



Women, Faith, and Power: Intercultural Tensions In Aceh's Election Supervision

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Abstract: Legally, the law in Indonesia has regulated and mandated female representation of 30%, but in the Aceh election supervisory institution, the representation figure does not reach the threshold. Aceh, as a province that was given the privilege of Sharia autonomy, actually experienced a deficit of representation, not caused by theological reasons, but because of structural obstacles and institutional bias. This study aims to evaluate the intercultural and institutional barriers that affect women's political participation in the Aceh Election Supervisory Committee (Panwaslih) and relate it to the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (CHDRI) as a normative reference option for gender recognition and strengthening. Applying a qualitative descriptive design, this study integrates critical content analysis and discourse on the official documents of the Bawaslu RI for Aceh (2023, 2028), Law No. 7/2017 on Elections, and CDHRI, in the context of political theory frameworks, with an emphasis on presence, norm contestation, and intercultural communication. The findings of the study show that 14 out of 23 regions in Aceh do not have female representation. This means that female Election Supervisors are only at 13%, a figure that shows the fact that there are gaps in the gender-based selection process, ignorance of historical experience, limitations in political access, and socio-cultural preferences. When it comes to the rights of women in the political sphere, articles 6, 13, and 16 of the CDHRI are crystal clear. They back up the need for a woman's space in the political arena. Coming from this understanding, it's not that religion is a barrier to women's political participation, but rather it can be a legitimate source of motivation, and can become the backbone for affirmative measures to fight discrimination. The harmony between legal compliance and religious contributions in shaping moral norms can strengthen the consolidation of the inclusiveness of the political system.

Keywords: Intercultural Tensions, Cairo Declaration, Election Supervision, Women's Representation

1. Introduction

A civil society is established by creating inclusive public space, without exception (Maifianti et al., 2024). However, the prevailing political system relegates women as a subordinate group, particularly with respect to formal politics (Lievesley, 2024; Maktabi, 2024). The male domain platform is generally constructed to limit women's power in politics (Berthet & Kantola, 2021; Murray & Bjarnegård, 2024). For electoral politics, women are repeatedly regarded as extra votes for men rather than being substantive actors in their own right (Thomsen & King, 2020). It is patriarchal cultures with strong masculine stereotypes that narrow the participation space even more (Vikalista et al., 2023), and, in turn, cause the neglect of women's welfare in shaping public policy, which is based on the male vision (Grzelec, 2022).

Women's participation in politics is now equated with democratic legitimacy, and empirical data show that more gender-equal legislatures increase perceptions of public legitimacy even among conservative populations (Kao et al., 2024). Yet, in Muslim majority societies, like Aceh, Indonesia, participation is always negotiated and constructed through a complex cultural process that intersects religious identity with local norms and hegemonic human rights claims (Al Aro et al., 2021; Moghissi, 2011). Women's participation in politics is now equated with democratic legitimacy, and empirical data show that more gender-equal legislatures increase perceptions of public legitimacy even among conservative populations (Kao et al., 2024). Aceh, as the only province with Sharia autonomy, displays a special dynamic: a national law (Electoral Law No. 7/2017) requires a quota of 30% women in electoral institutions (Minister of Law and Human Rights of the Republic of Indonesia, 2017 Article 92 (11)), but at the district/city level in Aceh, only about 13% of election supervisors are women, and 14 out of 23 regions have no female commissioners at all (Bawaslu Aceh, 2023). Barriers are not purely theological but also structural, including access to political networks, selection bias, and weak institutional support (Alex et al., 2023; Sulastri, 2020).

Recent local and national studies contribute a wealth of empirical evidence that maps the portrait of women's representation in Indonesian politics (Muharam et al., 2023, 2024; Muharam & Prasetyo, 2021). Similarly, through the study "Violence against Women in Elections and Its Impact on Women's Political Representation" (Wildianti & Ramadhana, 2024). Damayanti et al. (2024) found that quotas have not guaranteed the quality of representation due to cultural and institutional barriers through their paper "Policy Analysis of the 30% Quota of Women's representation in Indonesian Politics"; and the ASEAN Gender Outlook 2024 report by UN Women indicates that, despite increasing numerical representation in ASEAN, many countries have not succeeded in ensuring women's substantive participation in decision-making institutions (UN Women & ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). These findings are

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consistent with the OECD report (2024) and the SIGI Regional Report for Southeast Asia, which confirm that traditional gender norms, unequal care workloads, and a lack of gender-responsive policies widen the gap in women's public participation.

Previous research has identified various barriers, including patriarchy, culture, cost, and party selection, and demonstrated that formal rules (quotas) are crucial as a legal basis and source of legitimacy (Muharam et al., 2024; Prillaman, 2021; Qureshi & Ahmad, 2022). It also has a drawback, which is that many studies focus only on quantity (how many women are "represented") without looking at how much real power or influence they have in decision-making; no studies have been conducted linking the framework of Islamic human rights, in particular the Cairo Declaration - CDHRI 1990 (The Organization of Islamic Cooperation on Human Rights, 1990) with local practices; there is also a lack of regional comparisons that can identify institutional conditions in other countries of Muslim-majority (e.g. Pakistan or other ASEAN countries) that allow quotas to be transformed into substantive representations.

This research aims to bridge this gap with two key contributions. First, the study empirically highlighted structural and intercultural obstacles in the supervision of Aceh's elections, particularly in Panwaslih as part of Bawaslu, specifically for the Special Region of Aceh. Second, this study also marks CHDRI as a normative and symbolic monument to the legitimacy of women's inclusivity in the political realm (Hauwa, 2021; Inayatillah, 2023; Muharam & Pradhanawati, 2023). Relying on references to the perspective of intercultural communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2015) and norm contestation (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), this study reinterprets and harmonises religious discourse in formal politics. Thus, through CHDRI, a new normative alignment between religious identity and formal legal rules is achieved to achieve an inclusive democracy, through an evaluation of the structural and intercultural obstacles faced by women to penetrate their representation in the Election Supervisory Committee. A framework that can align religious identity with inclusive democracy.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Studies on women's representation associated with Islamic democracy often clashed head-to-head between traditions that conflict with modernity, religion versus rights, or Islam versus liberalism. This polarity will slowly ignore the process of cultural dialogue in gender-political inclusion (Nazneen, 2023). This paper repositions the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (CDHRI) as a critical normative artefact, as a connector between religious norms and global democratic values, and opens up new terrain for interpretive debate.

2.1. The Cairo Declaration: Relativism, Criticism, and Interpretive Opportunities

CHDRI has attracted criticism among Western human rights scholars. They consider that CHDRI, which is based on Islamic Sharia law, will weaken gender equality (Baderin, 2007; Strzelecka, 2020). Chamankhah (2021) argues that gender equality, especially in family and political rights, is an edict of patriarchy itself. Apart from the sound of Article 1 of the CHDRI, which affirms human dignity (The Cairo Declaration, 1990, Article 24). Scholars highlight that the Islamic legal tradition exhibits internal pluralism, allowing for gender-sensitive reinterpretation through *ijtihad* (contextual reasoning) (Baderin, 2007; Makhlof, 2020; Sumardi et al., 2021). In this context, articles such as Articles 6, 13, and 16 of the Cairo Declaration can be read as recognition of women's civil rights, economic independence, and profession as long as they are "in harmony with Sharia" (S). However, empirical research on how these provisions of the CDHRI are mobilised (or ignored) in local institutional practice remains very limited (Mozaffari, 2022; Peykani & Khalili, 2020). Thus, this study fills this gap and investigates how local actors in Aceh use or reject CDHRI in institutional arrangements for election supervision.

2.2. Women's Political Representation in Muslim-Majority Democracies: Agency vs. Structure

In studies of quotas and political reforms in Muslim countries, the results show that formal changes (such as quotas) often open up women's numerical access but do not always result in substantive power (Moghissi, 2011; Tajali, 2022). For example, legislative quotas in many Muslim-majority countries increase the number of women, but indicators such as committee leadership, influenced policy agendas, and budget controls still show inequality. In Indonesia, Rinaldo (2014) documents the strategies of Muslim activists who use Islamic discourse to "claim political space" in local corridors, a form of pious agency. Looking at the activism of women in Indonesia, Bayat (2007) laid out the idea of silent activism. From a different perspective, studies have largely ignored the massive hurdles that hinder a woman's ability to cut through the noise. Like lack of political connections, access to social capital, and institutionalised sexism and racism, something that Prillaman wrote about in 2021 (Prillaman, 2021). This study looks at the Panwaslih/Bawaslu Institute, a subnational body, to see how the way it is structured and aligned with religious beliefs affects the ability of women to participate in politics.

2.3. Towards an Integrated Theoretical Framework: Intercultural Contestation and Politics of Presence

This study formulates an analytical framework of Presence Politics (Phillips, 2000) within political institutions, particularly focusing on women's presence (descriptive representation) to amalgamate experience, perspectives, and representation (women) in order to impact policy-setting agendas. The absence of female representation in the 14 regions of Aceh Panwaslih not only signifies a quantitative void but also illustrates the oversight of gender issues, which may result in a democratic deficit. Drawing on Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) Contestation of Standards, the global principles of gender equality articulated in the CHDRI can be understood in terms of how they are interpreted, associated, accepted, or challenged in Aceh. CHDRI presents a compilation of documents that also serves as a platform for discussions between proponents of inclusion and their opponents. Bayat (2007) and Rinaldo (2014), drawing on Islamic Feminism and Silent Agency, argue that Acehnese women are not merely passive recipients of directives; rather, they strategically employ religious concepts to advocate for equality. Well-known techniques of theirs include softening, teaming up, and reinterpreting the rules, and all of these are related to intercultural communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2015). It regards Aceh as a convergence zone for the imperatives of national democracy, international gender standards, and indigenous Islamic customs. This positioning enables strategic and adaptive engagement with the CHDRI, where religious teachings become resources to promote gender equity through inclusive interpretations and institutional building.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design to examine the political representation of women in the context of institutional supervision of Aceh elections. The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables researchers to explore social processes, norms, and institutional practices in a space where religious, legal, and democratic values intersect (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

3.1. Data Sources

The primary data for the research are sourced from official documents published publicly on the Bawaslu RI Aceh website, including the announcement of the selection of district/city Panwaslih, the Selection Guidelines and Rules, the List of candidates and the selection results, and the Decree on the appointment of Panwaslih members. All documents downloaded are directly related to the Panwaslih selection process for the period 2023-2028. Only documents published by Bawaslu Aceh and available to the public are included in the analysis.

Meanwhile, secondary data include three key textual sources which include: the Cairo Declaration (CDHRI 1990), in particular on Articles 6, 13 and 16 on gender equality, professional rights, and political participation; Indonesian national legal instrument that requires women's representation at least 30% in the Election Supervisory Agency (Article 9 Paragraph 11 of Law Number 7/2017 concerning Elections); and academic literature on intercultural communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2015), Contesting norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) and politics of present (Phillips, 2000).

3.2. Units of Analysis

Unit analysis is defined as discrete textual segments (such as paragraphs, articles, rule items, or policy statements) within legal and administrative documents that contain selection criteria, normative legitimacy, or gender implications. The selection of this unit enables the identification of structural exclusion patterns, as well as religious legitimacy strategies relevant to the representation of women, which are treated as primary data and thematically analysed, following Assarroudi's guidelines (2018) and Graneheim & Lundman (2004).

Table 1: Unit Analysis and Coding

Segmentation Units	Data Source	Teknis Analisis	Coding Focus
Legal and regulatory text	Law No. 7/2017 on Elections; CDHRI 1990	Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)	Legitimacy of gender rights, normative framework
Dokumen seleksi Panwaslih	Selection announcement, candidate list, Appointment Decree	Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)	Women's representation, selection criteria
Panwaslih selection documents	Selection Team rules and criteria	CDA & QCA	Gender bias in "neutral" procedures
Secondary literature	Academic studies on gender and Islam (see, e.g., Rinaldo 2014; Tajali 2022)	Thematic triangulation	Cross-contextual normative & empirical comparison

Source: Adapted from Assarroudi's (2018), Alyaqoub et al. (2024), and modified to fit the objectives and context of this research.

3.3. Analytical Techniques

The analysis was conducted through a directed qualitative content analysis, informed by the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Content analysis serves to identify thematic categories based on a theoretical framework: the politics of presence (Phillips, 2000), contesting norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), and intercultural communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2015). Critical discourse analysis is used to examine how institutional texts perpetuate gender bias or, conversely, create opportunities for reinterpretation of gender justice (Fairclough, 2013).

The analysis process consists of three stages: document inventory, followed by deductive and inductive coding stages. Deductive coding, where the initial code is derived from the main theoretical framework, namely the Politics of Presence (Phillips, 2000), Contesting norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) and intercultural communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2015) and inductive coding, in the form of additional themes that arise from repeated reading of documents, such as barriers to network access, gender bias in selection, or women's strategies to utilise Islamic discourse. Another stage is a thematic synthesis to map the tensions between Islamic norms, national democracy, and local institutional practices. Coding is done manually with constant comparison (Elo et al., 2014; Mayring, 2015).

Table 2: Coding Protocol

Main Theme	Sub Theme	Operational Categorisation Matrix	Operational Definition
Politics of the present (Phillips, 2000)	Quota 30% Panwaslih	Formal rules on women's representation	Descriptive representation as an indicator of inclusive democracy
Contestation of Norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998)	Interpretation of the CDHRI	Legitimacy of political rights within the framework of Islam	Global norms are localised & reinterpreted contextually
Intercultural communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2015)	National vs Islamic legal dialogue	Legal text and discourse of the Panwaslih Selection Team	Negotiation between cross-cultural and religious norms

Main Theme	Sub Theme	Operational Categorisation Matrix	Operational Definition
Women's Agency (Bayat, 2007; Rinaldo, 2014; Tajali, 2022)	Aceh women's adaptive strategy	Public narrative & policy text	Women as active actors, not passive victims

Source: Developed from Mayring (2015); Elo et. al (2014); Assarroudi et al (2018); (Alyaqoub et al., 2024) adapted to the context of this research.

3.4. Research Credibility

To maintain credibility, this study uses an audit trail, which involves the systematic recording of the process of collecting, storing, and encoding documents, as well as peer debriefing, a discussion with academic colleagues in the field of gender and Indonesian governance, to validate the interpretation. Next, we look for and report examples of data that challenge the main interpretation to reduce confirmation bias, such as the case in Langsa, which is the only area that exceeds the representation threshold. Finally, a triangulation of documents is achieved by comparing Bawaslu documents with national regulations and CDHRI 1990, as well as academic literature, to validate the readings.

Researchers with a background in gender and governance research in Indonesia, as well as similar work experience and policy analysis, influence the understanding of the context in line with the research objective of understanding the institutional practice of Panwaslih selection from the perspective of normative discourse, rather than evaluating theological orthodoxy. Reflective awareness is described here in the interest of interpretive credibility in the analytical process to minimise interpretive bias (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

All data is public, so individual consent is not required. However, this research was still submitted and received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Diponegoro University, Semarang, Indonesia (Number: 1462/UN7.F7/AK/VII/2025; date of publication: August 28, 2025).

4. Analysis

Data analysis was conducted by referring to thematic categories derived from the inductive-deductive coding process. The results of the analysis are presented in four main themes: the politics of presence, the contestation of norms, intercultural communication, and the agency of women.

4.1. Politics of the Present: 30% quota in the Panwaslih Selection

In the Panwaslih selection document, it is clearly and firmly regulated with respect to the minimum female representation quota of 30%, in line with what is mandated in national regulations, namely, Law No. 7 of 2017 concerning Elections. However, in practice, this arrangement is only interpreted symbolically. The 30% quota is often only seen as an administrative obligation, without touching on the substantive aspect (Celis, 2009; Phillips, 2000). In the final selection process, the regulation that looks perfect results in more compositions that are far from gender support.

4.2. Normative Contestation: CDHRI and National Democracy

Analysis of the discourse in the official document of Panwaslih shows that there is an implicit reference to the link between Islamic values and national regulations. Articles 6, 13, and 16 of the CHDRI expressly protect and accommodate women's right to participate in the political space. But in reality, it is actually deflected as a justification for gender restrictions. Through the view of norm contestation (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), it is found that gender equality norms are often reconstructed into local Islamic frameworks, resulting in different platforms and practices. The struggle between secular norms and Islamic interpretations has resulted in legal pluralism in social practice in Turkey (Toktas & O'Neil, 2015). In another study, it was found that the use of religious idioms for domestic interests was the result of strategic collaboration between conservative women's organisations and political actors (Dursun, 2019; Mahmoudi, 2019).

4.3. Intercultural Communication: Negotiation of National and Sharia Law

The Panwaslih document accommodates 2 normative understandings, namely national law that encourages representative democracy for justice, but also does not set aside local Islamic law to create moral harmonisation. Research analysis shows that in the selection criteria, the term "gender neutral" is often used, but in practice, it is full of structural biases, for example, with the use of the term "good character" interpreted patriarchally. This is a visualisation of the concept of intercultural communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2015), where there is a crossing between cultural norms that results in solid institutional practices. A similar pattern is found in Malaysia, as well as in the study of Southeast Asian political paths, where moral and formal requirements are often woven into the wrapping of religious and cultural norms, resulting in a disregard for women's rights to important and influential positions in social status (Choi, 2019). Chen et al (2022) study illustrates legal reform and socio-cultural interaction in Malaysia, where these two studies find the same thing that selection criteria sometimes camouflage as formal moral requirements to hinder women's chances of entry into formal institutions (Chen et al., 2022; Choi, 2019).

4.4. Women's Agency: Adaptive Strategies in Institutional Contexts

The results of a recent literature analysis show that although official documents often imply structural bias, Acehese women are not entirely passive and apathetic. There is a bargain in the political space to pass the issue of gender equality, through the use of Islamic discourse, especially in the CDHRI. This is in line with the findings of Rinaldo (2014) and Tajali (2022) that women from Muslim-majority areas often use religious narratives to legitimise their political interests. Adaptively, they can increase women's bargaining positions and reverse subordinate positions to a higher level, even though they are subject to strict structural limitations (Bayat, 2007).

4.5. Synthesis Analysis

The four themes above reveal a pattern of fundamental tension: formal quotas open women's access, but normative contestation and cultural bias limit their substantive realisation. However, this space is not completely closed, as women themselves demonstrate the capacity of agents to use Islamic discourse to expand legitimacy. Thus, the political representation of women in Aceh cannot only be understood as the result of formal regulation, but as the product of a dynamic interaction between the rule of law, religious interpretations, and women's own strategies.

5. Result

Indeed, within the context of women's political rights, not all predominantly Islamic countries prioritise these interests (Cherif, 2010; Gouda & Potrafke, 2016). Human rights, the principles that arise within the Islamic world, are comparable to those developed in the West (Andri Nirwana et al., 2024). Both perspectives advocate for the respect of human rights regardless of race, religion, gender, or other characteristics, applicable to all individuals at all times and in all places (Baderin, 2007; Özler, 2018). We are seeing a right that has its roots in the deepest of philosophical ideas, and is blessed to us by Allah Almighty, as per the teachings of Washil & Fata (2017), when we look at the fundamental rights of people. Coming from a democratic system, civil rights that cover freedom of speech, belief, and expression are basically considered paramount, especially for women, as Donado (2022) stresses.

The Islamic view is that the political rights of women are well-regulated and recognised, and in some cases, they cannot exercise those rights, but it does not mean that they have been eliminated. Until the dawn of the age of modern democratic governance, they were considered crucial (Harlina, 2015). Muslim-majority, non-democratic countries are where the study of women's representation has become an interesting area of research, as per Potrafke (2010). Women in general face dogmatic, gender binding obstacles to religious resistance. The opposite situation occurs in Muslim-majority countries with democratic systems, where equal rights are provided and fully protected basic rights, including women's political rights. Regarding women in the political arena, the Cairo Declaration's stance on women's rights, which is in line with the Islamic position, is key to helping them claim their rightful place, according to Cherif (2010).

The Cairo Declaration opened the gates of interpretation of human rights to Muslim countries. Despite this, there is a major difference in how the West and Muslim countries perceive human rights. Since the gap is a very significant one, there has never been a more fitting addition to our understanding of human rights and our religious beliefs. The Cairo Declaration takes a much more extensive approach to safeguarding the fundamental rights of citizens than does the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, making it more attractive to Muslim-majority countries. Indonesia, as one of the democracies with the largest Muslim majority in the world, institutionalised the protection of human rights for all its citizens in the country's constitution, namely the Indonesian Constitution, Article 28A-J (Republik of Indonesia, 1945), which was again revealed in Law No. 39 of 1999 concerning human rights as an affirmation of the state's commitment to the human rights of its citizens (Sardi, 2016). Indonesia plays an important role in building human rights discourse based on an Islamic perspective (Riyanto & Muhammadin, 2019). The contribution of comprehensive thinking and dialogue from Indonesia in the interpretation of human rights protection and Islam in the life of its state can be a colour in international human rights discussions. The protection of human rights in Islam in Indonesia is inseparable from three main historical and legal artefacts, namely the Charter of Medina, the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (1981), and the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (1990). The three of them made a great contribution in inspiring and becoming a compass for the application of human rights principles in the life of the nation and state (Sardi, 2017).

Furthermore, human rights principles are enshrined in the Indonesian Constitution, specifically in Article 28A, J of the 1945 Constitution (Republik of Indonesia, 1945), which affirms the basic rights of all citizens. As the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, Indonesia plays an important role in shaping the discourse on human rights in the context of Islam (Riyanto & Muhammadin, 2019). Therefore, the country is required to deeply engage in Islam's conceptualisation of human rights protection. This framework is articulated through three major historical and legal instruments: the Medina Charter, the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (1981), and the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (1990). As a result, it is essential to understand the Cairo Declaration, look at what it says, push for its spread and promotion, and put its ideas into action (Sardi, 2017). Article 6 of the Cairo Declaration implicitly talks about gender equality by saying that women have the right to fully participate in all aspects of political life.

المادة 13

أ- المرأة مساوية للرجل في الكرامة الإنسانية، ولها من الحق مثل ما عليها من الواجبات، ولها شخصيتها المدنية ودمتها المالية المستقلة وحق الاحتفاظ باسمها ونسبها.
ب- على الرجل عبء الإنفاق على الأسرة ومسؤولية رعايتها.

Article 6 of the Cairo Declaration stipulates that women have an equal position with males in terms of rights, obligations, civil status, financial autonomy, and the protection of their reputation and interests related to their progeny (Sardi, 2017). This article implicitly asserts that women have equal rights in all dimensions of economic, social, and political life. Consequently, women should have the same opportunities as men to achieve a respectable income, encompassing the same rights to qualify for work and political posts through a legally regulated selection procedure.

Election Supervisors are a vital political-institutional role as mandated by Law No. 7 of 2017 concerning Elections, which ensures women's representation in it. Aceh Province has special status and autonomy rights, so its election supervisors are called the Aceh Provincial Election Supervisory Committee (Panwaslih) instead of the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) like in other parts of Indonesia. As stated in Article 13 of the Cairo Declaration, women serving as election supervisors are entitled to the same opportunities as their male counterparts, regardless of gender. For more information, please refer to Article 13.

المادة 13

العامل حق تكفله الدولة والمجتمع لكل قادر عليه، وللإنسان حرية اختيار العمل اللائق به مما تتحقق به مصلحته ومصلحة المجتمع، وللعامل حقه في الأمن والسلامة وفي كافة الضمانات الاجتماعية الأخرى، ولا يجوز تكليفه بما لا يطيقه، أو إكراهه، أو استغلاله، أو الإضرار به، وله - دون تمييز بين الذكر والأنثى - أن يتقاضى

أجرأ عادلاً مقابل عمله دون تأخير. وله الإجازات والعلاوات والفرقات التي يستحقها، وهو مطالب بالإخلاص والإتقان، وإذا اختلف العامل وأصحاب العمل فعلى الدولة أن تتدخل لفض النزاع ورفع الظلم وإقرار الحق، والإلزام بالعدل دون تمييز.

Article 13 guarantees that everyone capable of working has the right to work. They are free to choose a job that aligns with their interests and the interests of society. Employees have a right to safety, security, and all other social security benefits. They cannot be burdened with tasks beyond their means, coerced, exploited, or harmed. They are also entitled to fair remuneration for their work, without discrimination based on gender, and to receive benefits, holidays, and promotions in line with their rights. Employees are obligated to work sincerely and professionally. When workers and employers disagree on a problem, the state must intervene to resolve the dispute, eliminate tyranny, support the rights of both parties, and uphold justice without bias (Sardi, 2017). There is a guarantee of equal opportunities for women to work without discrimination, regardless of their gender. Women in Aceh have the same opportunity to compete fairly for the job of Election Supervisory Commissioner at all levels, from the national to the village level.

It is important to remember that women involved in the selection of election supervisors is more than just meeting the 30% requirement for female representation. This means that women need to be very well-prepared to take part in the process of choosing the Election Supervisory Committee (Panwaslih) or the Election Supervisory Board (Bawaslu). To be able to compete with men, they need to learn the right things, get the right skills, and learn how to think strategically. Women with higher education are given the same chances to use their political knowledge and professional credentials in these competitive jobs. This idea is talked about a lot.

المادة 16

لكل إنسان الحق في الانتفاع بثمرات إنتاجه العلمي أو الأدبي أو الفني أو التقني، وله الحق في حماية مصالحه الأدبية والمالية العائدة له على أن لا يكون هذا الإنتاج غير منافع لأحكام الشريعة.

Article 16 of the Cairo Declaration. Article 16 of the Cairo Declaration says that everyone has the right to benefit from the results of their scientific, literary, artistic, or technical work. It is also given the right to protect their moral and financial interests, as long as they do not go against the rules of the Shari'a that have been set out (Sardi, 2017). The Cairo Declaration's Articles 6, 13, and 16 say that this regulatory framework is meant to help women claim their political rights and take part in government or political institutions without having to worry about how Islamic law might limit their roles. The Cairo Declaration offers a means for Islamic nations or those with predominantly Muslim populations to preserve human rights, especially with respect to gender equality.

The Aceh Provincial Election Supervisory Committee (Panwaslih Aceh) has five commissioners: four men and one woman. This means that only 20% of the members are women, which is below the required 30%. Things are even worse at the district and city levels. In 23 local Panwaslih bodies, a total of 75 commissioners were elected: 65 men (87%) and 10 women (13%). Alarmingly, 14 of the 23 regions have no female representatives at all, including Aceh Besar, Bireun, Lhokseumawe, and Sabang. Only nine regions have women in their election supervisory bodies. Six of these, Aceh Tamiang, Southeast Aceh, Gayo Lues, Nagan Raya, Pidie Jaya, and Banda Aceh, achieved exactly 33% representation (one woman out of three seats). Langsa City stands out as the only region to exceed the threshold, with two women among three commissioners (67%). In contrast, East Aceh and Pidie districts, each with five seats, only recorded 20-25% female participation. For a detailed analysis of female representation in the Aceh Provincial Election Supervisory Committee (Panwaslih), please refer to Table 3 below.

Table 3: Organisational Framework of the Aceh Provincial Election Supervisory Committee (Bawaslu Aceh)

No	Names of the Panwaslih Commissioners for Aceh Province (in initial)	M / L	Division
1	AS	M	Chairperson of the Aceh Province Panwaslih
2	Y	M	Coordinator of the Human Resources, Organisation, Education, and Training Division
3	M	F	Coordinator of the Division of Prevention, Community Participation and Public Relations
4	FRY	F	Coordinator of the Division of Legal and Dispute Resolution
5	S	M	Coordinator of the Division of Handling, Breach, Data and Information

Source: (Bawaslu Aceh, 2023)

The data shown in Table 3 above show that the representation of women has exceeded 30% quota, which is required in the provisions of Article 92, Paragraph 11 of the Election Law.

“The composition of the Bawaslu, Provincial Bawaslu, and Regency/City Bawaslu membership is required to ensure female representation of at least 30% of the total membership.”

Acehnese women are guaranteed their rights under the Indonesian Election Law to occupy positions as Election Commissioners and Supervisors. The position of a province that is given privileges to govern its territory based on Islamic law does not negate the right of Acehnese women to participate fully in the system of politics, both local and national. Indonesia, with Pancasila as its national philosophy, recognises and protects all political rights of its citizens, regardless of ethnic, racial, and religious differences. The national law and the Islamic law go hand in hand and complement each other in forming the Indonesian system of government. Therefore, Acehnese women can take advantage of this political appreciation through their involvement in the political scene. The following is the number of female representations in Bawaslu/Panwaslih at the Regency/City level of Aceh Province, according to Decree No. 2586.1/KP.00/K/08/2023, depicted in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Women's Representation in the Election Supervisory Committee (Panwaslih) between the provinces and Cities of Aceh Province.

No	Regency/City	Gender		Percentage	
		M	F	M	F
1	Aceh Barat Regency	3	0	100	0
2	Aceh Barat Daya Regency	3	0	100	0
3	Aceh Besar Regency	3	0	100	0
4	Aceh Jaya Regency	3	0	100	0
5	Aceh Selatan Regency	3	0	100	0
6	Aceh Singkil Regency	3	0	100	0
7	Aceh Tamiang Regency	2	1	67	33
8	Aceh Tengah Regency	3	0	100	0
9	Aceh Tenggara Regency	2	1	67	33
10	Aceh Timur Regency	4	1	80	20
11	Aceh Utara Regency	5	0	100	0
12	Bener Meriah Regency	3	0	100	0
13	Bireun Regency	3	0	100	0
14	Gayo Lues Regency	2	1	67	33
15	Nagan Raya Regency	2	1	67	33
16	Pidie Regency	4	1	80	20
17	Pidie Jaya Regency	2	1	75	33
18	Simeulue Regency	3	0	100	0
19	Banda Aceh City	2	1	67	33
20	Langsa City	1	2	33	67
21	Lhokseumawe City	3	0	100	0
22	Sabang City	3	0	100	0
23	Subulussalam City	3	0	100	0

Source: (Bawaslu Aceh, 2023)

Table 4 above shows that there are many areas within Aceh Province that do not even have women's representation in the election supervisory institution. The rest seem to only meet the specified formal requirements. Among the 23 districts and cities, the number of male representatives is 65, or 87% of the total membership. Meanwhile, female representation amounts to only 10 people or 13% of the total membership, so the total number of members of the Aceh Provincial Election Supervisory Committee is 75 people. Of the 23 districts and cities, there are 14 districts and cities that do not even have female representatives on the Election Supervisory Committee. These areas include West Aceh Regency, Southwest Aceh Regency, Aceh Besar Regency, Aceh Jaya Regency, South Aceh Regency, Aceh Singkil Regency, Central Aceh Regency, North Aceh Regency, Bener Meriah Regency, Bireun Regency, Simeulue Regency, Lhokseumawe City, Sabang City, and Subulussalam City. A more detailed picture can be seen in Figure 1.

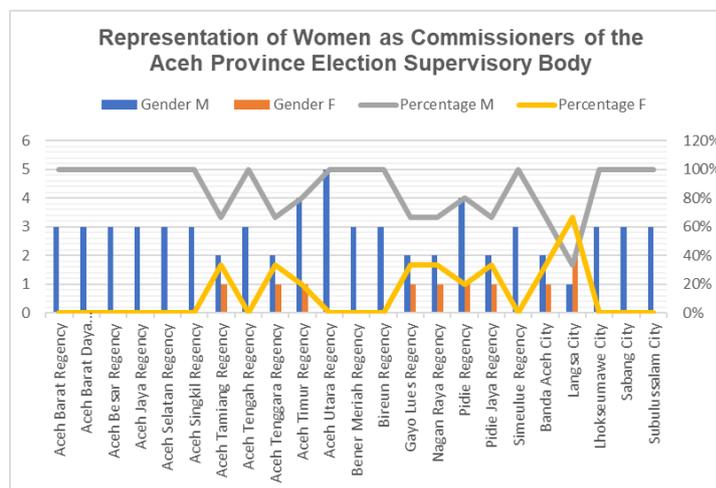


Figure 1: Presentation of Women's Representation on the Election Supervisory Committee in the Aceh Provincial Regency and City. Created by the Author.

The research findings show that there is a wide disparity between the mandate of the national law on 30% female representation and the factual conditions that exist in the Aceh election supervisory body. Women's representation in election supervisory institutions shows less than encouraging results, reflecting incomplete and uneven implementation of gender inclusion commitments. Many factors are related to this, including the lack of sanctions for non-compliance with regulations, coupled with informal recruitment practices that destroy the effectiveness of the quota system. Legal regulation alone is not enough; it requires expanding access to political networks, institutional support, and the formation of a massive socio-cultural perception of gender roles and inclusivity (Prillaman, 2021).

The Centre for Political Studies of the University of Indonesia highlights the large number of female candidates who are still unfamiliar with election procedures, limited access to politics, and have to face informal biases in the selection process (Muharam et al., 2023, 2024; Muharam & Prasetyo, 2021) Although it is formally announced that the selection process is gender-neutral, in practice, the selection process turns out to have potential structural gaps. In contrast to political parties,

where in the selection process there is no reserve quota or affirmative action mechanism for female candidates during the selection process. This is a contradiction, while the national law mandates a quota of 30% female representation, but in the selection process assumes the same starting point, ignoring the democratic deficit that occurs (Dahlerup, 2016; Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005). The case of Aceh is quite representative of similar conditions faced by other Indonesian women in fighting for equality and representation of their race in the political arena. This is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

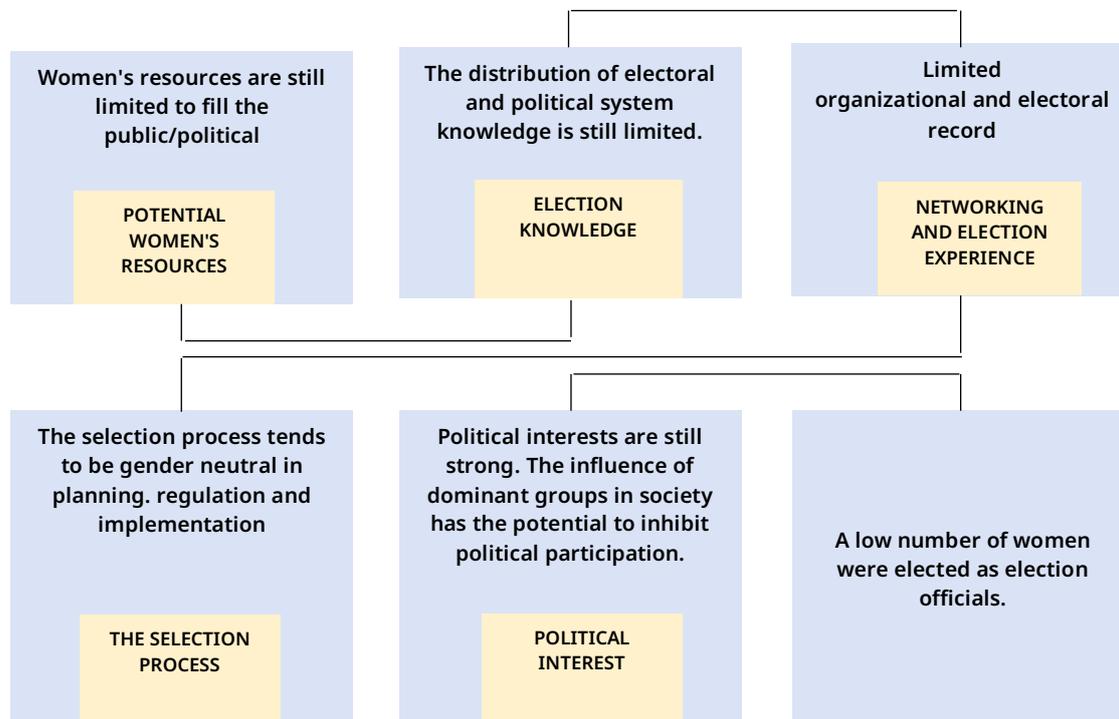


Figure 2: The Challenges of Women's Involvement in Elections (Muharam et al., 2024)

6. Discussion

Contradictions in women's representation in election supervisory institutions in Aceh are the focus of this study. The majority of the districts and cities in Aceh show low numbers, with even having no female representation in their areas. (although Langsa points to 67% female representation). This shows that Aceh is experiencing a fairly complicated democratic deficit, caused by complex interactions between institutional norms, structural biases, and value contestation in its society, not due to theological reasons alone.

6.1. Politics of Presence and Democratic Deficit

The findings of the study are an affirmation of Anne Phillips'(2000) Politics of Presence framework that women's representation is not seen as a number, but also as a determinant of the direction of the institutional agenda. The vacancy of female representatives in 14 of the 23 Panwaslih membership shows the lack of experience and a gender perspective in the formulation of electoral integrity. Confirming this, recent studies explain that the granting of gender quotas without supporting mechanisms will not bring about renewal; it will only result in symbolic representation (Bush & Zetterberg, 2021; Krook, 2020). Studies in Aceh prove that the application of Islamic law is not the cause of women's exclusion, but it is the political access gap that weakens women's representation, even though they have been given quota opportunities.

6.2. Norm Contestation and Localisation

Using the lens of contestation of norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), the Aceh instance shows that global gender norms are not just accepted or rejected in a binary way; they are also reinterpreted through local ways of knowing. The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, frequently attacked in the West, provides an alternative source of legitimacy for women asserting their political rights. This is in line with the findings of Muslim Women's Activism in the US by Sahar (2022), in which Muslim women activists use local religious idioms and religious rhetorical strategies to challenge patriarchal stereotypes, without having to reject religious norms as a whole (Sahar, 2022). In the context of Indonesia and Morocco, the study Integrating Islamic Family Law and Gender Equality also shows that Islamic law can be legally and socially reformed to reflect the principle of gender equality while still respecting local norms (Shiddieqy et al., 2025).

6.3. Women's Agency and Islamic Feminism

This discussion also enriched the literature on *Islamic feminism* and the strategy of "tacit activism" (Bayat, 2007; Rinaldo, 2014). Women in Aceh do not reject religion as a frame, but use it to negotiate political legitimacy. In line with Tajali's findings (2022) in Iran and Morocco, as well as Sanni et al. (2021) in Ghana, West Africa, religion-based strategies have proven to be more effective than purely secular advocacy. This refutes the view of the dichotomy of Islam vs gender equality, that religion can actually function as a venue for contesting norms, an adhesive as well as a strategic resource in creating inclusivity.

6.4. Contributions

The study developed a new contribution by integrating three theoretical frameworks: the politics of presence, the contestation of norms, and intercultural communication. The Cairo Declaration can be reconstructed as a link of intercultural legitimacy to strengthen women's representation. The global debate on governance inclusivity can be broadened by these findings and be realized in plural legal contexts, as well as opening up comparative horizons for other Muslim-majority countries in the face of similar tensions.

7. Conclusions

In the context of a Muslim-majority, the study offers three main interrelated contributions to scholarly and policy debates on gender, religion, and democratic governance. First, the uneven representation of women in Aceh's electoral control institutions is revealed by empirical contributions, despite the mandate of a 30% quota. Aceh is experiencing a democratic deficit, although it has been supported by formal regulations, but in practice, it does not receive support from regulatory enforcement mechanisms and institutional support. Next, the theoretical contribution of this study is the development of the conceptions of "presence politics" (Phillips, 2000) and "norm contestation" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) by conducting a strategic repositioning and mobilization of the Cairo Declaration for the legitimacy of intercultural norm contestation. This approach opens up a new area of the debate about how Islamic law and gender equality fit together. It focuses on the role of *ijtihad* and the localization of norms. In fact, the Cairo Declaration could be said to be a bridge between the two. Finally, still from a policy point of view, this research also reveals the need to enforce formal quotas by good mechanisms such as capacity building support, mentoring, or affirmative policies at the selection level. Without all of that, the regulation is just a symbolic rule on paper, but it does not address the structural barriers real women face.

When put together, this contribution of thought shows that the Cairo Declaration can be used strategically in a pluralistic system like Aceh, rather than being an obstacle. Intercultural dialogue and feminist *ijtihad* can help us understand and use the Declaration of Cairo in new ways. It can be more than just an ivory tower; it can also help make things more inclusive. Other countries of Muslim-majority countries can also use this strategy to deal with the intersection of faith, rights, and women's representation in politics and power.

8. Limitations

This study has important limitations, such as small primary data sources. The study used only factual data/information based on the official documents of Aceh Bawaslu, without triangulation from in-depth interviews or any participatory observation of the candidate selection process. This restricts the extent to which informal dynamics, which could be (and, we will argue later, are) important in Panwaslih selection, can be analysed. Next, the focus of the research is limited to Aceh, so generalisations to other Muslim-majority provinces, both in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, need to be made. The use of critical discourse analysis is limited to focus on normative and procedural texts, so that the interpretation of local actors cannot be recorded directly. These limitations create opportunities for future research, particularly through multi-method approaches (such as interviews, institutional ethnography, or public surveys) to explore the interaction between religious norms, formal law, and the experiences of women actors.

9. Implications

The findings and arguments in this study have important implications in three domains: theoretical, emphasising the importance of integrating the politics of presence with the contestation of norms to analyse gender representation in the plural legal system. In the realm of practical policy, it highlights the urgent need for implementing regulations, including affirmative quotas in the Panwaslih selection process and programmes to strengthen the capacity of female candidates. Eventually, the narrative of inclusivity and gender justice in Islam can be repositioned and reinterpreted to create an intercultural social movement with the mission of strengthening the legitimacy of local democracy, fostering intercultural dialogue, and strengthening global norms of gender equality towards inclusive democratic governance.

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