



ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH WOMEN’S
LEADERSHIP: INSIGHTS FROM INDONESIA’S ENVIRONMENTAL
AND RESOURCE GOVERNANCE INITIATIVES

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article History: <i>Received: 2 March 2025</i> <i>Revised: 21 October 2025</i> <i>Accepted: 9 November 2025</i> <i>Published: 15 August 2026</i> Keywords: <i>Women’s leadership, gender equality (SDG 5), environmental governance, Indonesia</i>	This study explores women’s leadership in Indonesia’s environmental and resource governance through a Systematic Conceptual Review (SCR) of 78 sources published between 2010 and 2024. Using NVivo and manual coding, the review applied defined inclusion criteria and quality assessment to synthesise scholarly, policy, and case-based evidence. Findings reveal persistent structural, cultural, and institutional barriers but also highlight women’s growing contributions to inclusive and sustainable governance. Comparative analysis with ASEAN and global contexts identifies key indicators, representation, policy integration, and leadership pathways, showing that quotas alone are insufficient without systemic reforms, mentorship pipelines, and gender-responsive governance. Strengthening women’s leadership is thus central to advancing SDG 5, environmental stewardship, and equitable human development in Indonesia.

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Introduction

Women’s leadership in Indonesia remains constrained by structural, cultural, and institutional barriers, despite gradual gains in political, economic, and social participation. Historically, women were largely confined to domestic roles or positioned in supporting capacities, with limited access to decision-making structures (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; UN Women, 2023). Although legal and policy frameworks now formally recognise gender equality, entrenched patriarchal norms, political patronage, and systemic inequalities continue to restrict women’s advancement. Yet the importance of women’s leadership has become increasingly visible, particularly in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where gender equality is not only a human rights imperative but also a strategic driver

of sustainability, resilience, and equitable governance.

The global development agenda situates SDG 5 (Gender Equality) at the heart of the 2030 Agenda, while SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) underscores the importance of collaboration across sectors, stakeholders, and scales. In environmental and resource governance, inclusive leadership is particularly relevant to addressing challenges such as climate change (SDG 13), marine resource protection (SDG 14), and biodiversity conservation (SDG 15). In this context, advancing gender equality through women’s leadership is not merely symbolic but a transformative mechanism for inclusive and adaptive governance, essential for building sustainable, resilient societies.

Women's roles in environmental stewardship, policy innovation, and grassroots resource management highlight their distinctive contributions to governance processes, characterised by collaboration, empathy, and community-centered decision-making, which are vital for navigating complex ecological and social challenges.

Indonesia provides a compelling case for examining these dynamics. As a resource-rich and ecologically diverse archipelago, the country faces pressing sustainability challenges including deforestation, overfishing, coastal degradation, and climate-related disasters. Women are often central to managing natural resources for household and community survival, from fisheries and mangrove ecosystems to farming and forest conservation. Yet, their contributions remain marginalised within formal governance structures. This disconnect between women's informal contributions and formal exclusion highlights the need to better understand the relationship between women's leadership and sustainable development in Indonesia, particularly within the context of resource and environmental governance.

Globally, prominent leaders such as Jacinda Ardern, Ursula von der Leyen, and Kamala Harris illustrate how inclusive leadership can transform governance cultures (Vani & Harte, 2021; Papadakou & Sternberg, 2025; Von Stauffenberg, 2025). However, such examples predominantly emerge from the Global North, where institutional frameworks for gender equality are relatively advanced. In contrast, countries in the Global South, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, India, and Kenya, share intersecting challenges of patriarchal structures, resource dependency, and ecological vulnerability, yet also demonstrate innovative pathways through community-based leadership and localised governance reforms (UNDP, 2022; Bappenas, 2023). Indonesia therefore offers a critical lens for understanding how women's leadership develops in contexts shaped by ecological vulnerability, resource dependency, and socio-cultural complexity.

Historically, Indonesian women have played vital roles in both political and social movements. Independence-era figures such as Cut Nya Dien, Cut Meutia, and Martha Christina Tiahahu embodied resistance leadership, while Raden Ajeng Kartini's advocacy for women's education reflected early struggles for empowerment (Blackburn, 2007; Muthoifin *et al.*, 2017; Karlina & Hudaidah, 2020; Marpelina, 2020; Yulianti *et al.*, 2020; Rahmayati, 2021; Djono *et al.*, 2022; Nuraedah, 2023). These legacies demonstrate that women's leadership is not a new phenomenon, even if it has often been undervalued or overlooked. In the post-Reformasi era, women gained greater opportunities to participate in politics and governance, from elected positions in local government to grassroots initiatives in environmental conservation, such as the mangrove rehabilitation project in Lampung, where women organised community-based coastal management programs and lobbied local authorities for sustainable aquaculture practices (Brown *et al.*, 2014; Bakri *et al.*, 2023; Simarmata *et al.*, 2023), and the fisheries cooperatives in North Sulawesi, where female leaders coordinated credit access and marine waste reduction campaigns (Sowards & Azizah, 2024; Bainus *et al.*, 2025). These brief cases illustrate how women combine gender equality with sustainability, integrating practical action with community resilience and ecological stewardship.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain. Women represent nearly half of Indonesia's population, with two-thirds in productive age groups (Johan & Hapsari, 2020; Dura & Wardana, 2024), yet their representation in politics, senior management, and formal decision-making remains disproportionately low. The 2015 regional elections recorded only 7.48 percent female candidates, reflecting structural exclusion from leadership pathways (Firdiansyah, 2024). Constitutional guarantees of equality and human rights legislation provide a normative framework, but practical implementation often lags. National reports by Bappenas (2023) and Komnas Perempuan

(2024) emphasised the persistence of gender bias in recruitment and promotion systems, indicating that policy progress has yet to translate into institutional reform (Mayasari *et al.*, 2025; Fitriani *et al.*, 2025). Legal quotas and gender-sensitive policies must therefore be reinforced with mentorship programs, leadership training, and stronger accountability mechanisms if women's leadership is to be genuinely transformative rather than tokenistic.

This study employs a Systematic Conceptual Review (SCR) to examine women's leadership in Indonesia within the broader framework of the SDGs, focusing particularly on SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), while linking them to environmental and resource governance. Following Snyder (2019) and Booth *et al.* (2022), the SCR was conducted through four stages: (1) Defining inclusion and exclusion criteria based on relevance to gender, leadership, and environmental governance; (2) identifying and screening peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and case studies published between 2010 and 2024; (3) selecting 78 sources through iterative coding and thematic mapping; and (4) synthesising results into three guiding themes, structural barriers, enabling conditions, and leadership outcomes.

By situating Indonesia within the global discourse on gender and sustainability, this study contributes to theoretical understanding and offers critical insights into governance strategies necessary for achieving the SDGs in resource-dependent contexts.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a Systematic Conceptual Review (SCR), combining conceptual exploration with the structured rigor of literature analysis. The method is particularly suited to synthesising scholarly debates, theoretical perspectives, and policy discourses on women's leadership, political participation, and gender equality within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 5. As emphasised by Booth *et*

al. (2008), library-based research enables the collection of diverse sources, including books, peer-reviewed articles, reports, and official documents, providing comprehensive insights into complex issues. This review draws on descriptive data from synthesised academic and policy texts, capturing narratives, case studies, and leadership experiences documented in written accounts (Creswell, 2017).

The review followed five structured steps: (1) Defining research objectives, (2) identifying relevant literature, (3) applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, (4) assessing source quality through a structured rubric, and (5) conducting thematic synthesis. Priority was given to peer-reviewed publications, reputable books, and credible organisational reports, while opinion pieces and works without clear methodology were excluded. Quality assessment considered three main dimensions: (a) Peer-review status and credibility of publication outlets, (b) relevance of content to women's leadership, gender equality, or SDG 5, and (c) methodological transparency, particularly the presence of a clear analytical or theoretical framework.

Sources published between 2010–2024 in English or Bahasa Indonesia were included if they addressed women's leadership, gender equality, or SDG 5. The 2010 starting point was chosen because it marked the institutional consolidation of gender mainstreaming in Indonesia, following the implementation of national gender policy frameworks and the preparatory phase for SDG alignment that began before 2015.

Searches were conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Indonesian databases such as GARUDA and Neliti, using keywords including “women's political participation,” “leadership,” “gender equality,” “Indonesia,” and “SDG 5,” refined with Boolean operators. From an initial 320 records, 78 met all criteria following screening and full-text review. Themes were identified through iterative coding, both manually and with NVivo, to ensure consistency and minimise bias. A PRISMA-style flow diagram illustrates

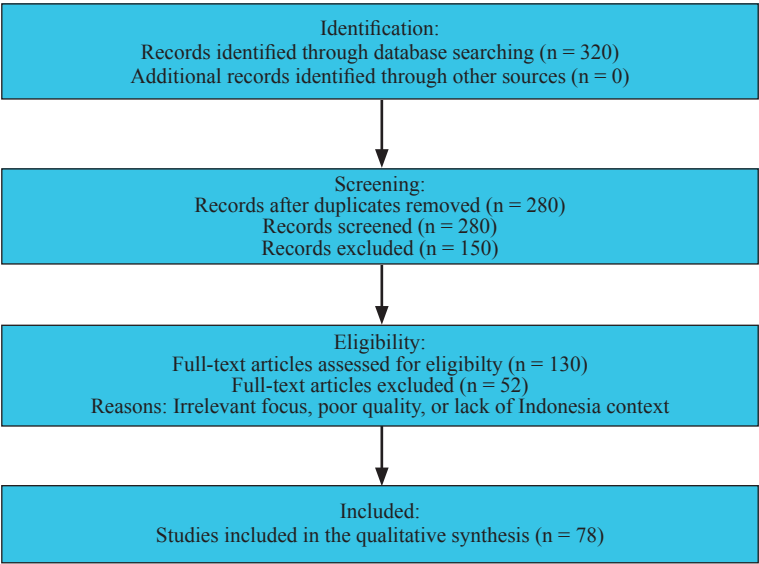


Figure 1: A PRISMA-style flow diagram

Table 1: Summary of the main themes identified during coding, showing the central categories that emerged from the synthesis of 78 included sources

Theme	Description
Institutional Barriers	Structural and policy-based obstacles limiting women’s access to leadership positions.
Mentorship and Networking Gaps	Limited formal and informal support systems for women’s career progression in politics and public leadership.
Community-based Leadership	Grassroots initiative and participatory governance models led by women at the local level.
Cultural Norms and Gender Roles	Persistent socio-cultural expectations influencing women’s leadership trajectories.
SDG and Policy Integration	The extent to which national and local policies align with SDG 5 targets on gender equality.

the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages, which enhances transparency and replicability.

This approach enabled exploration of barriers to women’s political participation, systemic challenges, and empowerment strategies, while also tracing patterns and trends in political representation. As the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2021) emphasises, understanding these dynamics is essential for designing effective gender equality policies.

The review further revealed gaps, particularly the limited focus on mentorship and networking in advancing women’s political careers (Arquisola, 2020; Mayasari *et al.*, 2025). Researcher reflexivity was a critical component of this process. The author’s positionality as an Indonesian scholar shaped by a socio-political environment that values communal leadership and traditional gender norms may have influenced interpretation of themes, particularly regarding cultural expectations and informal power dynamics. Acknowledging this standpoint enhanced sensitivity toward

context-specific understandings of leadership, preventing ethnocentric bias and reinforcing interpretive authenticity.

By synthesising available knowledge and exposing underexplored areas, this review provides a robust methodological foundation for examining women's leadership in the Indonesian context. The systematic design, transparent quality assessment, and reflexive stance collectively strengthen the credibility and transferability of findings.

Results

This section presents empirical evidence on women's leadership in Indonesia across four domains: (1) National parliamentary representation, (2) local and regional representation, (3) socioeconomic participation, and (4) ASEAN benchmarks. Findings are analysed to reveal structural, cultural, and policy-related implications behind statistical trends, providing a foundation for the subsequent discussion.

Women's Representation in National Politics

At the national level, women's seats in the DPR (House of Representatives) increased from 17.3% in 2014 to 20.5% in 2019, and remained

at 20.5% in 2021. This stagnation indicates that while affirmative action policies, such as the 30% gender quota for legislative candidates, have expanded women's opportunities, structural and cultural barriers continue to prevent these quotas from translating into higher actual representation. The persistence of male-dominated political party structures and limited campaign financing for women candidates are key factors contributing to this plateau. In the Regional Representative Council (DPD), women's representation rose from 26.5% in 2014 to 30.9% in 2021, reflecting a modest improvement but still falling short of gender parity goals. At the local level, women elected in regional elections increased from 8.6% in 2015 to 10.7% in 2020 (Figure 2), indicating gradual progress in subnational governance yet still demonstrating systemic underrepresentation at the grassroots level.

Local and Regional Representation

In 2021, women held 16% of local legislative seats in Indonesia. This was lower than the levels recorded in Laos (32%) and Vietnam (29%). Between 2015 and 2020, female candidacy in Indonesia averaged 8.6%, with 8.9% of those elected. The highest level of representation occurred in 2020, when women reached

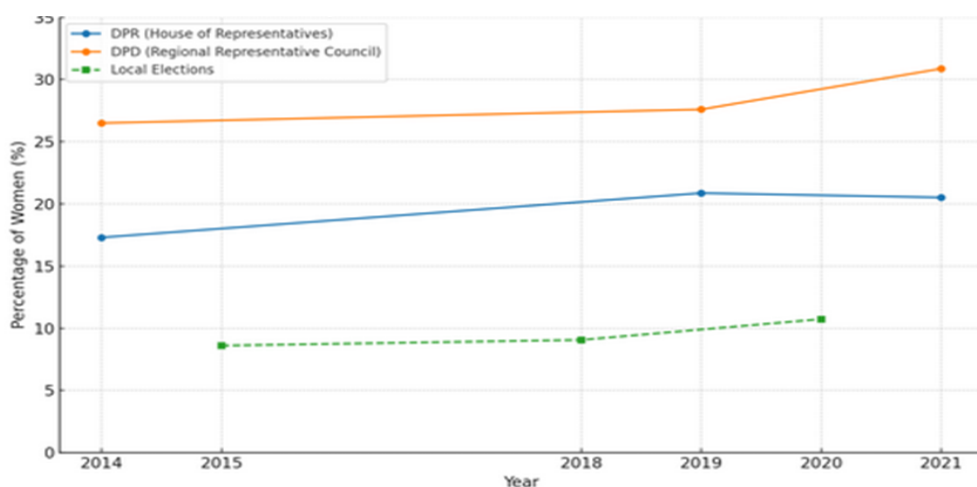


Figure 2: Women's representation in Indonesian politics (2014–2021)
Source: KPU (2021); Perludem (2015); Polpum Kemendagri (2018); CWI (2020)

10.73% of elected positions (Figure 3). These data suggest that local-level politics remains a challenging sphere for women, largely due to entrenched patriarchal norms, limited access to political networks, and inadequate enforcement of gender quotas. The comparative lag behind neighbouring Southeast Asian countries underscores the need for stronger institutional mechanisms, such as leadership mentorship programs, gender-sensitive electoral training, and transparent candidate selection, to elevate women’s visibility and competitiveness in elections.

Socioeconomic Participation

In 2023, women accounted for 49% of Indonesia’s total population. The female labour force participation rate was 55%. Employment distribution showed that 26% of women were concentrated in domestic sectors, while 89% of employed women worked in intermediate- to low-skill occupations. Educational attainment among women surpassed that of men, indicating that Indonesia has achieved near gender parity in access to education. However, this educational advancement has not been matched by equitable access to leadership and decision-making roles, particularly in corporate and public sectors. This

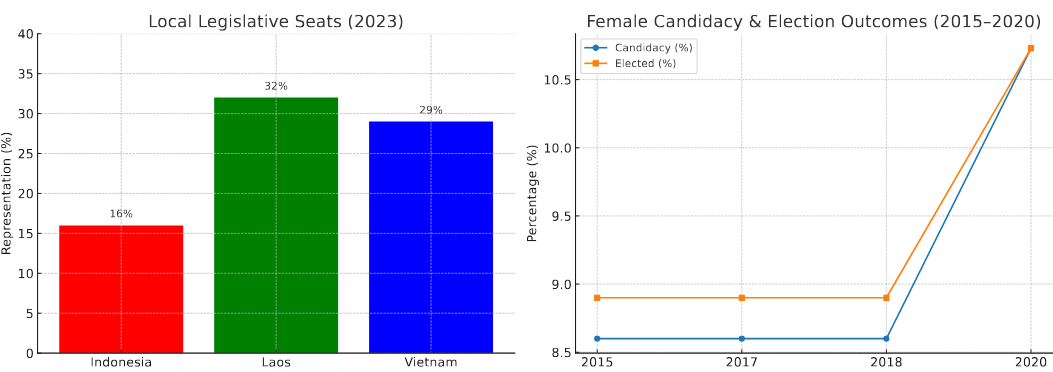


Figure 3: Women’s representation in local and regional politics (Indonesia & Southeast Asia)
Source: AP News (2023); ANU Bell School (2023); The Conversation (2018); Jakarta Post (2018); ANTARA News (2023); KPU/Perludem

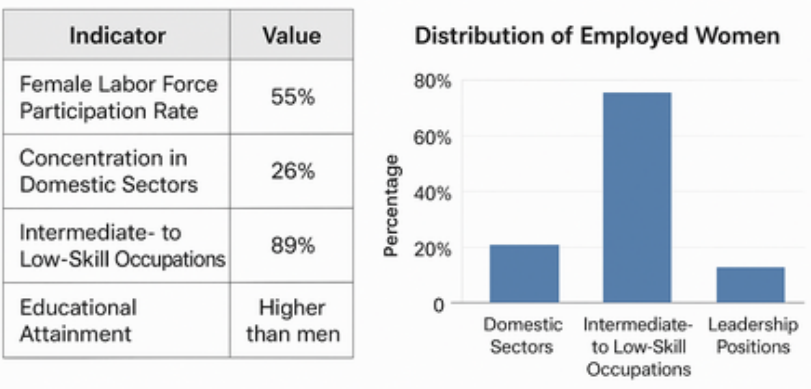


Figure 4: Socioeconomic participation of women in Indonesia
Source: Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS), 2023

disconnect points to a “leaky pipeline” effect, where women’s human capital development does not necessarily translate into empowerment outcomes due to institutional biases, unequal pay structures, and the persistence of gender stereotypes in professional hierarchies (BPS, 2023).

ASEAN Benchmarks

According to the ASEAN Gender Outlook (2023), women’s representation in Indonesia remained below that of Vietnam (29%) and the Philippines (28%). Vietnam’s consistent progress is attributed to state-led enforcement of gender quotas and the integration of women’s unions into policy-making processes, while the Philippines has institutionalised gender mainstreaming and mentorship initiatives through the Magna Carta of Women (Republic Act No. 9710). In contrast, Indonesia’s gender policies remain fragmented and unevenly implemented across regions, limiting their effectiveness. The higher achievements of Vietnam and the Philippines highlight the importance of sustained policy commitment, gender budgeting, and the alignment of national gender frameworks with local governance structures. In the Philippines, gender mainstreaming and mentorship programs have been institutionalised, while Nordic countries achieved higher levels through gender budgeting and social investment (Figure 5).

Overall, the findings illustrate that despite gradual improvements in women’s political and socioeconomic representation, structural barriers continue to restrict their leadership potential.

This indicates that numerical gains have not yet evolved into substantive representation capable of influencing governance outcomes. As the next section will explore, addressing these structural barriers is essential not only for gender equity but also for achieving sustainable and inclusive environmental governance.

Discussion

This study examines women’s leadership in Indonesia, focusing on its implications for gender equality and environmental governance. The discussion is structured around four interrelated themes derived from the results: (1) The stigma surrounding women in politics, (2) women’s leadership and gender equality in the SDGs, (3) women’s leadership in Indonesia, and (4) pathways for advancing gender-inclusive leadership. These themes are analysed through Gender and Development (GAD) Theory, Critical Mass Theory, and Critical Feminist Theory, situating Indonesia within broader ASEAN and global contexts.

Theme 1: The Stigma

Patriarchal norms and gendered power hierarchies remain deeply embedded in Indonesian society, shaping perceptions of leadership and reinforcing male dominance in politics and governance. Consequently, women continue to occupy subordinate positions that limit their full participation in decision-making arenas. At the national level, women’s representation in Indonesian Governance are summarised in Table 2.

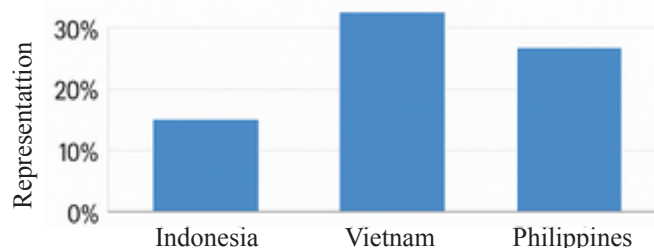


Figure 5: Women’s representation in nomination and electoral success rates (Regional)
Source: The ASEAN Gender Outlook (2023)

Table 2: Women’s representation in Indonesian Governance (2014–2021)

Level	2014	2019	2021
DPR	17.3%	20.5%	20.5%
DPD	26.5%	30.9%	30.9%
Regional Election (avg.)	8.6%	10.73% (2020)	–

Cultural norms such as the Javanese principle *wani di tata*, emphasising women’s obedience and supportive roles, discourage women from pursuing leadership (Muhmad & Nurahmawati, 2020). These expectations persist within political parties and families, creating structural disincentives for women to lead. Furthermore, Indonesia’s open-list electoral system and elite patronage networks restrict women’s candidacy and electoral competitiveness (Perdana & Hillman, 2020). This reflects Critical Feminist Theory’s assertion that patriarchal institutions sustain exclusionary hierarchies to preserve male dominance (Crenshaw, 1991).

In contrast, countries like the Philippines, with institutionalised mentorship programs, and Sweden, through gender budgeting and parental leave policies, have achieved higher women’s representation and policy influence (OECD, 2023; Frondoza *et al.*, 2025). These comparative insights reinforce that transforming institutional culture, not merely introducing quotas, is key to dismantling stigma and achieving gender parity.

Theme 2: The Notion of Women’s Leadership and Gender Equality in the SDGs

Women’s leadership is not only vital for SDG 5 (Gender Equality) but also a catalyst for advancing environmental and social goals, including SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Empirical evidence reveals that women leaders tend to champion community-oriented and sustainable policies, strengthening social welfare and economic resilience (Homsy & Lambright, 2021; Kiefner *et al.*, 2022; Cabaleiro & Buch, 2023; Sánchez *et al.*, 2023;).

However, nominal inclusion is insufficient to achieve structural change. Although women

hold 20.5% of DPR seats and 30.9% in the DPD, these remain below the 30% critical mass threshold necessary for meaningful policy influence (Dahlerup, 2006). At the local level, representation is even lower, at 16%, underscoring enduring cultural and institutional barriers (Perdana & Hillman, 2020; White *et al.*, 2024).

Applying GAD theory, gender mainstreaming must extend beyond token representation toward equitable participation in governance, particularly in environmental and resource management sectors (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Moser, 2012). Women’s limited access to party support, campaign financing, and leadership training constrains their ability to shape gender-responsive and sustainable policies.

Comparatively, the Philippines integrates gender equality into development planning through its Gender and Development (GAD) Budget Policy, while Sweden institutionalises gender budgeting to ensure that all fiscal decisions promote equity and sustainability. These examples illustrate that sustained, system-wide interventions, not isolated programs, enable women’s leadership to generate multiplier effects across economic, social, and environmental domains.

Theme 3: Women’s Leadership in Indonesia

Although women comprise nearly half of Indonesia’s population (49%) (BPS, 2023), their participation in decision-making remains disproportionately low. Female labour force participation stands at 55%, with most employed in domestic or informal sectors, reflecting structural inequalities that hinder leadership mobility (Figure 4).

Political representation mirrors this imbalance, as shown in Table 2, revealing stagnation below the critical mass threshold. The persistence of electoral and party-level barriers, coupled with deep-rooted cultural stereotypes that define leadership as masculine, continues to limit women’s advancement (Crenshaw, 1991; Connell, 2020).

Beyond political implications, these inequalities also hinder progress in environmental and community governance. Women’s perspectives, often emphasising health, education, and sustainable resource management, remain underrepresented, reducing the inclusivity and resilience of public policy (UN Women, 2021). Addressing these intersecting challenges requires firm commitment to enforcing gender quotas across all political levels, integrating gender accountability mechanisms within party systems, and investing in leadership pipelines and mentorship programs that align with both SDG 5 and broader environmental objectives.

Comparatively, Vietnam’s Women’s Union and the Philippines’ Local Councils for Women demonstrate how institutionalised platforms empower women to influence local governance agendas, improving social equity and climate resilience (Frondoza *et al.*, 2025).

Theme 4: The Way Forward

Advancing gender-inclusive leadership in Indonesia demands structural, institutional, and cultural transformation across governance systems. While women’s educational attainment has improved, their transition to leadership roles remains constrained by social expectations, limited networks, and policy gaps. To operationalise these findings, Table 3 presents a multi-level strategy for gender-inclusive governance.

Comparative ASEAN benchmarks (Sweden, Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia) reveal that institutionalised gender budgeting, mentorship pipelines, and inclusive governance frameworks accelerate progress towards SDG 5. Integrating such models can significantly strengthen Indonesia’s gender and environmental policy coherence.

Future research should adopt participatory and intersectional methods, focusing on regions such as coastal Java, rural Sulawesi, and indigenous Papua communities, where intersecting barriers of class, ethnicity, and geography compound gender inequality. Ethnographic and participatory action research (PAR) can illuminate how women navigate political and cultural constraints at local levels, providing evidence-based recommendations for context-sensitive interventions.

Table 3: Pathways for advancing gender-inclusive leadership in Indonesia

Level	Strategy	Mechanism	Expected Outcome
Legal Reforms	Enforce quota implementation and anti-discrimination laws	Ministry of Home Affairs and KPU monitoring	Gender parity in political representation
Institutional Reforms	Integrate gender accountability in political parties and environmental agencies	Gender focal points and annual audits	Enhanced gender-responsive governance
Social and Cultural Shifts	Civic education and community campaigns challenging patriarchal norms	Partnerships with media, religious, and youth organisations	Shifts in societal perceptions of women’s authority
Capacity Building	Leadership and policy training, mentorship, and research funding for women	Universities, NGOs, and CSOs collaboration	Strengthened women’s participation in SDGs and environmental policy

In sum, advancing women's leadership is not only a moral imperative but a strategic driver of inclusive, resilient, and sustainable development. Legal reform, institutional restructuring, and cultural transformation, supported by robust research, will enable Indonesia to realise SDG 5 and strengthen its contribution to regional and global gender equality commitments.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that women's leadership in Indonesia has made measurable progress but remains constrained by structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. While representation in national and regional politics has increased, it still falls below the critical mass required for substantive policy influence. Similarly, gaps persist between women's educational attainment, employment, and access to leadership positions, limiting the realisation of their full potential in governance and development.

The analysis reveals several critical insights. Persistent stigma and patriarchal norms continue to shape perceptions of women's leadership and restrict their participation in decision-making processes. Women's leadership plays a vital role in advancing SDG 5 and related environmental and social goals; however, token inclusion without genuine structural reform undermines its transformative potential. Moreover, socioeconomic and institutional inequalities continue to hinder women's mobility into leadership roles, despite their growing presence in education and the workforce. To close the leadership gap, strategic pathways must include stronger legal enforcement, gender-responsive governance, and sustained capacity-building initiatives that empower women to lead effectively and equitably.

Comparative evidence from ASEAN and global contexts underscores that quota alone are insufficient without complementary reforms such as mentorship programs, institutional accountability, and gender budgeting frameworks that embed equity within governance systems.

Future research should explore how intersectionality across class, ethnicity, and religion shapes leadership trajectories, particularly in resource-rich but marginalised regions such as Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Papua, to ensure that policy frameworks reflect Indonesia's social and geographic diversity.

In conclusion, only through holistic reform across legal systems, institutional structures, and cultural norms can Indonesia fully realise the transformative potential of women's leadership in achieving inclusive governance, social resilience, and environmentally sustainable development.

Acknowledgements

This publication was supported by the Faculty of Business, Economics and Social Development, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu through Postgraduate Bench Fees. Sincere appreciation goes to the FBESD Postgraduate Coordinators (2022–2025) for their outstanding dedication throughout this publication project.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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