

The Weight of Masculinity: An Exploratory Analysis of Male Technical Workers in Karawang

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Abstract

The technical and engineering sectors have long been constructed as male-dominated environments that reinforce specific hegemonic masculinity norms. While these norms prioritize resilience and logic, they often create significant barriers to mental health help-seeking and emotional expression. This study aims to explore the construction of masculinity among technical employees and how these gendered expectations influence their mental well-being and coping strategies. Using a qualitative approach, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with three employee groups. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Four major themes emerged: first, Physical and mental resilience as an ideal standard; second, the logic-emotion dichotomy and the "baper" (oversensitive) stigma; third, Kinship and collectivity as survival mechanisms under work pressure; and, lastly, navigating vulnerability through self-reliant coping strategies. Adherence to traditional masculinity, characterized by emotional restriction and self-reliance, functions as a double-edged sword; it fosters team solidarity but simultaneously facilitates normative male alexithymia, hindering professional help-seeking. These findings underscore the urgency for male-friendly mental health interventions in industrial workplaces to deconstruct the stigma of vulnerability.

Keywords: Masculinity, Technical Sector, Help-seeking Behavior

1. Introduction

In recent years, the discourse surrounding male mental health has regained significant prominence in Indonesia, largely catalyzed by the viral digital phenomenon known as "men do not tell stories" (*laki-laki tidak bercerita*) in late 2024. This digital trend serves as a marker of male resistance toward emotional expression and reflects deeper, internalized gender norms regarding masculinity. The cultural mandate to project invulnerability and suppress weakness is not merely a symbolic social construct; rather, it carries severe implications for psychological well-being. Data from the Indonesian National Police underscores this hidden vulnerability, revealing that men accounted for 79.64% of suicide cases between January and August 2024, a statistic that highlights the lethal consequences of traditional masculine expectations ([Polri, 2024](#)).

Within the specific cultural landscape of Indonesia, hegemonic masculinity compels men to internalize the persona of a dominant, powerful, and stoic figure. This framework aligns with Connell's theory of masculinity, which shows how gender power dynamics are reinforced by social norms that categorize emotional expression as a deviation from masculine identity. Prof.

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Dr. Agyo Demartoto emphasizes that such cultural constructions perpetuate the belief that vulnerability is an inherent threat to a man's status ([Sartika, 2024](#)). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that these norms drastically impede help-seeking behavior, as men frequently view mental health services as being in direct conflict with masculine performativity ([Vebiana & Ariana, 2023](#)). Global findings further validate that hegemonic masculinity is a primary predictor of delayed professional intervention, internalized psychological distress, and the adoption of dysfunctional coping mechanisms.

These social constructions of masculinity resonate particularly strongly within the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) sectors. Long established as a masculine domain, the STEM field prioritizes technical proficiency, physical stamina, and objectivity as the definitive attributes of male identity ([Hand et al., 2017](#)). In Indonesia, this gender bias is mirrored in academic trajectories, where men disproportionately dominate engineering disciplines ([Hermawati, 2018](#)). This educational concentration aligns with the labor distribution in major industrial hubs such as Karawang Regency, the largest industrial complex in Southeast Asia, where workers face extreme productivity pressures and rigorous performance expectations ([Fauzi et al., 2021](#)). Consequently, the competitive and hyper-masculine environment of the engineering workplace functions as a social crucible that reinforces the repression of emotion in favor of perceived toughness.

Notwithstanding the expansion of masculinity studies in Indonesia, the majority of existing research remains focused on domestic spheres or general social relations. There is a notable lack of investigation into the specific emotional experiences of male engineering workers within large-scale industrial environments, a context characterized by intense performative pressure and rigid masculine identities. Preliminary field observations indicate that even when engineering workers are professionally advised to seek psychological support following routine corporate health assessments, they often refuse based on the conviction that "men must be self-reliant" (*laki-laki harus mampu mengatasi sendiri*). Such patterns demonstrate that masculinity norms not only shape individual mindsets but also function as a direct barrier to mental health behaviors.

In response to these research gaps, the present study explores how masculinity norms dictate mental health outcomes, emotional expression, and the help-seeking processes among male engineering workers in Karawang. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how gender norms are reproduced in the technical workspace and how they shape men's psychological landscape. It is anticipated that these findings will enrich the academic literature on masculinity in industrial societies and provide a foundation for mental health interventions that are sensitive to both gender dynamics and occupational contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Conceptual Framework of Hegemonic Masculinity

Masculinity is fundamentally understood not as a static biological trait, but as a dynamic constellation of practices that provide legitimacy to male dominance over women and maintain hierarchies among men. These practices mandate a performance of strength and the categorical rejection of vulnerability, thereby suppressing emotional expression. Within this framework, hegemony operates across three distinct geographical strata: the local (family and workplace), the regional (culture and industry), and the global (technological norms). In the Indonesian context, the regional model of engineering culture mediates local interactions through everyday symbolism, where the "professional technician" archetype embodies technical competence,

control, and physical endurance as hallmarks of hegemonic masculinity ([Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005](#)).

Furthermore, the construction of masculinity in Indonesia is deeply entrenched in local cultural values and religious texts that internalize gender roles from an early age. The idealized image of a "true man" (*laki-laki sejati*) is frequently tethered to symbols of power and virility, encompassing wealth, property, and social status, and often draws upon historical national figures like Soekarno and Soeharto as manifestations of traditional masculine norms ([Vebiana & Ariana, 2023](#)). Consequently, men face intense social pressure to perform as providers and protectors who maintain absolute self-control; failure to adhere to these societal expectations often results in perceived social failure ([Kwiatkowski, 2022](#)).

2.2 The STEM Sector as a Masculine Domain

The fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) have been historically constructed as masculine domains. This gender disparity is rooted not merely in overt discrimination but in differentiated career preferences and socialization patterns established during adolescence. Statistical evidence suggests that men exhibit a greater affinity for machines and abstract, systemic rules than for person-oriented fields ([Stewart-Williams & Halsey, 2021](#)).

In high-tech industrial environments, such as those found in engineering complexes, the demands for extreme time commitment and spatial flexibility often necessitate a domestic arrangement in which household responsibilities are shifted to female partners. This environment fosters the "boys with toys" phenomenon, where the mastery of complex technology and logical problem-solving serves as a "badge of courage". Physical toughness, the ability to endure extreme weather, heat, and hazardous conditions, remains an integral component of the engineering identity. This exclusivity creates a precarious environment; a lack of technical proficiency can lead to feelings of inferiority, while the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon ensures that even when women enter the STEM field, their progression to leadership remains hindered by a non-inclusive, patriarchal workplace culture ([Hermawati, 2018](#)).

2.3 Psychological Implications and Male Gender Role Stress

The internalization of traditional masculine norms frequently manifests as restrictive emotionality, a condition where men are unable or unwilling to express emotions, such as sadness or fear, that might be perceived as weak or feminine. Often rooted in the "boys don't cry" socialization ([Ezeugwu & Ojedokun, 2020](#)), This can progress into normative male alexithymia, characterized by a chronic difficulty in identifying and describing one's own feelings ([Kwiatkowski, 2022](#)).

When men find themselves unable to meet the demands of their gender role, they experience Male Gender Role Stress. This stress is particularly acute due to the nature of Precarious Manhood, where masculine status is viewed as difficult to earn but easily lost through "inappropriate" behavior, such as admitting to psychological distress ([Mahalik & Di Bianca, 2021](#)). Notwithstanding the severity of their condition, men may view acknowledging depression as a forfeiture of their masculine status. The consequences are profound: increased risks of anxiety, the adoption of substance abuse as a coping mechanism, and significantly higher suicide rates compared to women. Men often mask their emotional pain through unconventional depressive symptoms, including irritability, aggression, and an obsessive retreat into excessive workloads ([Kwiatkowski, 2022](#)).

2.4 Barriers to Help-Seeking: A Theory of Planned Behavior Perspective

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), behavioral intentions are governed by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control ([Bauer et al., 2023](#)). In the context of mental health, help-seeking is often hindered by the belief that admitting weakness violates masculine integrity. Research on men in Indonesia indicates that traditional masculine orientations significantly diminish positive attitudes toward professional intervention ($\beta = -0,34$) ([Chandra & Himawan, 2025](#)).

Furthermore, subjective norms reflect a social expectation of self-reliance; international studies confirm that the drive for self-sufficiency and emotional opacity are primary barriers to care. Finally, perceived behavioral control is undermined by self-stigma and a rigid adherence to emotional control as a form of masculine self-mastery ([Gough & Novikova, 2020](#)). These factors, self-reliance, emotional control, and self-stigma, directly reduce the probability of a man seeking professional psychological support, which typically involves discussing problems and learning new coping strategies ([Mahalik & Di Bianca, 2021](#)).

2.5 Synthesis: The Interplay of Structure and Psychology

The mental health of male engineering workers is the cumulative result of interactions between sociocultural structures and individual psychological mechanisms. The engineering workspace, by reinforcing hegemonic masculinity, establishes a standard of the "rational and resilient" man. When faced with extreme occupational pressure, workers experience Male Gender Role Stress as their status of "Precarious Manhood" is threatened. To preserve their identity, they employ a restrictive emotional style as a defense mechanism, which may devolve into normative male alexithymia. Ultimately, even when suffering is internalized, TPB variables, specifically negative attitudes driven by self-stigma and subjective norms of self-reliance, ensure that the intention to seek help remains critically low.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This research adopted an exploratory qualitative design and was anchored in a constructivist paradigm. This perspective posits that reality is not a singular, objective truth but is instead a multifaceted social construction shaped by subjective meanings and individual experiences. Consequently, the researcher functioned as an active participant in the co-construction of knowledge through a dialogical and interpretative process. The methodological framework integrated naturalistic and hermeneutic approaches to decode the constructed meanings of masculinity within the technical workspace. By prioritizing depth over generalization, this qualitative approach captured nuanced phenomena that quantitative metrics are inherently unable to measure.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The study cohort comprised 15 male technical professionals operating within the industrial landscape of Karawang Regency. These participants were stratified into three distinct Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), with each session involving five individuals. The selection of FGDs as the primary data collection tool was predicated on their capacity to facilitate deep exploration through interpersonal interaction, a process that uncovers prevailing social norms and collective perspectives that individual narratives might otherwise obscure. Given that masculinity is fundamentally a social construct, this group-based method was deemed methodologically congruent with the research objectives.

The inclusion criteria targeted men aged 25 to 45 with at least 5 years of tenure in technical

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sectors, specifically mechanical, electrical, and control systems. This specific duration of employment is significant, while accumulation theory suggests that experienced workers may possess a heightened capacity to mitigate occupational stress, prolonged exposure to monotonous routines, and a static work environment simultaneously elevate the risk of burnout and professional dissatisfaction. To ensure a homogenous power dynamic within the groups, the sample was restricted to staff-level technicians directly involved in machinery maintenance, excluding those in supervisory or management roles. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select participants whose professional backgrounds directly aligned with the study's exploratory goals.

3.3 Procedures and Ethical Considerations

The recruitment was conducted through industrial networks and technical worker communities in Karawang. Each FGD session lasted around 90 minutes and was held in a neutral, comfortable setting to encourage open discourse. Prior to commencement, the researcher, acting as a neutral moderator, elaborated on the study's objectives and ensured that all participants provided informed consent.

Ethical integrity was maintained through several rigorous protocols. All discussions were recorded and transcribed using participant codes to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. Furthermore, the participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any juncture without negative repercussions. The researcher also ensured that the proceedings posed no physical or psychological risk to the subjects.

3.4 Data Analysis and Data Validity

The primary data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the inductive approach popularized by Braun and Clarke ([Braun & Clarke, 2025](#)). This systematic process involved several iterative stages: familiarization through repeated readings of the transcripts, initial coding of significant data segments, and the subsequent grouping of these codes into meaningful themes. These themes were then rigorously reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and relevance to the research questions before the final report was synthesized.

To ensure the findings' trustworthiness, the study employed a comprehensive validation strategy. Source triangulation was achieved by comparing narrative patterns across the three FGD groups, while methodological triangulation integrated field observations and notes with the discussion data. Finally, member checking was conducted by providing participants with a summary of the analysis for confirmation, ensuring that the interpretations accurately reflected their lived experiences.

4. Result and Discussions

4.1 Findings

This study employed a systematic six-step thematic analysis to identify narrative patterns of masculinity construction in the engineering work environment. The analytical process followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge organically from empirical data rather than imposing pre-existing theoretical categories. From this analysis, four primary themes were identified.

Physical and Mental Resilience as the Ideal Standard. The fundamental definition of the ideal male engineer is rooted in physical and mental toughness. Participants frequently used the local term *tatak*, which denotes a specific form of mental fortitude, to describe the psychological readiness required to withstand the rigors of field conditions. This ideal standard requires an unwavering readiness to work under extreme weather conditions, including intense heat and

rain, in hazardous or "dirty" environments without complaint.

The performative nature of this toughness is evident in how workers must continually prove their physical endurance to maintain their functional reputation among peers. Several illustrative excerpts highlight this demand: "*The mind must be strong because engineering is synonymous with field personnel... high pressure*" and "*For me... the important thing is to be robust... strong*". Consequently, those perceived as unable to meet these challenges are often labeled "unfit" for engineering or relegated to office-based roles, which are derisively viewed as "cold" and lacking significant challenge.

The Logic-Emotion Dichotomy and the Stigma of *Baper*: A sharp narrative divide exists between masculine-coded cognitive processes and feminine-coded affective ones. Engineering workers perceive men as more reliable in emergencies because they are perceived as prioritizing data and logic over emotional impulses. Conversely, emotionality often pejoratively referred to as *baper* (affective susceptibility) is viewed as a liability that compromises work objectivity and operational safety. Within this culture, harsh communication or shouting is normalized as a functional "notice" or pedagogical tool to prevent fatal technical errors. Men who exhibit emotional sensitivity to such communication are viewed as impediments to the team's target-oriented rhythm.

Collectivity and Familiarity under Operational Pressure. Notwithstanding the emphasis on individual toughness, technical masculinity is deeply contingent upon group solidarity. Participants noted that the sense of familial bonding (*kekeluargaan*) is significantly stronger in the field than in office settings, primarily due to the mutual trust required to ensure collective safety. This collectivity is often fostered through *nongkrong* (informal social gatherings), which provide a rare "safe space" for men to demonstrate care for their colleagues. However, this solidarity also functions as a mechanism of social control; behaviors such as arrogance or carelessness are strictly discouraged because they threaten team safety and technical integrity.

Navigating Vulnerability and Self-Coping Strategies Regarding the disclosure of personal issues, workers maintain rigorous boundary management. While they are highly transparent about technical obstacles framed as "troubleshooting", they remain remarkably guarded concerning domestic or familial struggles. There is a pervasive apprehension that revealing personal vulnerability could be weaponized by peers to assess one's weaknesses. Consequently, most adhere to a "deal with it myself" philosophy. Stress-release mechanisms are largely solitary or masculine-coded recreations, such as gaming, billiards, or exercise, rather than seeking professional psychological intervention.

4.2 Discussion

The dominance of physical resilience and logic in the engineering sector aligns closely with Raewyn Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity. In this context, masculine authority is derived from absolute self-control and technical mastery. The standards of being *tatak* and *robust* serve as internalizations of traditional gender norms that prize autonomy. While many participants benefit from the status conferred by these hegemonic norms, they also engage in complicit masculinity, where they accept selective venting as a tool for coordination and mental preservation without fully embodying every rigid masculine attribute.

Furthermore, the negative evaluation of affective styles (*baper*) reflects the phenomenon of Precarious Manhood, wherein masculine status is viewed as a fragile asset that must be constantly validated and can be easily forfeited through displays of vulnerability. This dynamic often leads to Normative Male Alexithymia, a condition in which socialization inhibits the willingness to express emotions, even when the capacity to feel them remains intact.

A critical contradiction exists between the strong sense of workplace "family" and the reluctance to share mental burdens. While technical proficiency grants "masculine capital," this capital is rapidly depleted if a worker displays public sadness. The reliance on "masculine recreation" as a coping mechanism is essentially emotional repression masked as leisure. Because rigid adherence to self-reliance is a primary predictor of severe mental health decline in men, these patterns warrant concern. Nevertheless, the emerging tendency among some workers to view emotional honesty as a "gentlemanly" trait suggests a nascent shift toward positive masculinity within this traditionally rigid environment.

5. Conclusions

The engineering work environment in Karawang remains deeply permeated by traditional masculine norms that prioritize physical resilience and the suppression of emotion to maintain operational efficiency. While team solidarity provides a crucial layer of social support, the pervasive fear of being perceived as "weak" remains a formidable barrier, deterring employees from seeking professional psychological intervention. Consequently, achieving a transformation toward enhanced mental well-being necessitates a rigorous deconstruction of the cultural myth that "real men do not tell stories" (*laki-laki tidak bercerita*). Such a shift is essential to prevent the accrual of long-term adverse psychological impacts on workers within this industrial sector.

To address these challenges, this study proposes several strategic recommendations. First, organizations should adopt Occupational Health and Safety (OHS), known locally as *K3 (Kesehatan dan Keselamatan Kerja)* as a standardized linguistic framework for navigating and resolving technical disagreements. By framing interpersonal or technical disputes within the objective language of safety protocols, the perceived personal threat to masculine status can be mitigated.

Furthermore, it is imperative to implement training programs focused on adaptive coping mechanisms. These initiatives should encourage healthy outlets for stress, such as designated "me-time," regular physical exercise, or engagement in recreational gaming, to facilitate psychological recovery. Finally, a structured approach to communication is recommended: workers should be encouraged to maintain transparency regarding professional challenges while being coached to identify specific, trusted audiences for the disclosure of domestic or familial concerns. This nuanced boundary management allows for emotional venting without compromising the individual's perceived professional integrity in the workplace.

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