



Beyond the Numbers: Gender Quota and Women's Political Representation in Bengkulu Indonesia

Wahyu Widiastuti^{1*}, Delfan Eko Putra ²

^{1,2}, Universitas Bengkulu, Indonesia

Email*: w.widiastuti@unib.ac.id

Received: 28 May 2026

Revised: 27 June 2026

Accepted: 29 July 2026

Abstract

Despite the widespread adoption of legislative gender quotas, women remain underrepresented in political office. While previous studies have emphasized institutional factors, less attention has been paid to how local gender norms shape quota outcomes. This qualitative case study examines how local gender norms influence the implementation of Indonesia's 30 percent legislative gender quota in Bengkulu Province. Data were collected through in-depth interviews **with** nine first-time female legislative candidates, political party officials, and political observers, complemented by documentary analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that while gender quotas expand women's formal access to electoral competition, their effectiveness is mediated by locally embedded gender norms that shape political legitimacy within political parties and society. Politics continues to be socially constructed as a masculine domain, requiring women to negotiate competing expectations of leadership, family responsibilities, and community roles. At the same time, participation in electoral politics enhances women's political confidence, networks, and leadership aspirations. This study contributes to the gender quota literature by demonstrating that local gender norms mediate the effectiveness of formal quota policies through the social construction of political legitimacy. The findings suggest that strengthening women's political representation requires not only institutional reform but also transformation of the gender norms through which political leadership is socially recognized.

Keywords: Gender Quotas; Local Gender Norms; Women's Political Representation; Feminist Institutionalism; Bengkulu Indonesia

Publisher's Note:

Yayasan Darussalam Bengkulu stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



© 2026 by the author(s).

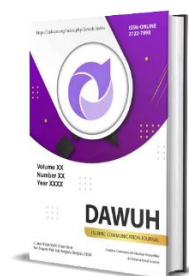
License Yayasan Darussalam, Bengkulu, Indonesia.

This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the

Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-SA 4.0)

4.0)

license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>).



INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, legislative gender quotas have become one of the most widely adopted strategies for addressing women's political underrepresentation. More than one hundred countries have introduced quota policies through constitutional provisions, electoral laws, or voluntary party rules, reflecting a global commitment to strengthening democratic inclusion by increasing women's presence in elected office (Dahlerup 2005; Krook 2009). These reforms have contributed to significant gains in women's descriptive representation across many democracies. However, increased numerical representation has not consistently translated into greater political influence, equal access to leadership positions, or stronger substantive representation of women's interests (Clayton 2021; Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2025). Across diverse political systems, women continue to encounter structural barriers despite the existence of formal affirmative action policies, creating a persistent gap between descriptive and substantive representation.

To explain this paradox, most scholarship has adopted an institutional perspective, arguing that the effectiveness of gender quotas depends primarily on the design and implementation of formal political institutions. Electoral system design, candidate placement rules, district magnitude, and enforcement mechanisms are widely recognised as key determinants of quota success (Dahlerup 2005; Krook 2009). Quotas generally perform more effectively in proportional representation systems with mandatory placement rules than in systems where political parties retain broad discretion over candidate nomination. Consequently, institutional design has become a dominant explanation for cross-national variation in women's electoral representation.

Political parties constitute another central focus of institutional research because they control candidate recruitment, campaign resources, leadership opportunities, and organisational support. Even under mandatory quota regulations, party elites frequently retain considerable discretion over recruitment and resource allocation, often favouring established male politicians over women candidates (Prihatini 2019; Ohmura and Bailer 2022; Clark, Blackman, and Şaşmaz 2024). Women's electoral opportunities are further constrained by unequal access to campaign finance, clientelistic networks, political patronage, and incumbency advantages, which continue to privilege candidates with stronger political connections and organisational resources (Aspinall et al. 2021; Schuler 2023). Recent studies also demonstrate that gender stereotypes concerning competence and leadership remain influential in candidate evaluation, limiting women's access to influential party networks and reducing perceptions of their electoral viability (Corbett et al. 2022; Pas, Aaldering, and Bos 2023; Fraile and Marinova 2024).

More recent institutional scholarship has expanded this perspective by examining how political efficacy, democratic legitimacy, grassroots participation, and party strategies influence quota outcomes. Studies suggest that gender quotas can strengthen democratic legitimacy under favourable institutional conditions (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2025), encourage women's political participation at the grassroots level (Goyal 2023), and increase public support for women candidates where institutional arrangements are conducive (Neundorf and Shorrocks 2021). Comparative research further demonstrates that ideological orientation, party strategies, and institutional contexts continue to shape women's electoral success across political systems (Polak and Lewandowski 2024; Noh, Grewal, and Kılavuz 2023).

Although this body of research has substantially advanced understanding of women's political representation, its primary focus remains on formal institutions. Less attention has been given to how quota policies are interpreted and enacted within local sociocultural contexts where



political authority is negotiated through everyday social relations. Consequently, institutional explanations provide only a partial account of why identical quota regulations often produce different outcomes across regions operating under the same legal framework. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond institutional design to examine the social processes through which political legitimacy and women's leadership are constructed.

While institutional scholarship explains how gender quotas create formal opportunities for women's political participation, it provides less insight into why identical institutional arrangements often produce different outcomes across local contexts. Political institutions do not operate independently of the societies in which they are embedded; rather, they are shaped by broader systems of social relations that influence how authority, leadership, and political legitimacy are understood. Explaining the uneven outcomes of gender quotas therefore requires a sociological perspective that considers not only formal institutions but also the social structures and cultural norms through which political participation is negotiated.

From this perspective, women's political underrepresentation is not simply the result of unequal access to elections but reflects enduring systems of gendered power. Walby (1990) conceptualizes patriarchy as a social system reproduced through interconnected institutions, including the family, the state, paid work, culture, and political organizations, that collectively sustain gender inequality. Political exclusion is therefore embedded within wider patterns of social organization rather than arising solely from deficiencies in electoral rules or party recruitment. Formal reforms such as gender quotas may expand opportunities for women to contest elections, but they do not automatically transform the structural conditions that shape access to political authority.

Connell's (2009) concept of the gender order further explains how these structural inequalities become normalized through everyday social practices. Societies construct culturally specific expectations regarding masculinity and femininity, assigning leadership, authority, and public decision-making predominantly to men while associating women with domestic responsibilities, caregiving, and community service. These expectations shape both political aspirations and public evaluations of leadership. Consequently, women entering electoral competition often confront a role incongruity in which they are expected to demonstrate political competence while simultaneously conforming to conventional expectations of femininity. As research consistently shows, stereotypes concerning leadership continue to influence perceptions of women's political capability even where formal legal barriers have been removed (Pas, Aaldering, and Bos 2023; Fraile and Marinova 2024).

These broader gender relations are reproduced within political institutions themselves. Feminist institutionalism argues that institutions are governed not only by formal rules but also by informal norms, organizational cultures, and routine practices that reflect wider gender hierarchies (Waylen 2017). Political parties therefore function as more than administrative organizations implementing electoral regulations; they are gendered institutions in which informal recruitment practices, leadership succession, mentoring, and resource allocation frequently continue to privilege male candidates despite formal quota requirements (Ohmura and Bailer 2022; Clark, Blackman, and Şaşmaz 2024). Institutional reform may change legal procedures, yet informal organizational practices often remain resistant to change.

The mechanism linking these structural and institutional processes is gender norms. Gender norms comprise socially shared expectations regarding the roles, behaviours, and responsibilities

considered appropriate for women and men (Sedlander et al. 2022; Streatfield et al. 2023). These norms shape not only individual choices but also collective judgments about competence, authority, and legitimacy. Individuals who conform to prevailing expectations generally receive greater social acceptance, whereas those who challenge established gender roles may encounter resistance or exclusion (Cislighi et al. 2022; Lawless et al. 2021). Within electoral politics, gender norms influence both the supply of female candidates and the demand for women's leadership by affecting recruitment decisions, campaign experiences, voter perceptions, and access to political resources.

These processes ultimately converge in the construction of political legitimacy. Political legitimacy extends beyond legal eligibility or electoral victory; it refers to the extent to which political authority is socially recognised as appropriate, credible, and deserving of public trust. Such legitimacy is produced through everyday interactions within families, religious organizations, neighbourhood associations, workplaces, and community networks, where ideas about leadership and gender are continually reinforced. This perspective suggests that the effectiveness of gender quotas depends not only on institutional compliance but also on the locally embedded gender norms through which political authority is interpreted and legitimized. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes quota implementation as a socially embedded process in which patriarchal social structures, gendered institutions, local gender norms, and political legitimacy interact to shape women's political participation. This framework provides the basis for examining how women in Bengkulu negotiate these social expectations while seeking elected office and helps explain why formal equality does not necessarily produce substantive political representation.

Indonesia provides a particularly important context for examining how formal gender quota policies interact with local gender norms. Since the introduction of the 30 percent legislative candidate quota, political parties have been required to nominate more women for legislative elections, contributing to gradual improvements in women's descriptive representation. Despite these advances, however, women's increased presence among candidates has not been matched by proportional gains in legislative representation, political influence, or access to strategic leadership positions within political parties and government institutions (Prihatini 2019). This continuing disparity suggests that while affirmative action has expanded women's formal access to electoral competition, it has not fundamentally transformed the social conditions that shape political participation and leadership.

The Indonesian case is particularly significant because democratic institutions operate within highly diverse local sociocultural environments. Political decentralization has strengthened the role of kinship networks, religious organizations, ethnic identities, patronage relationships, and community leadership in shaping electoral competition (Aspinall et al. 2021). Consequently, electoral success depends not only on party nomination or campaign strategy but also on candidates' ability to establish trust, moral credibility, and social legitimacy within their local communities. Although gender quota regulations are implemented under a uniform national legal framework, their outcomes are likely to vary because they are mediated by locally embedded understandings of authority, leadership, and gender relations.

Bengkulu offers an appropriate case for exploring these dynamics. Like many peripheral provinces in Indonesia, Bengkulu combines democratic electoral institutions with strong community ties, religious networks, and customary social values that continue to influence political life. Political legitimacy is negotiated not only within formal party organizations but also through interactions in families, neighbourhood associations, religious groups, and community

organizations. Candidates are evaluated according to their personal reputation, community engagement, family background, and conformity to locally accepted expectations of leadership. For women, these conditions create additional challenges because participation in community activities does not automatically translate into political legitimacy. Female candidates are often expected to demonstrate political competence while simultaneously fulfilling conventional expectations regarding family responsibilities, caregiving, and appropriate public behaviour. Electoral competition therefore becomes a process of negotiating both formal political institutions and informal gender norms.

Although previous studies on gender quotas in Indonesia have generated valuable insights into electoral systems, party recruitment, candidate selection, and descriptive representation (Prihatini 2019), relatively little attention has been paid to the sociocultural mechanisms through which quota policies are translated into political outcomes. Likewise, sociological research has examined patriarchy, gender relations, and women's public participation but has rarely connected these processes to the implementation of affirmative action in electoral politics. As a result, the relationship between formal quota policies, local gender norms, political legitimacy, and women's political agency remains insufficiently understood. Existing scholarship explains how quota policies are designed and implemented institutionally but offers less understanding of how locally embedded gender norms shape women's opportunities to gain political recognition and substantive representation.

This article addresses that gap by integrating institutional scholarship on gender quotas with sociological perspectives on patriarchy, gendered institutions, gender norms, and political legitimacy. Drawing on a qualitative case study of first-time female legislative candidates in Bengkulu Province, the study examines how local gender norms mediate the implementation of Indonesia's 30 percent legislative quota. It argues that quota policies should be understood not simply as legal instruments that expand women's access to electoral competition, but as socially embedded processes whose outcomes are shaped by the interaction between formal institutions and informal gender norms.

The study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it extends research on gender quotas by demonstrating that their effectiveness depends not only on institutional design but also on locally embedded gender norms that influence recruitment, campaigning, and political recognition. Second, it contributes to sociological debates on political representation by identifying political legitimacy as the mechanism linking patriarchal social structures with women's electoral opportunities and the emergence of political agency. Third, it provides empirical evidence from Indonesia's decentralized democratic context, showing how nationally mandated gender equality policies are mediated by local sociocultural conditions. These findings suggest that strengthening women's political representation requires not only institutional reform but also broader transformations in the gender norms through which political authority is socially recognized and legitimized.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how local gender norms shape women's political representation in Bengkulu Province, Indonesia, despite the implementation of the national 30 percent legislative gender quota. A qualitative approach was

appropriate because the study sought to understand the social meanings, lived experiences, and informal institutional practices that cannot be adequately captured through electoral statistics alone. Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of quota policy in numerical terms, the study explored how gender norms were negotiated through candidate recruitment, campaign experiences, and interactions between women candidates and political institutions.

Fieldwork was conducted between December 2023 and February 2024 during the preparation and implementation of Indonesia's 2024 legislative election. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the implementation of the legislative gender quota and their ability to provide rich information on women's political participation. The primary participants consisted of nine first-time female legislative candidates representing different political parties and electoral districts across Bengkulu Province. They ranged in age from approximately 30 to 55 years and came from diverse professional and community backgrounds, including education, entrepreneurship, religious organizations, women's organizations, and community leadership. Although none had previously served as elected legislators, most had been actively engaged in civic and community activities before entering electoral politics. Despite differences in political affiliation and electoral constituency, they shared similar experiences as first-time candidates recruited under the statutory gender quota and encountered comparable institutional and sociocultural challenges during the electoral process.

To strengthen the credibility of the findings through source triangulation, the study also included interviews with political party officials directly involved in candidate recruitment and nomination, as well as local political observers with extensive knowledge of electoral dynamics in Bengkulu. These participants provided institutional and contextual perspectives that complemented the experiences of the female candidates and enabled comparison between individual narratives, party recruitment practices, and broader electoral processes.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by five broad themes: pathways into political candidacy, recruitment experiences within political parties, campaign activities and access to political resources, perceptions of gender and political leadership, and challenges encountered during the electoral process. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian, lasted approximately 45–90 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent before being transcribed verbatim. Participation was voluntary, and all interview data were anonymized to protect participants' identities. The interview data were complemented by documentary analysis of electoral regulations, political party documents, reports published by the General Election Commission (KPU), and official election statistics to contextualize and corroborate participants' accounts.

The data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021), consisting of data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production. Coding was conducted inductively across all interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns, which were subsequently refined into broader themes concerning gender norms, patriarchal political practices, party gatekeeping, political legitimacy, and women's political agency. Throughout the analytical process, constant comparison was used to examine similarities and differences across participants' accounts and documentary evidence.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, source and document triangulation were employed by comparing evidence from female candidates, political party officials, political

observers, and relevant documentary sources. Interpretations were continuously checked against the empirical data to ensure that the findings accurately reflected participants' experiences rather than predetermined theoretical assumptions, thereby strengthening the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Politics as a Gendered Social Institution

The interviews reveal that women's exclusion from electoral politics begins long before they enter political parties or electoral competition. Rather than originating in formal recruitment processes, it is rooted in everyday social relations that shape who is expected to become a political actor and who is not. Across interviews with first-time female legislative candidates, politics was rarely described as a personal aspiration or long-term career path. Instead, most participants explained that their candidacy emerged after being approached by party officials, relatives, neighbours, or friends, often shortly before the candidate registration deadline. As one participant explained,

“I never imagined becoming a legislative candidate. I only agreed because the party asked me shortly before the registration deadline. Politics was never something I thought was meant for women like me” (P3).

This account illustrates that many participants entered electoral politics not as the result of long-term political ambition but in response to encouragement from trusted social networks. These narratives suggest that women's exclusion cannot be explained simply by a lack of competence or interest; rather, politics had long been socially constructed as a domain in which male leadership was regarded as more natural and legitimate.

The interviews further reveal an apparent paradox. Before entering electoral politics, many participants had accumulated substantial leadership experience through religious organisations, neighbourhood associations, women's organisations, educational activities, and other forms of community engagement. These experiences required organisational skills, public communication, and the ability to mobilise collective action, all of which are essential attributes of political leadership. Nevertheless, neither the participants nor political parties consistently regarded these experiences as political qualifications. One participant reflected,

“I had led community activities for years, but I never considered that experience as preparation for politics. People saw me as active in social work, not as someone who could become a politician” (P6).

The quotation demonstrates that extensive civic leadership was rarely perceived, either by the participants themselves or by others, as preparation for formal political leadership. This finding illustrates that the boundary between social leadership and political leadership is itself gendered. While women are encouraged to organise communities and sustain social cohesion, these forms of leadership are rarely recognised as legitimate political capital.

This perception was reinforced by political party officials, who acknowledged that recruitment was often driven by the need to comply with the statutory quota rather than by long-term efforts to develop women leaders. As one party official stated,

“Finding female candidates was not easy. Many women were reluctant to run, so we approached community leaders and acquaintances who were willing to help the party fulfil the quota” (Party Official 1).

A local political observer similarly noted that *“In Bengkulu, politics is still widely perceived as a male arena. Women who enter politics are often viewed as exceptions rather than legitimate political actors”* (Political Observer).

Together, these accounts indicate that gender quotas operate within an existing patriarchal social environment in which political leadership continues to be associated with masculinity. As a result, women's extensive civic engagement is rarely converted into political legitimacy. Many participants therefore entered electoral politics with limited confidence in their ability to be accepted as legitimate political leaders because prevailing social expectations continued to position political authority as a predominantly male domain.

This distinction reflects what may be understood as gendered political legitimacy, whereby political authority is evaluated not solely through competence or leadership experience but also through socially accepted expectations of masculinity and femininity. In Bengkulu, women's participation in community life is generally welcomed when it is associated with caregiving, social welfare, and collective service. Political leadership, however, continues to be associated with authority, competition, and decision making, qualities that are culturally perceived as masculine. Consequently, women's extensive civic engagement does not automatically translate into recognition as legitimate political leaders. Instead, many participants entered electoral politics with limited confidence in their political legitimacy because prevailing social expectations continued to position leadership as a predominantly male domain.

These findings resonate with Walby's (1990) conceptualization of patriarchy as a social structure reproduced through interconnected institutions rather than through isolated acts of discrimination. Women's political exclusion therefore begins not within electoral institutions alone but within broader social structures that define authority, leadership, and public participation through gendered expectations. Connell's (2009) concept of the gender order further explains how these expectations become normalized through everyday interactions, making masculine authority appear natural while limiting the political legitimacy of women. The experiences of the participants demonstrate that these patriarchal norms are reproduced long before women formally enter electoral competition and subsequently shape how both women and political organizations understand political leadership.

Viewed from this perspective, the limited impact of gender quotas cannot be explained solely by weaknesses in party recruitment or institutional implementation. Although quota policies create formal opportunities for women to contest elections, they operate within a patriarchal social structure in which political authority has already been constructed as masculine. Women's underrepresentation therefore reflects not only institutional barriers but also the continuing influence of local gender norms that shape political legitimacy long before formal political participation begins. This finding provides the foundation for the following section, which examines how political parties institutionalize and reproduce these socially embedded gender norms through their recruitment practices.

Political Parties as Sites of Patriarchal Reproduction

While local gender norms shape women's perceptions of political leadership, political parties function as the institutional arena where these norms are reproduced and translated into organizational practice. The interviews indicate that the recruitment of female candidates was rarely embedded within long-term cadre development or leadership succession. Instead, most participants reported being approached shortly before the registration deadline, often after party leaders had experienced difficulties in meeting the statutory 30 percent gender quota. As one participant recalled:

“I was contacted only a few days before the registration deadline. The party asked whether I was willing to become a candidate because they still needed women to complete the quota” (P4).

This account suggests that recruitment was largely reactive and intended to satisfy administrative requirements rather than to identify and develop prospective women leaders. A party official reinforced this interpretation by acknowledging:

“Our priority was to ensure that the candidate list met the legal requirement. We had limited time to prepare new female candidates” (PO1).

Together, these accounts indicate that the implementation of the statutory gender quota was understood primarily as fulfilling legal obligations rather than investing in women's long-term political development. Consequently, the 30 percent quota functioned largely as a mechanism of procedural compliance, emphasizing numerical representation over substantive political empowerment.

The recruitment process also reflected unequal patterns of institutional investment. After accepting their nominations, many participants reported receiving limited political orientation, campaign preparation, and organizational support. As one participant explained:

“After I submitted my documents, I received very little guidance from the party. I had to organise my own campaign and rely on family and friends” (P7).

This quotation illustrates that women were formally nominated but received little institutional investment to compete effectively. Without systematic training, mentoring, or access to party resources, many candidates relied primarily on personal networks and individual resources throughout the campaign. In many cases, the party's involvement ended once administrative requirements had been fulfilled, leaving female candidates to navigate electoral competition largely on their own. As a result, the quota increased women's presence on candidate lists but did little to strengthen their electoral competitiveness or political capacity. Rather than functioning as a mechanism for leadership development, quota implementation became an administrative exercise that fulfilled legal requirements without providing meaningful political support.

These findings illustrate how political parties operate as gendered institutions. Feminist institutionalism argues that organizations reproduce broader social inequalities through informal rules, routines, and everyday practices that appear politically neutral but systematically privilege particular groups (Waylen, 2017). In Bengkulu, gender inequality was reproduced not through explicit discrimination but through routine organizational decisions concerning recruitment timing, candidate preparation, resource allocation, and access to political networks. Consequently, women formally received the same opportunity to contest elections, yet they entered the electoral arena under substantially unequal conditions. The findings therefore demonstrate that the effectiveness of gender quotas depends not only on legal mandates but also on how political parties implement them.

Late recruitment, limited candidate preparation, unequal resource allocation, and weak organizational support collectively transformed the statutory quota from an instrument of political inclusion into a mechanism of procedural compliance.

The findings further suggest that party gatekeeping should not be understood solely as an organizational problem but as a reflection of broader sociocultural expectations regarding political authority. Party elites operate within the same local gender order that positions men as more experienced, electable, and politically legitimate. Consequently, female candidates entered electoral competition with fewer organizational resources, weaker campaign preparation, and more limited access to strategic political networks than their male counterparts. Rather than challenging patriarchal norms, political parties frequently became institutional mechanisms through which those norms were normalized and reproduced within formal democratic institutions.

These findings resonate with Walby's (1990) conceptualization of patriarchy as a system reproduced across interconnected institutional structures. Political parties do not create patriarchal norms independently; rather, they institutionalize gender relations that have already been normalized within families, communities, and local culture. Recruitment practices therefore represent one mechanism through which broader patriarchal structures are reproduced within democratic institutions. The implementation of gender quotas consequently reflects not only institutional practices but also the wider patriarchal environment in which political parties operate.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the limited effectiveness of gender quotas in Bengkulu cannot be attributed solely to weak party commitment or imperfect policy implementation. Rather, political parties translated the statutory quota into an administrative requirement focused on fulfilling nomination rules rather than developing women's political leadership. Although affirmative action expanded women's formal access to electoral competition, it left unequal patterns of recruitment, training, resource allocation, and organizational support largely unchanged. These findings demonstrate that the success of gender quotas depends not only on legal reform but also on institutional transformation capable of converting procedural compliance into substantive political empowerment.

Negotiating Gender Norms during Electoral Competition

The electoral campaign represented more than a competition for votes. For the women in this study, campaigning became a continuous process of negotiating the social expectations attached to femininity, leadership, and public visibility. Unlike male candidates, participants were required not only to demonstrate political competence but also to maintain culturally valued identities as respectable women, caring mothers, wives, and active community members. Their political participation therefore did not replace existing gender expectations but accumulated alongside them, creating multiple and often contradictory social demands throughout the campaign period.

Rather than relying primarily on formal party structures, most participants mobilized electoral support through community-based networks that had been established long before they entered politics. Religious gatherings (*pengajian*), neighbourhood associations, women's organisations, and other informal community activities became the principal venues through which candidates introduced themselves to voters. As one participant explained:

“To reach female voters, I relied on community gatherings such as neighbourhood women's rotating savings groups (arisan RT) and religious study groups organized through the

Badan Kontak Majelis Taklim (BKMT). Those were the places where I could meet women directly because they already knew and trusted me.” (P2)

This quotation illustrates that community and religious networks served not only as campaign venues but also as trusted social spaces where women candidates could engage voters through relationships established long before the election. These familiar settings reduced barriers to voter interaction by allowing women to campaign within culturally accepted environments rather than through highly competitive political events. Campaign mobility therefore followed existing community routines, enabling candidates to reach voters in socially legitimate spaces while simultaneously limiting opportunities to expand beyond the social networks in which they were already known. These community and religious networks not only influenced where women campaigned but also how they interacted with voters, favouring relationship-based communication over conventional party-centred campaigning. Consequently, community engagement functioned as both a political resource and a social boundary that shaped the scope of women's electoral campaigns. While these networks strengthened voter trust, they also reinforced the expectation that women's political legitimacy should emerge primarily from community service rather than from their capacity as political leaders.

Campaign activities also required women to negotiate prevailing expectations regarding appropriate femininity and public behaviour. Although participants did not explicitly describe these expectations as deliberate campaign strategies, their electoral activities were closely embedded within religious and community settings where social norms remained highly visible. Public meetings were frequently conducted through *pengajian*, neighbourhood associations, and other community gatherings that were already considered culturally appropriate spaces for women. These settings enabled women to interact with voters while remaining consistent with local expectations regarding respectable womanhood. As a result, campaign strategies extended beyond communicating political programmes to maintaining moral legitimacy within the community. Women therefore sought to demonstrate political competence without appearing to challenge prevailing gender norms or cultural expectations regarding femininity.

Family responsibilities further shaped campaign mobility throughout the electoral process. Several participants described balancing campaign schedules with childcare, household responsibilities, and obligations toward extended family members. Rather than campaigning continuously throughout the day, many adjusted political activities around domestic and professional responsibilities. As one participant explained:

“I usually carried out campaign activities in between my household responsibilities and my work at the office. I had to adjust my campaign schedule around both because I could not neglect either of them.” (P8)

This account illustrates that women's campaign mobility was constrained not only by electoral demands but also by the need to fulfil domestic and professional responsibilities simultaneously. Consequently, campaign mobility was determined not only by electoral strategy but also by women's ability to negotiate domestic responsibilities and socially acceptable forms of public participation. Unlike many male candidates, whose campaign schedules were generally less affected by household expectations, women often had to fit political activities around existing family and work obligations. Political visibility therefore required women to negotiate electoral competition alongside prevailing expectations regarding family responsibilities and appropriate public behaviour, shaping both the intensity and geographical reach of their campaigns.

These constraints were further intensified by limited institutional support from political parties. Several participants explained that they organized campaign activities independently or cooperated with fellow candidates to share transportation, campaign materials, and logistical resources. Others relied on assistance from senior politicians, most of whom were men with greater financial resources and stronger political networks. These arrangements reflected pragmatic strategies for overcoming institutional limitations, yet they also revealed unequal power relations within the electoral process. Women's campaigns frequently combined community-based mobilisation with selective reliance on male-dominated political networks, demonstrating that formal electoral competition continued to operate within a broader patriarchal structure in which access to strategic resources remained unevenly distributed. Consequently, women's campaign strategies reflected both individual agency and structural constraint, illustrating that electoral competition continued to privilege candidates with greater access to organisational resources, political networks, and financial support.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that women's agency should not be understood simply as resistance to patriarchal culture. Rather, agency was exercised through everyday negotiations over campaign mobility, voter interaction, self-presentation, family responsibilities, religious legitimacy, and community engagement. Instead of rejecting local gender norms, participants strategically adapted to them while gradually expanding their political presence within socially acceptable boundaries. This reflects what feminist institutionalist scholars describe as negotiating agency within gendered institutions, where women pursue political participation through strategies that accommodate, reinterpret, and occasionally stretch prevailing social expectations rather than openly confronting them (Waylen, 2017). Consequently, electoral competition in Bengkulu was not merely a contest for votes but a social arena in which gender norms were continuously reproduced, negotiated, and subtly redefined. The implementation of gender quotas therefore expanded women's formal access to electoral competition, yet their ability to compete effectively continued to be shaped by the gendered norms governing everyday campaign practices, community legitimacy, and access to political resources.

From Symbolic Inclusion to Emerging Political Agency

Although the experiences of the participants reveal the limitations of gender quotas in transforming women's political representation, the findings also suggest that symbolic inclusion can initiate important processes of political learning and identity formation. Most women entered electoral politics with limited political experience and little expectation of pursuing long-term political careers. However, participation in the electoral process appeared to broaden their reflections on politics, leadership, and their own capacity to contribute to public decision-making. Electoral competition therefore functioned not only as an institutional requirement but also as a context in which participants began to develop new understandings of political participation.

Throughout the campaign, participants were exposed to experiences that extended beyond electoral competition itself. Interactions with voters, engagement in public discussions, and involvement in campaign activities enabled many women to become more familiar with legislative responsibilities, political communication, and community representation. Several participants described gaining greater confidence in speaking publicly, interacting with diverse social groups, and articulating issues affecting their communities. These experiences suggest that political agency is not always a prerequisite for political participation; rather, participation itself may provide

opportunities for political agency to begin emerging. Formal access to elections, although initially symbolic, created opportunities for women to acquire political knowledge, expand their social networks, and reflect on their political identities.

Importantly, this emerging sense of political agency did not necessarily manifest as resistance to local gender norms. Instead, many participants described beginning to reinterpret their existing social roles as valuable resources for political engagement. Their experience as community organisers, religious activists, educators, and neighbourhood leaders became important sources of confidence that encouraged them to view politics as a domain in which they could legitimately participate. Rather than abandoning culturally valued identities, participants incorporated these identities into their understanding of political leadership. This finding is consistent with sociological perspectives that conceptualise agency as relational and context-dependent, developing through interaction with existing social structures rather than independently of them.

The findings also suggest that women's participation may have broader social implications extending beyond the individual candidates themselves. The visibility of women contesting legislative elections has the potential to challenge prevailing assumptions about who can legitimately occupy political space. Although most participants were not elected, their campaigns increased the public presence of female candidates and may have contributed to greater political interest among women within their communities. Symbolic representation therefore appears capable of generating social consequences that extend beyond immediate electoral outcomes by gradually expanding public recognition of women's presence in formal politics.

These findings invite a reconsideration of how the success of gender quotas should be evaluated. Existing assessments frequently emphasise descriptive representation by measuring the number of women elected to political office. While such indicators remain important, the Bengkulu case suggests that quotas may also generate less visible but equally significant sociological outcomes. Even when they do not substantially alter electoral results, quotas can create opportunities for political learning, encourage new political subjectivities, and broaden the social imagination of women's political leadership. Their contribution therefore lies not only in increasing women's numerical representation but also in creating conditions under which new forms of political engagement may gradually emerge.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the relationship between gender quotas and women's political representation is neither linear nor exclusively institutional. Legal quotas opened opportunities for women to enter electoral politics, but local gender norms continued to shape how those opportunities were experienced. At the same time, participation in electoral competition appeared to provide an important context in which participants began to reconsider their political roles, capabilities, and aspirations. Rather than viewing symbolic inclusion and substantive empowerment as mutually exclusive outcomes, this study suggests that symbolic inclusion may represent an early stage in a longer process through which political agency can gradually emerge. Because this research captures participants' experiences at a single point in time, it cannot determine whether these developments will be sustained over time. Future longitudinal research is therefore needed to examine whether these emerging forms of political agency persist beyond a single electoral cycle and translate into sustained political participation and leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how local gender norms shape women's political representation in Bengkulu despite Indonesia's legal requirement that political parties nominate at least 30 percent women candidates. The findings demonstrate that the limited effectiveness of gender quotas cannot be explained solely by weak party commitment or imperfect policy implementation. Rather, quota implementation is embedded within a broader gender order that continues to define political leadership as a predominantly masculine domain. Long before women enter political parties or electoral competition, local gender norms influence how political authority is perceived, how leadership is socially legitimized, and how women themselves imagine their place in politics. Consequently, affirmative action expands formal political access but does not automatically transform the informal institutions that continue to regulate political participation.

The study further shows that political parties function as important sites through which these gender norms are reproduced. Although parties formally complied with quota regulations, recruitment practices remained largely procedural, with many women recruited shortly before candidate registration and receiving limited organizational support, political preparation, or campaign resources. These practices should therefore be understood not merely as organizational shortcomings but as institutional expressions of broader sociocultural expectations that continue to privilege male political careers. The findings reinforce feminist institutionalist arguments that formal institutional reforms are unlikely to achieve substantive gender equality when informal institutional practices remain unchanged.

At the same time, the findings indicate that women were not simply passive recipients of patriarchal structures. Throughout the electoral process, participants actively negotiated expectations associated with political leadership, family responsibilities, community engagement, and moral legitimacy. Rather than rejecting local gender norms, they adapted existing social roles to establish political legitimacy within their communities. Participation in electoral politics also appeared to provide opportunities for political learning, increased confidence in public engagement, and the early emergence of political agency. Although most participants were not elected, symbolic inclusion should not be evaluated solely by immediate electoral outcomes, as it may represent the beginning of a longer process through which women's political identities and aspirations gradually develop.

This study contributes theoretically by shifting attention from the legal effectiveness of gender quotas toward the sociocultural processes that mediate their implementation. While previous studies have emphasized electoral systems, party recruitment, and institutional design, this research highlights local gender norms as a critical mechanism linking formal institutions with political outcomes. By demonstrating how these norms shape political recruitment, campaign experiences, and the emergence of women's political agency, the study provides a sociological perspective that complements institutional explanations of women's political representation.

REFERENCES

- Aspinall, Edward, Diego Fossati, Burhanuddin Muhtadi, and Eve Warburton. 2021. *Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia: Money Politics, Patronage and Clientelism*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2021. *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: SAGE.
- Cislaghi, Beniamino, Asha Bhatia, Elisabeth Hallgren, Nour Horanieh, Ann M. Weber, and Gary L. Darmstadt. 2022. "Gender Norms and Gender Equality in Full-Time Employment and Health: A 97-Country Analysis of the World Values Survey." *Frontiers in Psychology* 13:689815. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.689815>
- Clark, Jennifer, Ann D. Blackman, and Ayça Şaşmaz. 2024. "What Men Want: Parties' Strategic Engagement with Gender Quotas." *Comparative Political Studies* 57(14):2414–2448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140241252073>
- Clayton, Amanda. 2021. "How Do Electoral Gender Quotas Affect Policy?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 24(1):235–252. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102019>
- Clayton, Amanda, Diana Z. O'Brien, and Jennifer M. Piscopo. 2025. "Electoral Gender Quotas and Democratic Legitimacy." *American Political Science Review* 120(1):123–140. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055425000176>
- Connell, Raewyn. 2009. *Gender: In World Perspective*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Corbett, Caroline, Jan G. Voelkel, Marianne Cooper, and Robb Willer. 2022. "Pragmatic Bias Impedes Women's Access to Political Leadership." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119(6). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2112616119>
- Dahlerup, Drude. 2005. "Increasing Women's Political Representation: New Trends in Gender Quotas." Pp. 141–153 in *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, revised edition, edited by J. Ballington and A. Karam. Stockholm: International IDEA.
- Fraile, Marta, and Dora M. Marinova. 2024. "Closing the Gender Gap in Internal Political Efficacy? Gender Roles and the Masculine Ethos of Politics in Spain." *Political Behavior* 46(4):2287–2311. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-024-09918-w>
- Goyal, Tanushree. 2023. "Representation from Below: How Women's Grassroots Party Activism Promotes Equal Political Participation." *American Political Science Review* 118(3):1415–1430. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000953>
- Krook, Mona Lena. 2009. *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lawless, Sophie, Philippa J. Cohen, Cynthia McDougall, Stacy Mangubhai, Andrew M. Song, and Tiffany H. Morrison. 2021. "Tinker, Tailor or Transform: Gender Equality Amidst Social-Ecological Change." *Global Environmental Change* 72:102434. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2021.102434>
- Noh, Yujin, Sharan Grewal, and Mehmet T. Kılavuz. 2023. "Regime Support and Gender Quotas in Autocracies." *American Political Science Review* 118(2):706–723. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542300059X>
- Ohmura, Tamaki, and Stefanie Bailer. 2022. "Power-Seeking, Networking and Competition: Why Women Do Not Rise in Parties." *West European Politics* 46(5):897–927. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2022.2097442>



- Pas, Daphne van der, Loes Aaldering, and Agnieszka L. Bos. 2023. "Looks Like a Leader: Measuring Evolution in Gendered Politician Stereotypes." *Political Behavior* 46(3):1653–1675. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-023-09888-5>
- Polak, Aleksandra, and Marcin Lewandowski. 2024. "Institutions or Ideology? Cross-Party and Cross-Country Analysis of Factors Contributing to the Election of Women to the European Parliament." *European Political Science Review* 17(2):338–357. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773924000286>
- Prihatini, Ella S. 2019. *Women in Indonesian Local Politics: Islam, Gender and Networks in Post-Suharto Indonesia*. London: Routledge.
- Schuler, Paul. 2023. "Gender and Clientelism: Do Expectations of Patronage Penalize Women Candidates in Legislative Elections?" *Comparative Political Studies* 57(14):2348–2375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140231204248>
- Sedlander, Erica, Jeffrey B. Bingenheimer, Michael W. Long, Melissa Swain, and Rajiv N. Rimal. 2022. "The G-NORM Scale: Development and Validation of a Theory-Based Gender Norms Scale." *Sex Roles* 87:350–363. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-022-01319-9>
- Streatfield, Anne, Md. Mizanur Rahman, Shahabuddin Khan, Md. Mominul Haider, Md. Mahfuzur Rahman, Quamrun Nahar, and Kazi Jamil. 2023. "What Shapes Attitudes on Gender Roles among Adolescents in Bangladesh." *Frontiers in Public Health* 11:1121858. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1121858>
- Walby, Sylvia. 1990. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Waylen, Georgina. 2017. *Gender and Informal Institutions*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.