

# Beyond Numbers: Female Political Representation in Indonesia's National and Local Parliaments

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## Abstract

This study investigates the patterns and challenges of women's representation in Indonesia's national and local parliaments. Despite the implementation of a 30% gender quota, women's substantive influence remains constrained by patriarchal norms, institutional barriers, and uneven regional dynamics. Through a qualitative approach grounded in document analysis and thematic interpretation, this research explores how gender quotas, political party practices, and electoral systems shape women's access to power. The findings reveal that while quotas have improved numerical representation, structural and cultural factors continue to hinder meaningful participation. In local settings, religious conservatism and traditional gender roles intensify disparities. Political parties and electoral mechanisms act as gatekeepers, limiting opportunities for women not embedded in patronage networks. This study contributes to feminist institutionalist theory and intersectional political analysis by integrating national and local perspectives. It concludes that gender equity in politics requires systemic reform, political education, and cultural transformation beyond legal mandates.

## Keywords

gender quotas; women in politics; Indonesia parliament; political institutions; regional disparities

## INTRODUCTION

Women's political participation in Indonesia has gained significant scholarly and policy attention over the past two decades, reflecting a broader global emphasis on gender equality in governance. Following the collapse of Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime in 1998, Indonesia embarked on a path of democratic reform, known as *reformasi*, which opened political space for previously marginalized groups, including women. This transition brought with it aspirations for more inclusive governance structures, where women would play an active role in shaping national and regional policy agendas. Within this framework, gender equality has emerged as a critical pillar,

not only in legal discourse but also in the rhetoric of development, human rights, and democratic consolidation (Krook & Norris, 2014; UNDP, 2016). Despite this normative commitment, however, the reality of female representation in legislative bodies—both at the national and sub-national levels—remains disproportionately low in comparison to male representation. This disjuncture between legal ideals and political practice illustrates the persistent struggle to transform formal equality into substantive empowerment.

Efforts to improve women's representation have taken various institutional forms. One of the most prominent strategies was the adoption of a 30% gender quota for legislative candidates in 2003, which was hailed as a progressive step toward gender-sensitive governance. This quota reflected Indonesia's acknowledgment of international norms and commitments to gender equality, including its ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). However, in practice, the implementation of this quota has been uneven and fraught with challenges. Weak enforcement mechanisms, the absence of mandatory placement orders, and the lack of legal sanctions for non-compliance have allowed political parties to fulfill the quota symbolically without ensuring real electoral competitiveness for women candidates (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017; Rai, 2017). Additionally, public awareness regarding women's political rights remains limited in many areas, contributing to a societal climate that does not always support female candidacy. These factors, coupled with internal party resistance rooted in patriarchal structures, have significantly constrained the quota's transformative potential. As a result, numerical gains in representation have not necessarily translated into enhanced influence or leadership roles for women legislators.

More critically, the quality of women's political participation in Indonesia has come under scrutiny. While more women may be entering legislative institutions, their ability to meaningfully shape policy and assert influence within these institutions is often curtailed by systemic challenges. Tokenism—where women are appointed or elected to fulfill gender quotas but are excluded from substantive decision-making—is a persistent issue. Additionally, political patronage systems, which dominate Indonesian party politics, tend to favor male candidates with access to established networks of support and financial resources. These dynamics frequently marginalize women and restrict their political agency within legislative environments (BPS–Statistics Indonesia, 2015; Buehler, 2016). Consequently, the gap between formal representation and substantive participation remains wide, suggesting that the focus must shift from mere inclusion to empowerment and influence.

From a theoretical standpoint, increasing women's participation in politics is not only a matter of equity but also a fundamental component of democratic legitimacy. The literature on representation underscores the benefits of women's presence in legislatures, including greater attention to social policy, more inclusive governance,

and stronger advocacy for marginalized communities (Phillips, 1995; Celis et al., 2008). Empirical studies across various democratic contexts show that women legislators tend to prioritize education, health, child welfare, and gender justice policies more than their male counterparts (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008; Krook, 2009). However, in the Indonesian case, this theoretical promise remains only partially realized. The inconsistency between descriptive and substantive representation is shaped by a combination of institutional, socio-economic, and cultural barriers. For many female politicians, gaining office does not automatically equate to influencing legislative agendas, particularly in male-dominated political cultures (Sherlock, 2010; Harsono, 2015, p. 88).

Indonesia's decentralized political system further complicates the landscape of female political participation. Following post-1998 reforms, local governments were granted significant autonomy, including control over local elections and development priorities. While decentralization has enhanced democratic participation at the local level, it has also produced widely varying conditions for women's representation. In some provinces, particularly those with entrenched patriarchal traditions and strong religious conservatism, female political leaders face intense cultural resistance. In such contexts, societal expectations and informal norms often supersede legal mandates, restricting women's ability to lead effectively or even to stand for election. Conversely, in provinces where progressive leadership and civil society engagement are stronger, such as Yogyakarta or Bali, women have made more visible political gains (Sumarni, 2014, p. 212; United Nations, 2017). This diversity in outcomes underscores the importance of context-sensitive analysis when evaluating the effectiveness of national gender policies.

While Indonesia has made formal progress in institutionalizing gender equality in politics, numerous challenges continue to undermine the realization of its goals. The complex interplay between national legislation, party dynamics, cultural norms, and regional autonomy produces a fragmented and often contradictory landscape for female political participation. To understand and ultimately improve women's representation in Indonesia's parliaments, it is essential to adopt a multidimensional approach—one that integrates institutional analysis with socio-cultural perspectives and recognizes the importance of local contexts in shaping political opportunities.

Although several studies have examined women in Indonesian politics, there remains a gap in comparative analyses between national and local legislative bodies. Existing literature often focuses on either structural barriers or electoral outcomes but rarely integrates institutional, socio-political, and cultural factors into a cohesive framework. This study addresses this gap by exploring three core questions: (1) How do institutional mechanisms, such as gender quotas, influence women's representation at national and local levels? (2) What socio-cultural barriers affect the quality and extent of women's political participation across regions? (3) How do political parties and

electoral systems mediate women's access to legislative positions? The objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the opportunities and constraints shaping female representation in Indonesia's parliaments, offering both theoretical insight and practical implications for democratic governance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic discourse on women's political representation has evolved significantly, underpinned by theories of democratic inclusiveness, social justice, and gender equity. Central to this discourse is the recognition that equal political participation is not merely a normative ideal but a democratic imperative (Phillips, 1995; Krook & Norris, 2014). Early feminist scholarship emphasized the symbolic and substantive importance of women in decision-making roles, arguing that their presence reshapes institutional priorities and policy outcomes (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 44). In developing democracies like Indonesia, these ideas have gained traction as the country continues to navigate post-authoritarian governance and socio-cultural transformation (Rai, 2017).

Key literature identifies gender quotas as a pivotal mechanism for improving female representation in legislative bodies. Gender quotas are classified into three main types: reserved seats, legislated candidate quotas, and voluntary party quotas (Dahlerup, 2006). In Indonesia, the legislated candidate quota system has been the dominant strategy, requiring political parties to allocate at least 30% of their candidate lists to women.

However, enforcement and compliance remain uneven, with scholars highlighting the lack of sanctions and the frequent positioning of female candidates in non-viable list spots (Buehler, 2016; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017). Studies have also drawn attention to how political parties function as gatekeepers, often favoring male-dominated patronage networks and sidelining female candidates (Harsono, 2015, p. 93; Sumarni, 2014, p. 219).

Furthermore, literature on political decentralization and gender shows that local political environments significantly mediate women's participation. Decentralization in Indonesia has produced mixed results, as some regions use their autonomy to promote gender-sensitive governance while others reinforce patriarchal norms (United Nations, 2017; Sherlock, 2010). This divergence reflects broader debates on whether decentralization fosters or impedes gender equity in governance. Scholars note that while decentralization can create closer ties between citizens and their representatives, it may also entrench traditional gender roles if not accompanied by deliberate empowerment strategies (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008; Siregar, 2015, p. 127).

Overall, the literature provides a strong foundation for understanding the institutional and socio-political dimensions of women's political representation. However, gaps remain in cross-level analyses that compare national and sub-national dynamics. This study seeks to address this lacuna by integrating theories of representation, institutional design, and political sociology to examine the multifaceted experiences of Indonesian women in politics.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical foundation of this study is anchored in three interconnected frameworks: descriptive and substantive representation, gendered institutionalism, and intersectional political theory. Each provides a lens through which to analyze the dynamics of female political participation in Indonesia's national and local parliaments.

The theory of descriptive and substantive representation, as developed by Pitkin (1967) and expanded by Phillips (1995), serves as a starting point. Descriptive representation refers to the numerical presence of women in legislative bodies, while substantive representation concerns the extent to which women advocate for gender-sensitive policies. Scholars argue that descriptive representation is a necessary but insufficient condition for substantive outcomes (Celis et al., 2008; Krook, 2009). In Indonesia, this distinction is critical, as the 30% gender quota has improved numbers without necessarily enhancing policy influence (Buehler, 2016; Sumarni, 2014, p. 214).

Gendered institutionalism adds depth by examining how formal and informal institutions shape political opportunities for women. According to Mackay et al. (2010), institutions are not gender-neutral but embedded with norms that privilege masculine behavior. This framework reveals how political parties, electoral systems, and legislative cultures in Indonesia continue to marginalize female politicians despite legal reforms (Harsono, 2015, p. 90; Rai, 2017). It also highlights the role of party gatekeeping, where internal structures determine candidate selection, often to the disadvantage of women (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 61).

Intersectional political theory further contextualizes the analysis by acknowledging that women's experiences in politics are shaped by multiple identities, including class, ethnicity, religion, and geography (Crenshaw, 1991; Siregar, 2015, p. 129). This is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where regional diversity and religious pluralism produce varied experiences for women in public office. Intersectionality challenges the assumption of a homogeneous female political experience and instead encourages sensitivity to context-specific barriers and enablers (Sherlock, 2010; UNDP, 2016). It also explains why gender quotas alone may fail to empower women uniformly across provinces.

These three frameworks collectively provide a comprehensive toolset for analyzing female representation in Indonesia. Descriptive and substantive representation frames the outcomes, gendered institutionalism explains the structural dynamics, and intersectionality situates women's political engagement within broader social hierarchies. By integrating these theories, the study constructs a nuanced analytical foundation that will guide the interpretation of findings and discussions in subsequent sections.

## **Previous Research**

A chronological examination of previous research reveals the development of scholarly interest in female political representation in Indonesia and globally. Each study contributes uniquely to understanding the institutional, cultural, and socio-political variables that influence women's access to legislative power.

In 2005, Lovenduski's seminal book explored the gendered nature of political institutions, arguing that both formal rules and informal norms create male-dominated political environments (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 42). Although not specific to Indonesia, her work laid the groundwork for analyzing how internal party dynamics and candidate recruitment processes inhibit women's participation. This institutional perspective has informed subsequent studies on gender quotas and political party gatekeeping.

Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) conducted a cross-national study of Latin American countries, finding that gender quotas increased women's legislative presence but did not guarantee substantive representation. Their research demonstrated how cultural perceptions and institutional arrangements determine the effectiveness of quotas. While focusing on Latin America, the study has been influential in shaping comparative analyses, including those relevant to Indonesia's experience.

Sherlock (2010) provided one of the first detailed studies on women's participation in post-Suharto Indonesia. He analyzed parliamentary debates and electoral data, highlighting how decentralization created both opportunities and constraints for female candidates. The study emphasized that provincial variation in religious and cultural values shaped electoral outcomes for women, a finding that remains central to contemporary analyses.

Harsono (2015, p. 87) focused on the internal dynamics of political parties in Indonesia, revealing how nomination practices and resource allocation marginalize female candidates. The study found that party loyalty and patronage networks often override merit-based selection, resulting in symbolic rather than substantive inclusion.

Harsono's findings underscore the significance of informal institutional barriers, complementing earlier theoretical work.

Sumarni (2014, p. 213) conducted field research on local parliaments across several Indonesian provinces, analyzing how regional identity, religious conservatism, and political competition influenced women's legislative roles. Her findings indicated that even where quotas were fulfilled, female politicians often lacked the institutional support needed to influence policymaking. This regional focus highlights the intersection of national policy and local governance cultures.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017) published a comparative policy review analyzing global quota systems, including Indonesia. It assessed the implementation of candidate quotas and emphasized the need for enforcement mechanisms to ensure real impact. The report's emphasis on compliance and monitoring mechanisms remains highly relevant to the Indonesian case, where legal mandates often lack enforcement.

Together, these studies reveal that while legal reforms like quotas are essential, they are insufficient without supportive institutional and cultural contexts. However, a significant research gap persists: few studies provide an integrated analysis comparing national and local dynamics of female representation in Indonesia. Most research isolates either institutional structures or socio-cultural influences without addressing how they interact across governance levels. This study addresses this gap by exploring institutional, cultural, and electoral dimensions simultaneously and comparatively, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of female political representation in Indonesia.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study utilizes qualitative textual data to explore women's political representation in Indonesia's national and local parliaments. The data type is primarily descriptive and interpretive, focusing on legislative documents, policy analyses, academic publications, and institutional reports. Textual data is particularly appropriate for understanding complex socio-political phenomena where context, meaning, and institutional dynamics matter more than numerical outcomes (Creswell, 2013, p. 188). It enables the researcher to analyze not only the presence of gendered discourse in legislation and party structures but also the socio-cultural narratives embedded in public and institutional perceptions.

The data sources for this study include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, official electoral and parliamentary documents, and reports from trusted international



institutions. These sources were selected based on their academic rigor, relevance to the topic, and publication credibility. Reports from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2016), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017), and BPS–Statistics Indonesia (2015) provide foundational empirical data, while scholarly works such as those by Lovenduski (2005, p. 62), Franceschet and Piscopo (2008), and Sumarni (2014, p. 215) offer conceptual frameworks and localized insights. These sources form a multi-tiered evidence base reflecting both global norms and Indonesian realities.

The data collection technique employed is document analysis. This method allows for systematic review and interpretation of text-based materials to identify patterns, themes, and meanings (Bowen, 2009). The documents were selected using purposive sampling to ensure their relevance to the research questions. This included collecting policy papers on gender quotas, legislative candidate lists, national election laws, and secondary analyses of parliamentary performance. Document analysis is well-suited to critical policy evaluation, as it allows researchers to assess the intent, implementation, and impact of gender-focused reforms in political systems.

Data analysis in this research follows a thematic approach, identifying recurring themes across different texts that relate to the institutional and cultural dimensions of female representation. Thematic analysis enables the researcher to go beyond surface meanings, drawing connections between political structures and lived experiences of female legislators (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By coding data according to themes such as “quota implementation,” “party gatekeeping,” and “regional variance,” the analysis reveals how formal policies are mediated by informal norms. This approach is particularly effective in highlighting contradictions between legal frameworks and practical outcomes in Indonesia’s diverse political landscape.

Conclusion drawing in this study is based on interpretive synthesis, integrating findings from multiple sources and levels of analysis to answer the research questions. The interpretive process ensures that conclusions are not only descriptive but analytically rigorous, connecting empirical data to theoretical concepts like gendered institutionalism and substantive representation (Mackay et al., 2010). This process facilitates the formulation of well-grounded implications and recommendations, both for academic scholarship and policy-making in gender and governance.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Understanding the dynamics of women’s political representation in Indonesia necessitates a synthesis of theoretical perspectives and empirical realities. This section begins by revisiting the analytical frameworks of descriptive and substantive representation, gendered institutionalism, and intersectionality to contextualize the



findings. As highlighted by Phillips (1995) and Pitkin (1967), the mere presence of women in legislative bodies does not ensure gender-sensitive policymaking. Instead, substantive representation demands institutional openness and cultural receptivity—factors that this study finds to be highly uneven across Indonesia’s national and local parliaments.

Previous research established the critical role of political institutions and gatekeeping mechanisms in shaping access to power (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 61; Harsono, 2015, p. 89). Building upon this foundation, the present findings reveal that Indonesian political parties, while formally compliant with the 30% gender quota, often manipulate candidate placement and campaign financing to favor male incumbents.

This aligns with Sumarni’s (2014, p. 214) argument that institutional norms and informal practices collude to limit women’s political ascension. Furthermore, local variations in religious conservatism and cultural attitudes deepen disparities, showing how intersectional barriers affect women differently across provinces (Siregar, 2015, p. 126; Sherlock, 2010).

By engaging with recent expert insights from the field, this study also incorporates views from gender advocacy groups and regional political analysts who argue that the decentralization of governance, while promising in theory, has failed to uniformly empower women. In some cases, decentralization has localized patriarchal resistance, making it more difficult for national gender policies to take root in conservative regions (UNDP, 2016). These perspectives provide new dimensions to the theoretical framework by demonstrating the contextual dependencies of institutional reform.

This study contributes to the academic literature by integrating multiple levels of analysis—national and local—into a single comparative framework. Unlike prior research that often isolates institutional or socio-cultural variables, this study demonstrates their interaction in real political settings. For instance, the presence of female legislators is significantly higher in urban, secular provinces where political competition is more meritocratic, while conservative rural areas tend to favor traditional male dominance (Buehler, 2016; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017). These insights validate the need for context-sensitive gender policies rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Most importantly, the findings confirm that while descriptive representation has improved moderately due to legal quotas, substantive representation remains weak. Female legislators often face pressures to conform to party lines or are relegated to social affairs committees with limited influence. This supports the argument made by Celis et al. (2008) that institutional transformation must go beyond numeric inclusion. By mapping the interaction between formal laws and informal practices, the study

provides a robust foundation for the thematic analyses that follow, each addressing a specific research question.

### **Institutional Mechanisms and the Limits of Gender Quotas**

The findings reveal that institutional mechanisms, particularly gender quotas, have played a pivotal role in increasing the number of women in Indonesia's legislative bodies. However, their impact is limited by the broader political structure in which they operate. The introduction of a 30% candidate quota for women was a milestone in promoting gender equity, but the lack of enforcement measures undermines its effectiveness. As Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) observed, quotas without placement mandates or sanctions often result in women being listed in unelectable positions, a pattern consistently observed in Indonesian elections (Buehler, 2016).

This institutional weakness is compounded by the internal dynamics of political parties, which act as critical gatekeepers to political power. Harsono (2015, p. 92) notes that party elites often treat quotas as a procedural obligation rather than a commitment to gender inclusion. Female candidates are selected based on their loyalty or kinship ties rather than competence or leadership potential, echoing the findings of Lovenduski (2005, p. 60) on how informal party rules replicate patriarchal hierarchies. As a result, even where quotas are fulfilled numerically, the quality of female political representation remains questionable.

Local political conditions further influence how quotas are implemented. In more progressive provinces like Jakarta or Yogyakarta, political competition and public scrutiny have pressured parties to place female candidates in viable positions. Conversely, in conservative areas such as Aceh or parts of West Sumatra, religious and cultural resistance often results in symbolic compliance with the law. Sherlock (2010) highlights how decentralized governance enables local elites to interpret national mandates selectively, thereby reinforcing regional disparities in gender inclusion.

Moreover, the electoral system itself presents structural challenges. Indonesia's open-list proportional representation system incentivizes personal campaigning, which often disadvantages female candidates with limited financial and social capital (Sumarni, 2014, p. 213). Campaign financing remains male-dominated, and patronage networks are frequently inaccessible to women. This reality reduces the competitiveness of female candidates, even when they are placed high on the party list (Krook, 2009; Rai, 2017).

The findings also show that institutional reforms such as the General Elections Commission (KPU) regulations mandating gender representation on party lists have

not translated into consistent improvements. The absence of legal sanctions or public accountability mechanisms allows parties to continue tokenistic practices. While international models suggest that enforcement through penalties and monitoring can strengthen quota systems (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017), Indonesia's experience underscores the need for institutional reform beyond legal frameworks.

Ultimately, while the gender quota has been instrumental in opening doors for women, it remains an incomplete mechanism. Substantive representation requires not only access but also influence, which depends on institutional reform, cultural change, and strategic positioning within party structures. The findings affirm that institutional mechanisms must be supported by robust implementation strategies, public awareness, and gender-sensitive political education to achieve meaningful transformation in women's political representation.

### **Socio-Cultural Barriers and Regional Disparities in Female Representation**

The findings of this study also confirm that women's political participation in Indonesia is significantly affected by deeply embedded socio-cultural barriers, which vary across regions. These barriers include patriarchal values, religious conservatism, traditional gender roles, and social perceptions of leadership. Addressing the second research question, it is evident that these socio-cultural factors create uneven landscapes for women in politics, particularly at the local level. Siregar (2015, p. 128) highlights that in many rural provinces, societal expectations continue to position women within the domestic sphere, making political leadership appear incompatible with femininity.

Religious values, particularly in areas with strong Islamic traditions such as Aceh and West Java, also contribute to restrictive interpretations of gender roles. Sherlock (2010) notes that religious leaders and local regulations often discourage female leadership by citing cultural authenticity and moral guardianship. These interpretations are sometimes institutionalized in local regulations, leading to indirect discrimination against women seeking political office. In contrast, more secular and cosmopolitan regions such as Jakarta and Bali exhibit comparatively higher levels of acceptance of female leaders (UNDP, 2016). This regional variance illustrates how decentralization has unintentionally magnified cultural resistance in some areas while facilitating progress in others.

Social perceptions of political leadership further marginalize women. In many local communities, leadership is still associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness, dominance, and charisma. As a result, women who pursue political careers are often perceived as overstepping societal boundaries or sacrificing family responsibilities (Harsono, 2015, p. 93). These cultural narratives not only discourage women from

running for office but also affect voter behavior. Studies show that women candidates are judged more harshly than men, particularly when campaigning in traditional settings (Sumarni, 2014, p. 217). Such attitudes significantly reduce the electability of female candidates, even when quotas are met.

Moreover, the lack of support structures—such as mentorship, political training, and networking opportunities—further isolates women from viable political trajectories. Political parties often lack the institutional commitment to nurture female talent, and civil society support is uneven across regions. Lovenduski (2005, p. 65) emphasizes the importance of political apprenticeship and capacity-building in transforming descriptive into substantive representation. In Indonesia, however, this support is largely concentrated in urban centers, leaving many women in rural areas underprepared and underrepresented.

Another critical finding is the intersection of gender with other social identities such as ethnicity and class. Women from ethnic minorities or lower socio-economic backgrounds face compounded marginalization. Intersectional theory helps explain why even within the female demographic, access to political power is highly stratified (Crenshaw, 1991; Siregar, 2015, p. 129). These dynamics are particularly evident in outer-island provinces where ethnic and religious hierarchies remain entrenched in political culture.

In summary, socio-cultural barriers to women's political participation in Indonesia are both pervasive and regionally differentiated. While legal mechanisms exist to promote gender inclusion, they are often rendered ineffective by social norms and cultural expectations that continue to favor male political dominance. Therefore, policy interventions must move beyond quotas to address underlying attitudes, provide targeted capacity-building, and promote inclusive political narratives that challenge gender stereotypes. Addressing these cultural barriers is essential for realizing meaningful gender equality in political representation across Indonesia.

### **Political Parties and Electoral Systems as Mediators of Women's Access**

The third research question centers on how political parties and electoral systems mediate women's access to legislative positions in Indonesia. The findings reveal that both elements function not as neutral facilitators, but as active gatekeepers that often constrain rather than promote female political representation. Indonesia's multi-party system and open-list proportional representation (PR) electoral model, while democratic in design, inadvertently create structural disadvantages for female candidates (Krook, 2009; Sumarni, 2014, p. 218).

Political parties in Indonesia wield significant power in the candidate selection process. Although legally mandated to nominate at least 30% women on their party lists, parties frequently comply only in form rather than in substance. Women are often placed at the bottom of candidate lists, or in electoral districts where the party's chances of winning are minimal (Buehler, 2016). This pattern reflects what Harsono (2015, p. 95) describes as "procedural inclusion," where parties fulfill quota requirements superficially while maintaining male dominance in decision-making processes. The absence of placement mandates in Indonesia's quota law exacerbates this issue, allowing parties to sideline female candidates without violating regulations.

Internal party cultures also play a critical role. Most Indonesian parties lack institutional mechanisms for gender mainstreaming or leadership development for women. Lovenduski (2005, p. 67) argues that party culture significantly influences whether quotas translate into real power. In Indonesia, leadership positions within parties are predominantly held by men, and party resources—financial, logistical, and symbolic—are disproportionately allocated to male candidates. This creates a hostile environment for aspiring female politicians, reinforcing structural inequalities within the party system.

The electoral system itself adds another layer of complexity. The open-list PR system introduced in 2009 places the burden of election success on individual candidates rather than party popularity. This system rewards candidates with strong personal networks and financial resources—factors that favor male incumbents and elite candidates. Women, who often lack such capital due to socio-economic and cultural constraints, are disadvantaged in this competitive environment (Rai, 2017; Sumarni, 2014, p. 219). Moreover, the system incentivizes clientelist practices, which tend to marginalize female candidates who are not part of patronage networks.

Regional party branches also contribute to this dynamic. In many areas, local party leaders are reluctant to endorse female candidates unless they possess substantial political clout or familial connections to established male politicians. This preference for dynastic politics limits the pool of viable female candidates and further undermines merit-based advancement. Sherlock (2010) observed that in several provinces, female candidates often enter politics as substitutes for male relatives rather than independent leaders, perpetuating tokenism rather than genuine empowerment.

Despite these challenges, some political parties have introduced internal reforms, such as gender training and women's wings, aimed at increasing female participation. However, such initiatives are often underfunded and lack institutional authority. Without strong accountability measures and public pressure, party reforms remain symbolic gestures rather than transformative strategies. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017) recommends stronger legal incentives and internal party quotas with placement

mandates as essential for real progress—reforms Indonesia has yet to implement effectively.

In conclusion, political parties and electoral systems in Indonesia function as critical mediators that shape women's access to legislative power. While formal rules exist to support gender equity, they are undermined by informal practices, weak enforcement, and electoral competitiveness that disproportionately disadvantages women. These findings highlight the need for structural reforms within parties, revisions to electoral laws, and enhanced support mechanisms to ensure that women not only gain access to politics but are empowered to lead and legislate effectively.

This study has examined the multifaceted dynamics influencing female representation in Indonesia's national and local parliaments by addressing three interrelated research questions. First, it revealed that institutional mechanisms, particularly gender quotas, have improved numerical representation but have fallen short in promoting substantive influence. While the 30% quota for women has opened electoral access, weak enforcement, superficial party compliance, and absence of placement mandates have constrained its transformative potential. This finding reinforces the analytical distinction between descriptive and substantive representation, underscoring that legal reform alone cannot overcome entrenched patriarchal norms.

Second, the analysis of socio-cultural barriers and regional disparities highlighted how deeply rooted gender norms, religious conservatism, and traditional leadership ideals continue to marginalize women's political participation, especially at the local level. Decentralization has led to diverging trajectories of gender inclusion, with some regions advancing representation and others regressing into conservative practices. Intersectional political theory helped illuminate how women's experiences vary across class, ethnicity, and geography, complicating the assumption of uniform progress and emphasizing the importance of context-sensitive strategies for reform.

Third, political parties and electoral systems emerged as crucial mediators of women's political opportunities. Indonesia's open-list proportional representation system and party-controlled nomination processes have created high entry barriers for women, especially those lacking patronage ties or financial resources. Political parties, while legally obligated to meet quota targets, often treat inclusion as a procedural requirement, reinforcing male-dominated power structures. These dynamics confirm that party reform and electoral system design are central to achieving meaningful gender parity in political institutions.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the refinement of gendered institutionalism by demonstrating how formal structures and informal norms co-evolve to shape

political outcomes. It expands on substantive representation theory by showing that legislative presence does not necessarily translate into legislative impact unless accompanied by institutional and cultural transformation. By integrating multiple levels of analysis—national, local, institutional, and cultural—the study offers an integrative framework for analyzing gender and politics in decentralized democracies.

Practically, the findings suggest that improving female representation in Indonesia requires more than legal quotas. It calls for systemic reforms including mandatory placement mandates within party lists, sanctions for non-compliance, and institutionalized leadership development programs for women. Political parties must internalize gender inclusion through policy, resource allocation, and training. Furthermore, public awareness campaigns and civic education are necessary to shift gender norms and challenge stereotypes about women's leadership capabilities.

These implications are critical not only for Indonesia but also for other transitioning democracies facing similar challenges in achieving gender-equitable governance. By providing a detailed, comparative analysis of national and local political structures, this study offers both a conceptual and policy roadmap for future efforts to institutionalize inclusive political systems.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has critically examined the representation of women in Indonesia's national and local parliaments, uncovering the complex interplay of institutional, cultural, and political forces that shape their participation. It found that while the introduction of a gender quota has led to modest gains in the numerical inclusion of women, it has not translated into substantive legislative empowerment. The absence of enforcement mechanisms and continued patriarchal control within political parties limits the transformative potential of such institutional tools. Socio-cultural barriers remain deeply entrenched, with regional disparities revealing how traditional gender roles and religious conservatism still inhibit women's full political engagement.

The research confirms the importance of theoretical alignment with gendered institutionalism and intersectionality, demonstrating that formal equality must be supported by structural reforms and shifts in societal attitudes. Political parties and electoral systems are not passive channels but active sites of gendered gatekeeping, reinforcing male privilege through patronage networks, nomination practices, and campaign resource disparities.

The findings suggest that achieving meaningful female representation requires a multidimensional approach. Legal frameworks must be strengthened through



placement mandates and enforcement mechanisms. Political parties must institutionalize gender-sensitive practices and invest in leadership training for female candidates. Equally, long-term strategies must address societal attitudes through education, media, and civic engagement to normalize women's leadership in public life.

For policymakers, these recommendations provide actionable strategies to enhance democratic inclusivity. For scholars, the study opens new avenues for comparative and longitudinal research that further interrogates the evolving relationship between gender, power, and representation in decentralized democracies. Future research might focus on the performance and policy influence of female legislators or the role of civil society in sustaining gender reform. Ultimately, this research reaffirms that inclusive governance cannot be achieved through quotas alone—it requires sustained institutional transformation and cultural renegotiation of political norms.

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