

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Enhancement of Women's Representation and Evolving Political Myths on the North Coast of Java

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the enhancement of women's involvement in politics and the local community's evolving myths in the coastal areas of Java. This study employs qualitative research, by selecting political and cultural figures as the main informants. The theoretical framework employed involves exploring the relationship between politics and myth, along with the theories of women's political representation. The results of the research, conducted in the Pekalongan region of Java, show that women's participation in local politics has increased. The region is known to have local communities that preserve ancient traditions, including a myth that stipulates that women should be among the candidates to serve in regional leadership. This research finds optimism for more women to become involved in politics.

Keywords: Women; Myths; Descriptive Representation; Java; Indonesia

Introduction

Many studies of women and politics in various regions of Indonesia are related to cultural issues, reflecting Indonesia's significant ethnic diversity. More than a thousand ethnic groups in Indonesia occupy large and small islands, such as Java, Kalimantan, Sumatra, Sulawesi, Bali, Nusa Tenggara, and others. Many experts consider that women's lack of involvement in politics is related to cultural attitudes, which still consider women to be secondary. According to Jensen (1995), cultural factors presume male dominance and there is little to contradict the forces of traditional culture. Therefore, the study of women's involvement in politics within this male-dominated cultural context is always important. According to Matland and Montgomery (2018), it is imperative to explore the cultural foundations that support women's political involvement in response to changing times. This study aims to examine the ways women's involvement in politics in the coastal areas of Java are being enhanced by the local community's evolving myths.

Viewed simply through raw numbers, balance is indeed lacking between female and male representatives. The representation of women in politics in general in Indonesia is still below 30% (Umagapi, 2020). This number illustrates descriptive representation, defined as how the gender and ethnic composition of legislative institutions reflects the composition of their voting communities (Phillips, 2020). It is important to encourage the presence of voters' representatives in the legislative body so that substantive representation can be realized. Phillips (2020) emphasizes that substantive representation extends beyond descriptive representation. Cowell-Meyers and Langbein (2009) highlight how the presence

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of female members in the legislature can foster understanding and increase awareness of the importance of taking action.

A study by Bratton and Haynie (1999) found that female representatives generally have the same opportunities as male representatives to propose policies. However, minority groups, such as women, have a much smaller chance of seeing their proposed policies adopted. The main mechanism in elections is still decision-making based on the will of the majority of voters. Likewise, Mendelberg et al. (2014) show the importance of having more women as political representatives to voice the aspirations of women as a minority group. Geissel and Michels (2018) emphasize that recognizing the power of the victorious majority simultaneously harms the interests of minorities.

In a society that has absorbed a variety of foreign cultural practices, such as in Pekalongan on the north coast of Java, women's participation in local politics is an interesting issue to examine through the lens of the research findings reviewed at the beginning of the discussion. The main question formulated in this research is how women's involvement in politics has increased in the coastal areas of Java, and what local myths have developed in the society that could explain this increase. To address the research question, this paper is divided into four main sections. The first reviews the literature regarding women's representation and presents the issues; the second explains the methodology used in this research. The third section discusses Javanese cultural norms and existing myths about women and politics. The last section presents the conclusions of this research.

Literature Review

Descriptive representation is important because the presence of voter representatives in a legislative body enables substantive representation to be realized. Descriptive representation describes the gender and ethnic composition of legislative institutions, and the degree to which it reflects the gender and ethnic composition of their voting communities (Phillips, 2020). In other words, descriptive representation ensures that diverse groups in society are represented in political institutions. This fosters greater political legitimacy and enhances citizens' sense of representation. Then, Phillips (2020) describes substantive representation as an outgrowth of descriptive representation. Substantive representation is the effect of the direct presence of women representatives in a legislative body, where female politicians contribute to strengthening the position of women by articulating their interests. This illustrates how political representatives can act in accordance with the interests of voters, advocating for policies and ensuring that the voices and needs of the communities they represent are heard and met.

Likewise, a study from Lovenduski and Norris (2003) emphasizes that the presence of women in political institutions serves as an affirmative policy in promoting gender equality. The presence of more female elected representatives is crucial in achieving a balanced representation of genders, advancing public policy agendas related to gender issues, and supporting the capacity of women as political leaders. Meanwhile, Phillips (2020) says that women need to be included in politics, arguing for a mechanism the author dubs the "politics of presence". Phillips emphasizes that if political decisions are taken by mostly male legislative members, or if most members have never experienced discrimination, or are from an ethnic majority, this will create problems in representation (LSE Government, 2017).

An increase in the number of women in a legislature is expected to have an effect on addressing women's interests. Studies by Celis (2006) and by Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) show that women's representatives can make a unique contribution to advocating for women's interests. Therefore, it is important to raise women's issues in other institutions as well. Phillips and Asenbaum (2023) emphasized that politically, the "presence" of women

is important in various domains, not only in legislative institutions, but also in public institutions, organizations, and even companies because of the diversity of views and experiences they can offer.

Lombardo and Meier (2019) suggest that viewing symbolic representation as an effect of descriptive representation is reductive, because it limits our understanding of the relevance of symbolic representation. Symbolic representation presents constituents at a symbolic level, imparting narrative elements that enable or limit the political position and actions of women or other social groups. Perhaps because the issue of women's involvement in politics has been such a long and complex narrative, the myth has emerged that women are incapable and should not be involved in politics. According to Magdy (2020), politics and myth can be linked throughout the history of human life because humans live through experiences with myths that can guide human actions in reality. In fact, in the view of Apolte and Muller (2021), even educated people often believe in political myths. Individuals in groups have intuition, fallible though it may be. Social interactions that occur can also affect the balance of myths – the shared assumption that a given practice or understanding is right or wrong.

Flood (2013) states that political myths are narratives about past, present, or predicted political events, which are designed to be comprehended and imbued with meaning by society. These myths do not hold sacred status but are instead accepted as true by a group. They can also manifest in iconic forms such as paintings, posters, monuments, and ritual ceremonies. A political myth is an ideologically characterized narrative aiming to portray a genuine depiction of a set of past, present, or predicted political events and is generally accepted as valid by a social group.

Akindele et al. (2020) emphasize that women's involvement in politics seems now to have moved beyond this mythical problem, since women are able to demonstrate their competence in the world of politics. Akindele et al.'s findings show that leadership ability is not determined by gender, but by individual qualities, skills, and experience. The idea that women and children are still merely discussing issues among themselves is just a myth. This needs to be emphasized, to show the public that many women are starting to have vital, non-mythical roles in the real world of politics.

However, it must be acknowledged that there are still double standards and stereotypes regarding female politicians compared to their male counterparts. Teele et al. (2018) state that a majority of respondents in their investigation in the U.S. revealed a preference for female candidates. The respondents acknowledged that male and female candidates have the same profiles. However, when the researchers looked more closely, they discovered a distinction. Candidates who fit the typical home profile—that is, those who are married with children—are preferred by both elites and voters. This puts many women who want to work in politics in a difficult situation. If societal norms around women's familial responsibilities clash with the demands of a full-time political profession, it is probable that the underrepresentation of women in politics will persist.

In Indonesia, many experts attribute the low involvement of women in politics to cultural factors. Aspinall et al. (2021) identified several factors contributing to the gender gap in political representation in Indonesia, including women's willingness and capacity to compete, the attitudes of political parties towards female candidates, and general voter sentiments. In their view, widespread patriarchal attitudes are a significant barrier, alongside structural weaknesses (Aspinall et al., 2021). Their findings are echoed by other experts who have researched women's political participation across various Indonesian regions. Studies by Selinaswati (2019) and by Sari and Havifi (2021), for instance, illustrate that despite the matrilineal lineage of the Minangkabau people in West Sumatra, women still face obstacles to participating in politics. In Sulawesi, the patriarchal culture

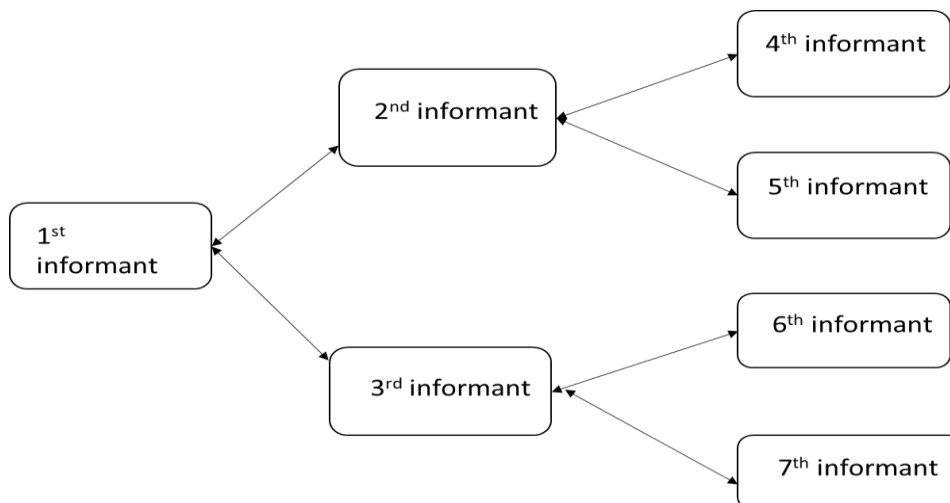
significantly influences women’s political participation (Lapian et al., 2022). Rhoads (2012) provides a comprehensive study revealing low levels of women’s political engagement in Bali, attributed to the resurgence of traditional institutions and local identity through decentralized policies. Likewise, in East Nusa Tenggara province, women have very limited opportunities to hold strategic positions in decision-making bodies (Kollo & Sunarso, 2018).

However, few experts have conducted research on women in politics as it relates to culture and myth. Gender, on the other hand, involves the complex relationship between women and men, encompassing social, cultural, and institutional dynamics. The construction of gender in society is inherently tied to the cultural context that surrounds it; they cannot be separated. In this context, studies of women’s participation in politics and local culture often spark stimulating conversations.

Research Method

This research employs qualitative research methods to construct knowledge by understanding individual’s unique viewpoints and the meaning attached to those viewpoints (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Our primary goal is to construct the socio-political reality related to the development of myths in the local political arena of Pekalongan Regency, which is part of the northern coastal area of Java. It seeks to explore the increase in women’s representation in politics in this region and investigate any links of potential relevance between the two. The selection of informants utilized the snowball technique (Audemard, 2020), starting with specific individuals and then extending to subsequent informants. The snowball technique employed in this study can be visualised as in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Schematic of the Snowball Technique.



Source: developed from Audemard (2020).

The initial interview was conducted with the first informant, namely RA, who was chosen for being a cultural figure and an academic associated with a university in Pekalongan. In response to RA’s insights, the writing team continued interviews with informants IN (cultural figure and entrepreneur), IS (cultural figure from the regional government), H (political figure), and L (academic), as indicated in the scheme. While the team spoke to additional informants such as A (batik entrepreneur), B (batik entrepreneur), C (regional government), S (regional government), and others, only information provided by the five informants

initially described is included in this article, due to its strong relevance. A process of impartiality was followed in the selection of informants. In order to ensure objectivity and comparability, a range of backgrounds from various groups were taken into account when selecting informants. Both female and male informants were chosen; from academic and non-academic backgrounds (including political actors); from the regional government and cultural community groups. In this way, we endeavour to ensure that the selection of informants is unbiased.

In addition to interviews, the research is supported by different data, obtained from sources such as the Pekalongan Regency Government (Cultural Service), the Pekalongan Regency website, scientific journals, and other reference sources such as regulations and election results documents. Subsequently, the authors analysed the data using Silbergh's (2001) approach of constructing an analytical framework consisting of pertinent theoretical structures. The analysis begins with a process of data clarification to ensure consistency. Data clarification is intended to sort out relevant data that will be used for this research. It was followed by the theoretical abstraction of information and facts from the field, enabling the formulation of fundamental statements. Data analysis begins when the data is discovered and continues throughout the research process to yield meaningful and interesting findings. Data analysis occurs by examining findings and delving into their meanings. In the next section, we provide an overview of the Indonesian socio-political context, with particular reference to the region we are studying, then the following section presents the results.

Women and Politics in Javanese Cultural Norms and Existing Myths

This article refers to several important research findings related to Javanese women and politics with respect to enduring cultural norms and the historical journey of Javanese society. A study by Kurniawati (2015) showed that in Javanese culture, the position of the mother is respected by both men and women. The election of a female leader illustrates that the candidate is perceived as "the mother of the people". In line with Kurniawati, Marwah (2016) showed that strength in Javanese tradition is marked by the ability to concentrate power in the hand of the ruler. In this context, feminine signifiers of the centralization of power relate to fertility, prosperity, stability, and glory. Moreover, harmony and orderliness are also dimensions of femininity, while fertility pertains to agricultural land. Hence, since the land is the source of people's lives in Java, people call it *ibu pertiwi*, meaning motherland (Handayani & Novianto, 2008). The mother figure in Javanese culture holds a very important position of trust. A study by Harini et al. (2024) shows that a woman who becomes a leader with a leadership approach rooted in Javanese culture will balance the values of assertiveness, respect, maintaining harmony, and consensus.

Today, the focus on women's political participation has spread to many parts of Indonesia. This is especially true since the enactment of Presidential Instruction No. 9 in 2000, concerning Gender Mainstreaming in National Development. Follow-up in the political field included a quota policy beginning with the 2004 election, which requires that the candidates nominated by political parties are at least 30% women. However, women's political participation in Indonesia is still not optimal. According to the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, Republic of Indonesia (2023), the Gender Development Index is 0.941, placing Indonesia just above Cambodia and Timor-Leste – among the newer ASEAN countries. A contributing factor to this low placement is that the political

participation rate, indicated by the share of women serving in the legislature, is still only 20.87%.

Myths still abound that women are incapable of leading in the political sphere. This assumption is based on stereotypes suggesting that women are less likely to make firm decisions, or that they are less likely to be strong leaders because they are fragile and prioritize emotions. This perceived weakness is also related to the misconception that women are incapable of negotiating and reaching political agreements. Kroeber and Krauss (2023), studying Germany and parliamentary oversight activities in the Bundestag between 1949 and 2013, emphasized that these gendered behaviours stem from different behavioural expectations and levels of risk aversion between women and men. Women tend to be more risk-averse, perhaps making them more suited to institutional roles in the legislature. This implies that gender differences shape perceptions regarding their respective roles as members of the government and the opposition.

In this article, we want to highlight different myths, particularly those that go hand in hand with the legends and traditions of local communities. The myth we cover in the study vividly illustrates how some believe leadership training should be undertaken by women. In the context of a society like Pekalongan that has experienced a variety of foreign cultural influences, women's participation in local political practices is an interesting issue, particularly in view of the research findings noted at the beginning of the discussion regarding women's participation in politics in other parts of Indonesia.

Pekalongan Regency is part of Central Java Province, Indonesia. This coastal community has traditionally had a fairly egalitarian culture, which meant that the inhabitants of the north coast of Java have been relatively free from rigid social distinctions between upper, middle, and lower classes. This distinguishes the area from the densely stratified Javanese communities in other parts of the region, especially those near the historical Javanese power centre, Surakarta-Yogyakarta. In these central regions of Javanese power, people from different classes even use different languages; the higher the social class, the more fluent and refined the Javanese language spoken. The northern coastal range, however, has been quite isolated from the central zone of Javanese control for geographical and topographical reasons. According to a local sociologist, RA, (interview on July 21, 2021), people in the northern coastal region of Java are relatively unfamiliar with the rigid social strata of other parts of Indonesian society. Therefore, the language used is the same across all social groups.

Most coastal regions in Indonesia rely on fishing for their livelihood (Widaningrum & Wahyudi, 2023). However, on the north coast of Java, especially in Pekalongan, the main occupation of the people is trading, usually as *batik*¹ traders or entrepreneurs. The history of trade in the northern region of Java started with the arrival of Arab and Chinese traders several centuries ago (Lombard, 2008; Vlekke, 1960). The structure of the livelihoods of the Pekalongan *batik* traders and entrepreneurs was conveyed by the Pekalongan cultural figures RA (interview on July 21, 2021) and IN (interview on September 15, 2021).

In this structure, governed by merchants or entrepreneurs, IS, a Pekalongan Cultural Bureau figure, said in an interview on September 17, 2021, that women in Pekalongan have long been accustomed to working outside the home. Culturally, the north coast of Java, like Pekalongan, is quite open to women's roles and positions. They play an important role by working in community, especially as *batik* artisans or traders. It is common for local women

¹ Batik is a traditional cloth that is part of Indonesian cultural heritage and has received recognition from UNESCO as a Masterpiece of Intangible Heritage of Humanity (see <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/indonesian-batik-00170>).

to have employment in the community, and not only in the home. Such a cultural framework could also facilitate negotiations on the role of women in politics.

In the context of these cultural foundations, local people have a myth about the pair of regent and deputy regent candidates who are chosen in every election: the elected pair must consist of a man and a woman, whether the regent candidate is male or female. Initially, this was a community experience articulated by a few people, but it has since developed into a belief held by most members of the community in that area. Based on the results of follow-up interviews conducted by researchers with local cultural expert RA (April 22, 2024), it can be seen that local communities in the rural areas of Pekalongan Regency are very likely the source of this myth. RA gave the example of a local community in the Kutorajo area. Here, where adherence to Javanese cultural traditions is still strong, people believe that leaders must have a balance of strength (masculinity) and softness (femininity) in order to carry out their duties and obligations well. From this perspective, the feminine dimension is needed in the figure of a leader. What RA reports is actually in line with several studies mentioned at the beginning of this subsection, which indicate that a leader figure in Javanese society has a mandate to promote harmony, reflecting a strong association with femininity (see Handayani & Novianti, 2008; Kurniawati, 2015; Marwah, 2016; Harini et. al, 2024). This shows that many rural village communities in Pekalongan still experience the Javanese cultural order as one of the influences on their lives, including when choosing a leader. We will reflect in more detail on the myths of current local political life in the following section.

The Increase of Female Representation in Local Politics: A Mythical Issue?

With the implementation of a policy in advance of the 2004 Indonesian elections mandating that at least 30% of nominees to the legislature be women, the number of women being elected has been increasing. The quota policy has been designed precisely to bring a growing number of women into the legislature, so to promote substantive representation of women in representative institutions. The quota policy provides a mandate for female legislative members to represent women’s interests, while also undermining negative stereotypes regarding women’s capacity as politicians. So far, however, women’s substantive representation still depends on the institutional environment and applicable norms (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008).

In Indonesia, since the minimum 30% quota policy was enacted for political candidates, women’s representation has fluctuated, but still remains below 30%. In the national legislature, women’s political representation has seen a gradual, irregular increase, from 11.82% in the 2004 elections to 20.87% in the 2019 elections. Meanwhile, in Pekalongan, women’s representation in the regional legislature was 15.6% in the 2004 elections and increased to 26.67% in the 2019 elections, as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Share of Women Elected to National and Pekalongan Regency Legislatures in the 2004–2019 Elections.

Election	National (%)	Pekalongan Regency (%)
2004	11.82	15.60
2009	17.86	17.90
2014	17.32	24.44
2019	20.87	26.67

Source: *The House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia (dpr.go.id); The General Elections Commission (kpu.go.id); <https://www.infografik-keterwakilan-perempuan-di-dpr-dalam-angka-Pekalongan-Regency-in-Figures>, BPS.*

Table 1 illustrates the political representation of women in Pekalongan in each election of the past two decades, with achievements above the national percentage. This is certainly good, even though it has not yet reached the target minimum of 30%. The results of the 2019 election in Pekalongan showed encouraging progress in women’s participation in politics and government (Table 2).

Table 2. Membership of the Regional Representative Assembly of Pekalongan Regency according to Political Parties and Sex in 2019–2024 Period.

Political Parties in the Pekalongan Regency	Male	Female	Total
PKB	12 (80%)	3 (20%)	15
PDI-P	8 (72.72%)	3 (27.27%)	11
PPP	4 (66.66%)	2 (33.33%)	6
Gerindra	3 (60%)	2 (40%)	5
PAN	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	4
Golkar Party	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	4
Total	33 (73.33%)	12 (26.67%)	45 (100%)

Source: DPRD Kabupaten Pekalongan (<https://dprd-pekalongankab.go.id>)

Note: percentages in brackets refer to the total number of representatives of each party.

Table 2 aims to enhance our understanding of the representation of women in local politics, particularly in regional legislatures. As depicted, in the Pekalongan Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah (DPRD) (Regional Representative Assembly), out of 45 total members, 33 are male and 12 are female, giving a rate of representation for women of 26.67%. This number is commendable as it approaches the 30% target set by positive policies in Indonesia aimed at increasing female representation in government. From the perspective of political parties and gender, among the ranks of Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB), which holds the highest number of seats with 15 representatives, only 3 are female members, while the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDIP) has the same number of women out of 11 representatives in total.

The executive branch, meanwhile, has also embraced more women in government positions. Out of the 29 heads of Organisasi Perangkat Daerah (Regional Organizations), three women serve as Heads of Service. Notably, the current Pekalongan regent, Laila Fadia Elfaouz Rafiq, the executive of the regional government, is a woman, as is the chairperson of the Pekalongan DPRD, Dra. Hj. Hindun, M. H. Then, three strategic positions within the Pekalongan DPRD are also occupied by women: the Chairperson of Commission C is Hj. Endang Suwarningsih, while Dra. Hj. Hindun, M. H. also sits as Chair of the Budget Agency and of the Deliberative Body (Table 3).

Table 3. Women and Their Position in the Regional Representative Assembly in 2019–2024 Period.

Position	Male	Female
1 Chairperson of DPRD	–	F
2 Chairperson of Commission I (Government and Law)	M	–
3 Chairperson of Commission II (Development)	M	–

4	Chairperson of Commission III (Economy and Finance)	–	F
5	Chairperson of Commission IV (People’s Welfare)	M	–
6	Chairperson of Budget Agency	–	F
7	Chairperson of Deliberation Agency	–	F
8	Chairperson of Honorary Body	M	–
9	Chairperson of Regional Regulation Formation Body	M	–
Total		5	4

Source: DPRD Kabupaten Pekalongan (<https://dprd-pekalongankab.go.id/>)

Tables 1, 2, and 3 demonstrate that women’s political representation has indeed increased, both in the regional legislature of Pekalongan and also in strategic positions in the legislature’s leadership. This increase in representation in strategic locations in the coastal region differs significantly from the findings of Kollo and Sunarso (2018), who observe that women in East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia, have not had the opportunity to hold strategic positions in the decision-making process. Their findings regarding women and politics are unfortunately common in other regions of Indonesia, such as Sulawesi (Lapian et al., 2022). The reason can be probably found out in the patriarchal culture which significantly influences women’s political participation. However, in addition to that, Aspinall et al. (2021) indicates that the gender gap in political representation in Indonesia is influenced by a variety of factors, including the willingness and capacity of women to compete, the attitudes of political parties towards female candidates, and the sentiments of voters in general. Nevertheless, in the context of the movement to strengthen women’s strategic positions in general, such as in Pekalongan Regency, women’s involvement in politics is no longer regarded as a peripheral issue.

Furthermore, in every regional election of regents and deputy regents (*Pilkada*) in Pekalongan Regency, there are myths that continue to develop, and which seem to potentially influence ongoing political contestation. H, a female political figure in Pekalongan (interviewed on September 1, 2022), stated that in elections for regent and deputy regent, a pair of candidates must have one female if they aim to win. This implies that the idea that a party slate must have both a male and female in order to win the election for regional head has achieved a kind of mythical status among regional politicians. Table 4 illustrates that in the five elections for regent and deputy regent of Pekalongan Regency, the winning pair has always included a woman in one of the two roles.

Table 4. Regents and Deputy Regents of Pekalongan Regency from 2001.

Period	Regent	Gender	Deputy Regent	Gender
2001–2006	Amat Antono	M	Siti Qomariyah	F
2006–2011	Siti Qomariyah	F	Wahyudi Pontjo	M
2011–2016	Amat Antono	M	Laila Fadia Elfaouz Rafiq	F
2016–2021	Asip Kholbihi	M	Arini Harimurti	F
2021–2026	Laila Fadia Elfaouz Rafiq	F	Riswadi	M

Source: *Kabupaten Pekalongan* (https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daftar_Bupati_Pekalongan) (pekalongankab.go.id);

In the 2001 Pilkada (regional elections), the elected pair featured a male candidate as regent and a female as deputy. In the 2006–2011 Pilkada, the winners were a female regent and a male deputy, while in 2011–2016 and 2016–2021, the winning pairs for the regional elections featured male regents and female deputy regents. Most recently, in the 2021 *Pilkada*, the winners of the regional elections were the female regent and male deputy regent candidates.

The myth that has developed in Pekalongan society, therefore, is that when electing the regional executive, if a woman is nominated to become regent, then there must be a male partner as a candidate for deputy regent, and vice versa. If the candidate pairs are both male, then it is believed that they cannot win the regional election. In the end, the mythical narrative that has developed seems to provide a significant opportunity for women to take part in regional elections. This was described by a political figure from Pekalongan DPRD (the Regional Representative Assembly) during an interview on September 1, 2022.

“Dampak dari mitos tersebut maka partai itu terdorong oleh budaya, bahwa mitos itu diakui oleh mereka. Bahwa yang jadi (pemenang pilkada, penulis) itu mesti lanang karo wedok. Partai-partai pun mencalonkan itu.”

(“The effect of this myth is that the party is guided by the culture, that the myth is recognized by them. That the winner (of the election, ed.) must be a man and woman. The parties also nominated them.”)

Since legislative elections are open and proportional, political parties are more focused on nominating candidates for the legislative assembly with high electability potential. These candidates can even come from outside the party; they are not necessarily party cadres. The selection of candidates proposed by the party is indeed within the party’s power, and the nomination process tends to be more centralized than democratic (Budi, 2020). Figures outside the party are often seen as more popular choices to increase electability. This is also a strategy employed by many parties in regional head elections, where political parties often seek popular figures to promote as candidates for regent and deputy regent pairs. Interestingly, in selecting the desired figures, political parties in Pekalongan specifically target female candidates to nominate alongside men.

The local myth surrounding the winning pair of regent and deputy regent candidates in every election so far insists on the inclusion of both a man and a woman, regardless of the gender of the regent candidate. This notion, as described by Flood (2013), resembles a narrative message that functions as a predictive element regarding future leadership partnerships. Flood suggests that these myths are not revered as sacred, but rather accepted as truths within a community. According to Magdy (2020), politics and myths have been intertwined throughout human history, as myths often influence human actions in reality. In the context of this paper, the evolving myth has served as a distinct driver for political parties to nominate women as candidates to office. It may also influence voters to base their political choices on regent and deputy regent candidate pairs composed of both genders, whether they be men and women or women and men.

In selecting candidates for regent and deputy regent positions in local elections, political parties will certainly seek to choose individuals who show both capacity or potential, as well

as high electability. Additionally, the parties will ensure that their nominated pair includes at least a woman. In the context of women's representation in the political sphere, this is perceived as beneficial, as the figures the parties draw from outside their ranks can be men or women. As one of the informants put it:

"Mesti munculnya itu, laki-laki dan perempuan, sehingga ini sudah menjadi mitos dan tinggal kapan dipecahkan mitos itu. Sehingga kadang-kadang partai-partai juga, apa iya sih harus perempuan, kalau laki-laki kuat ya laki-laki aja gak apapa, tapi nyatanya ya dia enggak berani mencalonkan. Dan dicari tokohlah dari mereka-mereka mencari perempuan dari mana pun."

("It's the way it has to be, men and women, so this has become a myth and it's just a matter of time before the myth will be debunked. Sometimes the parties think: is it true that there has to be a woman? If men are strong then men are fine – but in reality they don't dare to nominate [only men]. And so, they look for figures from them – they look for women from anywhere.")

Candidate pairs for regent and deputy regent can utilize mythological narratives to influence public opinion and change the perception of the masses to vote for them in the *Pilkada* (regional election). The myth has grown and developed into a kind of tool to legitimize the candidacy of the nominees. Myths can also be used to instil confidence and strengthen the position of candidates for regent and deputy regent in the eyes of the local community. At a more extreme level, myths can also be used as a tool to manipulate people's beliefs and emotions to achieve certain political goals. Apolte and Muller (2021) state that even educated people often continue to believe in political myths. According to them, individuals in groups have intuition, even if that intuition sometimes errs. Social interactions affect the balance of myths so that there is a balance of truth that is pursued by all individuals in the group.

In view of the current political landscape in Pekalongan Regency, it seems that the myth that women cannot participate in politics has already partly evolve into a new political myth asserting that women are equally capable. Notions regarding women's inability to succeed in politics are on the brink of being debunked. This is evidenced by Akindele et al. (2020), whose research demonstrates women's ability to participate in politics, surpassing mere myth.

Similarly, the political myth ingrained in Pekalongan's local society regarding regent candidate pairs deserves its own reconsideration. While its relevance in politics is uncertain, perhaps this myth has evolved to advocate for greater representation of women in the political sphere. Considering the findings of this study, which indicate a growing trend of support for female candidates coming also from public opinion, suggesting more open positions towards gender equality, there is an increasing space for women's political representation in Pekalongan. This underscores the importance of recognizing that women can engage in politics, addressing the full spectrum of political issues – the economy, education, human rights, health, safety, the environment – and not solely families and societies.

Conclusion

This research concludes that there has been an increase in women's involvement in politics in the northern coastal areas of Java, particularly since the 2004 Indonesian elections, when a reform requiring that candidates nominated by political parties are at least 30% women was issued. The political process in the region appears to be quite in harmony with the local egalitarian culture, which supports women's involvement in public spaces. Additionally, locals appear to hope that executive political leadership in the region will be shared between men and women as a complementary pair.

The number of women in the Pekalongan regional legislature is also increasing, even though they have not yet met the target minimum quota of 30% women elected as member. Women in regional legislatures hold quite strategic positions in decision-making, and many hope that this representation will not only be descriptive but also substantive. Furthermore, women hold strategic positions in the region's executive leadership, alternating as regional and deputy regional heads, aligning with a local myth that political leaders should consist of both men and women. Perhaps because of these mythical beliefs, there has been significant progress in women's involvement in local politics.

This suggests that when women excel in leadership roles, it is crucial that their success becomes common knowledge. Based on the results of this research, it is important for studies on women and politics in Indonesia to explore more deeply the local wisdom, culture, and political myths that are likely to encourage the increased involvement of women in politics.

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Funding and Acknowledgements

The team of authors would like to express gratitude to the Director of Research, Technology, and Community Service, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, for supporting the funding of this research in the 2022 National Competitive Basic Research scheme.

Disclosure statement

The team of authors hereby declares that the team does not have any conflict of interest with any party regarding the articles compiled.

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INTERVIEWS

Interview with H, Political Figure in Pekalongan, September 1, 2022
Interview with RA, Cultural Figure in Pekalongan, July 21, 2021 and April 22, 2024
Interview with IN, Cultural Figure in Pekalongan, September 15, 2021
Interview with IS, Cultural Figure in Pekalongan, September 17, 2021
Interview with L, Academic from Pekalongan, September 9, 2022