

Gender and Political Representation: Women's Leadership in Indonesia's Local Parliaments

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ABSTRACT

This study, titled "Gender and Political Representation: Women's Leadership in Indonesia's Local Parliaments", addresses the persistent underrepresentation of women in regional political institutions in Indonesia, despite the presence of affirmative policies designed to enhance female political participation. The research examines how structural barriers, entrenched patriarchal norms, and gendered party dynamics shape both the opportunities and challenges faced by women in local parliaments. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the study collected data through in-depth interviews with 35 informants, supplemented by direct observation of parliamentary proceedings in selected districts in Indonesia, as well as document analysis of archives, local regulations, and media reports. The selection of 35 informants was guided by the principle of achieving sufficient depth and diversity of perspectives on women's political experiences. Findings reveal that women parliamentarians tend to employ collaborative and empathetic leadership approaches, yet their influence is often constrained by hierarchical and male-dominated political cultures. The study contributes to political science by highlighting gender as a critical analytical lens for understanding representation and power. Recommendations include enhancing women's political skills, reforming party practices, and transforming societal perceptions of leadership.



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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of women's representation in politics, particularly within Indonesia's local legislative bodies, remains a critical issue attracting both scholarly and public attention. In democratic systems that uphold equality and social justice, women's presence in regional parliaments is expected to transcend mere compliance with quota requirements, instead reflecting substantive representation of women's interests and other marginalized groups (Ahmad & Aman, 2025). In practice, however, female political representation in local councils often remains symbolic, failing to fully capture meaningful participation or influence. This study, entitled "*Gender and Political Representation: Women's Leadership in Indonesia's Local Parliaments*", seeks to explore the dynamics of women's leadership in regional politics, examining how female politicians negotiate patriarchal norms, party structures, and socio-cultural biases that persist in local political contexts (Genova & Tazzara, 2025).

The study's background is rooted in the gap between democratic ideals and empirical realities. Although Indonesia has implemented affirmative policies, such as the mandated 30 percent quota for female legislative candidates as stipulated in Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections, the proportion of women elected to local parliaments remains significantly below expectations (Wangqu et al., 2025). In the most recent legislative period, women's representation in provincial and municipal/city councils averaged under 20 percent, with considerable variation across regions (JYOTHSNA, 2025). This discrepancy underscores complex structural and cultural barriers, including male-dominated party recruitment processes, limited political resources for women, and societal norms that continue to

confine women to domestic roles (Majumdar, 2023). Such conditions raise fundamental questions regarding how women exercise leadership and influence within male-dominated political arenas.

The primary problem addressed in this research is the mismatch between formal and substantive representation of women in local politics. Formal representation refers to the numerical presence of women in parliament, whereas substantive representation emphasizes the extent to which women can advocate for issues relevant to the public, particularly those affecting women and vulnerable populations (Adebajo et al., 2024). Previous studies have predominantly focused on quantitative dimensions, such as the proportion of female legislators, without sufficiently analyzing the quality of their leadership. Consequently, this research centers on understanding how female local council members articulate leadership roles, develop political strategies, and navigate patriarchal power structures.

The research gap motivating this study lies in the limited scholarship examining women's leadership from experiential and socially constructed perspectives at the local level. Most literature on gender and politics in Indonesia emphasizes the national stage, overlooking the distinct dynamics of local parliaments, which differ in power relations, party mechanisms, and community interactions (Lee-Koo, 2023). This study addresses this gap through an in-depth qualitative approach involving 35 informants, including female parliamentarians, women activists, political observers, and civil society representatives. By employing interviews, observations, and document analysis, the research aims to identify patterns of female leadership emerging across diverse social and cultural contexts within Indonesian regions.

A notable contribution of this study is the recognition that women's leadership in local parliaments cannot be fully understood solely through formal indicators of power. Rather, symbolic and cultural dimensions play a significant role (Lee-Koo, 2023). The research finds that many female legislators adopt collaborative, participatory, and empathetic leadership styles, contrasting with dominant masculine patterns of authority. Women leverage social capital, community networks, and emotional proximity to constituents as sources of political legitimacy (Johnson, 2023). Nevertheless, these strategies often confront resistance from male colleagues and hierarchical party structures (Dinger, 2025). These findings enrich contemporary political science by highlighting that political leadership is socially and gender-constructed, rather than universally defined (Tushabe et al., 2023).

The underlying hypothesis of this study posits that greater gender awareness and institutional support for female legislators enhance their capacity to exercise substantive leadership, enabling them to advocate more effectively for broad societal interests. In other words, women's political representation is determined not only by numerical presence but also by the quality of the political environment that supports their participation and leadership.

This research focuses on three central questions: (1) How do female local legislators develop and demonstrate political leadership within patriarchal political structures? (2) What factors facilitate or constrain women's effectiveness in advocating for public and gender-related issues in local councils? (3) What strategies and negotiation mechanisms do women employ to secure greater political influence? These questions provide the analytical framework for exploring the empirical experiences of female politicians operating in dynamic socio-political contexts.

The objectives of this study are to examine and analyze the forms, dynamics, and strategies of women's leadership in Indonesian local parliaments. Specifically, it seeks to uncover how female legislators navigate complex political systems, articulate gender-related interests, and foster inclusive and transformative leadership practices (Zaman et al., 2024). Additionally, the study aims to identify structural, cultural, and personal barriers that women encounter in exercising political authority (Isola, 2025).

The significance of the research is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to the advancement of contemporary political science by expanding understanding of gender-based political leadership and emphasizing the importance of socio-cultural analysis in studying local political practices (Vorchakova, 2023). Practically, the findings provide a reference for policymakers, political

parties, and civil society organizations in designing context-sensitive strategies to empower women politically (Yanti & Amaliah, 2024). Moreover, the study offers insights for female politicians themselves to enhance their leadership and negotiation capacities in competitive political environments (Kassotakis, 2024).

The limitations of the research pertain to its geographical scope and the number of informants, which are confined to selected regions of Indonesia. Given the qualitative methodology, the results are not intended for national generalization but rather aim to offer an in-depth understanding of region-specific socio-political contexts. Furthermore, the study encountered challenges in obtaining sensitive information, including internal party dynamics and conflicts of interest among council members. Despite these constraints, the analytical value of the research remains significant, underscoring the need for future comparative studies across regions and timeframes.

Future research should expand the analysis of women's leadership in local politics by incorporating intersectional factors such as social class, religion, and ethnicity. Recognizing that women's political experiences are not homogeneous, such research could provide a more nuanced understanding of how identity shapes leadership. Additionally, subsequent studies could examine the relationship between female representation in local parliaments and gender-sensitive public policy outcomes, thereby assessing the extent to which women's leadership contributes to broader social transformation.

In summary, "*Gender and Political Representation: Women's Leadership in Indonesia's Local Parliaments*" moves beyond merely quantifying women's parliamentary presence, exploring instead the meanings and practices of leadership they enact in local political realities. In a democracy still striving toward substantive equality, understanding women's leadership at the local level is critical for evaluating Indonesia's progress toward inclusive politics. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that female representation is not merely a statistical measure but a symbol of social change toward a more just, participatory, and gender-equitable political order.

RESEARCH METHODS

The present study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine women's leadership and political representation in Indonesia's local parliaments. A qualitative approach is considered the most appropriate methodological choice because the research aims to explore meanings, experiences, strategies, and power relations that shape women's political leadership, rather than to measure variables or test hypotheses statistically (Holmgren, 2025). Gender and political representation are socially constructed phenomena that are deeply embedded in cultural norms, institutional practices, and individual agency (Zewide, 2024). Therefore, qualitative research enables an in-depth understanding of how women legislators interpret their leadership roles, negotiate gendered constraints, and exercise political influence within local parliamentary institutions.

The research design adopted in this study is a qualitative case study. The case study design allows for a contextualized and holistic examination of women's leadership within specific institutional and socio-political settings. This design is particularly relevant for the topic of women's political representation because local parliaments in Indonesia operate within diverse cultural, religious, and political environments that shape gender relations in distinctive ways. By focusing on selected cases, the study is able to capture the complexity of women's leadership practices, informal power dynamics, and institutional barriers that cannot be adequately explained through large-scale quantitative designs. The case study design also aligns with the aim of producing analytically rich findings that contribute to theoretical debates on gender and political representation.

The research location is the Provincial Local Parliament (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah Provinsi) of Central Java, Indonesia. Central Java is selected as the research site due to its strategic relevance in Indonesia's political landscape and its relatively high number of female legislators compared to several other provinces. Central Java also represents a socio-political context where traditional Javanese cultural norms, Islamic values, and democratic political institutions intersect, making it a meaningful setting for examining gendered leadership practices. The province has implemented national gender quota policies for legislative elections, yet women legislators continue to

face structural and cultural challenges in exercising leadership roles. This combination of formal gender inclusion and persistent informal barriers makes Central Java a suitable and analytically rich location for investigating women's leadership in local parliaments.

The unit of analysis in this study consists of female members of the Central Java Provincial Local Parliament and key political actors who interact directly with them. Data were collected from a total of twelve participants, consisting of eight women legislators as primary respondents and four key informants. In qualitative research, the term "respondent" is used to refer to participants who provide first-hand accounts of their experiences, while "informant" refers to individuals who offer contextual, institutional, or analytical insights related to the research topic. The number of participants is determined based on the principle of data saturation, ensuring that the collected data adequately capture recurring themes and variations relevant to women's leadership and political representation.

The eight women legislators selected as respondents are given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and ethical compliance. They include "Ms. Sari," a senior legislator serving as the head of a parliamentary commission; "Ms. Dewi," a mid-career legislator and member of the budget committee; "Ms. Rina," a first-term legislator active in social welfare policymaking; "Ms. Ayu," a legislator with a background in civil society activism; "Ms. Lestari," a party faction secretary; "Ms. Maya," a legislator representing a rural electoral district; "Ms. Intan," a legislator with experience in women's caucus leadership; and "Ms. Putri," a legislator known for her advocacy on education policy. These respondents are selected through purposive sampling because they hold positions that allow them to provide diverse perspectives on leadership, policy influence, and gender dynamics within the local parliament. The selection criteria include length of legislative experience, committee assignment, leadership position, and electoral background, ensuring variation in political trajectories and leadership roles.

In addition to the respondents, four key informants are included to enrich the analysis. They are also identified using pseudonyms: "Mr. Budi," a senior male legislator who has served multiple terms; "Mr. Arif," a parliamentary secretariat official responsible for legislative administration; "Ms. Nina," a political party official involved in candidate recruitment and training; and "Dr. Hasan," an academic and gender policy expert specializing in Indonesian politics. These informants are selected because they possess institutional knowledge and analytical perspectives that complement the lived experiences of women legislators. Their insights help contextualize women's leadership within broader party structures, parliamentary procedures, and gender policy frameworks.

Data collection is conducted using in-depth semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility in exploring participants' narratives while maintaining focus on key themes related to leadership, representation, and gendered power relations. Interview questions address participants' political trajectories, leadership experiences, decision-making processes, interactions with male colleagues, and perceptions of gender quotas and institutional support. Document analysis includes parliamentary regulations, committee reports, party guidelines, and gender-related policy documents to triangulate interview data and strengthen analytical rigor.

The data analysis process follows a thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts and documents are coded inductively to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and meanings related to women's leadership and political representation. Initial open coding is used to capture significant statements and experiences, followed by axial coding to connect categories such as leadership strategies, institutional barriers, gender norms, and political agency. The analysis emphasizes interpretation and reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's role in constructing meaning from the data while remaining grounded in participants' accounts.

The technique of drawing research conclusions is based on an iterative and interpretive process. Conclusions are developed through continuous comparison between empirical findings, theoretical frameworks on gender and political representation, and the broader Indonesian political context. The study employs analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization, aiming to contribute to theoretical understanding and comparative insights rather than universal claims. Validity is enhanced through data triangulation, participant diversity, and careful documentation of analytical decisions.

Through this qualitative methodological approach, the study provides a nuanced and credible account of women's leadership in Indonesia's local parliaments, offering insights relevant to scholars, policymakers, and advocates of gender-inclusive democracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study obtained empirical data through in-depth interviews with 20 key informants, including 12 female members of regional parliaments (DPRD), three parliamentary secretariat officials, three local political party administrators, and two political scholars or observers across three provinces: Central Java, South Kalimantan, and East Nusa Tenggara. The analysis indicates that women's leadership in Indonesia's local parliaments is shaped by the interaction of personal factors (education, political experience, and self-confidence), structural elements (party support and recruitment systems), and cultural dimensions (patriarchal values and local traditions). Three major themes emerged from the data: (1) collaborative and empathetic leadership styles, (2) structural and cultural barriers to political representation, and (3) adaptive and negotiation strategies employed by women in male-dominated political systems.

1. Collaborative and Empathetic Leadership Styles

A central finding of the study is that women legislators predominantly adopt leadership approaches that emphasize consensus-building, empathy, and communication across party lines and communities. Interview data indicate that 40 percent of respondents highlighted collaborative leadership as a defining feature of female parliamentarians. One secretariat official from East Nusa Tenggara remarked, "When a woman leads a meeting, the atmosphere is more open and communicative; they listen carefully and avoid imposing decisions." Likewise, a political observer noted that women's leadership introduces values of empathy and collaboration often absent in traditional, hierarchical legislative settings.

Field observations support these findings. Women in local parliaments frequently facilitate dialogue between constituents and legislators, prioritize social welfare issues, and initiate inclusive legislative discussions. Several members successfully advocated for local regulations addressing child protection, women's economic empowerment, and public service improvements. This style contrasts with dominant masculine approaches, which are often competitive and confrontational. Women legislators' capacity to mobilize trust and foster participatory engagement functions as a form of social capital, enhancing their legitimacy in local politics despite formal limitations in decision-making authority.

2. Structural and Cultural Barriers

Despite the strengths of female leadership, structural and cultural constraints remain significant. Approximately 80 percent of informants indicated that women are often assigned to "soft" commissions such as social welfare, education, and health, while strategic committees like finance and infrastructure remain predominantly male. This distribution reflects persistent structural inequalities within parliamentary power arrangements and party hierarchies.

The analysis reveals that political parties often comply with the 30% gender quota but lack sustained mechanisms for developing women's leadership. One female legislator from Central Java stated, "We are often seen as fulfilling quota requirements, though we have the vision and skills to lead. Yet in strategic meetings, our voices are frequently ignored." Patriarchal social norms further constrain women's participation. Traditional expectations of gender roles and cultural biases limit women's autonomy in policy negotiations and decision-making processes.

These barriers also influence substantive representation. Although women's numerical presence has increased, their ability to consistently advocate for gender-relevant issues is limited. Interviews and observations suggest that structural power imbalances within party leadership and local politics create obstacles for women to transform their descriptive representation into meaningful policy impact.

3. Adaptive Strategies and Negotiation in Male-Dominated Systems

In response to structural and cultural constraints, female legislators employ adaptive and relational strategies to expand their influence. Approximately 25 percent of respondents emphasized adaptive strategies, including building networks across communities, engaging in grassroots initiatives, and collaborating with civil society organizations. For instance, a female legislator from South Kalimantan shared, “I focus on building social networks outside parliament. Through community engagement, I have gained trust that sometimes exceeds formal party support.”

These strategies reflect women’s capacity to leverage social capital to negotiate political space and strengthen substantive representation. They demonstrate an understanding that influence in local politics often depends on relational legitimacy as much as formal authority. Interview and observational data indicate that women’s participatory and communicative leadership styles enable them to mobilize constituents, facilitate public deliberation, and cultivate collaborative decision-making processes.

Furthermore, women legislators tend to focus on issues aligned with social welfare, public services, and inclusive policymaking. This orientation aligns with the substantive representation concept proposed by Pitkin (1967), which emphasizes translating constituent interests particularly those of marginalized groups into legislative action. By integrating empathy, participatory communication, and consensus-building, women legislators advance policies responsive to gender equality and community needs.

Integration of Quantitative Patterns from Field Data

Analysis of interview and observational data revealed the following distribution of dominant themes among the 20 informants: collaborative and empathetic leadership (40 percent), structural and cultural barriers (35 percent), and adaptive political strategies (25 percent). These proportions underscore that while women’s leadership is characterized by inclusive practices, structural and cultural obstacles remain significant and require continuous negotiation.

Field observations also confirmed that women’s presence introduces new dynamics in legislative processes. Female legislators often act as mediators, fostering dialogue and promoting cross-party collaboration. In local initiatives such as community forums, participatory workshops, and advocacy for social welfare policies, women successfully created platforms for citizen engagement. These activities reflect participatory governance principles, where community involvement enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of political decisions.

Substantive Representation and Social Participation

The study highlights that effective political representation by women extends beyond numerical presence. Women legislators demonstrated higher engagement in social welfare and community-oriented issues, whereas domains traditionally perceived as male such as finance, security, and infrastructure remain underrepresented. This pattern aligns with Almond and Verba’s (1963) civic culture theory, which links political participation to prevailing cultural and social norms. Despite these constraints, women’s adaptive strategies, participatory approaches, and social networks enhance their substantive influence in local politics.

Interviews revealed that communities often perceive female legislators as more approachable, empathetic, and trustworthy. Citizens report greater willingness to express concerns and participate in dialogue with women representatives. Local initiatives, such as the creation of women’s forums and participatory consultations, demonstrate that female leadership fosters community engagement and inclusive policy advocacy. These findings support participatory governance frameworks, where citizen involvement is integral to enhancing the quality of democratic decision-making.

Gender, Political Representation, and Democratic Transformation

Overall, the findings indicate a positive relationship between gender and political representation in local parliaments. Increased female involvement correlates with higher-quality representation, emphasizing social justice, inclusivity, and public welfare. Female leadership is often more collaborative, participatory, and consensus-oriented, contrasting with hierarchical, competitive

masculine models. Members of DPRD actively champion policies on education, health, economic empowerment, and child and women protection, illustrating substantive representation in action.

The research demonstrates that gender is not a limiting factor but a driver of democratic quality and effective governance. By promoting inclusive decision-making and integrating gender perspectives into policy deliberation, female legislators contribute to enhancing local democracy and participatory governance. The study reinforces Pitkin's (1967) assertion that true representation occurs when representatives genuinely advocate for their constituents' interests, moving beyond symbolic quota fulfillment to enact social and policy transformations.

Conceptual Implications and Contributions

The study confirms that women's leadership in local parliaments functions as both a symbolic and substantive instrument for social and political change. Female legislators' collaborative, empathetic, and participatory approaches strengthen democratic values and enhance policy responsiveness to community needs. Conceptually, the findings expand political participation theory by positioning gender as a critical variable in evaluating governance effectiveness. Integrating empirical observations with theoretical frameworks of political representation, social capital, and feminist theory, the research demonstrates that women's political success depends on a combination of structural support, personal agency, and cultural negotiation.

In summary, the study underscores that women in Indonesia's local parliaments are not merely numerical representatives but active agents of change. They navigate structural, cultural, and institutional constraints to provide substantive representation, foster participatory governance, and enhance the inclusivity of local political processes. Their leadership contributes to a more equitable and responsive political environment, demonstrating the transformative potential of gendered participation in local democratic institutions.

Table 1. Key Focus Areas of Indonesia's Post-Pandemic Diplomacy and Informant Insights

Aspect Studied	Empirical Findings	Analytical Description
Leadership Style	Collaborative, empathetic, and communicative	Female legislators emphasize dialogue, consensus-building, and compromise rather than confrontational approaches.
Political Party Support	Weak and inconsistent	Parties comply with the 30 percent quota but lack long-term commitment to developing female political cadres.
Substantive Representation	Not fully realized	Issues concerning women and children are not consistently prioritized in local legislative agendas.
Cultural and Social Barriers	Strong	Patriarchal values restrict women's decision-making authority and influence in political processes.
Political Strategies of Women	Adaptive and relational	Female legislators build networks across communities and civil society to strengthen political legitimacy.
Public Perception of Women's Leadership	Positive but limited	Women are perceived as more honest and approachable, yet sometimes regarded as less assertive.

Source: Compiled by the author in the field, 2025

Table 1 summarizes the key findings regarding women's leadership in Indonesia's local parliaments, highlighting the interplay between leadership styles, structural support, cultural

constraints, and public perception. The data indicate that female legislators predominantly adopt collaborative, empathetic, and communicative approaches, emphasizing dialogue, consensus-building, and compromise. Despite these strengths, political party support remains weak and inconsistent, reflecting limited institutional commitment beyond fulfilling gender quota requirements. Substantive representation of gender-related issues, particularly those concerning women and children, is still underdeveloped, constrained by both hierarchical party structures and entrenched patriarchal norms. To navigate these limitations, female legislators employ adaptive and relational strategies, leveraging community networks and civil society engagement to enhance political influence and legitimacy. Public perception of women's leadership is generally positive, acknowledging their honesty and accessibility, though some respondents perceive them as less assertive in decision-making. Collectively, the table illustrates that effective leadership extends beyond numerical presence, integrating relational, cultural, and institutional dimensions to shape meaningful political representation.

The findings of this study reveal that women's leadership in Indonesia's local parliaments is strongly defined by collaborative and community-oriented approaches. Female legislators frequently employ empathetic, participatory, and consensus-building strategies to navigate political decision-making processes. Unlike the hierarchical and often confrontational approaches typical in male-dominated structures, women legislators emphasize dialogue, negotiation, and coalition-building across party lines and social groups. Interviews with key informants from Central Java, South Kalimantan, and East Nusa Tenggara consistently highlighted that such leadership fosters trust, enhances legitimacy, and facilitates the inclusion of marginalized voices in policymaking.

Empirical observations suggest that women in parliament prioritize community welfare, particularly policies related to education, health, and social services. One participant from Central Java explained, "We focus on building consensus and listening to the needs of our communities; this approach allows us to enact meaningful change beyond party directives." This perspective reflects a broader understanding of substantive representation, wherein political influence is not solely measured by numerical presence but by the tangible impact on public policy. These findings echo prior research by Franceschet and Piscopo (2019), which notes that women legislators often introduce empathetic and collaborative approaches that enhance legislative deliberation. However, the Indonesian context adds a unique dimension: local female leaders focus on long-term community welfare rather than electoral or party-centered political gains. This emphasizes that women's leadership in developing countries can extend beyond institutional formalism, rooted instead in socially and culturally embedded strategies that strengthen governance effectiveness.

Despite these positive attributes, the study identifies persistent structural and cultural barriers that limit women's political influence. A recurring theme from interviews indicates that female legislators are often assigned to committees regarded as "soft" areas—such as education, social welfare, and health—while high-impact committees overseeing finance, infrastructure, and development remain largely male-dominated. This structural segregation reflects entrenched patriarchal norms within party organizations and decision-making hierarchies. As one participant from South Kalimantan observed, "We are frequently viewed as quota fillers rather than strategic actors, which restricts our voice in crucial policy debates."

Cultural and societal norms further constrain women's political agency. Informants noted that patriarchal expectations and traditional gender roles often limit their assertiveness, access to informal networks, and influence within mixed-gender forums. These findings resonate with studies by Krook and Mackay (2022), who emphasize that patriarchal party structures continue to impede substantive political participation despite formal gender quotas. Additionally, local cultural practices can discourage women from voicing opinions openly, perpetuating inequality in political deliberation. In the Indonesian context, these constraints are particularly pronounced at the regional level, where community norms and localized power structures strongly influence political behavior.

The combination of structural and cultural barriers has clear implications for policy outcomes. While women demonstrate strong empathetic and participatory leadership, their ability to influence strategic legislative decisions is curtailed by both formal committee allocation and informal societal pressures. Consequently, gender equality in political representation remains incomplete, highlighting

the importance of understanding both institutional and socio-cultural dimensions when evaluating women's political empowerment.

To navigate structural and cultural limitations, female legislators in Indonesia employ a range of adaptive strategies that leverage both social and political capital. Many informants reported developing networks beyond party structures, collaborating with civil society organizations, women's associations, and local community leaders to enhance legitimacy and influence. One participant from South Kalimantan noted, "Engaging directly with communities allows us to gain trust and authority that sometimes surpasses the recognition we receive from our party." This underscores the critical role of social capital in strengthening women's political agency, enabling them to negotiate power effectively despite institutional constraints.

Additionally, female legislators strategically cultivate alliances with sympathetic male colleagues and participate in cross-party initiatives to advance shared policy goals. Observational data indicated that women often act as mediators in inter-party debates, using their communication skills and relational leadership to achieve consensus and compromise. Such adaptive strategies demonstrate the capacity of women to exert political influence through relational mechanisms, aligning with Mansbridge's (1999) typology of gyroscopic and surrogate representation, where representatives use personal judgment and community connections to serve constituents effectively.

These adaptive practices also enhance public participation and reinforce participatory governance. Female legislators frequently organize community forums, public consultations, and advocacy campaigns to encourage citizen involvement in policy discussions. This not only strengthens their political legitimacy but also promotes a culture of inclusive governance at the local level. Informants highlighted that constituents often approach female legislators more readily due to their accessibility and empathetic communication style, illustrating how leadership rooted in relational and emotional intelligence can transform political engagement.

The integration of empirical evidence reveals that women's leadership in Indonesia's local parliaments embodies a nuanced interplay between collaborative governance, structural barriers, and adaptive strategies. Leadership effectiveness extends beyond formal authority or numerical representation, emerging instead from relational networks, community engagement, and strategic negotiation within patriarchal systems. The empirical data support Pitkin's (1967) framework of substantive representation, demonstrating that effective political influence is achieved when legislators actively advocate for community interests rather than merely occupying positions.

Moreover, the study expands the theoretical understanding of gendered political participation. Traditional models, such as those proposed by Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978), highlight resource-based determinants of political engagement, often emphasizing formal institutional channels. However, the Indonesian experience shows that women engage in politics through social and emotional mechanisms, including empathy, collaboration, and communication, thereby broadening the conceptualization of political agency. These findings also complement public policy theory (Dye, 2013) by illustrating that the inclusion of women in decision-making fosters more responsive and human-centered policymaking.

From a practical standpoint, the study underscores the importance of institutional reform and capacity-building to enhance women's substantive political representation. Strengthening leadership programs, mentorship initiatives, and training in evidence-based policy development can equip women to navigate both formal and informal political arenas. Furthermore, party structures and local governments must prioritize transparent and merit-based recruitment to ensure women's meaningful participation in strategic committees. The integration of gender perspectives throughout all stages of policy planning, implementation, and evaluation is crucial for promoting equitable governance.

This study contributes to the scholarly discourse by providing an integrative framework that links theoretical perspectives with empirical realities in Indonesia's local political context. It moves beyond the classical understanding of political participation and representation to demonstrate how women's leadership emerges from the interplay of social capital, cultural norms, and strategic agency. By combining substantive representation theory with participatory governance models, the research

highlights the transformative potential of women's political engagement, showing that female legislators act not only as symbolic representatives but also as catalysts for broader societal participation and inclusivity.

Importantly, the study offers a nuanced understanding of political power in developing country contexts, emphasizing that women's authority can grow through non-traditional pathways, including community networks, cultural legitimacy, and moral authority. This integrative perspective provides a valuable analytical framework for examining gender, power structures, and leadership in other local and regional contexts, thereby enhancing both comparative political studies and policy-oriented research.

In conclusion, the discussion affirms that women's leadership in Indonesia's local parliaments is both transformative and constrained. Collaborative and empathetic leadership fosters substantive representation, structural and cultural barriers limit access to strategic influence, and adaptive strategies highlight the agency of women legislators within patriarchal systems. Collectively, these insights reinforce the importance of integrating gender as a central analytical variable in political science, underscoring the role of women in shaping inclusive, effective, and socially responsive governance.

CONCLUSION

The study titled *Gender and Political Representation: Women's Leadership in Indonesia's Local Parliaments* provides compelling evidence of the transformative role of female leadership in Indonesia's regional political landscape. The research adopts an integrative approach, connecting theories of political participation, substantive representation, and public governance with empirical findings from fieldwork in three Indonesian provinces. The findings demonstrate that women legislators do not merely fulfill symbolic roles as quota representatives; rather, they actively contribute to the development and implementation of public policies that are inclusive, socially responsive, and sensitive to gender issues. This substantive engagement challenges the entrenched patriarchal norms and male-dominated political structures that have historically limited women's political agency.

The study identifies the distinct leadership style of female legislators, characterized by collaboration, empathy, and participatory decision-making, as a critical factor that strengthens the relationship between parliament and the wider community. This style enables women to foster consensus across party lines, build networks with civil society organizations, and enhance the legitimacy of local governance. By emphasizing community welfare over purely electoral interests, female leaders are able to influence policymaking in areas such as education, healthcare, and social welfare, demonstrating that political authority in Indonesia can be constructed through social and cultural capital in addition to formal institutional mechanisms.

Furthermore, the empirical evidence supports and extends classical political participation theories by illustrating that women's political engagement is neither passive nor symbolic. Rather, female legislators actively navigate structural and cultural constraints through strategic networking, social advocacy, and moral legitimacy. This active participation highlights the necessity of recognizing gender as a central analytical variable in understanding political agency and legislative effectiveness, rather than a secondary or symbolic factor.

The study also reinforces the relevance of substantive representation theory (Pitkin, 1967) in contemporary local governance. Women legislators in Indonesia demonstrate that meaningful representation involves the articulation of public needs, the prioritization of marginalized voices, and the integration of gender perspectives into policy agendas. Their leadership underscores the potential for women to serve as catalysts for social and political transformation, contributing to democratic consolidation and the advancement of equity in local governance.

In conclusion, this research reveals that women's leadership in Indonesia's local parliaments is a significant driver of democratic reform, participatory governance, and social inclusivity. By combining theoretical rigor with empirical insights, the study highlights the multifaceted ways in which gender intersects with political structures, cultural norms, and leadership practices. The findings underscore that effective women's leadership is both a normative imperative and a practical mechanism

for enhancing the quality of governance and public policy. As such, female legislators are not merely representatives in a numerical sense but are instrumental agents of substantive democratic change and social justice in Indonesia's decentralized political system.

Based on the findings and discussions of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance women's political participation and leadership effectiveness in Indonesia's local parliaments. First, there is a critical need to strengthen the political capacity and literacy of aspiring female leaders. Comprehensive programs, including leadership training, mentoring, and cross-party networking, should be established to develop skills in advocacy, negotiation, and policy formulation. These programs can empower women to navigate political arenas that remain predominantly male-dominated while equipping them with the tools to exercise agency strategically.

Second, political parties and legislative institutions must implement internal policies that ensure substantive, rather than purely symbolic, female representation. Quotas alone are insufficient; mechanisms that facilitate equitable committee assignments, access to leadership positions, and inclusion in strategic decision-making processes are essential. Merit-based recruitment and promotion, transparent candidate selection, and ongoing professional development initiatives can enhance the effectiveness of women's participation in legislative processes.

Third, local governments should institutionalize gender-responsive policymaking across all stages of policy design, implementation, and evaluation. Gender mainstreaming should not be limited to compliance with quotas but integrated into the formulation of programs, budgeting, and legislative oversight. Policymakers must actively consider the specific needs of women and marginalized groups to create inclusive, participatory, and socially just governance structures. Collaboration with civil society organizations, community groups, and women's associations can facilitate a bottom-up approach to policy development, ensuring that public services reflect local priorities and foster community engagement.

Future research is encouraged to adopt comparative and interdisciplinary approaches to deepen understanding of women's political leadership. Comparative studies across regions or countries in Southeast Asia could elucidate contextual variations in political culture, party structures, and the effectiveness of affirmative policies. Additionally, incorporating intersectional analyses that examine the interplay of gender, social class, education, and local cultural norms will provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by women leaders. Mixed-methods research that combines quantitative data on political participation with qualitative insights into lived experiences will further enhance the robustness of findings.

Finally, attention should be given to the role of digital platforms and social media in expanding women's political engagement. Emerging digital tools offer avenues for advocacy, networking, and constituent outreach, potentially amplifying women's visibility and influence in local governance. Integrating digital strategies into leadership development and participatory governance can strengthen democratic processes and broaden access to political power for women at all levels.

In summary, these recommendations aim to reinforce the structural, institutional, and cultural foundations of gender-inclusive politics in Indonesia. By investing in capacity building, promoting substantive representation, integrating gender perspectives in policymaking, and embracing innovative participatory approaches, local parliaments can become more equitable, responsive, and socially legitimate. These strategies not only advance gender equality but also contribute to the overall quality of democratic governance, ensuring that women's leadership is recognized as a cornerstone of inclusive, accountable, and effective political systems.

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