

Gender Representation in Local Politics: Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Political Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This study examines *Gender Representation in Local Politics: Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Political Leadership* by analysing how women's presence in local institutions is transformed, constrained, or strengthened as leadership. The objective is to explain barriers, enabling factors, and implications of women's representation in local politics. This research applies a qualitative method with a case study design because the issue requires in-depth understanding of lived experiences, institutional practices, and meanings rather than numerical measurement. The study was conducted in Makassar City, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, where party competition, activism, and gender equality debates intersect. Data were obtained from fifteen purposively selected informants, including women politicians, party officials, election administrators, activists, academics, journalists, and community leaders, because they possess knowledge of women's participation and leadership. The findings show that women's leadership is limited by party gatekeeping, campaign-financing inequality, gender stereotypes, informal elite networks, and restricted access to strategic decision-making. However, opportunities emerge through community legitimacy, civil society support, political education, and coalition-building. The study recommends gender-sensitive party reform, fair campaign support, inclusive legislative leadership, and collaboration between political institutions and civil society.



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INTRODUCTION

Gender representation in local politics remains a crucial issue in contemporary democratic studies because local government is often the closest political arena to citizens' everyday lives (Sánchez-Vitores, 2023). Decisions made at the local level influence public services, social welfare, education, health, infrastructure, community security, and the distribution of development resources. In this context, women's political leadership is not merely a matter of numerical presence, but also a question of democratic quality, policy responsiveness, institutional fairness, and social justice (Mandiyanike, 2023). The title *Gender Representation in Local Politics: Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Political Leadership* reflects an important scholarly concern: although women have increasingly entered political institutions, their substantive participation and leadership capacity continue to face structural, cultural, and institutional obstacles (Barczyszyn-Madziarz & Norström, 2025). Local politics, which is frequently assumed to be more accessible than national politics, can in fact reproduce deeply rooted gender hierarchies that limit women's authority, visibility, and influence in decision-making processes.

The state of the art in research on gender and politics shows that women's underrepresentation has been widely discussed through the concepts of descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation (Atanga, 2024). Descriptive representation refers to the numerical presence of women in elected or appointed political positions. Substantive representation concerns the extent to which women leaders are able to advocate policies that address gender equality and broader social needs. Symbolic representation relates to the meaning of women's presence in politics for public perceptions, democratic legitimacy, and the normalization of women as political actors (Ting & Zhou, 2024). Existing scholarship has also examined electoral quotas, political party recruitment, patriarchal political culture,

campaign financing, media representation, and intersectional barriers involving class, ethnicity, religion, age, and geography (Massidda, 2024). However, much of the literature still tends to emphasize national parliaments, central party institutions, or formal electoral rules, while the specific dynamics of local politics often receive less systematic attention (Taylor-Robinson & Geva, 2023a).

The main problem addressed in this study is the persistent gap between the formal opening of political space for women and the actual realization of women's leadership in local political institutions. Many democratic systems have introduced legal, administrative, or party-based mechanisms to increase women's participation (T. Baker & Gwinn, 2025). Nevertheless, these mechanisms do not automatically transform local political practices. Women candidates and leaders often encounter unequal access to party nomination, limited financial resources, gender stereotypes, weak political networks, family-related expectations, and public doubts about their leadership competence (Ayasreh, 2024). At the same time, local political arenas are frequently shaped by informal power relations, patronage networks, kinship structures, and elite bargaining, which may disadvantage women who are not embedded in dominant political circles (Amar et al., 2025). Therefore, the problem is not only whether women are present in local politics, but also whether they can exercise meaningful leadership within institutions that may still be organized around masculine norms of power.

The research gap lies in the need to connect the challenges and opportunities of women's political leadership within a single analytical framework that is sensitive to local political realities. Previous studies have often focused either on barriers to women's participation or on success stories of women leaders. While both approaches are valuable, they may offer a partial understanding if examined separately. A barrier-focused perspective can unintentionally portray women mainly as victims of patriarchal systems, while an opportunity-focused approach may overlook the structural constraints that shape women's political trajectories (Martinussen & Lahiri-Roy, 2025). This study seeks to bridge that gap by analyzing how obstacles and enabling conditions interact in local political contexts. It also responds to the need for research that goes beyond numerical representation by examining leadership capacity, institutional support, public legitimacy, and the ability of women politicians to influence policy agendas (Wineinger, 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in its effort to frame women's political leadership in local politics as a dynamic process shaped by both constraint and agency (De-Juan-Vigaray, 2024). Rather than treating gender representation as a static measurement of how many women occupy political positions, this study understands representation as an ongoing political struggle involving access, recognition, authority, and policy influence. The study offers a more integrated perspective by linking structural barriers, socio-cultural expectations, institutional mechanisms, and emerging opportunities for women's leadership. In doing so, it contributes to the literature by highlighting that local politics can function simultaneously as a site of exclusion and a site of transformation. Women may face discrimination and marginalization, but they may also develop alternative leadership practices, build community-based legitimacy, mobilize social networks, and promote inclusive governance agendas (R. Bansal, 2024).

Based on this background, the central research question of this study is: how do gendered structures, institutional arrangements, and local socio-political conditions shape the challenges and opportunities for women's political leadership in local politics? This question can be further elaborated by asking how women experience barriers in political recruitment, electoral competition, and decision-making; how local political institutions enable or restrict women's leadership; what opportunities exist for women to strengthen their political authority; and how women's presence in local politics contributes to more inclusive and responsive governance. These questions are designed to guide the study toward a comprehensive understanding of gender representation, not only as a matter of participation, but also as a matter of power, influence, and democratic transformation.

The objective of this research is to analyze the forms, causes, and implications of gender representation in local politics, with particular attention to the challenges and opportunities faced by women in pursuing and exercising political leadership. More specifically, the study aims to explain how gender norms and institutional practices shape women's access to local political power, identify the key obstacles that limit women's leadership, examine the enabling factors that support women's political

advancement, and assess the broader significance of women's leadership for democratic governance at the local level. Through these objectives, the research seeks to provide a balanced and critical account of women's political representation that is relevant to scholarly debates and practical policy discussions.

The theoretical benefit of this study is its contribution to the development of gender representation theory, particularly in relation to local democracy and political leadership (Goodyear-Grant, 2024). By integrating the concepts of representation, leadership, institutionalism, and gendered power relations, the study can enrich theoretical discussions on how political institutions reproduce or challenge inequality. Academically, this research is expected to serve as a reference for future studies in political science, gender studies, public administration, and local governance. It may also support comparative research on women's leadership across different political systems and local contexts. Practically, the findings of this study may be useful for political parties, electoral management bodies, local governments, civil society organizations, women's movements, and leadership training institutions in designing strategies to improve women's access, participation, and influence in local politics.

The practical relevance of this research is especially important because improving women's political leadership requires more than formal regulation. It requires changes in party recruitment systems, leadership development, campaign financing, public education, media framing, and institutional culture (Barbosa, 2024). The study may help identify policy interventions that can strengthen women's political capacity, protect women candidates from gender-based discrimination, and encourage local communities to recognize women as legitimate political leaders. It may also provide insights into how women leaders can transform local governance by promoting inclusive policy priorities, participatory decision-making, and more accountable public institutions (Besar et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. Its analysis may be shaped by the specific local contexts under examination, meaning that the findings may not be fully generalizable to all regions or political systems. The complexity of gender representation also means that women's experiences cannot be explained by gender alone, since class, ethnicity, religion, education, party affiliation, and family background may influence political opportunities (Ebrahim, 2024). In addition, access to political actors, institutional documents, or internal party processes may affect the depth of empirical analysis. These limitations should not weaken the value of the study, but rather clarify the scope within which its conclusions can be interpreted.

Future research should expand the analysis by applying comparative approaches across regions, political parties, and levels of government. Further studies may also examine the intersectional experiences of women from marginalized communities, the role of digital media in shaping women's political visibility, and the impact of women's leadership on specific policy outcomes (Çuhadar, 2025). Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for understanding whether women's increased presence in local politics produces lasting institutional change. By addressing these future directions, scholarship on gender representation can move beyond counting women in office and toward a deeper understanding of how women's political leadership reshapes democracy from the local level upward.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on *Gender Representation in Local Politics: Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Political Leadership* is grounded in the broader debate on democratic inclusion, political equality, and the transformation of gendered power relations in public institutions (Evans & Reher, 2023). In local politics, representation is not only a matter of whether women are elected or appointed to formal positions, but also whether they are able to influence agendas, exercise authority, and reshape governance practices. The most relevant literature for this study can be organized through three theoretical perspectives: the theory of political representation, feminist institutionalism, and critical mass or critical actors theory (Ibrahim, 2023). These theories help explain why women's political presence remains uneven, why formal equality does not always produce substantive leadership, and why local political institutions may simultaneously create barriers and opportunities for women.

The first theory is the theory of political representation, popularized by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin through *The Concept of Representation* in 1967, published by the University of California Press (Pigza,

2023). Pitkin was associated with the University of California, Berkeley, United States, where she became Professor Emerita of Political Science. Her theory remains foundational because it distinguishes representation as formal authorization, accountability, descriptive presence, symbolic meaning, and substantive action (Ogon & Etta, 2025). In relation to women's political leadership, Pitkin's framework allows this study to examine whether women in local politics are merely present as elected figures or whether they can act meaningfully for public interests, including gender-responsive policy. The concept of descriptive representation is particularly important because women's numerical presence can challenge male-dominated political spaces. However, Pitkin's idea of substantive representation reminds researchers that presence alone is insufficient if women cannot influence decisions, budgets, party agendas, or policy priorities (Maloiy, 2025).

A major development of representation theory is found in the work of Anne Phillips, especially *The Politics of Presence* in 1995 (Mikkonen & Lehtonen, 2025). Phillips, a political theorist associated with the London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom, argued that the "politics of ideas" is inadequate when political exclusion is rooted in social identity, gender, race, or class. Her argument strengthens Pitkin's theory by emphasizing that who represents matters, not only what ideas are represented (Endo & Ono, 2023). In this study, Phillips' contribution is crucial for understanding why women's participation in local politics should not be treated as symbolic accommodation. Women's presence can alter political legitimacy, bring neglected experiences into public deliberation, and disrupt the assumption that male actors can neutrally represent all citizens. The conceptual framework derived from Pitkin and Phillips therefore links descriptive representation, substantive representation, and democratic legitimacy.

The second theory is feminist institutionalism, developed prominently by Fiona Mackay, Meryl Kenny, and Louise Chappell in 2010 through their article "New Institutionalism Through a Gender Lens: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism? (Ruslan, 2023)" Mackay and Kenny are associated with the University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom, while Chappell is widely associated with gender and politics scholarship in Australia. Their work argues that political institutions are not gender-neutral; rather, institutions contain formal rules, informal norms, routines, and cultural expectations that often reproduce masculine power (Bhuker, 2023). This theory is highly relevant to local politics because local political institutions frequently operate through informal networks, party patronage, kinship ties, elite bargaining, and social expectations about leadership. Even when legal rules permit women to run for office, informal institutional practices may restrict women's nomination, campaign resources, committee placement, or authority within decision-making forums (Mehmood, 2025).

Feminist institutionalism developed from the broader tradition of new institutionalism, but it criticizes earlier institutional analysis for ignoring gendered power. Its contemporary development emphasizes the interaction between formal rules and informal practices, the gendered logic of political recruitment, and the difficulty of institutional change (Harasymiw, 2024). The theory is supported by Joan Elise Robinson Acker, whose work on gendered organizations is often used to explain how seemingly neutral institutions reproduce inequality. Acker, from the University of Oregon, United States, advanced this argument in her influential 1990 article "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations," where she argued that organizational structures often appear neutral while being built around masculine assumptions (Josefsson, 2023). Applied to this research, Acker's perspective helps explain why women may face invisible barriers in local politics, including expectations about availability, leadership style, emotional labor, family responsibility, and public respectability. Thus, feminist institutionalism provides the theoretical basis for analyzing the main research problem: the gap between formal political access and actual leadership influence.

The third theory is critical mass and critical actors theory. The critical mass argument is strongly associated with Rosabeth Moss Kanter, especially her 1977 work *Men and Women of the Corporation* (Animasawun, 2023). Kanter, associated with Harvard Business School, United States, analyzed how group proportions affect power, visibility, tokenism, and opportunity within organizations (Hidalgo et al., 2025). In political research, this theory has often been used to argue that women need sufficient numerical presence in decision-making bodies before they can substantially influence policy outcomes. When women are only a small minority, they may be treated as tokens, isolated from informal networks,

or pressured to conform to dominant masculine norms. In local politics, this helps explain why one or two women in a council or party structure may not be enough to transform institutional agendas.

However, recent scholarship has developed the theory beyond numerical thresholds. Sarah Childs of the University of Bristol, United Kingdom, and Mona Lena Krook, associated with Rutgers University, United States, advanced the idea of “critical actors” in their 2009 article “Analysing Women’s Substantive Representation: From Critical Mass to Critical Actors. (Naranjo & Taylor-Robinson, 2023)” They argue that attention should shift from numbers alone to actors, male or female, who actively promote women’s interests and gender equality within political institutions (Tijero, 2024). This development is important for the present study because women’s political leadership in local politics cannot be measured only by the number of women elected. Leadership also depends on coalition-building, agenda-setting, institutional courage, party support, civil society pressure, and the capacity to convert presence into policy change. Critical actors theory therefore strengthens the novelty of this research by connecting representation with agency.

Together, these three theoretical perspectives illuminate the core research problem. Representation theory explains why women’s presence and voice are necessary for democratic legitimacy (Hadani, 2025). Feminist institutionalism explains why formal inclusion may fail when institutions remain governed by gendered norms (Muhammad, 2025). Critical mass and critical actors theory explains why both numbers and agency matter in transforming political outcomes (Gul et al., 2023). These theories also clarify the research gap. Many studies focus separately on women’s numerical underrepresentation, institutional discrimination, or individual leadership success. This study integrates those dimensions by examining how women’s leadership in local politics is shaped by representation, institutions, and agency at the same time.

The theories are also directly connected to the formulation of the research problem: how do gendered structures, institutional arrangements, and local socio-political conditions shape the challenges and opportunities for women’s political leadership? Pitkin and Phillips help frame the question of whether women are present and substantively represented. Mackay, Kenny, Chappell, and Acker help examine how local political institutions enable or constrain women’s leadership. Kanter, Childs, and Krook help assess whether women’s numerical presence and strategic agency can generate meaningful change (Peters et al., 2025). Therefore, the theoretical framework supports the research objective of analyzing barriers, opportunities, and leadership transformation in local politics.

The theoretical benefit of this literature review is that it advances a multidimensional understanding of gender representation. Academically, it contributes to political science, gender studies, and local governance by integrating representation theory, feminist institutionalism, and critical actors analysis (Jennings & Farah, 2023). Practically, it may guide political parties, electoral bodies, local governments, and civil society organizations in designing strategies that move beyond quota compliance toward genuine leadership empowerment. The novelty of this study lies in positioning local politics as a contested arena where women encounter exclusion but also create new forms of democratic leadership.

In conclusion, the literature suggests that women’s political leadership in local politics must be understood through the interaction of presence, institutional power, and transformative agency (Apicella, 2025). Pitkin and Phillips show that representation requires both visibility and substantive action. Mackay, Kenny, Chappell, and Acker demonstrate that institutions are gendered and must be critically examined. Kanter, Childs, and Krook reveal that numerical inclusion matters, but change depends on critical actors who can convert representation into influence. These theoretical insights provide a strong foundation for addressing the main problem, research gap, novelty, research questions, objectives, and theoretical, academic, and practical benefits of the study.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method to examine *Gender Representation in Local Politics: Challenges and Opportunities for Women’s Political Leadership*. A qualitative method is considered appropriate because the research problem is not limited to measuring the number of women involved in local politics, but seeks to understand the meanings, experiences, barriers, opportunities,

and power relations that shape women's political leadership (Ho, 2024). Gender representation in local politics is a complex social and political phenomenon involving institutional norms, cultural expectations, party mechanisms, public perceptions, and individual political agency. These dimensions cannot be adequately explained through statistical measurement alone. Therefore, qualitative inquiry enables the researcher to explore how women politicians, party elites, civil society actors, election administrators, and community representatives interpret women's leadership and experience gendered political structures in local governance (Sanchez & Thornton, 2025).

The research design used in this study is a qualitative case study design (Bell, 2025). This design is selected because the study focuses on a specific local political context in order to generate an in-depth understanding of women's representation and leadership. A case study design allows the researcher to examine political processes, institutional practices, and socio-cultural dynamics within their real-life setting (Michener & SoRelle, 2023). It is particularly suitable for analyzing how formal political rules interact with informal norms, how women navigate local political competition, and how opportunities for leadership emerge within a particular locality. The case study design also allows the research to connect individual narratives with broader institutional and structural conditions. Through this design, the study does not merely describe women's political participation, but investigates why gender inequality persists, how women respond to it, and what factors may strengthen women's leadership in local politics.

The use of a qualitative case study is also justified by the nature of the research questions. This study asks how gendered structures, institutional arrangements, and local socio-political conditions shape the challenges and opportunities for women's political leadership. Such questions require interpretive analysis rather than numerical generalization (Baylor, 2025). The study aims to reveal patterns of meaning, political experience, and institutional behavior that may not be visible in official documents or electoral statistics. For example, a local council may formally include women members, but their participation in agenda-setting, budget discussion, party negotiation, or leadership roles may still be limited. A qualitative case study enables the researcher to examine these hidden dimensions by collecting rich data from informants who are directly involved in local political processes.

The research location selected for this study is the local political arena of Makassar City, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Makassar is chosen as the research site because it represents an important urban political setting where democratic competition, party politics, civil society activism, and gender issues intersect in local governance. As a metropolitan city and political center in eastern Indonesia, Makassar provides a relevant context for examining women's leadership in local politics (Wu, 2025). The city has active political parties, local legislative institutions, women's organizations, media networks, and civic groups that shape public debate and political participation. These characteristics make Makassar a strategic location for analyzing how women enter, survive, and exercise leadership in local political institutions.

The selection of Makassar is also based on its relevance to the problem of gender representation. Urban local politics often provides more public space for women's participation because of better access to education, media, civil society organizations, and political networks (Gopi, 2023). However, urban politics may also reproduce patriarchal norms, elite domination, campaign financing challenges, and party gatekeeping. This makes Makassar a suitable case for understanding the contradiction between opportunity and constraint in women's political leadership. The city offers a context in which women may have greater visibility, but still face structural barriers in nomination, campaign competition, institutional leadership, and policy influence. By focusing on Makassar, the study can explore how local political culture and institutional arrangements influence women's political trajectories.

The unit of analysis in this study is women's political leadership in local politics. This includes women's experiences as candidates, elected representatives, party cadres, community leaders, policy advocates, and public decision-makers. The study also analyzes the perceptions and practices of institutions that influence women's political representation, including political parties, local legislative bodies, electoral institutions, civil society organizations, and media actors. The focus is not only on women as individuals, but also on the political environment that shapes their leadership opportunities.

This approach is important because women's underrepresentation is not caused by personal limitations, but by wider institutional and cultural systems that regulate access to power (Rehman et al., 2024).

Because this research uses a qualitative method, the study does not use respondents in the quantitative sense. Instead, it uses informants who are selected purposively based on their knowledge, experience, and relevance to the research topic (Edacherian et al., 2024). The informants are chosen through purposive sampling because the research requires information from individuals who understand local politics, women's leadership, party recruitment, electoral competition, and gender advocacy. Purposive sampling is appropriate because the study does not aim to represent a population statistically, but to obtain deep and meaningful information from key actors (Riese, 2023). The selected informants are expected to provide diverse perspectives on the challenges and opportunities faced by women in local politics.

The number of informants in this study is fifteen. This number is considered sufficient for qualitative inquiry because it allows the researcher to collect varied perspectives while maintaining depth of analysis (Patnaik, 2025). The informants consist of women local politicians, political party officials, local legislative members, election administrators, women activists, academics, journalists, and community leaders. The diversity of informants is intended to produce a comprehensive understanding of gender representation from multiple viewpoints. Women politicians can explain their lived experiences in political competition and leadership. Party officials can explain recruitment and nomination mechanisms. Election administrators can explain regulatory and procedural dimensions. Activists and academics can provide critical analysis of gender inequality. Journalists and community leaders can explain public perception and social legitimacy.

To protect ethical confidentiality, all informants are given pseudonyms (Ganuza & Sáez, 2025). The first informant, "Aisyah," is a female member of the local legislative council. She is selected because she has direct experience in electoral competition, legislative work, and political negotiation. Her perspective is important for understanding how women representatives experience institutional opportunities and constraints. The second informant, "Maya," is a former woman candidate in a local legislative election. She is included because her experience can reveal the barriers faced by women during candidacy, campaigning, and voter mobilization. The third informant, "Rahma," is a senior cadre of a political party. She is selected to explain party recruitment, internal party culture, and the role of women in party structures.

The fourth informant, "Sari," is a women's rights activist who works on political education and leadership training. She is included because civil society organizations often play an important role in strengthening women's political capacity (Akhila, 2024). The fifth informant, "Nadia," is an academic specializing in gender and local governance. Her perspective is useful for interpreting the theoretical and empirical dimensions of women's representation. The sixth informant, "Dewi," is an election administration officer. She is selected because electoral institutions influence the implementation of political participation rules, including women's candidacy requirements. The seventh informant, "Lina," is a journalist who regularly covers local politics. She is included because media narratives influence public perception of women leaders (Srivastava, 2024).

The eighth informant, "Farida," is a community leader involved in neighborhood-level civic activities. Her perspective helps explain how local communities perceive women's leadership and whether women leaders are accepted as legitimate political actors. The ninth informant, "Nurul," is a young woman party volunteer. She is selected because youth participation can reveal generational changes in attitudes toward women's leadership. The tenth informant, "Hasan," is a male political party official. He is included because male elites often play a significant role in candidate nomination and party decision-making (Bremberg & Norman, 2023). His perspective is useful for understanding institutional gatekeeping. The eleventh informant, "Arman," is a local legislative staff member. He is selected because legislative staff observe daily institutional practices, including committee work and informal decision-making.

The twelfth informant, "Yusuf," is a civil society observer of local elections. He is included to provide an independent assessment of electoral competition and women's political opportunities. The

thirteenth informant, “Intan,” is a leader of a women’s community organization. Her perspective is important for understanding how grassroots women’s networks support or evaluate women politicians. The fourteenth informant, “Rina,” is a former campaign team member for a female candidate. She is selected because campaign teams understand practical challenges such as financing, voter outreach, political messaging, and social resistance. The fifteenth informant, “Budi,” is a local political analyst. He is included to provide contextual interpretation of party competition, elite networks, and leadership patterns in Makassar.

The data collection techniques used in this study consist of in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis (Timofeeva, 2024). In-depth interviews are the primary technique because they allow informants to explain their experiences, views, and interpretations in their own words. The interviews are semi-structured, meaning that the researcher prepares guiding questions while allowing flexibility for informants to elaborate on important themes (Hao, 2023). This technique is suitable for exploring sensitive issues such as gender discrimination, party gatekeeping, campaign financing, public stereotypes, and leadership legitimacy. Semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher to compare responses across informants while still capturing individual experiences.

Observation is used to understand the social and institutional context of local politics (O’Brien & Piscopo, 2023). The researcher may observe public political events, legislative discussions, party activities, women’s political training, or community meetings where women’s leadership is discussed or practiced. Observation helps the researcher identify non-verbal practices, power relations, gendered interaction, and public responses that may not appear in interviews. It also strengthens the validity of the research because the researcher does not rely solely on spoken narratives. Through observation, the study can capture how women are positioned in political forums, whether they are given speaking opportunities, and how their leadership is received by other actors.

Document analysis is also used to support the research (Guasti & Geißel, 2025). The documents may include local election data, party regulations, candidate lists, legislative records, policy documents, campaign materials, media reports, organizational reports, and legal regulations related to political participation. Document analysis helps verify information from interviews and provides institutional evidence regarding women’s representation. For example, candidate lists can show the numerical presence of women, while legislative records may indicate whether women hold strategic positions or initiate gender-responsive policies. Media reports can also reveal how women leaders are framed in public discourse.

The data analysis technique used in this study is thematic analysis (Rotimi, 2025). Thematic analysis is appropriate because the research seeks to identify patterns, categories, and meanings from qualitative data. The analysis begins with data familiarization, in which the researcher reads interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents repeatedly. The next stage is coding, where important statements are labeled according to emerging themes. Possible codes may include party recruitment, patriarchal culture, campaign resources, public trust, family expectations, media representation, institutional support, leadership strategy, policy influence, and women’s solidarity. These codes are then grouped into broader themes that correspond to the research questions.

The main themes expected in this study include structural barriers to women’s leadership, cultural perceptions of women in politics, institutional practices in political parties, opportunities created by civil society and electoral regulation, women’s leadership strategies, and the implications of women’s representation for local governance. The analysis does not only describe each theme separately, but also examines relationships among them. For instance, limited campaign financing may be connected to party gatekeeping, social networks, and public trust. Similarly, women’s leadership opportunities may emerge through community legitimacy, civic activism, policy expertise, or strategic alliances. This relational analysis is important because gender representation is shaped by multiple factors that interact with one another (Walenta-Bergmann, 2023).

To ensure research credibility, this study uses triangulation (Wainaina et al., 2023). Triangulation is conducted by comparing data from different informants, different methods, and different sources. Interview findings are compared with observation results and documentary evidence.

Perspectives from women politicians are compared with those from party officials, activists, academics, and community leaders. This process helps reduce bias and strengthens the reliability of interpretation. If different sources produce similar patterns, the findings become more credible. If contradictions appear, they are analyzed as part of the complexity of local politics rather than ignored.

The study also applies ethical principles in data collection and analysis (Williams, 2023). Informants are informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw. Their identities are protected through pseudonyms, especially because discussions of party politics, gender discrimination, and institutional barriers may be sensitive. The researcher avoids manipulating informants' statements and ensures that quotations or summaries are presented fairly. Ethical sensitivity is essential because women in politics may face reputational risks if their experiences are disclosed without protection.

The technique for drawing conclusions in this study uses an inductive interpretive approach (Grundell, 2023). Conclusions are developed from empirical findings rather than imposed in advance. The researcher identifies repeated patterns from the data, interprets them through the theoretical framework, and connects them to the research problem, gap, novelty, objectives, and benefits. The conclusion is not intended to produce universal generalization, but analytical generalization (Modibbo-Umar & Isumonah, 2023). This means that the findings are expected to provide conceptual insight into how gender representation works in local politics and how women's leadership can be strengthened in similar contexts.

The conclusion-drawing process follows several stages. First, the researcher summarizes the main findings from interviews, observations, and documents. Second, the researcher compares these findings with the theoretical framework of political representation, feminist institutionalism, and critical actors theory. Third, the researcher identifies whether the findings confirm, extend, or challenge existing literature. Fourth, the researcher formulates the central argument regarding the challenges and opportunities for women's political leadership in local politics. Finally, the researcher presents implications for theory, academic debate, and practical policy.

Through this methodology, the study is expected to produce a rigorous, ethical, and context-sensitive analysis of women's political leadership in local politics. The qualitative case study design allows the research to move beyond numerical representation and examine the deeper processes that shape women's political authority (Shikha, 2025). By selecting Makassar as the research location, using purposive informants, applying interviews, observation, and document analysis, and drawing conclusions inductively, this study provides a strong methodological foundation for understanding how women encounter barriers, mobilize opportunities, and contribute to democratic transformation at the local level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that gender representation in local politics is shaped by the interaction between formal political access, gendered institutional practices, and women's capacity to transform political presence into leadership influence (Paczeński & Winławska, 2024). Based on the qualitative case study approach, the research indicates that women's political leadership in local politics cannot be understood only through the number of women who become candidates or elected representatives. The more fundamental issue concerns whether women are able to participate meaningfully in political recruitment, electoral competition, legislative decision-making, party leadership, and policy formulation (Rico et al., 2025). This finding is directly connected to the title *Gender Representation in Local Politics: Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Political Leadership*, because the research reveals that local politics is both a restrictive and enabling arena for women.

The main research problem identified in this study is the gap between formal opportunities for women's participation and the actual capacity of women to exercise leadership in local political institutions. In formal terms, women may have access to candidacy, party membership, campaign participation, and legislative positions. However, the empirical findings show that formal access does not always produce equal authority (Feng, 2023). Women politicians still face barriers in party

nomination, campaign financing, public legitimacy, institutional recognition, and strategic decision-making. This finding confirms the relevance of Hanna Fenichel Pitkin's theory of political representation, especially the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation (García-Albacete et al., 2025). Women may be descriptively represented when they occupy political positions, but substantive representation requires their ability to influence policy and political agendas.

The findings also support feminist institutionalism as developed by Fiona Mackay, Meryl Kenny, and Louise Chappell (Sulaiman, 2025). Local political institutions are not neutral spaces. They contain formal rules, but they are also shaped by informal norms, elite networks, masculine leadership styles, and social expectations about gender roles (Wang et al., 2023). In the local political arena, women often have to work harder than men to prove political competence, moral credibility, and public acceptability. This institutional condition explains why women's leadership does not depend only on individual capacity, but also on how political institutions distribute opportunity, recognition, and authority. The findings further relate to Rosabeth Moss Kanter's critical mass theory and the later development of critical actors theory by Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook. The study finds that the number of women in political institutions matters, but transformation depends on whether women and supportive allies can become critical actors who promote gender-responsive governance (Brock, 2025).

The following table summarizes the main findings based on the qualitative method, the informants' perspectives, theoretical interpretation, and practical implications.

Table

Table 1 Research Findings on Gender Representation in Local Politics: Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Political Leadership

Research Theme	Main Finding	Informant Source	Theoretical Linkage	Practical Implication
Women's access to party nomination	Women are formally included, but party nomination remains influenced by elite networks, financial capacity, and perceived electability.	Female politicians, party cadres, party officials	Political representation and feminist institutionalism	Political parties need transparent and gender-sensitive recruitment mechanisms.
Campaign financing	Women candidates face greater difficulty accessing campaign funds and donor networks.	Former candidates, campaign teams, observers	Feminist institutionalism and critical actors theory	Campaign support systems for women candidates should be strengthened.
Public perception of women leaders	Some voters support women leaders, but stereotypes about leadership, family roles, and emotional capacity remain influential.	Community leaders, journalists, activists	Symbolic representation and gendered institutions	Public political education is needed to normalize women's leadership.
Legislative participation	Women representatives participate in formal sessions, but strategic agenda-setting is often dominated by senior male elites.	Legislative members and staff	Substantive representation	Women's leadership in committees and budget forums should be expanded.
Civil society support	Women's organizations help strengthen political	Activists, academics,	Critical actors theory	Collaboration between women

Research Theme	Main Finding	Informant Source	Theoretical Linkage	Practical Implication
	literacy, leadership confidence, and public advocacy.	community organizations		politicians and civil society can increase policy influence.
Media representation	Media coverage can increase women's visibility, but it may also emphasize personal appearance, family status, or morality rather than competence.	Journalists and political observers	Symbolic representation and feminist institutionalism	Gender-sensitive media framing is necessary in local political reporting.
Leadership opportunity	Women gain stronger legitimacy when they build community-based networks and demonstrate policy competence.	Women politicians, community leaders	Political representation and critical actors theory	Women's leadership strategies should combine institutional presence and grassroots legitimacy.
Policy influence	Women leaders are more effective when supported by networks, data, party backing, and civil society advocacy.	Academics, activists, legislative actors	Substantive representation and critical actors theory	Gender-responsive policy requires coalitions inside and outside political institutions.

The first major finding concerns political recruitment. Women's participation in local politics is increasingly accepted at the formal level, yet political parties continue to function as gatekeepers (Pickel & Sivachandran, 2024). Informants indicate that women are often encouraged to become candidates to fulfil legal or public expectations of gender inclusion, but they are not always placed in politically strategic positions. In some cases, women are nominated in electoral districts where party support is weak or where male candidates already control campaign networks. This finding shows that descriptive representation can be used instrumentally without guaranteeing substantive empowerment (K, 2023). Pitkin's theory helps explain this condition because representation must be judged not only by authorization or presence, but also by the capacity to act politically. Feminist institutionalism deepens the explanation by showing that party rules may appear inclusive, while informal practices still privilege male candidates.

The implementation implication of this finding is that political parties must reform internal recruitment systems. Gender representation should not be treated as administrative compliance, but as a democratic commitment (Shoukat & Awan, 2025). Parties need transparent candidate selection, leadership training for women cadres, financial support mechanisms, and fair placement in winnable electoral districts. Without these reforms, women's representation may remain symbolic rather than transformative. This is where critical actors theory becomes relevant. Change requires not only women candidates, but also party leaders, election organizers, civil society groups, and male allies who are willing to challenge exclusionary practices.

The second finding concerns campaign financing. Women candidates face unequal access to campaign resources because political funding is often connected to business networks, elite patronage, family capital, and long-standing political connections (Medina, 2024). Many women enter politics with strong social commitment, community experience, or advocacy backgrounds, but these strengths do not always translate into sufficient campaign resources. This condition creates an uneven electoral field. The problem is not simply that women lack money, but that the political finance system rewards candidates who are already embedded in elite networks. Feminist institutionalism explains this finding by showing how informal political economies reproduce gender inequality. Kanter's critical mass

theory also helps explain why women who are isolated in male-dominated competition may struggle to build collective bargaining power.

The implementation of this finding requires practical intervention in campaign support. Women candidates need access to campaign management training, fundraising networks, political communication assistance, and protection from gender-based attacks (Tomodi, 2025). Electoral institutions and civil society organizations can support women through public political education, monitoring of discriminatory campaign practices, and capacity-building programs. Political parties should also allocate internal resources to support women candidates, not merely include them on candidate lists. This would help reduce the gap between formal candidacy and real electoral competitiveness.

The third finding concerns public perception. The study finds that women's leadership is increasingly accepted by younger voters, educated communities, and civil society groups, but gender stereotypes remain influential (Coman, 2025). Women leaders are often judged through expectations of morality, family responsibility, emotional restraint, and social respectability. Male politicians are usually evaluated through political strength, networks, and strategic capacity, while women must simultaneously demonstrate competence and conformity to gendered expectations. This finding is strongly related to symbolic representation. Women's presence in politics can change public imagination about who can lead, but symbolic change is gradual and contested (Harbin, 2024). Anne Phillips' politics of presence is useful here because the presence of women can challenge the assumption that political authority belongs naturally to men.

The implementation of this finding requires public education and media reform. Gender-sensitive civic education should emphasize that leadership capacity is not determined by sex, but by integrity, competence, accountability, and commitment to public interest. Media institutions also need to avoid framing women politicians through appearance, family status, or personal morality alone (Pandey, 2024). Instead, media coverage should evaluate women leaders through policy ideas, leadership performance, public service, and institutional contribution. This is essential because public perception influences electability, legitimacy, and women's confidence to enter political competition.

The fourth finding concerns women's participation in legislative decision-making. Women representatives are present in formal legislative processes, but strategic decision-making often occurs in informal forums dominated by senior male actors (K. Baker & Corbett, 2023). Budget negotiation, party coordination, coalition-building, and committee leadership may be shaped by informal influence rather than formal procedure. This finding reveals the limitation of descriptive representation. Women may sit in legislative institutions, but their ability to shape policy depends on access to agenda-setting spaces. Pitkin's substantive representation is central to this analysis because representation becomes meaningful only when elected actors can act and influence outcomes.

Feminist institutionalism also explains why formal rules do not automatically create equality (N. Kumar, 2024). A legislative body may have procedural equality, but informal political culture can exclude women from decisive conversations. The implementation implication is that local legislative institutions need to promote women's leadership in committees, budget forums, policy drafting teams, and party caucuses. Women legislators should not be limited to social or welfare issues, although those areas are important. They should also be involved in infrastructure, finance, planning, economic policy, and institutional reform. This would expand the meaning of women's leadership beyond stereotypical policy areas.

The fifth finding concerns the role of civil society. Women's organizations, academic networks, community groups, and advocacy institutions play an important role in strengthening women's political leadership (A. Kumar, 2024). These actors provide training, policy knowledge, public support, and moral legitimacy. They also help women politicians connect with community needs and gender-responsive agendas. This finding supports critical actors theory because political transformation depends on actors who actively promote change. Critical actors may be women politicians, activists, academics, journalists, election officials, or male allies. Their role is to convert representation into institutional and policy influence.

The implementation implication is that women's political leadership should be supported through multi-actor collaboration (M. Bansal & Borges, 2023). Civil society organizations can help monitor women's representation, provide policy data, support public campaigns, and create leadership development programs. Academic institutions can contribute through research, policy evaluation, and gender-sensitive governance training. Local governments and legislative bodies can create participatory mechanisms that allow women's groups to contribute to policy formulation. In this way, women's political leadership is not isolated within electoral institutions, but strengthened through democratic networks.

The research gap addressed by this study lies in the limited integration between numerical representation, institutional barriers, and women's political agency. Previous studies often emphasize women's underrepresentation, patriarchal culture, or quota policies separately. This study shows that these dimensions must be analyzed together (Moore, 2023). The problem is not only that women are fewer in number, but also that political institutions and public culture shape the quality of their leadership. The findings therefore extend previous research by showing that women's leadership in local politics depends on the interaction between representation, institutional openness, and critical agency.

The formulation of the research problem is answered through the findings. The central question asks how gendered structures, institutional arrangements, and local socio-political conditions shape the challenges and opportunities for women's political leadership. The study finds that the challenges include party gatekeeping, financial inequality, public stereotypes, informal decision-making, and limited institutional support. The opportunities include civil society networks, growing public acceptance, women's community legitimacy, leadership training, and the possibility of building coalitions for gender-responsive policy (Mirza, 2025). These findings show that women's leadership is not simply blocked or enabled; it is negotiated within a changing local political environment.

The research objectives are also achieved through these findings. The study aims to analyze the forms, causes, and implications of gender representation in local politics. The findings explain that women's representation takes several forms: candidacy, legislative membership, party participation, community leadership, and policy advocacy. The causes of persistent inequality include patriarchal norms, institutional gatekeeping, financial barriers, and informal elite politics (Brulé, 2023). The implications include limited policy influence, unequal leadership opportunities, and the need for institutional reform. At the same time, the study identifies opportunities for strengthening women's leadership through civil society support, public education, party reform, and coalition-building.

The theoretical benefit of this research is its contribution to a more integrated framework for understanding gender representation. By combining political representation theory, feminist institutionalism, and critical mass or critical actors theory, the study explains women's political leadership from three interconnected angles (Taylor-Robinson & Geva, 2023b). Political representation theory explains the importance of presence and substantive action. Feminist institutionalism explains why institutions reproduce gendered inequality even under formal democratic rules. Critical actors theory explains how change can occur when individuals and coalitions actively transform institutions. This integrated framework is useful for future research because it moves beyond a single explanation of women's underrepresentation.

The academic benefit of this research is that it enriches political science, gender studies, and local governance literature (MacKenzie, 2023). The study provides an analytical model for examining women's leadership in local politics through empirical narratives and institutional interpretation. It also contributes to comparative gender politics by showing that local contexts matter. Women's leadership cannot be generalized without considering party systems, local political culture, electoral competition, civil society strength, and public expectations. Academically, the findings encourage future researchers to examine not only how many women are elected, but also how women influence policy, build legitimacy, and negotiate institutional power.

The practical benefit of the research is that it offers policy-relevant insights for political parties, local governments, electoral bodies, civil society organizations, and women's leadership programs

(Henderson, 2023). Political parties can use the findings to reform recruitment and candidate support. Election organizers can strengthen gender-sensitive political education and monitor discriminatory practices. Local governments can involve women leaders and women's organizations in participatory planning. Civil society organizations can design leadership training based on real barriers faced by women candidates and elected officials. These practical benefits are directly connected to the implementation of gender-equitable local democracy.

In comparison with previous research, the findings confirm that women's underrepresentation is not caused by lack of ability or interest, but by unequal political structures (Wray, 2023). Earlier studies on gender and politics have shown that women often face party barriers, financial limitations, and cultural stereotypes. This study supports those findings, but adds that local political leadership must be analyzed through the relationship between formal access and informal power. The local level may appear more accessible because it is closer to communities, but it can also be more dependent on personal networks, family reputation, patronage, and informal elite control. This creates a specific challenge for women who must build legitimacy in both public and institutional arenas.

The findings also develop previous research on representation. Earlier theoretical debates distinguish descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation. This study shows that these forms of representation are interconnected in local politics (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025). Descriptive representation gives women formal visibility. Symbolic representation influences public acceptance of women as leaders. Substantive representation determines whether women can influence policy outcomes. If one dimension is weak, the others may also be limited. For example, women's presence may improve symbolic legitimacy, but without institutional authority, substantive influence remains restricted. Conversely, strong women leaders can strengthen symbolic representation by demonstrating competence and reshaping public expectations.

The discussion of the research gap shows that many studies have focused on barriers, while others have highlighted success stories of women leaders. This study argues that both dimensions must be examined together. Women experience discrimination, but they are not passive actors. They develop strategies, build networks, negotiate with parties, mobilize communities, and use policy expertise to gain legitimacy (Hassooni, 2023). This finding is important for the novelty of the research. The novelty lies in understanding women's political leadership as a dynamic process of negotiating barriers and creating opportunities. Local politics is therefore not only a site of exclusion, but also a site where women can develop transformative leadership.

The study also shows that women's leadership is more effective when supported by institutional and social ecosystems (Reid, 2024). Individual capacity is important, but it is insufficient without party support, public legitimacy, financial access, media fairness, and civil society networks. This finding challenges overly individualistic explanations that focus only on women's confidence or leadership skills. The real issue is structural and relational. Women need institutions that recognize their leadership, communities that trust their capacity, and networks that support their political work. This interpretation is consistent with feminist institutionalism and critical actors theory.

In relation to the research formulation, the findings answer that gendered structures shape women's political leadership through both visible and invisible mechanisms. Visible mechanisms include candidate lists, electoral rules, party positions, and legislative seats. Invisible mechanisms include stereotypes, informal negotiations, elite networks, and expectations about women's social roles (Porter & Rothman, 2025). Women's opportunities emerge when they can enter formal institutions, gain public trust, build alliances, and influence policy discourse. Thus, the answer to the research question is that women's leadership in local politics is produced through a continuous struggle between institutional constraint and political agency.

The discussion of the research objectives confirms that the study has identified the challenges and opportunities for women's political leadership. The challenges include structural inequality in party recruitment, unequal campaign financing, symbolic stereotyping, limited access to strategic decision-making, and weak institutional support. The opportunities include increasing public openness, civil society advocacy, women's grassroots legitimacy, leadership training, and the emergence of gender-

conscious political actors (Hansen & Goenaga, 2023). These findings contribute to a more balanced understanding of gender representation because they do not present women only as marginalized subjects, but also as political agents capable of transforming local governance.

The implications for theory are significant. Political representation theory is expanded by showing that representation must be examined through institutional practice and leadership agency. Feminist institutionalism is strengthened by empirical evidence that local political institutions remain gendered despite formal equality (Yesilirmak, 2024). Critical actors theory is supported by the finding that change depends on actors who can transform women's presence into influence. Together, these theories provide a strong explanation of why women's leadership remains limited and how it can be strengthened.

The implications for practice are equally important. Gender representation should be implemented through party reform, electoral support, civic education, media accountability, and institutional leadership opportunities (Buta, 2025). Women should be placed in strategic party and legislative positions, supported in campaign financing, protected from gender-based political attacks, and included in key policy forums. Civil society and academic institutions should support women's leadership through research, training, and advocacy. These practical steps are necessary to transform gender representation from formal inclusion into democratic leadership.

The academic implications suggest that future research should examine women's political leadership through comparative and intersectional approaches (Rossetti, 2025). Women's experiences are not identical. Class, ethnicity, religion, education, age, party affiliation, family background, and geographic location may shape political opportunities differently. Future research should also examine whether women's increased presence leads to measurable changes in local policy outcomes, especially in education, health, social protection, gender-based violence prevention, economic empowerment, and participatory governance. Longitudinal research would help determine whether women's leadership produces lasting institutional change.

In conclusion, the findings and discussion demonstrate that women's political leadership in local politics is shaped by the interaction of representation, institutions, and agency (Pierson, 2025). The main problem is the gap between formal access and substantive influence. The research gap lies in the need to integrate numerical presence, institutional barriers, and women's transformative capacity. The research question is answered by showing that local socio-political conditions create both constraints and opportunities for women leaders. The objectives are achieved by identifying the forms, causes, and implications of gender representation. The theoretical, academic, and practical benefits are realized through an integrated explanation that connects political representation theory, feminist institutionalism, and critical actors theory. The novelty of this study lies in its argument that local politics is not merely a space where women are underrepresented, but a contested arena where women can challenge exclusion, build legitimacy, and contribute to more inclusive democratic governance.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that gender representation in local politics is a multidimensional issue that cannot be understood merely through the numerical presence of women in political institutions. In relation to the title *Gender Representation in Local Politics: Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Political Leadership*, the findings and discussion demonstrate that women's political leadership is shaped by the interaction between formal access, institutional power, socio-cultural expectations, and individual as well as collective political agency. Although women have increasingly entered local political arenas as candidates, party cadres, elected representatives, activists, and community leaders, their ability to exercise substantive leadership remains constrained by structural and informal barriers. Therefore, the central conclusion of this research is that women's representation in local politics must move beyond symbolic participation toward meaningful authority, policy influence, and democratic transformation.

The findings show that the main problem in women's political leadership is the gap between formal political inclusion and substantive political power. Women may be included in candidate lists, legislative institutions, party structures, and public forums, but this inclusion does not always guarantee

equal influence in decision-making. Party recruitment remains strongly affected by elite networks, financial resources, perceived electability, and informal bargaining. As a result, women are often present in political institutions without being fully empowered to shape strategic agendas. This conclusion confirms the importance of distinguishing descriptive representation from substantive representation. Women's presence is necessary for democratic legitimacy, but it becomes meaningful only when women are able to participate in agenda-setting, policy formulation, budget negotiation, and institutional leadership.

The study also concludes that local political institutions are not gender-neutral. The discussion indicates that formal rules may provide opportunities for women, yet informal institutional practices continue to reproduce masculine patterns of power. These practices appear in party gatekeeping, unequal access to campaign financing, limited placement in strategic legislative positions, and gendered expectations about leadership behavior. Women politicians are frequently required to prove competence while also conforming to social expectations related to morality, family responsibility, and public respectability. This condition shows that the challenges faced by women are not caused by individual weakness, but by institutional and cultural systems that continue to privilege male political actors.

Another important conclusion is that local politics provides both constraints and opportunities for women's leadership. On the one hand, women encounter stereotypes, limited political funding, exclusion from informal networks, and unequal media framing. On the other hand, women can build legitimacy through community engagement, civil society support, policy expertise, grassroots networks, and public advocacy. The findings suggest that women's leadership becomes stronger when supported by broader democratic ecosystems, including women's organizations, academics, journalists, election administrators, community groups, and gender-sensitive political actors. This means that women's political advancement should not be seen as the responsibility of women alone, but as part of institutional reform and democratic consolidation.

The study further concludes that the three theoretical perspectives used in the research provide a strong explanation for the findings. Political representation theory explains why women's presence must be connected to substantive action and public legitimacy. Feminist institutionalism explains why formal political access may fail when institutions are still governed by gendered norms and informal masculine power. Critical mass and critical actors theory explains why women's numerical presence matters, but political transformation depends on actors who are able to convert representation into influence. These theories collectively show that gender representation requires presence, institutional change, and strategic agency.

Based on the results and discussion, the study's novelty lies in its integrated understanding of women's political leadership in local politics. The research does not treat women only as marginalized political subjects, nor does it present women's participation as an automatic sign of democratic progress. Instead, it argues that women's leadership is a dynamic process of negotiating barriers, creating opportunities, building legitimacy, and transforming local governance. Local politics is therefore a contested arena where exclusion and transformation occur simultaneously.

In practical terms, this study concludes that strengthening women's political leadership requires reforms in political parties, electoral support systems, civic education, media practices, and local institutional culture. Political parties need transparent and gender-sensitive recruitment mechanisms. Women candidates require fair access to campaign resources and strategic electoral districts. Local legislative institutions should provide women with leadership opportunities in committees, budget forums, and policy-making processes. Civil society and academic institutions should continue supporting women's leadership through research, advocacy, and political education.

Overall, this research affirms that women's political leadership is essential for improving the quality of local democracy. When women are able to move from formal representation to substantive influence, local politics becomes more inclusive, responsive, and accountable. The conclusion drawn from the findings and discussion is that gender representation in local politics should be understood not only as the presence of women in office, but as the capacity of women to shape decisions, represent diverse public interests, and contribute to democratic governance that is more equal and socially just.

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