

Gendered Leadership in the Acehese Context: An Exploration of Governance and Customary Representation

Nurul Kamaly^{1*}, Soraya Agustina², Afrijal³, Khalid Vikriadi⁴, Fidhia Aruni⁵

^{1,2,3}Department of Government Studies, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Syiah Kuala
Jl. Teuku Nyak Arief, Kopelma Darussalam, Banda Aceh, Aceh, 23111.

⁴Department of Civic Education, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Bangka Belitung

⁵Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Educational Administration and Economics Universitas Senior Medan

*Corresponding author: nurulkamaly@usk.ac.id

ABSTRACT

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Women's leadership in Aceh is shaped by the interaction between Islamic Sharia, Acehese customary law (adat) and modern governance structures. This study aims to examine how these three normative frameworks influence the opportunities, constraints, and legitimacy of women's leadership in Aceh. Using a qualitative intrinsic case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with two purposively selected key informants (n=2), complemented by policy document analysis and relevant literature review. The findings reveal that the legitimacy of women's leadership is more strongly determined by social capital, kinship networks and religious affiliations than by technocratic competence alone. The study also identifies contextual variation, where acceptance of female leadership tends to be relatively more flexible in urban settings, while in rural communities legitimacy is more closely tied to religious authority and kinship structures. These findings imply that women's representation should be understood not merely in terms of numerical inclusion but as substantive agency operating within customary, community, and non-state spaces. Strengthening women's leadership in Aceh therefore requires an integrative approach that combines affirmative policy measures, the reformulation of inclusive normative narratives, and the empowerment of alternative spaces for women's participation.



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INTRODUCTION

Women's leadership in Aceh's public sphere constitutes a complex and paradoxical phenomenon situated at the intersection of religious norms, customary law, and modern governance structures (Maeda, et al, 2025). As a region that formally implements Islamic Sharia, Aceh is often associated with religious narratives perceived to restrict women's roles in the public domain. However, the historical legacy of the Aceh Sultanate most notably under the rule of Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah as well as the emergence of prominent female figures in the post-conflict and post-tsunami period, reveals a more dynamic and nuanced reality.

This issue is further complicated by the central role of customary and religious institutions within Aceh's socio-political structure. Raihan and Pushpalal (2020) note that these institutions remain influential in local decision-making processes however, women's participation within them remains limited. As a result, women's interests are often underrepresented in local governance practices and institutional deliberations.

In this context, women's leadership in Aceh cannot be understood through a single institutional lens, but rather as a process shaped by the interaction of Islamic Sharia (*hukum syariah*), customary norms (*hukum adat*) and modern bureaucratic governance. Drawing on (Pierre Bourdieu's, 2018) perspective, these dynamics can be interpreted through the mobilization of different forms of capital, particularly social capital embedded in community networks and symbolic capital derived from religious and customary legitimacy. The interaction of these normative frameworks produces a distinctive political landscape in which women leaders must continuously negotiate authority, legitimacy, and access to power.

Empirically, quantitative data from the Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) Aceh indicate that women's representation in public institutions particularly in the regional legislative bodies (DPRK/DPR) remains far from ideal, standing at approximately 8.97 percent. However, such figures reveal only part of the broader narrative.

Several previous studies have explored aspects of women's participation in the Acehese context. Zulfikar (2022) analyzed the dynamics of female leadership within Aceh's customary institutions, while Srimulyani (2020) examined women's roles in the interpretation and implementation of Islamic law. Rahmah (2022) investigated the structural and cultural challenges faced by women in accessing decision-making positions within Aceh's religious institutions.

Despite growing scholarship on Sharia governance, customary institutions and women's leadership in Aceh, these domains are often examined separately rather than as interconnected spheres of authority. As a result, limited attention has been given to how women leaders navigate these overlapping normative orders through the mobilization of different forms of capital. In particular, the relationship between symbolic capital derived from religious legitimacy and recognition as *keulamaan* and social capital, embedded in customary networks and communal trust, remains insufficiently theorized. This gap obscures the mechanisms through which women construct and legitimize authority within Aceh's complex sociopolitical landscape. Addressing this limitation, this study proposes a triangulated normative approach that conceptualizes Sharia, customary law and modern governance as interacting fields of power within which symbolic and social capital are strategically mobilized to sustain women's leadership.

Based on this contextual and scholarly gap, this article seeks to address two primary research questions: (1) How does the interaction among the three normative frameworks (Islamic Sharia, Acehese customary law, and modern governance) shape the opportunities and challenges for women's leadership at the local executive level in Aceh? (2) What strategies and forms of capital are mobilized by women leaders to build legitimacy and negotiate across these normative frameworks?

METHOD

This study employs an exploratory qualitative design with an intrinsic case study approach to examine the complexity of women's leadership within Aceh's socio-cultural and political context. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews with two key informants, who were selected purposively based on their extensive experience and expertise in navigating Aceh's political and gender landscape. The interviews, each lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted in Banda Aceh and its surrounding areas between september and october 2025. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. To enhance the robustness of the findings, the study employed source triangulation by incorporating a review of relevant policy documents (including Qanun on governance), statistical data on women's representation from the Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU) and Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) Aceh and a survey of pertinent academic literature.

The data analysis process was guided by the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This systematic approach involved several phases: familiarization with the data through repeated readings; generating initial codes using both deductive and inductive strategies; searching for broader themes by collating codes and comparing them against secondary sources; reviewing and refining themes for internal coherence; and finally, defining and naming the themes to form the foundation for interpreting how women leaders exercise agency and confront structural constraints. While the triangulation of diverse data sources constitutes a significant methodological strength, it is important to acknowledge the limitation posed by the small number of informants (n=2). Although their purposive selection ensures deep, context-rich insights, this limited sample restricts the variation of perspectives. Consequently, the findings are not intended to be broadly generalizable but rather to provide a profound, contextually-grounded understanding of the specific phenomenon under investigation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Track Record of Women's Leadership in Aceh

Historically, Aceh possesses a strong collective memory of women's leadership. Historical records indicate that the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate was ruled by four sultanahs for approximately 59 years, from 1641 to 1699 (Rahmawati, M., Bandarsyah, D., & Sulaeman, D. S., 2024). This period marked a significant phase in Aceh's political history, during which women occupied the highest authority within the royal governance structure.

Table 1. Table 1. Period of Female Leadership in the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate

No	Sultanah	Official Title	Period of reign
1	Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah	Al- Malikah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah	1641-1675
2	Nurul Alam Naqiatuddin	Al-Malikah Nurul Alam Naqiatuddin	1675-1678
3	Inayat Zakiatuddin Syah	Al-Malikah Zakiatuddin Inayat Syah	1678-1688
4	Kamalat Syah	Al-Malikah Kamalat Syah	1688-1699

Source: *Hasjmy. (1977). 59 Tahun Aceh merdeka dibawah pemerintahan Ratu. Jakarta: Bulan Bintang*

The historical record presented in Table 1 demonstrates that female leadership in the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate was not an isolated phenomenon but occurred across several consecutive reigns between the seventeenth century. Rather than merely representing symbolic authority, the Sultanahs occupied positions of sovereign political power within a monarchical system grounded in Islamic legitimacy and regional political alliances. From an analytical

perspective, their rule indicates that the legitimacy of leadership in Aceh historically operated through a combination of political authority, religious recognition, and elite networks. In this sense, women's leadership during the sultanate period can be interpreted through the mobilization of symbolic and social capital, where royal lineage, religious legitimacy and political alliances functioned as key resources for sustaining authority within the prevailing power structure.

Beyond the sultanate era, Acehese historical narratives also document female figures who exercised leadership in military and political domains that are commonly associated with masculine authority. One prominent example is Laksamana Malahayati, who commanded the Acehese naval forces under the Keumala Cahya troops (Muzayanah et al., 2025). Her leadership illustrates how women's authority in Aceh historically extended into strategic and territorial spheres, indicating that access to power was mediated not only by gender norms but also by the capacity to mobilize networks, legitimacy and institutional recognition. These historical precedents reveal that the relationship between gender and authority in Aceh has long been shaped by complex negotiations between religious legitimacy, customary norms, and political governance structures.

Following the 2004 tsunami and the end of armed conflict, Aceh's socio-political landscape underwent profound transformation, creating new spaces for women's leadership across various sectors. This dynamic is reflected in the field findings, as expressed in the following interview data:

"After the tsunami and conflict, the role of Acehese women strengthened through non-governmental organizations and civil society institutions, particularly in social recovery. In this space, women became accustomed to managing programs, budgets, and conducting international lobbying outside formal governmental structures. This pattern of leadership outside official positions reflects a historical repetition that continues into the contemporary era." (Interview with Mrs. Faraidiany, M.I.P)

The strengthening of Acehese women's roles in the post-tsunami and post-conflict period primarily occurred through non-state spaces, particularly non-governmental organizations and civil society institutions. This reinforces the argument that non-state spaces function as strategic arenas for the formation of women's leadership in societies characterized by strong political and religious structures such as Aceh. In line with Rajab and Indrawardana (2024), experience in managing organizations, programs, and international networks enables the conversion of social capital into political capital, which subsequently becomes a basis of legitimacy for entering formal power structures. In the Acehese context, this pattern also reflects a historical adaptation of women's leadership that was previously legitimized within royal structures but has now transformed through civil society pathways (Pujayanti et al., 2025).

This leadership legacy, as examined in historical literature (Siapno, 2021), constitutes a significant form of symbolic capital and cultural narrative that is frequently invoked to legitimize contemporary women's leadership. However, after that period, the narrative of women's leadership gradually faded alongside the consolidation of more patriarchal socio-political structures and increasingly restrictive religious interpretations, thereby creating a gap between the golden historical past and the reality of formal representation in the modern era.

The Challenge of Three Normative Frameworks in Women's Leadership in Aceh

To better illustrate the analytical framework of this study, the interaction between Islamic Sharia, customary norms (*adat*), and modern governance is conceptualized as overlapping normative fields that shape the legitimacy of women's leadership in Aceh. Drawing on Pierre

Bourdieu's perspective, the model also highlights how different forms of capital particularly social, symbolic, and religious capital are mobilized within these fields. The interaction of these elements is summarized in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1.

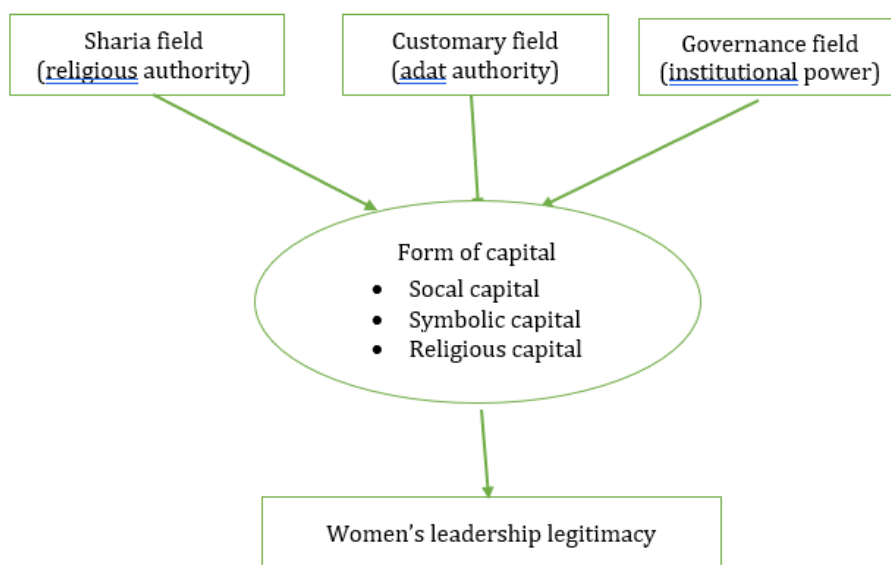


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Women's Leadership Legitimacy in Aceh

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework used to analyze the dynamics of women's leadership in Aceh. The model positions Islamic Sharia, customary norms (*adat*), and modern governance as three interrelated normative fields that jointly shape the structure of political authority and legitimacy. Rather than operating independently, these frameworks interact and continuously influence one another in defining acceptable forms of leadership, access to political space, and the boundaries of women's participation in public life.

Within this configuration, women leaders mobilize different forms of capital to negotiate legitimacy and authority. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's perspective, social capital embedded in kinship relations, community trust and local networks functions as an important resource for gaining political support. At the same time, symbolic and religious capital derived from religious recognition, cultural legitimacy, and affiliation with respected religious figures also play a crucial role in shaping public acceptance. These forms of capital enable women to navigate the overlapping normative expectations produced by Sharia, customary authority and bureaucratic governance. Consequently, the legitimacy of women's leadership in Aceh emerges not merely from formal institutional arrangements but from the strategic negotiation of authority within these interacting normative frameworks.

The challenge of the three normative frameworks in women's leadership in Aceh reflects a complex phenomenon rooted in distinctive social, cultural, and institutional configurations. Women's leadership is not solely influenced by individual capacity or the existence of formal policies, but is shaped by the interaction and tension between Islamic religious norms as the foundation of societal identity, Acehese customary norms that regulate social practices, and modern governance that introduces gender equality principles within national and global policy frameworks. These three normative frameworks operate simultaneously in the public sphere, forming a leadership landscape that requires women leaders to continuously engage in adaptation, negotiation, and legitimation in carrying out leadership roles in Aceh. As stated in the following interview:

“Women’s leadership in Aceh is dynamic because it unfolds through an ongoing negotiation process with patriarchal structures reinforced by religious and customary interpretations. Normatively, the state guarantees equal political rights, yet conservative interpretations of Sharia and adat often become actual obstacles for women. This dynamic can only be bridged when women’s leadership is able to reactivate the collective memory of historical precedents of Acehese women in positions of power, such as past leadership figures. Acehese adat itself is ambivalent, positioned between everyday patriarchal practices and narratives of historical heroism.” (Interview with Mrs. Magfirah Faraidiyani, M.I.P).

Women’s leadership in Aceh cannot be understood linearly within a purely legal-formal framework, but rather as the result of interaction among state institutions, cultural regimes, and religious interpretations. In line with Amin (2022), adat and interpretations of Sharia operate as social institutions that reproduce patriarchal power relations, although historically they also preserve counter-narratives of female heroism. In this context, collective memory functions as a source of symbolic legitimacy that enables the conversion of cultural and social capital into political capital. Previous studies also show that similar dynamics occur in the practice of women’s leadership in Aceh, where social acceptance is more easily achieved when women’s leadership is positioned as a continuation of local tradition rather than as an emancipatory agenda that directly confronts dominant norms (Mokat, 2024).

“The fundamental impediment confronting women’s aspirations for public office resides in entrenched traditional paradigms that continue to perceive women as inappropriate candidates for strategic policy-making positions. The conceptualization of women’s leadership prohibition has been systematically propagated through male-dominated narratives, notwithstanding the absence of any theological pronouncements (fatwa) from Acehese religious scholars proscribing female leadership.” (Interview with Mrs. Illiza).

The research findings indicate that traditional mindsets constitute a significant barrier to women’s participation in public leadership in Aceh, despite the absence of explicit theological grounds prohibiting such involvement. Narratives regarding women’s perceived unsuitability for leadership roles are predominantly based on socio-cultural constructs rather than valid religious interpretations. Consequently, cultural interpretations frequently serve as the primary instrument in constraining women’s leadership agency, particularly in Aceh.

The comprehensive interview findings reveal a substantial discrepancy between formal policy frameworks and the actualization of women’s involvement at the grassroots level. Despite normative guarantees and designated spaces for women’s participation, structural and cultural barriers persistently impede effective female engagement in policy-making processes (Kumari, 2025). Cultural determinants and religious interpretations emerge as significant obstacles in initiatives aimed at enhancing women’s representational capacity. Traditional gender role perceptions continue to exert considerable influence over decision-making dynamics within customary and religious institutional frameworks (Siapno, 2021).

The limited access of women to strategic institutional positions significantly affects the qualitative dimensions of policy outcomes. Multiple issues concerning women’s interests receive insufficient consideration within policy formulation processes (Afrianty, 2020). Systematic interventions aimed at strengthening women’s leadership capacity and advocating gender-responsive policy mechanisms are therefore essential. Such initiatives require comprehensive support from diverse stakeholders, including local government authorities and civil society institutions (Mahmood, 2022).

In addition, there are fundamental differences in perspectives and understandings of women's leadership between rural and urban areas, as indicated in the following interview:

"There is a sharp difference between urban and rural areas in Aceh in terms of acceptance of women's leadership, where urban communities tend to evaluate leadership based on performance, while rural areas remain strongly influenced by patriarchal patronage structures that limit women's political participation through social control and cultural sanctions." (Interview with Mrs. Magfirah Faraidiyani, M.I.P).

Acceptance of women's leadership is not determined solely by formal legal frameworks, but also by local social structures and power relations. In line with Batubara (2025), women in rural areas face stronger constraints because the public sphere remains dominated by masculine patronage networks based on the authority of customary and religious leaders. In contrast, urban communities demonstrate a higher level of political rationalization, where the separation between religious moral values and political practice allows leadership to be evaluated based on performance. In the Acehese context, this difference is also related to the capacity of urban communities to actualize history, adat, and religion within modern politics, while rural areas continue to negotiate patriarchal adat with the memory of historical female leadership (Batubara, 2025).

Within the socio-political structure of Aceh, the legitimacy of women's leadership does not stand as a neutral entity but is shaped by power relations and deeply rooted societal norms. The following informant statement illustrates how such legitimacy operates:

"In the context of Acehese society, the legitimacy of women's leadership is more determined by social capital, religious capital, and kinship factors than by bureaucratic competence alone. This pattern of legitimacy reflects historical continuity, where affiliation with families of religious or political figures, networks of ulama, and adherence to cultural-religious identity become the primary strategies for women to penetrate electoral structures that remain patriarchal."

Women's leadership in Aceh operates within a strong framework of cultural legitimacy, where access to power is mediated by gendered social structures. In line with Khamdan (2022), kinship and religious affiliation function as symbolic capital that enables women to convert social acceptance into political support. Ulama networks play a central role in shaping political legitimacy, such that religious endorsement often becomes a more decisive electoral prerequisite than technocratic competence (Andhika et al., 2024).

There is a substantial gap between formal policy frameworks and their practical implementation regarding women's representation. Despite the existence of affirmative policies, including the 30 percent quota for women's representation mandated by Law No. 8 of 2012 on Legislative Elections, a significant gap persists between formal institutional arrangements and everyday political practice. Deeply rooted cultural norms that associate women primarily with domestic roles continue to constrain their public participation. Moreover, patriarchal interpretations of religious and customary traditions are often mobilized to justify limitations on women's leadership. These dynamics illustrate that the legitimacy of women's leadership in Aceh emerges from the interaction between three normative frameworks sharia, customary authority and modern governance within which social, symbolic and religious capital are mobilized and negotiated.

Nevertheless, there are significant opportunities to enhance women's decision-making capacity through strategic resource allocation frameworks. This includes the establishment and

strengthening of women-oriented institutional platforms such as Balee Inoeng, Women Development Center, and Musyawarah Perencanaan Pembangunan Perempuan (Musrena).

“Currently, we have Balee Inoeng, the Women Development Center, and Musrena to involve women in Aceh, particularly in Banda Aceh.” (Interview with Mrs. Illiza).

Strategic allocation of resources for women’s advancement can function as a catalytic investment in sustainable development initiatives. The urgency of investing in women through systematic resource allocation mechanisms in order to achieve gender equality demonstrates a significant correlation with improved economic welfare (Girón et al., 2024). This paradigm reflects the emergence of collective efforts toward women’s empowerment and recognition of their specific needs as an integral component of long-term community development investment strategies.

CONCLUSION

Women’s leadership in Aceh can be understood as the outcome of an ongoing negotiation within three principal normative frameworks: Islamic Sharia, Acehese customary law (adat), and modern governance. These frameworks interact dynamically and simultaneously shape both the constraints and opportunities that define women’s participation in public leadership. Although Aceh possesses a strong historical legacy of female leadership, contemporary realities indicate that such practices are frequently circumscribed by patriarchal interpretations embedded within social and institutional structures. In this context, affirmative policies have not been fully internalized or effectively implemented at the grassroots level. Consequently, the legitimacy of women’s leadership tends to rely more heavily on social capital, religious affiliation, and kinship networks than on formal institutional guarantees. Public acceptance of women leaders is also heterogeneous, with significant differences evident between urban and rural areas.

In navigating this normative configuration, women leaders develop distinctive and context-sensitive strategies. These strategies include activating collective memory of historical female rulers in Aceh as a source of symbolic legitimacy and utilizing non-state spaces such as civil society organizations and non-governmental institutions that expanded in the post-conflict and post-disaster era as alternative arenas of leadership consolidation. Moreover, dedicated women-oriented platforms such as Balee Inoeng function as important mechanisms for capacity building, network consolidation, and the articulation of women’s interests. Therefore, enhancing women’s representation in leadership in Aceh requires a holistic and integrative approach that not only strengthens affirmative policy measures but also reformulates cultural narratives and empowers alternative spaces beyond formal state structures.

This study has several limitations, although the triangulation of diverse data sources strengthens the analysis, the research relies on a small number of purposively selected informants (n=2), which limits the diversity of perspectives captured. In addition, the study primarily focuses on the interaction between Sharia norms, customary authority and governance structures, while other factors such as economic resources, party institutionalization and generational dynamics receive less attention. Therefore, the findings are not intended to be broadly generalizable but rather to provide a contextually grounded understanding of women’s leadership legitimacy in Aceh. Future research could expand the scope by involving a larger number of participants, adopting comparative approaches across districts or examining how emerging generations of women leaders negotiate legitimacy within evolving socio-political contexts.

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