



The Social Construction of Generation Z Adolescents Regarding Mothers' Roles as Primary Family Breadwinners

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Abstract

Changes in family structure in Indonesia have shifted gender role divisions, including the increasing number of mothers serving as primary breadwinners. However, how Generation Z adolescents interpret this change remains underexplored, despite their critical stage of identity formation, openness to gender equality, and exposure to social and digital influences shaping family perspectives. This study aims to examine the social construction of Generation Z adolescents regarding mothers' roles as primary breadwinners by considering personal experiences, family interactions, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study involved six adolescents aged 18–21 from upper, middle, and lower economic classes. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that socioeconomic class shapes each stage of adolescents' social construction, from externalization and objectivation to internalization. Upper-class adolescents perceive working mothers as a conscious choice and self-actualization, middle-class adolescents view it as family negotiation and cooperation, while lower-class adolescents regard it as an economic necessity and a form of family resilience. Academically, this study contributes to family and gender sociology from a cross-class adolescent perspective. Practically, the findings inform educators, communities, and policymakers in strengthening gender literacy, social studies education, and context-sensitive family empowerment programs.

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INTRODUCTION

Family structures in Indonesia have become increasingly complex over the past decades in response to ongoing social, economic, and cultural changes. A family system that was previously predominantly patriarchal, in which men were positioned as primary breadwinners and women were responsible for domestic roles, has undergone significant transformation. (Wijdanah, 2025). Modernization, urbanization, and women's increasing access to education and employment opportunities have contributed to the growing fluidity of gender role boundaries within society. (Wijdanah, 2025). These changes align with the social constructionist perspective, which emphasizes that gender roles are not fixed but are shaped through ongoing social interactions and collective experiences. The characteristics constructed for men and women may vary across regions and evolve over time in response to cultural and social dynamics. Social construction theory further asserts that social meanings are produced through processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization within social interactions (Fikri et al., 2025). Among Generation Z adolescents, the process of externalization is reflected in how they express views and narratives about mothers' roles, shaped by family experiences and exposure to digital media. Objectivation occurs when these views are accepted as taken-for-granted social realities within family and social environments. Internalization then takes place as these meanings are absorbed and integrated into adolescents' cognitive frameworks and attitudes toward gender roles within the family.

Historically, fathers have been regarded as the economic backbone of the family, while mothers were primarily responsible for domestic duties. However, social developments and advancements across various sectors have shifted this division of roles. Women now have greater opportunities to participate in the public sphere and are no longer solely dependent on men's income. (Tuwu, 2018). Contemporary realities show that men are not always the primary breadwinners, and women no longer serve merely as supplementary income earners. Data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS) indicate that in 2023 more than five million

households were headed by women, accounting for approximately 17% of all households nationwide. This trend signifies women's increasingly strategic role as key contributors to household economic stability and highlights the emergence of more diverse family patterns within Indonesia's social context.

The increasing number of women serving as primary breadwinners is particularly evident in urban areas such as Bandung City. Indriyani, (2024) previous studies note that shifts in gender roles are increasingly pronounced in urban areas, influenced by factors such as household economic conditions, divorce, spousal migration, and work demands. Data from the Bandung City Office of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (DP3A) (2025) show that more than 100,000 women serve as primary contributors to household economies. One area reflecting this condition is Rancabolang Subdistrict in Gedebage District, where women work across various formal and informal sectors, perform dual roles, and adapt to family economic demands. This situation not only transforms household structures but also generates new social meanings of motherhood as a central figure extending beyond domestic responsibilities.

Within the context of transforming family structures, Generation Z has grown up amid a transition from traditional to modern values. Born between 1997 and 2012, Generation Z is a digital generation with broad access to information, discourses on gender equality, and global human rights issues. Such exposure shapes their initial frameworks for understanding women's roles, including the legitimacy of mothers as primary breadwinners. However, these meaning constructions do not always align seamlessly, as understandings derived from social media and popular culture often involve negotiation or even tension with the domestic realities directly observed within families (Rahmah et al., 2024).

The critical, adaptive, and open-minded characteristics of this generation make it essential to examine Generation Z in order to understand social changes influencing the construction of gender roles (Solikah, 2024). Research Rahmah et al. (2024) shows that Generation Z demonstrates a higher level of awareness regarding gender discrimination and

views gender as a social construct that can be critically reexamined. Meanwhile, other studies Solihin et al. (2022) have found that Generation Z is significantly more accepting of gender role equality between men and women within the family compared to previous generations. The family serves as the primary institution shaping adolescents' understanding of social values, authority, and the distribution of gender roles. Mother-child relationships constitute a crucial space in forming adolescents' perceptions of who holds decision-making power and how these roles are enacted. (Solikah, 2024). Social construction theory emphasizes that social values and identities are not formed naturally, but emerge through repeated social interactions that eventually become collectively accepted realities. (Pramono & Hardati, 2024). Therefore, when mothers assume the role of primary breadwinners, adolescents have the opportunity to construct new meanings regarding female authority, family responsibility, and patterns of gender relations within the household.

Existing studies on women as primary breadwinners have largely focused on dual role burdens, economic resilience, and the emotional pressures experienced by mothers. Nurhayati, (2021) indicates that women who serve as primary breadwinners experience higher levels of stress due to their dual roles. Other studies Dwi Artih & Susilawati, (2019) on agricultural laborer families show women's dominance in meeting household economic needs while their domestic responsibilities remain unchanged. However, these studies have paid limited attention to children's or adolescents' perspectives on such role changes. In this context, adolescents, as a generation in the process of identity formation, are crucial to examine, as their perceptions may serve as indicators of broader social change (Sahraz et al., 2025).

Several recent studies have addressed this issue. First, research Aurynnia et al. (2025) on gender role reversal indicates that Generation Z interprets changes in gender roles in diverse ways based on their experiences and sociocultural values. Second, research Astuti et al. (2024) examines public perceptions of women in dual roles and finds that economic motivation is the primary factor, yet

it does not address adolescents' perspectives. Third, research Sianturi & Huwae, (2023) emphasizes the psychological aspects of women as primary breadwinners, such as self-esteem and resilience, but does not examine how other family members interpret these role changes. Together, these three studies provide a theoretical foundation while simultaneously revealing a gap in research concerning children's or adolescents' perspectives.

Based on this review, a research gap remains regarding how Generation Z adolescents construct social meanings of mothers as primary breadwinners. This gap lies in the limited in-depth exploration of how adolescents interpret mothers' roles in everyday life, how they understand shifts in gender role division within the family, and how personal experiences, parent-child interactions, and socioeconomic conditions shape these perspectives. Moreover, few studies have examined the social construction processes through which adolescents make sense of changing gender roles within the family, despite their strategic role in transforming social values in the future.

This gap underscores the need for in-depth research on Generation Z adolescents' social construction of mothers' roles as primary breadwinners. Drawing on Berger and Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality, this study examines how personal experiences, family interactions, cultural and environmental contexts, and social media shape meaning through processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Social media is included as a key factor as it provides a space for Generation Z adolescents to construct and negotiate gender role meanings beyond the family context.

Theoretically, this study enriches scholarship on social construction and gender dynamics within urban families and contributes to the development of social studies education literature. Practically, the findings may serve as a reference for educational institutions in designing gender-sensitive learning, assist communities in understanding gender roles more equitably, and provide a foundation for further research on family and youth perceptions of changing social roles. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the social construction of Generation Z

adolescents regarding mothers' roles as primary breadwinners within the family.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach as it seeks to understand the subjective meanings constructed by Generation Z adolescents regarding mothers' roles as primary breadwinners. According to Creswell & Creswell, (2023), Qualitative research is an approach used to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups assign to a social or human phenomenon. This study adopts a phenomenological design, as it focuses on informants' lived experiences and the meaning-making processes through which they interpret the phenomenon under investigation.

The study was conducted in Rancabolang Subdistrict, Gedeage District, Bandung City, West Java. This area was selected due to its urban social dynamics, high female participation in economic activities, and the diversity of family conditions relevant to the social construction of mothers' roles. Data collection was carried out from October to December 2025.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted to capture participants' subjective interpretations of their experiences, while observation helped contextualize family interactions. Documentation was used to support the data through field notes and relevant records.

Participants were selected using criterion-based sampling as part of purposive sampling (Creswell, 2023). The study involved six Generation Z adolescents aged 18–21 residing in Rancabolang Subdistrict who had direct experience living in families where mothers served as primary breadwinners. This age range represents late adolescence, a developmental stage characterized by relatively stable cognitive, emotional, and social maturity, enabling individuals to reflect critically on their experiences and construct social meaning. The informants were chosen for their relevance to the research focus and their ability to articulate lived experiences and social interpretations. They came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds: ANF (21) and SAL (20) from upper-class families; RG

(18) and FT (20) from middle-class families; and DN (21) and SN (19) from lower-class families. Within each socioeconomic category, one male and one female informant were selected to capture gender-based variation in perspectives. This diversity provides a comprehensive context for understanding Generation Z adolescents' social construction of mothers' roles as primary breadwinners.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. According to Creswell (2023), thematic analysis involves organizing the data, reading the entire dataset, coding, grouping codes into categories, and developing key themes that represent patterns of meaning in qualitative data. The resulting themes were then interpreted within the sociocultural context of Generation Z adolescents' lives in Rancabolang Subdistrict.

Data credibility was enhanced through source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Methodological triangulation involved examining the consistency of data collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Interview data on Generation Z adolescents' views of mothers as primary breadwinners were verified through observations of family interaction dynamics and relevant daily activities. These data were further supported by field notes and related documents concerning family conditions and the informants' social environments. This process was carried out iteratively throughout the data collection and analysis stages to identify convergence and divergence in the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Social construction refers to the process through which reality is understood as the product of symbolic interactions within society. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), knowledge and social reality are collectively produced through human communication and actions, particularly habits and habitualization, meaning that "reality" is not an objective phenomenon but a socially constructed process that continually evolves (Suandika & Wirasatya, (2021).

Language, norms, and culture function as media for constructing shared meanings that shape individuals' ways of thinking and behaving in society. Accordingly, social construction rejects the assumption that reality is static or universal; instead, reality is continuously formed, maintained, and reproduced through dynamic social interactions. (Huda, 2025).

This study examines how Generation Z adolescents interpret mothers as primary breadwinners in urban families, considering differences in socioeconomic class. The analysis is framed through Peter Berger's three processes of social construction—externalization, objectivation, and internalization—which illustrate how social meanings are formed, institutionalized, and accepted by adolescents as social reality.

Externalization (Adolescents' Initial Perceptions of Mothers as Primary Breadwinners)

Externalization refers to the stage in which Generation Z adolescents begin to express their initial understandings of mothers' roles as primary breadwinners based on everyday observations, family interactions, and lived experiences. Through this process, adolescents construct basic meanings regarding why mothers work, how these roles are managed, and what they perceive as significant in a mother's role within the family.

In upper economic class families, adolescents' externalization tends to focus on abstract values such as self-actualization, professionalism, and gender equality. Adolescents view a working mother as a life choice and a form of self-expression. Informant ANF (19) perceives his mother as capable of balancing public and domestic roles, where work is understood not merely as an economic obligation but also as a space for self-fulfillment, equal to the father's role, and regarded as natural within a modern family.

A similar attitude is observed in informant SAL (21), who associates her mother's work with strong personal capacity, independence, and the ability to maintain family emotional stability. SAL (21) considers her mother's success in managing both public and domestic roles as a reflection of high self-quality and professionalism. In this group, adolescents externalize the reality that working

mothers have choice, control, and opportunities for self-actualization, perceiving work not as a burden but as a valuable form of social contribution.

In contrast, adolescents from the middle class externalize mothers' working roles through a more practical, adaptive, and family-cooperative perspective. They view the decision of mothers to serve as primary breadwinners not entirely as an ideal choice but as a result of aligning family needs with a flexible division of roles.

Informant RG (20) explained that in his family, economic and domestic roles are exchanged fluidly. The mother works and serves as the family's primary earner, while the father assumes most domestic responsibilities. For RG, this arrangement is not problematic but understood as mutual adaptation to support family continuity. Informant FT (18) reflects a similar understanding. The mother is seen as a central figure who can still manage, control, and coordinate household needs despite work responsibilities. Her involvement in both spheres is not viewed as conflicting but as evidence of how middle-class families manage gender roles in a negotiated and functional way. In this group, externalization emphasizes balancing economic responsibilities with maintaining household harmony.

Meanwhile, adolescents from lower economic classes externalize mothers' working roles in a more emotional and pragmatic manner. They view mothers as working out of economic necessity rather than personal choice or self-actualization. Informant DN (18) sees his mother as a central figure bearing nearly all family economic responsibilities while still managing household tasks, interpreting her hard work as a demonstration of resilience and sacrifice to meet the family's needs. Informant SN (20) shares a similar view, noting that his mother must work because the father's income is insufficient, making the mother the primary economic supporter. In this group, externalization illustrates how adolescents perceive mothers' roles as a form of family resilience dependent on women's hard work and sacrifice, consistent with findings that women's dual roles relate to family coping strategies amid economic pressures and evolving gender dynamics. (Rizqa, 2025).

Adolescents externalize in a more emotional and practical way, as mothers work due to economic pressures. Direct observation of mothers bearing primary responsibilities shapes the understanding that earning income is a necessity rather than a personal choice.

Table 1. Differences in Externalization Patterns Based on Economic Class

Economic Class	Externalization Pattern	Verbal Representation
Upper	Value-oriented, sees mother's role as a modern, equal choice	ANF: <i>"ibu dan ayah itu sama-sama berperan sebagai panutan ..."</i>
Middle	Realistic and cooperative, adjusting roles to ensure family harmony	RG: <i>"ibu menjadi pencari nafkah utama, kalo ayah lebih banyak mengurus rumah ..."</i> FT: <i>"ibu sih yang ngatur banyak, dari urusan rumah sampai nemenin anak kalau lagi ada masalah"</i>
Lower	Needs and experience based, perceives mother's role as a primary responsibility burden	DN: <i>"ibu itu perannya sangat besar dalam keluarga, terutama dalam aspek ekonomi"</i> SN: <i>"ibu juga bisa aktif di luar rumah, bahkan ikut bantu cari uang itu keren banget"</i>

The differences in externalization patterns across economic classes indicate that adolescents' initial meanings are not formed solely on an individual basis but are strongly influenced by family structural conditions and everyday social experiences. Family economic background plays a

significant role in shaping how members interpret mothers' dual roles (Alimi & Saprudin, 2022). Thus, externalization among Generation Z adolescents not only reflects the objective conditions of the family but also illustrates how young people interpret the social reality they experience.

Objectivation (Acceptance of Social Norms and Role Legitimacy)

Objectivation describes the stage when Generation Z adolescents begin to accept mothers' roles as primary breadwinners as a legitimate reality according to social norms. At this phase, their initial personal perceptions shift toward more stable and rational meanings in line with the family's socio-economic context.

In upper-class families, objectivation appears as a positive and egalitarian acceptance influenced by modern values. Adolescents like ANF view a working mother as a professional choice equal to the father, while SAL sees the mother's public role as not diminishing family relationship quality. Exposure to media, a progressive social environment, and strong gender equality values lead them to believe that women have public capacities equal to men. Objectivation is shaped by modern cultural legitimacy, where a working mother is considered part of a professional lifestyle rather than a violation of domestic roles. These egalitarian norms make adolescents accept the mother's work as legitimate and practice gender equality within the family.

In middle-class families, objectivation is more pragmatic and functional. Adolescents accept the mother's role as a breadwinner because they see it as part of the family's strategy to balance economic and emotional needs. For example, RG considers that his mother's flexible work system keeps the family warm even though she is the primary earner. FT also understands that her mother manages both productive and domestic roles simultaneously, which is seen as a responsible and commendable act. In this group, the prevailing norm is adaptive: a working mother is accepted as long as family harmony is maintained. Acceptance arises not only from modern values but also from daily experiences showing that this role division is functional and realistic.

In lower-class families, objectivation is highly emotional and rooted in survival needs. Adolescents like DN witness firsthand how their mothers work hard to meet family needs because the father's contribution is insufficient. SN also observes her mother bearing both productive and domestic responsibilities, evoking admiration mixed with empathy. In this group, objectivation arises not from notions of equality or professional choice but from economic realities that leave no alternative. Collective norms position women as figures who must be strong and capable of supporting the family, making the mother's role as breadwinner understood as an unavoidable necessity.

The different objectivation processes across economic classes indicate that acceptance of the mother's role as the primary breadwinner is not uniform but legitimized through social norms embedded within the family and surrounding environment. Additionally, (Sianturi & Huwae, 2023) It emphasizes that mothers as primary breadwinners are often seen as strong and responsible figures, especially in families with limited economic resources.

Table 2. Differences in Objectivation Patterns Based on Economic Class

Economic Class	Objectivation Pattern	Verbal Representation
Upper	Accepted as normal and equal	ANF: <i>"sama-sama berperan sebagai panutan"</i> . SAL: <i>"membuat keluarga merasa diperhatikan"</i> .
Middle	Combines traditional and modern values	RG: <i>"ibu pencari nafkah utama, ayah urus rumah"</i> FT: <i>"ngatur rumah & nemenin anak nyaman"</i>
Lower	Accepted due to economic necessity	DN: <i>"ibu berperan besar, terutama"</i>

ekonomi"
SN: *"ibu aktif di luar rumah, ikut bantu cari uang keren banget"*

The findings show that adolescents' initial perceptions of mothers as primary breadwinners are reinforced and legitimized through social norms in the family and community. Objectivation transforms adolescents' subjective experiences into a social reality that is considered normal, legitimate, and acceptable. This process aligns with Berger and Luckmann's view that social reality becomes objective when the meanings formed are institutionalized and collectively accepted.

Internalization (Integration of Social Meaning into Adolescent Identity)

The internalization stage is the process in which Gen Z adolescents absorb social experiences of mothers as primary breadwinners into their personal values, perspectives on family, and ideals of a future family. After observing these experiences in daily life (externalization) and understanding them as social patterns within the family (objectivation), adolescents then incorporate them into their beliefs and self-identity.

Internalization in upper-class adolescents shapes values oriented toward gender equality, female independence, and family harmony. Economic stability allows them to see mothers working not as a form of compulsion, but as a conscious choice and an expression of professionalism. This shows that the internalization of gender equality values develops through relatively stable family experiences, where the mother's work is understood as part of an equitable social relationship that helps maintain family balance. This perspective highlights the family as the primary space for learning gender values, influencing how adolescents perceive women's roles in both public and domestic spheres (Rahman, 2021).

ANF considers an ideal family as one that provides space for all members to grow. ANF internalizes that gender roles are flexible, seeing that the mother can manage both public and domestic responsibilities without reducing family warmth.

SAL adopts a similar value, viewing that women as primary breadwinners are not problematic as long as the decision is made consciously and maintains emotional balance. This process leads upper-class adolescents to believe that gender roles are determined by agreement and capacity, not by sex. They develop egalitarian and appreciative attitudes toward working mothers, seeing them as strong and professional role models.

Internalization in middle-class families shapes values of balance, family cooperation, and role flexibility. For them, the mother as the primary breadwinner results from negotiation and family needs, rather than purely an ideal choice or coercion.

RG internalized values of cooperation and agreement, though sometimes feeling sympathy seeing her mother bear heavy responsibilities. FT shifted from believing the ideal family is father works and mother stays home to understanding that a family's success depends on adaptability, not fixed rules. Both view women as able to be primary earners as long as balance and fair division of responsibilities exist. This internalization emphasizes that women can take economic roles while the household foundation relies on cooperation and mutual agreement.

Internalization among lower-class adolescents is more emotional and cautious, emphasizing family stability. Direct experience of mothers working out of necessity fosters more conservative values and a desire to avoid the heavy burdens their parents faced. DN internalized that women should not bear the primary breadwinning role. Mothers may still work, but being the main economic supporter is seen as less ideal. The family's financial struggles led DN to envision a more stable family structure in the future. SN shows a similar pattern, viewing the ideal family as one where the father assumes primary economic responsibility while the mother focuses on caregiving.

Nevertheless, positive internalization still emerges. DN recognizes her mother's resilience and creativity as life lessons, while SN emphasizes the importance of responsibility and choosing a partner wisely as a foundation for building a stable family. This shows that the family values and emotional regulation internalized by adolescents influence the

development of their social attitudes. (Josua et al., 2020).

Table 3. Differences in Internalization Patterns Based on Economic Class

Economic Class	Internalization Pattern	Verbal Representation
Upper	Egalitarian values, equality as the standard for an ideal family	ANF: <i>"lebih open-minded ... memberi ruang bagi semua anggotanya untuk berkembang"</i> .
Middle	Adaptive values, emphasizing balance and family cooperation	RG: <i>"kasihan kalau ibu harus bekerja terlalu berat ... keluarga tetap bisa ideal kalau saling bekerja sama"</i> FT: <i>"keluarga ideal itu yang saling kerja sama"</i>
Lower	Conservative and emotional values, based on caution regarding economic burden	DN: <i>"tidak semua laki-laki harus jadi satu-satunya pencari nafkah"</i> SN: <i>"tanggung jawab utama menafkahi keluarga ada pada ayah"</i>

The internalization stage shows that social experiences of mothers as primary breadwinners are absorbed into Gen Z adolescents' values and identities. This process shapes their understanding of gender roles, the concept of an ideal family, and future life orientation, making objectified social meanings an integral part of their personal beliefs.

CONCLUSION

The social construction of Gen Z adolescents regarding mothers as primary breadwinners is shaped by a combination of personal experiences at home, the quality of interactions with parents, and the role dynamics they observe in their families. These perceptions are further reinforced by cultural values, the socioeconomic conditions of their environment, and portrayals of working women in social media. Adolescents from upper-class families construct the idea that a working mother represents choice, professionalism, and self-actualization; middle-class adolescents interpret it as a negotiated role to maintain family stability; while lower-class adolescents view it as a form of resilience and sacrifice to meet basic needs. All these constructions emerge through the processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization, showing that adolescents' perceptions of working mothers are not formed in isolation but through the interplay of direct experiences and broader social influences.

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