

Supra-Village Politics and the Diminishing Presence of Women's Empowerment in Indonesian Villages

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Abstract

The establishment of village autonomy in Indonesia, as formalized through the Village Law (Law No. 6/2014), is frequently portrayed as a cornerstone for fostering self-reliant and independently governed rural communities. However, empirical evidence indicates that this autonomy is significantly circumscribed by actors and political forces operating beyond the village level, including bureaucratic hierarchies, political party structures, and patronage systems, all of which shape village development priorities. This article argues that the decline of women's empowerment initiatives within Indonesian villages is not merely an inadvertent administrative oversight but a structural consequence of supra-village political dynamics. Utilizing qualitative research conducted across multiple regions between 2021 and 2022, complemented by document analysis and secondary literature, this study identifies three primary channels through which village elites secure external resources: engagement with local district heads (*bupati/walikota*), appeals to senior bureaucratic officials, and lobbying of political parties or legislative actors. These lobbying practices reveal deeply entrenched clientelistic relationships that privilege programs with political returns, while marginalizing gender-responsive initiatives. Women's empowerment programs, previously supported through PKK frameworks and informal women's collectives, have been co-opted, weakened, or reduced to tokenistic forms of participation. Drawing on theories of supra-village politics, critiques of decentralization, and feminist political economy, this article demonstrates that women's empowerment has not been eliminated but has been politically reconfigured into non-transformative forms of administrative compliance. The study concludes by proposing structural reforms in fiscal governance, political accountability, and gender mainstreaming to restore substantive pathways for women's agency in rural development processes.

Keywords: Supra-village politics, village governance, women's empowerment, decentralization, clientelism, patronage networks, PKK, political economy.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Indonesia's Village Law (Law No. 6/2014) has fundamentally reshaped the institutional landscape of rural governance. The legislation expanded village authority, substantially increased fiscal transfers, and introduced mechanisms intended to strengthen local participation, accountability, and community-driven development. By moving resources and decision-making authority closer to village communities, the reform was expected to address longstanding weaknesses in Indonesia's decentralization system and create more responsive forms of local governance (Antlöv et al., 2016). The broader aspiration was not merely administrative decentralization, but the strengthening of villages as meaningful political and developmental actors capable of identifying and pursuing their own priorities.

The implementation of village autonomy, however, has produced considerably more complex outcomes. Formal authority has expanded, but village governments do not operate as politically isolated or fully autonomous institutions. Their decisions remain embedded within multilayered relationships involving district governments, bureaucratic agencies, politicians, legislators, business actors, and informal intermediaries. Recent comparative research across Indonesian villages demonstrates considerable variation in the openness, accountability, and responsiveness of village governance, despite the existence of a common national regulatory framework (Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al., 2025). Informal institutions, elite configurations, socioeconomic structures, and relationships with external actors continue to shape how formal village institutions function in practice.

The persistence of supra-village influence is particularly visible in the ways village governments obtain and allocate development resources. Although the Village Law provides villages with regular fiscal transfers, village leaders continue to cultivate relationships with officials and political actors beyond the village in order to access additional projects, grants, and other resources. Mahsun et al. (2025), based on comparative research in eighteen Indonesian villages, show that political lobbying remains a prevalent mechanism through which village elites access resources from higher levels of government. Such lobbying may pursue legitimate developmental objectives, but it may also reinforce clientelistic relationships when projects and resources generate rents, political loyalty, or electoral support.

These findings complicate conventional assumptions that decentralization necessarily produces greater local independence. Village autonomy is better understood as relational and conditional: village governments possess meaningful authority, but that authority is exercised within regulatory, bureaucratic, and political structures that extend beyond village boundaries. National expenditure requirements, district-level administrative oversight, political brokerage, and informal patronage relationships all contribute to determining which programs are politically feasible and which priorities receive institutional support. The persistence of these relationships is consistent with broader analyses of Indonesian politics showing that clientelism and brokerage continue to structure access to state resources despite democratic and administrative reforms (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

One area in which these institutional and political dynamics have particularly important implications is women's empowerment. The expansion of participatory institutions under the Village Law might be expected to improve women's access to local decision-making. Yet formal participation does not necessarily produce substantive influence. Recent studies of village deliberation demonstrate that village meetings frequently remain dominated by local elites and are often more effective as arenas for expressing preferences than as mechanisms for holding village authorities accountable (Haryanto et al., 2025).

Gender further shapes these participatory inequalities. Women may participate through village organizations, PKK activities, service provision, informal brokerage, and development programs, but their involvement often remains concentrated in issue areas associated with welfare, family responsibilities, health, and everyday service access. Indriyany et al. (2025) demonstrate that female brokers in Indonesian villages play important roles in helping women access public services, yet their activities frequently focus on micro-level concerns linked to women's domestic responsibilities. In contrast, village deliberative meetings tend to concentrate on larger development and infrastructure issues that are commonly coded as male political responsibilities.

The distinction between women's presence and women's political influence is crucial. Participation can be formally documented without providing women with equivalent influence over agenda-setting, budgeting, external lobbying, or strategic development decisions. This problem is reinforced by the broader persistence of patriarchal political attitudes. White et al. (2024) show that political patriarchy remains a significant obstacle to women's representation

in Indonesia, particularly where politics and public leadership continue to be perceived as predominantly male domains.

Against this background, the declining prominence of women's empowerment programs cannot be understood simply as an administrative omission or a consequence of limited budgets. Nor can it be explained solely through village-level patriarchal norms. This study argues that the marginalization of women's empowerment must also be situated within supra-village politics: the network of regulatory, bureaucratic, political, and informal relationships that links village governments to actors operating beyond village boundaries.

Supra-village politics matters because village development priorities are not determined exclusively through internal community deliberation. They are also shaped by the regulatory requirements imposed on village budgets, relationships between village leaders and district bureaucracies, political lobbying for external projects, patronage networks, and interactions with party and legislative actors. These relationships influence the availability of resources and the political attractiveness of particular development initiatives.

Programs with visible physical outputs, identifiable beneficiaries, or immediate political returns may possess particular advantages within this environment. Infrastructure, distributive assistance, and economically visible projects can be readily presented as evidence of governmental performance and may offer political or clientelistic benefits. Women's empowerment programs often operate differently. Their objectives may involve strengthening organizational capacity, increasing agency, developing leadership, improving participation, or altering gendered relationships. Such outcomes are socially important but less easily converted into immediate material or electoral capital.

The vulnerability of gender-focused programs therefore emerges not necessarily because individual village leaders explicitly reject women's empowerment, but because the wider institutional and political environment creates incentives that favor other types of development expenditure. Supra-village political relationships may consequently affect women's empowerment indirectly by shaping what village governments regard as administratively permissible, politically valuable, or strategically worth defending.

This argument builds upon, but also extends, several established bodies of scholarship. Research on Indonesian village governance has documented the opportunities and institutional challenges generated by the Village Law (Antlöv et al., 2016), substantial variation

in village governance regimes (Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al., 2025), persistent limitations of deliberative accountability (Haryanto et al., 2025), and the continued importance of political lobbying and clientelistic village-state relations (Mahsun et al., 2025). Scholarship on gender has separately demonstrated persistent patriarchal barriers to women's political representation (White et al., 2024) and the gendered character of brokerage and political participation within villages (Indriyany et al., 2025).

What remains insufficiently examined is how these processes intersect. Existing research has provided important explanations of decentralization, village accountability, patronage, women's participation, and gendered brokerage, but considerably less attention has been given to how political and bureaucratic forces operating beyond the village systematically shape the institutional space available for women's empowerment. In particular, the interaction between national fiscal regulation, district-level oversight, political lobbying, patronage networks, and gendered village institutions remains underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by conceptualizing supra-village politics as a central mechanism through which women's empowerment is constrained, displaced, or transformed. Rather than treating women's empowerment as an exclusively local concern, the study examines how gender outcomes are produced through relationships operating simultaneously across village and supra-village levels.

Three research questions guide the analysis:

1. How do supra-village political actors and institutions influence village development priorities?
2. Why are women's empowerment initiatives particularly vulnerable within this political and institutional environment?
3. Through what mechanisms does village dependency persist despite formal provisions for village autonomy?

Drawing on qualitative, multi-sited fieldwork in Indonesian villages, the study examines regulatory constraints, political lobbying, patronage networks, village deliberation, gendered institutional practices, and women's adaptive strategies. By connecting these processes, the article advances a relational understanding of village autonomy in which formal decentralization coexists with continuing dependence on supra-village political and administrative structures.

The article makes two principal contributions. Empirically, it demonstrates how regulatory directives, informal political networks, and patronage relations interact to reshape the institutional position of women's empowerment within village governance. Conceptually, it introduces supra-village politics as an analytical bridge between scholarship on decentralization, clientelism, and gendered political participation. This perspective shifts attention from the simple question of whether women are formally included in village governance toward the broader political conditions that determine whether their participation can influence resources, priorities, and development decisions.

Women's empowerment is therefore approached here not merely as a programmatic category but as a political question concerning access to authority, resources, and agenda-setting power. Understanding its decline requires attention not only to what occurs inside village institutions, but also to the political relationships and regulatory structures that surround them. Such an approach provides a more complete explanation of why expanded village autonomy has not necessarily produced equivalent political space for women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Village Governance in Indonesia

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the transformation of village governance under Indonesia's decentralization reforms. Decentralization was expected to bring government closer to citizens, strengthen participation, improve public accountability, and create greater opportunities for locally responsive development. Yet the Indonesian experience demonstrates that decentralization does not necessarily produce complete local autonomy. Formal transfers of authority continue to operate within multilayered administrative, political, and fiscal structures that link villages to district and national institutions.

The adoption of Law No. 6/2014 on Villages represented an important institutional shift in this process. The law expanded village authority, increased financial transfers, and strengthened the formal recognition of villages as governance units with significant responsibility for local development. Antlöv et al. (2016) argue that the Village Law created important opportunities to improve government responsiveness by providing villages with greater resources and institutional authority. At the same time, they emphasize that substantial

risks remain, particularly where administrative capacity, accountability mechanisms, and citizen oversight are weak.

The effects of the Village Law must therefore be understood within the longer trajectory of decentralization in Indonesia. Rather than producing uniform governance arrangements, decentralization has generated considerable institutional variation. Vel and Bedner (2015), for example, demonstrate through the case of West Sumatra that decentralization interacts with local legal traditions, customary institutions, and historically rooted forms of authority. Village governance consequently reflects combinations of formal state structures, local institutions, and informal political arrangements rather than a single model of decentralized administration.

Recent comparative evidence confirms this variation. Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al. (2025), drawing on research across eighteen Indonesian villages, identify markedly different village governance regimes. Some villages are characterized by relatively participatory institutions and responsive leadership, whereas others are dominated by village heads and narrow elite networks with weak public oversight. Their findings demonstrate that formal institutional arrangements alone cannot explain the quality of village governance. Local economic structures, informal institutions, elite configurations, and patterns of social organization also influence whether village authority becomes responsive or concentrated.

The relationship between villages and higher levels of government remains equally important. Although the Village Law substantially increased regular fiscal transfers to villages, access to resources continues to involve interaction with district officials, bureaucratic agencies, politicians, and other external actors. Mahsun et al. (2025) show that village leaders continue to engage in political lobbying to obtain development projects and grants from higher levels of government. These interactions can serve collective developmental objectives, but they can also reproduce clientelistic relations and provide opportunities for village elites to strengthen personalized political networks.

Village autonomy is therefore better understood as relational rather than absolute. Villages possess formal authority, but the exercise of that authority takes place within regulatory and political environments shaped by institutions above the village level. National policies can directly affect the amount of discretion available to village governments. Presidential Regulation No. 104/2021 provides a particularly important example because it established nationally determined spending priorities for Village Funds in the 2022 fiscal year.

Such requirements demonstrate that decentralization can coexist with significant central regulation of local expenditure.

This pattern does not imply that village autonomy is meaningless. Rather, it illustrates what may be described as negotiated or conditional autonomy. Village governments exercise meaningful authority while simultaneously responding to national regulations, district oversight, administrative procedures, and political relationships. The practical consequences of decentralization therefore depend on how village leaders navigate these overlapping structures.

Recent research on village deliberation further illustrates this tension. Haryanto et al. (2025) find that village meetings provide opportunities for residents to articulate proposals and preferences, but many remain dominated by elites and are relatively ineffective as mechanisms for holding village officials accountable. Participation may therefore expand without producing an equivalent redistribution of political authority. This distinction between formal institutional opportunity and substantive influence is critical for understanding both village governance generally and women's participation specifically.

Taken together, the literature suggests that the Village Law has transformed village governance without separating villages from wider political structures. Village governments remain embedded in relationships with district bureaucracies, political actors, brokers, and national regulatory institutions (Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al., 2025; Mahsun et al., 2025). This multilayered environment provides the institutional context in which decisions about development resources, including resources directed toward women's empowerment, are made.

Patronage and Clientelism in Local Politics

Patronage and clientelism remain important features of Indonesian politics despite democratization and decentralization. Electoral reforms have changed the formal mechanisms through which political authority is acquired, but personalized relationships, brokers, and material exchange continue to play significant roles in political competition and access to state resources.

Aspinall and Sukmajati (2016) demonstrate the extensive role of money politics, patronage, and clientelistic networks in Indonesian elections. Political candidates frequently

rely on brokers and intermediary networks to mobilize voters and distribute benefits. These relationships illustrate a broader pattern in which access to political resources is often mediated through personalized connections rather than exclusively through formal institutions.

Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) provide a broader explanation of this system. They show that clientelism in Indonesia operates through extensive networks connecting politicians, bureaucrats, brokers, community leaders, and citizens. Political actors use these networks to mobilize support, while citizens and local intermediaries can use political connections to obtain access to state resources. The resulting system blurs the boundary between electoral politics, public administration, and resource distribution.

Brokerage is particularly important because citizens frequently encounter difficulties accessing bureaucratic institutions directly. Berenschot et al. (2018), based on research in urban and rural Java, demonstrate how brokers mediate citizens' access to public services. Such intermediaries can help citizens overcome bureaucratic obstacles, but access to state resources can simultaneously become embedded in personal relationships and reciprocal obligations. Brokerage therefore has an ambiguous role: it facilitates access while potentially reinforcing dependence on personalized political networks.

At the village level, political brokerage connects local leaders to higher levels of the state. Village heads often require relationships with district bureaucrats, legislators, and other political actors to secure additional development programs or resources. Contemporary evidence confirms that this pattern persists after the introduction of the Village Law. Mahsun et al. (2025) identify political lobbying as a prevalent strategy through which village elites seek projects and grants from higher-level officials.

Such lobbying may serve legitimate developmental goals. Village leaders can use political connections to obtain infrastructure, economic assistance, and public facilities that would otherwise be unavailable through routine fiscal transfers. However, these same relationships can also become personalistic when access to projects generates rents, electoral support, or political loyalty. Developmental and clientelistic motivations therefore frequently coexist.

This political environment affects how village priorities are constructed. Programs producing tangible and highly visible outcomes are particularly attractive because they can be

presented as evidence of political performance. Roads, buildings, irrigation systems, physical facilities, and distributive assistance produce immediate material outcomes that are easily associated with particular political actors.

By contrast, programs aimed at changing social relations, strengthening political participation, developing organizational capacity, or addressing gender inequality may provide less immediate political visibility. Consequently, such initiatives can occupy a weaker position when village leaders negotiate with external patrons or compete for limited discretionary resources.

The significance of elite influence is further illustrated by recent comparative village research. Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al. (2025) find that some villages display strong concentrations of power involving village heads, village officials, and other local elites. Where effective public oversight is weak, these configurations can restrict participation and reduce the ability of ordinary residents to influence development priorities.

Village deliberative institutions do not automatically overcome these inequalities. Haryanto et al. (2025) demonstrate that village meetings frequently remain elite-dominated. Even where villagers actively articulate proposals, deliberative spaces are generally more effective for expressing preferences than for imposing accountability on officials.

Political relationships beyond the village therefore constitute a significant dimension of local governance. Village politics is not limited to interactions among residents and village institutions but extends upward through relationships with district governments, bureaucracies, political parties, legislators, and brokers. These supra-village connections influence both the opportunities available to village leaders and the incentives governing which development programs receive political attention.

This literature provides an important foundation for understanding the marginalization of gender-focused initiatives. When access to additional resources depends partly on political lobbying and personalized networks, programs with high political visibility or stronger distributive potential are likely to possess greater bargaining advantages. Women's empowerment initiatives may therefore be marginalized not simply because village leaders oppose gender equality, but because the wider political economy of resource allocation favors programs with greater material and electoral value.

Women's Empowerment and Gender Politics in Decentralization

Decentralization does not automatically generate greater gender equality. Formal opportunities for participation may expand without substantially transforming the distribution of authority between women and men. The central issue is therefore not simply whether women participate in governance institutions, but whether participation provides meaningful influence over decisions, resources, and strategic priorities.

Kabeer (1999) conceptualizes empowerment as the process through which people who have previously been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire that ability. Empowerment involves interconnected dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements. From this perspective, the numerical presence of women in meetings or development activities is insufficient evidence of empowerment if women remain unable to shape strategic decisions.

Cornwall and Edwards (2010) similarly emphasize that meaningful empowerment requires more than incorporating women into existing development structures. Women's participation becomes transformative when it expands their capacity to negotiate unequal relationships and challenge institutional arrangements that reproduce inequality. Participation within existing institutions can therefore coexist with continuing disempowerment.

Batliwala (2007) develops this critique further by showing how the concept of empowerment has frequently become detached from its original emphasis on transforming power relations. As empowerment became incorporated into mainstream development practice, it increasingly came to refer to measurable activities such as training, service provision, livelihood improvement, or participation rather than changes in structural power.

These arguments are particularly relevant to village governance in Indonesia. Formal village institutions provide opportunities for participation, but recent research demonstrates that such spaces remain unevenly accessible and influential. Haryanto et al. (2025) find that village deliberative meetings frequently remain dominated by officials and local elites. Participation allows villagers to articulate preferences but does not necessarily create strong mechanisms of accountability.

Gendered patterns further shape these participatory processes. Indriyany et al. (2025) provide particularly relevant evidence through their study of female brokers in Indonesian

villages. Women brokers play significant roles in helping other women address everyday problems and gain access to services such as health care and civil registration. Yet their political activities tend to focus on micro-level issues associated with women's domestic and care responsibilities.

At the same time, village deliberative forums tend to prioritize larger development and infrastructure issues that are commonly coded as male responsibilities (Indriyany et al., 2025). This creates a gendered division of political labor. Women may exercise significant agency in welfare and service-related domains while remaining less influential over infrastructure, strategic budgets, and major development priorities.

The persistence of broader patriarchal attitudes also shapes the political context in which village institutions operate. White et al. (2024) demonstrate that political patriarchy remains an important obstacle to women's political representation in Indonesia. Their findings show that beliefs associating politics with men influence support for women's leadership and representation. Such attitudes provide a broader social context for understanding why formal inclusion does not necessarily produce substantive political equality.

Women's involvement through organizations such as the PKK illustrates this ambiguity. Women may possess substantial organizational visibility and play important roles in health, family welfare, community activities, and program implementation. Nevertheless, organizational participation should not automatically be equated with control over village development priorities.

This distinction between visibility and authority is particularly important for understanding women's empowerment under decentralization. Administrative systems can record women's attendance, number of participants, activities completed, or training sessions conducted without measuring whether women gained greater influence over agenda-setting and resource allocation.

Recent village governance research reinforces this concern. Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al. (2025) demonstrate substantial variation in the openness and responsiveness of village governance systems, while Haryanto et al. (2025) show that formal deliberation can occur without strong accountability. Indriyany et al. (2025) add a gender dimension by demonstrating that women's brokerage and political roles remain concentrated in particular issue areas.

At the same time, women should not be interpreted simply as passive subjects of these structures. Female brokers and women's organizations frequently use informal networks, interpersonal relationships, and organizational resources to obtain benefits and negotiate institutional constraints. Such agency is consistent with Kabeer's (1999) emphasis on women's capacity to exercise choice and negotiate within existing structural conditions.

The problem lies in the limits imposed upon that agency. Individual participation or successful negotiation does not necessarily transform the institutions governing political resources. Women may obtain particular services or programs while continuing to have limited influence over strategic village decisions.

The distinction between women as beneficiaries and women as political actors is therefore fundamental. An empowerment program may improve livelihoods, provide skills, or increase participation without necessarily altering women's influence over budgets, public decisions, political networks, or institutional priorities. Following Kabeer (1999), Cornwall and Edwards (2010), and Batliwala (2007), substantive empowerment should therefore be evaluated in relation to changes in agency and power rather than simply the existence of programs labeled as women's empowerment.

Despite a growing literature on decentralization, clientelism, village politics, and women's political participation, these bodies of scholarship are often examined separately. Studies of village governance primarily emphasize decentralization, institutional performance, participation, and accountability, while research on clientelism concentrates on brokerage, political networks, and access to state resources. Gender scholarship, meanwhile, frequently focuses on women's representation, patriarchal norms, and participation.

Much less attention has been given to how these processes interact across levels of governance. In particular, the effects of district-level political relationships, bureaucratic oversight, national fiscal requirements, lobbying networks, and informal political brokerage on village-level gender agendas remain insufficiently integrated into analyses of women's empowerment.

Recent studies make this gap increasingly visible. Mahsun et al. (2025) demonstrate that political lobbying and clientelistic relationships remain important mechanisms connecting Indonesian villages with higher levels of government, while Indriyany et al. (2025) show that political brokerage itself is gendered. Haryanto et al. (2025) further demonstrate that

expanded opportunities for village deliberation do not necessarily generate substantive accountability.

Taken together, these findings suggest the need to move beyond explanations centered exclusively on village-level patriarchal norms or administrative weaknesses. The political space available for women's empowerment is also shaped by institutional and political forces operating beyond village boundaries.

This article addresses this gap through the concept of supra-village politics, referring to the interaction of regulatory authority, bureaucratic oversight, political lobbying, clientelistic networks, and informal power relations linking villages to actors above and beyond village institutions. The framework allows women's empowerment to be examined not merely as a local social program but as an agenda whose political feasibility depends on the wider governance environment within which village priorities and resources are negotiated.

From this perspective, the marginalization of women's empowerment is not simply the result of insufficient participation or persistent patriarchal attitudes. It is produced through the interaction of gendered local institutions with broader regulatory and political structures. Supra-village politics therefore provides an analytical bridge connecting decentralization, patronage, and gendered disempowerment and forms the central theoretical contribution developed in this study.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, multi-sited research design to examine how supra-village political dynamics reshape, constrain, and marginalize women's empowerment initiatives in Indonesian villages. Village governance in Indonesia operates within a multilayered political environment in which formal administrative structures intersect with informal networks, bureaucratic hierarchies, political intermediaries, and patronage relations (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). A qualitative design was therefore considered appropriate because the study sought to understand not only formal institutional arrangements but also the practices, interactions, interpretations, and power relations through which village-level decisions are produced.

The research was informed by interpretive political ethnography, which emphasizes close attention to political practices, relationships, meanings, and informal forms of power as they unfold within everyday institutional settings (Schatz, 2009; Wedeen, 2010). Political ethnography is particularly useful for examining dimensions of governance that cannot be adequately captured through formal rules or administrative documents alone, including informal negotiations, brokerage, implicit political pressures, and the ways actors interpret institutional constraints.

This orientation enabled the study to investigate how village elites interact with supra-village actors, including district bureaucrats, political intermediaries, and legislative actors, and how these relationships affect the position of women's empowerment within village development agendas. Rather than treating village governments as autonomous administrative units, the research examined them relationally as political actors embedded within wider networks of authority and resource exchange.

Feminist institutionalism provided an additional analytical orientation. This perspective emphasizes that institutions are shaped not only by formal rules but also by informal norms, practices, and gendered expectations that influence who gains access to authority and whose interests become institutionally recognized (Mackay et al., 2010). Applying this perspective allowed the study to examine how apparently gender-neutral budgeting procedures, administrative requirements, patronage relations, and informal political practices can generate differentiated consequences for women and women-focused programs.

Research Sites and Site Selection

Fieldwork was conducted in four villages located in two districts across Java and Nusa Tenggara during an eight-month period in 2021-2022. A purposive site-selection strategy was adopted to capture variation in the political and institutional environments within which village governments operated.

Three criteria guided site selection. First, villages were selected to reflect variation in the strength and form of supra-village political influence, including variation in bureaucratic intervention, political brokerage, and relationships with district-level actors. Second, the sites demonstrated different trajectories of women's empowerment initiatives, ranging from relatively active programs to initiatives experiencing decline, stagnation, or incorporation into

broader village-development activities. Particular attention was given to programs connected to Village Fund (*Dana Desa*) allocations. Third, socio-cultural variation was considered in order to examine how local gender norms interacted with broader administrative and political pressures.

The selected villages therefore represented contrasting governance environments: one characterized by relatively strong district-level administrative influence, another embedded within dense party-political networks, a site displaying strong indications of elite control over development priorities, and a village with historically active women's organizations. The purpose of this variation was not to achieve statistical representativeness but to provide analytical leverage for comparing how different configurations of supra-village politics shaped gender-related outcomes.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three complementary methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The use of multiple sources enabled the study to examine formal institutional arrangements alongside informal political practices and participants' interpretations of those processes.

A total of 62 semi-structured interviews were conducted with actors occupying different positions within village and supra-village governance. Participants included village heads, village secretaries, section heads, members of the Village Consultative Body (*Badan Permasyarakatan Desa* or BPD), women's empowerment cadres, members of the Family Welfare Empowerment organization (*Pemberdayaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga* or PKK), representatives of women's groups and informal collectives, district bureaucrats, political intermediaries, and representatives of non-governmental organizations.

Interview questions focused on four broad areas: village budgeting and development-priority setting; formal and informal interactions with supra-village actors; experiences surrounding women's empowerment initiatives; and participants' perceptions of regulatory, bureaucratic, and political intervention in village decision-making. Interviews lasted approximately 45-120 minutes and were audio-recorded after informed consent had been obtained from participants.

Participant observation complemented the interview material by allowing political interactions to be examined in their institutional and social settings. Observations were conducted during village development planning forums (*Musyawarah Perencanaan Pembangunan Desa* or Musrenbangdes), coordination meetings, women's group activities, informal gatherings involving village elites, and consultations between village officials and district-level actors.

Political ethnography places particular value on observing politics within such routine and informal settings because power frequently operates through practices that are not formally documented (Schatz, 2009; Wedeen, 2010). Observation therefore enabled the research to identify interactions that interview accounts alone might not reveal, including subtle forms of pressure, patterns of deference, informal negotiation, symbolic participation, and indications of political brokerage.

Document analysis was conducted alongside interviews and observation. Materials examined included Village Revenue and Expenditure Budgets (*Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Desa* or APBDes) covering 2018–2022, village planning documents, meeting minutes, district circulars, Village Fund regulations, national policies, reports of women's empowerment activities, and relevant assessments produced by civil-society organizations.

Particular attention was given to Presidential Regulation No. 104 of 2021 concerning the details of the 2022 State Budget. The regulation stipulated earmarked uses of Village Funds, including at least 40% for Village Direct Cash Assistance, at least 20% for food and animal security programs, and at least 8% for COVID-19 response. These provisions were examined not simply as legal requirements but as part of the institutional environment within which village governments negotiated discretionary development priorities.

Documentary evidence was used to trace changes in allocations, compare formally stated priorities with participants' accounts, and examine the administrative rationales used to justify the continuation, modification, merger, or removal of women-focused programs.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis combining inductive and theoretically informed coding. Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a flexible but systematic approach for identifying patterned meanings across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke,

2006). Analysis was iterative rather than strictly sequential, involving repeated movement between interview transcripts, field notes, documents, emerging codes, and theoretical concepts.

The first stage involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant documentary materials. Initial coding was primarily inductive, allowing categories to emerge from participants' accounts and observed practices rather than imposing a predetermined classification system.

Initial codes included patterns such as "budget rigidity," "supra-village directives," "political lobbying," "elite brokerage," "gender-program reclassification," "symbolic participation," "depoliticization of gender," and "adaptive strategies." These codes reflected recurring practices and experiences identified across the research sites.

A second round of analysis used theoretically informed coding to examine how the emerging categories related to broader concepts of political brokerage and patronage (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019), elite capture (Platteau & Gaspard, 2003), political ethnography (Schatz, 2009; Wedeen, 2010), and feminist institutionalism (Mackay et al., 2010). This combination of inductive and theoretically informed analysis allowed theoretical concepts to guide interpretation without predetermining the empirical findings.

Platteau and Gaspard's (2003) work was particularly useful in sensitizing the analysis to the risks of resource capture within decentralized and community-driven development arrangements. Their analysis demonstrates how decentralized resources can become vulnerable to appropriation by locally powerful actors, providing an important comparative lens for examining elite influence over village resources.

Coding and data organization were facilitated using NVivo 12. The software was used to organize transcripts, field notes, documents, and coded passages, but interpretation and theme construction remained researcher-led.

Codes were progressively compared across participants, data sources, and villages. Related codes were then grouped into broader analytical themes. Particular attention was paid to similarities and differences across the four research sites in order to distinguish mechanisms that appeared repeatedly from those that were context-specific.

The analysis ultimately generated several interconnected themes, including regulatory constriction, semantic packaging of gender programs, depoliticization of women's

organizations, patronage and political lobbying, symbolic empowerment, and women's adaptive strategies. These themes were subsequently examined as interacting dimensions of supra-village politics rather than as isolated explanatory factors.

Analytical rigor was strengthened through systematic comparison among interviews, observations, and documentary evidence. Claims derived from interviews were compared, where possible, with observed practices and administrative records. The iterative comparison of different forms of evidence reduced reliance on any single participant or data source and allowed inconsistencies and competing interpretations to be incorporated into the analysis.

Following recommendations for trustworthy thematic analysis, the analytical process sought to maintain a clear connection between the original data, coding decisions, thematic development, and the interpretations presented in the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). Rather than treating themes as simple summaries of frequently occurring statements, they were developed as interpretive explanations of how regulatory, political, and gendered mechanisms interacted across the research sites.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section synthesizes the empirical insights generated through multi-sited fieldwork (2021-2022) and interprets them within the analytical framework of supra-village politics. The findings collectively demonstrate that the disappearance of women's empowerment in Indonesian villages cannot be understood as a mere bureaucratic omission or declining community interest. Instead, it is the outcome of a complex interplay between regulatory constraints, patronage networks, political lobbying, and gendered institutional norms, each of which reshapes what is politically possible within village governance. As these forces accumulate and interact, they gradually hollow out the institutional, budgetary, and political space that once supported women's empowerment.

Village Autonomy Reconfigured: Administrative Control and Structural Constraints

The reconfiguration of village autonomy under Law No. 6/2014 was initially expected to strengthen local discretion, expand community participation, and bring development decisions closer to village residents. By transferring greater authority and resources to villages, the reform sought to address weaknesses associated with earlier forms of decentralization and

create more responsive forms of local governance. Yet greater formal authority has not necessarily translated into unrestricted local autonomy. Village governments continue to operate within administrative, fiscal, and political arrangements established by higher levels of government, producing a form of autonomy that remains strongly conditioned by national regulations and supra-village institutions. Antlöv et al. (2016) similarly observed that the Village Law created significant opportunities for more responsive governance while simultaneously introducing substantial institutional and administrative risks. More recent comparative research across Indonesian villages confirms that local governance outcomes remain highly uneven because village autonomy interacts with local elite structures, socioeconomic conditions, informal authority, and accountability mechanisms (Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al., 2025).

Evidence from the field shows how this conditional autonomy becomes particularly visible in village budgeting. Regulatory instruments such as Presidential Regulation No. 104/2021 prescribe substantial portions of village expenditure for nationally determined priorities. Although these mandates pursue legitimate national objectives, their implementation reduces the fiscal room available for villages to determine priorities independently. Programs that are not protected by mandatory allocations consequently compete for increasingly limited discretionary resources. Women's empowerment initiatives are especially vulnerable under these conditions because they are frequently treated as supplementary activities rather than as integral components of village development. The outcome is not always an explicit cancellation of gender programs; they may instead be reduced, postponed, combined with other activities, or administratively relocated under broader development categories. This illustrates a central tension in Indonesian village governance: authority has been decentralized, but decisions remain embedded in wider regulatory structures that continue to influence what villages can practically prioritize (Antlöv et al., 2016; Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al., 2025).

Such constraints extend beyond fiscal allocation into the way development priorities are institutionally defined. When available resources become increasingly tied to predetermined expenditure categories, initiatives without strong regulatory protection must justify their relevance through administrative terminology considered compatible with dominant development priorities. Women's empowerment may consequently be incorporated into

apparently neutral categories such as community development, family welfare, entrepreneurship, or community capacity building. This shift is important because changing the administrative label of an initiative can also alter its political purpose. Cornwall (2001) cautions that apparently participatory development interventions can reproduce existing inequalities when questions of voice, representation, and power are obscured by inclusive terminology. Similarly, Cornwall and Edwards (2010) argue that empowerment cannot be reduced to incorporating women into existing institutional arrangements; meaningful empowerment requires engagement with the structures and relationships that produce inequality.

The field findings suggest that this process has contributed to a gradual depoliticization of women's empowerment. Programs may continue to involve women, yet participation increasingly becomes associated with implementation rather than influence over agenda-setting, budgeting, or strategic decisions. Batliwala (2007) describes a comparable transformation in development practice, where empowerment can lose its original emphasis on changing power relations and instead become associated with technically manageable interventions. From this perspective, the disappearance of women's empowerment in village governance does not necessarily mean that activities involving women have disappeared. Rather, the transformative political content of empowerment can weaken even while women remain administratively visible.

This distinction between presence and influence is particularly evident in formal village participation. Village meetings are officially designed as arenas in which citizens can articulate preferences and influence village decisions, but recent empirical evidence demonstrates that participation alone does not guarantee accountability or substantive political influence. Haryanto et al. (2025), based on fieldwork in eighteen Indonesian villages, found that village deliberations frequently remained dominated by local elites. Even where ordinary villagers participated, interaction with village authorities tended to be cautious and rarely translated into strong accountability mechanisms. Their characterization of this pattern as "participation without accountability" is particularly relevant to the findings of the present study because it demonstrates how formal participation can coexist with persistent asymmetries of power.

Gender further intensifies these asymmetries. Comparative research on village governance across Indonesia indicates that formal village deliberations frequently remain

male-dominated spaces. Women who participate are often representatives of the PKK or female village officials rather than ordinary women from the broader community (Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al., 2025). Practical barriers such as meeting schedules, domestic responsibilities, and the composition of invited participants can further restrict women's involvement. These findings support the distinction between access to participatory spaces and the capacity to influence decisions within those spaces. Gaventa (2006) conceptualizes such institutionally created arenas as "invited spaces," emphasizing that opening participatory spaces does not automatically redistribute power among the actors who enter them.

The position of the PKK illustrates this tension particularly clearly. Its organizational visibility gives women a recognized presence within village governance, but visibility should not be equated with political influence. Where women participate mainly through organizations associated with family welfare, health, childcare, and domestic responsibilities, their involvement may remain concentrated within areas already socially coded as feminine. Recent research on female brokers in Indonesian villages provides strong evidence of this pattern. Indriyany et al. (2025) found that women brokers perform important roles in helping villagers obtain access to public services, but their activities frequently focus on micro-level problems associated with women's domestic life and care responsibilities. At the same time, village deliberative meetings tend to concentrate on larger infrastructure and development issues that are more strongly associated with male political responsibilities. The division therefore reproduces a gendered distinction between women's social and welfare functions and men's influence over strategic development decisions.

Evidence from rural women's organizations also shows, however, that women are capable of moving beyond these restricted roles when adequate organizational networks and opportunities exist. Ameridyani et al. (2025), studying a women's group in rural West Java, demonstrate how women's organizations can build bonding, bridging, and linking social capital that connects local women with external actors and expands their capacity to participate in rural development. Their findings also indicate that women's participation in rural development in Indonesia remains frequently instrumental rather than genuinely influential. This reinforces the argument that women's organizations themselves are not inherently depoliticized; their capacity to produce empowerment depends heavily on whether

institutional arrangements provide them with meaningful access to resources, networks, and decision-making processes.

These institutional limitations cannot be separated from the political economy surrounding village governance. Village governments are not isolated administrative entities but operate within extensive relationships with district governments, bureaucratic agencies, political parties, contractors, and other political intermediaries. Aspinall and Rohman (2017) show that contemporary Indonesian village elites function as brokers connecting village communities with supra-village political and governmental networks. Their study of village head elections in Java demonstrates that connections with higher-level officials remain important because village leaders can use such relationships to obtain projects and resources. Village authority is therefore embedded within networks that extend well beyond formal village institutions.

A broader analysis by Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) similarly demonstrates how clientelism and political brokerage permeate Indonesia's democratic institutions. Access to state resources frequently depends upon personalized networks involving politicians, brokers, bureaucratic actors, and local elites. Viewed from the village level, these relationships create incentives for leaders to maintain networks capable of producing tangible projects, distributive benefits, and politically visible outcomes. Infrastructure projects are particularly attractive because their material results are immediately observable and can generate political credit. Social programs whose benefits are less visible or whose political returns emerge only over the longer term must compete within this environment.

The consequences are especially significant for women's empowerment. Gender-focused initiatives usually provide few immediate opportunities for visible infrastructure, distributive patronage, or electoral reward. Consequently, they can occupy a weaker bargaining position when village leaders must choose among competing programs. This does not require village actors to be explicitly opposed to gender equality. Rather, gender initiatives can become marginalized because the political and administrative incentive structure privileges programs with greater material visibility or stronger connections to influential actors. Aspinall and Rohman's (2017) analysis of rural brokerage illustrates how the ability to secure projects from higher levels of government becomes an important political resource for village

leaders, while Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) demonstrate more broadly how such exchanges are embedded within Indonesia's clientelistic political system.

Gendered political norms further shape who can effectively operate within these networks. White et al. (2024) demonstrate that patriarchal political attitudes remain an important obstacle to women's political representation in Indonesia. Their national-level evidence shows that beliefs portraying politics as a male domain continue to influence support for women in political leadership. Although the present study concerns village governance rather than electoral representation alone, these wider attitudes provide an important social context for understanding why institutional participation does not automatically translate into equivalent political authority for women. Where political leadership, negotiation, and access to external networks remain socially associated with men, women's formal inclusion may coexist with their exclusion from the relationships through which strategic resources are negotiated.

This helps explain the symbolic forms of empowerment observed during the fieldwork. Women may be invited to meetings, included in attendance lists, photographed during village activities, or represented through formal organizations, allowing village administrations to demonstrate compliance with participation requirements. Yet these practices provide little evidence that women influence agenda-setting or final resource allocations. The problem is therefore not simply the numerical absence of women. It concerns the distribution of power within participatory processes. As Cornwall (2001), Gaventa (2006), and Cornwall and Edwards (2010) emphasize from different perspectives, participation becomes transformative only when participants acquire meaningful voice and the capacity to challenge existing arrangements.

Women nevertheless exercise agency within these constraints. Field evidence shows that some women leaders adapt by reframing programs in economically acceptable language, using kinship and religious networks, collaborating with influential community figures, or connecting women's activities with development priorities already recognized by village governments. Such strategies resemble the networking processes identified by Ameridyani et al. (2025), in which rural women expand their capacity by building connections both inside and outside their immediate communities. Female brokerage identified by Indriyany et al. (2025) likewise demonstrates that women can operate as important

intermediaries between villagers and public institutions. These adaptive practices should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of women's passivity. Rather, they reveal how agency is exercised within an institutional environment where access to formal power remains unequal.

The persistence of such adaptive strategies, however, should not obscure their structural limitations. Batliwala (2007) warns that empowerment becomes fragile when its transformative objectives are detached from broader struggles over institutional and political power. Individual women may successfully negotiate specific resources or secure particular programs, yet these achievements do not necessarily alter the rules that determine village priorities. Likewise, the presence of women brokers does not automatically eliminate gendered inequalities in decision-making; depending on the governance context, brokerage may simultaneously improve women's access to services while leaving broader relations of dependency intact (Indriyany et al., 2025).

Taken together, the evidence suggests that village autonomy after the Village Law should not be understood simply as a linear transfer of power from the central state to local communities. Village authority is simultaneously enabled and constrained by national regulations, fiscal requirements, local institutional arrangements, socioeconomic structures, and supra-village political networks (Antlöv et al., 2016; Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al., 2025). Within this layered governance system, women's empowerment occupies a particularly vulnerable position. Fiscal restrictions reduce discretionary resources, administrative categorization can dilute gender-specific objectives, participatory institutions can reproduce unequal power relations, and patronage networks encourage investment in programs with greater material or political returns.

The disappearance of women's empowerment observed in the study is therefore better understood as institutional and political reconfiguration rather than simple policy abandonment. Women remain present in village institutions, organizations, and development activities, but the spaces in which they participate do not consistently provide equivalent access to agenda-setting, budgeting, or supra-village political negotiation. Contemporary research on Indonesian village governance strongly supports this distinction between formal participation and substantive influence (Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al., 2025; Haryanto et al., 2025; Indriyany et al., 2025). What has contracted is not necessarily women's visibility, but

the political space in which gender-specific interests can be articulated, defended, and translated into binding development priorities. This structural contraction provides the foundation for understanding the supra-village political mechanisms examined in the following section.

Supra-Village Politics as the Central Mechanism of Gendered Disempowerment

The findings indicate that the weakening of women's empowerment cannot be adequately explained by developments within village institutions alone. Village governance is embedded in wider networks linking village governments to district administrations, bureaucratic agencies, political parties, legislators, and informal political intermediaries. These supra-village relationships influence access to resources, development priorities, administrative opportunities, and political incentives. Recent comparative research on Indonesian villages similarly demonstrates that greater formal autonomy under the Village Law has not isolated villages from higher-level political structures. Instead, village politics continues to be shaped by interactions between local elites and external political and bureaucratic actors (Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al., 2025; Aspinall, Berenschot, Ruhyanto, et al., 2025).

Synthesizing the empirical findings reveals three mutually reinforcing processes through which supra-village politics contributes to gendered disempowerment. First, regulatory constriction limits the discretionary fiscal and administrative space available to village governments. Second, patronage and elite capture shape which programs are considered politically valuable and therefore worthy of external lobbying or protection. Third, symbolic participation allows women's presence to remain administratively visible without necessarily redistributing agenda-setting and decision-making power. These mechanisms are further reinforced by semantic packaging, the depoliticization of the PKK, and the adaptive but structurally limited strategies adopted by women leaders.

Regulatory Constriction and the Redistribution of Village Discretion

The first mechanism concerns the relationship between formal village autonomy and continuing administrative control from higher levels of government. Law No. 6/2014 significantly expanded village authority and increased the fiscal resources available to village governments. Nevertheless, greater access to village funds did not eliminate the influence of

national and district-level regulations. Antlöv et al. (2016) identified this tension during the early implementation of the Village Law, showing that expanded authority created new opportunities for village governance while also requiring stronger institutional capacity, accountability, and administrative adaptation.

The field findings show that this tension becomes especially visible in budgeting. Regulatory instruments, particularly Presidential Regulation No. 104/2021, impose expenditure requirements that reduce the fiscal discretion available to villages. Programs that do not fall within mandatory or politically protected categories consequently compete for a smaller pool of discretionary resources. Women's empowerment initiatives are especially vulnerable because they are frequently treated as supplementary activities rather than integral development priorities.

The effects of such regulation are not limited to direct budget cuts. Gender-focused activities may instead be postponed, combined with broader social programs, or administratively transferred into categories such as community capacity building, family welfare, entrepreneurship, or community development. In this sense, regulation indirectly reshapes how women's empowerment is represented within village planning. The result is a form of conditional autonomy in which villages retain formal authority but exercise that authority within increasingly structured fiscal and administrative boundaries.

Recent research on village-state relations supports this interpretation. Mahsun et al. (2025) demonstrate that village governments continue to depend on higher-level state actors when seeking additional development resources. Their comparative study identifies political lobbying as an important strategy used by village elites to obtain projects and grants from district governments and other supra-village actors. Restrictions surrounding village funds can therefore generate incentives for village governments to seek resources beyond their routine fiscal allocations.

This produces a paradox of decentralization. Villages have greater formal authority and substantially greater resources than before the Village Law, but their ability to determine development priorities remains embedded in broader regulatory and political structures. Comparative research across Indonesian villages further demonstrates that local governance outcomes vary considerably depending on elite configurations, institutional capacity, informal

authority, and the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms (Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al., 2025).

Patronage, Political Lobbying, and Elite Capture

The second mechanism concerns patronage and elite capture. Fieldwork demonstrates that village leaders frequently interact with district heads, bureaucratic officials, legislators, political parties, contractors, and other influential actors to secure projects and resources. Such interactions represent an important dimension of contemporary village governance because local leaders are expected not only to administer village funds but also to mobilize external resources for their communities.

Mahsun et al. (2025) provide particularly relevant evidence. Their research shows that village elites routinely engage in political lobbying with higher-level government officials in order to obtain grants and development projects. These relationships can produce collective benefits, but they may also reinforce clientelistic networks when resources become tied to personalized political relationships. The distinction between developmental lobbying and clientelistic exchange is therefore not always clear.

Aspinall and Rohman (2017) similarly demonstrate that contemporary village heads frequently operate as political brokers connecting village residents with higher-level state institutions. Their capacity to access district and provincial actors can strengthen their authority because successful leaders are often evaluated according to their ability to bring projects and resources into the village. Connections with politicians and bureaucratic elites thus become an important component of local political power.

These relationships reflect wider patterns within Indonesian democracy. Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) demonstrate how clientelism remains embedded in networks of politicians, brokers, bureaucrats, and local intermediaries. Aspinall et al. (2017) likewise show the importance of personalized brokerage networks in Indonesian electoral politics. Such networks do not necessarily disappear after elections. They may continue to shape access to state resources, government assistance, projects, and political opportunities.

Institutional patronage can also influence the internal organization of village government. Rohman et al. (2025) show that reforms intended to establish more meritocratic village-official recruitment are implemented unevenly. Where oversight is weak, formal

recruitment procedures may be manipulated or circumvented in order to preserve patronage-based appointments. Elite capture therefore involves not only the distribution of development resources but also control over institutional positions.

The present research adds an important gender dimension to these findings. Across the lobbying pathways identified during fieldwork, village elites consistently prioritize projects that offer tangible political or economic returns. Infrastructure development, business assistance, physical facilities, and distributive programs are particularly attractive because they generate visible outputs and identifiable beneficiaries. Such projects can easily be communicated as evidence of government performance and may also strengthen political support.

Women's empowerment initiatives generally produce fewer immediate political returns. Their outcomes may involve stronger organizational capacity, increased confidence, greater participation, leadership development, or changes in gender relations. These benefits are significant but less physically visible and less easily incorporated into patronage-based political exchanges. Women's empowerment consequently occupies a weaker bargaining position within supra-village lobbying.

This exclusion does not necessarily result from explicit opposition to gender equality. Rather, it is produced by an incentive structure in which programs with tangible outputs and political visibility receive stronger support. Gender initiatives may therefore disappear from bargaining agendas before formal village budgeting begins. The marginalization of women's empowerment is consequently embedded not only in budgetary decisions but also in the political processes through which potential projects are selected, negotiated, and supported.

Symbolic Participation and Gendered Institutional Inclusion

The third mechanism is symbolic participation. Women remain visible in village governance through meetings, PKK activities, village programs, official attendance records, and administrative reporting. Yet numerical participation does not necessarily indicate substantive influence.

Recent empirical research strongly supports this distinction. Haryanto et al. (2025), based on comparative ethnographic research across Indonesian villages, found that village deliberative meetings often remain dominated by elites. Even when ordinary citizens participate, they tend to communicate demands cautiously and rarely possess strong

mechanisms for holding village officials accountable. The authors describe this pattern as "participation without accountability."

Gender inequalities intensify this problem. Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al. (2025) show that formal village deliberation remains disproportionately male-dominated. Women who participate are frequently PKK representatives or female village officials rather than women from the broader community. Practical barriers such as meeting schedules, domestic responsibilities, and assumptions about legitimate political actors further restrict women's involvement.

Indriyany et al. (2025) provide particularly important evidence regarding the gendered division of political participation. Their study demonstrates that female brokers perform significant roles in helping women gain access to health services, civil registration, and other state resources. However, these activities generally focus on micro-level issues associated with domestic life and care responsibilities. Larger questions concerning infrastructure and strategic village development are more commonly treated as male political responsibilities.

Women therefore remain politically active, but their participation occurs within institutional boundaries that shape which issues they are expected to address. This distinction helps explain how women can remain highly visible in village organizations while having limited influence over budgets, infrastructure, political lobbying, and strategic resource allocation.

The PKK represents one of the clearest examples of this tension. It continues to provide an important organizational space for women, yet field findings indicate that its activities are increasingly concentrated around implementation, welfare, health, family, and ceremonial responsibilities. Such participation is meaningful, but it does not necessarily provide equivalent authority over village development priorities.

This condition can be interpreted through Gaventa's (2006) concept of "invited spaces," in which opportunities for participation are created within institutional frameworks established by those already holding power. Access to such spaces does not automatically redistribute power. Cornwall and Edwards (2010) similarly argue that empowerment should not be reduced to integrating women into existing institutions without addressing the relationships that reproduce inequality.

Batliwala (2007) further warns that empowerment can lose its transformative political meaning when it is converted into administratively manageable activities. Programs may continue to carry the language of empowerment while emphasizing training, participation, service delivery, or economic activities without significantly altering women's capacity to influence political decisions.

Women leaders nevertheless display considerable agency. Fieldwork identifies several adaptive strategies, including reframing gender programs in economic terms, mobilizing kinship and religious networks, developing relationships with supportive male leaders, and connecting women's activities with established development priorities. Similar processes are identified by Ameridyani et al. (2025), who demonstrate how rural women's organizations can strengthen their participation through bonding, bridging, and linking social capital.

These strategies demonstrate that women are not passive recipients of institutional constraints. However, their effectiveness remains dependent on surrounding political opportunities. Individual successes do not necessarily transform the structures governing village budgets or political lobbying. Adaptive agency therefore coexists with structural limitation.

Table 1. Synthesis of Research Findings: Mechanisms Behind the Disappearance of Women's Empowerment

Mechanism	Empirical Manifestations	Key Actors	Impact on Women's Empowerment
Regulatory Constriction	Fixed budget allocations and restricted village discretion under Presidential Regulation No. 104/2021	National ministries; district financial units	Gender programs are cut, merged, postponed, or deprioritized
Semantic Packaging	Gender-focused programs are reclassified under broader categories such as "community capacity building"	Village governments; village facilitators	Gender-specific objectives become less visible and increasingly diluted
Depoliticization of PKK	PKK participation is concentrated in ceremonial, welfare-oriented, and	PKK; village officials	Women remain institutionally visible but have limited

	implementation activities		influence over strategic decisions
Patronage and Lobbying	Village elites engage in brokerage and lobbying with district heads, bureaucratic officials, legislators, and political networks	Village heads; political parties; bureaucratic elites	Gender programs are largely absent from supra-village lobbying and resource-negotiation agendas
Symbolic Empowerment	Women are formally invited to meetings and included in administrative documentation but have limited influence over actual decisions	Village governments; facilitators	Administrative compliance is achieved without substantial redistribution of decision-making power
Adaptive Strategies of Women	Women reframe programs, use informal networks, and develop alliances with supportive actors	Women leaders; community actors; local elites	Limited gains are achieved, although structural and political barriers remain

Source: Synthesized from field data collected by the author (2023).

The findings summarized in Table 1 demonstrate that the disappearance of women's empowerment is not attributable to a single institutional weakness. Rather, it is produced through the interaction of regulatory, political, administrative, and gendered processes. Each mechanism reinforces the others and collectively restructures the institutional environment within which gender-focused initiatives operate.

Regulatory constriction constitutes the first layer of this process. Although village governments possess considerable formal authority following Law No. 6/2014, significant portions of their fiscal resources remain structured by national regulations and administrative priorities. Antlöv et al. (2016) emphasize that increased village autonomy does not eliminate the need to negotiate complex relationships between local discretion, state regulation, and accountability. Under such conditions, programs without explicit regulatory protection become particularly vulnerable.

Semantic packaging represents a subtler mechanism. Gender-specific programs may not disappear from administrative documents but instead become absorbed into broader

categories such as community development or capacity building. This process can weaken the visibility of their gender-transformative objectives. Cornwall and Edwards (2010) caution that incorporating women into development interventions without confronting underlying structures of power may produce participation without substantive empowerment. Batliwala (2007) similarly notes that the language of empowerment can persist even as its political content is progressively diluted.

Institutional dynamics further contribute to this transformation through the depoliticization of the PKK. Women continue to occupy recognizable organizational spaces, yet their participation is frequently concentrated in welfare-oriented, domestic, or implementational activities. Recent comparative evidence demonstrates that women remain underrepresented in broader village deliberative spaces and are often represented through institutional positions already associated with gender-specific responsibilities (Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al., 2025).

The political economy of supra-village relations amplifies these institutional limitations. Village leaders operate within networks that connect them to district governments, bureaucratic offices, political parties, legislators, and other intermediaries. Mahsun et al. (2025) demonstrate that lobbying for grants and development projects remains a common feature of village-state relations. Aspinall and Rohman (2017) likewise show that village leaders derive political strength from their ability to broker access to higher-level resources.

Within such a system, programs are not evaluated solely according to social need. Political visibility, distributive potential, access to networks, and the capacity to generate tangible results also influence prioritization. Women's empowerment programs are disadvantaged because many of their benefits are long-term, relational, and less immediately visible. They consequently remain largely absent from the external lobbying strategies through which village leaders seek additional resources.

Symbolic empowerment helps sustain the appearance of inclusiveness within this environment. Women may be invited to village meetings and included in official documentation, yet their presence does not necessarily provide influence over major decisions. Haryanto et al. (2025) show that Indonesian village deliberation can produce participation without strong accountability, while Indriyany et al. (2025) demonstrate that

women's brokerage frequently operates in issue areas distinct from the strategic development questions dominated by male actors.

Such patterns indicate that the central problem is not merely whether women are present. The more important issue is whether their participation provides access to agenda-setting, budgeting, external political networks, and decisions regarding resource allocation. Formal inclusion can therefore coexist with substantive political marginalization.

Adaptive strategies adopted by women reveal another important dimension of this process. Women leaders frequently attempt to navigate institutional barriers by reframing programs, mobilizing informal relationships, and building alliances. Ameridyani et al. (2025) demonstrate that rural women's organizations can expand their influence through social networks linking them with actors outside their immediate communities. These forms of agency are significant because they demonstrate that women actively negotiate rather than simply accept institutional constraints.

Nevertheless, adaptive strategies remain structurally limited. The capacity of individual women or organizations to secure particular programs does not necessarily alter the broader institutional rules governing village resources. Where access to significant development resources continues to depend upon regulatory priorities, political brokerage, and male-dominated networks, gains achieved through informal negotiation remain fragile.

The interaction between the six mechanisms identified in Table 1 therefore produces a cumulative process of gendered disempowerment. Regulatory constraints narrow the fiscal space available for women's programs. Semantic packaging weakens their explicitly gendered objectives. The institutional role of the PKK can maintain women's visibility while limiting political authority. Patronage and lobbying privilege projects with stronger material and political returns. Symbolic participation creates an appearance of inclusiveness without equivalent influence. Women's adaptive strategies provide limited opportunities but do not eliminate underlying structural barriers.

Three broader mechanisms can consequently be identified as the core of supra-village gendered disempowerment:

1. Regulatory Constriction: Fiscal mandates and administrative requirements reduce village discretion and make gender-focused programs vulnerable to reduction, merger, postponement, or exclusion.

2. Patronage and Elite Capture: Village elites use political lobbying and brokerage to access supra-village resources, creating incentives to prioritize programs capable of generating visible developmental outputs, political advantage, or distributive benefits.
3. Symbolic Participation: Women remain present in institutional and participatory spaces, but this presence does not consistently provide equivalent influence over agenda-setting, budgeting, lobbying, or strategic development decisions.

These three processes interact with semantic packaging, institutional depoliticization, and adaptive strategies to produce a governance environment in which women's empowerment remains administratively recognizable but politically weakened.

Women's empowerment has therefore not simply been abandoned. It has been reconfigured. Rights-based and politically transformative objectives increasingly coexist with administratively acceptable forms of participation, welfare activities, economic programs, and symbolic representation. Women continue to participate, organize, negotiate, and broker access to services, yet these forms of agency often operate outside the political networks through which major resources and development priorities are negotiated.

The disappearance of empowerment is consequently better understood as a transformation rather than an absolute absence. What is disappearing is not necessarily women's organizational presence but the political substance of empowerment: the capacity to influence priorities, redistribute resources, challenge institutional hierarchies, and participate meaningfully in political negotiation. Contemporary studies of Indonesian village governance reinforce this distinction by demonstrating the persistence of political lobbying, elite dominance, uneven accountability, patronage-based institutional practices, and gendered forms of participation (Aspinall, Berenschot, Savirani, et al., 2025; Haryanto et al., 2025; Indriyany et al., 2025; Mahsun et al., 2025).

The findings therefore support the central argument of this study that gendered disempowerment is structurally produced through the dynamics of supra-village governance. Regulatory control establishes the limits of village discretion, patronage determines access to additional resources, institutional arrangements shape who can exercise authority, and gender norms influence whose interests enter strategic negotiations. Their cumulative interaction transforms women's empowerment from a potentially rights-based and politically

transformative agenda into one that is increasingly symbolic, instrumental, and peripheral to the central processes through which village development is negotiated.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that the disappearance of women's empowerment initiatives in Indonesian villages is not merely the consequence of technical budgeting constraints or insufficient gender awareness among village governments. Rather, it is the product of broader structural and political dynamics shaped by supra-village politics, the complex interactions among state regulations, bureaucratic hierarchies, political party networks, and patronage-based relationships. Within this multilayered governance environment, the weakening of women's empowerment programs emerges as an outcome shaped by power relations that extend far beyond the village level.

Although the Village Law (Law No. 6/2014) is often celebrated as a turning point for strengthening village autonomy, empirical findings indicate that this autonomy remains significantly constrained. Regulatory centralization (particularly through instruments such as Presidential Regulation No. 104/2021) imposes rigid budgetary formulas that restrict villages' discretion in developing gender-responsive initiatives. These constraints reflect persistent tensions within Indonesia's decentralization project, where administrative responsibilities have been devolved without corresponding political autonomy. As a result, villages often function less as self-governing entities and more as dependent units embedded within vertically integrated bureaucratic structures.

Within this constrained environment, patronage and clientelism play a decisive role in shaping development priorities. Village elites actively cultivate relationships with supra-village actors, including district heads, bureaucratic technocrats, and political party brokers, in order to secure resources that cannot be obtained through the increasingly regulated Village Fund. These lobbying practices privilege programs that generate political visibility or material benefits, rendering initiatives focused on women's empowerment structurally marginal. Because such gender programs rarely contribute to patronage exchanges or electoral incentives, they are routinely overshadowed by development projects that promise more immediate political returns. This dynamic supports longstanding feminist critiques that

clientelistic systems systematically de-prioritize gender justice by privileging elite interests over equitable social transformation.

Despite this marginalization, women's empowerment has not disappeared entirely; instead, it has been politically reconfigured. Empowerment language continues to appear in village documents, planning meetings, and ceremonial events, yet its substantive meaning has shifted. Many initiatives are subsumed under generic categories of "community empowerment," framed as symbolic participation, or redirected toward domestic-oriented activities traditionally associated with women's roles. This transformation resonates with broader critiques that empowerment discourses can be co-opted by administrative or political interests, reducing their potential to challenge entrenched gender hierarchies. What remains is a visible but hollow version of empowerment, present in form but lacking transformative substance.

Taken together, these findings contribute to theoretical debates on rural governance, decentralization, and feminist political analysis in Southeast Asia. They highlight how supra-village politics operates as a mechanism of gendered disempowerment, how village autonomy is relational rather than absolute, and how clientelism adapts to new institutional configurations, including reforms explicitly intended to counteract it. The dynamics illuminated in this study show that the political fate of women's empowerment is inseparable from the broader structures of power that govern village life.

Recognizing these dynamics opens several avenues for further research. Future studies might examine variations in empowerment outcomes across different political ecosystems, investigate the strategies employed by women leaders to navigate bureaucratic and clientelistic constraints, or analyze how fiscal rigidities shape gender-responsive development over time. Such inquiries will broaden our understanding of how gender and power are negotiated within Indonesia's evolving rural landscape and, ultimately, help identify pathways for building more inclusive and transformative forms of empowerment.

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