Jurnal Perempuan
untuk pencerahan dan kesetaraan
Vol. 29 No. 3, 2024, 227—237

**DDC: 305**

# Women's Leadership at the Grassroots Level and Democratic Resilience: A Conceptual and Theoretical Study

**Nur Iman Subono**

Lecturer, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP), University of Indonesia, West Java, Indonesia

boni.subono@gmail.com

Manuscript Chronology: received 12 March 2025, revised 27 April 2025, accepted 22 August 2025

**Abstract**

Women have long played a crucial role in social and political development around the world, including in Indonesia, although their contributions are often overlooked or insufficiently recognized. In this context, women's leadership at the grassroots level becomes particularly important. The grassroots serves as the foundation for larger social and political structures, and active participation by women at this level can strengthen the foundation of a more inclusive and participatory "democratic resilience." A country's democratic resilience is not only determined by elite or high-level political leaders but also by the extent to which marginalized groups, including women, are involved in the political process. This paper aims to explore the deep relationship between women's leadership at the grassroots level and democratic resilience. By examining how women in various communities influence local socio-political dynamics, we can understand their role in strengthening democratic resilience. Furthermore, the paper addresses the challenges and obstacles that women face in attaining leadership positions at the grassroots level.

Keywords: women's leadership, grassroots, democratic resilience

## Introduction

The data from various national and international sources is clear and relatively convincing. There is a clear trend towards greater female leadership and participation in organisations that have traditionally been male-dominated, including government and bureaucracy, the private sector, and civil society organisations (Carter & Rudd 2005). Various studies also demonstrate the benefits of increased female participation. Indeed, several studies show that women often exhibit leadership styles associated with good performance, resulting in more effective leadership (Eagly 2007). In particular, meta-analyses show that women tend to be more democratic or participatory in their approach, while men tend to be more autocratic or directive (Eagly & Carli 2003).

However, a different picture emerges at this point. So far, we have heard more about the positions, roles, and achievements of female leaders at global, regional, and national levels. However, attention is often focused solely on formal political leadership and women in senior management positions in the public and private sectors. But what about women's leadership in their communities? What form does it take? How has it developed? What changes have they managed to bring about? For many women, especially those who are poor, underprivileged, powerless, or otherwise marginalised from services, opportunities, and decision-making processes, change within their communities is needed to affect their daily lives. This makes their leadership, and that of their peers, very important.

However, even when we focus on a micro level, such as villages, new problems can arise. Since the 1998 Reform, two major changes have occurred, particularly at the local level: the decentralisation policy of the 2000s, and the 2024 ratification of the Village Law and Village Fund Development. Theoretically and normatively, there is an international consensus on the objectives of decentralisation: (a) deepening democracy and good governance, (b) encouraging community participation and capacity, including women and other marginalised groups, (c) implementing efficient programmes and providing accessible services, and (d) implementing affirmative action to ensure decentralisation and women's participation (Rondinelli & Cheema 1983).

In reality, however, there is often a gap between the normative and the actual. Although decentralisation has increased women's participation in politics, women who are considered capable of leadership at the grassroots level generally come from elite social,

political, and economic backgrounds, or have family ties to local oligarchies. Their leadership is often merely seen as a 'proxy' for their extended family, kinship ties, and local elites. Consequently, a female leader's legitimacy and influence are not usually assessed based on her abilities, vision, or personal track record, but rather on her connections to important figures within her family, kinship network, or elite groups in a region. Meanwhile, the most important task for these female leaders is to implement local government programmes that tend to be top-down and focus on women's roles in the household or private sphere, such as their roles as mothers, wives, and carers. In other words, their actions only serve to reinforce existing gender roles and positions. Of course, there are also many female leaders who are, or present themselves as, independent. However, they are often considered successful in terms of practical gender-related issues, such as improvements in living conditions, short-term programmes, and specific targets.

Programmes related to meeting daily needs certainly have a significant impact, such as improving living standards, enhancing health services, providing clean water, meeting infant milk needs, and ensuring the availability of doctors and ambulances, particularly for women and children. However, the issue is completely different when it comes to implementing strategies related to strategic gender interests. Interventions that focus on strategic gender interests emphasise fundamental issues related to the subordination of women (and, less frequently, men) and gender inequality. These strategies are long-term and usually non-material, often involving structural changes in society with regard to the status and equality of women. Such interests include enacting laws that support equal rights, reproductive choices, and increased participation in decision-making processes. This strategy targets both men and women, and improves the gender status of women by increasing their access to and control over resources, achieving equal rights in education, combating violence against women and children, and eliminating the gender-based division of labour. Typically, female leaders at local and community levels promote policies within the framework of practical gender interests, either independently or as a 'proxy'. Conversely, few dare to promote their policies in terms of strategic gender interests. Why is this the case? As public officials, they focus on a patriarchal social structure that would be profoundly affected by such policies. This concept was first introduced by Maxine Molyneux, a British sociologist who has written extensively about the women's movement (Molyneux, 1985). The differences between the two approaches are shown in the following table for further clarification:

**Table 1.**

**Differences between Practical Gender Interests and Strategic Gender Interests**

| Category | Practical Gender Interests | Strategic Gender Interests |
|---|---|---|
| Focus | Meeting basic needs and improving individual welfare without changing existing gender relations | Improving the social position of women, changing norms and structures that restrict women, and promoting gender equality |
| Objectives | Short term, improving individual welfare | Long term, improve gender equality and women's empowerment |
| Challenges | Existing gender relations, lack of access to resources | Unequal gender relations, discriminatory social norms, lack of women's participation in decision-making |
| Examples | Women's access to safe health services, sanitation, nutrition, and safe drinking water | Empowerment of women in decision-making, equal rights to education and employment, and increased participation of women in various sectors |
| Benefits | Improving individual well-being, enhancing quality of life | Promoting gender equality, women's empowerment, and more equitable social change |
| Approach | Meeting practical needs without having to change existing gender relations | Improving gender relations, challenging norms and structures that restrict women, and increasing women's participation in decision-making |

Source: Compiled from various sources

Based on this, this paper aims to highlight and explore the deep relationship between women's leadership at the grassroots level and democratic resilience through literary, conceptual, and theoretical analysis. Understanding how women in different communities influence local socio-political dynamics helps us grasp their role in strengthening democratic resilience. Furthermore, we can identify the challenges and obstacles that women encounter when trying to attain leadership roles at the grassroots level.

**Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach involving a literature review. This method was chosen because the study emphasises conceptual exploration and theoretical analysis of the relationship between women's leadership at the grassroots level and democratic resilience. It enables researchers to collect, critically assess, and integrate the results of previous theoretical and empirical studies to construct a more robust argument (Snyder 2019; Webster & Watson 2002).

Data for this study were sourced from various relevant materials, including: Books: various literature on leadership theories, gender, political studies, grassroots community dynamics, and concepts and indicators of democratic resilience, as well as studies specifically addressing the interrelationship between these issues. The author processed research articles published in scientific journals that focus on women's leadership, political participation at the grassroots level, democratic issues, and relevant interdisciplinary studies. The study is also based on documents and reports from relevant institutions, such as official documents and research reports, which can provide information and perspectives relevant to the research topic.

This literature review approach is considered appropriate because it strengthens the conceptual basis of the research, provides a foundation for cross-context comparison, and contributes to theory development. Literature reviews not only summarise findings, but also present conceptual syntheses that enrich academic discourse (Snyder 2019; Webster & Watson 2002).

**Leadership, Female Leadership, and Gender Bias**

Firstly, what do we mean by 'leadership'? If we take Stogdill's definition from his book 'Handbook of Leadership: A Survey of Theory and Research', leadership is defined as 'a pattern of relationships between individuals who lead and members of the group who follow' (Stogdill 1974). P. G. Northouse, who also discusses leadership, defines it as 'a process whereby an individual influences a group to achieve a common goal' (Northouse 2018).

Taking these two definitions into account, we can define leadership as the process by which an individual (the leader) influences a group of individuals (the followers) to achieve a common goal. Leadership involves the ability to inspire, motivate, and direct others. This includes making effective decisions, building strong teams, and inspiring people to work enthusiastically. Effective leaders must have a clear vision, excellent communication skills, and the ability to overcome challenges.

When we relate the concept of leadership to leadership theories, several emerge. The first, as described by R. M. Stogdill (1948), is known as 'Trait Theory'. This theory focuses on the characteristics or innate traits of leaders that distinguish them from non-leaders. Traits such as intelligence, honesty, confidence, and charisma are often associated with effective leadership. In other words, this theory suggests that leaders are born with these traits. They are born to be leaders. Therefore, those who believe in this theory can identify individuals with the potential to be effective leaders. Next is the 'Behavioural Theory', a classical theory introduced by K. Lewin, R. Lippitt, and R. K. White, among others, in 1939. According to this theory, the focus is on what the leader does rather than who they are. The two main dimensions that are often studied are task-oriented behaviour (structure initiation) and relationship-oriented behaviour (consideration). The discussion then moves on to autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles. This theory provides a framework for understanding the impact of different leadership styles on subordinates.

Another important point to note is 'Contingency or Situational Theory', which is widely considered to be part of classical leadership theory. First introduced by F. E. Fiedler (1967), this theory suggests that no single leadership style is most effective in all situations. Leadership effectiveness is largely determined by the extent to which a leader's style is appropriate to the context and conditions faced. This idea was later enriched by V.H. Vroom and P.W. Yetton (1973) and P. Hersey and K.H. Blanchard (1969), who emphasised the importance of a leader's flexibility in adjusting their leadership approach to the demands of different situations.

Additionally, two influential modern leadership

theories have emerged, namely 'Transformational Theory' and 'Transactional Theory'. 'Transformational Theory' was originally introduced by J.M. Burns (1978) and further developed by B.M. Bass (1985) and B.J. Avolio (1994). This theory emphasises a leader's ability to inspire, motivate, and transform followers to prioritise common goals over personal interests. Transformational leaders build vision, provide inspiration, stimulate intellectually, and give individual attention to subordinates. This leadership model is highly relevant in the context of organisational change and the development of followers' potential.

In contrast, 'Transactional Theory' emphasises the reciprocal nature of the relationship between leaders and followers. Within this framework, leaders provide rewards or punishments based on subordinates' performance; therefore, the main focus is on management, maintaining stability, and achieving short-term goals. This theory is important for understanding how reward and punishment structures can affect motivation and performance.

For now, these leadership theories can be considered ideal types. In practice, however, these models often overlap, complement, or even contradict each other. The MAMPU (Australia–Indonesia Partnership for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment) programme, however, offers an interesting alternative conceptualisation of leadership. Within the MAMPU framework, leadership is generally understood as the exercise of influence.[1]

Developed through years of field research and community support, this conceptualisation is not tied to formal positions, governance frameworks, or individual socioeconomic status. Rather, it is viewed as an individual's or collective's capacity to influence decision-making relevant to the community's daily life.

In the context of women's leadership at the grassroots level, MAMPU demonstrates that this influence can emanate from 'ordinary people' performing extraordinary deeds. For example, women who campaign for the allocation of public resources, advocate for basic services, or improve access to health facilities. This influence can be either individual or collective and can extend from small communities to local and even national policies.

This confirms that women's leadership at the grassroots level is real and significant in driving social change. Leadership is not fundamentally a matter of formal position or institutional status, but rather a matter of influence that ensures public decisions are responsive to the needs of women, the poor, and other marginalised communities.

It should be emphasised from the outset that leadership is not fundamentally determined by 'sex' or 'gender', and can therefore be exercised by both men and women. However, in practice, there is still gender bias — both explicit and implicit — in how women's involvement in leadership is viewed. To understand this bias, Hogue and Lord (2007) propose a multi-level complexity theory approach. Their model identifies various factors that influence the emergence of gender bias, including internal factors of leaders (e.g., self-confidence) and external factors (e.g., the opinions or perceptions of others).

According to Hogue and Lord, 'initial biases against leaders can disappear quickly as more information is received, or they can accumulate over time as existing structures develop' (Hogue & Lord 2007, p. 372). They emphasise that complexity in leadership arises from nonlinear interactions between many elements in a social system. Therefore, when seeking to understand how gender bias forms, persists, or changes, it is important to consider contextual factors and the history of interactions.

Historically, expectations and ideas about leadership have often been derived from a masculine norm (Lämsä & Sintonen 2001). Consequently, women in leadership roles often face obstacles and barriers that men in similar positions do not (DeBebe 2009). As is often the case in the private sector and bureaucracy, women at the grassroots level frequently encounter a 'glass ceiling' that prevents them from participating fully in many leadership roles (Themudo 2009). Women are sometimes subjected to prejudicial reactions that men do not experience (McEldowney, Bobrowski & Gramberg 2009). Women in male-dominated organisations often face various gender-related expectations and obstacles. Barriers to empowerment and influence cited by women include a lack of acceptance from both female and male colleagues, unequal socio-political and economic status, work-life balance issues, and a lack of strong role models.

However, MAMPU's 2020 study found that young women in particular do not tend to view these obstacles and challenges as something to be feared, avoided, or passively accepted. This demonstrates optimism and courage in the face of limiting structures. Although leadership is never 'black and white', there are often

differences in leadership styles and approaches between men and women. Female leadership is essentially associated with motivating, inspiring, and empowering others, as well as making strategic decisions from a unique perspective. Female leaders often emphasise collaboration, empathy, and balance, thus presenting a model that complements existing leadership practices.

**Female Leadership and Grassroots Communities**

But what exactly do we mean by 'grassroots', or more precisely, 'grassroots communities'? Put simply, they refer to groups of people at the bottom of the social structure. They usually consist of individuals or groups with a lower social, economic, and political status or power. These communities often lack direct access to, or representation in, decision-making processes at the highest levels, such as in government or large companies. Grassroots communities can also be defined as operating at a local level, closer to the daily lives of individuals, and often unbound by formal structures or complex bureaucracy. They typically focus on issues that directly affect their lives, such as education, health, employment, and social welfare (Diana 2021).

Meanwhile, women's leadership in grassroots communities refers to women who lead, organise, and empower communities or groups at a local level, particularly in communities lacking direct access to formal power. This leadership is important because women in grassroots communities often have direct experience of the daily challenges faced by their groups, such as social and economic inequality and violence (Mona 2020).

Reviewing the results of research conducted by various institutions and universities can help us identify the characteristics of women's leadership in different places, including at the grassroots level. However, it should be noted from the outset that these characteristics cannot be considered 'black and white' in comparison to male leadership and cannot be applied universally. This means that these characteristics are highly contextual and depend on a particular place and time. Nevertheless, this is a good starting point for describing the leadership tendencies commonly associated with women in grassroots communities. These tendencies can be described as follows:

First, when the opportunity to lead arises, we see that women tend to be 'task-oriented'. This is understandable, given that opportunities for women to become leaders are still rare amid various obstacles and challenges. Consequently, female leaders tend to focus intensely on completing the work and tasks assigned to them. Both individually and collectively, they strive to complete the daily tasks necessary to ensure that planned programmes run smoothly. There is also a personal challenge to prove that women, who are often considered incapable of leadership due to cultural or societal constructs, can perform leadership tasks well.

This task-focused leadership style helps to ensure that the group or organisation runs effectively. However, followers working with leaders who apply this style may not always understand the strategic importance of these tasks for the organisation. Furthermore, female leaders focus not only on tasks but also on long-term sustainable solutions. They tend to be more oriented towards sustainability in various aspects of life — social, economic, and environmental — and strive to create changes that will benefit not only the present, but also future generations.

Second, in terms of leadership theory, women's leadership style is often categorised as 'transformational'. Several literature reviews and research papers have noted that women with this style become role models by gaining the trust and confidence of their followers. These leaders guide and empower their followers, encouraging them to reach their full potential and contribute more effectively to their organisations' activities (Eagly & Carli 2003).

Transformational leadership is a powerful characteristic because it enables leaders to effect change in today's grassroots communities. Without transformational leaders, organisations would be unable to reinvent themselves when needed. In short, transformational leaders are often seen as drivers of change and development for their followers.

Third, many female leaders prefer to build organisations with a 'flat organisational structure'. Why is this? This is because they tend to prefer a more collegial atmosphere. This leadership style is necessary to encourage and shape activities that require close integration and solidarity among followers. However, flat organisational structures do not take into account the experience and knowledge of more experienced followers.

Fourthly, the focus is on 'promoting cooperation and collaboration'. Female leaders at the grassroots level are usually aware of internal limitations or obstacles, such as a lack of self-confidence or limited skills, as well as external ones, such as cultural barriers and societal

values and opinions that do not particularly support female leadership. Therefore, female leaders strongly encourage cooperation and collaboration among their followers and supporters in the community. This can be seen in the way women at the grassroots level organise groups to solve problems together, becoming liaisons between various parties in a mutually beneficial collaborative network (Hadiningrat 2025; Gordon 2020; Wulandari 2023).

Teamwork and collaboration are essential for establishing and managing a large, diverse community. Female leaders tend to prioritise the involvement of all community members, regardless of their background or social status (inclusivity). Decisions are made by considering the interests of the wider group and prioritising collective well-being. Women leaders also demonstrate transformational leadership by focusing on interpersonal relationships, knowledge exchange, and reflection in order to overcome inequality and support social change in their communities (Hadiningrat 2025; Gordon 2020; Wulandari 2023).

Fifthly, 'empathy and balance' is another characteristic. This aspect is particularly evident in female leadership. Women often adopt a more empathetic leadership style, considering the social and emotional impact of their decisions. They strive to balance individual and group needs, ensuring that marginalised voices, such as those of children, the elderly, and other vulnerable groups, are heard and considered.

Sixthly, 'resilience and tenacity'. Women at the grassroots level often have to overcome cultural, social, or economic barriers in order to lead. Their resilience and tenacity in facing these challenges make them strong leaders who can persevere and continue to fight for shared goals, even under pressure or when facing resistance.

Seventh is what is referred to as 'indirect communication'. Women often communicate their programmes and expectations to their followers indirectly through tasks, giving them the freedom to work towards achieving their goals. This approach enables followers to apply their knowledge and experience to complete the assigned tasks. However, this can be a weakness if followers require a hands-on leader who provides direct orders.

The final characteristic of grassroots leadership is 'mentoring and training others'. Female leaders can provide effective mentoring and training to enhance the knowledge, skills, and abilities of their current followers. However, grassroots communities are not accustomed to clear task division and strict rules, as found in professional organisations. This means that a potential weakness of this leadership style is that it can be difficult to separate women as leaders from their roles as authority figures, siblings, or friends of their followers.

All of the above characteristics should be understood as ideal models that are widely used, although they are highly contextual, local, and case-specific. Models are simplifications of reality, but they are not reality itself. This means that these characteristics may overlap or negate each other in some cases, or be present only partially rather than entirely.

**Barriers and Challenges Faced by Women at the Grassroots Level**

Women at the grassroots level often face various obstacles and challenges stemming from a range of factors, including norms, cultural values, socio-economic issues, and politics. These factors directly or indirectly limit the scope of action for women leaders in grassroots communities (Diana 2021). The main obstacles faced by women leaders at the grassroots level include:

Firstly, the influence of traditional local beliefs. In some areas, women are hindered by traditions or local beliefs that consider leadership to be a male domain, relegating women to domestic roles such as caring for the household, children, and family. This can make it difficult for women to have a say in decision-making processes (Diana 2021).

Consequently, opportunities for women to participate in public or political activities are limited. Certain values and customs still deem women unsuitable for playing an active role in community or political activities, let alone as leaders. Therefore, even though women have great potential, they may be prevented from realising it due to the influence of the dominant culture.

In *Jurnal Perempuan* No. 111 (Vol. 27, No. 1, 2022), which has the theme 'Social Forestry and Women', the authors — including Enik Ekowati, Muamar and Nur Dwiyati — demonstrate how women in various Indonesian provinces often face community norms and values that exclude them from participating in the public sphere socially, economically and politically, both individually and collectively.

In Aceh, for example, women started to participate in social forestry after flash floods hit their village in 2015 (Manalu, Subono, & Putri 2022). The women realised that deforestation was the main cause of the disaster. Their village was located within a 251-hectare protected forest, but outsiders frequently cut down trees in the area to fuel the brown sugar factory in the neighbouring village. Consequently, the women lost their livelihoods and access to clean water.

Social norms, cultural beliefs, and collective practices reinforce gender role divisions. Women are associated with the domestic sphere and the continuity of the household. Consequently, when flash floods occur, they suffer the most and are burdened with guilt because they are expected to ensure the continuity of the family. However, their desire to play a greater role in addressing deforestation is hindered by gender roles and beliefs within the community.

These obstacles are compounded by the fact that involvement in the supervision and management of protected forests requires legal status. The process of obtaining legal forest management rights is difficult, partly due to strong gender bias in society. Prevailing norms and values still view women as unsuitable for participation in the public sphere, including forest management and supervision. Thus, these women find themselves in a situation akin to the proverb 'when it rains, it pours': they are the group most affected, yet they are also marginalised when trying to find solutions.

The second factor is gender stereotypes that suppress women's ambitions. These stereotypes often hinder the development of women's leadership at the grassroots level. Women are often labelled as more emotional, irrational, and less assertive than men. However, many studies demonstrate that women possess comparable, if not better, leadership qualities in certain areas, such as collaboration and empathy (Manalu, Subono, & Putri 2022; Eagly & Wood 1999). These stereotypes make it difficult for women to gain recognition for their leadership abilities. Women at the grassroots level are often taught to prioritise the interests of their families or others over their own. This can cause them to lack the courage to pursue their personal ambitions, including leadership roles. When women are considered 'unworthy' of standing out or leading, they become accustomed to passive roles and find it hard to break free.

Another challenge is the lack of representation in the media. The lack of positive female representation is also a significant issue for women at the grassroots level. In many cultures, the media often portrays women in limited roles, such as housewives or supporters, rather than as independent leaders or decision-makers — unless they are considered exceptional. Conversely, female leaders are often subjected to intense media scrutiny when they make mistakes relating to corruption, scandals, or inappropriate public statements. This exacerbates gender stereotypes and limits opportunities for women to see themselves as leaders.

Meanwhile, various socio-economic and political obstacles can be identified for women at the grassroots level, especially for female leaders. The most prominent social obstacle is access to education. In some areas, particularly rural ones or those with high poverty rates, women often struggle to access adequate education. These restrictions are related to traditional gender roles that see women as housekeepers or family caregivers. Without sufficient education, it becomes more difficult for women to develop leadership skills or become involved in politics and society. These obstacles are closely related to restrictions on social mobility. Some communities hinder women's social mobility by limiting their freedom to interact outside the home or community for safety reasons, or due to religious norms or conservative social views. This makes it difficult for women to expand their networks, collaborate with others, or participate in broader decision-making processes.

But what about economic and political constraints? Existing economic and political constraints further exacerbate the position of women at the grassroots level, particularly those with the potential and ambition to become leaders. One of the main constraints is limited access to economic resources. Women often have limited access to business capital, land, or decent jobs (Orisadare 2019). Many women are trapped in informal or domestic work without social security or a steady income. This reduces their potential to improve their standard of living and expand their leadership capacity. This is closely related to another economic obstacle: the difficulty of obtaining financing (Manalu, Subono, & Putri 2022). Women often struggle to secure financing for their small businesses, either due to discrimination within the banking sector or a lack of knowledge about accessing loans. Although several women's empowerment programmes offer financial assistance, it is often insufficient to overcome existing structural barriers, such as unrealistic loan requirements imposed on women in remote areas. These two issues

are intertwined with 'economic dependence on a partner or family'. In many cultures, women are still financially dependent on their partners or families. This dependence can limit women's ability to make independent decisions in both their personal lives and in the context of community leadership. Without their own economic resources, women find it difficult to initiate the social change they desire. Conversely, the double burden of work disadvantages women equally. Many women at the grassroots level have to manage household work while also working to earn a living. This often leaves them exhausted and unable to pursue education or leadership training that could enhance their capabilities. Consequently, their opportunities to develop their leadership skills and play an active role in social change are limited.

Meanwhile, limited access to formal leadership positions remains the most significant political obstacle. Although women have the potential to be leaders in their communities at the grassroots level, they often encounter structural barriers that prevent them from accessing formal and informal leadership roles at local and national levels. This relates to gender inequality within a political system that is still dominated by men. Patriarchal political and cultural structures often place women in less strategic positions or deem them unfit to hold public office (Manalu, Subono, & Putri 2022). Women generally become members of groups, with few becoming administrators of group institutions. Limited abilities and self-confidence can also hinder women. Consequently, political representation inequality becomes increasingly apparent.

In many countries, women remain underrepresented in legislative and governmental institutions. Although some countries have introduced gender quotas to improve representation, the number of women in leadership roles remains far lower than that of men. This creates inequality in political decision-making. Policies tend to favour certain groups without considering the specific needs and interests of women. At the same time, gender-based discrimination and violence are prevalent in politics. Women entering politics often experience more severe discrimination and gender-based violence. They are frequently subjected to sexual harassment, intimidation, and smear campaigns designed to discredit them. This violence fosters an unfriendly political environment for women and diminishes their motivation to participate actively (Mona 2020).

The social, economic, and political challenges that women face at the grassroots level create significant barriers to their access to leadership opportunities. To overcome these challenges, we need more inclusive and gender-sensitive policies, improved access to education and leadership training, and a more supportive political environment (Ardiani 2023). Removing these barriers would provide women with more opportunities to lead and play an active role in strengthening democratic resilience at local and national levels.

**Democracy, Political Participation and Feminist Criticism: Where Are the Women?**

Before discussing democratic resilience and its relation to female leadership at the grassroots level, it is worth critiquing the concept of democracy (liberal democracy). In political science studies, particularly those concerning democracy, it is generally assumed that it is a system involving all citizens. A well-known slogan about democracy is 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'. But is this true in practice and in theory? Academics and feminist activists were among the first to sharply criticise this, arguing that the democratic political system is gender biased in both theory and practice. When discussing democracy, academics, students, and lecturers on political science programmes will almost certainly refer to the renowned political scientist Robert Dahl (1998).

According to Dahl, there are two main elements of a democratic political system. The first is political contestation, or competition, and the second is political participation, or inclusion. In contestation, members of society compete to win public office as members of parliament or heads of government at the regional and central levels. In contestation, Dahl argues that only citizens are considered, and their number is irrelevant as long as they undergo the procedural process correctly. Then, the contestation that takes place can be considered adequate or valid through general elections for heads of government and regional leaders. Meanwhile, the second element is political participation. But what exactly is meant by political participation? There are many definitions, but the classic definition proposed by political scientists Norman H. Nie and Sidney Verba (1972) in the 'Handbook of Political Science' (Goodin 2011) is the most useful. According to Nie and Verba, political participation is defined as follows: 'The legal personal activities of citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of state officials and/or their actions'.

For many political activists, including students, politicians, intellectuals, and academics, the practical

meaning of 'political participation' emerged during the Reformation in Indonesia, particularly following the end of the New Order regime and Suharto's resignation as President of the Republic of Indonesia. Why is that? Because, according to Nie and Verba, what happened before that was more accurately described as mobilised participation, i.e., participation organised by other parties. They also argue that this characteristic was more prevalent in political life during the New Order era, as well as briefly during Guided Democracy under Soekarno. That is the gist of the argument. So, is the matter clear and settled? Not quite, because women's activists and feminists disagree.

What exactly do they object to in this understanding of political contestation and participation? Paxton (2008) identifies at least two underlying assumptions. Firstly, the term 'every citizen' assumes the involvement of both men and women in political contestation and participation. Secondly, participation is only considered "political' if it directly aims to influence the selection of state officials and/or the political actions they take.

But what is the socio-political reality? Feminist studies have long demonstrated that society is divided into two spheres: the public and the private. The public sphere, which is largely inhabited by men, is synonymous with the formal political arena and decision-making. In contrast, women are more prevalent in the private sphere. According to the conventional definition of political participation, women who focus on the private sphere cannot be categorised as political actors because they are not considered to influence public policy or the actions of state officials directly. Similarly, men continue to dominate electoral contests at the legislative and executive levels, while women's involvement remains limited, despite an increase in their numbers.

Based on this, academics and feminist activists proposed a strategy known as 'reversal', which aims to restructure politics in order to make them more open to gender relations. This strategy involves redefining democracy and political participation more broadly, enabling women to occupy positions and roles equal to those of men. Within this framework, the famous slogan of the student movement and second-wave feminism of the late 1960s, "The Personal is Political" or "The Private is Political" (Heberle 2015), takes on meaning. It asserts that women's personal experiences are inextricably linked to larger social and political structures.

Consequently, the private sphere — encompassing daily and informal politics centred on family, kinship networks, community, and interpersonal relationships — cannot be overlooked in terms of its role in political participation (Tong & Botts 2024).

For feminists, politics encompasses personal and domestic life, which, in practice, is often based on unequal power relations. This inequality arises when men have greater access to, control over, and authority than women — even over women's own bodies and lives — a condition known as patriarchy. Feminists are fighting for a place in this political arena by reinterpreting the meaning of contestation, participation, and democracy.

Building on the previous section's discussion of democracy in terms of liberal or representative democracy and its critiques, this section highlights the concept of democratic resilience and its relevance to women's participation at the grassroots level. Democratic resilience is defined as the ability of a democratic system to survive, develop, and continue to function effectively despite facing social, political, and economic crises. A strong democracy is characterised not only by free and fair elections, political parties, civil society organisations, parliaments, and other democratic institutions, but also by its capacity to respond to the needs of the people, protect human rights, and create inclusive spaces in which all citizens can participate. A resilient democracy must be able to withstand external pressures, such as foreign intervention, as well as internal pressures, such as corruption, social inequality, and violence, without abandoning the principles of freedom, equality, and justice.

Furthermore, democratic resilience is greatly influenced by inclusivity within the system, the extent of political participation, and the ability of institutions and community actors to collaborate in maintaining democratic sustainability. The concept also emphasises the importance of a democracy's ability to adapt to changing times without abandoning its fundamental principles. In an era of globalisation and rapid technological development, challenges to democracy arise from internal factors such as political conflicts of interest and external factors such as global economic pressures, climate change, and threats to privacy. Therefore, a healthy democracy must respond to these dynamics while ensuring the active participation of all citizens, free from discrimination or restrictions on fundamental rights.

## Grassroots Women's Leadership in Democratic Resilience

In this context, women's leadership originating from the grassroots can significantly impact democratic

resilience. By bringing new perspectives and more inclusive values, and fighting for social justice, women can promote diversity and enhance the quality of decision-making within government and society (Steffen 2011). The following are some of the effects of women's leadership on democratic resilience:

The most obvious effect is encouraging diversity in decision-making. Why is that? Women bring unique experiences and perspectives that are often overlooked in decision-making processes. In the context of democratic resilience, this diversity of perspectives is essential for creating more balanced and equitable policies. Women's leadership creates space for marginalised voices, such as those of the poor, minority groups, and women who are vulnerable to discrimination, to be heard. Another factor is strengthening political participation among the next generation. With more women in leadership positions, they create change in policy and become a source of inspiration for the younger generation.

The presence of female leaders shows that politics and leadership are accessible to everyone. This inspires more women to become involved in politics, fight for their rights, and contribute to the democratic process. Female leadership can encourage the emergence of more inclusive and diverse future leaders. Taking this a step further, another important impact is the fulfillment of more holistic and inclusive democratic principles.

The resilience of democracy depends heavily on the extent to which fundamental principles such as equality, freedom, and justice are upheld. Women's leadership supports the fulfilment of these principles because women prioritise social justice, the advancement of individual rights, and equal access to social and economic services. In this way, they help to change the democratic paradigm, making it more comprehensive so that every individual, regardless of gender, race, or social status, can benefit from the system.

Socio-economic impacts also appear to be a factor. Women's leadership in various sectors, such as economics, health, and education, helps promote more equitable social and economic empowerment. For instance, when women participate in economic policy, they often advocate for more inclusive initiatives that focus on alleviating poverty, providing access to decent work, and creating equal opportunities in entrepreneurship. This strengthens society's economic base, which in turn supports social and political stability, as well as democratic resilience. This can or will reduce political and social polarisation. How could it not? Women's leadership has the potential to ease the increasingly sharp political polarisation in some countries. With their ability to listen, empathise, and find 'win-win' solutions, women can play a vital role in easing political and social tensions. They can facilitate constructive dialogue between conflicting groups and encourage broader consensus, which is vital for maintaining democratic stability.

## Closing

The resilience of democracy depends heavily on the active participation and leadership of women. Increasing women's representation in politics and decision-making and supporting women's leadership at the grassroots level make democracy more inclusive and responsive, and more resilient to various challenges. Women's leadership brings direct benefits in the form of fairer and more equitable policies and strengthens the foundations of democracy. It creates a more transparent and accountable government and motivates broader political participation among the public. Therefore, strengthening the role of women in democracy is essential for ensuring its stability and sustainability.

Overall, women's leadership at various levels of government and society, and their active participation in decision-making processes, contribute significantly to maintaining the resilience of democracy. By offering a more holistic and inclusive perspective, women help ensure that democracy remains responsive to society's diverse needs and can face emerging challenges.

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## Footnotes

1 MAMPU was a partnership between the Australian Government (DFAT) and the Indonesian Government (Bappenas), running from 2012 to 2020. The programme worked with civil society partners to improve access to essential services and government initiatives for poor women, with the aim of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as helping the Indonesian government to achieve its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).