

## Political Feminism and Women's Representation in Public Policy in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to identify structural, cultural, and political factors that still hinder women in fighting for gender interests in the public policy arena. This study employs a qualitative research method using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) developed by Norman Fairclough, combined with intersectionality analysis from Kimberlé Crenshaw, and political representation theory from Hanna Pitkin to produce a comprehensive, critical, and contextually sensitive analysis of Indonesia's socio-political landscape. The findings state that it is now time for Indonesia to stop being satisfied with merely increasing the number of women in politics and start demanding real change – not just new faces, but bold moves that can dismantle patriarchal public policies, free women from co-optation, and promote the emergence of female leadership that dares to challenge, defend the oppressed, and demand substantive justice; political feminism must become the energy that forces the state and political parties to truly prioritise women's interests, not just use them as window dressing for democracy. To achieve this, a transformation of political culture, structural reforms, and the strengthening of women politicians' capacity are needed so that they can stand firm amid the whirlwind of political compromise and the still very strong pressure of masculinity.*

## **A. Introduction**

The journey of feminism in Indonesia has never been separated from political narratives and the complexity of women's representation in public spaces, especially in public policy formulation and implementation. The phenomenon of political feminism in Indonesia represents a long struggle between power, patriarchal culture, and women's efforts to negotiate their existence and aspirations in a political system that has historically been built and maintained by masculine interests. Indonesia's historical background as a country that grew amid the convergence of paternalistic local cultures and a modern political system rooted in liberal democracy has created a unique arena for discourse in political feminism (Brulé, 2023). This dynamic intensified during the reform era, when demands for gender equality were articulated in social terms and in political and legal language that bound the state to represent and fulfil women's rights in public policy (Suwarni et al., 2024).

In the early days of independence, women's voices in Indonesian politics were often sublimated in a larger narrative of nationalism, so women's roles were usually reduced to symbols or complements in the nation's struggle, rather than as authoritative political subjects. This can be traced in the history of Indonesian women's organisations, such as the 1928 Indonesian Women's Congress, which showed the beginnings of collective awareness among women of the importance of political participation, but at the same time limited itself to domestic and moral issues due to the strong influence of traditional values at the time. During the New Order regime, state policies towards women prioritised domestic roles through the concept of 'state motherhood,' which positioned women as guardians of family and national morality. This ideology, formulated in various social, educational, and family policies, effectively limited women's space in the public sphere while reproducing structural gender inequality (Karimullah, 2023b).

The transition to the Reform era brought new hope for women's participation in politics and public policy. The 1998 Reformasi opened the floodgates of democratisation, providing greater opportunities for women's groups to formulate the national political agenda actively (Anindya, 2024). This is where political feminism found its momentum. Women activists and intellectuals no longer merely spoke about justice and equality at the community level, but also demanded structural change through legislation and more meaningful political representation. The enactment of Law No. 12 of 2003 on the Election of Members of the DPR, DPD, and DPRD and Law No. 2 of 2008 on Political Parties, which stipulates a minimum quota of 30 per cent representation of women in legislative candidate lists, became important milestones in the institutionalisation of women's representation in national and regional political institutions. However, these affirmative regulations do not automatically translate into substantive representation of women in politics and public policy.

Within the framework of political feminism, the debate on women's representation should not stop at numerical or descriptive aspects. It also extends to the quality of women's participation in their ability to advocate for gender interests in policy-making processes. Many studies indicate that despite a significant increase in the number of women in parliament, their involvement remains constrained by masculine party structures, patronage politics, and a political culture that marginalises women's voices. The phenomenon of "tokenism", sense of women as mere additions to candidate lists without being given strategic roles in decision-making, has become a latent problem that is difficult to unravel.

This dynamism has become the discursive terrain of political feminism in Indonesia. Political feminism is no longer the exclusive domain of activists or academics. Still, it has become part of the public debate on the direction of democracy and social justice. Women who have broken through structural barriers and secured positions in parliament, government, or policy-making institutions often face dilemmas between loyalty to their party, constituents, and gender identity. Many cases show that women's agendas, such as women's rights, gender

equality, sexual violence, equal pay, and access to reproductive health, are often marginalised by the broader agendas of political parties dominated by male elites.

On the one hand, the state has adopted principles of inclusive democracy by strengthening women's political participation (Das, 2025). Still, women's hands, political structures and culture continue to perpetuate patriarchal power relations that limit women's autonomy as political subjects. Women's dominance in politics is often legitimised not because of their capabilities or commitment to the gender equality agenda (Fathony et al., 2024), but because of genealogical factors, closeness to the elite, or family political legacy. The phenomenon of 'political dynasties' involving women in Indonesian dynasties suggests that women's access to political power is severely limited by paternalistic social structures, rather than meritocracy or competence-based social mobility. This results in bias in assessing women's role in politics, as women's status is often seen as an exception rather than a logical consequence of a fair and equitable political system.

In exploring the dynamics of political feminism and women's representation in Indonesia, it is important to consider previous studies that have provided conceptual foundations, empirical findings, and critical insights. The study conducted by Susan Blackburn (2004) in her book 'Women and the State in Modern Indonesia' is an important reference in understanding the relationship between the state and women from the colonial era to the reform era. Blackburn traces how the state systematically regulates and manipulates the role of women in the framework of national development, from restricting women's movement in the public sphere to women's construction-based motherhood policies. Linda Rae Bennett (2005), in her study, 'Women, Islam and Modernity: Single Women, Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Contemporary Indonesia,' highlights reproductive health and women's rights as part of the women's agenda that is often neglected in public policy due to moral and religious pressures.

Previous research has also outlined how Muslim women's organisations negotiate their women's issues and ministry values in advocating for gender-equitable public policies. These studies demonstrate that political feminism in Indonesia faces unique challenges in confronting religious and conservative forces (Kloos & Ismah, 2023; Rinaldo, 2008; Savirani et al., 2021). In addition, several studies examine how gender power relations greatly influence the representation of women in law enforcement agencies and the legislative process (Kim, 2022; Lazarus et al., 2025; Smith & Sinkford, 2022). These studies reinforce the argument that the presence of women in formal institutions does not necessarily automatically change policies to be more pro-women if it is not accompanied by substantive commitment.

Based on the results of these various studies, it can be concluded that previous research has shown how complex the struggle for women's representation in public policy in Indonesia is. There is a pattern of ambivalence on the part of the state in adopting a gender agenda, the challenge of a strong patriarchal culture, resistance from political parties, and fragmentation among women's movements themselves. These studies also highlight the importance of distinguishing between descriptive and substantive representation and the need for an intersectional approach in understanding the highly diverse experiences of women in Indonesia.

Based on the findings and gaps in previous studies, the main objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the struggle for political feminism is not only about the issue of representation, but also the quality, meaning, and real impact of women's representation in influencing gender-responsive and equitable public policy. This study aims to identify the structural, cultural, and political factors that still hinder women in fighting for gender interests in the public policy arena, while exploring innovative strategies used by Indonesian women across sectors—in parliament, government, and grassroots movements—in formulating, advocating, and monitoring public policies that are more sensitive to women's needs and rights.

## **B. Method**

This study uses qualitative research methods with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach developed by Norman Fairclough (2013, 2023), combined with intersectionality analysis from Kimberlé Crenshaw (2013; 2013), and political representation theory from Hanna Pitkin (1967; 2004). Critical Discourse Analysis examines the discourses that frame women in public policy, including policy documents, political speeches, mass media, and narratives from political actors. This approach is particularly useful for identifying how power relations, patriarchal ideologies, and social constructions of gender manifest themselves in policy and political practice, including resistance and negotiation by women at various levels.

The integration of intersectionality theory allows this study to delve deeply into the layered experiences of women, not only as women, but also as individuals with backgrounds of class, ethnicity, religion, or other marginalised groups. Meanwhile, Hanna Pitkin's theory of political representation provides a framework for distinguishing between descriptive representation (the numerical presence of women) and substantive representation (the ability of women to fight for gender interests). Data was obtained through policy document analysis and media coverage. By integrating these three theories, the study aims to produce a comprehensive, critical, and contextually sensitive analysis of Indonesia's socio-political landscape, offering inclusive and transformative policy recommendations to advance political feminism and meaningful women's representation in public policy.

## **C. Results and Discussion**

### **1. The Ambiguity of Women's Representation in Indonesian Politics**

In contemporary Indonesian political discourse, the issue of women's representation is often articulated on two levels: descriptive representation and substantive representation. Descriptive representation, usually manifested in affirmative policies such as a 30 per cent quota for female legislative candidates, emphasises the importance of women's physical or numerical representation in legislative and executive institutions. Substantive representation, on the other hand, focuses on how women's presence brings forward agendas, perspectives, and policy changes that favour women (Shim, 2022). Ambiguity arises when political systems and parties tend to stop at descriptive representation – meeting the numbers but failing to facilitate women's political and substantive empowerment.

This ambiguity cannot be separated from Indonesia's historical and sociocultural political context, where gender politics remains a 'grey area' fraught with compromise, resistance, and co-optation (Malik et al., 2025). Since the New Order era, the state has framed women's role in politics through the concept of state motherhood, placing women in strategic positions in the national development narrative but limiting their political articulation to domestic issues and family welfare. Post-Reform, affirmative action through gender quotas has indeed provided greater opportunities for women to enter formal politics. However, these quotas themselves have become a new arena of contestation: on the one hand, they serve as a strategic instrument to penetrate the patriarchal structures of political parties and parliament; on the other hand, they are often used as symbolic legitimacy for parties to merely fulfil legal requirements without making structural changes within their internal politics.

Quantitative data showing an increase in the number of women in parliament often serves as the main argument for the state, political parties, and even some gender activists to mark the success of women's representation (Goyal, 2024; Sugitanata et al., 2023; Sundström & Stockemer, 2022). However, there remains a significant gap between numbers and reality behind this celebration. Many female politicians are recruited or positioned merely as fillers on candidate lists or "vote-getters" without adequate political training or authority. The phenomenon of "party-ordered women" further highlights how quotas can create cosmetic politics that mask the root causes of representation issues. Many women are selected because



of their closeness to party elites, family ties, or popularity, rather than their strong gender advocacy capacity or commitment to defending women's interests. In this context, women's representation becomes an extension of political oligarchy, rather than a manifestation of autonomy and the articulation of women's collective interests.

Ambiguity in representation also occurs within the internal mechanisms of political parties. The majority of parties in Indonesia, even those with nationalist and inclusive backgrounds, are still run with a strong paternalistic logic. Strategic decision-making is almost always in the hands of male elites, while women are often placed in symbolic positions or assigned administrative tasks. The space for building progressive and visionary female political leadership remains very limited. The regeneration of female cadres is rarely a priority, and even when it is, it is more often driven by the pragmatic need to meet quota regulations than by a desire to strengthen women's leadership capacity.

In many cases, the recruitment process for female politicians is instantaneous, without any serious effort to cultivate political knowledge, gender advocacy, and a solid constituent base (Muszel, 2025; Yanti & Amaliah, 2024). As a result, female politicians often face a dilemma between loyalty to the party and the struggle for women's interests, a dilemma rooted in structural powerlessness. The challenge of substantive representation does not stop at recruitment but also extends to women's bargaining power in policy-making. Women who manage to break into parliament or executive institutions often encounter thick walls of resistance from male coalitions in fighting for gender agendas.

Issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive health rights, protection of female workers, and various pro-women policies are often sidelined or marginalised. Legislative discussions, such as the draft law on the elimination of sexual violence, face prolonged negotiations and resistance, even among female legislators themselves, who are divided by political orientation, party pressure, or religious and moral constructs. Often, female politicians who voice progressive agendas experience double marginalisation—they are weakened by their male colleagues and marginalised by their fellow women who have been co-opted by conservative narratives or political elitism (Karimullah, 2022).

This reality indicates that the presence of women in political institutions does not automatically mean the presence of women's politics. Women's representation, if measured solely in terms of numbers, can become a trap of symbolism that obscures the reality that power structures remain biased towards patriarchal logic and political pragmatism. Various studies have found a paradox that an increase in the number of women in parliament does not always correlate with an increase in the number or quality of gender-sensitive policies. This occurs because the political process is still dominated by exclusive mechanisms that limit the autonomy of female politicians. In formal political processes, women often do not have strong enough power networks, are usually not given space to occupy strategic positions, and are frequently encouraged to voice neutral or compromising agendas to 'survive' the internal dynamics of parliament and political parties.

In addition to internal institutional issues, external factors such as society's political culture also play an important role in shaping the ambiguity of women's representation. Indonesian society still holds fast to patriarchal values that view women's leadership as less than ideal, even contrary to religious norms or local traditions. The stigma that women active in politics have 'strayed from their nature' is often internalised by the wider community, the mass media, and even by some women themselves. As a result, many female politicians experience social delegitimisation, intimidation, and symbolic violence both in the real world and on social media.

It is not uncommon for women in politics to be required to 'behave well,' maintain morality, and preserve political harmony, rather than dare to take critical positions or challenge the status quo. When women's voices are confronted with controversial issues such

as the elimination of sexual violence, gender minority rights, or the protection of migrant workers, the response of the public and political elites is often defensive, even hostile.

This situation causes female politicians to face double pressure—pressure from masculine party structures and misogynistic social pressure. As a result, many women choose to play it safe, follow the party line, or manage issues that are considered ‘normal’ for women, such as children's education, maternal health, and family welfare, without daring to tackle more radical structural issues.

Substantive politics requires the courage to go beyond the boundaries of mainstream narratives and fight for an agenda of change that challenges structures of gender injustice. This ambiguity is further complicated when discussing the diversity of women's identities in Indonesia. Women are not homogeneous; they are divided by class, ethnicity, religion, education, and life experiences (Sugitanata et al., 2024). Many female politicians who have successfully entered parliament come from the upper middle class and have access to economic resources, elite networks, and higher education. Meanwhile, poor women, indigenous women, women with disabilities, or women from religious and sexual minorities are still very rarely represented in political institutions and public policy.

The representation produced by our political system tends to favour women who already have strong social and political capital, rather than women who face double marginalisation. When women from the majority or upper-class groups sit in parliament, their experiences and aspirations are often very different from those of grassroots women, so the policy agenda they bring to the table may not address the root causes of gender inequality experienced by most Indonesian women. This phenomenon underscores the main criticism of the logic of symbolic representation: that the presence of women in politics, if not accompanied by capacity, courage, and commitment to vulnerable groups, will only strengthen elite politics and widen the gap between women who are ‘represented’ and women who ‘truly need change.’

Many female politicians are trapped in a culture of patronage and dynastic politics, where their political positions are determined more by family ties or loyalty to party elites than by their track record of advocacy or closeness to their female constituents. As a result, feminist agendas or the interests of grassroots women are often ignored or replaced with populist agendas that are more acceptable to the party and the public (Caravantes, 2021). Not only that, the mass media also contributes to the ambiguity of women's representation by constructing biased images of female politicians. The media often highlights the personal aspects or appearance of female politicians, framing them in sensational narratives or comparing them to unfair standards of masculinity. This practice further reinforces the perception that women's involvement in politics is more of an entertainment or an accessory, rather than an equal and powerful political entity. As a result, female politicians find it difficult to break out of the circle of symbolism and exoticism, and it becomes increasingly difficult for them to be accepted as true decision-makers in the public sphere.

Ironically, affirmative policies that were originally intended to address gender inequality in politics risk perpetuating symbolism if they are not accompanied by critical evaluation, capacity building, and renewed gender advocacy strategies. Political parties often comply with quota regulations when registering legislative candidates, but neglect women in prioritising candidate lists, distribution of campaign funds, and support networks for winning elections. The legislative process and policy negotiations in parliament remain dominated by male actors or old elites who lack gender sensitivity. As a result, the policies produced reflect elite compromises rather than progressive breakthroughs for gender justice. In this reality, challenging women's representation is an urgent effort to dismantle political assumptions and practices that consider ‘women's presence’ sufficient as a parameter of democratic progress.

Substantive representation can only be achieved if female politicians are able and supported to articulate women's interests in a critical, progressive, and transformative

manner. There needs to be a paradigm shift from merely 'counting the number of women' to 'counting the changes brought about' for the benefit of women and social justice. Women must have sufficient space to fight for policies based on the real-life experiences of women from various backgrounds, not just the agenda of the elite or short-term political interests.

For women's representation in politics to be truly substantive, it is necessary to reorient and reform the political system, party recruitment, political education, and strengthen grassroots women's movements. Political parties must be encouraged not only to meet quotas but also to build women's cadre and capacity at various leadership levels. The state must also ensure that affirmative policies are implemented effectively and sustainably, including monitoring and evaluating the real impact of women's presence in parliament and executive institutions. On the other hand, women's movements must expand their advocacy base, focusing on formal institutions and empowering women at the community, family, and digital levels as new arenas for political participation. Ambiguity regarding women's representation in Indonesian politics will only be resolved if women's representation is radically understood as a political process that transforms structures, norms, and power relations.

Women are not merely statistical objects or administrative requirements, but political subjects with critical thinking, an agenda for change, and the capacity to articulate women's experiences into public policy. Women must dare to reject symbolic politics and emerge as agents of systemic change, challenging patriarchal and oligarchic practices, and collectively negotiating their identities and aspirations across borders with solidarity. At this point, women's representation must be encouraged to be intersectional and inclusive, not only opening access for women from majority groups, but also for women from minority groups, marginalised groups, and those who have never been invited into decision-making spaces. Only in this way will women's representation transform from a mere symbol into a substantive force capable of shifting the direction of politics and public policy towards greater justice, equality, and humanity (Karimullah, 2024).

Ultimately, the question of women's representation is not just about 'how many' women hold positions of power, but 'how far' the policies they produce can change the lives of Indonesian women, especially those most vulnerable and marginalised by the system. In Indonesia's politically ambiguous spaces, the tension between symbolism and substance will persist as long as women's representation is treated as a marginal agenda or a mere legalistic requirement. The major challenge today is how to transform the structures, mentalities, and political practices that have produced and reproduced gender inequality into an inclusive, progressive, and just collective space for struggle (Yazid & Sugitanata, 2024).

This is where women's representation must be understood as a dynamic process that is always open to criticism, improvement, and encouragement so that it truly becomes a motor for change, not merely a meaningless decoration of democracy. The ambiguity of women's representation in Indonesian politics is a reflection of the political dynamics still faltering in integrating gender justice into the national political system. However, behind all the challenges and failures, there is always room for hope – that with the consolidation of women's movements, political reform, and critical awareness at the community level, Indonesia can give birth to a new generation of female politicians who are not merely 'represented' but can represent and fight for the future of Indonesian women in a meaningful and transformative way.

## **2. Political Feminism in the Vortex of Patriarchal Culture and Masculine Political Practices**

The history of Indonesian politics has never been completely devoid of women. However, their presence has been more of an exception than the norm, appearing more often in narratives of nationalism or domestic roles than as autonomous and empowered political subjects. The era of the struggle for independence recorded the names of women such as

Kartini, Dewi Sartika, and Cut Nyak Dien as symbols of emancipation. Still, after independence was achieved, state discourse and political institutions tended to normalise women back into domestic roles, as mothers of the nation and guardians of morality. This condition was exacerbated by the influx of conservative values, both religious and traditional, which reinforced the position of women as second-class citizens. In practice, the state consciously produced and reproduced masculine politics by defining the limits of women's participation, whether through regulations, policies, or symbolic representation.

When feminist movements entered the formal political arena in political parties and public policy spaces, they were confronted with a thick wall of structural masculinity that demanded adaptation, compromise, or even co-optation (Gunnarsson Payne & Tornhill, 2023). Political parties, as the main pillars of Indonesia's electoral democracy, are still dominated by a paternalistic logic that places men at the centre of power and as the organisation's decision-makers. In the recruitment process, the placement of strategic positions, and decision-making, female politicians are often faced with two choices: follow the masculine political game or be pushed to the margins. Many female politicians must negotiate their identity and aspirations with the pragmatic political reality, where loyalty to the party and the elite is more important than the gender advocacy agenda.

This masculine politics is reflected in the practices of power sharing, patronage, money politics, and symbolic and verbal violence that often befall female politicians. Adaptation strategies have become the choice of many female politicians to survive amid the tide of political masculinity. Adaptation does not always mean submission, but more often involves clever diplomacy, managing power relations, and developing cross-gender networks to ensure that women's agendas remain on the decision-making table. Many female politicians must present themselves according to masculine expectations, from speaking and dressing to compromising on discourse and issues (Anand, 2025). They must also be extra careful not to be seen as 'too vocal,' 'radical,' or 'disruptive to party harmony.' Such survival strategies sometimes create an ambiguous image: women who succeed in surviving are seen as having 'broken through the patriarchy,' but often at the cost of holding back or even sacrificing critical feminist political agendas.

On the other hand, many female politicians choose a strategy of resistance (Tildesley et al., 2022). This resistance takes various forms, ranging from advocating progressive policies, forming cross-party women's caucuses, to public campaigns against violence, discrimination, or sexual harassment in parliament and public institutions. This resistance often leads to internal party resistance or social and political sanctions. Still, in many cases, this strategy has opened up new spaces for discussion about the importance of women's perspectives in public policy. Resistance to masculine politics is also manifested through cooperation with civil society, the media, and international institutions to strengthen the capacity of women politicians and expand the basis for gender advocacy. However, these resistance strategies do not always run smoothly, as many female politicians are caught in a dilemma between loyalty to their party and commitment to the feminist agenda.

The vortex of patriarchal culture is not only present within political parties but also strongly grips the realm of public policy. Policy formulation is often dominated by masculine interests that ignore the needs and experiences of women. Issues such as reproductive health, protection of domestic workers, protection of victims of sexual violence, and recognition of the rights of indigenous women are often marginalised in public discussions and legislation. Even when women hold decision-making positions, patriarchal forces are still able to control the agenda through political pressure, media framing, and bureaucratic mechanisms that tend to be insensitive to gender issues.

There is a tendency to 'include women' in committees or special panels merely as token gestures, without allowing women to lead independently or determine policy direction. Political feminism is often considered foreign, radical, or contrary to local values. Political



elites, religious institutions, and mainstream media systematically construct negative stigma towards feminism. In this context, feminist movements in Indonesia must fight hard to build a counter-narrative that articulates that political feminism is part of the struggle for democracy, social justice, and human rights. Feminist discourse must be carefully adapted so that it can be accepted by various segments of society, without losing its critical power and transformative agenda. This requires intellectual capacity, communication strategies, and diplomacy from feminist leaders and female politicians. The adaptation of the feminist movement to the masculine-political structure in Indonesia is also evident in their efforts to embrace cross-sectoral issues, such as education, health, poverty, and the environment.

Feminist movements are no longer limited to classic women's issues, but seek to show that gender equality is an integral part of national progress (Aulia et al., 2024). Collaboration with civil society organisations, progressive religious communities, and international actors is a key strategy to strengthen the bargaining position of feminist movements in the masculine political arena. However, amid these efforts, the challenge of resistance never truly disappears. Many male politicians still view the feminist agenda as a threat to the status quo, and it is not uncommon to see systematic attempts to discredit or silence critical female voices in the public sphere.

The phenomenon of 'backlash' against the feminist movement has grown stronger in recent years, especially after sensitive issues such as sexual violence, LGBTQ+ rights, and the protection of female migrant workers began to receive public attention and legislative momentum. At the parliamentary level, efforts to pass progressive regulations such as the Sexual Violence Elimination Bill (PKS) and the Domestic Workers Protection Bill (PPRT) often face dead ends due to resistance from conservative groups and masculine politicians who are reluctant to change the policy paradigm. Women who dare to be at the forefront of advocating for these policies are often intimidated, harassed, and even labelled as "destroyers of national morality" or "foreign puppets." In this context, courage and solidarity are the core values needed to challenge the deeply entrenched and powerful currents of political masculinity. However, women politicians' resistance and adaptation are not always frontal or explicit.

Many women choose the 'silent politics' strategy – fighting through informal channels, building grassroots power, and conducting political education in their communities. They are aware that changing patriarchal structures cannot be achieved solely by challenging them forcefully in formal spaces, but requires a transformation of values and culture at the societal level. Although not spectacular in the media, this silent politics instils critical awareness among women and young people about the importance of inclusive and gender-equal political participation.

The issue of political masculinity in Indonesia cannot be separated from broader economic and political dynamics (Insani et al., 2024). The patronage capitalism that surrounds political parties, extremely expensive electoral campaigns, and dependence on 'old boys' networks' make it increasingly difficult for women to break into power structures without compromising or collaborating with the masculine elite. The high cost of politics encourages many women to rely on family resources (Sugitanata & Karimullah, 2023), business networks, or even political dynasties to gain entry into the political arena. In many cases, this marginalises feminist agendas in favour of pragmatic interests or compromises with dominant masculine forces. Money politics, corruption, and transactional practices further reinforce the patriarchal barriers that women politicians face every day.

Within this framework, political feminism in Indonesia faces a dilemma between "ideological puritanism" and "pragmatic reality." On one hand, there is a demand to maintain the purity of the feminist agenda and reject the co-optation of political masculinity; on the other hand, there is a need to adapt, negotiate, and build strategic alliances to open up space and ensure the movement's sustainability. There is no single path; strategies must always be dynamic, contextual, and responsive to changes in political structures and actors. Female

leaders must have the courage to identify when to fight head-on, when to negotiate, and when to build power from below slowly but surely.

In addition to individual and movement strategies, the state's role in strengthening or weakening political feminism is crucial. States that are still masculine and patriarchal, whether in their legal systems, bureaucracy, or public policies, will always be a major challenge for feminist movements. Regulations that appear progressive on paper, such as women's quota policies, are often not followed by internal structural changes within parties or guarantees of fair access for women. The state is also frequently ambivalent in responding to issues of political feminism, especially when these issues are perceived as disrupting political stability or contradicting the majority's norms. As a result, the space for political feminism in Indonesia has always been overshadowed by political compromises dictated by the masculine elite.

In the media, both mainstream and social media, female politicians and feminist movements face double challenges. The press often reproduces gender stereotypes, objectifies female politicians, and frames feminist issues as marginal concerns. In the digital age, women who are vocal on social media are often the target of cyberattacks, doxing, and misogynistic hate speech. However, social media has also become an important tool for feminist movements to build solidarity, educate the public, and pressure policymakers. This dynamic shows the importance of mastering media and information technology as part of a strategy for adaptation and resistance against masculine politics. The struggle of political feminism in Indonesia, in the vortex of patriarchal culture and masculine political practices, is not an easy battle.

It is a long process full of challenges, compromises, and failures, yet in innovation, solidarity, and courage. Feminist movements have successfully forced the state and political parties to open space for women, but the struggle to change power structures and political culture remains long (Nazneen & Okech, 2021). Smart adaptation strategies, cross-sectoral collaboration, and critical and inclusive political education must always accompany resistance. Only in this way can political feminism survive and thrive, not merely as an elite movement, but as an authentic and grounded force for social change. In the future, Indonesian political feminism needs to be bolder in dismantling masculine political practices that harm women, expand the movement's mass base, and build women's leadership at all levels.

Solidarity among women across class, ethnic, religious, and sexual orientation lines must be strengthened so that the feminist movement is not fragmented by identity politics or elite co-optation. Women must continue to train themselves to become critical, visionary leaders who are not easily controlled by patriarchal structures. In the ongoing vortex of patriarchal culture and masculine politics, Indonesian political feminism will always be challenged to prove that resistance and adaptation are two inseparable sides of the coin in the struggle for true gender justice and equality. Only then can politics in Indonesia truly belong to all, and women are no longer mere accessories, but owners and shapers of their nation's future.

### **3. The Impact of Women's Representation on the Direction and Content of Public Policy**

Women's representation has indeed experienced significant development since the Reformation era, driven, among other things, by affirmative policies such as a 30 per cent quota for women on candidate lists and the growing collective awareness of the importance of women's political participation. This has increased the number of women who have successfully held legislative, executive, and other public positions. At first glance, this phenomenon reinforces the argument that women's representation is an important prerequisite for the emergence of more inclusive and gender-sensitive policies. However, the big question that must be critically examined is: are these numerical changes in line with substantive transformations in public policy in Indonesia? Does the success of women in achieving strategic positions truly shift the direction and content of policies towards greater

gender equality, or does it merely reinforce the status quo through political compromise and systemic co-optation?

An in-depth analysis of several key policies in Indonesia post-reform shows that women's representation, while providing space for progressive agendas, does not always automatically result in substantial change (Zamjani, 2022). One example often cited is the successful advocacy for enacting the Law on Sexual Violence (UU TPKS). This achievement is indeed a milestone in the long struggle of the women's movement, supported by female politicians across parties, civil society organisations, and massive public pressure. The legislative process of the TPKS Law demonstrates how the presence of women in parliament can serve as a bridge for pro-women policy advocacy, with several female legislators becoming driving forces, lobbyists, and decision-makers in the formulation and enactment of the policy. However, this success deserves deeper scrutiny: was the TPKS Law enacted solely due to the collective courage of women in parliament, or also because of political pressure, shifts in public opinion, and compromise strategies involving multiple actors, including progressive men, the media, and international networks?

At the same time, this success was also inseparable from a series of compromises at the legislative table that resulted in several important articles having to be adjusted or even weakened to gain majority support in parliament (Hermanto et al., 2024). This phenomenon of political compromise is not unique to the TPKS Law, but is also evident in various other policies directly related to women's rights and gender issues. For example, public policies are often partial, half-hearted, or contradictory in reproductive health and mother and child protection. On the one hand, national legislation and programmes support the rights of mothers and children and reproductive health, such as the Mother and Child Health (KIA) programme, family planning services, and health services in community health centres and hospitals. However, cultural resistance, budget constraints, and local regulations biased towards religion or conservative morality often hampered these policies. In many regions, for example, women victims of sexual violence still face difficulties in accessing health services and justice because state officials, including female politicians, continue to prioritise religious norms or local values that tend to stigmatise victims (Aminah et al., 2024; Insani et al., 2023).

This shows that the presence of women in strategic positions does not automatically guarantee a paradigm shift in policy, especially when their political orientation and affiliations are closer to conservative forces than to progressive feminist agendas. This complexity is also evident in the issue of protection for domestic workers, female migrant workers, and other vulnerable groups, the majority of whom are women. Despite decades of advocacy, the Domestic Workers Protection Bill (RUU PPRT) has yet to be passed, often stalling in the legislative process. This is even though the majority of domestic workers are women who are highly vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and structural discrimination. In this case, female politicians in parliament do not always agree to fight for the same agenda. Political fragmentation, party pressure, loyalty to specific economic interests, and the internalisation of patriarchal values have led some female politicians to become part of the status quo that delays or weakens policy advocacy (Karimullah et al., 2024). They often resort to moral logic, family protection, or concerns about party image, rather than taking a bold stance to challenge the patriarchal structures that oppress the most vulnerable women.

The discourse on the impact of women's representation becomes even more interesting when highlighting the differences in political orientation, ideology, and organisational affiliation among female politicians. Not all women in parliament carry a feminist agenda; many actively oppose or ignore progressive gender issues (Karimullah et al., 2023). Political orientations rooted in nationalist parties, religion, or even specific political dynasties make some female politicians more loyal to the masculine structures of their parties than to gender solidarity. This is reflected in the decision-making dynamics of the House of Representatives, where women sometimes become the main voices rejecting progressive bills, defending the

interests of party elites, or even reinforcing conservative narratives that perpetuate patriarchal norms.

This phenomenon shows that gender identity is never singular or homogeneous when determining the direction of public policy. A female politician can be more conservative, pragmatic, or anti-feminist than her progressive male counterparts. Political identity, class interests, religious background, and internal party dynamics are no less important than biological identity. Women's representation, if not accompanied by critical awareness and a commitment to gender justice, can merely become an instrument for strengthening symbolic politics or even perpetuating patriarchy. This distinguishes numerical representation from substantive representation in the context of public policy.

It cannot be ignored that the political process in Indonesia is fraught with compromise, negotiation, and transactions that often obscure the original orientation of a policy. In many cases, female politicians who dare to bring forward progressive feminist agendas must face internal pressure, marginalisation, and even stigma from their fellow parliamentarians, both male and female. They face a difficult choice: compromise for their political careers or fight for an agenda that could lead to exclusion from the centre of power. As a result, many policy agendas that were initially very progressive become 'blunt' and lack courage when they become the final product of legislation.

This lengthy and compromising legislative process reflects the enduring dominance of masculine politics, despite the increasing number of women in parliament. Not all women's policy agendas are necessarily synonymous with feminism or gender justice. Sometimes, female politicians focus more on issues traditionally considered to be 'women's domain,' such as children's education, family health, or charitable social programmes. Meanwhile, structural problems such as power redistribution, reproductive rights protection, or the elimination of gender discrimination are often avoided because they are considered too controversial, unpopular, or challenging to the norms of the majority. In such conditions, the presence of women in strategic positions tends to be reduced to strengthen domestic roles in the public sphere rather than radically transform the substance of state policy.

Another equally important challenge is structural resistance within the bureaucracy and state institutions. Many pro-women policies fail to be implemented effectively due to a masculine bureaucratic culture, insufficient budgets, or weak implementation capacity. At the local level, even female local leaders often face male-dominated bureaucratic structures that resist change, hinder programme implementation, or even engage in political sabotage. Such practices further reinforce the notion that substantive change will only occur if structural reforms, capacity building, and solid political support from various parties accompany women's representation. This situation is further complicated by the role of the media, which often frames female politicians in sensational, domestic, or even dismissive narratives.

The media is often more interested in discussing female politicians' aspects, appearance, or domestic life than their contributions and struggles in formulating public policy. This framing reinforces the perception that women are still positioned as 'other' in politics and state policy, not as key actors capable of influencing and fundamentally changing policy orientation. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that significant progress has been made thanks to women's representation in parliament and state institutions (Karimullah, 2023a). The successful enactment of the TPKS Law, advocacy for reproductive health, strengthening child protection, and increasing attention to migrant worker issues are achievements that would not have been possible without the presence and struggle of female politicians. However, these achievements must be considered part of a long and non-linear process, as every step forward is accompanied by setbacks, resistance, and attempts at hijacking by conservative political forces. The struggle of female politicians is often not only against masculine politics but also against other women who do not support the gender justice agenda for various ideological, pragmatic, or structural reasons.



Critical discourse on the impact of women's representation also teaches us that feminism in politics cannot be built simply by increasing the number of women in positions of power (Aiston, 2024). There is a need for a political cadre agenda for women that focuses on strengthening capacity, courage in advocacy, and solidarity across parties and social classes. Women's organisations must continue to build networks, conduct political education, and expand their mass base so that women's voices are not only present in formal spaces but also strong at the community and grassroots levels. It is important to remember that the strength of social movements, public pressure, and independent media support largely determines the impact of women's representation on public policy. In Indonesia, the success of several pro-women policies has often been due to strong civil society movements, media pressure, and solidarity across groups. This process must be maintained and continuously encouraged, because if not, the representation of women that has been achieved can easily be co-opted or even reduced to a tool for legitimising the patriarchal status quo.

Women's representation in Indonesian public policy must be understood as a dynamic, dialectical, and even paradoxical process. On the one hand, women's representation provides opportunities and space for policy direction and content that are more favourable to women and vulnerable groups (Zaidi & Fordham, 2021). However, on the other hand, public policy remains susceptible to masculine bias, political compromise, and co-optation by elite interests. Not all women in parliament automatically become agents of feminist change; political orientation, organisational affiliation, economic interests, and structural context greatly influence whether they will become pioneers of change or part of the patriarchy (Karimullah & Aliyah, 2023).

The big challenge ahead is ensuring that women's representation does not stop at the symbolic level, but is truly translated into progressive, inclusive, and gender-sensitive public policy. To achieve this, a transformation of political culture, structural reforms, and the strengthening of women politicians' capacities are needed so that they can stand firm amid the whirlwind of political compromise and the still very strong pressure of masculinity. Only then can the presence of women in strategic positions have a real impact, not only on the direction and content of public policy, but also on more just and civilised social change for all Indonesians.

#### **D. Conclusion**

It is time for Indonesia to abandon its false satisfaction with the increase in the number of women in parliament and public institutions and start demanding real proof that their presence is truly shaking up public policy, which patriarchal interests and the male elite have long controlled. For without the courage to challenge political co-optation, expose masculine practices in decision-making processes, and advance an agenda that prioritises gender justice and the rights of marginalised women, women's representation will remain a hollow democratic myth. Therefore political feminism in Indonesia must dare to demand more: strengthening critical political education, building solidarity across identities, fighting for the development of female leadership, and pressuring the state, political parties, and society to ensure that politics is not merely friendly towards the presence of women, but is truly forced to change, to achieve public policies that are fair, equal, and liberate all people from the shackles of gender discrimination perpetuated by the status quo.

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