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Feminisms and Gendered Dynamics of Whistleblowing: How Organisational Culture Shapes Women's Ethical Decisions

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ABSTRACT

Purpose : The study examines the feminist perspectives and gendered dynamics of whistleblowing within Indonesian local governments. Unlike previous research that largely centers on the causal link between gender and whistleblowing behavior, this study delves deeper into the structural, psychological, and cultural barriers that hinder women from reporting misconduct.
Method : The study employed a qualitative approach by interviewing retired civil servants using open-ended questions to elicit detailed narratives about their experiences and perceptions. The collected data were analysed using a thematic approach based on themes that emerged during the interview process.
Findings : The findings suggest that women hesitate to blow the whistle due to group-oriented thinking, loyalty obligations, perceived innocence of wrongdoers, financial dependence, emotional burdens, and vulnerability to coercion.
Novelty : Theoretically, this study fills a gap in empirical research on whistleblowing and gender in non-Western, collectivist settings. It highlights the need to contextualize rational action theory. It is because the decisions to report fraud are influenced not just by legal and ethical considerations but by social harmony, hierarchy, and conformity. Practically, the findings urge organizations to create inclusive whistleblowing systems that address gender norms, enhance protections, and promote an ethical culture that supports speaking out.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism, organisational culture, and whistleblowing systems remain critical and interconnected issues in contemporary research, particularly on ethics and governance (Kenny, 2024; Van Portfliet & Kenny, 2022). In many settings, particularly in bureaucratic and hierarchical organisations (Onyango, 2021), whistleblowing systems exist formally but are often undermined by informal power relations, gendered expectations, and workplace norms that discourage employees, especially women, from speaking out.

Prior studies on gender and whistleblowing systems have predominantly focused on cause-and-effect relationships, examining how gender influences the likelihood of reporting wrongdoing and the consequences faced by whistle-blowers (Bozeman et al., 2024; Lee, 2020; Park & Kim, 2023; Peralta-Borray et al., 2024). These studies often rely on quantitative analyses that establish correlations between gender and whistleblowing behaviour, highlighting patterns such as women being more likely to report ethical violations in collaborative work environments but less likely in male-dominated settings due to fear of retaliation. Research has also explored how gendered workplace cultures shape individuals' perceptions of misconduct, with findings suggesting that women are more sensitive to ethical breaches related to discrimination, harassment, and social injustices (Liyanarachchi & Adler, 2011; Prysmakova & Evans, 2022). However, these studies often treat gender as a static variable rather than interrogating the deeper structural and cultural forces that shape whistleblowing experiences. If we just focus on causality, much of the existing research overlooks the broader institutional and social mechanisms that discourage women from reporting misconduct and silence their voices when they do. This approach risks reinforcing simplistic narratives – such as framing women as either inherently more ethical or more vulnerable – without critically examining the gendered power structures that influence how whistleblowing functions within organisations.

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Moreover, empirical research on whistleblowing in male-dominated or bureaucratic settings has also been limited in scope, often failing to consider the unique socio-cultural and economic dynamics that shape women's decision-making processes. Studies rarely explore the role of relational obligations, perceptions of innocence, and financial dependence in influencing whistleblowing behaviour, despite evidence suggesting these factors are crucial in professional environments where loyalty and hierarchy are emphasised (Kenny & Fanchini, 2024; Nisar et al., 2019). Moreover, research in the context of developing countries, such as Indonesia, remains scarce, with most literature focusing on Western contexts that may not fully capture the complexity of workplace interactions in non-Western governance structures. This gap in empirical research restricts our understanding of how women navigate whistleblowing dilemmas in environments where obedience, harmony, and group-oriented thinking are highly valued. Without a nuanced exploration of these factors, current models of whistleblowing decision-making remain incomplete and potentially misunderstanding.

From the above theoretical and empirical concerns, the aim of this study is to explore the complex relationship between gender, organisational culture, and whistleblowing behaviour. For example, even though prior research has established that women often hesitate to report misconduct due to fear of retaliation and professional marginalisation, this study seeks to go beyond these surface-level explanations by examining the deeper socio-cultural and psychological factors that shape whistleblowing decisions. The lack of empirical research examining these intersections, especially in non-Western contexts, means that current understandings of whistleblowing and gender remain incomplete. Based on our literature review, most existing studies focus on Western governance structures, where individualism and legal protections for whistle-blowers are stronger, leaving a gap in research on collectivist work environments where loyalty, group harmony, and hierarchical obedience play a crucial role in decision-making.

Because of this complex reality, rational action theory becomes an especially useful way to understand whistleblowing behavior in such settings. This theory assumes that people make decisions based on careful thought, aiming to choose the option that offers the best outcome given their situation (Steinmetz & Pratt, 2024). It focuses on how individuals consider both the risks and the rewards of any possible action, including the limits they face in terms of power, knowledge, and social position (Brandt et al., 2024). For women in the public sector who are surrounded by unwritten rules of loyalty and gender expectations, the decision to report misconduct is rarely driven by emotion alone. Instead, it is a strategic calculation, shaped by the need to protect themselves from harm. As such, rational action theory helps explain why many women decide that staying silent is the safer, more logical path. Speaking up might feel morally right, but if it brings isolation, job loss, or damage to personal relationships, it can seem too costly. In these situations, silence becomes a form of self-protection rather than a sign of indifference. This theory also helps shift the conversation away from blaming individuals and toward examining the structural conditions that limit ethical action. It shows that to encourage whistleblowing, we need more than just legal protection. We must also understand and address the social and cultural pressures that influence how people make decisions. Therefore, by using rational action theory, this study gives a clearer, more realistic view of why whistleblowing remains rare in settings where loyalty, fear, and power shape every decision.

According to Goldthorpe (1998), the rational action theory is fundamentally grounded in the principle that human behaviour follows a structured and intentional logic. Individuals make decisions by systematically evaluating their available options, assessing risks and rewards, and selecting the course of action that maximises their utility (Power et al., 2019). This process is not merely instinctive or arbitrary but is shaped by conscious deliberation based on preferences, constraints, and anticipated outcomes (Power et al., 2019). The theory assumes that actors possess a clear set of objectives and act in ways that optimise their interests within existing limitations (Goldthorpe, 1998; Steiner et al., 2017). Whether those limitations stem from time, resources, or information, decision-makers seek the most effective path toward their desired outcomes (Lieder et al., 2018). This rational calculation is not necessarily driven by absolute knowledge but by relative assessments of what is feasible and beneficial given the circumstances. Of course, this perspective does not imply that individuals always make perfect decisions but that their choices are guided by the pursuit of optimal solutions based on their subjective evaluations. Even in situations of uncertainty, individuals apply probabilistic reasoning, adjusting their strategies as they gather new information (Calabretta et al., 2017). This adaptability emphasises the dynamic nature of rationality, where decisions evolve in response to changing circumstances. The theory also emphasises the role of incentives, recognising that human actions are shaped by the perceived benefits of different courses of action (Burton et al., 2020; Steiner et al., 2017). By understanding the mechanisms that influence decision-making, rational action theory provides a powerful lens through which to interpret behaviour across diverse settings. It moves beyond simplistic notions of human unpredictability and establishes a coherent model of action grounded in strategic calculation. Thus, the essence of the theory is not merely the act of choosing but the structured reasoning behind every decision, demonstrating that human agency is a calculated process rather than an arbitrary impulse.

Feminism plays a crucial role in challenging and reshaping power structures within male-dominated organisations (Coyle, 2003). These environments are often built upon entrenched hierarchies that reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting opportunities for women and other marginalised groups (Villeseche et al., 2022). Feminism, as both a theoretical framework and a practical movement, seeks to expose and dismantle these systemic barriers by advocating for policies that promote gender equity. These barriers are not incidental; they are reinforced through historical exclusion, cultural norms, and structural biases that privilege male perspectives in leadership, decision-

making, and professional advancement (Manning, 2021). It can be argued that feminism challenges the assumption that gender disparities in workplaces result from individual choices or meritocratic failures, emphasising instead the systemic nature of these inequalities.

Interestingly enough, women employees are often assumed to be secondary in professional settings. Even when women demonstrate equal or superior competence, they are frequently perceived as supplementary to male leadership rather than as primary contributors in their own right (Kossek et al., 2021). This bias is evident in workplace dynamics where women are disproportionately assigned supportive or administrative tasks rather than strategic roles. The expectation that women prioritise family responsibilities further reinforces this secondary status, leading to assumptions that they are less committed to their careers than their male counterparts (Bowyer et al., 2022). As a result, organisations often hesitate to invest in women's long-term professional development, assuming they are more likely to take career breaks or work part-time due to caregiving responsibilities. These structural assumptions create a cycle where women face limited opportunities for advancement, reinforcing the false perception that they are less suited for leadership (Weekes et al., 2025).

Feminism directly challenges these deeply ingrained biases by advocating for policies and cultural shifts that recognise women as equal contributors in the workforce. It exposes how the assumption of women as secondary is not a reflection of capability but a product of systemic discrimination. Feminist movements push for workplace reforms that address gendered expectations, such as equal parental leave policies, flexible work arrangements without career penalties, and leadership training programs designed to support women's advancement (Balan et al., 2023). These initiatives aim to dismantle the barriers that prevent women from being viewed as primary actors in professional spaces. Moreover, feminism critiques the way organisational cultures often celebrate traits associated with masculinity, such as competitiveness and risk-taking, while undervaluing qualities like collaboration and emotional intelligence, which are crucial for effective leadership (Loh et al., 2024). So, feminism advocates for an inclusive workplace where authority is not linked to gendered stereotypes but to competence, innovation, and strategic vision. Only through such structural and cultural transformations can workplaces move beyond seeing women as secondary and fully recognise their essential role in shaping industries, economies, and societies.

Gender in whistleblowing systems: Prior studies on gender in whistleblowing systems have largely focused on understanding how gender influences the decision to report wrongdoing and the consequences faced by whistle-blowers (Kenny & Fanchini, 2024; Prysmakova & Evans, 2022; Tavares et al., 2024). Research has consistently shown that women and men exhibit different whistleblowing behaviours due to varying social expectations, workplace dynamics, and risk perceptions. Other scholars suggest that women are often more ethically conscious and more likely to report misconduct in collaborative or supportive environments (Wang et al., 2022). However, in male-dominated organisations, where hierarchical structures are rigid (Oyewunmi & Oyewunmi, 2022), women are significantly less likely to come forward due to the fear of retaliation and professional marginalisation. These points indicate that whistleblowing is not solely an individual ethical choice but one that is deeply embedded in gendered workplace cultures. The structural barriers that women face, including credibility biases and heightened scrutiny, shape their willingness to report wrongdoing (Prysmakova & Evans, 2022). Thus, while women may exhibit a stronger ethical orientation, the decision to act on ethical concerns is constrained by systemic gender biases that shape their workplace experiences.

Women role in an organisations: In many regions, the increased presence of women in Indonesian local governments, specifically in leadership role, often masks the reality of tokenistic representation rather than genuine inclusion. They often occupy symbolic positions with limited authority, preventing meaningful influence over policy and resource allocation. Practically, they are frequently assigned to roles perceived as 'feminine,' reinforcing traditional gender roles rather than challenging them (Adamovic & Leibbrandt, 2023; Westoby et al., 2021). This strategic placement allows male-dominated institutions to claim progress in gender representation while maintaining control over critical areas of governance, such as economic policy, infrastructure, and security (Tayal & Mehta, 2023). The absence of women in these strategic sectors highlights the limitations of quotas as a stand-alone measure.

Additionally, women workers are instinctively perceived as possessing accuracy, patience, and perseverance. As a result, many organisations in the public sectors channel female employees into administrative, clerical, and support roles, reinforcing occupational segregation (Westoby et al., 2021). While these roles are essential for organisational efficiency (Mella, 2022), they often lack pathways for career advancement, limiting women's opportunities to enter decision-making positions. This systemic placement of women in administrative work under the assumption of 'natural' suitability ultimately constrains their professional growth and sustains gender hierarchies within workplaces (Gaudet et al., 2022). Even when women attain leadership positions, they frequently encounter resistance from bureaucratic structures and male colleagues, making it difficult to exercise full authority. Empirically, studies on gendered leadership in Indonesia suggest that women's involvement in local governance has been linked to higher levels of accountability and anti-corruption efforts (Ratu & Rahajeng, 2024), as female politicians are often perceived as more resistant to corrupt practices compared to their male counterparts. However, institutional barriers, including male-dominated political party structures, continue to restrict women's electoral success and governance effectiveness.

We perceive that this perception stems from long-standing gender stereotypes that associate women which may affect their willingness to report any wrongdoing. Because women in administrative roles are often expected to

be compliant, detail-oriented, and service-driven (Westoby et al., 2021), they may feel pressured to prioritise organisational harmony over exposing misconduct. This expectation creates an implicit bias where women are seen as custodians of order rather than as agents of change, discouraging them from engaging in whistleblowing behaviour. Furthermore, the perception that women are naturally suited for administrative tasks reinforces their subordinate position in organisational hierarchies (Mickey, 2022), making them more vulnerable to power imbalances that deter them from reporting unethical behaviour. They may fear that speaking out will be perceived as disruptive or as an overstep of their designated roles, leading to professional marginalisation or retaliation (Kenny & Fanchini, 2024; Tavares et al., 2024). Moreover, the assumption of women's obedience makes them more susceptible to exploitation in the workplace. As a result, women in many organisations are expected to be accommodating, to avoid conflict, and to accept managerial directives without challenge (Elhoushy et al., 2024). This assumption places them at a structural disadvantage, as obedience is often mistaken for a lack of leadership potential, limiting their career progression. So, women who conform to these expectations may find themselves undervalued, while those who assert authority or challenge decisions risk being perceived as difficult or uncooperative. In effect, such biases create a professional environment where women must navigate a double standard, expected to demonstrate loyalty and compliance while also proving their capability for leadership and strategic thinking.

RESEARCH METHODS

We interviewed seven retired civil servants who worked in Indonesia's local government. Those worked during periods when their local government experienced fraud committed by the regent. Essentially, these individuals possess extensive experiential knowledge, having directly navigated the bureaucratic structures and ethical dilemmas associated with public sector governance during periods marked by fraud. Their retrospective insights offer a critical vantage point, enabling the study to uncover how organizational culture, power relations, and gender norms shaped responses to misconduct over time. Furthermore, their distance from active duty allows for more candid reflections, free from immediate institutional pressures, making them particularly valuable in understanding the nuanced, context-specific barriers to whistleblowing in a collectivist and male-dominated environment.

Therefore, their opinions offer a rare and valuable insight into the structural weaknesses, ethical dilemmas, and cultural dynamics that shaped governance in Indonesian local governments. As former government employees, they provide critical reflections on how fraud was either enabled or overlooked, revealing the extent to which internal controls and oversight mechanisms failed to prevent recurring corruption. Their lived experiences shed light on the complexities of working within a system where formal rules often clashed with informal practices, influencing both individual ethical choices and institutional accountability. Specifically, by examining their views, we gain a deeper understanding of how gendered roles and workplace norms may have influenced responses to any wrongdoings. In many local government settings, female employees are often expected to be compliant, unselfish, and loyal to their superiors, which can affect their willingness to challenge unethical behaviour. These retired civil servants we interviewed help us explore whether these expectations played a role in shaping who spoke out and who remained silent.

Research procedure: We used in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Striepe, 2021). The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling. Practically, we designed open-ended questions to encourage detailed narratives about their experiences, perceptions of fraud, organisational culture, and the gendered dimensions of ethical decision-making. All their options are just perceptions. Before conducting interviews, we obtained informed consent from all participants. We ensure they understood the research objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was strictly maintained by anonymising all responses and removing any identifying details that could link participants to specific local governments or fraud incidents. Additionally, we were sensitive to the emotional impact of recalling unethical practices, allowing participants to set boundaries regarding which aspects they were willing to discuss. During the data collection we always prioritise ethical integrity. This study ensures that the voices of retired civil servants are represented responsibly, contributing to a deeper understanding of governance failures, ethical behaviour, and gendered experiences in local governments.

Data analysis: We employed a qualitative data analysis approach (Bouncken et al., 2021). Operationally, the analysis followed the framework proposed by Miles et al. (2014) and Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019), which emphasises three interrelated processes: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. This approach allowed a systematic examination of the qualitative information by first reducing and organising the data into meaningful categories, then displaying it in structured formats for better interpretation, and finally deriving conclusions that reflected the underlying patterns, themes, and relationships within the data. Given the exploratory nature of the study, thematic analysis was used to identify patterns, relationships, and emerging themes from the interview data (Bouncken et al., 2021). After transcribing the interviews verbatim, we conducted an initial round of open coding, systematically reviewing the transcripts to identify key concepts related to fraud experiences, ethical decision-making, organisational culture, and gendered expectations in whistleblowing. This process involved labelling excerpts of text that reflected participants' insights on structural weaknesses, power dynamics, and behavioural responses to misconduct. Codes were then grouped into broader categories, allowing us to refine the data into meaningful themes that captured the underlying issues in governance and ethics (Mishra & Dey, 2022).

A second phase of analysis involved axial coding, where we examined how these themes interconnected (Locke et al., 2022). We explored how gendered expectations influenced ethical decision-making, particularly whether female employees felt more constrained in reporting wrongdoing due to workplace norms emphasising obedience and loyalty. We also assessed whether hierarchical structures affected employees' willingness to challenge authority figures, identifying power imbalances that may have discouraged whistleblowing. The final stage of analysis involved selective coding, where we synthesised the findings into core narratives that explained how fraud persisted despite formal governance mechanisms. We applied a reflexive approach to ensure that our interpretations remained grounded in participants' experiences rather than preconceived assumptions. To enhance reliability, we conducted member checking, sharing preliminary findings with colleagues to validate whether our interpretations accurately reflected their perspectives. This systematic approach ensured that our findings provided a novel understanding of how whistleblowing system, gendered workplace norms, and ethical decision-making intersect in Indonesian local governments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study highlights several themes that influence women employees to report any wrongdoings in Indonesian local governments. Those themes are explained in further discussions.

Group-oriented thinking

Group-oriented thinking refers to a cultural and social mind-set where individuals prioritise collective harmony, group cohesion, and shared interests over personal actions or individual recognition (Jacobson, 2024). In the context of our study, this explains why many women in Indonesian local government hesitate to become whistleblowers. As suggested in the following quotes, they fear that speaking up could disrupt the stability of their workplace, harm their relationships with colleagues, and lead to negative consequences for the group as a whole. This mind-set fosters a strong sense of belonging and responsibility but can also discourage individuals from taking actions that might be perceived as disruptive or confrontational, even when ethical concerns are at stake. Their reluctance to stand out as a whistle-blower stems from the fear of being labelled a troublemaker, which could lead to professional or social isolation. Consequently, rather than exposing wrongdoing, these women choose silence to maintain group unity and avoid personal risk.

"They didn't want to be the only ones speaking up. It felt too risky, but I did know exactly" (Interviewee 1).
"They thought about their team and their future. Their decisions on it could have ruined everything" (Interviewee 3).

The above quotes are congruence with rational action theory explaining that people make decisions based on costs and benefits (Power et al., 2019). They view whistleblowing as too risky. As such, they act rationally by staying silent to protect themselves.

Strong duty to reciprocate favours

Previously, we found that group-oriented thinking made them stay silent. Another important reason was their strong duty to reciprocate favours. If someone had helped them before, they felt obligated to stay loyal. The next quotes suggest that reporting misconduct felt like betrayal. They feared breaking trust and damaging relationships.

"They easily felt they had to repay favours, their boss helped them get promoted, for example" (Interviewee 1).
"They knew the rules were broken, but, yes, they kept them" (Interviewee 2).
"I was sure, they stayed silent because they didn't want to hurt those who once helped them" (Interviewee 5).

Perceived innocence

Even when women saw wrongdoing, they believed their colleagues did not have bad intentions. They thought mistakes happened because of pressure, lack of choice, or system flaws. They might believe that it is unfair to report any mistakes. As a result, they chose to stay silent rather than accuse someone they saw as not truly guilty. These assumptions may stem from implicit gender norms and organisational cultures that discourage questioning authority or challenging male colleagues (Maulidi, 2024). Socialisation patterns (Maulidi et al., 2024) may also lead women to internalise beliefs that prioritise harmony and trust over suspicion, especially in male-dominated environments. The following quotes illustrate this point.

"They felt their colleagues had no choice, so they didn't report them" (Interviewee 2).
"They thought the system was the problem, not the people" (Interviewee 7).
"They believed their team didn't mean to break the rules, so they stayed quiet" (Interviewee 7).

These quotes also show a recurring theme of moral rationalization rooted in empathy and systemic critique, which plays a significant role in shaping non-reporting behavior. The belief that colleagues "had no choice" signals a perception of constrained agency, where actions are seen as driven by situational pressures rather than personal

volition. Similarly, the idea that "the system was the problem, not the people" suggests a shift in moral focus from individual wrongdoing to structural deficiencies, effectively deflecting blame from perpetrators to institutional failings. Finally, interpreting rule-breaking as unintentional, "they didn't mean to break the rules", further softens moral judgment and repositions potential whistleblowing as unnecessarily punitive. Together, these views construct a cognitive buffer that justifies silence, reduces perceived ethical urgency, and allows individuals to maintain professional loyalty without confronting misconduct. This emotional and moral framing, while understandable in collectivist cultures, ultimately undermines accountability and enables the normalization of unethical behavior.

In the long term, this perception of innocence can have serious implications. It may contribute to an organizational culture where accountability is undermined, allowing unethical practices to persist. If women do not speak up due to these assumptions, it can silence potential whistleblowers and hinder efforts to improve transparency. Over time, this may erode trust in the system, perpetuate power imbalances, and disincentivize ethical leadership. Addressing this issue requires a cultural shift that encourages critical awareness and empowers all employees to question and report wrongdoing, regardless of the gender or status of the accused.

Financial independence

Our study also shows that financial independence, or the lack of it, influenced their silence. Many Indonesian women were not the main income generators in their households. Because they depended on their husbands for financial support, they felt less empowered to take risks at work. Losing their job would not cause financial ruin, but it could create tension at home. Without the pressure of being the primary breadwinner, they prioritised stability and avoided actions that could disrupt their careers. Consequently, they chose to stay silent rather than report any misconducts.

"They didn't feel the need to take risks since they weren't the main earners" (Interviewee 2).
"They thought staying quiet was easier because they weren't financially dependent on their job" (Interviewee 5).

These quotes emphasize that without financial dependence on their employment, women tend to prioritize job stability and social harmony over ethical confrontation, viewing whistleblowing as an unnecessary risk with limited personal gain. Furthermore, this mindset can foster a sense of detachment or diminished responsibility, where the cost of inaction appears lower than the potential disruption that could follow speaking out. As a result, financial non-dependence does not empower ethical courage. Instead, it subtly reinforces passivity by lowering the perceived stakes of tolerating wrongdoing. It can argued that this shows a paradox: while financial independence is often seen as a pathway to empowerment, in this case, financial security outside of work becomes a disincentive to engage in ethically risky behavior, reinforcing a culture of silence.

Vulnerability to coercion

Vulnerability to coercion in this context refers to how women in Indonesian local government are pressured or intimidated into staying silent about misconduct. The next quotes highlight their lack of power to resist threats. Many women held lower-ranking positions, making it difficult to resist demands from those in power. Colleagues might also pressure them to stay quiet to protect the group. In some cases, they experienced subtle warnings, such as being excluded from meetings or given fewer responsibilities. Others feared more direct consequences, like being transferred to a less desirable role or facing verbal or emotional intimidation. With limited power and support, speaking up seemed too risky. As such, they chose silence as a way to protect themselves from those concerns.

"They were afraid of being moved to a worse position if they said something" (Interviewee 2).
"They saw what happened to others who spoke up, and they didn't want the same fate" (Interviewee 7).

Moreover, these quotes specifically highlight the theme of retaliation through positional punishment, where fear of being demoted, sidelined, or reassigned to less desirable roles acts as a powerful deterrent to whistleblowing. The concern expressed, being "moved to a worse position", demonstrates how organizational authority can be weaponized to maintain silence, especially against those in vulnerable or subordinate roles. Additionally, witnessing the negative consequences experienced by others who previously spoke up creates a climate of learned deterrence, where women internalize the risks of whistleblowing by observing real examples of punishment. This form of indirect coercion reinforces the perception that ethical action invites professional harm, making silence appear as the safest and most rational choice. Ultimately, these fears suggest how institutional retaliation not only targets individuals but also serves as a warning mechanism that reinforces a broader culture of compliance and fear.

Emotionally driven

Interestingly, the following quotes indicate that many women in Indonesian local government do not become whistle-blowers because their decisions were emotionally driven. As illustrated, fear, guilt, and empathy played a big role in their silence. Some were afraid of conflict and the potential backlash from colleagues and superiors. Others felt guilty about exposing people they had worked with for years. They empathised with those involved, believing

that their actions were caused by pressure or difficult circumstances. Instead of seeing whistleblowing as a duty, they saw it as an emotional burden. Their feelings made it harder to take action, so they chose to stay silent.

"They felt bad about reporting their colleagues. . ." (Interviewee 3).
"They were scared of making enemies, so they just let it go" (Interviewee 4).

Together, these sentiments in the above quotes, show that whistleblowing is not only a rational or professional decision but also an emotionally charged one, especially for women operating in collectivist and hierarchical work environments. In such settings, workplace relationships are often built on long-standing personal ties, shared struggles, and mutual support, making the idea of reporting a colleague emotionally painful (Maulidi, 2024). Women may fear not only being socially ostracized but also being labeled as disloyal, ungrateful, or disruptive to group harmony. These emotional consequences are deeply internalized and can feel more immediate and personally damaging than the abstract ethical duty to report misconduct. This emotional burden, rooted in guilt, fear of social conflict, and the anticipation of damaged relationships, becomes a powerful internal barrier. Even when misconduct is clearly recognized and morally troubling, the emotional weight of taking action often silences women. As a result, decisions around whistleblowing are not solely based on rational risk-benefit analysis but are heavily shaped by emotional dynamics that make speaking up feel deeply uncomfortable, if not personally dangerous. This highlights the need for organizations to not only provide formal protections but also create emotionally supportive environments where ethical concerns can be voiced without fear of social isolation or relational damage.

Insecurity

Our informants highlight insecurity from women employees. Insecurity in this context refers to a lack of confidence from becoming whistle-blowers. It means they doubt their own authority, knowledge, or ability to challenge those in power. Essentially, their explanations directly or indirectly indicate that women employees felt insecure about challenging superiors, believing they did not have enough power or credibility. Some feared that their concerns would be dismissed or that they would be seen as disrespectful. Others doubted their own judgment, worrying that they might be wrong or that speaking up would make them look incompetent. This lack of confidence kept them from taking action. The next quotes are examples of the informants' points.

"They did not feel important enough to challenge their bosses" (Interviewee 1).
"I did not know what was going on. I thought, many women employees didn't feel confident enough to challenge their superiors" (Interviewee 2).
"They worried that speaking up would make them look disrespectful" (Interviewee 4).

Moreover, such quotes inform us about the internalized power asymmetries and deep-seated insecurity that inhibit whistleblowing among women in hierarchical organizational cultures. The sense of not being "important enough" reflects a perceived lack of legitimacy or authority, which discourages women from challenging unethical behavior, especially when it involves superiors. Uncertainty and lack of confidence, as noted in the second quote, further amplify this hesitation, suggesting a cognitive barrier where women question their own judgment or fear misinterpretation of events. Moreover, the concern that whistleblowing could be seen as "disrespectful" illustrates how cultural expectations of deference and obedience constrain ethical action. In general, these insights show that silence is not merely a strategic choice but a consequence of deeply internalized norms about gender, hierarchy, and propriety – norms that reinforce compliance over confrontation and sustain a culture of unaccountability.

Discussion of research results

The findings of this study shows that women in Indonesian local government often choose silence over whistleblowing due to deeply rooted cultural and social factors. These insights are clearly presented in Table 1, which summarizes the key themes emerging from a qualitative data analysis approach. Using such an approach, the study systematically identified patterns in participants' narratives through open, axial, and selective coding techniques. Clearly, each theme in Table 1 represents a recurring psychological or contextual barrier that prevents women from engaging in whistleblowing. As such, a qualitative data analysis approach in this study allowed for rich, detailed exploration of lived experiences, making it possible to uncover the nuanced and often invisible forces that influence ethical silence. Therefore, Table 1 is not a simple categorization of findings, but a reflection of the broader cultural logic that governs behavior in Indonesian local government. It serves as both a summary of the empirical data and a foundation for deeper theoretical interpretation, particularly through the lens of rational action theory and feminist perspectives, which contextualize how personal ethics intersect with institutional power and gendered expectations.

As suggested in Table 1, group-oriented thinking plays a significant role. Women employees tend to prioritise maintaining harmony and avoiding disruption. They fear being seen as troublemakers, which could isolate them from colleagues or even lead to professional consequences. Their hesitation is congruence with rational action theory – when weighing the risks and benefits, staying silent appears to be the safer option (Agyemang et al., 2021). Additionally, a strong duty to reciprocate favours further reinforces their reluctance. If a superior has supported their

Table 1. Themes and Sub-themes of Research results

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Group-Oriented Thinking	Prioritising harmony, fear of standing out as a troublemaker
Reciprocity and Loyalty	Obligation to return favours, fear of betraying trust
Perceived Innocence	Belief that wrongdoing is due to pressure or system flaws
Financial Independence	Lack of financial necessity to take risks
Vulnerability to Coercion	Fear of professional consequences, intimidation from superiors
Emotional Decision-Making	Fear, guilt, empathy influencing silence
Insecurity	Lack of confidence to challenge authority, fear of appearing disrespectful

Source: Created by Author

career progression, they feel an obligation to remain loyal, even in the face of unethical behaviour. In this regard, for women employees reporting wrongdoing could be perceived as a betrayal, damaging relationships they have worked hard to build. This emotional burden, tied to their sense of gratitude, makes it even harder for them to act.

Another striking factor is the perception of innocence. Even when misconduct is evident, many women believe their colleagues are not acting out of malice but rather due to systemic pressures or lack of alternatives. They empathise with their co-workers and view the system itself as the real issue, leading them to justify inaction. This emotional perspective is closely linked to their vulnerability to coercion. In fact, within Indonesian bureaucracies, many women hold lower-ranking positions and lack the power to resist intimidation or threats. Some have seen colleagues face repercussions for speaking out, reinforcing their fear of similar consequences. Moreover, financial dependence on their families reduces their motivation to take risks, as their jobs are not the primary source of household income. Without a financial necessity to assert themselves, stability becomes their priority. Lastly, emotional factors such as fear, guilt, and insecurity also shape their decision-making. Our study illustrates that many women feel unqualified to challenge authority or worry that speaking up could be seen as disrespectful. Their lack of confidence, combined with an emotionally driven decision-making process, ultimately leads them to remain silent, despite recognising unethical behaviour.

Discussion of theoretical implications

Our study contributes to prior research (Nisar et al., 2019; Xiao & Wong-On-Wing, 2022), by showing why many women employees in Indonesian local government choose not to become whistle-blowers. Many studies have explored gender and whistleblowing (see also Oelrich & Erlebach, 2021), but they have not focused on the specific reasons that prevent women from speaking up. Using rational action theory, we can explain this in terms of costs and benefits. Women in our study weighed their choices carefully and often found that staying silent was the safer and more logical option. One major reason for this is group-oriented thinking. While earlier research has examined how fear of punishment discourages whistleblowing (Oyewunmi & Oyewunmi, 2022; William & Vandekerckhove, 2023), it has not sufficiently addressed how a strong sense of obligation to superiors and colleagues reinforces silence. In our study, women felt morally indebted to those who had supported their careers, such as bosses who facilitated their promotions or colleagues who had previously helped them. This sense of loyalty created a psychological conflict, where whistleblowing was perceived not as a duty to uphold ethics but as an act of betrayal against those who had contributed to their professional success. In this context, remaining silent is not necessarily a sign of passivity or lack of ethical awareness but rather a rational decision to avoid being labelled as a troublemaker, which could have long-term consequences on their professional standing and social belonging. This contribution is significant because it challenges the assumption that ethical decision-making is purely based on personal integrity or legal safeguards (Mustafa et al., 2025). Instead, our study suggests that ethical choices are shaped by social obligations, where women prioritise maintaining relationships over exposing misconduct. These results differ notably from (Prysmakova & Evans, 2022), who used a vignette-based experiment to explore whistleblowing motivation and gender in local government. Although their work provided useful quantitative insights into hypothetical scenarios, our research uses a qualitative, context-rich approach grounded in real experiences of women facing ethical dilemmas in collectivist and hierarchical settings. Instead of treating gender as a variable, we use it as a lens to explore deeper cultural and institutional dynamics. Our findings highlight not just whether women blow the whistle, but why many remain silent, due to emotional, relational, and cultural factors like group loyalty, moral obligation to superiors, and fear of harming relationships. In doing so, we offer a richer understanding of whistleblowing within a non-Western, real-world context.

Our findings also contribute to prior studies by offering a more comprehensive understanding of how the perception of wrongdoing influences whistleblowing decisions, particularly among women in collectivist work environments. For instance, previous research has largely treated whistleblowing as a response to clear ethical violations, assuming that individuals recognise misconduct and decide whether to report it (Dey et al., 2021; Oelrich, 2021; Otchere et al., 2023). However, our study expands this perspective by showing that women in Indonesian local govern-

ment do not always interpret rule-breaking as deliberate wrongdoing. Instead, they attribute it to systemic pressures, external constraints, or a lack of viable alternatives. This has a different view from the traditional assumption that whistle-blowers simply expose unethical behaviour (Olesen, 2024). Instead, it suggests that their decision-making is shaped by their interpretation of intent and responsibility. When women believe that colleagues are forced into misconduct due to organizational flaws or workplace pressure, they see reporting as unfair rather than necessary. This insight, of course, advances whistleblowing research by showing that moral judgment is not always black and white; rather, it is influenced by situational empathy and structural awareness. It also highlights that existing whistleblowing frameworks, which focus on protecting reporters from retaliation (Prysmakova & Evans, 2022), may not be enough to encourage disclosures if employees do not perceive wrongdoing in the first place.

Furthermore, prior studies have largely examined financial risk in terms of job security, assuming that employees avoid whistleblowing because they fear losing their main source of income (Hennequin, 2023). In this sense, our findings provide a different perspective by showing that, for many women, financial dependence on a spouse or family can actually decrease their willingness to take professional risks. Since their job is not the primary source of household income, they are less motivated to challenge misconduct, as the personal stakes are lower. This contrasts with the work of Schnatterly et al. (2018), traditional economic explanations of whistleblowing, which indicate that financial need drives employees to report wrongdoing in order to protect their careers. Instead, our study shows that financial security outside of work can reduce the urgency to act, leading women to prioritise stability over ethical concerns. Our study also expands this understanding by demonstrating that emotional factors such as fear, guilt, and insecurity can be just as influential, if not more, than objective legal or professional concerns. Although previous studies have acknowledged fear of retaliation as a deterrent to whistleblowing (Kenny & Fotaki, 2023), our findings go further by highlighting how emotional attachments to colleagues and superiors create an internal conflict. Women in our study did not simply fear external consequences; they also struggled with personal guilt and empathy, believing that reporting misconduct would betray long-standing relationships. For many women, the real struggle happens internally, where the psychological burden of speaking up outweighs the ethical or professional duty to report misconduct.

Additionally, our study shows that women employees lacked confidence in their own authority, knowledge, or ability to challenge those in power. They feared that their concerns would be dismissed or that they would appear incompetent for questioning workplace practices. This result demonstrate that whistleblowing hesitancy is not solely a response to external threats but is also shaped by deeply ingrained self-perceptions. Women's doubts about their credibility reinforced their decision to remain silent, even when they recognised wrongdoing. This study shows that emotions are central to the decision-making process. For women in Indonesian local government, whistleblowing was not merely a legal or professional risk but an emotionally taxing act that could lead to social alienation and psychological distress. Obviously, this contributes to prior studies by expanding rational action theory beyond material costs and benefits to include emotional and relational calculations. So, by framing silence as a logical response to overwhelming emotional risks, our research provides a deeper and more contextually grounded explanation for why whistleblowing remains rare, despite legal frameworks designed to protect whistle-blowers.

Discussion of managerial implications

This study highlights the urgent need for managers to foster an environment where ethical reporting is both safe and culturally supported. To counter fear-driven silence, especially among women employees, managers must implement structurally sound and psychologically safe reporting mechanisms. First, establish anonymous and encrypted whistleblowing channels managed by independent ethics officers to eliminate fear of retaliation and ensure confidentiality. Second, introduce zero-retaliation policies with clear enforcement protocols, including disciplinary measures for those who intimidate or marginalize whistle-blowers. These policies should be embedded in the organization's core compliance framework and communicated regularly.

Next, integrate relationally sensitive ethics training that reframes whistleblowing not as betrayal, but as an act of integrity and collective responsibility. Such training should include real-life scenarios, gender-based dilemmas, and role-play exercises to increase empathy and moral confidence. Managers should also cultivate visible ethical leadership by responding transparently to complaints and publicly recognizing employees who raise legitimate concerns, thereby signaling that speaking up leads to positive, not punitive, outcomes. For employees who are not financially dependent on their roles, such as women in secondary income positions, managers must emphasize non-monetary values, such as respect, trust, and fairness, as part of the organizational identity. Finally, embed equity-driven performance evaluations that reward ethical conduct, not just output, and ensure that whistle-blowers are supported, not sidelined, in their career trajectories. We believe that these concrete strategies collectively shift the risk calculus, making it rational – and safe – for employees to choose integrity over silence.

CONCLUSIONS

This study finds that women employees in Indonesian local government often remain silent – not because of ethical indifference, but as a rational response to a complex environment shaped by collectivist values, rigid hierarchies, and entrenched gender norms. From the lens of rational action theory, their silence emerges as a calculated

decision in which the perceived costs, for example social, professional, and emotional, far outweigh the benefits. As suggested, in environments where loyalty and group harmony are culturally valued, reporting misconduct may jeopardize important relationships and be perceived as a betrayal, particularly of those who may have played a role in supporting one's career. This perception is further reinforced when misconduct is seen as a result of systemic constraints rather than individual wrongdoing, rendering whistleblowing not only socially disruptive but ethically ambiguous. Essentially, women in lower-ranking roles often lack the institutional power and protection to resist coercion. Moreover, this study suggests that emotional factors, such as fear of conflict, guilt, and anxiety over social isolation, add another layer of complexity to whistleblowing decisions, illustrating that rational action also involves emotional self-preservation. These emotional burdens are not peripheral but central to the decision-making process, especially in environments where maintaining social cohesion is valued over individual assertion. Furthermore, feelings of insecurity and internalized perceptions of low status diminish women's confidence to challenge authority, reinforcing their silence. Therefore, it can be argued that whistleblowing is not a straightforward ethical decision but a high-stakes choice shaped by relational, institutional, and emotional constraints. In this context, silence, while ethically fraught, becomes a rational, self-protective response.

This study has several limitations that future research can address. First, it relies on qualitative interviews with retired civil servants, which provide valuable insights but may not fully capture the perspectives of current employees who actively navigate whistleblowing dilemmas. Future studies could incorporate surveys or experimental designs to obtain broader and more generalisable findings. Second, this research focuses on Indonesian local governments, where cultural and bureaucratic factors strongly influence workplace ethics, limiting the applicability of findings to different governance structures or private-sector organisations. Comparative studies across various institutional and cultural contexts could offer a more comprehensive understanding of gendered whistleblowing behaviour. Third, while this study highlights key psychological and socio-cultural barriers to whistleblowing, it does not quantitatively measure the extent to which these factors contribute to decision-making. Future research could develop statistical models to test the relative influence of these barriers across different demographics. Lastly, this study primarily examines women's perspectives, but men's experiences in whistleblowing systems remain underexplored. Future studies should consider a gender-comparative approach to understand how organisational culture affects whistleblowing behaviour across different gender identities, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and effective reporting mechanisms.

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