



Symbolic Violence in the Practice of Sexist Jokes against Female Workers in the Workplace

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Abstract

This study examines sexist jokes in the workplace as a form of symbolic violence experienced by female workers in Indonesia, employing a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven female informants across diverse occupational sectors, complemented by document analysis of relevant sources. The findings reveal that sexist jokes frequently manifest as comments on women's bodies and appearance, sexually suggestive remarks, and gender stereotypes that undermine women's competence. Rather than functioning as harmless humor, these practices operate as symbolic mechanisms that reinforce gender inequality and sustain male dominance within workplace interactions. Their normalization is facilitated by repeated exposure, collective acceptance, and the absence of explicit organizational regulations, leading such practices to be widely perceived as commonplace. This study concludes that sexist jokes constitute a form of symbolic violence that reproduces patriarchal values and unequal power relations in the workplace, underscoring the need for heightened awareness and stronger institutional frameworks to promote safer and more equitable work environments.

Keywords: *Sexist Jokes; Symbolic Violence; Female Workers; Workplace; Gender Inequality*

Introduction

The phenomenon of sexism in the workplace remains a highly relevant issue in Indonesia, especially in light of the increasing participation of women in the professional sphere. According to data from Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS), the female labor force participation rate in Indonesia reached 56.42 percent in 2024. This figure represents an increase compared to 54.52 percent in 2023, and 53.41 percent

in 2022. This trend indicates a significant rise in women's participation in the professional workforce. A work environment that upholds professionalism through the presence of established norms or regulations is expected to foster a pleasant, safe, calm, and comfortable work atmosphere. Such an environment can have a significant emotional impact on employees (Syiva et al., 2023). Unfortunately, not all workplaces can provide a sense of safety and comfort for their workers, especially for women who often face various challenges, such as gender discrimination or sexism (Rukman et al., 2023).

Female workers still frequently experience criminalization, physical violence, and sexual harassment in the workplace (Komnas Perempuan, 2025). Research published by Populix in 2024 shows that 40% of formal sector workers in Indonesia reported having experienced sexual harassment, with 76% of these cases involving sexually suggestive teasing, jokes, and whistling. Other forms of harassment include persistent staring at certain body parts (42%), followed by receiving sexual gestures such as winks or kissing gestures, as well as being touched, kissed, or hugged without consent, which was experienced by 22% of victims in the workplace (Indonesia Watch, 2024).

In daily practice, communication in the workplace is often manifested through informal conversations, one of which takes the form of jokes. Jokes represent a contextual form of humor that occurs in daily interpersonal interactions. In this sense, jokes are a type of social communication similar to teasing, which is generally understood as humor (Dyner, 2008). However, jokes are also frequently used to belittle or devalue a particular social group without attracting criticism, as it is perceived merely as a joke. This practice often appears through comments, jokes, or gender-laden expressions that refer to the body, social roles, and stereotypes of female workers.

Humor or jokes that are demeaning in nature are expressions intended to make people laugh by insulting, belittling, or degrading a particular target. A clear example of such humor is sexist jokes, a type of humor that degrades or belittles by insulting, stereotyping, sacrificing, and objectifying someone based on their gender (Gutiérrez et al., 2022). By definition, the term “sexist” itself refers to expressions that position one gender in an unequal or inferior position (Sholikhati et al., 2022). When this sexism is expressed in the form of humor, it manifests as sexist jokes. Such jokes are regarded as a subtle form of discrimination by conveying insults or degradation of dignity, particularly toward women, through a format that is framed as amusing (Bouckaert et al., 2025).

Sexist humor, particularly that which targets women, can be identified through four components, according to Shifman & Lemish (2010). First, such humor mocks women by emphasizing their supposed inferiority compared to men. Second, it targets women either directly or indirectly, often implicitly through the use of demeaning stereotypes. Third, it reinforces traditional stereotypes that portray women as foolish, dependent on others, irrational, and valued primarily as sexual objects. Finally, this type of humor not only highlights perceived differences in character between women and men, but also upholds and perpetuates social hierarchies that position women as subordinate to men.

Sexist jokes directed at female workers in the workplace frequently function as a subtle and unrecognized form of domination. In this context, the concept of symbolic violence proposed by Pierre Bourdieu becomes essential for understanding sexist jokes as a form of violence that operates subtly, invisibly, and often unconsciously, both for the perpetrator and the victim. Symbolic violence refers to the imposition of a system of symbols and meanings upon a particular social group, leading them to internalize these structures as legitimate, thereby concealing the power relations embedded within such practices (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Sexist jokes can be understood as a form of symbolic violence because it functions to maintain unequal power relations while normalizing gender stereotypes through daily communication practices. Those who become the targets of such jokes are often in a vulnerable position to refuse or resist. Perpetrators can easily evade responsibility by claiming that their remarks are merely jokes, while the

women who are targeted may feel pressured to laugh along to avoid being labeled as overly sensitive. These jokes reinforce male dominance over women by positioning women as the objects of jokes, leading them to gradually accept and internalize sexist values, thereby turning sexually masked humor into a normalized workplace culture (Ariani, 2023). This condition allows gender inequality to be subtly reproduced and perpetuated without being fully recognized by either the perpetrators or the surrounding social environment.

In practice, sexist humor not only reproduces gender inequality but also enables the expression of negative attitudes and increases tolerance toward violence against women (Gutiérrez et al., 2022). By emphasizing its humorous aspect, sexist humor makes degrading content and gender stereotypes appear harmless, thereby facilitating the normalization of sexist attitudes (Siddiqi et al., 2018). A lack of understanding and indifference toward verbal sexual harassment also reinforces this normalization, as sexist jokes are repeated to the point that they are perceived as commonplace. In fact, such practices target women's sexuality and have the potential to cause discomfort and psychological distress, while simultaneously perpetuating unequal power relations in workplace culture (Amelia et al., 2022).

Research on jokes related to sexuality and gender in the workplace is important to examine because such practices are still frequently found in daily interactions among workers. This phenomenon has also attracted scholarly attention in several countries, including Costa Rica, Finland, Germany, and Indonesia (Bouckaert et al., 2025; Gutiérrez et al., 2022; Hommelhoff et al., 2023; Humonen & Whittle, 2023; Kinady & Linando, 2025). In general, most of these studies tend to focus on perceptions of sexist humor, its psychological impacts, or the dynamics of interpersonal relationships with organizations. Meanwhile, from a theoretical perspective, several studies have used the concept of symbolic violence to analyze how power relations are reproduced through language practices and social interactions (Björkert et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2021; Syahrizal, 2025). Symbolic violence indirectly reproduces and maintains unequal power relations between women and men, operating in subtle ways and often unconsciously (Reinoso et al., 2024). In this context, sexist jokes can be understood as a form of symbolic violence that reproduces patriarchal power relations through language practices that normalize gender-based ridicule or harassment directed at women (Perwita et al., 2024; Saraswati et al., 2026).

Although previous studies have examined sexist humor in the workplace as well as symbolic violence in various social contexts, research that specifically integrates these two perspectives by examining sexist jokes as a practice of symbolic violence in the workplace remains relatively limited, particularly in the context of female workers in Indonesia. Therefore, through a qualitative descriptive approach and drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, this study seeks to fill this gap by focusing on an analysis that specifically examines sexist jokes as a form of symbolic violence that operates subtly within the workplace, placing the experience of women workers in Indonesia at the center of discussion. Accordingly, this research is expected to provide a deeper understanding while also serving as a reflective foundation for fostering a work environment that is more just, safe, and respectful of gender equality.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence. Qualitative research is a method used to explore and interpret social or humanitarian phenomena from the perspective of individuals or groups. In this approach, researchers describe situations comprehensively using words to portray the views and experiences of the subjects being studied (Creswell, 2016). Meanwhile, the descriptive qualitative approach is a research tradition and is considered appropriate for addressing questions related to who, what, and where an event or experience occurs, as well as for gaining insights from informants regarding phenomena that remain insufficiently understood (Kim et al., 2016). Descriptive qualitative research aims to present a systematic, accurate, and factual

description of the facts, characteristics, and relationships among the phenomena being examined (Furidha, 2023). Through this approach, the researcher seeks to describe the practices of sexist jokes experienced by female workers in the workplace and analyze them through the perspective of symbolic violence.

Symbolic violence, according to Pierre Bourdieu, refers to the process of imposing systems of symbols and meanings upon a particular group or social class so that they accept them as natural and legitimate. This acceptance conceals the underlying power relations, allowing such practices to persist and be reproduced through culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The use of Symbolic Violence Theory in this study is based on its relevance in explaining how sexist jokes in formal workspace settings function as subtle forms of domination that often go unnoticed. Sexist jokes, which are frequently perceived as ordinary humor, can actually represent gender bias and perpetuate inequalities between men and women. Through this theoretical perspective, the study seeks to examine how sexist jokes operate as symbolic practices that normalize gender inequality in daily interactions within formal workplace environments.

Data collection in this study was conducted through in-depth interviews with seven informants, as well as through document analysis obtained from various sources such as books, reports, journals, and other relevant materials. The selection of informants was carried out using a purposive sampling technique. Therefore, the researcher established specific criteria for determining the informants. The first category of considerations was that the informants were women, as the focus of this study is specifically on female workers' experiences. In this case, the chosen informant is the one who is willing to be interviewed intensively and openly about the experience. The second category consisted of women who currently work or have previously worked for at least one year in a formal workplace in Indonesia. The next category included informants who had direct experiences with sexist jokes. In this category, the researcher limited the informants to individuals who experienced sexist jokes that had an impact on certain aspects of their lives, whether emotionally, psychologically, socially, or within the dynamics of workplace relationships. Throughout this process, the researchers paid particular attention to research ethics principles, especially concerning the confidentiality, comfort, and safety of informants in sharing their sensitive experiences.

Table 1. Research Informants

No.	Initials	Age	Occupation	Institution	Work Experience
1.	PST	39 years old	Marketing Manager	Healthcare Services	16 years
2.	ASR	36 years old	Project Control	Extractive Industry	13 years
3.	DKF	31 years old	Assistant Editor	Production House	7 years
4.	RA	30 years old	Graphic Designer	Food and Beverage Manufacturing	6 years
5.	PAL	27 years old	Digital Marketing	Home Furnishing Retail	3 years
6.	CLL	27 years old	Human Resources	IT Services	4 years
7.	NAA	26 years old	Content Writer	Travel Services	2 years

Source: Data Researcher (2026)

Data analysis in this study employed the data analysis techniques proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which consists of three stages, namely data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. In addition, to ensure the validity of the data, this study applied the source triangulation and member checking techniques, which were used as methods to re-examine the credibility of the information and the informants during the interview process.

Results

1. Forms of Sexist Jokes in the Workplace

Forms of sexist jokes in the workplace appear in various forms that generally refer to women's bodies, appearance, and sexuality. One of the most common forms is comments about the body, such as remarks on specific body parts, physical shapes, or the way women dress. This form of sexist joke was experienced by informant ASR. In her work experience, sexist jokes frequently appear in male-dominated work environments, such as in the mining and construction sectors. She described that such situations often occurred both among peers and older colleagues. In a field largely occupied by male workers, sexually nuanced jokes commonly appeared in the form of comments directed at women's bodies, including catcalling and objectification that explicitly highlighted certain body parts or physical features.

Another form of sexist jokes is reflected in questions or statements that intrude into private and sexual domains. For example, questions about virginity status, sexual experiences, life after marriage, and suggestive remarks referring to sexual activities. Although often framed as humor, several informants indicated that this type of joking crosses personal boundaries and can create discomfort for female workers as the targets. Informant RA revealed that jokes that initially seemed light, such as those referring to marital status, often escalated into more personal and sexual topics. She explained that her colleagues not only questioned her reason for not being married, but also began to probe into her sexual experiences, despite these being highly private matters.

"I was often made the subject of jokes because I am not married yet, with comments such as, 'How come you are already this age and still not married? Even those younger than you already are.' At first, it seemed normal; however, as it continued, the conversation shifted toward their sexual experiences, with remarks like, 'What about you? Have you ever...?' Even though I am not married." (RA, February 5, 2026).

RA also added that these conversations took place openly in the workplace, even during working hours, and involved several other colleagues who responded to and reinforced the jokes. This experience indicates that sexist joking does not merely remain at the level of implicit comments, but can also develop into statements that clearly violate both professional and personal boundaries. Meanwhile, informant DKF shared her experience of being exposed to sexually suggestive jokes delivered in front of others. She recounted a situation that made her feel uncomfortable while gathering with several colleagues in the office pantry, where she was the only woman present in the room.

"I remember one time we were gathered in the pantry, and everyone was there, but I was the only woman. At that time, we were talking about a colleague who rarely went home and hardly met his wife. Then someone, who was actually my supervisor, made a joke directed at me, saying, 'Be careful, something might wake up.' It was clearly referring to that colleague's intimate organ." (DKF, February 20, 2026).

She further explained that the joke was met with laughter from other colleagues present at the time. The situation not only caused discomfort for DKF, but also led to feelings of embarrassment, as she became the center of attention in a sexualized context. Informant PAL also shared her perspective on sexist jokes, which she considers a form of verbal harassment that positions women merely as sexual objects and often intrudes into what should be private matters. She recounted another experience in which the jokes directed at her frequently targeted her personal life. Before getting married, a colleague once made a joke by asking what she had already done and questioning her virginity. After marriage, these jokes shifted into even more private territory, such as asking about her activities during the honeymoon and what she had done after getting married.

“Before I got married, a colleague made jokes about me, saying, ‘What have you done so far? You’re not a virgin anymore, right?’ After I got married, the jokes shifted into more private matters, such as, ‘Where did you go for your honeymoon? What have you done?’” (PAL, December 17, 2025).

A similar experience was also shared by informant NAA. She described being subjected to sexist jokes that often targeted her body and sexuality.

“I once wanted to borrow a flash disk from a male colleague, and I said I would plug it into my laptop. He and his friend instead made jokes, saying, ‘Oh yeah, plugging it in—what are you plugging in?’ and then they laughed. It was clearly implying something sexual. There was also another time with a male colleague who was older and already married. He invited me to go on an assignment to the airport, and I declined because there wasn’t really any work for me there. He then said, ‘Alright then, if we go, you can stay overnight with me,’ and there were several people in the car who just laughed. They often make jokes about the women in the office, especially since there are only a few women in our division. They frequently talk about breast sizes, and once they even asked a male colleague of ours, ‘Hey, you hang out with your girlfriend a lot, right? How did her size get so big?’” (NAA, December 27, 2025).

She further explained that although the perpetrators framed their remarks as jokes, their words made the victims feel that their personal boundaries and privacy were being violated. These experiences indicate that the jokes received by informants PAL and NAA had crossed the line of privacy by targeting their personal and sexual lives. The questions posed by their colleagues, illustrate how women’s bodies and sexual lives are turned into subjects of humor in workplace interactions. This situation led the informants to perceive such jokes not as harmless humor, but as a form of verbal harassment that infringes upon personal boundaries.

Informant PST also shared her experience of receiving sexist jokes from a male superior during a management meeting attended by various divisions. During the meeting, the superior gave directions related to her role as a marketing manager, particularly in building good communication with specialist doctors, for example, by inviting them to lunch or fostering closer relationships. However, these directions were delivered alongside implicit jokes with sexual undertones, as if emphasizing a form of closeness that implied intimate relations. Furthermore, she revealed that the perpetrator frequently made remarks targeting her body and appearance, often accompanied by gazes that made her feel uneasy and uncomfortable.

In addition, sexist jokes also appear in the form of gender stereotypes directed at women. Women are often made the object of jokes that portray them as weak, emotional, irrational, or dependent on men. These jokes may be delivered either implicitly or explicitly, yet they consistently function to reinforce women’s subordinate position within workplace social relations. This was conveyed by informant CLL, who also shared her experience. During a meeting with colleagues and representatives from a partner company, her superior made a joke suggesting that one of the reasons she was hired was because of her “attractive body.” On another occasion, when the recruitment process was facing difficulties, her superior jokingly suggested that she should “flirt” with the user to make the process easier.

“I remember during a meeting with a business partner and the director from a sister company, there was a discussion about why we were accepted into this company. My superior jokingly responded that one of the reasons I was hired because I have a good body. There was also a moment when the hiring process was difficult, and my superior said, ‘Well then, just charm the user, find a way to get close to them so they’ll give you good candidates. Being a little flirtatious is fine.’” (CLL, January 11, 2026).

Furthermore, informant CLL revealed that these jokes were delivered in front of others within a professional forum, which made her feel that her presence in the company was not valued based on her competence or work capabilities, but rather on her physical appearance and attractiveness as a woman. The sexist jokes she experienced were perceived as a form of degradation and stereotyping, as they implied that women can rely on their attractiveness or personal closeness as a means to achieve work-related goals.

Informant DKF also shared another experience in which the jokes directed at her often implied that women are less competent at work. In a male-dominated work environment, DKF revealed that from the very beginning of her employment, she had already sensed assumptions from her male superior that, as a woman, she was less capable of performing the job compared to her male colleagues.

“When I first started working, I was already being underestimated and looked down upon, as if, because I am a woman, I was not capable of doing the job well. Previously, he had also held the same view toward other women who had worked there, as if the only ones considered truly capable were men. Even if it was meant as a joke, it was very clear that it was demeaning.” (DKF, February 20, 2026).

A similar experience was also reported by informant NAA. She shared another form of sexist joking that she encountered. A male colleague once made a joke while she was receiving a task from her superior, delivering it in a tone that undermined women’s ability to understand certain types of work. According to her, the joke she experienced referred to a form of humor that can make someone feel belittled. Thus, she perceived this experience as a form of joking that demeans women’s careers and competence, as it implicitly reflects the assumption that women are less capable or do not possess the same capacity as men in carrying out job responsibilities.

“My colleague once made a joke that seemed to belittle women’s careers. I was being assigned a task by my superior, and he said, ‘Ah, when it comes to this kind of thing, how would she understand? Women are complicated.’” (NAA, December 27, 2025).

The experiences shared by these informants indicate that sexist jokes based on gender stereotypes do not merely function as humor, but also serve as a medium for reproducing unequal power relations in the workplace. Such jokes consistently position women in a weakened position, whether through the objectification of their bodies, the assumption that women rely on personal attractiveness, or the labeling of women as less competent than men.

2. Sexist Jokes as a Form of Power and Masculine Domination

The findings of this study also indicate that informants perceive sexist jokes as practices that reflect power relations and masculine domination in the workplace. Based on several informants’ experiences, sexist jokes often emerge in situations where the perpetrators hold stronger positions, whether in terms of rank, age, or the numerical dominance of men in the work environment.

Several informants revealed that sexist jokes are frequently delivered by individuals who occupy higher positions within the organizational hierarchy. This condition makes it difficult for women to respond to or reject such jokes. Informant PST, for example, explained that jokes targeting women’s appearance or bodies become more disturbing when expressed by someone who holds a higher position of power. She stated that such situations create discomfort, particularly because there is a professional hierarchy that should be maintained in the workplace.

“Jokes such as complimenting our appearance might be acceptable, as long as they are delivered in the right manner, time, and context. However, when they are expressed in a one-on-one situation, accompanied by suggestive and unsettling gazes, they create feelings of discomfort and unease. I also feel disturbed, especially because there is a hierarchy that should be respected and upheld.” (PST, December 6, 2025).

This statement indicates that hierarchical relations in the workplace can reinforce the position of perpetrators in making sexist jokes. In such conditions, women as the recipients of these jokes are often placed in a more vulnerable position due to power imbalances. A similar view was expressed by informant DKF, who stated that the existence of power relations makes women feel that they have no space to respond to sexist jokes delivered by their superiors. She explained that when such jokes come from someone in a higher position, women tend to feel powerless to reject or challenge them.

“If it’s a superior who makes the joke, it’s confusing, you feel like you can’t really do anything because they are your superior.” (DKF, February 20, 2026).

DKF also added that, in her view, holding a higher position enables perpetrators to feel freer to say or joke about anything. This statement highlights how structural positions within an organization can shape the way women respond to sexist jokes. When the perpetrator occupies a higher rank, women often choose to remain silent or avoid confrontation in order to maintain working relationships and the stability of the professional environment. In addition, informant CLL expressed a similar perspective, noting that sexist jokes delivered by superiors can reflect the exercise of power within workplace relationships. According to her, a higher position can lead perpetrators to feel legitimized in making inappropriate jokes toward women.

“When jokes like that are made, especially by someone in a higher position, I feel that they may see themselves as more powerful, and us as more junior, so we are expected to be more understanding of them as superiors. It is as if they want to demonstrate that they have more power, while we, as women, are often seen as less competent and merely as objects.” (CLL, January 11, 2026).

She also argued that jokes delivered by superiors have a different impact compared to those coming from colleagues at the same level. Although working relationships may be relatively close, there remains a professional distance or positional gap between superiors and subordinates that requires mutual respect. Therefore, when sexist jokes are expressed by those in higher positions, they are not only perceived as inappropriate humor, but also as a form of misuse of authority and power within workplace relations. This situation often places female employees, particularly those in subordinate positions, in a more vulnerable position, as they feel they have limited ability to respond to or directly reject such jokes.

Beyond hierarchical relations, several informants also understood sexist jokes as a means of reinforcing male dominance in the workplace. Informant ASR explained that sexist jokes are often delivered by men who hold higher positions or are more senior in age. In such situations, other colleagues who occupy lower positions tend to simply laugh along without challenging the jokes. These findings indicate that sexist jokes can function as a symbolic mechanism to assert male dominance within social interactions at work.

Furthermore, several informants, including ASR, also associated the practice of sexist joking with the persistence of patriarchal culture in society. ASR argued that patriarchal mindsets shape how some men perceive women in the workplace. She explained that sexist jokes can serve as a way for men to assert their superiority over women, often reflecting views that position men as dominant or as those who should lead. In such situations, successfully making women feel embarrassed through these jokes is often seen by the perpetrators as a form of entertainment.

“In my opinion, this is also related to the patriarchal system that remains strong in Indonesia. When they joke, the object is often women. At that time, I felt that they seemed to feel more powerful when they succeeded in making women feel embarrassed, as reflected in their laughter. Perhaps this is linked to patriarchal thinking or upbringing that positions men as leaders. When they come to the workplace and joke by objectifying women with a sense of pride, it reflects patriarchal attitudes. They see women as being in a lower position than them.” (ASR, February 2, 2026).

This patriarchal mindset was also highlighted by informant RA. According to her, sexist jokes can emerge from the patriarchal system that remains strong in Indonesia and become a way for some men to feel that they hold greater power over women.

“Sexist jokes can indeed stem from the patriarchal system, which is still strong in Indonesia today. Because they feel they have more power or a higher position, they believe they have the right and the authority to comment on or talk about inappropriate things regarding women.” (RA, February 5, 2026).

A similar perspective was also expressed by informant NAA, who viewed sexist jokes as reflecting the assumption that men occupy a higher position than women. According to her, such jokes reveal a way of thinking that places men as having the authority to comment on or judge women.

“I feel that many men assume their position is above women. They believe that, as men, they should always lead women. As a result, women are seen merely as objects, as something of lower value, and it feels as though we are powerless.” (NAA, December 27, 2025).

These statements indicate that sexist jokes are often inseparable from patriarchal social constructions that position men as more dominant in various social spaces, including the workplace. In this context, sexist jokes become a symbolic means through which such dominance is maintained in everyday interactions.

Overall, the findings of this study show that sexist jokes are not merely understood as humor, but also as practices that reflect power relations and masculine domination in the workplace. These jokes frequently emerge in situations where men hold more dominant positions, whether through rank, seniority, or social structures shaped by patriarchal culture. Within this context, several informants perceive sexist jokes as a symbolic mechanism that sustains unequal power relations and reinforces male dominance over women in the workplace.

3. The Normalization of Sexist Jokes in the Workplace

The normalization of sexist jokes in the workplace occurs when such practices are perceived as a natural part of everyday interactions in professional settings. Jokes containing sexist elements are often framed as light humor, making them less likely to be recognized as problematic. In many cases, both the perpetrators and those around them are unaware that these jokes carry meanings that are demeaning or discriminatory toward women. Based on the experiences of several female employees, this lack of awareness contributes to the continued repetition of sexist jokes, allowing them to become habitual and widely accepted without meaningful criticism.

Several informants described how sexist jokes are frequently delivered in a casual and repetitive manner, eventually becoming perceived as normal occurrences. As one of the informants who often hears such jokes in her workplace, PAL shared that sexist jokes in her work environment are commonly treated as ordinary humor and are easily directed at anyone. However, on a personal level, PAL does not consider sexist jokes as something that can be justified, as they contribute to her discomfort within her professional life.

On the other hand, informant NAA explained that the normalization of sexist jokes occurs because many people still perceive such jokes as mere entertainment. She further added that this normalization is reinforced by the reactions of those around, particularly when others laugh along, as if sexist jokes are amusing rather than inappropriate.

“Jokes like that still happen frequently because some people see them as entertainment. Moreover, when someone makes such jokes, many male colleagues around us tend to laugh along. It makes me wonder why they find it funny, as if it is something entertaining for them. These kinds of jokes eventually come to be seen as ‘normal jokes’ or ‘just joking.’ Especially in an environment where the same jokes are repeated every day, they gradually become habits that are normalized, and people end up not realizing that they are actually inappropriate.” (NAA, December 27, 2025).

A similar experience was also shared by informant DKF. When she became the target of sexist jokes, none of her colleagues defended her; instead, they joined in the laughter. According to her, such responses create an atmosphere that implicitly supports and normalizes this kind of behavior.

“In my workplace, maybe this happens because the majority of employees are men. On top of that, many people around just laugh along, so indirectly it feels like people are allowing and even supporting that kind of behavior.” (DKF, February 20, 2026).

Informant RA also expressed her view that the frequent occurrence of sexist jokes in her workplace is partly due to the tendency of others to either tolerate or even laugh along with such remarks. However, she emphasized that this situation is also influenced by seniority, where employees in lower positions feel hesitant to challenge such behavior and instead go along with it.

“In my opinion, there is also a factor of seniority. In my workplace, colleagues who are in lower positions than the perpetrator usually do not defend the target. Instead, they tend to agree or laugh along with the jokes to appear connected or get along with that person. As a result, it feels like many people are actually perpetuating this behavior.” (RA, February 5, 2026).

RA further added that this normalization is also reflected in how sexist jokes often do not receive direct rejection. Several informants, including RA, revealed that they tend to remain silent or avoid the situation rather than respond openly to such jokes.

“If we stay silent, it is as if we are agreeing with them. But if we defend ourselves, it could escalate, become awkward, and affect our professionalism at work. Even reporting it to HR feels worrying, because they might also normalize it, especially if the HR staff are men.” (RA, February 5, 2026).

A similar response was also shown by informant NAA, who chose to remain silent in order to avoid escalating the situation, despite feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable when hearing such jokes. These experiences indicate that perpetrators often perceive their remarks as normal and unproblematic because they are framed as humor or “just joking.” This perspective leads them to overlook the boundaries being crossed, allowing sexist jokes to be repeatedly expressed without awareness of their impact. Furthermore, when such jokes are continuously repeated, met with laughter, and not explicitly challenged, they become increasingly reinforced as a normal part of everyday workplace interactions. As a result, sexist jokes persist and solidify as habitual practices that are no longer questioned, even though the informants personally recognize them as inappropriate and boundary-violating.

This condition also highlights the connection between the normalization of sexist jokes and the lack of clear protection and regulation in the workplace. In the experiences of several informants, the absence of specific rules addressing sexist jokes or verbal harassment makes it difficult to categorize such behavior as a violation. This was also emphasized by informant CLL, who stated that, in addition to the

lack of awareness among perpetrators, the normalization of sexist jokes is influenced by cultural factors and workplace regulations themselves.

“Perhaps it is still widely normalized because, on a personal level, many individuals lack awareness. They do not realize that such jokes should not be made because they can make others feel uncomfortable. In addition, workplace culture also plays a role, in my opinion. In some other companies, there may already be regulations that address verbal harassment under certain categories, making it possible to report such behavior. However, if a workplace does not have clear rules or sanctions regarding this issue, people tend to feel free to engage in it.” (CLL, January 11, 2026).

In addition, informant ASR expressed a similar view, stating that many companies do not yet have regulations that specifically classify sexist jokes as a form of misconduct.

“In my opinion, this normalization occurs because it is not clearly regulated. Many workplaces only regulate issues such as marriage, infidelity, and other matters, while sexist jokes are still considered trivial.” (ASR, February 2, 2026).

The absence of such regulations results in sexist jokes not being perceived as actions with consequences, allowing perpetrators to feel free to continue their behavior. Moreover, the lack of clear reporting mechanisms often leads victims to remain silent or avoid the situation rather than report their experiences.

Discussion

The practice of sexist jokes in the workplace can be understood as a form of symbolic violence that operates subtly through language, interactions, and everyday habits. Jokes that target women's bodies, sexuality, and competence indicate the imposition of particular meanings that position women as objects, both as sexual objects and as individuals perceived as less competent. These jokes can be seen as a subtle form of discrimination, conveying humiliation or degradation, particularly toward women, through expressions that are framed as humorous (Bouckaert et al., 2025). This imposition of meaning does not appear overtly as violence, but is instead disguised as light-hearted humor. In Bourdieu's framework, this reflects how systems of symbols and meanings are imposed on certain groups and come to be accepted as legitimate and natural (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

This phenomenon is evident in how the informants experienced jokes related to their bodies, appearance, sexuality, and gender stereotypes that demean women. Such jokes demonstrate a process of objectification, in which women are frequently turned into objects of humor, portrayed as weak and passive figures, whether in narratives centered on sexuality or in humor constructed by men as the dominant narrators (Hermawan et al., 2017). From the perspective of symbolic violence, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a tool of domination that carries specific social meanings. These jokes do not merely operate at the level of verbal interaction, they also function as symbolic mechanisms that reinforce women's subordinate position within workplace social relations. When women are repeatedly positioned as objects of jokes related to their bodies and sexuality, this gradually shapes a collective perception that such positioning is natural and acceptable. It is in this process that symbolic violence operates through *misrecognition*, where the power relations embedded in these practices are not recognized as violence but are instead understood as normal and acceptable (Jenkins, 2002).

Furthermore, sexist jokes experienced by several informants that target women's competence, such as assumptions that women are less capable or rely solely on physical attractiveness, indicate a

process of cultural reproduction that sustains social inequality. In this context, sexist jokes can limit women's agency and potential by reinforcing gender stereotypes, understood as beliefs or assumptions about differences between men and women. These stereotypes often generate social stigma, leading to the devaluation of women and the emergence of feelings of insecurity (Rahmawati et al., 2023). In Bourdieu's framework, this is related to the concept of *pedagogic action*, which refers to the process of instilling particular values and meanings into cultural forms that are essentially arbitrary but reflect the interests of dominant groups (Jenkins, 2002). Through repeatedly expressed jokes, values that demean women are indirectly taught, normalized, and reproduced within the workplace. As a result, social structures that position men as the dominant group are continuously maintained (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

The power relations identified in this study further clarify how symbolic violence operates. Sexist jokes experienced by the informants are often delivered by individuals who occupy higher positions, either in terms of rank or seniority, indicating a form of power legitimacy that is not always explicitly visible. In such situations, women tend to be placed in positions where they feel unable to resist or respond, leading them to remain silent or conform to the ongoing interaction. This condition reflects what Bourdieu describes as symbolic power that operates invisibly yet effectively in producing compliance (Bourdieu, 1991). This form of power does not require physical coercion, as it has already gained legitimacy through existing social structures.

In addition, the practice of sexist joking also reflects the presence of a patriarchal habitus that has been internalized within individuals and the broader workplace environment. Habitus, as explained by Bourdieu, refers to a set of dispositions or tendencies that shape how individuals act and respond in particular ways. These dispositions generate practices, perceptions, and attitudes that appear "structured," even though they are not consciously regulated or governed by explicit rules (Bourdieu, 1991). In this study, the habitual use of sexist jokes indicates that patriarchal values have become embedded within the habitus, unconsciously shaping individual behavior. This habitus is then reproduced through everyday interactions, allowing sexist jokes to persist as recurring practices that are perceived as part of workplace culture. Thus, individuals do not act solely based on rational awareness, but are also influenced by pre-existing dispositions.

Furthermore, this patriarchal habitus is rooted in a broader patriarchal system that structurally produces gender inequality across various aspects of life. Several informants in this study also expressed the view that sexist jokes are linked to and may perpetuate the patriarchal system in Indonesia. One type of humor that has developed in Indonesia is that which centers on women, a phenomenon largely influenced by the dominance of the patriarchal system within Indonesian society (Perwita et al., 2023). Patriarchal culture tends to position women as subordinate to men (Mulyasih et al., 2022). This condition is reflected in male dominance as the primary authority, while women occupy subordinate positions with limited access and influence in public spaces (Irdianti et al., 2024). This inequality not only shapes patterns of social relations but also reinforces imbalanced power relations between men and women, including in the workplace. In this context, sexist jokes function as a symbolic mechanism that reproduces male dominance while normalizing various forms of violence against women. This situation can be further exacerbated by tendencies to silence or ignore such experiences, allowing these practices to persist without significant resistance (Pebriaisyah et al., 2022).

The normalization of sexist jokes further illustrates how symbolic violence operates effectively in everyday life. When sexist jokes are perceived as commonplace, met with laughter, and not challenged, this gives rise to what Bourdieu refers to as *doxa*, a set of beliefs formed through continuous processes of internalization (Rusdiarti, 2003). In such conditions, individuals no longer perceive sexist jokes as problematic, but rather as a natural part of workplace culture. These jokes often operate subtly and go unnoticed by many, including the victims themselves, at least initially. Perpetrators frequently justify such remarks as mere humor or as a way to build familiarity. As a result, this type of humor can shape

societal perceptions, making objectification and sexist attitudes appear normal (Savito & Gono, 2025). This process is continuously reinforced through repetition, further strengthening the legitimacy of such practices. The persistence and acceptance of sexist jokes as normal, within the framework of symbolic violence, reflects what is referred to as *orthodoxa*, which functions to support doxa and maintain the legitimacy of dominant discourse. Meanwhile, the discomfort, embarrassment, and other negative impacts experienced by the informants can be understood as forms of *heterodoxa*, representing perspectives that challenge doxa and indicate the potential for resistance against such discourse (Ningtyas, 2015). However, due to the strength of existing social structures and power relations, these forms of resistance are often not openly expressed.

This normalization is further reinforced by the mechanism of *euphemism*, which disguises violence in subtle forms so that it does not appear harmful and becomes difficult to recognize (Bourdieu, 1991). Sexist jokes, in this context, enable the expression of negative attitudes and increase tolerance toward violence against women (Gutiérrez et al., 2022). However, these jokes are often framed as humor by emphasizing their entertaining aspects, thereby blurring the boundary between joking and harassment and making them appear harmless and inoffensive. As a result, such jokes can foster tolerance toward sexist attitudes and come to be regarded as normal (Siddiqi et al., 2018). Consequently, perpetrators are able to make degrading remarks without being perceived as committing serious violations.

On the other hand, the mechanism of *sensorism*, which positions symbolic violence as a means of preserving values considered as “moral honor” (Bourdieu, 1991), also contributes to sustaining these practices. It does so by framing sexist jokes as part of accepted norms or culture that should not be questioned. Continuous exposure to sexist humor can shape prejudiced norms, making individuals more likely to express sexist attitudes without fear of criticism (Siddiqi et al., 2018). In this regard, language serves as the primary tool through which symbolic power operates. Bourdieu (1991) defines symbolic power as a form of power that is invisible, as it does not manifest physically but operates through symbolic forms that gain social legitimacy.

Thus, sexist jokes in the workplace are not merely a form of humor or ordinary social interaction, but rather a practice of symbolic violence that operates through language, culture, and power relations. This practice not only degrades women on an individual level, but also contributes to the maintenance and reproduction of gender inequality in a systematic way. Due to its subtle and disguised nature, symbolic violence becomes difficult to recognize and resist, thereby becoming further entrenched in everyday workplace life.

Conclusion

This study shows that the practice of sexist jokes in the workplace constitutes a form of symbolic violence that operates subtly through language and everyday interactions. Sexist jokes appear in various forms, such as comments on women's bodies and appearances, sexually suggestive remarks, and gender stereotypes that undermine women's competence. The findings highlight that sexist jokes do not merely function as humor, but also serve as a symbolic mechanism that reproduces gender inequality and sustains masculine domination within workplace relations. This practice also reflects the presence of power relations, in which perpetrators generally occupy more dominant positions, placing women as targets in vulnerable positions with limited ability to resist. Furthermore, the normalization of sexist jokes occurs through the process of repetition, collective acceptance, and the lack of awareness and regulation within the workplace. These conditions lead to sexist jokes being perceived as normal, thereby indirectly reinforcing patriarchal values and perpetuating gender inequality within workplace culture.

Based on the findings of this study, comprehensive efforts from multiple stakeholders are required to address the practice of sexist jokes in the workplace. Institutions or companies need to

develop policies that explicitly regulate verbal harassment, including sexist jokes, and provide a safe and responsive reporting mechanism for victims. On the other hand, employees must also develop critical awareness to avoid normalizing sexist jokes in daily interactions. For future research, it is recommended to examine the perspective of men as both perpetrators and bystanders in order to better understand the construction of meaning, motives, and justifications behind sexist jokes in the work environment. In addition, further exploration of women's resistance strategies, both overt and subtle, may provide deeper insights into the agency of victims in confronting symbolic violence.

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