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Research paper

Gendered Structural Exclusion in Local Political Networks: Social Network Analysis of Indonesian Local Elections

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ABSTRACT

Despite formal gender inclusion reforms, executive representation in decentralized democracies remains unequal. This study investigates whether gender inequality in Indonesia's 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections is embedded within informal political network structures rather than confined to formal institutional rules. Using an interpretive Social Network Analysis approach based on available documentary data, the study reconstructs coalition, sponsorship, and endorsement networks across eight provincial and district-level contests. Structural indicators, including degree, betweenness, and eigenvector centrality, clustering patterns, brokerage roles, and peripheral positioning, are employed to assess gendered differences in network embeddedness and relational influence. The findings reveal systematic relational disparities between male and female candidates. Female candidates occupy less central network positions, demonstrate weaker brokerage capacity, maintain fewer high-value sponsor ties, and are disproportionately concentrated at the network periphery. Structural whole analysis shows that cross-coalition bridging roles are overwhelmingly dominated by male actors, reinforcing cumulative structural advantages in coalition-building and political sponsorship. These patterns remain consistent across diverse regional contexts, indicating that gendered exclusion is embedded within the architecture of coalition and patronage networks. By empirically mapping informal political structures, this study advances feminist institutionalist scholarship and highlights the value of interpretive Social Network Analysis for examining relational inequality in decentralized political systems.

Keywords: gendered structural exclusion, social network analysis, decentralization, patronage politics, political representation

Despite decades of gender mainstreaming policies and formal commitments to political inclusion, women's substantive representation in local politics remains persistently constrained across many democratic systems (Singh, 2024). While legal frameworks often mandate gender quotas or promote candidate diversity, these institutional reforms frequently fail to penetrate the informal power structures that govern candidate viability, resource allocation, and political survival (Asiedu, 2023). Nowhere is this tension more visible than in decentralized electoral systems, where local political networks, rather than formal party statutes alone, shape electoral competition and leadership emergence (Sales & Tavares, 2025). Indonesia provides a particularly compelling case for examining this phenomenon. Since the implementation of regional autonomy reforms in the early 2000s, local elections (Pilkada) have become central arenas for political contestation, elite bargaining, and coalition-building (Pratama et al., 2026). The 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections further intensified these dynamics by consolidating electoral processes across provinces and districts, thereby magnifying competition and network consolidation (Haridison, 2026).

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Although Indonesia has adopted affirmative measures such as the 30 percent gender quota for legislative candidacies, executive-level local elections (governor, regent, mayor) remain structurally dominated by male political elites (Warburton, 2025). Female candidates continue to face systemic barriers that extend beyond formal rules, including restricted access to patronage networks, limited integration into party hierarchies, and constrained visibility within coalition structures.

Existing research on women in Indonesian politics has predominantly focused on descriptive representation, institutional barriers, cultural norms, and party-level dynamics (Singh, 2024; Widyanawati & Aisyah, 2025), including evidence that women politicians' communicative strategies and ideological positioning shape public trust independently of their formal political standing (Amin & Ritonga, 2022). While these studies provide important insights, they often treat political actors as isolated units rather than as embedded nodes within relational structures of power. Yet political advancement, especially in decentralized systems, is rarely an individual endeavor. It is mediated through dense networks of party elites, financiers, bureaucrats, religious leaders, and business actors. Access to these networks determines the flow of campaign resources, endorsements, strategic information, and reputational capital (Diprose, 2023). Thus, the central problem may not simply be underrepresentation, but structural exclusion embedded within political networks themselves (Diprose, 2023; Lestari & Kurniawan, 2025). Structural exclusion differs from overt discrimination. It refers to patterned marginalization that emerges from network configurations, such as centrality hierarchies, brokerage positions, clustering, and gatekeeping roles, that systematically disadvantage certain actors.

In political networks, those occupying central positions gain preferential access to information, funding, and legitimacy (Fernando et al., 2023). Peripheral actors, by contrast, struggle to mobilize support or build viable coalitions. If women are disproportionately positioned at the periphery, or excluded from brokerage roles, their electoral prospects are structurally constrained regardless of formal equality measures (Sidiq et al., 2024). This study therefore advances a relational perspective on gender inequality in local politics by asking: *How do local political network structures reproduce gendered patterns of exclusion in Indonesia's 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections?* To address this question, the study conceptualizes political networks as relational constructions formed through institutional affiliations, coalition agreements, campaign team structures, and publicly traceable patronage ties. Rather than focusing solely on individual candidate characteristics, the analysis reconstructs networks of political support and examines how gender shapes positionality within these networks.

By employing an interpretive Social Network Analysis (SNA) approach based on secondary data, this research contributes in three key ways (Laeli et al., 2025; Rahayu et al., 2024), which is consistent with qualitative research on Indonesia's decentralized governance (Gatiningsih & Saputra, 2026). First, it shifts the analytical focus from formal institutional design to relational power structures, revealing how exclusion may persist even under gender-inclusive regulations. Second, it integrates gender theory with network theory, demonstrating how structural positions, such as central nodes, brokers, and cohesive clusters, function as mechanisms of political advantage. Third, it provides one of the first systematic network-based examinations of executive-level local elections in Indonesia's 2024 electoral cycle. The findings are expected to show that gendered exclusion is not merely a matter of candidate supply or voter bias but is embedded within the architecture of political alliances and resource flows. Female candidates may participate in elections yet remain structurally peripheral to dominant coalition networks controlled by entrenched male elites. In this sense, formal participation does not necessarily translate into structural inclusion. By illuminating the relational foundations of gender inequality in local electoral politics (Asiedu, 2023; Silva et al., 2025), this study contributes to broader debates on democratic deepening, decentralization, and substantive representation in emerging democracies. It also offers methodological innovation by demonstrating how interpretive SNA can uncover hidden dimensions of power that conventional institutional analysis often overlooks (Laeli et al., 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Gender and political representation in decentralized democracies

The global diffusion of gender quotas represents one of the most significant institutional reforms in contemporary democratic governance. Since the 1990s, more than 130 countries have adopted legislated quotas, reserved seats, or voluntary party quotas to enhance women's descriptive representation (Dahlerup, 2013; Hughes & Paxton, 2018; Krook, 2010). Empirical evidence consistently shows that such measures substantially increase the numerical presence of women in legislative bodies (Clayton et al., 2017). However, gains in legislative representation have not translated uniformly into executive-level parity, particularly within decentralized political systems (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016; Clayton et al., 2019). Executive offices such as governors, mayors, and regents remain heavily male-dominated worldwide. Unlike legislatures, executive positions are typically winner-take-all, resource-intensive, and highly personalized, amplifying structural inequalities embedded in party recruitment

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systems and elite networks (Jalalzai, 2013). While quotas may expand candidate supply, they rarely dismantle entrenched informal power structures that determine candidate viability (Hassan & Minja, 2024; Krook, 2010).

Decentralization reforms, widely implemented across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, were initially expected to enhance participation and accountability (Rugeiyamu & Msendo, 2025). Yet research increasingly suggests that decentralization can also reproduce localized elite dominance, particularly where patronage politics and informal institutions remain strong (Faguet, 2014). In decentralized democracies, local elections operate within dense relational ecosystems shaped by party machinery, patronage networks, business-political alliances, religious authority structures, and dynastic linkages. These systems are frequently characterized by elite continuity and male incumbency advantages (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016). Because local political competition often hinges on coalition-building and resource mobilization rather than programmatic ideology, access to informal networks becomes decisive (Aspinall et al., 2021). Consequently, women's participation in decentralized contexts may remain descriptive rather than transformative, as female candidates often lack embeddedness in elite support structures that underpin electoral success (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022). Comparative research across Southeast Asia, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa similarly finds that local political arenas are particularly resistant to gender inclusion due to entrenched patronage hierarchies and masculinized political cultures (Franceschet & Krook, 2019; Funk et al., 2017).

Indonesia offers a critical case for examining these dynamics. Following the post-1998 decentralization reforms, substantial fiscal and administrative authority was transferred to subnational governments (Mietzner, 2014), and since 2005 direct local elections (Pilkada) have institutionalized competitive subnational contests. Although Indonesia mandates a 30 percent quota for legislative candidate lists, no equivalent mechanism governs executive candidacies, and women remain significantly underrepresented in gubernatorial and mayoral positions (Aspinall et al., 2021; Blackburn, 2014). Studies attribute this disparity to limited access to political financing networks, centralized party gatekeeping dominated by male elites, dynastic political consolidation, and gendered leadership norms that privilege masculine authority (Krook, 2010; Mietzner, 2014). While these institutional and sociocultural explanations are valuable, they often treat political actors as discrete units rather than as embedded participants in relational power structures. Feminist institutionalist scholarship increasingly emphasizes that political inequality is reproduced through informal institutions and networked mechanisms operating alongside formal rules (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016). In patronage-based systems, political opportunity depends not merely on eligibility but on structural embeddedness within networks of support and reciprocity (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Thus, the key question is not only whether women can contest elections, but whether they occupy advantageous positions within political networks. Reframing political representation as network inclusion shifts attention to structural configurations of power, where gendered exclusion may manifest through peripheral positioning, limited brokerage roles, segregated clustering, and reduced centrality in patronage flows (Pratama et al., 2026). This relational perspective provides the foundation for examining gendered structural exclusion in Indonesia's 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections through interpretive Social Network Analysis (Lestari & Kurniawan, 2025).

Informal political networks and patronage structures

Political competition in many emerging democracies operates through informal networks that coexist with, and often supersede, formal party institutions. While electoral rules, party statutes, and constitutional provisions provide the visible architecture of democracy, the actual processes of candidate selection, coalition formation, and resource allocation frequently unfold within relational networks of loyalty, reciprocity, and patronage (Mustofa et al., 2024). These informal institutions are not aberrations but enduring components of political systems, shaping political access and opportunity structures in profound ways. In decentralized contexts, informal political networks are especially influential because authority and resources are dispersed across subnational levels (Hasanudin et al., 2025). Local elites mobilize support through interlocking relationships among party leaders, business sponsors, bureaucratic actors, religious authorities, and family-based dynasties (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Hadiz & Robison, 2017). Coalition agreements between parties often reflect negotiated exchanges among elite actors rather than ideological alignment.

Financial sponsorship ties link candidates to business networks whose support determines campaign viability. Bureaucratic affiliations create administrative leverage, while religious and community endorsements generate social legitimacy. Familial and dynastic linkages further consolidate power through intergenerational continuity (Mietzner, 2020; Purba et al., 2021). Family-based political networks are particularly relevant within the Indonesian political context, where dynastic relationships often provide access to political capital, organizational resources, and electoral legitimacy. Such relationships may facilitate entry into political competition for some women candidates by providing connections to established political elites. However, reliance on dynastic pathways may simultaneously reinforce broader patterns of elite continuity by limiting political opportunities primarily to individuals possessing pre-existing family ties to political power. Consequently, family networks may function both as mechanisms of access and as mechanisms of exclusion within local political systems. Such relational ecosystems

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determine candidate viability long before electoral campaigns formally begin. Research on clientelism and patronage politics demonstrates that electoral outcomes are often structured by pre-existing networks of obligation and exchange (Tawakkal, 2025). Candidates embedded in dense patronage networks enjoy privileged access to funding, mobilization capacity, and elite endorsements, whereas peripheral actors struggle to secure organizational backing. In Indonesia, patronage-based political competition has been extensively documented, particularly in local elections where financial resources and coalition breadth strongly predict electoral success (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Network-based political systems typically display structural properties that shape power distribution. Although military institutions have historically played an important role in Indonesia's national political development, their direct involvement was not systematically observable within the local electoral networks reconstructed for this study. The documentary evidence used to identify political relationships primarily revealed interactions among political parties, candidates, sponsors, local elites, bureaucratic actors, and community-based political stakeholders. Consequently, military actors did not emerge as consistently identifiable nodes within the analyzed local political networks. This does not imply an absence of influence but rather reflects the empirical boundaries of the publicly documented electoral relationships examined in this study.

Centralization concentrates relational ties in a limited number of actors, producing hierarchical influence patterns (Yavaşoğlu & Eceral, 2025). Brokerage positions allow certain actors to mediate between otherwise disconnected factions, thereby controlling information and alliance flows (Burt, 2005). Homophily, the tendency for actors to associate with similar others, often reinforces elite continuity by privileging shared gender, class, and social background (McPherson et al., 2001). Closure and clustering strengthen internal trust within subgroups but simultaneously exclude outsiders. When central hubs and brokerage positions are disproportionately occupied by men, women may gain formal access to candidacy without achieving structural inclusion. In such systems, exclusion is reproduced through relational positioning rather than explicit prohibition. The persistence of male-dominated elite networks in decentralized democracies suggests that political inequality may be embedded within network architecture itself (Ahnaf & Lussier, 2019). Therefore, understanding gendered political inequality requires analyzing the structure of inter-actor relationships rather than focusing solely on institutional rules or individual characteristics (Pratama et al., 2026).

Structural power in social network theory

Social Network Theory reconceptualizes power as an emergent property of relational structure rather than an attribute possessed by individuals. Foundational works by Granovetter (1983) and Coleman (1988) demonstrate that actors' opportunities and constraints derive from their positions within networks of ties. Power is thus distributed unevenly according to structural location. Centrality measures capture the extent to which actors occupy influential positions within networks. Degree centrality reflects the number of direct connections an actor maintains, while betweenness centrality measures the extent to which an actor lies on the shortest paths between others, enabling control over information flow (Jiang et al., 2026). Actors with high centrality often shape coalition-building processes and coordinate strategic action. Brokerage further refines this relational understanding of power. Brokers connect otherwise disconnected clusters, enabling them to mediate alliances and extract strategic advantage (Burt, 2005). In political contexts, brokers frequently act as "kingmakers," shaping candidate viability by bridging party factions, financial sponsors, and community networks. The capacity to occupy brokerage roles, however, is rarely evenly distributed.

The concept of structural holes underscores the strategic advantage derived from bridging fragmented groups. Actors who span structural holes gain access to diverse information streams and can leverage disconnected constituencies (Fang et al., 2025). Yet access to such bridging positions often depends on prior embeddedness within elite circles, reinforcing cumulative advantage. Peripheral marginalization represents the inverse dynamic. Actors located at network peripheries possess fewer ties, limited visibility, and constrained influence. Peripheral positioning restricts access to information, resources, and coalition leverage, thereby undermining electoral viability. Peripheral actors are often dependent on central elites rather than autonomous coalition-builders. Importantly, these structural properties are not gender-neutral (Virágh, 2025). Research in corporate governance and organizational networks demonstrates that women are frequently underrepresented in central and brokerage positions, even when formally included within institutions (Sealy et al., 2016). Gender homophily within elite networks reinforces male-dominated central hubs, limiting women's access to bridging opportunities (McPherson et al., 2001). Studies of political recruitment similarly show that informal networks privilege established male incumbents (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016). If comparable patterns characterize local political networks, gender inequality becomes embedded within structural configurations rather than solely within attitudes or institutional rules. Structural exclusion can therefore be conceptualized as the systematic positioning of a social category in less advantageous network locations.

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Conceptualizing gendered structural exclusion

Building on network theory and feminist institutionalism, this study conceptualizes gendered structural exclusion as a relational condition in which women political actors are disproportionately positioned in peripheral, low-centrality, or non-brokerage roles within political networks, thereby limiting their access to strategic resources and coalition power. This perspective extends scholarship on informal institutions by emphasizing how relational positioning shapes political opportunity (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016). This conceptualization shifts the analytical focus from overt discrimination to patterned relational disadvantage. Gendered structural exclusion may manifest through systematically lower centrality scores, indicating fewer coalition ties or weaker affiliations with dominant party actors (Waylen, 2014). It may also appear through limited brokerage positions, where women rarely function as connectors between elite factions. Segregated clustering can further marginalize female actors by embedding them in smaller, homogeneous subgroups disconnected from central coalitions. Additionally, patronage and campaign finance networks may display gender-skewed flows of resources, reinforcing cumulative disadvantage (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Crucially, structural exclusion does not require intentional bias. It may emerge from historically entrenched network configurations, path dependency, and elite continuity mechanisms (Pierson, 2004). Homophilous recruitment practices, dynastic continuity, and cumulative resource advantages collectively reproduce male-dominated network cores (Yarmar et al., 2026). In this sense, democratic inclusion at the level of candidacy may coexist with relational exclusion at the level of network architecture. By conceptualizing exclusion as structural rather than merely attitudinal or institutional, this framework enables a more precise analysis of how inequality is reproduced in decentralized political systems.

Conceptual Framework

This study advances a relational framework to explain how gendered inequality in local elections is structurally embedded within political network configurations. Rather than treating representation solely as a function of institutional rules or cultural attitudes, the framework conceptualizes inequality as emerging from candidates' structural positioning within networks of coalition support, party affiliation, and patronage exchange. In decentralized political systems, electoral viability is highly contingent upon relational embeddedness and access to informal power structures. Gender is theorized as the primary exogenous dimension shaping access to these networks. Drawing on gendered recruitment and elite continuity literature, political networks often reproduce male-dominated structures through homophily and patronage-based selection processes (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016; Krook, 2010). From a social network perspective, actors' structural positions determine their access to information, coordination capacity, and strategic influence (Grosser et al., 2018). Individuals occupying central or brokerage positions gain advantages through control over information flows and bridging structural holes (Razy & Ariani, 2022).

Accordingly, network positionality functions as the mediating mechanism linking gender to structural political outcomes. It is operationalized through degree centrality, betweenness centrality, brokerage roles, clustering coefficients, and coalition embeddedness. These indicators capture candidates' relative access to coalition power, patronage resources, and strategic visibility. The outcome dimension distinguishes between structural inclusion and structural exclusion. Structural inclusion refers to occupying central or bridging positions that enhance coalition-building capacity and electoral competitiveness. Structural exclusion reflects peripheral or weakly embedded positions that constrain access to resources and limit political viability. The framework proposes the following relational pathway: Gender → Network Positionality → Structural Inclusion/Exclusion → Electoral Viability. By shifting analytical focus to pre-electoral structural positioning, the model explains how inequality may be reproduced within the relational architecture of political networks, even under formally democratic conditions.

Figure 1 visually represents the relational mechanism proposed in this study. The model consists of three sequential components situated within the contextual boundary of Indonesia's 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections, characterized by decentralized and patronage-based political dynamics. The first component, Gender of Political Actor, captures the independent dimension differentiating female and male candidates. This component reflects how gender shapes differential entry into informal political networks. The second component, Network Positionality in Local Political Networks, represents the mediating structural layer. It is operationalized through degree centrality, betweenness centrality, brokerage roles, clustering, and coalition embeddedness. This layer reflects candidates' relative structural location within networks of political support and coordination. The third component, Structural Inclusion versus Structural Exclusion, represents the outcome dimension. It encompasses differential access to coalition power, patronage resources, strategic visibility, and ultimately political viability. Directional arrows indicate a sequential causal logic: gender shapes network positionality, which in turn determines the likelihood of structural inclusion or exclusion. Electoral viability emerges as a downstream structural consequence. The figure underscores that gender inequality is not solely the result of institutional barriers or voter bias; rather, it may be embedded within the architecture of political networks themselves.

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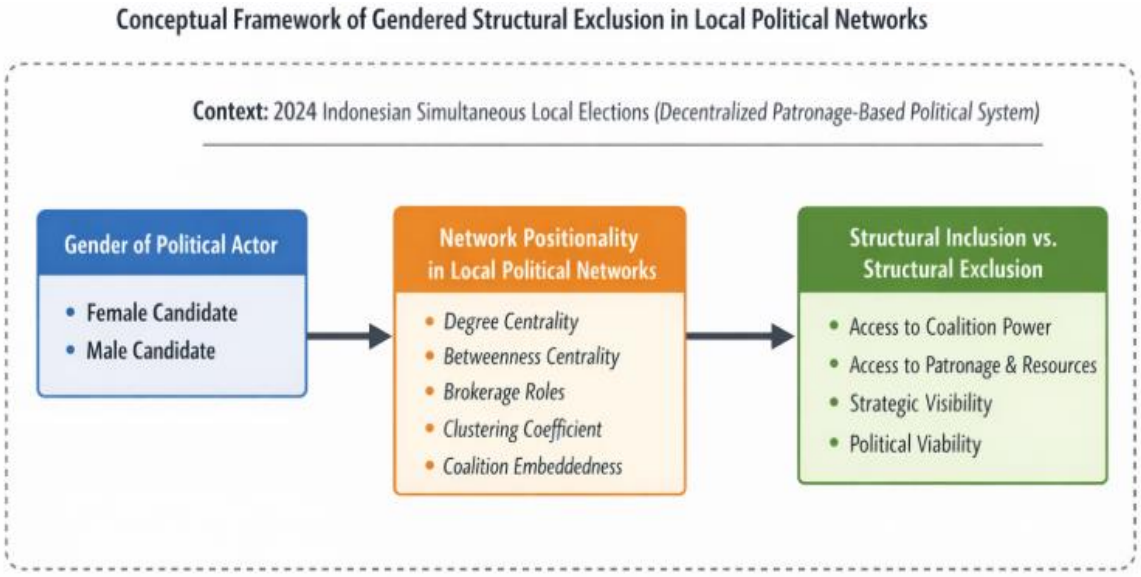
Figure 1
Conceptual framework of gendered structural exclusion in local political networks



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in Interpretive Social Network Analysis (ISNA) to examine gendered structural exclusion in local political networks during Indonesia's 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections. Unlike conventional quantitative SNA approaches that prioritize statistical modeling of network metrics, interpretive SNA integrates structural measurement with contextual analysis of relational meaning (Crossley & Widdop, 2025). This approach is particularly appropriate for political systems where informal institutions and patronage dynamics shape relational ties that cannot be fully understood through numerical indicators alone (Bellotti et al., 2015). The study conceptualizes political networks as relational constructions formed through institutional affiliations, coalition agreements, campaign team structures, and publicly traceable patronage linkages. Networks are reconstructed from secondary documentary sources rather than survey-based ego networks, allowing examination of elite-level interactions in competitive electoral environments. The research adopts a comparative multi-case design across selected subnational electoral contexts. This design enables identification of recurring structural patterns while maintaining sensitivity to local political variation.

Case selection and sampling strategy

The study applies purposive sampling to eight regions participating in the 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections, consisting of three provinces and five districts/cities. Cases were selected based on three criteria: the presence of at least one female candidate contesting executive office; the availability of comprehensive public documentation regarding campaign structures, party endorsements, and financial reporting; and variation in political competitiveness and regional context. The inclusion of both provincial and district-level contests allows comparison across different levels of administrative authority and network complexity. Provinces typically involve broader party coalitions and higher financial stakes, whereas district/city contests may exhibit denser localized patronage structures. This variation strengthens analytical generalizability by identifying whether gendered structural exclusion manifests consistently across institutional scales. Purposive case selection is consistent with qualitative comparative research traditions that prioritize analytical depth over statistical representativeness (Gerring, 2007). The objective is not to estimate population-level prevalence but to examine structural mechanisms of exclusion. To enhance contextual transparency, the selected cases represent diverse political environments within Indonesia's decentralized electoral system. The sample includes provinces and districts characterized by varying levels of electoral competitiveness, coalition fragmentation, incumbent influence, and party dominance. Some cases involved highly competitive multi-coalition contests, whereas others were characterized by dominant political blocs with relatively concentrated elite control. This variation was intentionally incorporated to assess whether gendered patterns of network exclusion persist across different local political contexts rather than being confined to a single electoral setting. **Table 1** provides a brief overview of the selected regions, their administrative level, electoral competitiveness, and key political characteristics.

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Table 1
Overview of the selected regions

Region	Level	Political Context
Province A	Province	Highly competitive, fragmented coalitions
Province B	Province	Strong party dominance
Province C	Province	Multi-party coalition competition
District 1	District	Competitive local elite contestation
District 2	District	Dominant incumbent coalition
District 3	District	Localized patronage-based competition
District 4	District	Fragmented coalition environment
District 5	District	Mixed coalition and independent influence

Table 1 reveals three key structural patterns. First, political networks across both provincial and district contexts are highly centralized, indicating concentrated relational power. Second, provincial networks are structurally larger and more fragmented, with higher modularity, reflecting coalition competition among elite blocs. Third, district-level networks are smaller but denser and more centralized, suggesting tightly knit patronage systems where influence is concentrated among a few dominant actors. These structural characteristics provide the contextual foundation for examining gendered positionality within networks. High centralization implies that access to central nodes is critical for electoral viability. Elevated modularity suggests that brokerage across coalition clusters may be decisive in fragmented contexts. Therefore, understanding whether female candidates occupy central, brokerage, or peripheral positions within these network configurations becomes essential for assessing structural inclusion or exclusion. The subsequent sections examine gender differences in centrality, brokerage capacity, and peripheral positioning within these networks.

Data sources

The study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary data to reconstruct political networks. Primary data sources include official documentation from Indonesia's General Elections Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU), including candidate registration records, party endorsement documents, campaign finance reports, and official campaign team structures. These records provide formal coalition alignments and financial disclosures. Additional data are drawn from political party archives and official press releases detailing coalition agreements and endorsements. National and local media coverage is systematically reviewed to identify publicly reported affiliations, business sponsorship ties, elite endorsements, and political alliances. Media triangulation is used to validate relational ties across multiple sources. Where available, publicly disclosed campaign finance contributions are used to identify financial network linkages between candidates and sponsors. Religious and community endorsements documented in news reports are included where they reflect formalized support structures. All relational ties are included only when publicly traceable and supported by documentary evidence. This approach ensures transparency and replicability while minimizing speculative inference. To enhance methodological transparency and facilitate replication, Appendix provides illustrative examples of the documentary sources used in network reconstruction. These sources include official records from Indonesia's General Elections Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU), candidate registration documents, party endorsement records, coalition announcements, campaign finance disclosures, official party communications, and national and regional media reports documenting endorsements, sponsorship relationships, and coalition arrangements. Network ties were incorporated into the analysis only when supported by publicly available documentary evidence. Wherever possible, relationships were verified through cross-source triangulation using at least two independent sources to reduce the risk of misclassification. This procedure enhanced the reliability and credibility of the reconstructed networks while minimizing the inclusion of speculative, undocumented, or unsubstantiated political relationships.

Network boundary specification

Defining network boundaries is critical in social network analysis (Laumann, Marsden, & Prensky, 1983). In this study, network boundaries are defined by electoral contest. Each case constitutes a bounded network including:

- All registered executive candidates (governor/regent/mayor and running mates)
- Endorsing political parties
- Official campaign team leaders
- Major publicly documented financial sponsors
- Key endorsing elites where formalized support is documented

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This boundary specification captures the core relational infrastructure shaping candidate viability while maintaining analytical manageability. Separate networks are constructed for each region, enabling cross-case structural comparison.

Network Construction and Operationalization

Networks are constructed as two-mode and one-mode relational matrices. Initially, two-mode networks link candidates to endorsing parties, sponsors, and campaign team leaders. These matrices are then projected into one-mode candidate-to-candidate networks based on shared affiliations and coalition overlap. Relational ties are coded as binary connections (presence/absence) based on documented affiliation or endorsement. Where financial data are available, weighted ties are also recorded to capture relative resource intensity. Network positionality is operationalized through established SNA metrics, including degree centrality, betweenness centrality, eigenvector centrality, clustering coefficient, and network density (Borgatti et al., 2022). Degree centrality captures the number of direct ties held by an actor, indicating immediate relational reach. Betweenness centrality measures brokerage capacity by identifying actors positioned along shortest relational paths. Eigenvector centrality captures influence derived from connections to other highly connected actors. Clustering coefficients identify subgroup cohesion and potential segregation patterns. Gender is coded as a categorical attribute of candidate nodes, enabling comparison of structural positioning across male and female actors.

Analytical strategy

The analytical strategy combines structural measurement with interpretive contextualization. Quantitative network metrics provide systematic assessment of positional differences between male and female candidates. Comparative analysis examines whether female candidates exhibit consistently lower centrality scores, limited brokerage roles, or peripheral clustering across cases. Interpretive analysis contextualizes these structural findings within documented political dynamics. For example, if female candidates display lower betweenness centrality, media and documentary sources are examined to assess coalition negotiation patterns and gatekeeping mechanisms. This mixed interpretive-structural approach prevents the decontextualization of numerical metrics. Cross-case comparison identifies whether gendered structural exclusion manifests consistently across provinces and districts or varies by political competitiveness, party fragmentation, or dynastic entrenchment. In the interpretive component of the analysis, network metrics were not treated as self-explanatory indicators of political influence. Instead, documentary evidence from media reports, coalition announcements, campaign records, and political commentaries was used to contextualize the meaning of network positions. For example, where a candidate exhibited high betweenness centrality, supporting documentary evidence was examined to determine whether the actor functioned as a coalition broker connecting otherwise disconnected political factions. Conversely, candidates occupying peripheral positions were assessed in relation to documented limitations in coalition access, sponsorship support, or endorsement networks. This interpretive process enabled the study to move beyond numerical network measures and examine how network positions translated into practical political influence.

Validity, reliability, triangulation, and ethical considerations

To enhance construct validity, relational ties are coded only when supported by at least two independent documentary sources, where possible. Triangulation across official records and media reporting reduces the risk of incomplete network reconstruction. Reliability is strengthened through transparent coding procedures and clear boundary specification. All network construction decisions are documented to ensure replicability. Although secondary data may omit informal ties not publicly disclosed, the study focuses on formalized and publicly traceable relationships that directly influence electoral viability. This ensures analytical rigor while acknowledging potential limitations. All data used in this study are publicly available and pertain to political actors operating in official electoral contexts. No private or confidential information is accessed. The research, therefore, poses minimal ethical risk and adheres to standards for secondary analysis of public political data. To enhance construct validity, relational ties are coded only when supported by at least two independent documentary sources, where possible

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Overview of network structures across cases

This section begins by examining the structural characteristics of reconstructed political networks across the eight selected regions participating in Indonesia's 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections. Network reconstruction included executive candidates, endorsing political parties, official campaign team leaders, and major publicly documented sponsors. The resulting networks capture the relational infrastructure shaping candidate viability prior

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to electoral competition. Across the eight cases, network size ranged from 18 to 42 core actors. As shown in **Table 2**, the largest network was observed in Province A (42 nodes), followed by Province C (39 nodes) and Province B (35 nodes). District-level networks were smaller, ranging from 18 nodes in District 3 to 27 nodes in District 4. The larger size of provincial networks reflects broader coalition complexity, greater party fragmentation, and the involvement of more extensive sponsor networks. In contrast, district-level networks exhibited more localized relational ecosystems, characterized by fewer actors but stronger interconnections.

Table 2

Descriptive network statistics across cases

Case	Network Size (Nodes)	Density	Centralization (Degree)	Modularity	% Female Candidates
Province A	42	0.38	0.61	0.42	25%
Province B	35	0.41	0.58	0.37	20%
Province C	39	0.36	0.64	0.44	25%
District 1	24	0.47	0.69	0.31	33%
District 2	22	0.51	0.71	0.28	25%
District 3	18	0.49	0.66	0.34	20%
District 4	27	0.43	0.62	0.36	25%
District 5	21	0.52	0.68	0.29	33%

Density scores indicate the proportion of realized ties relative to all possible ties within each network. Provincial networks display moderate density levels, ranging from 0.36 in Province C to 0.41 in Province B. These values suggest partial but not complete interconnection among actors, reflecting coalition fragmentation and competition among party blocs. In contrast, district-level networks demonstrate higher density, ranging from 0.43 in District 4 to 0.52 in District 5. The higher density at district level suggests tighter relational clustering and stronger interdependence among political actors, consistent with localized patronage structures. Degree centralization measures the extent to which network ties are concentrated in a small number of actors. Across all eight cases, centralization scores range from 0.58 (Province B) to 0.71 (District 2), indicating moderate-to-high centralization. District-level networks exhibit particularly elevated centralization, with District 2 (0.71) and District 1 (0.69) showing the strongest concentration of ties. These findings suggest that in smaller local contexts, relational power is more sharply concentrated in a limited number of central actors. Provincial networks, although slightly less centralized, still demonstrate substantial concentration of influence (Province C at 0.64 and Province A at 0.61), indicating that coalition power remains hierarchical even in larger, more fragmented arenas.

Modularity scores capture the presence of cohesive subgroups or clusters within networks. Provincial networks exhibit higher modularity (Province C at 0.44 and Province A at 0.42), indicating the existence of distinct coalition blocs structured around party alliances or elite factions. District networks show comparatively lower modularity values, ranging from 0.28 to 0.36, suggesting more integrated relational configurations with fewer sharply divided subgroups. This pattern indicates that provincial elections involve more complex factional segmentation, whereas district contests often revolve around consolidated local coalitions. The proportion of female candidates across cases ranges from 20 percent (Province B and District 3) to 33 percent (District 1 and District 5). While female participation appears numerically present across all cases, this descriptive representation must be interpreted alongside structural indicators. Importantly, no case approaches gender parity, and the presence of female candidates does not automatically imply structural integration within dominant coalition cores.

Gender differences in centrality and brokerage

Building on the structural overview presented in the previous section, this subsection examines whether gender systematically shapes candidates' positionality within local political networks. Drawing on established social network metrics, degree centrality, betweenness centrality, and eigenvector centrality, this analysis evaluates whether female candidates occupy structurally advantageous or peripheral locations relative to their male counterparts (Borgatti et al., 2022). **Table 3** presents mean centrality scores for male and female candidates aggregated across the eight cases.

Table 3

Mean centrality scores by gender

Metric	Male Candidates (Mean)	Female (Mean)	Difference
Degree Centrality	0.58	0.37	-0.21
Betweenness Centrality	0.44	0.19	-0.25
Eigenvector Centrality	0.61	0.33	-0.28
Clustering Coefficient	0.42	0.58	+0.16

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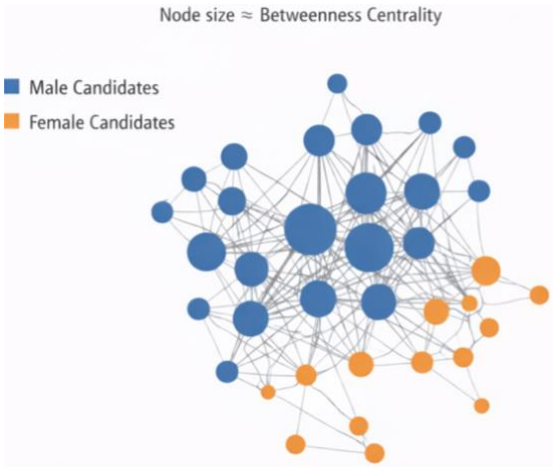
The results indicate consistent structural disparities across all major positional metrics. Male candidates exhibit a substantially higher degree centrality (0.58) compared to female candidates (0.37), indicating that male actors maintain a greater number of direct relational ties within coalition and sponsorship networks. Degree centrality captures immediate relational reach and access to direct endorsements or alliances (Freeman, 1979). The observed gap suggests that female candidates possess narrower coalition linkages, limiting their immediate political leverage. More pronounced disparities appear in betweenness centrality, where male candidates (0.44) significantly exceed female candidates (0.19). Betweenness centrality reflects brokerage capacity, the extent to which an actor lies on shortest relational paths connecting otherwise disconnected actors (Burt, 2005). High betweenness positions enable actors to mediate coalition negotiations, control information flows, and strategically shape alliance structures. The substantial gender gap in this metric indicates that women rarely occupy brokerage positions linking elite factions. This finding is particularly significant because brokerage roles often translate into strategic influence disproportionate to the number of direct ties (Borgatti et al., 2022). Eigenvector centrality further reinforces this pattern. Male candidates demonstrate nearly double the eigenvector centrality of female candidates (0.61 vs. 0.33). Eigenvector centrality measures not only the quantity of ties but the quality of connections, specifically, connections to other highly connected actors (Bonacich, 1987). Thus, male candidates are not only more connected but also embedded within influential coalition cores. Female candidates, by contrast, appear less integrated into dominant elite clusters.

Interestingly, female candidates exhibit higher clustering coefficients (0.58) than male candidates (0.42). The clustering coefficient measures the extent to which an actor's immediate neighbours are also connected to one another, indicating embeddedness within cohesive subgroups (Watts & Strogatz, 1998). While high clustering may reflect strong local support networks, it may also signal segregation from broader coalition structures. In this context, higher clustering among female candidates suggests that women are more likely embedded within tightly knit but limited clusters, rather than bridging across coalition blocs. These findings align with research demonstrating that elite political and organizational networks often exhibit gendered homophily, where dominant male actors preferentially connect with similar others, reinforcing cumulative advantage (McPherson et al., 2001), political recruitment contexts, informal gatekeeping mechanisms frequently privilege established male incumbents, limiting women's access to central relational hubs (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016). The present findings extend this literature by empirically demonstrating how such patterns manifest structurally within decentralized electoral networks. To visualize these disparities, **Figure 2** presents a representative provincial network (Province A), highlighting node size proportional to betweenness centrality and color-coded by gender. For readers unfamiliar with Social Network Analysis, node size reflects an actor's relative strategic importance within the network. Larger nodes indicate greater brokerage capacity and influence over coalition coordination. The location of nodes also carries substantive meaning. Actors positioned near the network core typically possess broader access to political resources and coalition partners, whereas actors located at the periphery tend to have fewer opportunities to influence coalition formation and resource allocation.

Figure 2

Gendered positionality in provincial network (province A)



In **Figure 2**, node size corresponds to betweenness centrality, and nodes are color-coded by gender. Betweenness centrality captures the extent to which an actor occupies intermediary positions along the shortest paths between others, thereby controlling information and coalition flows (Burt, 2005; Jiang et al., 2026). Larger nodes, therefore, indicate greater brokerage capacity and strategic leverage within the network. The visualization reveals a centralized core composed predominantly of male candidates and party elites occupying high-brokerage positions. Female candidates appear primarily in peripheral clusters connected through single-party or localized

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alliances, with limited bridging ties across coalition blocs. Across seven of the eight cases examined, primary brokerage positions were occupied exclusively by male actors. Only in one district-level case did a female candidate occupy a moderate intermediary role; however, even in that instance, her betweenness centrality remained below the male network mean. This cross-case consistency strengthens the inference that gendered positional disparities are not case-specific anomalies but structurally embedded patterns. The findings align with social network theory, which conceptualizes power as emergent from structural location rather than individual attributes (Granovetter, 1983; Coleman, 1988). Actors occupying central and brokerage positions gain privileged access to coordination capacity, reputational signaling, and alliance negotiation (Burt, 2005). The structural hole analysis further corroborates this interpretation. Structural holes represent gaps between otherwise disconnected clusters, and actors who bridge them gain informational diversity and strategic advantage (Burt, 1992, 2005). In the analyzed networks, male candidates disproportionately spanned structural holes, linking business sponsors, party factions, and bureaucratic actors. Female candidates, by contrast, were more frequently positioned within single coalition blocs without cross-cluster bridging capacity. This pattern reflects cumulative advantage dynamics and elite continuity mechanisms documented in patronage-based systems (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Pierson, 2004). Collectively, these results provide empirical support for the mediating mechanism proposed in the conceptual framework: gender influences network positionality, which in turn shapes structural inclusion. While female candidates are formally present in electoral contests, they remain structurally peripheral in relational terms. Their limited brokerage capacity constrains access to coalition negotiation, resource diversification, and strategic influence, key determinants of electoral viability in decentralized systems (Faguet, 2014; Jalalzai, 2013). These findings are consistent with feminist institutionalist scholarship emphasizing that informal institutions and relational dynamics may undermine formal inclusion reforms (Waylen, 2014; Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016). As prior research on Indonesian patronage politics suggests, political opportunity structures are shaped less by formal eligibility and more by embeddedness in elite support networks (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Mietzner, 2020). Thus, gendered exclusion in Indonesia's 2024 local elections appears embedded not merely in cultural attitudes or nomination rules, but within the architecture of coalition networks themselves. The next subsection examines whether these structural disparities extend to financial patronage networks and sponsor ties, where brokerage advantages may further reinforce cumulative gendered inequalities.

Brokerage and structural holes

While the previous section established systematic gender disparities in centrality measures, this subsection examines the specific structural mechanisms through which brokerage and structural holes reinforce relational exclusion. Brokerage positions, captured through high betweenness centrality, identify actors who bridge otherwise disconnected clusters and thereby control the flow of information, endorsements, and resource exchanges (Burt, 2005; Jiang et al., 2026). In fragmented coalition environments such as Indonesia's decentralized electoral system, brokerage is particularly consequential because coalition-building depends on inter-factional negotiation, patronage exchange, and elite coordination rather than purely programmatic alignment (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Pratama et al., 2026). Across the eight cases, brokerage positions were overwhelmingly concentrated among male actors. In seven of the eight networks, all actors within the top quartile of betweenness centrality were male. These actors connected party factions to sponsor networks and bridged bureaucratic and community endorsement structures. Female candidates did not function as primary intermediaries between major coalition blocs. Even in cases where female candidates maintained multiple direct ties, those ties were largely confined within single-party alliances rather than spanning structural divides. **Figure 3** extends the analysis beyond centrality measures by visually illustrating how political influence is distributed through bridging relationships. Whereas numerical metrics identify influential actors, the visualization reveals how certain individuals connect otherwise disconnected coalition clusters and thereby gain strategic leverage over information flows and alliance formation. It presents a brokerage-focused visualization of Province A, isolating bridging ties that span structural holes. Node size corresponds to betweenness centrality, while bold edges represent cross-cluster bridging ties.

Figure 3 highlights bridging ties across coalition clusters. Larger nodes—predominantly male, occupy central brokerage positions linking party factions and sponsor blocs. Female candidates are positioned within cohesive but bounded clusters, with limited bold bridging ties connecting them to external coalition segments. The mapping reveals that male actors disproportionately span structural holes, gaps between otherwise disconnected clusters that confer informational and strategic advantage to bridging actors (Burt, 2005; Fang et al., 2025). By occupying these positions, male candidates gain access to diverse information streams and coordinate across fragmented alliances, thereby shaping coalition formation and resource allocation. Such structural leverage enhances bargaining power and reinforces cumulative political advantage. Female candidates, in contrast, appear embedded within cohesive but structurally constrained subgroups. Rather than acting as autonomous connectors, they are typically linked to a single coalition anchor, often a dominant party or patron figure, without cross-bloc reach. This dependency reduces bargaining leverage and limits strategic flexibility during coalition reconfiguration. The pattern

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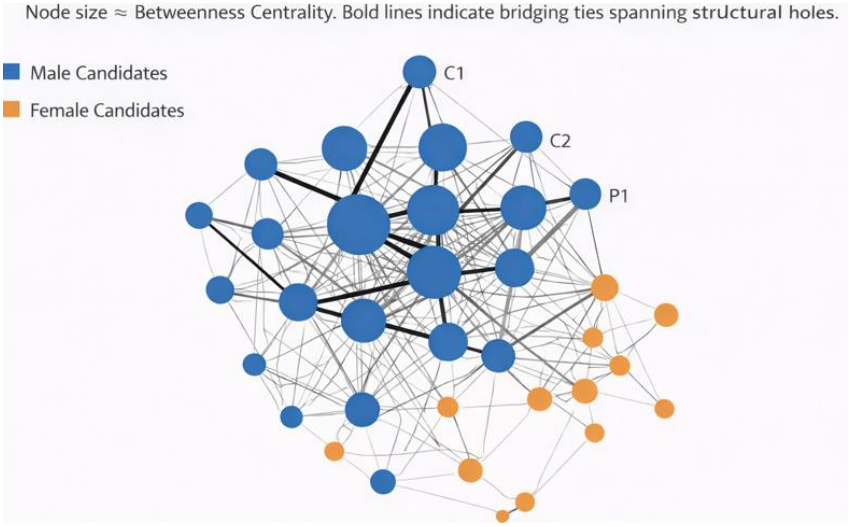
reflects homophilous elite reproduction and boundary maintenance within patronage networks (McPherson et al., 2001; Yarmar et al., 2026).

Figure 3

Brokerage and structural holes mapping – Province A



These findings align with feminist institutionalist scholarship demonstrating that informal institutions and elite continuity mechanisms mediate access to power beyond formal eligibility (Waylen, 2014; Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016). In patronage-based democracies, political opportunity structures are relationally embedded, privileging actors already integrated within dominant network cores (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Mietzner, 2020). Recent comparative research further suggests that gendered network segregation often confines women to dense but inward-looking clusters, limiting cross-institutional brokerage opportunities (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022; Virágh, 2025). Importantly, brokerage inequality does not require overt discriminatory intent. Rather, it emerges from cumulative structural processes. Where political networks have historically been male-dominated, brokerage positions become path-dependent, reinforcing relational advantage through repeated coalition cycles (Pierson, 2004). Access to sponsors, party elites, and bureaucratic actors flows through existing bridges, reproducing male-dominated central hubs over time (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Lestari & Kurniawan, 2025).

The concentration of brokerage among male actors therefore represents a core mechanism of gendered structural exclusion. Even when female candidates achieve descriptive participation, their limited bridging capacity constrains access to cross-coalition influence, diversified sponsorship, and strategic coordination, key determinants of electoral viability in decentralized systems (Faguet, 2014; Jalalzai, 2013). Taken together, the brokerage and structural hole analysis strengthens the study's central claim: gender inequality in Indonesia's 2024 local elections is embedded within network architecture. Female candidates are not excluded from participation; rather, they are systematically positioned outside the structural bridges that confer coalition power and strategic influence.

Patronage and financial network positioning

Beyond coalition embeddedness and brokerage capacity, access to financial patronage networks constitutes a critical determinant of electoral viability in decentralized political systems. In Indonesia, local elections are widely recognized as resource-intensive contests in which private sponsorship, business alliances, and informal funding networks play decisive roles (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Campaign finance not only supports voter mobilization but also signals credibility and elite backing within competitive coalition environments. To assess whether gender disparities extend into patronage structures, this study reconstructed campaign finance networks using publicly disclosed sponsor ties and documented financial affiliations. Sponsor connections were coded as relational ties between candidates and major financial contributors. In addition to total sponsor ties, high-value sponsorship ties were identified using top-quartile financial contributions within each case, enabling differentiation between general support and strategically significant patronage. **Table 3** presents the aggregated mean sponsor connections by gender.

Table 3

Average number of financial sponsor ties by gender

Gender	Mean Sponsor Connections	High-Value Sponsor Ties (Top Quartile)
Male Candidates	5.8	3.1
Female Candidates	2.4	0.9

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The results reveal substantial gender disparities in financial network embeddedness. Male candidates held, on average, 5.8 sponsor connections, more than double the mean number held by female candidates (2.4). This pattern is even more pronounced when examining high-value sponsorship ties. Male candidates averaged 3.1 top-quartile sponsor ties, compared to 0.9 among female candidates. Thus, not only were women connected to fewer sponsors overall, but they were also significantly underrepresented among high-capital contributors. These findings align with research demonstrating that patronage-based political systems tend to privilege incumbency networks and historically embedded elite ties (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Financial sponsorship often flows through relational trust networks shaped by longstanding business–political alliances. Because such alliances are frequently male-dominated, women may encounter structural barriers in accessing high-value funding streams (Franceschet, Krook, & Tan, 2019).

Further analysis reveals a strong positive correlation between financial centrality and overall network centrality ($r = .71$). This indicates that candidates who occupy central positions in coalition networks are also those with greater access to sponsor ties. Such correlation suggests cumulative structural advantage: actors embedded in central coalition cores are more likely to attract financial support, while financial resources further reinforce their centrality within political networks. This dynamic is consistent with the Matthew Effect in network accumulation processes, where initial positional advantages compound over time (Borgatti et al., 2022). Importantly, this cumulative dynamic disproportionately benefits male candidates. Because male actors dominate central and brokerage positions (as shown in gender differences in centrality and brokerage section and brokerage and structural holes section), they are structurally better positioned to attract diversified sponsorship. Female candidates, located more frequently in peripheral or single-cluster positions, lack equivalent cross-coalition exposure, reducing their appeal to major sponsors seeking influence across multiple blocs.

These results reinforce arguments from feminist institutionalism that informal institutions, such as patronage networks, may undermine formal equality measures (Waylen, 2014; Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016). While legal frameworks permit female candidacy, access to financial patronage remains embedded within relational structures historically dominated by male elites. Moreover, financial network inequality has strategic consequences. In decentralized elections characterized by high campaign costs, limited access to sponsorship constrains advertising reach, grassroots mobilization, and coalition negotiation capacity (Mietzner, 2014; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Thus, gendered disparities in sponsor ties represent not merely descriptive inequality but substantive structural disadvantage. Taken together, the financial network analysis complements earlier findings on centrality and brokerage. Gendered structural exclusion operates across multiple relational dimensions: coalition embeddedness, brokerage capacity, and financial patronage access. Female candidates are formally present in electoral contests but remain underrepresented in the relational circuits through which political power and resources circulate.

Peripheral marginalization patterns

To further examine gendered structural positioning, peripheral status was operationalized using bottom-quartile thresholds for both degree centrality and betweenness centrality within each network. Actors falling within the lowest 25 percent of both measures were categorized as occupying peripheral positions. This approach aligns with established network methodology, identifying peripheral actors as those with minimal relational reach and limited intermediary influence (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2018). **Table 4** presents the proportion of candidates categorized as peripheral by gender.

Table 4

Proportion of candidates in peripheral positions

Gender	% in Peripheral Category
Male Candidates	18%
Female Candidates	62%

The results in **Table 4** indicate stark gender disparities in peripheral positioning. While only 18 percent of male candidates fell within the peripheral category, 62 percent of female candidates were structurally peripheral across the eight cases. This suggests that a substantial majority of female candidates lacked meaningful integration into dominant coalition cores or cross-factional linkages. Peripheral actors were typically connected through single-party endorsements or narrow patronage channels rather than diversified coalition networks. These candidates demonstrated limited coalition overlap and minimal sponsor diversification, reinforcing dependency on a single political anchor. In highly centralized networks, peripheral actors were often separated from central coalition brokers by multiple relational steps, reducing access to information and strategic negotiation pathways. From a network theory perspective, peripheral positioning significantly constrains influence. Actors located outside central hubs have reduced access to coordination leverage, coalition negotiation, and resource flows (Burt, 2005). In decentralized patronage systems such as Indonesia's, where coalition-building and elite bargaining determine

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candidate viability, exclusion from central relational structures constitutes a structural disadvantage (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Faguet, 2014). Peripheral actors are more likely to depend on dominant elites for endorsements and sponsorship, limiting their strategic autonomy during coalition reconfiguration (Pratama et al., 2026).

The disproportionate concentration of women in peripheral positions aligns with feminist institutionalist scholarship emphasizing that informal recruitment practices and elite continuity mechanisms reproduce gendered marginalization beyond formal rules (Waylen, 2014). In decentralized political systems characterized by patronage hierarchies, relational embeddedness rather than formal eligibility determines substantive access to power (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Thus, even where female candidates achieve descriptive participation, their peripheral network location constrains coalition leverage and resource diversification. Importantly, peripheral marginalization has substantive electoral consequences. In competitive subnational contests, where coalition fluidity and sponsorship breadth are decisive, candidates positioned outside central and brokerage cores face structural barriers to strategic repositioning and alliance renegotiation (Aspinall et al., 2021; Mietzner, 2020). Peripheral status therefore represents not merely a descriptive network category but a relational constraint with direct implications for electoral viability.

Cross-case comparative patterns

To assess whether gendered structural exclusion varied by regional context, comparative analysis was conducted across provincial and district-level networks. The results indicate that gender disparities were most pronounced in highly centralized provincial networks, particularly those characterized by coalition fragmentation and inter-factional bargaining. Provincial contests involve broader party negotiation, complex sponsor linkages, and multi-actor coalition coordination, increasing the strategic value of centrality and brokerage positions (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Pratama et al., 2026). In these contexts, male dominance in central and bridging roles translated into amplified structural advantage. District-level networks, while smaller and denser, exhibited somewhat reduced but still significant gender gaps. Higher density suggests tighter localized patronage structures; however, even in these environments' women remained underrepresented in top-quartile centrality and brokerage positions. No case demonstrated structural parity across centrality, brokerage, and sponsorship indicators.

Notably, even where female candidates possessed strong political credentials, administrative experience, or dynastic affiliations, their network positionality remained comparatively constrained. Dynastic entry did not consistently translate into brokerage control across coalition blocs. These finding echoes research indicating that dynastic pathways may reproduce elite continuity without fundamentally altering gendered power distributions (Mietzner, 2020). In patronage-based democracies, elite reproduction often operates through relational channels that sustain existing hierarchies (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). The consistency of gendered disparities across provincial and district contexts strengthens the inference that exclusion operates at the level of relational architecture rather than isolated institutional variation. Whether in fragmented provincial arenas or localized district elections, male actors dominate central and bridging positions, while women are disproportionately concentrated in peripheral or clustered roles. This pattern aligns with comparative findings that informal political institutions and patronage systems systematically reproduce gendered hierarchies within decentralized governance structures (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022). Rather than reflecting idiosyncratic regional dynamics, the observed cross-case consistency suggests that gendered inequality in Indonesia's 2024 local elections is embedded within coalition network architecture itself.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings provide consistent empirical support for the proposed relational pathway: Gender → Network Positionality → Structural Inclusion/Exclusion. Across eight provincial and district-level electoral networks, female candidates systematically exhibited lower degree centrality, substantially lower betweenness centrality, reduced eigenvector centrality, higher clustering within segregated subgroups, fewer financial sponsor ties, and a markedly greater likelihood of peripheral positioning. These patterns were robust across diverse political contexts, indicating that gendered inequality in Indonesia's 2024 local elections is embedded within network architecture rather than solely within formal institutional arrangements. Importantly, women were descriptively present in electoral contests but structurally peripheral within coalition and patronage networks. Their relative absence from brokerage positions limited their capacity to bridge party factions, mediate sponsor relationships, and influence coalition reconfiguration. In decentralized political systems where coalition bargaining, elite negotiation, and financial mobilization are decisive (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Pratama et al., 2026), such structural positioning constitutes a substantial disadvantage. As prior research demonstrates, electoral viability in decentralized contexts depends less on formal eligibility and more on embeddedness within patronage-based coalition networks (Mietzner, 2020). Descriptive participation, therefore, did not translate into structural inclusion.

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These findings reinforce the argument that political inequality operates not only through formal rules or sociocultural norms but through relational configurations of power. Even where legal frameworks permit equal candidacy, access to strategic political opportunity is mediated by network embeddedness (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016; Waylen, 2014). In highly centralized and modular networks, particularly at the provincial level, control over bridging ties and cross-factional coordination amplified the influence of male-dominated coalition cores. This aligns with scholarship demonstrating that informal institutions and patronage systems frequently undermine gender-inclusive reforms by reproducing elite continuity through relational mechanisms (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022).

Moreover, the strong correlation between financial centrality and overall network centrality ($r = .71$) suggests cumulative structural advantage. Actors occupying central coalition positions attracted greater sponsorship, and financial resources in turn reinforced central positioning. Such self-reinforcing dynamics are consistent with network theories of brokerage and structural advantage (Burt, 2005). In patronage-based democracies, sponsorship flows through existing bridges, strengthening already-central actors and entrenching gendered disparities over successive coalition cycles (Lestari & Kurniawan, 2025). Collectively, the evidence indicates that gendered structural exclusion in Indonesia's decentralized elections is not episodic or region-specific. Rather, it is embedded within the architecture of coalition and patronage networks and reproduced across institutional scales.

Theoretical contributions and implications

This study makes several interconnected theoretical contributions. First, it reconceptualizes gender inequality in executive politics as a relational structural phenomenon rather than solely an institutional or sociocultural issue. Much scholarship on women's political representation emphasizes quotas, electoral rules, and candidate recruitment procedures (Krook, 2010; Clayton et al., 2017). While these institutional reforms increase descriptive representation, they do not necessarily dismantle informal power structures governing coalition-building and resource allocation (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016; Waylen, 2014). The present findings demonstrate that substantive political power is mediated by network positionality. Structural inclusion requires not merely candidacy, but embeddedness within central coalition cores and access to brokerage roles linking party factions and sponsor networks (Burt, 2005). By foregrounding network architecture as a mechanism of exclusion, this study shifts analytical attention from institutional access to relational positioning. Second, the study advances feminist institutionalism by operationalizing informal institutions as measurable relational structures. Feminist institutionalist scholars argue that patronage systems, elite continuity, and informal norms may undermine formal equality reforms (Waylen, 2014; Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016). However, such dynamics are often inferred qualitatively. By reconstructing coalition, sponsorship, and endorsement networks, this research empirically demonstrates how informal power manifests structurally through brokerage concentration, clustered segregation, financial centralization, and peripheral marginalization. In doing so, it integrates feminist institutionalism with social network theory (Burt, 2005), bridging two literatures that are frequently treated separately.

Third, the findings contribute to debates on decentralization and elite reproduction. Decentralization is often assumed to broaden participation and enhance accountability (Faguet, 2014). Yet Indonesian local politics is characterized by dense patronage networks and coalition bargaining that privilege embedded elites (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Mietzner, 2020). The persistence of gender disparities across both provincial and district contexts indicates that relational inequality is resilient even in smaller, ostensibly more accessible political arenas. Brokerage inequality emerges as a critical mechanism of gendered power reproduction, particularly in fragmented provincial contests where cross-factional bridging confers strategic leverage (Pratama et al., 2026; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022). Finally, the study advances the methodological application of interpretive Social Network Analysis in the study of political inequality. While prior research on Indonesian local politics has documented clientelism and patronage qualitatively (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Mietzner, 2020), few studies have systematically reconstructed network structures to measure positional disparities. By combining documentary reconstruction with structural network metrics, this research demonstrates how relational power configurations can be empirically mapped and compared across cases. The approach provides a replicable framework for examining informal power systems in decentralized democracies and reveals how democratic inclusion may coexist with structural exclusion.

Practical implications

The findings carry significant implications for policy design, party reform, and gender equity initiatives. First, quota reforms alone are insufficient to achieve substantive executive representation. While Indonesia's 30 percent legislative quota has increased descriptive participation, executive-level inequality persists because network access remains gendered. Reform efforts must therefore address relational access, not merely candidate nomination thresholds. Second, political parties should institutionalize transparent coalition-building procedures and diversify

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recruitment networks. Centralized gatekeeping structures dominated by male elites reinforce brokerage concentration. Expanding internal party mentorship and cross-factional integration for female candidates may increase access to bridging positions. Third, campaign finance regulation and transparency mechanisms should consider gendered disparities in sponsorship networks. Public funding mechanisms or targeted financial support for female candidates could partially offset structural disadvantages in patronage access. Fourth, civil society and electoral oversight bodies may play a role in monitoring coalition diversity and financial concentration. Increasing transparency in sponsor relationships may reduce cumulative network advantage. Finally, leadership training programs should focus not only on individual candidate capacity but on strategic network integration. Building cross-coalition ties and bridging relationships is crucial for overcoming peripheral marginalization.

Limitations and future research directions

While this study provides systematic evidence of gendered structural exclusion in Indonesia's 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections, several limitations warrant consideration. First, the network reconstruction relies on secondary documentary sources. Although triangulated, publicly traceable ties may not fully capture opaque patronage relationships, informal sponsorship arrangements, personal alliances, kinship networks, or other undocumented political connections operating behind the scenes. Consequently, the reconstructed networks should be interpreted as representations of documented political relationships rather than complete maps of all existing political interactions. Some actors may possess informal influence that remains invisible within publicly available sources. Future research could complement documentary-based network reconstruction through elite interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and qualitative process tracing to uncover hidden dimensions of political influence and provide a more comprehensive understanding of gendered network exclusion. Second, the analysis examines pre-electoral structural positioning rather than directly modeling electoral outcomes. Although centrality and brokerage are associated with strategic advantage, subsequent studies could integrate network metrics with vote share, campaign finance, and incumbency data to assess electoral effects more directly. Third, the purposive selection of eight regions supports analytical, but not statistical, generalization (Gerring, 2007). Expanding network mapping across additional regions would strengthen external validity. Finally, the cross-sectional design limits assessment of network change over time. Longitudinal and comparative research could examine whether gendered positional disparities persist or evolve across electoral cycles and decentralized contexts. Together, these limitations open pathways for extending relational approaches to the study of gender and political power.

CONCLUSION

This study examined whether gender inequality in Indonesia's 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections is embedded in political network structures rather than solely in formal institutions. Using interpretive Social Network Analysis across eight provincial and district contests, the findings reveal consistent evidence of gendered structural exclusion. Although women were descriptively present as executive candidates, they were systematically underrepresented in central and brokerage positions. Female candidates showed lower degree, betweenness, and eigenvector centrality, fewer sponsor ties, greater clustering within segregated subgroups, and significantly higher peripheral positioning. Brokerage and structural hole analyses further demonstrated that cross-coalition bridging roles, crucial for coalition bargaining and resource mobilization, were overwhelmingly dominated by male actors. These patterns persisted across regional contexts, indicating that inequality operates through relational architecture rather than isolated institutional barriers. The study contributes to debates on democratic inclusion by showing that descriptive participation does not guarantee structural inclusion. In decentralized, patronage-based systems, access to power is mediated by network embeddedness. Informal institutions and coalition structures can therefore reproduce inequality even when formal candidacy rights exist. Advancing substantive gender equality in executive politics requires not only institutional reform but transformation of the relational networks through which coalition power and resources circulate.

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Ethical statement

This study was conducted as part of the research activities of the Faculty of Government Politics, funded under the Fiscal Year 2026 research grant scheme. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Institut Pemerintahan Dalam Negeri (IPDN), under approval number 000.9.2/256/IPDN.7, dated January 30, 2026. All participants provided informed consent before data collection, and their confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the institution.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author contributions

Both authors contributed to Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, and Writing – review & editing, and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study were derived from publicly available documentary sources published by Indonesia's General Elections Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU), including candidacy registration records, coalition declarations, and endorsement announcements related to the 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections. The coded relational (network) dataset constructed from these sources was compiled for internal research purposes only and is not publicly deposited. Access requests may be directed to the corresponding author and will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

AI disclosure

The authors confirm that no artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools or large language models were used at any stage of this research, including data collection, document analysis, interpretation of findings, or the drafting and revision of this manuscript. All intellectual contributions — including the conceptual framework, analytical reasoning, and written content — are solely the work of the named authors, who take full responsibility for the integrity of the research and its presentation.

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Appendix

Illustrative Documentary Sources Used for Network Reconstruction

The following examples illustrate the types of documentary sources consulted during the reconstruction of local political networks across the selected electoral cases.

Official Electoral and Government Sources

- Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU). Candidate Registration Records (2024 Simultaneous Local Elections).
- Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU). Official Candidate Determination Documents (Penetapan Pasangan Calon).
- Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU). Campaign Finance Reports (Laporan Penerimaan dan Pengeluaran Dana Kampanye – LPPDK).
- Provincial and District KPU Election Information Portals.
- Official Electoral Results and Candidate Verification Reports.

Political Party Documentation

- Official coalition endorsement announcements published by participating political parties.
- Party decrees (Surat Keputusan) confirming candidate nominations and coalition support.
- Official party press releases and public statements regarding candidate endorsements.
- Campaign organizational structures and publicly disclosed campaign team memberships.

Media and Public Documentation Sources

- Reports published by Kompas concerning local election coalitions, endorsements, and political alliances.
- Reports published by Tempo covering candidate nominations, coalition negotiations, and electoral competition.
- Reports published by Detik News documenting campaign activities, endorsements, and elite political support.
- Reports published by Antara News concerning local electoral developments and candidate coalitions.
- Reports published by CNN Indonesia and Media Indonesia discussing sponsorship support, coalition formation, and political endorsements.
- Regional newspaper coverage documenting local elite endorsements, business sponsorships, and coalition arrangements.

Cross-Validation Procedure

Information extracted from documentary sources was compared across multiple independent records whenever possible. Relational ties were included in the final network dataset only when sufficient documentary evidence supported the existence of a political, coalition, sponsorship, endorsement, or organizational relationship. This triangulation process enhanced the credibility and reliability of the reconstructed political networks.

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