

Religious Radio and *Amal Soleh*: The Reality of Worker Exploitation at Religious Radio Stations in West Java

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Abstract. Religious radio stations serve as one of the media platforms for preaching and disseminating religious teachings. However, there is a noticeable tendency within these institutions to overlook workers' welfare under the pretext of prioritizing religious missions. This study aims to analyze the labor management practices of religious radio stations in West Java. Employing a qualitative approach, the research is grounded in theoretical perspectives proposed by Weber (2002) and Marx (1978). The study involved eighteen religious radio stations across West Java as research subjects. The findings indicate that most of these religious radio stations rely heavily on freelance work and volunteer work. Moreover, the fulfillment of workers' rights tends to be neglected, often falling short of labor regulations, and is legitimized through narratives of religious devotion, virtuous deeds, and spiritual rewards.

Keywords: Dakwah; Exploitation; Radio; Religious

1 Introduction

Religious radio is one of the genres or formats of radio broadcasting that presents religious content, religious programming, or religious preaching. Religious radio accounts for at least one-third of the programming mapped by the West Java Broadcasting Commission [1]. The mapping includes three categories: first, radio stations registered in the broadcasting system of the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo RI) as stations with a religious broadcasting format. Second, radio stations are not registered in the system as having a religious format but broadcast religious content. Third, radio stations are registered as general format stations but owned by religious institutions such as Islamic boarding school foundations or dioceses. Though not featuring dominant religious programming, the third type of religious radio station focuses on religious content with a more subtle presentation.

In modern society, religious radio is one of the media for preaching or conveying religious teachings. Thus, preaching is not always delivered through direct face-to-face communication via pulpits in places of worship or study forums like *majlis ta'lim* but also through media, including radio. It must be adapted to existing conditions in conveying religious teachings to modern society. To ensure that the message is well received and that religion has a strong influence on its followers, the functions and roles of religion are used as motivation to shape ethical values. One of the media used to convey religion and spread religion is radio, which is part of the mass media.

When considering the content of religious radio broadcasts, they feature religious programming such as sermons, spiritual music, readings from sacred texts (in Islam, this includes recitations of the Quran), religious studies, and other content such as inserts on religious knowledge or scholarship. Thus, the format and presence of religious outreach activities through radio also offer several advantages for both the media and the audience. One of the advantages is that the audience can easily access religious information through this radio medium. Sunarto [2] explains that conveying information through religious messages through radio broadcasts spreads effectively because radio has its appeal, which includes three elements: music, words, and sound effects.

One of the reasons religious radio stations have survived until now is the presence of human resources who work voluntarily at the radio station without expecting anything in return. Religious radio stations taking advantage of free human resources have become controversial and have sparked debate among the public. However, this has become a unique feature, as these religious radio stations, motivated by the desire to do good in the path of Allah, have managed to survive despite the challenges of finding broadcasting personnel, especially those who can be 'paid cheaply.'

In Indonesia's labor system, workers' rights are regulated under Labor Law No. 13 of 2003 and the Job Creation Law No. 11 of 2020. Workers are entitled to fair compensation, social security, and humane working conditions. However, practices at some religious radio stations indicate that worker compensation often does not meet standards.

This was highlighted in an interview with one religious radio station, Latanza Radio, which served as a source. Latanza Radio Sukabumi emphasized that religious preaching is commercial, so to ensure quality programming, its human resources must be professional, and their wages must reflect this. Latanza has seven (7) permanent employees and some volunteer broadcasters who work under 'charitable deeds,' meaning they do not receive wages.

There is a tendency for religious radio stations, as a medium for religious outreach, to neglect worker welfare under the pretext of prioritizing religious activities. However, such an approach creates disparities that can damage the image of religious media as an institution in the public sphere. The public sphere, including religion-based media, is often still dominated by traditional values that do not always align with modern principles of rationality. As Habermas [3] argued, social institutions must adhere to more universal standards of rationality and justice. In the context of religious radio, the concept of working sincerely to replace the wage system is a form of traditional values dominating modern regulations.

This was also previously mentioned by Burhanuddin et. Al. [4] in his writing, where he argued that religious media tends to wrap power relations in the guise of sincerity and reward. According to him, religious teachings are sometimes used to legitimize exploitative work practices. In line with Burhanuddin, Alvita [5] also observed similar occurrences in Muslim TV, a media outlet owned by MNC Channels. In her article, Alvita noted that despite being a religious-based media outlet, Muslim TV practices exploitation of its workers in the form of extended working hours and double work-

loads. Additionally, Alvita argues that Muslim TV, as a religious media outlet, mystifies workers through religious narratives and instills a sense of pride in being part of the media extension of religious outreach.

This study is important because it combines three fields that are often separated: labor ethics, religious communication, and media studies. Through an analysis of work practices in religious radio, this research opens opportunities for a new interpretation of religious values, which can be used to mask power relations in religious media institutions. Based on the description of the problem and previous studies, this research will further discuss how the exploitation of human resources or workers in religious radio occurs and how religious narratives are used to justify these practices. This research aims to reveal the internal dynamics of religious media, which are often hidden behind the spirit of spreading religious teachings. This research aims to answer two main research questions: how work practices in religious radio stations organize their workforce, and how religious narratives justify these practices.

2 Method

In this study, the researcher used qualitative research methods with a limited ethnographic approach and critical discourse analysis, particularly in examining religious broadcasting institutions' narrative construction and managerial practices. According to Creswell [6], qualitative research is an in-depth process that refers to methodological traditions to explore human issues. The researcher builds complex interactions, an overall picture of reality, content analysis, reports from informants, and all data obtained in the field.

The subjects of this study are stakeholders in broadcasting related to religious radio in West Java, namely eighteen (18) radio stations. The criteria for determining informants were based on research needs, namely aligning with media management principles that state the success of broadcast programs and business operations depends on various parties. Thus, these parties can serve as informants in this study.

In this study, data collection was conducted in a natural setting, as the researcher collected field data at the location where the participants experienced the issues or problems being studied. The researcher did not alter the environmental setting or the participants' activities. Information was gathered by speaking with the individuals directly and observing their actions in their natural context. Based on the data sources, data collection in this study used primary sources, which are data sources that directly provide data to the data collector [7]. Researchers also consider ethics in accessing sensitive information by maintaining the anonymity of informants and not disclosing data that could potentially harm sources directly.

This study used the Analysis Interactive model data analysis technique from Miles and Huberman. In this technique, Miles and Huberman [8] state that activities in qualitative data analysis are conducted interactively and continuously until completion, ensuring that the data is saturated. Data analysis activities are divided into several parts: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verifying data.

3 Results and Discussion

Several facts were discovered based on the results of a Focus Group Discussion with religious radio broadcasting institutions. This research explores the construction of religious narratives used to justify voluntary work or work outside the formal employment standard, especially in the context of religious broadcasting institutions. First, Radio Riyadhul Jannah Tasikmalaya. This radio station was established and broadcast, among other things, to spread the teachings at this Islamic boarding school. The radio station is located within the Islamic boarding school environment, and the advertisements it airs also originate from within the Islamic boarding school environment. The advertisements received are professional advertisements that rely on a budget. The station has begun collaborating with several religious forums in Tasikmalaya for its broadcast programs, such as religious study sessions or live broadcasts of religious discussions. The aim is to attract new listeners. The challenge is that while a religious radio station is not merely about broadcasting sermons or recitations, it must also provide entertaining content for the community. The human resources (HR) of Radio Riyadhul Jannah currently consist of five people, ranging from commissioners, directors, and production staff to two broadcasters who assist each other. All five HR members are permanent employees and are supported by volunteer staff, one of whom is a graduate of a religious boarding school who has committed to serving for one year at Radio Riyadhul Jannah.

Secondly, Radio Elshifa Subang is currently in a phase where it is required to be self-reliant and operate independently. One of the efforts undertaken is to sell products independently to generate income for the radio station. Like other religious radio stations, Radio Elshifa aims to seek blessings in every broadcast with its outstanding human resources. For human resources, there are permanent employees, non-permanent employees, and volunteer employees who serve after completing their studies. The total number of human resources currently stands at seven people: five permanent employees and two volunteers.

Third, Radio Maestro Bandung manages its human resources professionally. During the COVID-19 pandemic, full-time and part-time workers were adjusted according to the company's conditions. Some part-time broadcasters were willing to broadcast without pay. Currently, Maestro is still in a challenging phase, particularly regarding finances.

Fourth, as mentioned in the introduction, Latanza Radio Sukabumi emphasizes that *da'wah* is commercial. Human resources must be professional to ensure quality programming, and their compensation must reflect that. Latanza has seven permanent employees, and some broadcasters work voluntarily under the '*amal sholeh*', which does not require payment.

Lastly, Radio Rodja FM. The management of this radio station is divided into two parts: internal and external. The human resources department at Radio Rodja is based in Bogor. Bogor has three broadcasters, a technical team, and a marketing team. However, the marketing team at Rodja has specialized roles, including a finance team and an IT team. At Rodja, there are only broadcasters and IT staff, with no additional marketing personnel.

Additionally, the production team and others are staff members who hold dual roles. Those working at Radio Rodja start their shifts from 5:00 AM to 2:00 PM WIB, followed by a shift change. Since this radio station aims to spread the message of Islam, there are no calculations involved; instead, everyone is self-aware and helps one another, as they share the same goal and spirit of benefiting many people. Professionalism is maintained through job descriptions and other procedures.

The following is a table summarizing the number of employees at several religious radio stations in West Java:

Table 1. Table captions should be placed above the tables.

No	Name of Radio	Number of Human Employees
1.	RadioQU Kuningan	8 full-timers, 5 freelancers
2.	Radio Latanza FM Sukabumi	5 full-timers, 2 volunteers
3.	Radio Simpati FM Cirebon	4 full-timers
4.	Radio SKN Al-Bayaan Cianjur	5 volunteers
5.	Radio Tren FM Purwakarta	4 full-timers
6.	Radio Salam FM Sukabumi	5 full-timers, 2 freelancers
7.	Radio MQ FM Bandung	3 full-timers, 9 contracts, 8 freelancers
8.	Radio Ashidiq FM Purwakarta	4 full-timers, 4 freelancers
9.	Radio Kharisma Bandung	2 full-timers, 8 freelancers
10.	Radio Rodja 104.3 FM Bandung	4 full-timers
11.	Radio Riyadhul Jannah Tasikmalaya	3 full-timers, 2 freelancers, 5 volunteers
12.	Radio Maestro FM Bandung	5 full-timers, 10 freelancers, 10 volunteers
13.	RadioQU Majalengka	1 full-timer, 2 freelancers, 1 volunteer
14.	RadioQU Cirebon	7 full-timers, 4 freelancers
15.	Radio Wadi FM Bogor	5 full-timers, 8 freelancers
16.	Radio Rodja Majalengka	4 full-timers
17.	Radio Fajri FM Bandung	5 full-timers
18.	Radio Elshifa Subang	5 full-timers, 2 volunteers

Based on the data presented in the table, thirteen (13) out of eighteen (18) radio stations have workers with freelance and volunteer systems. Although the Indonesian Labor Law does not directly or explicitly regulate the exact proportion between permanent workers, freelance workers, and volunteers, this could be seen as exploitation. According to Law No. 13 of 2003, a Fixed-Term Employment Contract (PKWT), which includes contract workers or freelance workers, can only be classified as if the nature or type of work can be completed within a specific period. This means that work that is ongoing or core to the business cannot simply be classified as contract or freelance work, such as broadcast producers, content editors, or broadcast technicians at a radio station, which are core to the radio station.

This also applies to volunteers. An individual is considered an employee if their work is regulated, meaning they work on a regular schedule with set working hours, have specific recurring tasks, and are bound by an organizational system rather than being a volunteer. Even according to Constitutional Court Decision No. 100 of 2012, an employment relationship is determined by the existence of work, instructions, and wages, not by the name of the contract. Therefore, workers who are considered volunteers but meet all three criteria are still considered legitimate workers and are entitled to the rights and welfare of workers as stipulated in the law.

The researchers' findings show that the discursive strategies used by radio management, such as narratives of reward, worship, and devotion, are a form of naturalization of unpaid work. This practice shows how the organization channels power through standardized moral values. The overall management of human resources also plays a key role. However, challenges related to compensation policies, such as employees not being paid in full, also affect operational stability and work motivation within the radio environment. Based on interviews with 18 radio stations, they have both permanent, contract, and freelance workers. While human resource management varies among radio stations, they follow a similar pattern.

Some religious radio stations already follow the minimum wage regulations regarding the wage or salary payment system. However, others show that wages are still below the minimum wage standard. As explained by the source from Radio MQFM Bandung, from the perspective of employee rights, every worker at MQFM has an official employment contract signed in writing. The contract details the wage amount received and the work obligations that must be fulfilled. Radio MQFM has a strategy of conducting worker regeneration explicitly related to broadcasting academy training, which is MQFM's way of recruiting staff.

In contrast, during an interview with Fajri FM, the source mentioned that while employees are paid wages and the company has its wage standards, the amounts do not meet the UMK standard. This is because the work is part of a religious outreach effort. The same pattern is applied based on the interview with Simpati FM, where employees receive government-provided insurance and wages that do not meet the UMR standard, only approaching it. The interviewee mentioned that the spirit of dedication is the primary value instilled in employees, enabling them to work sincerely.

PT Radio Mustika Said stated the same thing during the interview and confirmation process. During the interview, the source said.

"All our employees, whether permanent or contract workers, work based on dedication to da'wah. However, the management also provides wages/salaries adjusted to the level of involvement or workload/tasks carried out by each employee." (Interview, 2024).

In practice, some radio stations do not pay their employees in full according to the standard, citing that the work is a form of dedication to religious values.

Meanwhile, in the case of Latanza FM, the narrative of '*amal sholeh*' became the primary justification for unpaid workers. Broadcasting and content production still require professionalism and generate commercial value. This highlights the paradox between spiritual orientation and the demands of media production. A comparable situation is observed at Radio Rodja and Wadi FM, which framework as a field of merit but

still demand formal work commitments. A comparable situation occurs at Radio Rodja, where the motivation for work and the rights and responsibilities of employees is rooted in the concepts of worship and the promise of rewards. As stated,

"Besides professionalism, they also have their awareness, you know, wanting to... what is it called... the reward in religion, you know, wanting to do good. If that good reaches many people, then they automatically get that reward. However, it is not forced, and it is not like, you know, they must do this or that. They have more awareness because when they join, they realize that this radio station wants to get together with others. However, most are still permanent employees, like those with contracts, but only initially. Once they pass the one-year mark, we make them permanent. From this perspective, the managers within the organization are employees, just like in any other company" (Interview, 2023).

Even at one radio station, the human resources staff only receive salaries when donations are made to the foundation's account. As stated by the source from Radio Wadi

"In Purwakarta, there are no ads so far. When we have ads, our salaries are taken from there, and I distribute them directly. However, when no ads are coming in, we do not get any ads, so we must wait for the owner. The owner is responsible for operational costs, but that is why sometimes people have already been paid, but we have not." (Interview, 2023).

Like the previous radio station, RadioQU Cirebon explained that every RadioQU station constantly collaborates with the Al-Bahjah Islamic boarding school in each city. One of the collaborations is that RadioQU serves as a place for service for students who have completed their education at the boarding school before graduating and returning to society. This collaboration is interesting as an effort to obtain free human resources support from the boarding school, which Buya Yahya also leads. However, from an employment perspective, this is one form of exploitation in radio broadcasting institutions. Because people who work for private radio stations (LPS) do not receive compensation, this is a problem because the workers are deemed not to receive wages commensurate with the law.

As argued by Weber, "the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs" (Weber, 2002). This indicates that the notion of demanding work as moral service, originating from religious teachings, persists. In practice, this ideology is used to justify expectations of demanding work without adequate compensation. Meanwhile, Habermas (1984) highlights that decisions made in the public sphere must go through a rational discourse process that considers all interests equally. However, this justification of dedication is often used as a tool for legitimization, disregarding workers' rights that should be upheld. Thus, viewing work as a form of devotion without adequate compensation is not only a managerial issue but also reveals a conflict between religious values, work ethics, and social justice.

The willingness of most people who work in religious radio but do not receive compensation or receive compensation that does not meet the requirements is due to their religious beliefs. According to them, working or conducting activities for the benefit of religious radio is part of their devotion and is considered a form of worship that brings rewards.

"It is not much. It might be far below the minimum wage. But this is part of serving the teacher and striving in the path of religion" (Nurdin, Radio Wadi FM Purwakarta, 2023).

In Indonesia's labor system, workers' rights are regulated in the Labour Law No. 13 of 2003 and the Job Creation Law No. 11 of 2020. Workers are entitled to fair compensation, social security, and humane working conditions. Some religious radio stations do not provide adequate worker compensation.

As outlined in the data above, religious radio stations use the concept of 'charitable deeds' as a form of reward for workers, where wages are considered secondary to the spiritual value of the work itself. Workers at religious radio stations often do not receive fixed wages by wage regulations or only receive minimal honoraria because their work is part of their devotion to religion. In line with what Marx and Engels (1970) noted, 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas,' in the context of religious radio as a place or world of work based on religion, ideas about sincere work, afterlife rewards, and charitable deeds become dominant ideas perpetuated by radio managers. Furthermore, radio managers, like the 'ruling class,' have the power to shape workers into obedient subjects under the guise of religious discipline. Even the bodies of workers are controlled through long working hours, no protests, and always being 'polite' because they represent the name of religion. This study borrows from Mosco's ideas about digital and unpaid labor in the media context, where unpaid work is framed as a moral or social contribution, even though it still generates economic value for institutions. In this case, religious narratives serve as a tool of mystification to keep power relations stable [9,10].

This phenomenon reflects how work in a religious context does not always follow the patterns of modern economic rationalization. Weber [11], in *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, argued that work within a religious system holds higher spiritual value than material value. This is the central doctrine of work in the religious field, justifying rewards over rights that are considered 'worldly.' In religious radio, work is often seen as part of worship, so wages are not viewed as a right but as a secondary form of appreciation.

Public spaces, including religious-based media, are often still dominated by traditional values that do not always align with modern principles of rationality. As Habermas [3] argues, social institutions must adhere to standards of rationality and justice that are more universal. Habermas' concept of the public sphere challenges the dual logic between modern rationality and religious values. In this context, religious claims often obscure the deliberate process, which should be open and equal, replacing it with narratives of piety that cannot be critically debated. In religious radio, working with sincerity instead of the wage system is a form of traditional values dominating modern regulations.

This issue of exploitation highlights the tension between rational and universal labor regulations and religious-based work values that still uphold elements of devotion. The state has clear regulations, but religious devotion values and doctrines still influence their implementation in religious radio.

4 Conclusion

Labor practices at a few religious radio stations in West Java demonstrate good standing and compliance with the law. The main contribution of this study is to highlight labor relations that are not only based on professional relationships but also on charitable acts, which then become a bridge to worker exploitation. This is complemented by discourse in Indonesian communication studies, which still lacks discussion of labor aspects, especially in religious media. However, most religious radio stations in West Java show evidence of labor exploitation. This is evident through the considerable proportion of freelance and volunteer work systems. The blurred boundaries between professional work cloaked in religious merit and missionary work create a space for the legitimization of substandard wages and the disregard for workers' fundamental rights. The narratives of missionary work and charitable deeds have transformed into symbolic tools that render labor relations exploitative.

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