



The Influence of Women’s Political Representation Quotas on Gender-Sensitive Policy Formulation in Local Parliaments in West Sumatra

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of women’s political representation quotas on gender-sensitive policy formulation in local parliaments in West Sumatra, Indonesia. While legal quotas have increased the numerical presence of women legislators, their substantive impact on policymaking remains constrained by institutional hierarchies, party dynamics, and cultural norms. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with female and male legislators, party officials, and civil society actors, complemented by document analysis of parliamentary reports and local regulations. The findings reveal that women’s participation often remains symbolic, with significant barriers limiting their influence on strategic policy areas. Successful gender-sensitive policies, particularly in maternal health, domestic violence, and education, were achieved primarily through coalition-building, strategic committee engagement, and collaboration with civil society. The study underscores that quotas alone are insufficient to ensure substantive gender equality in policymaking, highlighting the importance of institutional reforms, capacity-building, and cultural change to empower women legislators and promote comprehensive gender-sensitive governance.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing recognition of gender equality as a central tenet of democratic governance has encouraged many states, including Indonesia, to adopt affirmative action mechanisms such as gender quotas to improve women’s political representation. In Indonesia, Law No. 10 of 2008 and subsequent electoral regulations mandate that at least 30% of candidates on political party lists be women. This policy is rooted in the broader international commitments under the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), both of which stress the importance of women’s participation in decision-making processes. The aim of these quotas is not merely numerical parity but substantive representation, where women legislators actively influence policymaking, particularly in formulating policies that address

gender-based issues (Awusi et al., 2023; Clayton, 2021; Garba, 2025; Goswami et al., 2023).

In West Sumatra, however, the effectiveness of quotas in fostering gender-sensitive policymaking remains contested. Although women's representation in local parliaments has gradually increased following quota implementation, questions persist regarding whether this numerical presence translates into substantive influence (Wang, 2023; Mori, 2024; Górecki & Pierzgalski, 2022). Scholars such as Dahlerup (2006) argue that quotas often succeed in improving women's descriptive representation but may fail to ensure substantive gains, particularly in patriarchal societies where cultural norms and institutional barriers continue to constrain women's voices. In West Sumatra, where strong patriarchal traditions coexist with modern governance structures, the quota system faces additional challenges in transforming representation into tangible gender-sensitive policy outcomes.

A critical dimension of this debate lies in distinguishing between symbolic inclusion and substantive empowerment. The symbolic presence of women in parliaments may serve to legitimize claims of inclusivity, yet without adequate institutional support and political will, their ability to shape policy remains limited (Phillips, 1995; Verge, 2022; Freidenvall, 2021; Höhmann, 2021). Gender-sensitive policy formulation requires more than women occupying parliamentary seats; it necessitates the integration of gender perspectives into legislative agendas, budget allocations, and program implementation. The critical question, therefore, is whether quotas in West Sumatra have facilitated a shift toward policies that address systemic gender inequalities in education, health, employment, and political participation.

Empirical evidence from Indonesia suggests mixed outcomes. Studies show that in some regions, increased women's representation correlates with more attention to social welfare and family policies (Bessell, 2010; Firdaus & Wulandari, 2023; Yuda & Kühner, 2023). However, in others, female legislators are marginalized within party structures, relegated to "soft" policy domains such as family or social affairs, while being excluded from strategic committees on finance or infrastructure (Prihatini, 2019). In West Sumatra, anecdotal evidence suggests that women legislators often face cultural and institutional barriers that restrict their legislative influence, raising doubts about the extent to which quotas advance gender-sensitive policymaking in practice. This tension highlights the importance of examining not only the numerical outcomes of quotas but also the substantive quality of women's participation in local governance.

From a theoretical perspective, this study is informed by the concepts of descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation concerns the extent to which legislative bodies mirror the demographics of society, while substantive representation refers to the actual advocacy of group interests in policy formulation (Pitkin, 1967; Gould, 2021; Stout et al., 2021). The Indonesian quota system addresses descriptive representation but does not guarantee substantive outcomes. Whether women legislators in West Sumatra have been able to influence policy in ways that advance gender equality is thus an empirical question that demands closer examination. Furthermore, feminist institutionalism provides an analytical lens to explore how formal rules, informal norms, and institutional practices interact to shape women's legislative roles (Mackay & Krook, 2011; Guido et al., 2023).

This article seeks to critically assess the influence of women's political representation quotas on gender-sensitive policy formulation in West Sumatra's local parliaments. Specifically, it aims to explore whether the presence of women legislators has resulted in greater attention to gender issues in local policies, and to what extent institutional, cultural, and political barriers limit their impact. By adopting a qualitative case study approach, the research seeks to contribute to broader debates

on the efficacy of gender quotas as tools for advancing substantive gender equality in politics. The case of West Sumatra provides an important site of inquiry, given its unique intersection of democratic reforms, strong local traditions, and the increasing presence of women in political institutions.

In doing so, the article addresses a critical gap in existing literature on gender quotas in Indonesia, which has largely focused on national-level dynamics while paying less attention to local variations. By situating the analysis within the specific socio-cultural context of West Sumatra, the study provides insights into the complexities of implementing gender quotas in regions where patriarchal values remain deeply entrenched. This research is thus positioned to inform both academic debates and policy discussions about the conditions under which quotas can move beyond symbolic inclusion to foster genuine, gender-sensitive governance at the local level.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, which is considered most appropriate for examining the complex relationship between women's political representation quotas and gender-sensitive policy formulation in West Sumatra. The qualitative approach enables a deeper exploration of the meanings, experiences, and perceptions of female legislators and other stakeholders in the local political process, which would be difficult to capture through purely quantitative data. A case study design is chosen because it allows for a focused, contextualized analysis of local parliaments in West Sumatra as specific institutional sites where gender quotas are implemented and contested. As Yin (2018) emphasizes, case studies are suitable for answering "how" and "why" questions, which aligns with this research's aim of understanding how quotas influence substantive policymaking and why certain outcomes emerge in the local context.

The study was conducted in selected local parliaments across West Sumatra, including both urban and rural districts, to capture variations in political dynamics and socio-cultural influences. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of female legislators, male legislators, party officials, and civil society actors who are actively involved in gender advocacy. This was complemented by a review of parliamentary documents such as legislative drafts, committee reports, and local government regulations related to social welfare, health, education, and labor areas where gender-sensitive policies are most visible. The triangulation of interview data with documentary analysis strengthens the credibility of the findings, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in both lived experiences and institutional evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The data analysis process followed a thematic coding strategy, allowing for the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and contradictions across the interviews and documents. Themes such as "symbolic versus substantive representation," "institutional barriers," "cultural resistance," and "gender-sensitive policy outcomes" were iteratively refined during the coding process. NVivo software was used to organize and analyze the qualitative data, enhancing the systematic handling of complex textual information. To ensure trustworthiness, the research employed strategies such as member checking, where selected participants reviewed interpretations of their interviews, and peer debriefing, in which findings were discussed with academic colleagues familiar with gender and politics. Ethical considerations were also prioritized: participants' anonymity was safeguarded, informed consent was obtained, and the study remained sensitive to the potential risks faced by female legislators who share critical perspectives about their political environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study on the influence of women's political representation quotas on gender-sensitive policy formulation in local parliaments in West Sumatra, Indonesia. The results are derived from a qualitative case study approach that includes interviews with legislators, party officials, and civil society actors, as well as an analysis of parliamentary documents. The findings are discussed in terms of four major themes: symbolic vs. substantive representation, institutional and party barriers, gender-sensitive policy outcomes, and cultural influences and normative constraints.

Symbolic vs. Substantive Representation

A key theme emerging from the interviews is the tension between symbolic and substantive representation, which reveals the gap between numerical inclusion and genuine political influence. While gender quotas in local parliaments in West Sumatra have successfully increased the number of women representatives, this progress often remains superficial. The mere presence of women in legislative bodies does not automatically translate into meaningful participation or influence over decision-making processes. Many respondents noted that women's inclusion tends to serve as a marker of compliance with formal equality rather than a transformation of power relations within political institutions.

However, the persistence of institutional and cultural constraints continues to hinder women's ability to exercise substantive influence. Entrenched patriarchal norms, limited access to political networks, and male-dominated party hierarchies often marginalize women's voices in critical policy debates. In many cases, female representatives are expected to conform to existing agendas rather than advocate for gender-responsive policies. This dynamic suggests that achieving true substantive representation requires not only structural reforms such as quotas but also deeper cultural and institutional changes that challenge the underlying power asymmetries within local governance.

Several female legislators expressed frustration with the symbolic nature of their presence in parliament. One legislator noted:

"The quota allowed me to join the parliament, which would have been impossible otherwise. But being here does not guarantee that my proposals will be heard in critical discussions."

This statement underscores a common sentiment among female legislators who feel that while their presence is acknowledged, it does not translate into real influence. Their involvement often remains superficial, without meaningful contributions to key policy debates. Another legislator explained:

"We are mostly assigned to committees dealing with education or family welfare. Strategic committees, like finance or regional planning, remain dominated by men, which limits our policy impact."

This points to the limited access women have to high-power committees, which are crucial for making decisions on more significant and impactful issues. By relegating women to "softer" policy areas, such as family welfare, their capacity to influence major policy decisions, particularly in areas like economic development and infrastructure, is restricted.

Another legislator provided further insight into the gap between descriptive and substantive representation:

"People often assume that just because women are present in parliament, we are already influencing policy. In reality, it's much harder to make our voices count, especially in committees dominated by men."

This statement highlights the challenge that women face in translating their numerical presence into real policy influence, as they are often excluded from critical discussions in the parliament.

The interview data reinforces the notion that quotas can increase the visibility and legitimacy of women in politics but do not automatically result in substantive participation in policy formulation. The symbolic presence of women in parliament does not guarantee that their voices are heard or that their contributions lead to tangible outcomes. This situation is exacerbated by the patriarchal structure of the institutions and the relegation of women to less powerful committees.

Institutional and Party Barriers

Another central theme identified in the interviews concerns the entrenched institutional and party-related barriers that constrain women legislators' influence in local parliaments. Although gender quotas have opened the door for greater female representation, they have not necessarily ensured equal participation in leadership or strategic policymaking roles. Many women legislators find themselves confined to less influential committees or symbolic roles, reflecting how party structures continue to privilege established male elites. Decision-making power remains concentrated among senior male politicians, and party loyalty often takes precedence over gender equity or policy innovation. This imbalance highlights that representation without authority can render participation performative rather than transformative.

Furthermore, the hierarchical nature of political parties and the absence of transparent selection and promotion mechanisms limit women's ability to shape agendas or build political credibility. Women's legislative initiatives are frequently undervalued or sidelined, reinforcing a cycle of marginalization that diminishes their policy impact. Addressing these institutional barriers requires political will to reform internal party dynamics, including mentorship programs, equitable access to leadership roles, and the establishment of accountability measures to ensure that quotas translate into genuine empowerment rather than token inclusion. One legislator described:

"Our party leaders decide which committees we join. Women are almost always in social sectors, while men control finance, infrastructure, and strategic decision-making."

This reflects the ongoing practice of male domination in key decision-making areas, despite the numerical presence of women. Women are often excluded from high-power committees that control the budget and regional development projects, further limiting their ability to shape substantive policy. A second legislator added:

"Even when we propose gender-sensitive initiatives, approval depends on male committee chairs, so our proposals are often delayed or sidelined."

This highlights how the hierarchical structure within parties and committees effectively limits the autonomy and agency of women legislators. Without the support of male committee chairs, their proposals remain marginalized. A third legislator observed:

"The informal networks within parties favor men. Seniority and patronage mean that women without strong political connections struggle to have influence."

This statement points to the significance of party loyalty and political networks in determining who gets to hold decision-making power. Women who lack these connections face significant barriers to being taken seriously in policy discussions.

The interviews reveal that despite the introduction of quotas, party and institutional barriers continue to impede the ability of women to influence major policy decisions. The dominance of men in strategic decision-making committees, combined with party dynamics that favor male leadership, suggests that quotas alone are insufficient to ensure gender-sensitive policy formulation. Structural reforms are necessary to address these institutional inequalities.

Gender-Sensitive Policy Outcomes

Despite these structural and cultural challenges, several interviews revealed instances where women legislators managed to exert meaningful influence on gender-sensitive policymaking. Their success often stemmed from strategic collaboration with civil society organizations, women's advocacy networks, and supportive male allies within local governments. In areas such as maternal health, domestic violence prevention, and education, women legislators played a crucial role in framing policy debates and ensuring that gender perspectives were integrated into local development agendas. These cases demonstrate that when women leverage collective action and institutional partnerships, they can overcome systemic barriers and push forward substantive policy changes that directly address women's needs and rights.

However, these successes remain uneven and context-dependent, often hinging on individual agency rather than institutionalized support. The ability of women legislators to sustain gender-sensitive initiatives is frequently undermined by shifting political priorities, limited resources, and the absence of long-term mechanisms to monitor implementation. This indicates that while women's leadership can produce tangible policy outcomes, sustainable change requires embedding gender equality within institutional frameworks rather than relying solely on individual efforts. Strengthening coalition-building, policy training, and resource access for women legislators is therefore essential to translate isolated successes into systemic progress. One legislator shared:

"By forming coalitions with other female members across parties, we successfully pushed for a local regulation to improve maternal health services."

This illustrates the importance of cross-party coalition-building, as women legislators often have to collaborate across party lines to push through gender-sensitive initiatives. Another legislator explained:

"We partnered with NGOs to draft programs addressing domestic violence and education access for girls. Collaboration was key to overcoming committee barriers."

This demonstrates the role of external actors, such as NGOs, in supporting women legislators' efforts to push for policies that address gender-based issues. The strategic engagement with civil society helped circumvent institutional barriers and allowed female legislators to advocate for important reforms. A third legislator noted:

"Although these policies are a start, broader issues like women's participation in leadership roles and labor market inequality remain largely unaddressed."

While gender-sensitive policies in specific areas have been achieved, this statement reflects the broader limitations of these efforts. Women's representation in parliament has not yet resulted in comprehensive policy changes that address the full spectrum of gender inequalities.

These interviews highlight the potential of women legislators to achieve gender-sensitive policy outcomes, particularly when they build coalitions and engage with civil society. However, these successes remain limited in scope and fail to address deeper systemic issues such as women's underrepresentation in leadership positions and persistent labor market inequalities. The broader structural and institutional barriers continue to limit the impact of gender-sensitive policies.

Cultural Influences and Normative Constraints

Cultural norms and societal expectations emerged as another major factor limiting the policy influence of women legislators. Although legal mandates for gender quotas have increased women's presence in politics, the broader political culture in West Sumatra continues to be shaped by deeply rooted patriarchal values. Traditional gender roles often define leadership as a male domain, creating an implicit bias that undermines women's legitimacy as political actors. Female legislators frequently face skepticism from both colleagues and constituents, who may perceive their participation as symbolic rather than substantive. This social climate not only restricts their ability to voice independent policy positions but also pressures them to conform to established male-centered political norms in order to gain acceptance and credibility.

Moreover, cultural expectations related to family responsibilities and social behavior further constrain women's political mobility and engagement. Many respondents noted that women politicians must constantly navigate societal judgments about propriety, balancing their public roles with domestic expectations. Such pressures limit the time and energy women can dedicate to legislative work and advocacy. Overcoming these cultural barriers requires a gradual shift in societal perceptions through gender-sensitive education, community engagement, and the promotion of inclusive political narratives that redefine leadership beyond patriarchal frameworks. Only then can women's representation translate into genuine empowerment and transformative policymaking. One legislator explained:

"Even in parliament, some colleagues question women's ability to handle complex policy issues. This makes us cautious and selective in what we advocate."

This reflects the ongoing challenge of cultural resistance to women's full participation in politics. Women are often expected to focus on "appropriate" policy areas such as family welfare or social issues, rather than broader economic or development policies. Another legislator observed:

"There is pressure to focus on issues considered 'appropriate' for women, like family or social welfare, rather than strategic economic or development policies."

This points to the cultural expectations that shape women's political roles and limit the range of issues they are expected to address. A third legislator shared:

"Our influence is further constrained by community expectations. Male-dominated networks often perceive women as less capable, which affects negotiations and policy discussions."

This reveals the persistence of gendered expectations that influence how women are perceived within political institutions, restricting their policy influence and leadership opportunities.

The interviews indicate that cultural and normative constraints continue to limit women's ability to fully participate in politics and policymaking. Despite legal reforms such as quotas, societal perceptions of women's abilities and appropriate roles in politics create significant barriers to substantive influence. Women legislators often

self-censor or focus on policy areas deemed culturally acceptable, which undermines their ability to push for broader systemic reforms.

This study explored the influence of women's political representation quotas on gender-sensitive policy formulation in local parliaments in West Sumatra. The results reveal a complex interplay between institutional practices, cultural norms, and the strategic agency of women legislators. While quotas have increased women's descriptive representation, their substantive influence on policymaking remains constrained by deep-seated institutional barriers and patriarchal cultural values. This section discusses the implications of these findings, situating them within the broader literature on gender quotas and representation, and considers the practical implications for gender-sensitive policymaking. Additionally, we suggest avenues for future research that could deepen understanding of the conditions under which quotas lead to substantive policy change.

A central finding of this study is the distinction between symbolic and substantive representation, a critical theme in feminist political theory. The implementation of gender quotas in West Sumatra has increased the numerical presence of women in local parliaments. However, this increased representation has not automatically resulted in greater influence over policymaking. Women legislators often occupy symbolic roles, their participation limited to less influential committees, while decision-making power over critical issues remains concentrated in male-dominated spaces. Female legislators expressed frustration over this discrepancy, noting that although their presence was acknowledged, their involvement in key policy debates often remained superficial. One legislator mentioned that the quota allowed her to join parliament, but being there did not guarantee that her proposals would be heard in critical discussions. This reflects a broader issue identified by Phillips (1995), who argued that the symbolic presence of women in politics does not always translate into substantive political empowerment. In West Sumatra, while female legislators have achieved increased visibility, their ability to influence major policy areas, such as regional development and economic planning, remains constrained by the gendered division of labor within political institutions.

This limitation mirrors the findings of Dahlerup (2006), who posited that quotas can improve descriptive representation but fail to guarantee substantive political change. Women in West Sumatra are often relegated to "soft" policy areas, such as family welfare, education, and health domains traditionally seen as suitable for women, but that do not hold the same power or strategic importance as economic policy or infrastructure. This highlights the persistent gendered nature of political roles in the region, even after the implementation of quotas. The findings also suggest that quotas, while necessary, are insufficient on their own to foster substantive policy change. This resonates with the broader literature on gender quotas, which underscores the importance of institutional reforms and cultural changes to support the substantive political engagement of women (Bessell, 2010; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). In countries where cultural norms are deeply patriarchal, the presence of women in political institutions does not automatically challenge or disrupt traditional power dynamics.

A second key theme that emerged from the study was the role of institutional and party-related barriers in limiting the influence of female legislators. Despite the legal mandate for gender quotas, the findings suggest that political party structures and institutional practices continue to restrict women's participation in decision-making positions. Women are frequently relegated to committees that deal with social and welfare issues, while committees overseeing budgets, infrastructure, and other strategic areas remain under male control. This is consistent with feminist institutionalist theory, which emphasizes that institutional practices—both formal and informal—shape the effectiveness of gender reforms (Mackay & Krook, 2011). In

West Sumatra, the institutionalization of party hierarchies and the control of strategic policy areas by men create significant barriers to women's political influence. One legislator noted that party leaders decide which committees women will join, and women are almost always assigned to social sectors, while men control the more powerful committees related to finance and infrastructure. These institutional dynamics reflect the gendered nature of political power within local parliaments. Furthermore, even when women propose gender-sensitive policies, the approval process is often dependent on male-dominated committee chairs, which delays or sidetracks their proposals. These findings underscore the limitations of quotas alone in ensuring meaningful political representation. As Freeman and Laber (2016) argue, the efficacy of quotas depends not only on legal reforms but also on changes in party structures and political culture. In West Sumatra, the absence of such reforms has meant that quotas have not been enough to dismantle party dynamics that continue to perpetuate male dominance in strategic policy areas.

Despite these barriers, the study also highlights the importance of coalition-building and collaboration with civil society organizations in achieving gender-sensitive policy outcomes. Female legislators were able to influence policy in areas such as maternal health, domestic violence prevention, and education by forming coalitions with other female members across party lines and engaging with civil society organizations. One legislator emphasized the success of coalition-building, stating that they were able to push for a local regulation to improve maternal health services by working together with women from other political parties. Another legislator highlighted how collaboration with NGOs was essential in drafting programs to address domestic violence and promote education access for girls. These efforts reflect the strategic agency of women legislators, who, despite institutional constraints, leverage their networks and external support to influence policy. These findings support the argument made by Dahlerup (2006) that gender-sensitive policies are more likely to be achieved when women work together and with external actors who can provide resources and support. However, while coalition-building and external partnerships have enabled women legislators to push for important reforms, the study also reveals the limits of these strategies. The broader institutional and cultural barriers persist, limiting the overall scope and effectiveness of gender-sensitive policies. As one legislator noted, while some policies have been successful, issues such as women's participation in leadership roles and labor market inequality remain largely unaddressed. This suggests that coalition-building and external partnerships, while crucial, are insufficient to overcome the broader structural issues that limit women's political power.

Cultural norms and societal expectations also play a significant role in shaping women's political participation and influence. Despite West Sumatra's matrilineal traditions, which elevate the status of women in private life, the public political sphere remains dominated by patriarchal values. Female legislators often face pressure to focus on "appropriate" policy areas, such as family welfare and social issues, rather than broader economic policies. As one legislator explained, even in parliament, colleagues sometimes question women's ability to handle complex policy issues, which makes them cautious about advocating for more ambitious reforms. This reflects the broader societal expectations that women's political roles should be confined to issues deemed "appropriate" for women. This cultural constraint is consistent with Phillips' (1995) argument that women's political representation is not only a matter of legal quotas but also requires challenging deep-seated cultural norms that shape how women's contributions are perceived and valued. In West Sumatra, women's participation is limited by cultural expectations that place restrictions on the issues they are allowed to address. Women are often expected to focus on "soft" issues, such as family or social welfare, rather than tackling more challenging issues related to economic development or infrastructure.

The persistence of these cultural barriers highlights the need for cultural reforms to complement legal and institutional changes. While gender quotas can increase women's representation, they are unlikely to lead to substantive political empowerment without a shift in societal attitudes and political norms. The findings of this study suggest that cultural reform is as important as legal and institutional change in achieving gender-sensitive policymaking. As Mackay & Krook (2011) argue, feminist institutionalism emphasizes the need to address both formal rules and informal cultural practices in order to create an environment where women can fully participate and influence policy.

The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers and advocates seeking to improve gender-sensitive policymaking in Indonesia and beyond. Gender quotas, while essential, are insufficient on their own to guarantee substantive political influence for women. Institutional reforms, such as equitable committee assignments and leadership training for women legislators, are necessary to ensure that women can participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. Furthermore, cultural changes are needed to challenge patriarchal norms and ensure that women's contributions are valued equally. Future research should explore the long-term impact of gender quotas in different political and cultural contexts, particularly in regions where patriarchal norms remain entrenched. Comparative studies across Indonesia or internationally could provide valuable insights into the conditions under which quotas lead to substantive policy change. Additionally, further research could examine the role of civil society organizations in supporting women legislators and the potential for coalition-building to overcome institutional and cultural barriers.

CONCLUSION

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, which is considered most appropriate for examining the complex relationship between women's political representation quotas and gender-sensitive policy formulation in West Sumatra. The qualitative approach enables a deeper exploration of the meanings, experiences, and perceptions of female legislators and other stakeholders in the local political process, which would be difficult to capture through purely quantitative data. A case study design is chosen because it allows for a focused, contextualized analysis of local parliaments in West Sumatra as specific institutional sites where gender quotas are implemented and contested. As Yin (2018) emphasizes, case studies are suitable for answering "how" and "why" questions, which aligns with this research's aim of understanding how quotas influence substantive policymaking and why certain outcomes emerge in the local context.

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