

From Peace Agreement to Political Arena: Women's Participation in Politics after 15 Years of the Mou Helsinki in Aceh

Teuku Muzaffarsyah, Malikussaleh University, Indonesia*

Bobby Rahman, Malikussaleh University, Indonesia

Naidi Faisal, Malikussaleh University, Indonesia

Fidhia Aruni, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Administrasi Nasional, Indonesia

Rifki Elindawati, Malikussaleh University, Indonesia

Abstract

The Helsinki MoU is the peace agreement signed on August 15, 2005, between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) in Helsinki, Finland. In the context of political participation, the MoU urges Acehnese to increase women's participation in politics through affirmative action, particularly a 30% quota in legislative bodies. However, after 15 years of the MoU, Acehnese women's participation in politics is still yet far from the quota. Thus, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of affirmative action policy through the landscape of gender and the persistent gaps between policy intent and outcomes. This study used a qualitative research method with a post-positivist approach. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with members of the Aceh People's Representative Council (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Aceh, DPRA), political party representatives, and women's empowerment officials. The secondary sources were derived from legislation, reports, and media. Findings reveal persistent structural, cultural, and institutional barriers, such as patriarchal norms, limited political support, insufficient resources, and weak institutional enforcement—that hinder the effectiveness of affirmative action policies. As the result we found that while legal frameworks exist, the actual empowerment of women in Aceh's political sphere remains constrained and symbolic.

Keywords:

Aceh; Affirmative action; Gender empowerment; Helsinki MoU; Women in politics

INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, there has been a growing understanding of the importance of gender equality, women's empowerment, and the realization of women's rights in

international rules and accords reflect this understanding, such as The Rio Declaration in 1992 was adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED).

These instruments collectively highlight the interdependence between gender equality, environmental sustainability, and inclusive

*Correspondence:

Cot Tengku Nie Reuleut, Muara Batu, Aceh

Utara, Provinsi Aceh, Indonesia, 24353

Email: tmuzaffarsyah@unimal.ac.id

attaining sustainable development.

development strategies. Moreover, a broader international gender frameworks like the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) which United Nations (UN) melmbelr statels elndolrseld in 1995 (UN Wolmeln, 2014).

Gender inequality has been a systemic and enduring challenge in Indonesia since its independence in 1945. It is rooted in both institutional structures and cultural norms, and has remained a critical challenge since the country's independence in 1945 (Sutiyono et al., 2018). During the New Order era, women participation in politics was limited. Although the introduction of a 30% quota for female political candidates by the 2004 election marked as an important milestone (Aspinall et al., 2021). However, none political parties put women candidate as highly as their men counterarts on party list. This showed that the actual improvements have been slow and uneven.

Women remain marginalized in politics, with only 17–22% representation in legislative bodies, even the quotas mandate were higher levels (Anggraini et al., 2024; Ruriana et al., 2023). Despite constitutional guarantees of equal political rights (Articles 1, 2, 6A, 19, 22C, 27, 28D–E of the 1945 Constitution) and affirmative action policies formalized under Law No. 12/2003, implementation has been impeded by patriarchal cultural norms, weak institutional enforcement, and limited political support for genuine female leadership. It also happened to many regions in Indonesia, such as Aceh.

Previous studies have shown that the gap between policy and outcome has

several critical impacts, such as women are placed low on party lists or in areas where they are unlikely to win, making them less favorable during election (Celis & Lovenduski, 2018; Yurista, 2023). As a result, there are fewer women in positions where they can speak up for important gender-related issues like health, education, or protection from violence (Franceschet et al., 2009). This also means young women or those from traditional communities are hardly to see many female role models in politics. Moreover, it can discourage them from getting involved (Chappell & Waylen, 2013). Even when women get elected, they are sometimes sidelined and not given real decision-making roles, called “tokenism”. Although the law exists to support equality, it has not done enough to change the deeper problems in politics and society (Sari & Aminah, 2020).

In the context of Aceh, the 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) brought an end to decades of armed conflict in Aceh. One of the outcomes was the establishment of an autonomy of Aceh based on local laws, this also includes many aspects related to governance and elections (MoU Helsinki, 2005). This agreement also reflected a shift toward decentralization, empowering Acehnese institutions to shape political and social policies according to local norms, including those related to gender participation (Aspinall et al., 2021). Following the MoU, Law No. 11/2006 on the Government of Aceh (Undang-Undang Pemerintahan Aceh, UUPA)

granted the autonomy to create local political parties, enforce Islamic law, and administer direct regional elections.

While this autonomy provided a unique opportunity to build inclusive political systems, the intersection of Sharia law, post-conflict dynamics, and gender norms in Aceh. Studies show that decentralization in post-conflict areas like Aceh can either open democratic space or reinforce conservative norms, depending on institutional commitment and societal attitudes. Contrary to this believe, it has resulted in limited space for women in politics. Despite legal provisions and increased candidacies, such as the rise in female candidates from 6% in 2009 to 15% in 2014 The actual number of elected women remains low. Cultural resistance, religious justifications against female leadership, and inadequate institutional support persist as significant barriers (Wahyudi, 2021; Anggrainidewi et al., 2024).

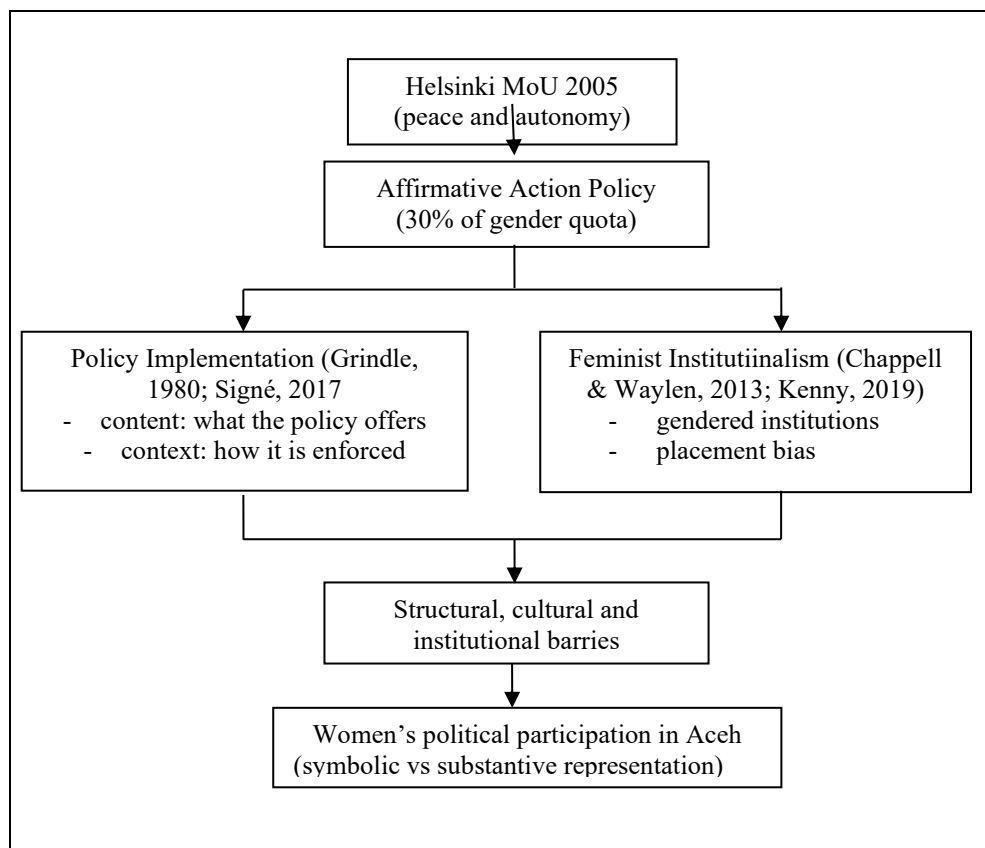
This disconnect between policy intent and practical outcomes raise a

critical issue to why do affirmative action frameworks, including those enabled by special autonomy, fail to deliver substantial political empowerment for women? To answer the issue, this study aims to examines the effectiveness affirmative action mechanisms through the landscape of gender and the persistent gaps between policy intent and outcomes. It argues that without substantive shifts in party practices, social attitudes, and institutional capacity, formal legal frameworks alone cannot deliver meaningful gender empowerment, particularly women's participation in politics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To address the issue, this paper used gender perspective, followed by public policy implementation, affirmative action as gender-focused public policy and feminist institutionalism.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of the Paper



Source: Primary Source, Processed by the Authors, 2024

Public Policy Implementation

Public policy is defined as a set of strategic decisions or action outlines taken by the government to regulate the management and distribution of public resources in pursuit of public welfare (Maimanah & Nolvianto, 2015). Making public policy is a complex process that involves interactions between political institutions, interest groups, and the needs of society, all shaped by the social, cultural, and economic environment (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009). In reality, public policies are not neutral, they reflect the interests, power dynamics, and beliefs of the people and groups involved in creating and carrying

them out (Cairney, 2012). In alignment with Easton (1969) and Dye (2009), public policy is not simply a written program but a mechanism through which values are allocated authoritatively and social problems are addressed.

The focus of this paper is the implementation of affirmative action in Aceh Province following the 2005 Helsinki MoU, mainly about women participation in politics. The MoU and follow-up laws provided a chance to include more women in decision-making through policies like the 30% quota. However, putting these policies into action is not always straightforward.

According to Signé (2017), the implementation is not merely a technical phase of a policy cycle, but he also argued the change either occurs or fails. Whether or not these changes succeed depends a lot on how well different groups, such as the government, political parties, and local communities. It depends on the interactions between actors, institutions, and contextual dynamics. This means that even if the rules support equality, the real-world results can fall short without broader support and understanding from institutions and society.

Meanwhile Grindle's (1980) framework shows that this process by identifying two central domains of policy implementation. *First* domain is content of policy, it includes the interests affected, types of benefits, decision-making venues, and resource allocation. *Second* domain context of implementation, which consists of actors' political will, institutional capabilities, and sociocultural norms. In the case of Aceh, the implementation of gender quotas (30%) in political parties represents a content-driven affirmative policy. Meanwhile, the cultural-religious context, the application of Sharia Law affects the policy's success on the ground.

Affirmative Action as Gender-Focused Public Policy

Affirmative action is recognized as a "fast-track" policy strategy to accelerate gender equality in political spaces (Rahmatunnisa, 2016). This is a form of constructive discrimination. It aimed at correcting historic marginalization of women in leadership

(Sari & Aminah, 2020). The rationale behind this approach lies in enabling women to influence decision-making in male-dominated institutions by reaching a "critical mass" as a minimum level of representation needed for their voices to be persuasive and impactful (Rahmatunnisa, 2016). Accordingly, the state has adopted affirmative action as a response to systemic gender-based discrimination, inequality, and marginalization. These stem from patriarchal structures present in both public and private spheres (Sari & Aminah, 2020).

Affirmative action is therefore intended not only to improve women's numerical presence but also to create space for them to access leadership roles based on their talents and abilities. However, as Hamid (2019) study argued that without strong and sustained implementation, particularly in post-conflict or religiously conservative regions, such policies risk becoming symbolic or tokenistic (Hamid, 2020). When state policies regarding marginalized groups remain poorly enforced, it can lead to the continued perception of women as unsuitable to participate meaningfully in public affairs. Thus it reinforces structural exclusion (Hamid, 2019).

In Aceh, affirmative action policies often confront dual challenges, first a lack of institutional enforcement capacity and the persistence of informal norms that reinforce male political dominance. Despite the national-level adoption of gender quotas, the region shows resistance in translating these policies into actual representation, as reflected in the relatively low number of elected

women. This illustrates that while gender quotas are among the most efficient methods for increasing women's representation, particularly in legislatures. They must be supported by institutional will and cultural shifts to be truly transformative (Rahmatunnisa, 2016).

Feminist Institutionalism

Feminist Institutionalism (FI) is a theory that examines how formal rules, such laws or quotas and informal norms, like religious expectations or patriarchal bias interact to structure gendered outcomes in political systems (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Kenny, 2013). FI argues that institutions are not gender-neutral. Instead, they are embedded with implicit norms that reflect and reproduce male-centered values. In Aceh Sharia political and legal systems formally allow female participation, however, it may carry embedded narratives that limit women's roles in leadership. Even when women are elected, the institutional culture may discourage their influence or visibility.

Key concepts that are relevant to this study is *first*, gendered institutions which systematically advantage male actors unless deliberately reformed. *Second*, rule informality and resistance, this concept shows that even with formal gender quotas, parties may sideline female candidates through placement bias or lack of campaign support. This reveals how informal norms and unwritten rules within political institutions often subvert the intent of gender equality policies (Chappell & Waylen, 2013). *Third* concept is critical mass vs. critical actors, by increasing the number of women is not enough. Their

influence depends on the presence of actors committed to challenging gender norms (Celis & Lovenduski, 2018).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study applies a descriptive qualitative method with a post-positivist approach. The researcher uses theoretical frameworks particularly Grindle's Policy Implementation Theory and Feminist Institutionalism, while grounding the analysis in the actual social and political realities of Aceh Province. The research aims to explore how the Aceh People's Representative Council (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Aceh*, DPRA) and the Office for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (*Dinas Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak*, DPPPA) carry out their roles in formulating and recommending gender-related policies, mainly those related to affirmative action in the post-Helsinki MoU context.

Data were collected through a combination of document analysis and in-depth interviews. The document analysis focused on reviewing performance reports, relevant legislation, journal articles, and credible media sources that discuss gender policy and political participation in Aceh. In-depth interviews were conducted with stakeholders including officials from DPPPA and Regional Development Planning Agency (*Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah*, Bappeda), members of the DPRD, local women leaders, and academic experts. These interviews followed a structured guide to ensure consistency across themes and topics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Women's Political Involvement in Aceh Province

The data shows women's representation in Aceh's parliament remains consistently low across the province and its cities for the years 2020 and 2021 (**Table 1**). For example, in Aceh overall women's involvement was

11.11%, with variations the lowest 2.22% in Aceh Utara to the highest of 36.67% in Aceh Tamiang. The persistent gap between the mandated 30% quota and the actual political participation of women, indicating that the quota requirement has yet to fully translate into proportional female representation.

Table 1. Women's Involvement in Parliament across Aceh Province and Regencies (2020–2021)

Province/City/Regency	Women's Involvement in Parliament (%) 2020	Women's Involvement in Parliament (%) 2021
ACEH	11.11	11.11
Simeluluel	20	20
Aceh Singkil	12	12
Aceh Selatan	10	10
Aceh Tenggara	10	10
Aceh Timur	7.5	7.5
Aceh Tengah	16.67	16.67
Aceh Barat	8	8
Aceh Besar	2.86	2.86
Pidie	17.5	17.5
Bireuen	7.5	7.5
Aceh Utara	2.22	2.22
Aceh Barat Daya	4	4
Gayo Lues	5	5
Aceh Tamiang	36.67	36.67

Source: BPS - Statistics Indonesia, 2022.

Women's participation in politics remains difficult to fully integrate into the broader political sphere. This is largely due to how women are represented within political institutions and decision-making processes. Their presence in the legislature is far from proportional to their share of the population. This means women's perspectives are underrepresented in policy debates and law-making. Moreover, women's involvement in

legislative matters cannot be separated from their broader engagement in political life as both are shaped by structural opportunities and systemic barriers. While the importance of women's representation is supported by strong arguments, empirical evidence shows that many barriers still hinder their political participation (Fellegi et al., 2023).

Since women continue to face discrimination, their presence in

parliament is vital for ensuring that their interests and rights are effectively represented (Bernhard et al., 2021). However, entrenched practices among some male lawmakers contribute to the persistently low level of women's representation, particularly in advancing women's rights agendas. Progress for women in parliament is also shaped by the interplay of religion, cultural norms, traditions, and government policies.

In Aceh, despite facing the lack of number (with below quota), DPRA participates in the implementation of gender-responsive policies, especially those promoting the 30% quota for women's representation in politics. The DPRA is responsible for ensuring that these autonomy rights are used to support gender justice. The DPRA is involved in budgeting and policy oversight to ensure that gender mainstreaming is integrated into provincial programs. This includes cooperation with DPPPA and other stakeholders. DPRA also exercises oversight over the implementation of gender mainstreaming policies and evaluates the performance of gender-focused institutions in Aceh, including how effectively affirmative action is being practiced. *"The DPRA, especially Commission VIII, conducts oversight over the realization of programs that promote gender equality in Aceh."*

A critical takeaway from is that having laws and formal commitments to increase women's representation in politics is important, but it is not enough to create real change in Aceh. If deep-rooted cultural norms, gender bias, and structural barriers are not addressed, the 30% quota may remain more of a

symbolic target than a real driver of equality (Aspinall et al., 2021; Hillman, 2018). Real progress requires two things, which are stronger enforcement of the rules and active efforts to challenge social attitudes that keep women in the private sphere (Fraser, 1995). Thus, women's representation go beyond meeting numbers to having genuine influence in political decision-making.

2. Female Legislators and Party Representation

During 2019 election, female legislative members of the Aceh People's Representative Council (DPRA) during 2019–2024, their party affiliations, and number of votes received as it is shown in **table 2 and 3**. Women represent a minority, only 8 of 81 members (8.2%) during 2019–2024 (**table 3**), it is below quota despite an increasing number of female candidates. The challenges comes from two factors, first strong competition from male political candidates, which overshadows women's participation, and second, a lack of civic education about the role and importance of women voters. Although women's participation in politics has become more common, especially after their consistent presence in legislative elections since 2008.

In a personal interview, Darwati A. Gani, a member of the Aceh Regional People's Representative Council (DPRA), highlighted persistent challenges in promoting gender awareness within Acehnese society. She noted, *"There is still a lack of understanding of gender in Acehnese society due to competition with male election participants and a lack of education regarding the role of women voters at the grassroots level."* Reflecting on

recent political developments, she added, *“The presence of women in the 2019 election is no longer a novelty because the democratic party was energized by the female presence in previous elections, specifically the legislative elections in 2008, 2014, and 2019”* (D. A. Gani, personal communication, August 11, 2022).

This underrepresentation as it is shown in **table 3**, the gender composition of DPRA showed gap between male and female representative between 2019-2020. It is also linked to the structural dynamics within political parties in Aceh, where leadership, campaign resources, and strategic electoral districts are often controlled by male-dominated networks. Female candidates are frequently placed in less

competitive positions on the party list, limiting their chances of winning (Inside Indonesia, 2019). Furthermore, the absence of systematic mentorship, leadership training, and long-term support programs for women reduces their capacity to build political careers that extend beyond a single term (White et al., 2024). As a result, women’s legislative presence often remains symbolic, with limited influence over core decision-making processes. Addressing these barriers requires not only stronger enforcement of the 30% quota within party structures but also targeted interventions to shift societal attitudes that continue to perceive politics as a male domain.

Table 2. Female Legislative Members of Aceh
People's Representative Council (DPRA) 2019–2024

No	Legislative Member Name	Party	Votes
1	Darwati A. Gani	PAN	5,768
2	Kartini Ibrahim	Gerindra	8,091
3	Hj. Nurllellawati	Golkar	6,411
4	Nuraini Mayda	Golkar	7,456
5	Martini	PA	9,767
6	Suryani	PKS	2,416
7	Nolra Idah Nita	Demokrat	15,637
8	Hj. Asmidar	PA	14,204
9	Hj. Sartina Na	Golkar	19,219

Table 3. Gender Composition of Aceh
People's Representative Council (DPRA) 2019–2024

Gender	Number of Members	Percentage	Information
Male	73	91,8	Dominant
Female	8	8,2	Below quota
Total	81	100	

Source: DPRA, 2022.

3. Policy Implementation: Between Normative Mandates and Reality

Despite national laws and Aceh's enhanced autonomy under Law No. 11/2006 (Undang-Undang No. 11/2006 tentang Pemerintah Aceh) promoting gender equality and affirmative action, practical application remains weak. The Office for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (DPPPA) has limited power to apply the gender quota, the agency efforts are mainly socialization and advocacy, rather than regulation or sanctions: *"DPPPA does not have the authority to regulate or sanction political parties who fail to meet the 30% quota. Our role is limited to socializing and advocating gender awareness."* (Interview with DPPPA Aceh Official, 2023). This reflects Grindle's (1980) theoretical assertion that policy implementation depends not only on the policy content but critically on context implementation. It includes actor interests, institutional capacities and socio-political norm. DPPPA's institutional limitations restrict effective monitoring and compliance enforcement of gender quotas.

Empirical research supports this disconnect. Although a 30% candidate quota exists, its enforcement remains weak, as political parties often treat compliance as a formality (Fransin Kontu & Stefanus Pesak, 2025). According to Perdana and Hillman (2020) observed that although a 30% candidate quota exists, parties often comply only on paper. Common tactics include placing women in unwinnable positions on party lists, reflecting weak enforcement of the rule (Perdana & Hillman, 2020). The 2019 national survey by Komnas Perempuan

also found that only 14% of political parties across the country fully complied with the 30% female candidate requirement, with several manipulating administrative rules to avoid sanctions. In Aceh particularly, the number of women candidates rose from 6% in 2009 to 15% in 2014. Although the percentage figures show an increase, the number of elected women remained stagnant due to weak oversight and tokenistic compliance (Darwin & Haryanto, 2020). These findings underscore the importance of not just having affirmative action laws, but ensuring that local institutions have both the authority and resources to implement them effectively.

These systemic challenges are compounded by internal political dynamics. Kartini Ibrahim (Gerindra), a DPR member expected to serve as Deputy Chair of Commission II on Economic Affairs, holds a strategic position but notes significant barriers to women advancing in leadership roles. *"There are very few women in parliament, and it is difficult for us to obtain positions like commission chairs or faction leaders because we are underrepresented—only nine women in total,"* she stated (Interview, August 27, 2022, Banda Aceh). Similarly, Asmidar (Partai Aceh), expected to serve as Secretary of Commission VI on Education and Privileges, represents another rare case of female presence in high-level commissions. However, the overall landscape remains male-dominated.

Adding to this, Darwati A. Gani, another member of the DPR, emphasized the structural and cultural

barriers that persist: *"There is still a lack of understanding of gender in Acehnese society due to competition with male candidates and a lack of voter education at the grassroots level"* (Interview via WhatsApp, August 11, 2022). She further noted that while women's participation in elections is no longer novel, experience alone has not translated into significant gains in representation. *"The 30 percent quota for female candidates is already legally mandated, which is a major achievement for political parties, but it needs to be pushed further to be more effective."* These interviews illustrate the need not just for laws, but for institutional reform and grassroots political education in order for women moving from candidacy to meaningful leadership. Without this, women's roles remain peripheral and affirmative action risks becoming merely symbolic.

4. Political Parties and Resistance to Quota Realization

Interviews with political party representatives reveal that gender quotas tend to be treated as formalities rather than strategies for substantive inclusion: *"There is indeed a quota. But practically, we place women candidates just to fulfill the formality. It's hard to find female cadres who want to be involved in politics, and those who do are often not prioritized."* (Interview with Political Party Representative, Aceh, 2023). This candid admission demonstrates the phenomenon of placement bias. It refers to the systemic practice where women are listed low on candidate rosters, reducing their electability. It happened despite the commitment to achieve gender quotas. In closed-list proportional representation

systems, list-ranking directly influences electability. This resonates with Feminist Institutionalism's critique of how informal norms and party practices undermine the mandates of formal gender policies.

The issue is further compounded by the centralized decision-making processes within many political parties. The candidate selection is heavily influenced by senior male elites. This often results in the prioritization of candidates who have strong personal or financial ties to party leaders, rather than those chosen based on merit or commitment to gender equality. As noted in interviews, this dynamic sidelines competent female candidates and reinforces a cycle where women's political presence remains minimal and largely symbolic. Without internal party reforms to democratize selection processes and ensure transparent criteria, the quota will continue to be met only on paper, not in meaningful political representation (Perdana & Hillman, 2020).

5. Cultural and Religious Norms as Barriers

The underrepresentation of women in Aceh's political landscape stems from multiple interrelated factors, both internal and external. Culturally rooted beliefs continue to reinforce the notion that the political sphere is exclusively for men. Meanwhile women are expected to remain in the domestic space. This division between the public and private spheres has become normalized, making it difficult for women to claim legitimacy as political actors. These perspectives not only originate from societal norms but

are also deeply embedded in community practices and religious interpretations (Blackburn, 2004; Buehler, 2016).

The influence of Sharia law and conservative religious interpretations in Aceh plays a significant role in restricting women's political participation. Even though formal laws do not explicitly prohibit female leadership, interpretations of religious texts and local regulations often vary and are used to justify limitations on women's roles. In post-conflict Aceh, women's access to the public sphere has been narrowed through both formal Sharia rules and conservative discourse, marginalizing their political agency (Mubarrak & Yahya, 2020).

During the interview, the authors found the prejudice in society that women are not fit to lead. *"People still think women are not fit to be leaders, especially when religious norms are involved. Even if we run, society may not support us."* (Interview with Female Political Candidate, 2023). Beside the prejudice, the cultural barriers were perpetuated by some religious society who perceive women can not be leader *"It's not about the law, it's about perceptions. Many religious leaders are silent when women are pushed out of politics."* (Interview with Civil Society Leader, Banda Aceh, 2023). These narratives indicate the gendered institutional structures described in Feminist Institutionalism. Whereby informal social rules within official systems cause women to be excluded from politics.

These embedded patriarchal values were also evident during a discussion hosted by Ureung Inong Aceh and the International Republican Institute

(March 4, 2017), where it was highlighted that women, particularly those married women often base their political choices on their husband's views. One speaker emphasized, *"Because a woman must obey her husband—our heaven is no longer under our parents but under our husband's feet. Even taking one step outside without permission can be fatal..."* (Dialeksis.com, accessed August 19, 2022). Such social expectations lead many to believe that women's political engagement is inappropriate, reinforcing the perception that politics is a male domain. Thus, from these two concepts reveal the existence of a culture that is perpetuated.

6. Affirmative Action Outcomes: Between Symbolic and Substantive Representation

While the proportion of female candidates has increased, it started from 6% in 2009 to 15% in 2014 (Darwin & Haryanto, 2020). However, this statistic growth has not translated into substantive political power. Several female legislators report experiences of political tokenism, *"Even when we win a seat, we are not included in key decisions. Sometimes we're just there to meet the quota."* (Interview with Female Legislator, DPRA, 2023).

This supports the theoretical distinction highlighted by Celis & Lovenduski (2018) between critical mass, such as numerical representation and critical actors like agents capable of substantive influence (Celis & Lovenduski, 2018). A mere increase in women's numbers alone does not guarantee meaningful empowerment. Despite the legal framework mandating

a 30% quota, many political parties in Aceh continue to treat this requirement as a mere formality rather than a genuine effort to enhance inclusivity. Women are often placed in unelectable positions on party lists or given constituencies with limited chances of success, a practice widely recognized as placement bias (Mietzer & Aspinall, 2010). This structural marginalization ensures that even women included, their likelihood of electoral success is minimized. As a result, the quota risks functioning more as a symbolic gesture than as a mechanism for substantive change.

Moreover, those women who do gain office often face internal constraints that restrict their influence within legislative institutions. Research from the previous studies shows that female legislators in Indonesia, including Aceh, are frequently excluded from leadership roles such as commission chairs or faction leaders, limiting their ability to shape policy agendas (Bessell, 2010; Siregar, 2020). This dynamic illustrates how gendered institutional practices prevent women from transitioning from symbolic representation to substantive influence. Without reforms that address both party-level barriers and institutional cultures, affirmative action in Aceh will continue to deliver numbers without power, reinforcing rather than dismantling gender hierarchies.

7. Stakeholder Fragmentation and Institutional Disconnection

Various agencies involved in gender-related policymaking acknowledge the importance of women's political empowerment, including the DPRA, DPPPA, and Bappeda. However, their

efforts are still lack, the interview with Bappeda officials supported this argument *"Bappeda has mainstreamed gender in planning, but we don't control political recruitment. So, the impact is limited."* (Interview with Bappeda Official, 2023). This fragmentation undermines the sustainability and effectiveness of gender policies. It supports Grindle's (1980) framework that successful implementation requires harmonized strategies among actors and alignment of political interests.

In practice, institutional disconnection is evident in the limited coordination between policymaking bodies and political parties. While agencies like the DPPPA focus on advocacy and awareness-raising, they lack the authority to enforce sanctions on parties that fail to meet the 30% quota. Meanwhile, the DPRA is often more concerned with budgetary oversight than with ensuring women's substantive representation. This lack of synergy reduces the effectiveness of affirmative action measures, making policies more symbolic than transformative. Without a clear mechanism for collaboration across institutions, women's political empowerment risks becoming a fragmented agenda with little practical impact (Lestari et al., 2021).

Furthermore, competition and overlapping mandates among stakeholders exacerbate the problem. For example, while Bappeda integrates gender concerns into regional development planning, its role does not extend to electoral processes or candidate selection, creating a disconnect between development policy and political representation. Similarly, the

DPRA and DPPPA may share a commitment to gender equality but operate with different priorities and limited coordination. This institutional fragmentation reflects what Grindle (1980) calls “implementation gaps,” where well-intentioned policies are diluted by conflicting interests and weak inter-agency collaboration. Addressing these gaps requires stronger institutional linkages, clearer division of roles, and a shared accountability framework to ensure that women’s political participation is not only promoted but effectively safeguarded.

Moreover, gender mainstreaming in local Indonesian government frequently suffers from coordination breakdowns. For instance, a case study on Wonogiri District (Central Java) revealed that, despite national mandates, regional gender policy implementation often becomes symbolic, it is hindered by technical limitations, weak political will, and poor inter-agency collaboration (Hanani et al., 2025). A similar pattern is visible in Salatiga City, where gender planning progressed steadily, but the lack of comprehensive understanding and stakeholder engagement meant that even well-structured policies had limited impact on changing gendered dynamics in political participation and decision-making (Takayasa, 2023). These findings illustrate that, without integrated institutional frameworks and shared accountability, gender equality initiatives remain superficial rather than transformative.

8. Challenges in Women’s Political Empowerment

This study also found additional obstacles, such as *first* limited political support and party practices. Female candidates often receive insufficient backing from party elites and are positioned unfavorably on ballots. *Second*, socio-economic and geographical constraints where the financial issue and remote area difficult limit women’s electoral participation. *Third*, discriminatory practices and tokenism can result in women holding political positions that are merely symbolic, lacking real power or influence. This argument is supported by one of the key informant, Darwati A. Gani (DPRA member), she emphasizes the persistent lack of political education on gender roles at the grassroots level as a key barrier (Interview, August 11, 2022).

Beyond these barriers, the lack of sustained capacity-building initiatives also hinders women’s ability to compete equally with male candidates. Research shows that women in Indonesia often enter politics without access to long-term mentorship, leadership training, or networks that are crucial for building political careers (Bessell, 2010). Without these resources, women are more vulnerable to being sidelined within parties and to experiencing tokenistic representation when elected. This situation highlights that overcoming structural barriers requires not only affirmative action but also continuous investment in strengthening women’s political skills, confidence, and institutional support.

9. Impact of Gender Mainstreaming Policies and Historical Context

Although gender mainstreaming has made some improvements in resource access and participation, however the progress is still slow and uneven. From the historical context, Acehnese women has significant roles in resistance and leadership contrast with present challenges. Notable figures in history like Cut Nyak Dhien and Cut Nyak Meutia played critical roles as military leaders and symbols of resistancy during Dutch colonization. Their legacy illustrates a tradition of female agency and public leadership in Acehnese society.

However, in current settings, it was perpetuated the ideology such as *State Ibuism*. Women's roles are often confined to domestic identities as wives and mothers. This narrow framing disregards their potential as political actors and leaders. Moreover, state policy frequently neglects matrilineal and matrifocal kinship systems, instead reinforcing the father's role as the head of the household. While rural communities may still practice matrifocal customs, the shift in cultural norms, mainly in urban contexts, has diminished women's cultural authority and influence. Consequently, the structural and cultural barriers embedded in both policy and social norms continue to undermine gender empowerment in Aceh.

CONCLUSION

Despite the formal adoption of affirmative action policies based on autonomy arrangements under the Helsinki MoU, women's political

empowerment in Aceh remains limited in practice. It faces the challenge such as structural, cultural, and institutional barriers, including patriarchal norms, lack of political will, limited institutional capacity, and religious interpretations. These challenges undermine the effective implementation of gender quotas. While the representation of women in politics has increased based on the statistics, however it remains symbolic rather than substantive. Affirmative action mechanisms alone are insufficient without genuine commitment from political parties, harmonized institutional efforts, and broader societal support. The study recommends strengthening political education, reforming party recruitment practices, and fostering inter-agency collaboration to ensure women's political roles become significant.

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