisors' instructions, and students' abilities. At the same time, however, they recognized social assumptions that associate certain characteristics with men or women. This finding points to a gap between the principle of equality expressed by the informants and the presence of gender stereotypes in the interpretation of behavior.

At the Secretariat of the Riau Provincial DPRD, AQR explained that task allocation was determined by work requirements and employees' instructions. She did not directly identify any gender-based differentiation in administrative tasks. In her view, administrative work could be performed by male and female students alike, provided they had the required abilities and attention to detail. The account provided by ZSM, a male informant who interned at the same institution, was substantively consistent with AQR's experience. Similar views were expressed by AM and IR at the Pekanbaru City KPU. Both regarded competence and work requirements, rather than assumptions about jobs suitable for men or women, as the basis for task allocation. These accounts indicate that informants perceived the division of labor as relatively equitable, although they cannot be generalized to represent all task-allocation practices at either institution.

IR also suggested that tasks assigned more frequently to men may gradually come to be understood as tasks that are inherently more suitable for men, even though women may possess the same abilities. This statement draws attention to the naturalization of the division of labor: the repetition of a particular pattern may make that division appear normal and no longer open to question. From the perspective of Doing Gender, West and Zimmerman (1987) explain that gender is enacted and sustained through interactional practices that continually make the distinction between male and female categories relevant. Accordingly, an analysis of the division of labor should go beyond establishing whether task differences exist and examine how assignments are justified and whether recurring patterns become associated with gender-based assumptions about ability.

Nevertheless, the research data do not show that gender-based task-allocation patterns systematically occur at both sites. Rather, informants tended to perceive administrative task allocation as relatively equitable. Gender expectations were more apparent in the interpretation of professional behavior and communication. AM stated that a man who talks a lot may be seen as confident or bold, whereas a woman who behaves similarly may be regarded as talkative or nagging. IR raised a similar possibility regarding assertiveness: assertive behavior by men may be considered ordinary, while the same behavior by women may be judged as too harsh. These accounts indicate the informants' awareness of the possibility that different evaluative standards may be applied on the basis of gender.

These findings can be interpreted through the concept of accountability in the Doing Gender perspective. A person's actions are evaluated not only in terms of their content or relevance to work but may also be assessed against normative expectations about how men and women should behave (West & Zimmerman, 1987). For example, speaking actively or displaying assertiveness may acquire different social meanings depending on the gender category of the person displaying such behavior. However, it is important to distinguish informants' recognition of stereotypes from their direct experience of being evaluated in this way. The data more strongly indicate that AM and IR recognize the possibility of double standards; they do not establish that employees at the internship sites actually applied such labels to them.

The distinction between professional rules and gender expectations is also evident in AQR's experience. She described neat appearance, politeness, and discipline as general requirements for interns in a government environment. These requirements therefore cannot immediately be categorized as gender expectations without evidence that they are applied differently to male and female students. AQR also mentioned information she had heard about a tendency for DPRD protocol positions to be assigned to men. Since this information was neither based on her direct observation nor verified as an official policy, it can only be treated as an indication of perceptions concerning the allocation of certain functions, not as evidence of a formal restriction on women.

Compared with studies of student organizations discussed in the introduction, these findings extend the focus from access to organizational roles and participation to the evaluation of professional

behavior in the workplace. Dewanti et al. (2025), as summarized in the introduction, examined experiences of sexism, stereotypes, participation barriers, and dominance in decision-making within student organizations. The present study does not provide sufficient evidence to claim comparable experiences of direct discrimination. The limited point of convergence lies in the relevance of stereotypes to the interpretation of behavior, while the difference concerns the context of interns, who encounter workplace rules and authority relations in public organizations. This comparison establishes a dialogue at the level of research focus; it does not claim that the two studies produced identical empirical findings.

The finding that task allocation among student interns was generally perceived to be based on work requirements and individual competencies does not necessarily mean that gender expectations are absent from the workplace. Kinanti et al. (2021) demonstrate that gender-based occupational stereotypes continue to shape perceptions of the characteristics and abilities considered appropriate for particular types of work. Similarly, Smith and Gayles (2018) show how gender expectations can shape women's experiences in academic and professional settings through everyday social interactions. From an organizational perspective, Sukandi (2025) further draws attention to the ways in which gender bias may be embedded in organizational processes and practices. These studies provide a useful basis for interpreting the present findings, particularly the informants' accounts of differing expectations for men and women in relation to appearance, communication styles, assertiveness, and confidence. Although not all informants reported directly experiencing gender-differentiated treatment, their awareness of such expectations suggests that gender remains a relevant frame of reference through which workplace behavior and professionalism are understood and evaluated.

Thus, the gender practices identified in this study reveal two processes occurring side by side. Informants perceived administrative task allocation as relatively equitable and emphasized competence as the basis for assignments, while also recognizing gender stereotypes in the evaluation of speaking styles, assertiveness, and confidence. These findings do not demonstrate occupational segregation or institutional discrimination at either site. Their analytical contribution lies in showing that perceived equality in task distribution does not necessarily eliminate gender expectations in the social evaluation of behavior.

Negotiation Strategies and the Limits of Interns' Agency

Students' negotiation of gender expectations is not always expressed through open resistance. In the informants' experiences, responses to the workplace also took the form of behavioral adjustment, observation of organizational routines, and consideration of when and how to express opinions. AQR and ZSM explained that they tended to understand workplace rules and procedures before taking action. AM and IR, meanwhile, stated that they would consider expressing their views politely if they encountered task allocation they perceived as unfair. This pattern suggests that negotiation may take place as a process of considering possible courses of action, even when it does not lead to rejection or a change in decisions.

The decision to adapt is related to students' position as temporary participants in an organization. Students depend on supervisors' guidance, are still building work experience, and may feel that their behavior forms part of the assessment of their internship performance. These conditions require them to consider the social consequences of expressing disagreement. In this context, adaptation can be a strategy for understanding the environment and maintaining professional relationships. However, adaptation does not necessarily indicate acceptance of every rule or assumption that applies.

The analysis needs to distinguish adaptation to intern status from negotiation specifically related to gender. AQR's choice to observe the situation and follow formal procedures primarily reflects a strategy for adapting to a hierarchical government environment. The available data do not indicate that this choice was specifically prompted by her identity as a woman or that male students had different room for action. AQR's and ZSM's experiences are therefore more appropriately used to explain the context in which interns' agency is limited, rather than as direct evidence of gender negotiation.

The connection with gender is more apparent in AM's and IR's view that task allocation should be based on ability rather than sex. Both also stated that feelings of deference, their status as interns, and concerns about being considered impolite could affect their willingness to express disagreement. This reveals a tension between the principle of equality they espouse and their ability to put it into

practice in workplace interactions. Awareness that assignments should not be determined by gender does not necessarily give students sufficient authority to question a supervisor's decision.

It is important to distinguish the intention to express disagreement from negotiation that has actually taken place. Statements that informants would express their views if they encountered unfairness indicate a normative commitment to equality, but do not establish that they have rejected assignments, voiced protests, or changed organizational decisions. The data therefore provide stronger evidence of critical awareness and contemplated strategies than of resistance practices that have occurred and produced change.

At the level of interpretation, the statement that administrative work is not inherently women's work and technical tasks are not automatically men's work reflects an effort by informants to reject explanations of ability based on gender categories. This stance can be understood as a rejection of essentialism, namely the assumption that certain abilities or characteristics are naturally inherent in men or women. From the Doing Gender perspective, this interpretation is important because gender categories are not only reproduced but can also be questioned in interaction. Nevertheless, the study does not yet have sufficient evidence to determine the extent to which these views changed task-allocation practices or informants' behavior during their internships.

These findings have a limited point of convergence with Nauman's (2023) study of female interns' experiences in a male-dominated business environment, as discussed in the introduction. Both studies treat internship experiences as an important context for understanding gender relations. However, the present study does not focus on women's experiences in male-dominated environments or seek to establish discrimination. Instead, it examines how students interpret stereotypes and consider possible responses from within a hierarchical internship position. This comparison indicates that internship experiences need to be understood in relation to organizational context and interns' positions, rather than assumed to be uniform across workplaces.

Gender negotiation in this study should not be understood as a binary choice between compliance and resistance. Students may follow professional rules, adapt because of their limited authority, and at the same time question stereotypes they consider unfair. Negotiation takes place within a space constrained by learning needs, relationships with supervisors, and the consideration of maintaining professional relations. The findings show that interns exercise agency, although it cannot always be expressed through overt action or changes in decisions.

Organizational Hierarchy as a Context for Gender Negotiation

Gender practices and negotiations among interns take place within organizations characterized by distributions of authority, work procedures, and relationships among employees, supervisors, and interns. ZSM and AQR emphasized the importance of supervisors' instructions and compliance with procedures, while AM and IR explained that their status as interns affected their willingness to express opinions. These accounts indicate that students do not occupy positions equal to those of employees or supervisors in determining tasks and evaluating their completion. Hierarchy thus forms a context that shapes students' choices, particularly when they consider whether to voice disagreement.

Organizational hierarchy cannot, however, be equated directly with gender-based domination. The authority relationship between supervisors and interns may, in principle, apply to all interns. To establish that such a relationship produces gender inequality, it would be necessary to show that it provides male and female students with different opportunities, expectations, or consequences. The available data are insufficient to establish such differences. Hierarchy in this study is therefore more appropriately understood as a structural condition that generally limits students' room for negotiation, while its connection to gender appears through informants' awareness of stereotypes and differing behavioral standards.

Organizational culture is shaped by formal rules and everyday interactional routines. Requirements concerning dress, discipline, and etiquette may form part of professional standards that apply generally. However, the same rules may produce different experiences if students' behavior is evaluated through gender expectations. For example, assertiveness may be regarded as a professional quality in one situation but judged as too harsh when displayed by a woman. In this study, AM and IR recognized the possibility of such differences in evaluation. However, there is not yet sufficient documentation of specific incidents to establish how these standards were applied by employees or supervisors at either institution.

At the level of organizational governance, AQR suggested that internship tasks should be allocated in a more structured and transparent manner and accompanied by clear learning targets. This proposal can be understood as a recommendation to clarify the rationale for assignments, responsibilities, and learning opportunities for each student. Transparent assignment criteria would also enable students to understand the basis for task allocation and reduce room for unstated assumptions. However, this recommendation does not prove that previous task allocation was discriminatory. It is more appropriately understood as a practical implication of the need for accountable internship management.

Compared with Zulkarnain et al.'s (2026) study of sexual harassment during internships in Indonesia, the present study has a different focus. As introduced earlier, that study treats sexual harassment as its central concern, whereas this research examines gender practices in the interpretation of behavior, task allocation, and student negotiation. This difference in focus is important so that the findings are not conflated with experiences of harassment or discrimination that were not reported by the informants. The present study shows that gender analysis in internship contexts can also address more subtle social expectations, although direct evidence of the application of double standards remains limited.

Overall, hierarchy and organizational culture help explain the context that shapes students' room for action. The findings also show that informants perceived administrative task allocation as relatively equitable, recognized gender stereotypes in the evaluation of behavior, and considered negotiation within the limits of the authority attached to intern status. The study's contribution lies in identifying the tension between students' stated commitment to equality, the presence of stereotypes in social interpretation, and the limits of agency within hierarchical workplace relations.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that interns' experiences at the Secretariat of the Riau Provincial DPRD and the Pekanbaru City KPU reveal gender dynamics in the division of labor, interaction, and interpretations of professionalism. In general, task allocation was understood to be based on work requirements and students' abilities. At the same time, informants' experiences also revealed an awareness of gender expectations, particularly concerning appearance, communication styles, assertiveness, and confidence in the workplace.

From the Doing Gender perspective, these findings show that gender is not only related to task allocation but is also present in everyday interaction and the interpretation of behavior. Students respond to these dynamics by observing, adapting, and communicating while taking organizational norms and work procedures into account. Their position as interns also shapes how they understand and negotiate the expectations they encounter during their internships. Internship experience thus becomes a space for social learning in which students come to understand the relationship between gender, professionalism, and organizational culture. This study provides an initial account of how students interpret and respond to gender expectations in the workplace. Future research could involve a larger number of informants and expand observations of workplace interactions to develop a deeper understanding of these dynamics.

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