

Navigating Cultural and Structural Barriers: Women's Political Organizing under Patriarchal Malay Customs and Political Oligarchy in Riau

Fitri Rahmadani¹, Junaidi², *Trio Saputra³

¹Magister Management/Graduate School/Universitas Lancang Kuning

²Magister Management/Graduate School/Universitas Lancang Kuning

³Magister Management/Graduate School/Universitas Lancang Kuning

Correspondence*: Trio Saputra
e-mail: trio_saputra@unilak.ac.id

Abstract

This study investigates how women's organizations in Riau, Indonesia, navigate the dual challenges of patriarchal Malay customs and political oligarchy in their pursuit of gender equality in political participation. Despite the presence of progressive gender mainstreaming policies such as Regional Regulation No. 3/2023, structural and cultural constraints continue to hinder meaningful representation of women in political institutions. Using a qualitative approach, the research draws on interviews with activists, female politicians, and government officials, alongside policy analysis and field observations. The findings reveal that women's organizations employ culturally adaptive strategies—such as engaging religious and traditional leaders—to legitimize their political agency, while also challenging elite-dominated party systems through advocacy, coalition-building, and political education. These strategies reflect a pragmatic synthesis of resistance and negotiation, enabling incremental shifts in power and discourse. The study emphasizes the importance of local feminist agency and adaptive governance in transforming patriarchal and exclusionary systems. It further recommends institutionalizing gender-responsive mechanisms in political parties, enhancing accountability in policy implementation, and providing sustained support for grassroots women's leadership initiatives. By centering the lived realities of women in Riau, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of feminist organizing in culturally conservative and politically restrictive environments.

Keywords: gender mainstreaming, women's political participation, patriarchy, political oligarchy, Riau

1. Introduction

The ongoing struggle for gender equality in political spheres remains one of the most pressing global challenges in both democratic and transitioning societies. Although international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have underscored the importance of women's political participation, actual implementation at local levels often collides with persistent socio-cultural norms and entrenched structural impediments. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the socio-political landscape of Riau Province, Indonesia, where patriarchal Malay customs and a resilient political oligarchy continue to obstruct meaningful participation and leadership of women in politics.

Indonesia, as a nation-state, has made significant legal strides in the area of gender mainstreaming, including the issuance of Inpres No. 9/2000 on Gender Mainstreaming and the inclusion of gender-responsive budgeting through Peraturan Menteri PPPA No. 6/2022. At the subnational level, Riau has formally codified its commitment to gender equality through Regional Regulation No. 3 of 2023 concerning Gender Mainstreaming. However, the mere existence of legal instruments does not guarantee their effective implementation. The intersectionality of gender, culture, and political power dynamics has rendered such progressive policies relatively ineffective when they encounter institutional inertia and deep-rooted patriarchal values. As highlighted by Lombardo and Mergaert (2018), the resistance to gender mainstreaming is often subtly embedded in organizational cultures and political routines, rendering formal commitments superficial in impact.

Within this context, women's organizations in Riau have emerged as critical actors in challenging cultural hegemony and advocating for structural reforms. These organizations function not merely as advocacy groups but as politically conscious entities employing strategic maneuvering to assert agency in male-dominated political terrains. Their struggle is twofold: to dismantle the cultural dominance of *adat* (customary law) which defines and limits gender roles, and to penetrate the oligarchic political systems that control access to power and resources. As Agarwal (2018) argues, effective political participation for women must address both agency and structure—a duality that is often neglected in mainstream policy interventions.

In the Malay cultural tradition predominant in Riau, women's roles have been historically confined to the private domain, with public and political authority being reserved for male lineage. This gendered division is sustained by both normative values and institutional practices that socialize women into roles of compliance and domesticity. Despite modern legal frameworks advocating for equality, the persistence of patriarchal ideology remains a formidable barrier to political representation. Saptari and Holzner (2018) emphasize that cultural norms not only inform public attitudes but are actively reproduced through formal education, religious institutions, and local governance mechanisms. Thus, challenging these norms requires a culturally embedded approach that respects local wisdom while simultaneously subverting its gendered implications.

Parallel to cultural barriers, structural impediments arise from the oligarchic nature of political institutions in the region. Political oligarchy in Riau, as in many other provinces in Indonesia, is characterized by the concentration of power in the hands of elite families and political dynasties who control electoral processes, party nominations, and campaign financing. This power asymmetry significantly limits the entry points for women into political leadership. As noted by Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2020), political violence and exclusion are common strategies used by elites to maintain dominance and suppress gender reform initiatives. The oligarchic logic not only marginalizes women but also instrumentalizes them as mere symbols of representation rather than substantive actors in decision-making.

Against this backdrop, women's organizations in Riau have developed innovative strategies to navigate these intertwined challenges. They employ a range of tactics from

alliance-building with progressive male leaders and religious figures, to leveraging affirmative action policies and gender quotas. In many cases, they also engage in grassroots political education aimed at empowering women to participate in electoral politics as both voters and candidates. These efforts, however, are often met with resistance and co-optation by dominant actors who seek to neutralize their transformative potential.

The current research, grounded in qualitative methodologies, aims to critically examine the strategies employed by women's organizations in Riau to overcome cultural and structural barriers to political participation. Specifically, the study interrogates how these organizations build coalitions with traditional leaders and local elites to strengthen the implementation of gender-responsive policies. It also evaluates the extent to which Regional Regulation No. 3 of 2023 on Gender Mainstreaming is perceived as effective by these organizations in addressing the structural marginalization of women in politics.

Edward's policy implementation model serves as the theoretical foundation for analyzing the interplay between policy content, institutional capacity, and environmental factors. This model allows for an exploration of the 'implementation gap'—the disjuncture between policy formulation and execution—in the context of gender mainstreaming in Riau. The concept of 'adaptive cultural strategy' further enriches the analysis by acknowledging the agency of local actors in creatively negotiating cultural norms without engaging in direct confrontation, thus facilitating incremental change.

This study also seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on feminist institutionalism, which interrogates how formal and informal rules, norms, and practices shape gendered outcomes in political institutions. As Bacchi and Eveline (2020) argue, feminist analysis must move beyond surface-level indicators and examine the discursive and structural mechanisms that reproduce gender inequality. This is particularly important in regions like Riau, where gender mainstreaming policies coexist with deeply patriarchal institutions, creating a paradoxical policy environment that simultaneously enables and constrains women's political agency.

Importantly, this research situates the struggle for gender equality within the specificities of local political culture, thereby rejecting one-size-fits-all models of empowerment. The notion of 'gender mainstreaming' is not treated as a technocratic fix but as a contested and negotiated process involving power, resistance, and transformation. As True (2021) notes, mainstreaming gender in governance requires more than institutional mechanisms; it demands a reconfiguration of political cultures and relational practices that sustain gender hierarchies.

In this vein, the article engages with the concept of *gendered citizenship*, which interrogates the differential access to political rights and responsibilities based on gender. Women's limited participation in political processes is not merely a result of lack of opportunity but reflects deeper issues of recognition, voice, and legitimacy within political institutions. Drawing on Pearse (2020), this study highlights how economic, social, and political structures interact to shape gendered experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

Furthermore, the study addresses the role of data and evidence in informing gender-sensitive policymaking. The availability of gender-disaggregated data, as mandated by the 2023 Regional Regulation and promoted by DP3AP2KB Riau, is crucial for identifying gaps and designing targeted interventions. Yet, as the research reveals, data alone is insufficient without political will and institutional accountability to act on the findings. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks must be designed not only to track progress but to facilitate adaptive learning and policy refinement.

The findings from this research are anticipated to have significant implications for both policy and practice. For policymakers, it offers grounded insights into the barriers and enablers of gender mainstreaming in local governance. For women's organizations, it provides strategic reflections on how to amplify their influence and navigate complex power terrains. For

scholars, it enriches the literature on feminist political organizing in Southeast Asia, a region often underrepresented in global gender studies.

By centering the lived experiences and agency of women activists in Riau, this study underscores the importance of localized, culturally informed approaches to gender justice. It challenges prevailing assumptions about women's passivity in patriarchal contexts and illuminates the multiple ways in which they exercise resistance, negotiation, and leadership. In doing so, it offers a compelling narrative of resilience and transformation in the face of entrenched inequality.

Ultimately, navigating the twin barriers of patriarchal custom and political oligarchy requires more than policy innovation—it demands collective imagination, institutional courage, and sustained activism. As Indonesia continues its journey toward democratic consolidation and gender equality, the experiences of women in Riau offer valuable lessons on the promises and pitfalls of mainstreaming gender in politically complex environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Gender Mainstreaming and Public Policy*

Gender mainstreaming has evolved into a globally recognized strategy aimed at achieving gender equality in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of policies across all sectors of governance. According to the United Nations (UN Women, 2023), gender mainstreaming entails the systematic integration of gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality in all activities. In the Indonesian context, gender mainstreaming is anchored in Presidential Instruction No. 9/2000 and reinforced by subsequent national and regional regulations, such as Riau Province Regulation No. 3/2023, which mandates the incorporation of gender-responsive approaches into public policy.

Scholars such as Bacchi and Eveline (2020) have argued that gender mainstreaming should not be reduced to technocratic procedures or bureaucratic checklists; rather, it requires a critical interrogation of the political and institutional norms that shape public discourse and determine access to resources and power. Similarly, Lombardo and Mergaert (2018) emphasized the importance of recognizing resistance within bureaucratic systems that often neutralize or co-opt gender reform initiatives. These insights suggest that successful gender mainstreaming demands both structural reforms and a cultural shift within institutions, making it a deeply political process rather than a mere administrative exercise.

2.2 *Patriarchy, Customary Norms, and Gendered Citizenship*

The concept of patriarchy continues to be central to feminist analysis, especially in non-Western societies where cultural traditions play a dominant role in shaping gender relations. In Riau, patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched in *adat* (customary law) and religious interpretations that subordinate women's political roles to those of men. As Oakley (1972) and Butler (1990) have theorized, gender is socially constructed through repeated norms, discourses, and practices that regulate bodies and behaviors.

In the Malay cultural context, gendered expectations are further legitimized through symbolic roles assigned to women within familial and communal structures. This has profound implications for gendered citizenship—where women are recognized as bearers of moral values rather than political agents. Saptari and Holzner (2018) argue that such forms of cultural patriarchy do not operate in isolation but are reinforced by the state through selective appropriation of tradition and religion in governance.

Thus, challenging patriarchy in such settings requires not only legal frameworks but also culturally sensitive strategies that engage with local belief systems. Arivia and Dwyer (2021) highlight the importance of grounding feminist movements in local epistemologies to ensure both legitimacy and sustainability. In Riau, women's organizations have sought to work with

rather than against traditional structures, forming partnerships with male religious and community leaders as part of an adaptive cultural strategy.

2.3 Political Oligarchy and Structural Exclusion

Beyond cultural limitations, structural exclusion remains a significant barrier to women's political participation in Indonesia. Political parties and electoral institutions are frequently dominated by oligarchic networks that privilege lineage, loyalty, and economic capital over merit or inclusivity. Nugroho (2020) underscores that the Indonesian political system, though democratic in form, is deeply influenced by elite patronage, which systematically marginalizes women and other underrepresented groups.

This exclusion is especially evident during candidate recruitment and campaign financing stages. The findings of Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2020) reveal that political violence and exclusionary practices—ranging from verbal harassment to policy manipulation—serve to deter women from contesting or actively participating in formal politics. In Riau, this is exacerbated by the concentration of political power within elite families who treat political offices as hereditary possessions rather than public mandates.

Women's organizations must thus navigate not only institutional inertia but also deliberate resistance from entrenched power holders. According to Rai et al. (2019), transformative participation requires disruption of power hierarchies through collective action, alliance-building, and policy advocacy. In this regard, affirmative action measures—such as the 30% quota for women in party structures and electoral lists—become critical, albeit insufficient, instruments for structural change.

2.4 The Role of Women's Organizations in Political Transformation

Women's organizations have played a pivotal role in resisting both cultural and structural impediments to gender justice. Their dual engagement—both within formal state institutions and outside in civil society—positions them as hybrid actors who mediate between grassroots constituencies and elite power centers. As noted by Kabeer (2020), such organizations often engage in "strategic essentialism," mobilizing gender identity not for victimhood but as a source of collective bargaining and policy leverage.

In Riau, organizations such as *Mitra Perempuan*, PUSPA Riau, and gender advocacy groups within DP3AP2KB have adopted intersectional approaches that recognize the diverse needs of women across rural, urban, indigenous, and disabled communities. Their strategies include legal advocacy, political education, leadership training, and participatory forums such as *Musrenbang Perempuan* (Women's Development Planning Deliberations). These efforts reflect a broader feminist organizing tradition that seeks to embed gender equity into the fabric of local governance (Budiarti & Suryani, 2023).

Moreover, these organizations have increasingly focused on data-driven advocacy. The availability of sex-disaggregated data and gender impact assessments has enhanced their capacity to influence public budgeting and program design. However, as Setyowati (2021) cautions, the institutionalization of gender data must be accompanied by mechanisms for accountability and enforcement to ensure that gender statistics lead to tangible outcomes.

2.5 Gender-Responsive Governance and Policy Implementation

One of the most debated issues in the gender and governance literature concerns the gap between policy formulation and policy implementation. Edward's policy implementation theory, which emphasizes the role of communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure, provides a useful framework for analyzing this phenomenon in the context of Riau. Despite formal commitments to gender-responsive governance, the lack of dedicated resources, capacity, and political will has hindered effective implementation of gender policies.

The Regional Regulation No. 3 of 2023 in Riau, while symbolically important, lacks detailed operational guidelines and enforcement mechanisms. Interviews with key stakeholders indicate that many local agencies still treat gender mainstreaming as an add-on rather than an integral component of their institutional mandates. This reflects what Mergaert and Lombardo (2022) term as the “symbolic implementation” of gender policies—where institutions perform compliance without engaging in substantive transformation.

Furthermore, the implementation of gender budgeting, as required by Peraturan Menteri PPPA No. 6/2022, remains uneven across government departments. The absence of gender-sensitive performance indicators and evaluation frameworks weakens the institutional accountability of public bodies. As True (2021) asserts, mainstreaming gender within governance requires not only technical adjustments but a shift in organizational culture and leadership commitment.

2.6 Localizing Feminist Theory: From Global Norms to Regional Practices

A recurring theme in feminist governance studies is the tension between global gender equality norms and local socio-political realities. While CEDAW, SDGs, and national gender policies provide a normative framework, their translation into local practices is often fraught with contradiction. Lombardo and Mergaert (2018) warn against the imposition of universalist models that overlook contextual variations in gender power dynamics.

In the case of Riau, the localization of feminist strategies involves a deliberate negotiation with cultural values, religious beliefs, and political hierarchies. As Pearse (2020) explains, localized feminist praxis entails reworking global concepts to fit community realities while retaining their emancipatory intent. This approach is evident in how women's organizations in Riau have redefined leadership, agency, and empowerment within culturally acceptable narratives, such as “ibu bijak” (wise mothers) or “penjaga moral komunitas” (guardians of community morality).

These efforts demonstrate that feminist transformation is not always radical or confrontational. Incremental change—achieved through negotiation, coalition-building, and everyday resistance—can be equally powerful in dismantling patriarchal norms. Kartini et al. (2023) call this “transformative empowerment,” wherein women gain the capacity to shape both their personal trajectories and institutional landscapes, even within resource-constrained or conservative environments.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the strategies used by women's organizations in Riau in overcoming cultural and structural barriers to political participation. A qualitative design was deemed appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the research, which seeks to understand the subjective experiences, agency, and negotiation processes of women actors within patriarchal and oligarchic contexts. The research is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, allowing the researcher to uncover meanings constructed through social interactions, institutional practices, and local political norms.

Data collection was conducted primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. Informants included leaders of women's organizations, female political figures, government officials involved in gender mainstreaming, and community leaders from cultural or religious backgrounds. The selection of participants followed a purposive sampling strategy, focusing on individuals with direct involvement or influence in gender-responsive political efforts in Riau. Interviews were supported by document analysis, including regional regulations, organizational reports, and gender-disaggregated data from official government sources.

Thematic analysis was applied to interpret the data, with coding conducted manually to identify recurring patterns and categories. Key themes such as adaptive cultural strategies, institutional resistance, cross-sector collaboration, and policy implementation gaps were identified and analyzed in relation to Edward's policy implementation framework. Triangulation was applied by comparing interview data with policy texts and field observations to ensure the credibility and consistency of findings.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their identities were kept confidential. Data were collected with consent and used exclusively for academic purposes. Overall, the methodological design aimed to capture the complexity of women's political organizing in Riau, highlighting the interplay between local culture, institutional dynamics, and gender-based advocacy.

4. Result and Discussion

The results of this study reveal the multi-layered strategies employed by women's organizations in Riau in confronting cultural and structural impediments to their political engagement. These strategies are not monolithic but adaptive and context-sensitive, reflecting a deep awareness of local power structures, cultural sensitivities, and institutional limitations. The findings are organized around three interrelated themes: navigating patriarchal cultural norms, engaging with political oligarchies, and responding to the limitations of gender mainstreaming policies.

4.1 Navigating Patriarchal Norms through Cultural Adaptation

A dominant theme emerging from interviews with organizational leaders and activists is the deliberate use of culturally adaptive strategies to negotiate space within male-dominated institutions. Rather than adopting confrontational approaches that might provoke resistance from traditional power holders, women's organizations in Riau have chosen to work within cultural frameworks to legitimize their presence. For example, activists intentionally invoke religious and *adat*-based narratives of female virtue, maternal wisdom, and community stewardship to position women not as challengers to tradition but as protectors of social harmony.

This strategic cultural framing reflects what Pearse (2020) refers to as "cultural negotiation"—a feminist praxis that emphasizes persuasion over opposition. By aligning their advocacy with locally respected values, these organizations reduce resistance and broaden community support. A case in point is how women leaders engage with *tokoh adat* (customary leaders) and religious clerics not as antagonists but as allies in advancing gender-responsive programs, such as female leadership training or the inclusion of women in village development planning forums. These approaches echo the principles of adaptive governance, wherein institutional actors adapt their messaging and alliances to accommodate deeply rooted social norms.

Nonetheless, this culturally embedded strategy is not without its tensions. While it provides a practical pathway to influence, it also risks reinforcing traditional gender roles by framing women's political participation in terms of their domestic or moral responsibilities rather than their rights as equal citizens. Such concessions, while strategic, can be seen as a form of constrained agency, where women's power is legitimized only when it conforms to pre-existing cultural expectations. This paradox reflects what Kabeer (2020) terms the "double bind" of gender advocacy in patriarchal settings—where women must navigate the fine line between cultural compliance and transformative resistance.

4.2 Confronting Structural Barriers in a Politically Oligarchic System

In parallel to cultural negotiations, women's organizations in Riau also confront the more rigid and exclusionary domain of political oligarchy. The findings confirm that electoral processes, political party structures, and access to campaign financing remain heavily controlled by male-dominated networks, often organized along familial or dynastic lines. Female candidates face systemic barriers such as tokenistic inclusion in party lists, lack of access to patronage networks, and informal practices that favor loyalty and kinship over gender equity.

Participants described how party quotas—although mandated—are often fulfilled superficially, with women placed at the bottom of candidate lists, rendering their electoral chances negligible. This confirms earlier critiques by Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2020) on the “symbolic representation” trap, in which numerical inclusion does not translate into substantive influence. One female candidate recounted how, despite her qualifications and grassroots support, she was sidelined by party elites in favor of a male relative of a powerful party donor. Such experiences illustrate how formal democratic institutions can be co-opted to serve oligarchic interests, thus undermining the integrity of gender-inclusive reforms.

In response, women's organizations have adopted a dual strategy: building horizontal coalitions across different civil society groups and engaging vertically with reformist elements within government agencies. Organizations such as PUSPA Riau and Mitra Perempuan have developed partnerships with sympathetic bureaucrats and female politicians to advocate for more transparent candidate selection processes and increased funding for women's political education. These alliances serve to partially circumvent oligarchic gatekeepers, although their success remains uneven due to entrenched clientelism within party politics.

What is noteworthy is the organizations' growing emphasis on grassroots political education as a long-term strategy for structural transformation. Through workshops, community forums, and local mentoring programs, they aim to cultivate a new generation of women leaders equipped not only with political skills but also with critical awareness of systemic inequality. This approach resonates with feminist institutionalist theory, which emphasizes the importance of disrupting both formal and informal rules that maintain gender asymmetry in political institutions.

4.3 Evaluating the Implementation Gap in Gender Mainstreaming Policies

The third major finding pertains to the gap between formal policy commitments and their actual implementation—a concern echoed throughout the interviews with both civil society actors and local government officials. Regional Regulation No. 3/2023, which mandates gender mainstreaming in all aspects of development planning, was widely recognized by participants as a progressive step. However, its translation into operational practice remains inconsistent and often symbolic.

Most government agencies lack the institutional capacity and political will to embed gender indicators into performance evaluations, budgets, or program designs. Gender focal points in some offices are appointed merely to fulfill regulatory requirements and are often not trained in gender analysis. As Setyowati (2021) observes, this “instrumental compliance” creates the illusion of reform without altering the underlying logic of gender-blind governance.

Women's organizations have sought to fill this void by conducting parallel monitoring and evaluation efforts. For instance, they produce shadow reports assessing the impact of gender policies and advocate for gender-disaggregated data to be used in decision-making. However, their influence is contingent on the receptivity of local leaders and the strength of institutional linkages. In some cases, their recommendations are sidelined, particularly when they challenge budget allocations or expose elite favoritism.

Moreover, the lack of clear sanctions for non-compliance and the absence of dedicated funding for gender mainstreaming further undermine the policy's effectiveness. Participants emphasized the need for more robust institutional frameworks, including mandatory training for civil servants, gender-responsive budgeting mechanisms, and participatory planning processes that include marginalized women's voices. Without these measures, gender mainstreaming risks becoming a rhetorical exercise rather than a transformative agenda.

4.4 Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the findings underscore the complexity of women's political organizing in Riau. The interplay between cultural accommodation and structural contestation requires nuanced and context-specific strategies. Rather than adopting a linear model of empowerment, women's organizations in this setting employ a repertoire of tactics—ranging from symbolic alignment with tradition to direct policy advocacy—to incrementally shift power dynamics.

This hybrid strategy challenges binary understandings of resistance and compliance, highlighting the strategic pragmatism of local actors in navigating hostile terrains. It also suggests that meaningful political change requires not only legal reform but the reconfiguration of institutional cultures and social imaginaries. As True (2021) argues, gender equality in governance is not simply about numbers or representation, but about transforming the terms through which authority, legitimacy, and participation are constructed.

Importantly, the findings also highlight the value of feminist-informed policy analysis that centers lived experience, local agency, and the politics of translation between normative frameworks and on-the-ground realities. In the case of Riau, women's organizations operate at the frontlines of this translation process, making visible the contradictions, possibilities, and tensions that shape gendered political life.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that the pursuit of gender equality in political participation within contexts like Riau cannot be effectively addressed through legal reforms or normative frameworks alone. Instead, it requires a multidimensional approach that recognizes the interplay between cultural traditions, institutional arrangements, and power asymmetries. Women's organizations in Riau have demonstrated not only resilience but strategic ingenuity in navigating the complex terrain of patriarchal customs and entrenched political oligarchy. Their approaches provide valuable insights for designing and implementing more effective gender-responsive governance across similar sociopolitical environments.

To move beyond symbolic compliance, there is an urgent need to institutionalize gender mainstreaming as an integral component of policy design, budgeting, and evaluation at the regional and local levels. This entails developing standardized gender impact assessment tools, integrating gender indicators into government performance metrics, and ensuring that gender focal points are equipped with substantive authority and technical capacity. Furthermore, local governments must allocate dedicated funding for gender mainstreaming activities, thereby signaling institutional commitment rather than procedural obligation.

From a political reform perspective, mechanisms that ensure genuine inclusion of women within party structures must be enforced. Quotas should be supported by internal party policies that promote women's candidacy in electable positions, transparent nomination processes, and equitable campaign financing. Electoral monitoring bodies and civil society actors can collaborate to evaluate and report party compliance, thus creating external pressure for institutional accountability.

Equally important is the need to strengthen horizontal coalitions among civil society organizations, including those working in education, youth, and religious affairs. These coalitions can serve as platforms for cross-sectoral dialogue and policy innovation, allowing

feminist agendas to permeate wider segments of society. Strategic alliances with reform-minded male leaders and community influencers should be maintained and expanded, not as a compromise, but as a pragmatic approach to social norm transformation.

Finally, the cultural strategies adopted by women's organizations in Riau—anchored in adaptive engagement with *adat* and religious leadership—offer a replicable model for other regions navigating similar patriarchal contexts. Policymakers, donors, and feminist scholars must recognize and support these culturally embedded approaches as legitimate and potentially transformative, rather than peripheral or insufficiently radical. Investing in local feminist leadership development, narrative change, and community-based political education are vital steps toward building sustainable and inclusive democratic institutions.

In essence, the pathway to substantive gender equality in political life is not linear nor universal. It is a negotiated process that demands policy innovation, institutional restructuring, and cultural recalibration. The experiences of women's organizations in Riau illuminate not only the challenges of this process but also the opportunities that emerge when resistance is strategic, grounded, and collective.

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