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Research Article

Communicative Mechanisms of Political Exclusion: Power, Discourse, and the Limits of Women's Representation in Indonesia's Garment Global Production Networks

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Abstract

The feminisation of labor in export-oriented garment industries is frequently portrayed as a pathway to economic inclusion. However, increasing evidence suggests that such integration occurs within unequal and exploitative in global garment production, limited attention had been given to the communicative mechanisms through which the political exclusion of women workers is reproduced. This study investigates how communicative practices shape and constrain the political representation of women garment workers within Global Production Networks (GPN) in Indonesia. Employing a critical qualitative approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews and focus group discussion with 18 participants, comprising 15 women workers and three labor union representative from two garment factories in North Jakarta. Data were analysed using Critical Thematic Analysis (CTA), integrating Nancy Fraser's theory of justice with Michel Foucault's perspective on discourse and power. The findings show that political exclusion is reproduced through interconnected mechanisms, including economic exploitation, disciplinary practices fostering fear and self-censorship, the dominance of managerial discourse, restriction on union activities, organisational fragmentation, and gendered social norms that marginalise women's voices. These mechanisms collectively undermine workers' ability to express, negotiate, and institutionalise their interests. The study argues that political exclusion is mediated through everyday communicative practices, extending Fraser's framework by demonstrating how communicative mechanisms operationalise structural injustice through the regulation of voice, knowledge, and participation within global production regimes.

Keywords: Garment Industry; Political Representation; Power and Discourse; Women Workers.

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INTRODUCTION

The garment industry is often positioned as both a driver of economic growth and a major source of employment for women workers in developing countries. The incorporation of women into industrial sectors, including garment production, is frequently framed as a form of economic inclusion that expands access to income, financial independence, and social mobility (Cameron, 2023; Kurniasari et al., 2025; Kurniasih et al., 2022; Padang et al., 2025). However, such narratives tend to oversimplify a far more complex reality, in which women's integration into the garment industry occurs within asymmetrical and exploitative power relations.

In the Indonesian context, numerous studies and reports indicate that women workers experience not only economic exploitation but also systematic constraints across cultural and political dimensions. For instance, a report by Better Work Indonesia shows that women workers tend to work longer hours and receive lower wages compared to their male counterparts (Djaya et al., 2019). Other studies highlight that women workers face precarious working conditions, including job insecurity due to outsourcing systems, low wages, limited social protection, and restricted career opportunities (Aini, 2024; Wee et al., 2023). Furthermore, reports by the ILO (2022) and FEMNET e.V. (2025) demonstrate that women workers are subjected not only to economic exploitation but also to restrictions on freedom of association, union-busting practices, and marginalisation in representation processes (ILO, 2022; FEMNET eV, 2025). These conditions suggest that the injustices experienced by women workers cannot be reduced solely to issues of economic distribution but instead reflect broader configurations of power within global capitalism.

These dynamics are closely linked to the logic of labour feminisation within global capitalism, where women are recruited on a massive scale as primary labour due to their perceived flexibility, lower cost, and ease of control (Anh et al., 2024). Labour feminisation operates as a structural feature of global capitalism, sustaining production efficiency through gender-based differentiation in labour organisation. Rather than leading to empowerment, labour feminisation is often associated with work intensification, low wages, precarious employment, and the normalisation of gender-based violence (GBV) (Anh et al., 2024; Ford, 2002). Flexible labour arrangements - such as short-term contracts, high production targets, and unpaid overtime - have become normalised practices within export-oriented production systems (Thee, 2015). Within this framework, work intensification, job insecurity, and the normalisation of workplace violence and harassment cannot be understood as incidental phenomena, but rather as integral components of global production systems. Consequently, the subordination of women workers is not only material in nature but is also culturally legitimised and institutionally reproduced.

Structurally, these dynamics are rooted in the transformation of production systems within the framework of Global Production Networks (GPN), where production is fragmented across transnational networks involving multinational corporations, states, local suppliers, and workers' households (Munck, 2002). Within this system, transnational corporations maintain strategic control over design, pricing, production standards, and market access, while production risks and cost pressures are transferred to suppliers and workers (Graz et al., 2022; Anner, 2022). Baglioni et al. (2022) argue that labour feminisation operates as an exploitative labour regime within global production, shaped by the intersection of commercial demands from lead firms and gendered social reproduction politics at the local level (Baglioni et al., 2022). This cross-border fragmentation generates increasingly flexible and precarious labour systems, characterised by labour flexibility and job insecurity. Such transformations are driven by global economic restructuring and

competitive pressures within global production networks (Quinlan et al., 2024). In this context, women workers occupy the most vulnerable positions within global production hierarchies.

Although existing literature has extensively examined the economic dimensions of exploitation in the garment industry, relatively little attention has been paid to how power operates in legitimising the voices and participation of women workers through everyday communication practices. The exclusion of women workers occurs not only through unequal resource distribution but also through limited recognition of women as legitimate subjects capable of speaking, articulating their experiences, and influencing decisions. This indicates that injustice within the garment industry is inherently multidimensional.

From a development communication perspective, access to equitable communication spaces and recognition of marginalised voices are essential prerequisites for participatory and inclusive development (Servaes, 2020). However, in global industrial practice, communication within production spaces tends to be hierarchical, limiting the possibility of equal dialogue. This reveals a critical gap: while GPN literature explains global structural pressures, it pays insufficient attention to how power operates through communication practices; conversely, development communication literature emphasises participation but often assumes communication as a neutral space.

To bridge this gap, this study employs Nancy Fraser's framework of justice, which conceptualises injustice across three interrelated dimensions: economic (maldistribution), cultural (misrecognition), and political (misrepresentation). These dimensions are mutually constitutive and determine the achievement of participatory parity - a condition in which individuals can participate as equals in social life (Mudzakkir, 2021). In this perspective, injustice arises when objective (economic), intersubjective (status), and political (representation) conditions are not simultaneously fulfilled.

To further understand how these injustices are produced, this study integrates Michel Foucault's perspective on discourse and power. This approach enables an analysis of how the legitimacy of voice, knowledge, and truth is constructed through discursive practices and disciplinary mechanisms within production spaces.

Building on this framework, this study argues that the exclusion of women workers in the garment industry is not only reproduced through economic structures and gender subordination but is also mediated through communication mechanisms that regulate who is allowed to speak, to be heard, and to be recognized. Communication is thus understood as a mechanism that connects and operationalises the three dimensions of justice within social practice.

This study aims to analyse how power relations and discursive practices within the garment industry shape communication mechanisms and constrain the political representation of women workers within the context of global production networks. Theoretically, this research contributes to extending Fraser's framework into the realm of communication practices by demonstrating how injustice is operationalised through everyday discursive mechanisms; integrating Foucault's perspective to explain the micro-level production of power within production spaces; and bridging macro-level GPN analysis with communication practices at the organisational and interactional levels. In doing so, this study not only advances the analysis of injustice in the garment industry but also offers a novel analytical framework for understanding communication as a central mechanism in the reproduction of political exclusion under global capitalism.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach within a critical paradigm to examine how power relations and discursive practices in the garment industry shape communication mechanisms and constrain the political representation of women workers within the context of global production networks. The study was conducted in 2024 in two garment factories in North Jakarta. Both factories are integrated as suppliers for global brands within transnational production networks. The sites were selected purposively as they represent key characteristics of the Indonesian garment industry, namely reliance on women workers, the flexibilisation of labour relations (including short-term contracts and daily casual labour), and high production pressures within fast fashion systems. This purposive selection was intended to capture, within a single research setting, the full range of economic, cultural, and political conditions through which the communicative exclusion of women workers is produced and suistained. Following critical feminist scholarship, women workers' experiences are approached not merely as empirical evidence, but as forms of situated knowledge and political experience (Lazar, 2014).

Data Sources and Participant

This study draw on three primary sources of data: in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and documents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 18 participants to explore their working conditions, workplace power relations, disciplinary practices, and experiences of GBV, including verbal and sexual harassment. Three were held across the two factories to examine collective dynamics, shared experiences, and the processes through which GBV becomes normalised in everyday workplace relations. Combining individual interview with FGDs enabled the study to compare partisipants'personal experience with their collective interpretations of shopfloor disciplinary practice. Document analysis covered Indonesian labour regulations, particularly Labour Law No. 13 of 2003 and the Omnibus Law on Job Creation No. 11 of 2020, collective labour agreements from both factories, and materials produced by independent labour unions. These documents were analysed to situate workers' experiences within broader legal, organisational, and industrial context. Particular attention was given to how weak grievance mechanisms and anti-union practices contributed to everyday employment insecurity in export-oriented garment production.

Participants

The study involved 18 participants, comparasing 15 women garment workers and three union actors from an independent labour union (FS*). Participant were recruited through union facilitation to ensure informed consent, protect confidentiality, and create a safer environment in which they could discuss sensitive experiences of GBV. Most participants were women workers in their late thirties to late forties who had worked in the industry for many years and had been actively involved in the union. They were selected because their long-term organizational engagement had fostered stronger trust in the union and greater confidence to participate in discussion of sensitive issues.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a critical thematic analysis (CTA) approach, which is specifically designed to connect patterns of discourse with broader relations of power and ideology (Lawless et al., 2019). Unlike conventional thematic analysis, CTA not only identifies themes but

also examines how these themes reflect and reproduce structures of social inequality. The analysis was supported by NVivo 12 software for data management, coding, and thematic organisation. However, the software functioned solely as an analytical aid, while interpretation remained a reflective and iterative process undertaken by the researcher. The analytical process was carried out in two main stages:

a. Open coding
   Open coding was conducted by identifying discursive patterns based on the principles of recurrence (emergence of similar meanings), repetition (repetition of words or phrases), and forcefulness (expressive emphasis in narratives). This stage aimed to capture the subjective experiences of women workers inductively and to identify initial themes emerging from the data.
b. Closed coding
   Closed coding focused on critical interpretation by linking the identified themes to structures of ideology, power relations, and social hierarchies. At this stage, Nancy Fraser's framework was used to analyse how objective (economic), intersubjective (status), and political (representation) conditions shape the possibility of participatory parity. Meanwhile, a Foucauldian perspective was employed to analyse how power operates through discursive practices, processes of normalisation, and the production of knowledge in everyday interactions within production spaces (Foucault, 1995; Santoso, 2002). Through this process, the analysis moves from a descriptive level to a critical level that connects everyday discourse with broader political-economic structures within global production networks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal patterned constraints on women workers' ability to articulate, negotiate, and institutionalise their claims within production spaces. These patterns are not merely organisational or incidental; rather, they reflect deeper forms of power embedded within the global production system. This discussion interprets these findings through the theoretical frameworks of Nancy Fraser's theory of justice, Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse and power, and Global Production Networks (GPN) analysis. This approach enables the conceptualisation of political exclusion not simply as the absence of institutional representation, but as a communicatively mediated process rooted in global capitalism.

Within this framework, political exclusion - as a form of misrepresentation (political injustice) in global production systems - occurs not only through institutional structures such as labour unions, bipartite forums, collective labour agreements (CBA), labour regulations, or social auditing mechanisms. More fundamentally, exclusion operates through communicative processes that hinder the achievement of participatory parity, that is, a condition in which women workers possess equal capacity to participate as full partners in social and political interaction (Mudzakkir, 2022).

Thus, exclusion does not arise solely from the absence of formal representation, but from systematic restrictions on who is recognised as a legitimate subject entitled to speak, what can be said, and what forms of knowledge are considered valid. As a result, communication spaces within

garment factories do not function as egalitarian deliberative arenas, but rather as structures of power that hierarchically regulate the distribution of voice, knowledge, and authority.

From the perspective of Nancy Fraser's theory of justice, this condition reflects not only formal misrepresentation but also misframing - errors in defining who is included within the political community - and metapolitical injustice, which refers to practices that determine the very boundaries of the political arena itself interaction (Mudzakkir, 2022). These three dimensions are intertwined in constructing and sustaining the exclusion of women workers in the two garment factories studied in North Jakarta. Existing formal representation does not guarantee substantive representation, as it is controlled through the formation of employer-aligned unions and restrictions on collective action. At the same time, the experiences and interests of women workers are not recognised as legitimate political issues, reflecting their subordinated status. Meanwhile, the boundaries of the political are defined through communicative practices that regulate who is allowed to speak and be heard.

The integration of Fraser and Foucault provides a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. It demonstrates that injustice in Fraser's framework is not only structural but also reproduced through everyday discursive practices that govern the legitimacy of voice. In this sense, Fraser's normative conception of justice can be operationalised through a micro-level analysis of power relations as articulated by Foucault. Fraser offers a normative framework to identify forms of injustice through the principle of participatory parity, while Foucault explains the micro-mechanisms through which injustice is produced, normalised, and sustained via discourse and disciplinary practices. Accordingly, communication cannot be understood as a neutral medium; rather, it constitutes an arena in which the legitimacy of voice, the authority of knowledge, and the boundaries of participation are produced and negotiated.

Taken together, these findings indicate that political exclusion operates not only at the institutional level but is continuously reproduced through everyday communication practices. These communicative inequalities reflect the failure of the objective, intersubjective, and political conditions required to achieve participatory parity. Therefore, communication functions as a central mediating mechanism through which economic, cultural, and political injustices within global production systems are reproduced and maintained.

Global Political Economy and Labour Feminisation as the Material Basis of Exclusion

Global political economy cannot be understood merely as a structural backdrop; rather, it constitutes an objective condition that directly shapes the possibility of achieving participatory parity within production spaces. In Fraser's framework, these objective conditions refer to the distribution of material resources that either enable or constrain individuals' capacity to participate as equal partners in social interaction interaction (Mudzakkir, 2022). Accordingly, who is able to speak, what can be said, and which forms of knowledge are recognised as valid are determined not only by institutional rules but also by the material conditions produced within global production systems.

In this context, the integration of Indonesia's garment industry into Global Production Networks (GPN) has generated a production system characterised by cost efficiency, labour flexibility, and asymmetrical power relations. Transnational corporations retain strategic control over production, while risks and cost pressures are transferred to local suppliers and (Graz et al., 2022; Anner, 2022). This practice reflects the logic of "Bloody Taylorism," which emphasises efficiency through intensified labour control (Munck, 2002). Within Fraser's framework, such a

structure not only produces economic exploitation (maldistribution) but also constitutes the objective conditions for participatory parity, whereby unequal resource distribution creates economic dependency that systematically limits women workers' ability to participate equally in communicative and political arenas. Thus, maldistribution does not stand alone; it also serves as the material basis mediating misrepresentation.

Within this framework, labour feminisation functions as an operational mechanism that sustains the system. Women workers are positioned as flexible, low-cost, and easily controlled labour (Anh et al., 2024). The findings of this study indicate that this is reflected in the flexibilisation of labour relations, including short-term contracts, daily casual labour status, and outsourcing, which generate job insecurity and economic vulnerability, as illustrated in the following testimonies:

> "There are not even 10 percent permanent employees… 75% are on contracts" (TTN, FGD, 27 August 2024).
>
> "The wage is only slightly above IDR 100,000 per day (daily casual wage)" (RM, in-depth interview, 9 October 2024).

These conditions contribute not only to economic exploitation - such as low wages, high production targets, long working hours, and intensified labour under inadequate facilities - but are also evident in workers' own accounts:

> "The targets are high, inhumane… We only get 30 minutes of rest because we have to meet the target… we can only go home at 5 p.m., often later… without overtime pay" (RN, in-depth interview, 20 September 2024).
>
> "The machines are old, but the output is expected to be good and high" (SR, FGD, 12 September 2024).
>
> "One person operates four machines" (LL, FGD, 28 September 2024).

Labour feminisation also produces unequal communicative conditions. Job insecurity increases the risks associated with speaking out, leading women workers to limit their articulation of experiences and interests:

> "We don't dare… We are women. We don't want to cause trouble… we still need money" (SF, in-depth interview, 5 October 2024).
>
> "We just comply… otherwise we might be dismissed or transferred" (SF, in-depth interview, 5 October 2024).

Thus, communicative inequality is not always produced through direct representational exclusion, but through the creation of material conditions that render voice articulation risky. Economic dependency resulting from labour flexibility functions as an indirect mechanism of control that restricts the possibility of speaking. In this sense, silencing operates structurally through the production of conditions in which speaking becomes socially and economically costly, including risks of humiliation, social exclusion, or contract non-renewal.

Furthermore, labour feminisation is reinforced through the production of gendered discourses that position women as "compliant" and "undemanding" workers. These narratives function not only as cultural legitimations of exploitative practices but also as discursive mechanisms that regulate the boundaries of communication. This is evident in everyday interactions within production spaces, where power relations are explicitly asserted through statements such as:

> "I am the boss and you are the worker… you must obey the boss" (SF, in-depth interview, 5 October 2024).

"You should be grateful you can work here… You are nobody, you are just a worker" (LD, in-depth interview, 21 September 2024).

Within Fraser's framework, these practices reflect the failure of intersubjective conditions for participatory parity, as prevailing norms and social practices do not allow for relationships based on mutual respect and equality among participants. This aligns with Barrientos (2019), who demonstrates that global markets actively exploit and reinforce traditional gender norms to suppress wages and enable production flexibility (Barrientos, 2019) . In Fraser's conception of justice (2008), this condition reflects cultural injustice (misrecognition) in the form of status subordination, whereby women workers are not recognised as equal partners in social interaction (Mudzakkir, 2022). Such status subordination not only diminishes their social position but also limits their recognition as legitimate communicative subjects, thereby directly reinforcing misrepresentation.

Accordingly, the political exclusion of women workers cannot be understood without recognising the interconnections between economic structures, discursive practices, and communication mechanisms. Misrepresentation in the context of the two garment factories in North Jakarta is produced through multidimensional forms of power. Global political economy provides the structural foundation, while labour feminisation functions as the material basis that enables the continuous reproduction of unequal communication mechanisms. These elements form mutually reinforcing configurations of power: GPN provides the structural framework, feminisation provides the operational mechanism, and the resulting material conditions constrain the articulation of voice. In this context, communication operates as a mediating mechanism through which maldistribution and misrecognition are transformed into misrepresentation, ultimately hindering the achievement of participatory parity among women workers within production spaces.

Disciplinary Practices and Communication Mechanisms in the Reproduction of Political Exclusion

At the organisational level, structural power asymmetries in the garment industry are reproduced through disciplinary practices that directly constrain the possibilities for resistance and participation among women workers in collective activities. The findings of this study show that disciplinary practices function as a primary instrument for regulating the legitimacy of voice within production spaces. These practices are reflected in various forms of direct control, including restrictions on unionisation and intimidation, such as threats of dismissal, forced transfers, administrative sanctions, and verbal abuse directed at women workers in the two garment factories in North Jakarta. Such practices are strategically deployed to suppress workers' involvement in organisations and to limit the articulation of their interests. In this context, disciplinary practices operate as mechanisms of control that regulate behaviour while simultaneously restricting communicative space, particularly in determining who is allowed to speak and on what issues. The experiences of women workers illustrate this dynamic:

"They (women workers) are not allowed to wear the FS*** uniform" (RM, in-depth interview, 22 October 2024).

"When she joined the independent union, FS***… the next day she was summoned… asked to sign contract termination and resignation" (TTN, FGD, 27 August 2024).

"I was transferred everywhere… as if they were afraid it would spread" (RM, in-depth interview, 9 October 2024).

"He got very angry, I received a warning letter… was told to move to another union… even a small mistake leads to a warning" (HM, FGD, 28 September 2024).

These disciplinary practices do not only target specific individuals but also create a collective climate of fear that inhibits the articulation of women workers' voices. In a work environment dominated by short-term contracts and insecure employment status, the threat of job loss becomes a primary instrument for enforcing compliance, as expressed by one worker: "Since the illegal levies were reported in the suggestion box, they tried to find out who did it. After that, people became afraid to speak" (TTN, in-depth interview, 5 October 2024).

Consistent with the findings of Ahmed (2024) and Kabir et al. (2025), economic exploitation and symbolic violence operate simultaneously in maintaining production control (Ahmed, 2024; Kabir et al., 2025). In this context, verbal abuse and intimidation function as technologies of silencing that define the boundaries of communication. This is evident in the following accounts:

"I was called a pig, a dog, a traitor just because I joined a union" (TTN, in-depth interview, 5 October 2024).

"I was summoned… shouted at… called a dog… accused of damaging the stitching, not following SOP" (SF, FGD, 27 August 2024).

"Pig, dog… all kinds of inappropriate words… all animal insults came out" (HM, FGD, 13 August 2024).

These practices indicate that restrictions on communication do not always take the form of explicit prohibitions, but rather emerge through conditions that render speaking risky. This aligns with Zanoni & Miszczyńsk (2024), who argue that labour control in contemporary capitalism also operates through seemingly neutral organisational mechanisms, such as performance evaluation, work arrangements, and managerial decisions (Zanoni & Miszczyński, 2024). Such practices normalise domination as organisational rationality, positioning resistance as deviance that must be corrected through various interventions, including exclusion, administrative pressure, or job reallocation (Ahmed, 2024).

Furthermore, disciplinary practices are reinforced through symbolic and cultural mechanisms operating through discourse. Negative labelling and stigma are used to delegitimise active women workers, as illustrated below:

"Unmanageable, defiant, arrogant, irresponsible" (IM, FGD, 28 September 2024).

"Considered rebellious… problematic… not working properly" (SR, FGD, 12 September 2024).

"Called bandits, arrogant, traitors" (ATN, FGD, 13 August 2024).

This delegitimization extends into identity-based stigma, such as: "What is your union called?... Are you joining a lesbian union?" (AT, in-depth interview, 19 September 2024). In addition, normative narratives such as "a good woman should not make many demands" and "just work properly" function as disciplinary mechanisms that restrict the legitimacy of voice. As expressed by workers:

"I was told I was ungrateful for demanding a fair wage" (RN, in-depth interview, 20 September 2024).

"In every meeting… they say don't get involved, just focus on your work" (SF, in-depth interview, 5 October 2024).

From a Foucauldian perspective, these practices can be understood as forms of disciplinary power operating through normalisation and internalisation (Foucault, 1995). Control is exercised

not only through external coercion but also through the production of subjects who regulate themselves. In this study, women workers are not only silenced through organisational pressure but are also encouraged to engage in self-censorship, as compliance becomes a norm perceived as rational and safe.

Thus, silencing in this context operates in a dual manner: externally through organisational pressure and internally through self-discipline. These findings are consistent with Kabir et al. (2025), who argue that harassment, stigma, and symbolic violence function as structural mechanisms that sustain labour compliance and production stability (Kabir et al., 2025). Under such conditions, inequalities in communication mechanisms arise not only from restricted access but also from the production of subjects who are unable to articulate their voices.

More broadly, disciplinary practices function as a bridge between economic exploitation and political exclusion. As discussed earlier, labour flexibilisation and economic dependency create material conditions that limit the courage to speak. Disciplinary practices then operationalise these conditions at the organisational level by ensuring that communicative boundaries are actively enforced in everyday interactions. As a result, women workers not only face labour control but also lose the conditions necessary for voice articulation. This reinforces the argument that political exclusion among women workers is not merely institutional in nature, but is mediated through unequal communication mechanisms that restrict them as legitimate communicative subjects within production spaces.

Managerial Discourse and Epistemic Exclusion in Production Spaces

Beyond disciplinary mechanisms, this study demonstrates that political exclusion is also reproduced through the dominance of managerial discourse, which regulates the legitimacy of knowledge within production spaces. While disciplinary mechanisms restrict who is allowed to speak, managerial discourse determines whose knowledge is recognised as truth. Thus, exclusion operates not only at the level of participation but also at the epistemic level, shaping the authority of knowledge within the discursive order of production

Empirically, this dominance is evident in the ways in which the aspirations of women workers in the two garment factories in North Jakarta are ignored, dismissed, or reduced to expressions of ignorance. Even concrete complaints regarding working conditions fail to produce meaningful change. These findings indicate that communication mechanisms do not merely regulate who can speak but also define the boundaries of recognised truth. This is reflected in the following accounts:

> “At that time I asked, but it was ignored” (TTN, in-depth interview, 5 October 2024).
>
> “There has been no change in water conditions after the protest; it still smells, and we still have to buy our own drinking water” (TTN, FGD, 28 September 2024).
>
> “We have protested many times about the poor quality of food, until we are exhausted” (IM, FGD, 28 September 2024).

From a Foucauldian perspective (1972-1977), this condition reflects the formation of a regime of truth, a system of knowledge that determines what counts as truth and who has the authority to declare it (Santoso, 2002). In the findings of this study, managerial discourse functions as the primary source of authority in defining production realities. Knowledge produced by management - related to productivity, efficiency, and rationality of work - is positioned as legitimate truth, while the lived experiences of women workers lack equal epistemic status. In this context,

control operates not only over labour processes but also over the production of meaning and knowledge that shape how work realities are understood.

Within Fraser's framework, this condition reflects not only epistemic inequality but also misrecognition in the form of status subordination. Women workers are not recognised as equal partners in social interaction and therefore lack equal epistemic authority in defining the realities of their own working conditions. The issue, therefore, is not merely a lack of recognition of identity, but a failure in the social status structure that determines who is entitled to be known, heard, and believed.

This condition also indicates a failure of the intersubjective conditions required for participatory parity, where prevailing norms and social practices do not allow for relationships based on mutual respect and equality. Women workers' experiences are not recognised as legitimate sources of knowledge, resulting in a loss of their legitimacy to articulate and define their own working conditions. Recognition of women workers is instrumental and conditional, emerging only in response to external pressures such as audits by global buyers. As noted by one worker: "In 2017, 70% of contract women workers were made permanent to meet buyer requirements… a buyer came and required that at least 25% be permanent employees… they were afraid the orders would be withdrawn" (TTN, FGD, 27 August 2024). This illustrates that legitimacy is not grounded in communicative equality, but in production interests.

The dominance of managerial discourse also inhibits the formation of equal communication spaces. The findings show that there are no communication forums that enable two-way interaction between management and workers. Under these conditions, communication becomes one-directional and hierarchical: management produces and distributes meaning, while workers are positioned as passive recipients. This is reflected in the following statements:

> "I once said: I want to speak as a union representative, but I was not given space" (TTN, in-depth interview, 5 October 2024).
>
> "There has never been any invitation from management to discuss anything. There has never been any discussion at all" (RN, FGD, 12 September 2024).

Such conditions reinforce the positioning of women workers as objects of production rather than as equal subjects of communication. This aligns with Bartley and Coe (2022), who argue that, at the global level, women workers are not positioned as equal actors in the market but rather as flexible factors of production without meaningful participation in decision-making processes (Bartley et al., 2022).

Thus, inequality in communication not only restricts access to communicative spaces but also limits the recognition of women workers' voices and knowledge. Managerial discourse functions as a mechanism that defines the boundaries of truth, determines what can be articulated, and establishes who has the authority to speak. In this context, communication becomes the arena in which misrecognition is mediated and reproduced.

Conceptually, these findings reinforce the argument that misrepresentation in Fraser's framework cannot be fully understood without considering its discursive and epistemic dimensions. Political exclusion occurs not only due to the absence of formal representation but also due to inequalities in status structures and the legitimacy of knowledge, which obstruct the achievement of participatory parity. Therefore, political justice cannot be realised solely through institutional reform; it requires the transformation of intersubjective conditions and discursive orders that enable

women workers to be recognised as equal subjects of communication and knowledge within production spaces.

Labour Organisation Fragmentation and Pseudo-Representation

Within the context of labour organisation, restrictions on women workers' freedom of association are not exercised solely through direct repression, but also through strategies of organisational fragmentation that systematically weaken collective capacity. The findings of this study indicate that fragmentation functions as a mechanism that regulates the distribution of voice within the arena of organisational communication, thereby limiting the articulation of shared interests.

Inequalities in communication mechanisms within the two garment factories in North Jakarta are reinforced by the presence of multiple labour organisations with differing orientations, low levels of trust among actors, and corporate intervention through the formation of employer-aligned unions. This is reflected in the following worker accounts:

> "A rival union appeared immediately after FS*** was established" (ATK, FGD, 27 August 2024).
>
> "At AMS, there was initially only one union, but now there are three" (OC, in-depth interview, 25 October 2024).

Fragmentation is further intensified by weak internal cohesion within labour organisations, as expressed by JM: "There are many leaders within each organisation, but we do not trust each other… each still holds onto their own ideology" (JM, in-depth interview, 30 October 2024). This condition produces a fragmented structure of representation that weakens political bargaining power. Such fragmentation cannot be understood merely as an internal organisational dynamic; rather, it represents a strategy of power aimed at maintaining dominance within production spaces by preventing the formation of collective strength. This is evident in the following statements:

> "The organisation is not yet solid and tends to be fragmented, not strong enough" (OC, in-depth interview, 25 October 2024).
>
> "Struggling individually will not lead to results, except criminalisation" (JM, in-depth interview, 30 October 2024).
>
> "I was monitored like a general (because I refused to sign the wage suspension)… I was the only one who did not sign" (RM, in-depth interview, 9 November 2024).

Such fragmentation increases the vulnerability of women workers to intimidation and criminalisation, as struggles are carried out individually and without strong collective support. This condition narrows the capacity of women workers to articulate their interests collectively. Existing literature indicates that fragmentation of labour organisations significantly weakens collective capacity to influence economic and political policies (Jelly et al., 2024; Indira Wahyuningtyas et al., 2025). In this context, fragmentation operates as a political mechanism that reinforces political exclusion by weakening solidarity and representational capacity.

Moreover, the presence of employer-aligned (yellow) unions creates an illusion of participation that ultimately strengthens managerial control (Jelly et al., 2024). In this study, formal representation remains in place, but it fails to produce substantive representation because organisational structures are shaped by corporate interests. This is reflected in workers' statements: "The union is just a formality" (RM, in-depth interview, 22 October 2024). "What matters is having a base… having members. But they tend to align with management" (TTN, FGD, 27 August 2024).

Thus, the existence of representational institutions does not automatically guarantee the legitimacy of voice, as such legitimacy continues to be determined within hierarchical communication mechanisms.

Furthermore, although women workers often constitute the majority in membership and collective actions, they remain marginalised in leadership positions and decision-making processes (Ward, 2022). This reflects a contradiction between numerical representation and substantive representation. Even issues specific to women workers are often not recognised as collective agendas. This contradiction indicates that formal representation alone is insufficient to ensure political justice, as the legitimacy of voice remains contingent upon power relations that determine who is allowed to speak, be heard, and influence decisions. As expressed by women workers:

> "The majority of leaders are men… in the Jakarta labour forum… they do not consider these issues important… not seen as shared concerns" (RM, in-depth interview, 9 November 2024).
>
> "It is placed low on the priority list… not considered a collective issue, but an individual problem… what is seen as crucial is wage struggle" (AR, in-depth interview, 23 October 2024).

Within Fraser's framework, this condition reflects misrepresentation as a failure of the political conditions necessary for participatory parity. Organisational fragmentation not only reduces the effectiveness of representation but also undermines the formation of a collective communicative base required to achieve participatory parity, as women workers lose shared spaces to articulate their interests in an equal and effective manner. Consequently, they not only lose access to representation but also the conditions that would allow their voices to be recognised and considered in decision-making processes.

Thus, organisational fragmentation not only weakens the political power of labour but also erodes the collective communication infrastructure that underpins meaningful participation. The voices of women workers become fragmented, isolated, and deprived of influence within the political arena of production.

Conceptually, these findings reinforce the argument that misrepresentation in Fraser's framework is not limited to the absence of formal representation, but also involves the failure to establish political conditions that enable equal collective participation. Therefore, political justice requires not only institutional reform but also the reconstruction of collective communication arenas that allow women workers to participate as equal partners in articulating and advancing their interests.

Communication as an Arena of Power and Its Implications for Development Communication

This study demonstrates that power relations and discursive practices fundamentally shape the legitimacy of women workers' voices in two garment factories in North Jakarta. As a result, communication does not function as a neutral and egalitarian participatory arena; rather, it operates as a social space in which the distribution of voice, knowledge, and authority is hierarchically organised. Communication must therefore be understood as an arena in which power relations are not only reflected but also produced, negotiated, and sustained through everyday practices.

These findings both reinforce and critically challenge a central assumption in development communication, which conceptualises communication as a dialogic medium for fostering participation and inclusivity (Servaes, 2020). The results indicate that the mere existence of

communicative spaces does not automatically lead to meaningful participation. The legitimacy of voice is not determined by the availability of space, but by underlying power relations. In practice, communication is not inherently inclusive; rather, it may function as a mechanism that constrains the articulation of the experiences and interests of marginalised groups.

Within Fraser's framework, these findings reveal the interconnections between maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation in obstructing participatory parity. However, this study emphasises that these relationships are fundamentally mediated through communication mechanisms. In this context, communicative inequality can be understood as the operational form of the failure of participatory parity, whereby the distribution of voice legitimacy, access to articulation, and recognition of knowledge are unevenly structured. This study thus contributes to explaining how maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation are reproduced within communicative arenas.

Accordingly, communication does not merely serve as a medium for participation, but as an arena in which the objective, intersubjective, and political conditions necessary for participatory parity are negotiated. Inequalities in communication reflect the failure of these conditions, resulting in women workers not only experiencing maldistribution and misrecognition but also being constrained in their ability to participate equally in decision-making processes.

The contribution of this study to development communication lies in its assertion that participation should not be understood simply as involvement within communicative spaces, but must include equal access to voice legitimacy and social recognition. In other words, participatory development requires not only the creation of communicative spaces, but also the transformation of the conditions that enable equal participation, including the distribution of resources, recognition of status, and access to representation.

In conclusion, this study affirms that communication is not a neutral medium, but an arena in which participatory parity is negotiated - and often undermined. These findings extend Nancy Fraser's theory of justice by demonstrating that failures of redistribution, recognition, and representation cannot be fully understood without analysing the communication mechanisms that regulate the legitimacy of voice in everyday social practice. Without transformation at this level, participation will remain procedural, and political exclusion will continue to be reproduced through communication mechanisms that appear neutral but are substantively exclusionary.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the political exclusion of women workers in two garment factories in North Jakarta is not solely caused by the absence of formal representation, but rather results from the failure of the conditions necessary to achieve participatory parity - that is, a condition in which individuals are able to participate as equal partners in social and political life. This failure is fundamentally mediated by communication mechanisms that regulate the legitimacy of voice, knowledge, and authority within production spaces.

Such exclusion is produced through multidimensional forms of power, encompassing global political economy, labour feminisation, disciplinary practices, the dominance of managerial discourse, and the fragmentation of labour organisations. Within Nancy Fraser's framework of justice, these findings reveal the interconnections between economic injustice (maldistribution), cultural injustice (misrecognition), and political injustice (misrepresentation), which together obstruct the achievement of participatory parity. Women workers experience not only economic

exploitation, but also status subordination and limited political representation, which simultaneously constrain their capacity to participate as equals.

More specifically, this study shows that the relationship among these three dimensions of injustice is mediated through everyday communication practices. Communication mechanisms determine who is able to speak, to be heard, and to be recognised as legitimate subjects. In this process, communication becomes the arena in which maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation are reproduced. Communication thus operates as a mediating mechanism that enables these forms of injustice to function within social practice.

Theoretically, this study contributes to operationalising Fraser's framework of justice by demonstrating how the failure of participatory parity is produced and sustained through communication mechanisms within the context of global production systems. By integrating Michel Foucault's perspective on discourse and power, this study underscores that communication practices cannot be understood as neutral media, but rather as technologies of power that actively shape the legitimacy of voice and the boundaries of participation. In doing so, the study not only extends Fraser's framework but also firmly positions communication as an operational mechanism that links maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation.

The implications of this study for development communication lie in the need to shift from approaches focused on providing spaces for participation toward those that emphasise the conditions enabling equal participation. Participation should not be understood merely as presence within communicative spaces, but must include equal capacity to speak, to be heard, and to be recognised as legitimate subjects. Development communication must therefore address the distribution of resources, recognition of status, and access to representation as prerequisites for meaningful participation.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations, as it focuses on two garment factories within a single geographical area, and therefore cannot be directly generalised to the broader garment industry or other geographical contexts. Future research should adopt comparative approaches across regions or countries to better understand variations in mechanisms of exclusion within different Global Production Network contexts.

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