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Who Governs for Women? Gender Representation, Bureaucratic Leadership and Policy Responsiveness in Developing Countries

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Abstract

Although women's representation in legislatures has increased as never before, a seat is not a mandate to influence policies, and the relationship between representation and influence is not fully understood. While there is ample research on quotas and seat shares, research on how the presence of a quota leads to authority, and how authority leads to gender-responsive policy, is limited, especially in non-high income, democratic contexts and in political and administrative arenas. I wonder how women acquire the power to influence policy in four countries with very different party systems, administrative traditions and quota systems: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Rwanda and Indonesia. I analyze 15 semi-structured interviews with political actors, public officials, policy researchers and civil-society representatives, as well as constitutional, legal and policy documents from 2015 to 2025 in a qualitative comparative case design. Six findings emerge. Representation is necessary but not enough, institutional power is in-between, there's a non-electoral way to power, responsiveness to evidence and consultation is better when coupled with decisions and budgets, parties and informal networks are the sources of access to power, and civil society links institutions and women's experience. The formal design of each case is captured in the documents, but not in the interviews which focus on who is in charge in practice. The novelty of the article is on the mechanism for conversion (authority) and the segregation of political and administrative channels, and the separation of the design of institutions from their enactment. Policy should address mapping not counting women. Five propositions are presented for testing using greater comparisons and process tracing.

1. Introduction

A mandate doesn’t mean to have a seat. Numbers are still not enough to make parliamentary quotas and reserved seats and mainstreaming a gender responsive policy, despite over a quarter of parliamentary seats being held by women worldwide and the adoption of these measures in most regions. The representation of women in parliament and cabinets in early 2026 was 27.4% and 22.4%, respectively, lower than the 23.3% and 23.4%, respectively, in early 2024 (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU] & UN Women, 2026). Only about a third of the national gender-equality mechanisms surveyed reported that their institutional power has grown in the past two years, and none of the targets under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 are on track for 2030 (UN Women & United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2026). What I pick up here is why representation has not always resulted in Gender Responsive outcomes and what needs to be in place within institutions that can lead to Gender Responsive outcomes.

The full and equal participation of women in decision-making at all levels (SDG 5, target 5.5) and responsive, inclusive, and representative decision-making (SDG 16, target 16.7) are both targets in the SDG agenda (United Nations, 2015). The two targets presuppose that participation and institutional quality strengthen each other. What we know the least on the agenda is the way and where they do and where the link fails. The question is more relevant when viewed in the context. As 2030 nears and the budget for gender equality work shrinks (UN Women & UN DESA, 2026), governments and donors may

be tempted to consider the number of seats as a measure of progress, but the evidence does not support this.

The question of representation has many answers, but few conditions. Pitkin (1967) differentiated standing and acting for a group, Phillips (1995) suggested the politics of presence and Mansbridge (1999) discussed when descriptive representation is most required. Later research has avoided the use of a specific numerical threshold and focused instead on the actors and claims of which representation is enacted (Childs & Krook, 2009; Dahlerup, 2006). The history is unclear. There are policy differences related to the presence of women in village councils in India (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004), day-care provision in Norway (Bratton & Ray, 2002), and spending following quota reforms (Clayton & Zetterberg, 2018). They are significantly less pronounced in Swiss legislatures, for which the gender differences are concentrated in the field of social policy (Kläy et al., 2025) and women legislators are not any closer to the preferences of women voters than men legislators (Kläy et al., 2024). If there are two female mayors in a municipality, they have a higher probability than a single female or no female mayors of enacting more women-sensitive policies, under specific conditions (Huang et al., 2025). In each case, that is, in each position, team composition or institutional setting, it is mediated by some other aspect. That something else is seldom explained.

It is most nearly described in two theories which have evolved relatively independently. Feminist institutionalism posits that the imbalance in power is the result of a combination of formal rules and informal norms and party practice (Lowndes, 2020; Mackay et al., 2010). The question about when a public bureaucracy that reflects the population does is answered discretion and context (An et al., 2022; Selden, 1997). But in the Global South, research on room for maneuver has focused on the impact of quotas, party control and donor-driven mainstreaming on the room for maneuver of women, not on how women acquire authority once in. Studies on the Global South, on the other hand, have tended to be about the limits on women's room for maneuver as a result of quotas, party control and donor-driven mainstreaming, not about how women gain authority once in. It's not a numbers gap, it's a concepts gap. A lack of authority, a lack of a finding that quotas work, or don't work, means that there is no way to interpret the finding.

I therefore acquired to shift the focus from "how many women go to institutions" into "how do they come to be in a position to shape policy?" My thesis is that the presence of an institution needs to be changed to be an influence and that there are two ways to change it from presence to influence: political and administrative - and that these two ways are seldom discussed together when formal reform takes place. It is based on 15 semi-structured interviews and constitutional, legal and policy documents, and is a qualitative comparison of four countries with different quota design, party systems and administrative traditions (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Rwanda and Indonesia).

The analysis is based on three questions. How do political actors, public officials, policy researchers and civil-society representatives talk about the gap between women's formal representation and policy impact? What are the formal and informal institutions conditions that enable or constrain the exercise of

authority through which influence is being exerted? How do these factors – bureaucratic leadership, evidence and consultation, party networks and civil-society collaboration – fit into gender-responsive policy processes? The answers offer analytical disassociation of institutional design and institutional enactment, they identify how a presence is linked to policy agency as authority and they conceptualize political and administrative representation as interacting pathways. The framework is developed in section 2, the design is presented in section 3, the results are presented in section 4, implications for the current theory are discussed in section 5 and the conclusions are presented in section 6.

2. Theory and Literature

2.1. The ability to represent, to have authority, and to have institutions.

Legitimacy, respect (Beckwith, 2007; Mansbridge, 1999) are reasons for descriptive presence that are not directly related to legislation. The only gain Rwanda has in its research is that it is a gain in perceived respect, not in step with policy influence (Burnet, 2011). Women are not either a monolithic group either. Class, ethnicity, region and party shape needs and opportunities for expressing needs (Crenshaw, 1989; Hughes, 2011), and ethnic divisions in Rwanda and Burundi affect the impact of quotas (Guariso et al., 2018). Representation is thus seen here as a means of potential influence, rather than a vehicle that conveys one agenda for women.

The channel tends to be quite narrow and that's because of feminist institutionalism. Institutions are not gender neutral – formal rules are enacted in informal routines that are about who is heard, promoted and trusted (Lowndes, 2020; Mackay et al., 2010). Informal institutions may supplement, accommodate, compete with or replace formal institutions (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004); and in parties, recruitment is rooted in homosocial capital and clientelist networks, which Bjarnegård and Kenny (2025) have recently assembled. The design of the quota has an impact on accountability. In Argentina, quota-elected women were women who were constrained by their institutional context (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008); in the Philippines, reserved-seat party-list members are more accountable to their party leaders than to their constituents (Dutoya, 2013). There is still a lack of parity in committees and leadership roles (Heath et al., 2005; Kerevel & Atkeson, 2013). The unspoken, but obvious point is that authority is not shared in institutions, and quotas do not share authority.

The settings studied here, however, also have representation in the reserved seats and in the constitution, and these are also used for party or regime strategies. Bauer and Burnet (2013) demonstrate how political context shapes the possibilities for high numbers of women, and Panday (2008) discusses “representation without participation” in Bangladesh. Women's entry into an institution is related to the authority they have in that institution.

2.2. The policy responsiveness and Administrative pathways.

The question of representation is carried over from elected office to administration by the representative-bureaucracy theory. Mosher (1968) recognized two types of representation: passive, which refers to the

similarity of the officials to the population; and active, which refers to the action of the officials on behalf of the groups that they resemble. It is not an “active representation” right. Based on discretion, position and salience of the issue (Keiser et al., 2002; Meier & Nigro, 1976; Sowa & Selden, 2003) and evidence is mixed (Bishu & Kennedy, 2020). Context decides much. The effects of representative-bureaucracy are more common and stronger in countries with high levels of gender equality and political support for women, and in Tanzania, the impact of representation in government was felt at the top but not in women's education and employment (An et al., 2022; Park & Mwihambi, 2022). Meier and Dhillon (2022) show that there is an interaction between the bureaucratic and legislative representation in India.

Although mainstreaming was supposed to put gender in the mainstream of policy processes (True & Mintrom, 2001), when it comes to implementation, commitments melt when they touch implementation (Moser & Moser, 2005), and gender-equality institutions lose influence when mandates and funding are reduced (UN Women & UN DESA, 2026). There is a similar lack of evidence and participation. When decision makers have an incentive and authority to act on the research, it can be symbolic (Head, 2010; Weiss, 1979); when decision makers have an incentive and authority to act on the research, consultation can be symbolic (Ansell, 1969); and collaboration cannot overcome unequal power (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Progressive changes in the field of violence against women have been observed thanks to the actions of autonomous women's movements (Htun & Weldon, 2012); a study of 30 OECD countries reveals three different ways in which a blend of accountability mechanisms can facilitate women's political representation (Nazar & Zarghami, 2026). Representation, evidence and participation are significant in all strands in relation to authority.

There are three limits which motivate the study. One of the following explains each link in the chain from presence to policy: work on elected representatives, work on the composition of the bureaucracy, mainstreaming, and work on accountability; and the chains are not connected (Meier & Dhillon, 2022; Nazar & Zarghami, 2026). High income democracies or one policy area is the best evidence. Even though the difference between presence and influence exists, there are still only qualitative descriptions of the difference in the cases with different structures of women's admittance to institutions.

2.3. Analytical framework

The following are some ideas that could be used for one sequence. The missing link between the two is institutional authority, explained by feminist institutionalism, which is the desired presence that is not realized with descriptive representation. Representative bureaucracy carries on the process into administration, in which leadership is discretionary, and parties and informal institutions are responsible for access to both arenas. The combination of collaborative governance and policy responsiveness results in the sharing of authority with actors outside of the state and policy responsiveness that is part of the process.

The framework (Figure 1) is four steps that are linked together: presence, authority, policy agency and responsiveness. Presence: the ability to be present, to be in the world. According to Bachrach and Baratz (1962), there is a distinction between decisions and control of the agenda, the latter being the power that

can be exercised to shape the agenda as well as the content of decisions. It can be expressed in three ways: portfolio, rank, and committee seat; resource (budgets, personnel and instruments); and informational and relational (evidence, sponsors and networks where decisions are prepared). Forms can be separated and a post can have resources without networks, or networks can have resources without forms (Kanter, 1977; Kerevel & Atkeson, 2013). Policy agency is about authority in use, through expertise, relationship and coalitions. Each transition is unique: entry is linked to the design of the quota; authority is linked to the culture of the organization and gatekeeping; agency is linked to networks; evidence and relation is linked to civil society; responsiveness is linked to budgets; monitoring and accountability is linked to the organizational culture and gatekeeping.

Responsiveness is the outcome concept and needs specifying. Building on the distinction among policy, allocation, service, and symbolic responsiveness (Eulau & Karps, 1977), Table 1 sets out five dimensions, adding accountability and learning. The study assesses process responsiveness as participants perceive it and documents record it; it does not measure welfare outcomes. An account counts as evidence of responsiveness only if it links an actor or an instrument to a change in at least one dimension, and otherwise it is read as potential responsiveness. Symbolic responsiveness is kept separate because it can rise without any change in policy (Burnet, 2011).

Table 1. *Operational dimensions of policy responsiveness*

Dimension	Definition	Interview indicators	Documentary indicators
Policy (agenda and design)	Gendered problems enter policy agendas and are reflected in policy design.	Accounts of who sets priorities and whether gendered needs shape design.	Gender analysis, targets, or provisions in laws, strategies, and plans.
Allocation	Resources are assigned to gender-related priorities and can be traced.	Accounts of influence over budgets and spending decisions.	Gender-responsive budget statements or reports; identifiable allocations.
Service and implementation	Delivery is accessible and adapted to women's circumstances.	Accounts of discretion, coordination, and delivery problems.	Implementation or evaluation reports; service-coverage data.
Accountability and learning	Monitoring, sex-disaggregated data, and feedback connect decisions to women's experience.	Accounts of data use, consultation, and feedback to participants.	Monitoring frameworks, data systems, and consultation records.
Symbolic	Women's roles in public life are recognized, respected, and seen as legitimate.	Accounts of visibility, respect, and recognition.	Public statements; representation figures.

Note. Dimensions follow (Eulau & Karps, 1977), extended with accountability and learning. The indicators are those the study can observe; none measures welfare outcomes.

The next 5 propositions are conditional, and each is employed for the purpose of interpretation rather than for the purpose of testing causation. P1: Responsiveness is related to presence, not just a seat when it comes to women in positions of authority or when they have resources. P2: Formal rules of gender equality change policy processes only when women have access to influential spaces in the organizational culture and practice. P3: The bureaucratic leadership has a clear path to responsiveness based on expertise, coordination and discretion, which is enhanced by rank and access to the top decision-makers. P4: evidence and consultation are used to enhance responsiveness in decisions, budgets and feedback. P5: depending on who controls them, policy agency is increased through sponsorship, networks and coalitions of civil society.

3. Research design and research methods.

3.1. The design and the selection of cases.

The study is a comparative qualitative case study, appropriate for exploring mechanisms which combine indicators to mask (George & Bennett, 2005). The four countries were purposively selected for institutional variation (Table 2), because they have reserved seats either of party lists (Pakistan), reserved seats allocated among parties (Bangladesh), a constitutional requirement of 30% and reserved seats (Rwanda), or a 30% candidate quota and zipper rule under open lists (Indonesia) (Seawright & Gerring, 2008; Small, 2009; Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Dutoya, 2013; Panday, 2008; Prihatini, 2019a).

Table 2. *Gender-quota and reserved-seat arrangements in the four cases*

Case	Representation mechanism	Illustrative sources
Pakistan	Constitution reserves 60 National Assembly seats and 17 Senate seats for women; National Assembly seats are allocated to parties and filled from party lists. The Elections Act requires parties to award at least 5% of general-seat tickets to women.	(Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973, arts. 51 and 59; Dutoya, 2013; Elections Act (Pakistan), 2017, s. 206)
Bangladesh	Constitution reserves 50 parliamentary seats for women, filled by proportional representation among parties and extended in 2018; reserved seats in local government; National Women Development Policy of 2011.	(Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1972, art. 65(3); Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, 2011; Panday, 2008)
Rwanda	Constitution requires at least 30% of decision-making posts for women and reserves 24 of 80 Chamber of Deputies seats, elected by electoral colleges; women won 51 of 80 seats in 2024.	(Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, 2015, arts. 10 and 76; Devlin & Elgie, 2008; International IDEA, n.d.)
Indonesia	Election law requires at least 30% women candidates with one woman in every three names, under open-list proportional representation since 2008; gender-responsive planning and budgeting promoted since 2000.	(Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections, 2017, arts. 243 and 246; Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2000 on Gender Mainstreaming in National Development, 2000; Prihatini, 2019a)

Note. The table summarizes the sources listed and is not exhaustive.

Political system, party organization and administrative tradition are other areas of difference between the countries. This variation enables the examination of whether this obstacle of presence and authority is present when women are admitted to office in different ways. The cases are not representative of developing countries and the design cannot make causal statements or rank the cases. The comparative strategy is to identify in each of the accounts in the sequence outlined in Section 2.3, the place in which the obstacle is located, and then to compare the locations of the obstacles across countries, rather than the results or outcomes.

3.2. Data

The primary data are 15 semi-structured interviews (5 in Pakistan, 5 in Bangladesh, 3 in Rwanda, and 2 in Indonesia). The participants were women and men political actors, public officials, policy researchers and representatives of civil society (Table 3). I used purposive sampling and added snowball sampling to find the information rich participants (Tansey, 2007). Requirements for inclusion included at least five years' experience in political, public administration, policy research, gender policy, or civil-society advocacy work, as well as first hand experience in policy formulation or implementation. The uneven distribution is due to the access to eligible participants and not a quota design.

Table 3. *Interview participants by country, broad role, mode, and language*

Country	n	Political actors	Public officials	Researchers and civil society	Mode	Language
Pakistan	5	1	2	2	Online video or telephone	English, Urdu
Bangladesh	5	1	2	2	Online video or telephone	English, Bengali (some English)
Rwanda	3	1	2	0	Online video	English
Indonesia	2	1	1	0	Online video	English
Total	15	4	7	4	Online video and telephone	English, Urdu, Bengali

Note. Role categories are broad to limit identifiability in small policy communities. Participants included women and men.

The interviews were conducted online via video or phone from January to April 2026 in English, Urdu and Bengali and took 50-60 minutes. The guide addressed issues of representation, institutional authority, decision making, gender-responsive policy making, bureaucratic leadership, parties and networks, civil society and reform. Interviews were conducted and audio recorded with the consent of the interviewees and transcribed verbatim. When it was not feasible to record, I took copious notes both during and after the interview, and these notes were used in the analysis of the interview data, but are not quoted. I translated the Urdu and Bengali interviews into English and repeated comparison with the original transcripts (Temple & Young, 2004) was done for checking the translations. Spoken extracts are those that have been given in English and translated extracts are those that have been translated by a researcher. The interviews were complemented by documents in force or published between 2015 and 2025, such as constitutions, electoral laws, national gender policies, government strategies, implementation reports, and international reports.

The number of 15 interviews is fairly small and saturation is not a stopping criterion in thematic analysis, but rather depends on the aims of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021c; Malterud et al., 2016). The participants were selected based on direct knowledge, the framework was used to guide the interviews and the interviews were of a depth nature to identify the mechanisms that occur repeatedly. There is less information power in comparison between countries. The Rwandan and Indonesian subsamples cannot be used to describe national patterns, and I use them as illustrative.

3.3. Analysis and trustworthiness

I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases to go through the interviews, analyzing them into themes. Coding was done by both deductive and inductive coding from the framework and interview guide with the participant's accounts. All interviews were coded manually, analytic memos and a codebook were maintained and six themes were generated through an iterative review process prior to comparing

across countries. Themes were read against the dimensions of responsiveness (Table 1) and the rules for reading (Section 2.3) in the interpretive stage. Thematic analysis is interpretive, and the data were coded by only one researcher, therefore, I do not report an intercoder-reliability statistic but instead make the process of coding transparent as suggested by Braun & Clarke (2019, 2021a).

There are three strategies to credibility. Firstly, documents were read against interview accounts; documents were complementary to interviews, not confirmatory in that they fixed formal design, while interviews illuminated enactment, and neither measured policy outcomes. Second, I maintained analytic memos, discussed interpretations with colleagues, and went back to the transcripts if an interpretation seemed to be too easy to make. Third, interview statements are not considered as evidence of policy impacts, but rather as the participants' interpretation of the impacts (Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2010). The Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (O'Brien et al., 2014) have been used to report. Access and interpretation were influenced by my political science and governance research background. My skills in Urdu and my knowledge of Bengali was working and I did not have any prior connections with the participants or their organizations (Berger, 2015).

3.4. Ethics

Participants were informed about the study, the fact that participation was voluntary, how confidentiality would be maintained and their right to withdraw. There was no formal ethical approval as per institutional guidelines. Electronic written consent was obtained before conducting video interviews and verbal consent was obtained and documented at the beginning of telephone interviews. Data were kept in password protected files with only I being able to access them. Quotes are only identified by a participant code, country and general role because participants occupy senior positions in small policy communities and identifying information has been deleted or generalized; for the same reason, the Rwandan participants are identified only as public officials (Saunders et al., 2015).

4. Findings

Six themes are organized that helps to convey the nature of representation becoming influence, and not influence becoming representation. These are introduced with an analytical claim, the evidence from interviews, a comparison between the four countries, and implications for theory and for the propositions. The quotations are exactly as the speaker said them and are identified with the participant code, role and country; other statements summarize the participants' accounts and are attributed if a particular participant is identified. The comparisons are on institutional arrangements and not on national performance.

4.1. From number to substance: policy influence in numbers.

The first is that the presence initiates the conversion, but doesn't finish it. The participants in all four countries separated holding a position and did so in similar terms, as to what the institution does. A Bangladesh policy researcher said, "Agriculture is the poorest sector. As Bangladesh's policy researcher said, "Agriculture is the poorest sector.

A descriptive representation does not necessarily lead to substantive representation. Women can be in institutions, but may not have access to agenda setting, resources or to strategic decision making in institutions. Bangladesh's policy researcher (P10)

The limitations the quotation refers to are all forms of authority from Section 2.3: agenda, resources and strategic spaces. Conditions that were emphasized by participants from Pakistan, Rwanda and Indonesia were access to decision making spaces, institutional support and control over resources. The cases vary in terms of when the conversion "stalls. The Rwandans participants saw constitutional and quota systems as a way to increase participation, but emphasized that access to strategic spaces was the key. In Bangladesh and Indonesia, women were said to be present and "limited" in their agenda setting and budget, and in Pakistan in the informal political structures. The constitutional texts validate the plans participants mentioned and do not say anything about who prioritizes (Table 4).

As described in Table 1, these are accounts of a lack of symbolic and/or policy or allocation responsiveness. They fill the gap between critical mass and critical actors (Childs & Krook, 2009): visibility is not sufficient to be a critical actor as that requires positional, resource, and informational authority (Heath et al., 2005; Kanter, 1977). The discovery is related to P1.

4.2. The role of institutional structures as enablers and constraints

The second finding is that there are formal rules which open doors whose use is dependent on organizational practice. Participants recognized that the following were real opportunities: constitutional provisions, quotas, recruitment processes and gender policies, and qualified each one of these. An official from the Rwandan public said, "The perception is that,"

Opportunities are offered in institutional rules and it is the commitment of the organization to ensure that those opportunities result in meaningful outcomes. This is a public official's comment from Rwanda (P13).

The participants from Pakistan and Bangladesh read their own settings in the same manner, emphasizing that actual rights were formal rights which were implemented in practice and given a voice in decision-making. This is more of a comparison of rule and enactment than of countries. The Rwandan case was the one that focused on commitment, and Rwanda has a more stringent formal commitment provision of the four, so that there is no reduction in the gap between the design and enactment. The participants in Pakistan identified party dynamics (Elections Act (Pakistan), 2017, s.) as the constraint as the 5% ticket and party list reserved seats give selection to the party. 206).

The finding is the second analytical move, separating institutional design from institutional enactment, of the article, and it aligns with feminist institutionalism, which focuses on the interaction of formal and informal rules (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004) and the fading away of mainstreaming commitments in practice (Moser & Moser, 2005). It promotes P2 and provides it with an evaluative advantage: a reform should be evaluated based on its impact on the access to decisions, information and accountability, not on the existence of a rule.

4.3. The power of the bureaucracy and administration

Administration provides an avenue of influence in addition to electoral politics, and responds to different conditions. Participants noted that women administrators have been involved in the following ways in their respective fields of education, health care, social development, gender-responsive budgeting and community development: through technical expertise, policy analysis, coordination and implementation. “A Rwandan public official said:

Women officials participate in the contribution through the technical aspects, planning and programmed implementation. P12: public official (Rwanda)

Participants in Pakistan and Indonesia talked about a similar process, in which influence was derived from expertise, coordination and implementation duties, and not from elected office, and linked this to institutional authority, professional credibility and access to decision making. In this interpretation, the political agenda sets agendas and priorities, and the administrator sets the agenda for interpretation, funding, coordination and delivery of the policies. They are participants' accounts of their own involvement rather than evidence of impact and this is the least of the six findings, with the only extract being from Rwanda, and no indication of the role of rank or discretion.

Despite this, the discovery is in line with the identification of active representation in discretion (Lipsky, 1980; Sowa & Selden, 2003) and builds on the relationship between bureaucratic and legislative representation that is identified by Meier and Dhillon (2022). It also sets the bar high for the assumption of representation by administration. The accounts give credibility, influence and access to decision makers to rank, so a group of women in lower-level or technical positions would seem representative but lack the power outlined in these accounts. The discovery has significance for P3.

4.4. Indication, consultation, and gender-responsive policymaking

Evidence and consultation are only effective in enhancing responsiveness if they lead to action. Resources mentioned by participants for policy design included gender-disaggregated data, research, consultation of stakeholders and programmed evaluation, in the areas of women's economic empowerment, maternal health, prevention of violence and social protection. A representative of civil society in Bangladesh posed the question:

Policies are more effective when they take into account women's realities, in practice, and not just formal equality. The role of civil-society representative from Bangladesh (P9).

The public officials and political actors in the cases all concurred that evidence was important if it could impact priorities, resource allocation, and implementation, but not just in identifying needs. This is a structural face, as documented. UN Women (2022) and UN Women & UN DESA (2026) report that there is a significant gender-data gap, and a need for capacity to produce sex-disaggregated data in Bangladesh.

The discovery helps to clarify research use. Evidence is only effective in reaching decisions when decision makers have the incentive and authority to take action based on the evidence (Head, 2010; Weiss, 1979), and consultation without feedback is symbolic (Arnstein, 1969). Through the lens, the evidence is a source of informational power and its utility is only when it gets to the budget and implementation phase that is called allocation and accountability in Table 1. The condition P4 gives is the condition. When, then, is evidence relevant? The accounts suggest that it is important who has the power to allocate the budget or implement it, as it has a destination where it has some impact, but where no one has authority, it accumulates without impact.

4.5. The political parties and informal networks, as well as access to power.

The formal opening becomes an influence through the decisions of the parties and networks. Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia participants highlighted party support, relationships with family, professional, mentoring and campaign resources, and visibility of leadership. In Pakistan (P1) a woman politician said that formal representation had increased access, but informal political structures and party dynamics, and the lack of resources continued to influence what women could achieve. The Indonesian participants (P14, P15) also identified party structures as one of the factors that influence the implementation of gender responsive policies, in addition to institutional mechanisms and gender responsive policies.

The documents are silent on the question but do not prove it. Reserved seats are selected via party-controlled processes in Pakistan and Bangladesh (Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1972, art. 65(3); Dutoya, 2013), while in Indonesia, there is a combination of the two: individual vote-getting and list position (Aspinall et al., 2021; Prihatini, 2019a). The interviews will be the proof of informal practice, which will not be documented in any documents.

The accounts presented here build on the work on homosocial capital and clientelism, as they explain who gets invited into early discussions, is supported when proposing policy, and can form coalitions (Bjarnegård, 2013; Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015; Kenny, 2013). Informational & relational authority is a resource in and of itself, through channels outside the scope of quotas. The discovery resonates with P5 and also with the circumstances, foremost party control, in which sponsorship enables or hinders.

4.6. A collaborative governance approach to civil society.

Civil society helps to link institutions to women's experiences and it shapes their power. Civil-society actors reported that advocacy, research, community mobilization, monitoring, and awareness-raising are the tools they use to draw in the experiences of rural women, challenges in service delivery, and gaps in implementation into the policy arena. The civil society representative from Bangladesh went on to say:

Civil society is a bridge between citizens and institutions: experiences from communities are included in policy discussions. Civil-Society representative, Bangladesh (P9)

The participants in Pakistan, Rwanda, and Indonesia also talked about CSOs engaging in discussions with the government with their own experiences, research data, and implementation concerns. This was most evident in Bangladesh where the NGO sector is also very dense (Panday, 2016). Access is not equal, consultation can benefit well-connected organizations, and funding is stressed: The 2026 Gender Snapshot shows a 28% decrease in funding for women's rights organizations (UN Women & UN DESA, 2026).

It's not about collaboration being alongside the explanatory chain, it's about it being inside the explanatory chain. The policy change has been brought about by autonomous women's organizations and coalitions, although the level of authority that they give varies (Htun & Weldon, 2012; Nazneen et al., 2019). Consultation mechanisms should thus not be interpreted as participation, unless the voice of the public can be heard in the decision-making process, as this constitutes a strengthening of agency in P5.

4.7. Reading the cases in pairs

The six findings represent one mechanism, having several channels. Women’s influence is most likely to influence policy when they are allowed to have a say in policy-making, draw on evidence and expertise, access influential networks and engage actors who can support or monitor policy change. The interview accounts are placed next to documentary evidence of formal design in Table 4. These two overlap with respect to design, since in all four cases there are reserved seats, quotas, and mainstreaming instruments; and differ in what they can demonstrate: documents reveal no information about the committee chairs, the influence on the budgets, or the access to high-ranking decision makers, where the constraints were perceived to be. Budgets, or the access to high-ranking decision makers, where the constraints were perceived to be.

Table 4

Interview accounts compared with documentary evidence on formal design

Case (n)	Formal design in documents	Interview accounts	Relation of the two
Rwanda (n = 3)	Constitution: at least 30% of decision-making posts for women; 24 of 80 deputy seats via electoral colleges; women hold 51 of 80 seats (2024). (Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, 2015, arts. 10 and 76; International IDEA, n.d.)	Quota and constitutional arrangements linked to participation; access to strategic spaces and organizational commitment decisive (P12, P13).	Convergent on design and numbers. Documents do not show who holds strategic authority; consistent with debates on symbolic versus substantive influence (Bauer & Burnet, 2013; Burnet, 2011).
Pakistan (n = 5)	Constitution: 60 National Assembly and 17 Senate reserved seats; National Assembly seats filled from party lists; Elections Act: at least 5% of general-seat tickets to women. (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973, arts. 51 and 59; Elections Act (Pakistan), 2017, s. 206)	Formal representation widened access, but informal political structures, party dynamics, and limited resources shape influence (P1).	Design places selection with parties and sets a low general-seat threshold, consistent with gatekeeping accounts; informal practice itself is not documented.
Bangladesh (n = 5)	Constitution: 50 reserved seats by proportional representation among parties, extended 2018; National Women Development Policy 2011; gender-data gaps noted. (Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1972, art. 65(3); Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, 2011; UN Women, 2022)	Women visible but constrained on agenda and budgets; civil society prominent; emphasis on practical realities and evidence (P9, P10).	Consistent. Documents show the framework and data gaps but not the budget-influence constraint.
Indonesia (n = 2)	Election law: at least 30% women candidates, zipper rule, open lists since 2008; Presidential Instruction 9/2000; gender-responsive planning and budgeting. (International IDEA, n.d.; Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections, 2017, arts. 243 and 246; Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2000 on Gender Mainstreaming in National Development, 2000; WPS-ASEAN, 2024)	Participation strengthened through institutional mechanisms and gender-responsive initiatives; party structures and implementation remain decisive (P14, P15).	Convergent on instruments. Whether instruments change allocations is not shown; two interviews make this case illustrative only.

Note. Documents are those in force or published between 2015 and 2025. None of the documents measures policy outcomes.

So, what is representation in terms of influence? There are a series of events in the accounts which can be recognized as having identifiable breaks. Access is restricted by a quota, reserved seat or

appointment. When it has control of the agenda, resources or information, it's its authority, it's not when it's chosen by the party or it's a “periphery” post. It is when women can build coalitions, sponsors and networks to become policy agencies that the role of networks and civil-society partners is involved. Agency is responsiveness when decisions, budgets and monitoring consume it, evidence and consultation join it up, or don't. All of the steps can fail on their own. The cases vary in terms of location of authority (constitution in Rwanda, party in Pakistan and Indonesia, instrument beyond the numbers in Pakistan and Bangladesh); in terms of instruments beyond the numbers; and in terms of the prominence of civil society (most clearly in Bangladesh). The Rwandan configuration is most exposed at enactment, most challenging at selection and party control, and at nomination and at making existing instruments work, the Pakistani and Bangladeshi configurations. The cases are not ranked in the above descriptions. The divergent accounts were not significant, but there was a variation in the level of effectiveness of the formal mechanisms in institutional contexts in terms of gaining authority.

5. Discussion

The essential is that representation is not the same as it is and isn't sufficient, and the missing link is authority. There have been prior studies that have found differences in impact across policy fields, team composition and context (An et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2025; Kläy et al., 2025); however, they have not identified what these differences are. Is mentioned in the interviews.It is referred to in the interviews. When women were in seats without authority, participants felt that they were being influenced by the authority over the agenda, resources and access. Authority provides the operational content to the transition from critical mass to critical actors, and why numbers-based quotas don't have to change policy processes. It also gives a compelling inference. In some domains (Kläy et al., 2025) or in teams of a specific size (Huang et al., 2025), representation effects could be seen as a sign of “enough” women; the narratives presented here indicate that representation effects may occur when the conditions of conversion are fulfilled.

The discovery also raises two tenets of reform practice into question. The first is that the two approaches of quotas and mainstreaming are complementary, so that the impact of the two approaches is multiplicative. The accounts indicate that they talk about steps, entry and embedding and neither is about authority, the step between entry and embedding. The second is that administrative representation is a subordinate question which must be addressed once political equality has been achieved. They said administration is a way in itself and if a country takes one path and finds itself on another one, it means that it is stuck. The emphasis is on action, and “reform failure” is one such. If a quota does not work, and women are not engaged in the budget process, it is typically because there are not enough women and/or there is not enough will. The third option is that the reform succeeded in its intended way and that the design of the reform did not make its way to the places of authority distribution.

Mainstreaming and gender responsive budgeting (Moser & Moser, 2005; Rubin & Bartle, 2005) can result in two outcomes – the use of an instrument and the integration of the instrument into the budget decision making process. However, who decides on the party list, who chairs the committee, who gets to

see the data, who writes the budget line – the feminist-institutionalist observation about informal as a means of implementation (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Lowndes, 2020). Finally, influence is more complex and can be transmitted through a variety of channels that may not be tackled in the same way by reform.

The routes to political, administrative, network, and collaborative are via agenda-setting, negotiation, sponsorship, and access, respectively; and civil-society links are the route to collaborative. The administrative pathway is the least studied (An et al., 2022; Park & Mwihambi, 2022), and the descriptions indicate that it is as viable or more as a form of leverage as schooling and high income. The differences between countries are not rankings but comparative as the pathways are mixed in different ways in the countries.

Table 5

Assessment of the propositions against the evidence

Prop.	Observable implication	Interview evidence	Documentary evidence	Assessment
P1	Accounts distinguish holding a seat from controlling agendas or resources.	Section 4.1: all four countries; P10.	Reserved-seat designs do not themselves specify authority (Table 4).	Supported as an illustration; variation in authority within cases not examined.
P2	Where formal rules exist, accounts of enactment vary with organizational commitment and informal practice.	Sections 4.2 and 4.5; P13.	Formal instruments present in all four cases; enactment not documented.	Consistent; discrepant accounts not yet reported.
P3	Administrators describe influence through expertise and implementation, varying with rank and discretion.	Section 4.3; P12.	Implementation reports, where available, contextualized administrative practice but did not measure influence.	Weakest evidence: one extract, one country; rank and discretion not examined.
P4	Evidence and consultation matter when tied to decisions and feedback; otherwise procedural.	Section 4.4; P9.	Gender-data gap (Bangladesh); budgeting instruments (Bangladesh, Indonesia).	Consistent; no case traces evidence through to a decision.
P5	Sponsorship, networks, and coalitions expand agency; gatekeeping constrains it.	Sections 4.5 and 4.6; Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia; P9.	Party-controlled selection (Pakistan, Bangladesh); open-list competition (Indonesia).	Consistent; enabling and constraining effects not separable with current data.

Note. Assessments are qualitative judgments of illustrative fit, not tests of the propositions.

Each of these is summarized in Table 5. The P1 is most well supported, and is seen in all four countries. P3 is the least significant and only a few extracts were found and none of these changed by rank. Conditional claims are not included in the most informative test (cases with enabling conditions and cases with responsiveness), but are included in the evidence for P2, P4 and P5. There are alternative explanations which cannot be ruled out. The nature of the results of the quota can be influenced by the nature of the regime and its party-system dominance (Bauer & Burnet, 2013), as can be the nature of the results of mainstreaming, depending on who is selected to participate in the quota, and who is not (Tripp, 2015; True & Mintrom, 2001). These are boundary conditions on the propositions, and not on their refutations.

6. Conclusion

The question of under which institutional circumstances women acquire the power to shape policy. The interviews and documents from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Rwanda and Indonesia react conditionally and in a processual manner. Presence creates potential, presence creates authority, policy agency is exercised by presence, and responsiveness is achieved through the absorption of the decisions, budgets and implementation by presence. Organizational commitment, party control, administrative capacity, and evidence use and civil society links open the door on the question of whether or not formal rules make a difference. The study therefore highlights the mechanisms of conversion (authority), the pathways of interaction (political and administrative representation) as well as the distinctness of design and enactment, which are associated with substantive representation and representative bureaucracy, and feminist institutionalism.

The mechanism is carried over to the implications. It is possible to report on the number of women in leadership positions, in committees, and on budgets, but not on the influence of their authority, as done by governments and oversight bodies (Heath et al., 2005; Nazar & Zarghami, 2026). Budget, responsible units and monitoring are needed for gender commitments (Bud lender, 2000; Stansky, 2016). Electoral quotas should be the focus of leadership pathways, as is now the case for electoral quotas (Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017); decisions should be based on evidence and consultation, and should be shared with those consulted (Arnstein, 1969; Head, 2010); and informal gatekeeping should be audited through nomination and committee-assignment practices (Bjarnegård, 2013; Chappell & Waylen, 2013). These are directions for testing and not the effects as demonstrated in this study. As for methodological aspects the questions asked during the interviews are different from the questions asked in the documents and the design and implementation, as well as comparison, should be read in parallel.

Borders are correct. The interviews were done with senior and experienced persons and the numbers (15, not evenly distributed) are too small to draw country level conclusions, particularly for Rwanda and Indonesia. Interviews were conducted via video call, and were in three languages, with one researcher coding the data. The design was not able to depict that representation resulted in certain policies and there was not enough of a sample for intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2007). Process-tracing designs (Beach & Pedersen, 2013) can be used in future research to investigate the specific

policy processes from agenda-setting to implementation, and to explore budgeting and other policy processes that involve gender responsiveness, violence prevention and maternal health, as well as the processes through which policy decisions are made, which can be captured in legislative records, budget data and interviews. More ambitious comparisons to other electoral systems and administrative traditions might be explored in future research, with the same set-ups (Huang et al., 2025; Meier & Dhillon, 2022). It is not the women in office that is the indicator of development but their ability to govern.

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Figures

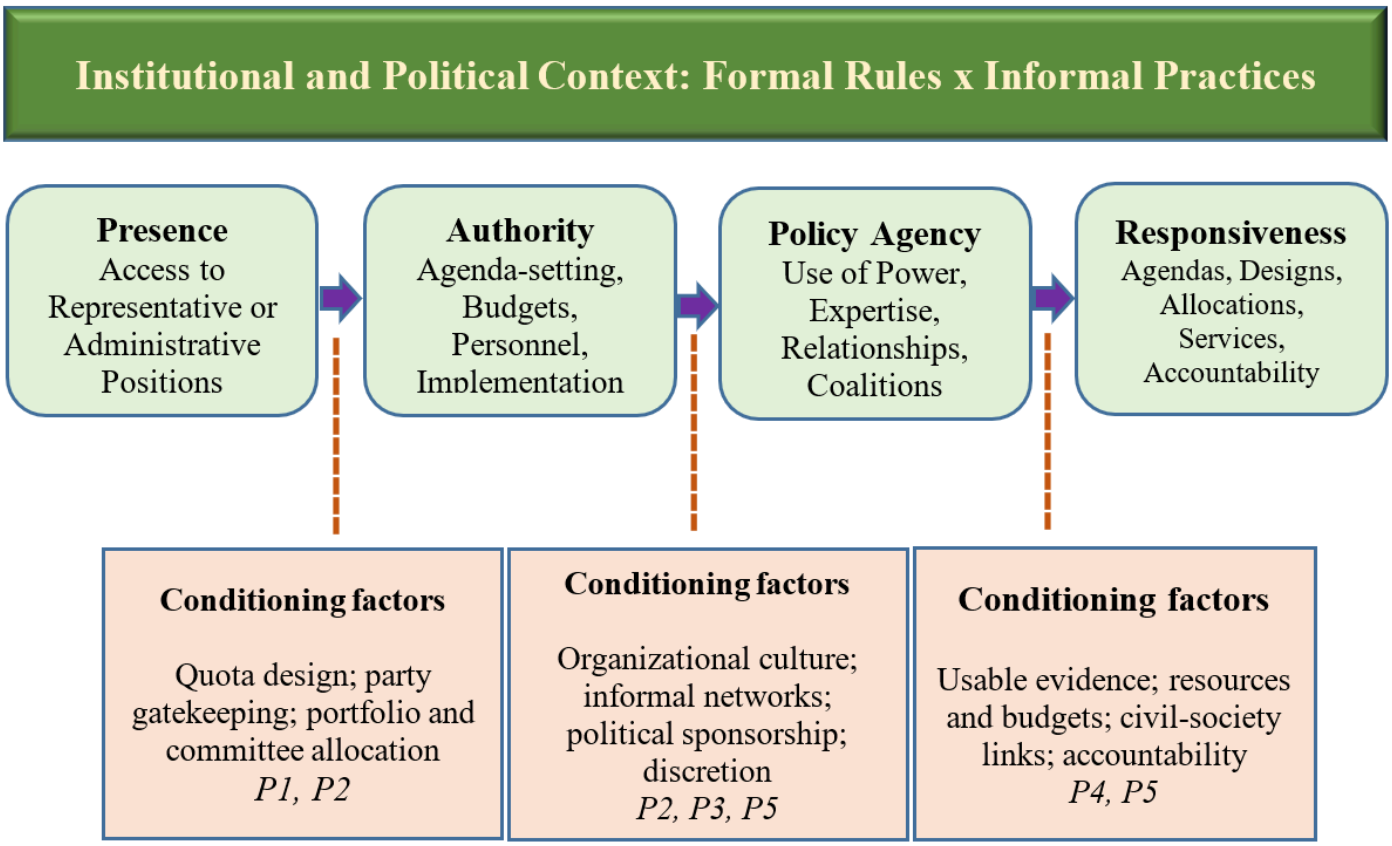


Figure 1

Conceptual framework: from presence to policy responsiveness

P = proposition (Section 3.2). Each link is institutionally conditioned and may be weakened or strengthened.
Note. Author's own elaboration.