

# Examining Local Policy to Improve Women's Participation in Village Politics : A Case Study in Semarang Regency, Indonesia

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# Examining Local Policy to Improve Women's Participation in Village Politics: A Case Study in Semarang Regency, Indonesia

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**Abstract.** The Indonesia government has enacted the Village Act (Law No. 6/2014) which allows villages to establish a simple democratic government which consists of an executive (village leader) and a legislative body named Village Representative Council (VRC). As the legislative politics have been progressing forward to gender equality through affirmative action so does the village. This article explores the development of affirmative action at the villages of Semarang Regency whereby the regent government has enacted an affirmative action mechanism to ensure women representation in the VRC for at least one woman per village. Moreover, it is supposed that such policy can improve their political capabilities and public supports, thus the task of this article to find out. Therefore, we used a qualitative approach to examine the policy's implementation in the villages of Semarang Regency. Our preliminary findings explain that the policy mandates the village government to facilitate and encourage women villagers to be active in politics, especially decision-making, through three key strategies, self-participation, self-representation, and community building. Self-participation means that women shall be organized as a political group. Self-representation means that the representative of women's interests shall come from, be nominated, and voted by, women villagers only.

**Keywords:** *affirmative action, self-participation, self-representation, women's role in politics*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the Indonesian government enacted the Law No. 6/2014 on Village or often called as the Village Act. The Village Act is a statute which permitted villages to establish its own autonomous government along with its complete mechanism –i.e. election- and governmental system –i.e. executive and legislative bodies-. This act is a part of decentralization politics in Indonesia that is named as *otonomi daerah* or regional autonomy.

Initially, the state granted multi-faceted autonomy powers to provinces and districts with the former has higher authority than the latter. The decentralization mandates the central government to allocate some powers to regional governments as to take a decision and legislating statutes specifically addressed and applied in accordance with each own province and district [1]. Whereas the central government would only retain powers in the field of monetary matters, defense, foreign affairs, justice and religion [2]. As an extension policy to decentralization politics, the Village Act started a new phase for Indonesia's village governance which was once posited as the smallest and hierarchically lowest administrative unit in a top-down system towards an autonomous *polis*-like community [3]–[6].

Decentralization is integral to the democratization efforts in Indonesia. Another vital part of democratization is achieving equality, especially in terms of gender [7]. The Indonesian government has been committed to realizing this goal by enacting an affirmative action, a special measure that is intended to uplift the voice of the disadvantaged and disenfranchised, in a form of quota policy which is stipulated in the Law No.2/2011 or Political Party Act and Legislative Election Act (Law No. 7/2017) [8]–[10]. The quota mandates a 30% minimum of women participation in both party membership and electoral candidacies for any political party that intends to participate in the election. This policy is proven to be fruitful as to boosting women participation in politics and also their representation in the state legislative –or as Indonesians have known as the People's Representative Assembly-. In the 2019 election, women constituted 48 % of the total candidates and 20.5% of the total winning candidates in state legislative and senate, the highest one since the post-reform era (bbc.com, 2019).

Looking at the increasing popularity of gender equality movement and the positive reception of the affirmative action [11], the idea of women representation in decision-making has become more common as a staple fundamental value for Indonesia's democracy in any political level, whether it is as great as a state or as small

as a village [12]–[15]. Speaking of village politics, the Village Act also incorporated the value of gender equality, albeit only in the Village Representative Council [16]. However, the Village Act does not regulate the electoral mechanism for villages that are likely to be drastically different than that of the state. Hence, the authority lies to the regional government as to regulate electoral mechanism for villages. This article will explore on how the regional government regulated village's electoral mechanism and how effective it is as to improving women political participation and representation in village politics. The topic will be based on our research placed in Semarang Regency, Indonesia, whom the regent government enacted its original policies that are, as we concluded, substantively and practically effective for women political participation and representation through three elements; self-participation, self-representation, and community building.

#### METHOD

This article is based on a case study on the implementation of two regional legislation (the **Regency Government Regulation No.4/2018** and the **Regent Decree No.21/2018**) of Semarang Regency regarding village election. However, this study will only focus on parts which involve women's electoral participation, either as voters, candidates, or currently seated members. This study used empirical data that are comprised of observation and interviews with an expert, government officials, women groups, village officials, and women's village representative. The data are then analyzed as to its relation to three elements; self-participation, self-representation and community building.

#### RESULTS

##### **Village Election and Village Politics in Indonesia**

The Village Act (Law No. 4/2016) promulgated that village governance lies upon two vital institutions; an executive government led by a village leader and a legislative body named the Village Representative Council (VRC). Like in a typical democratic government, the policymaking procedures of the village on policy and regulations involve cooperation between the executive and legislative branches [17], [18]. The village leader and members of the VRC are elected differently: Where the former is elected through a ballot election, the latter is either selected through ballot election or the deliberation of community constituents. Moreover, the Village Act stipulates that the VRC must consist of an odd number of members in the range of five to nine people. Regarding the member formation of the VRC, the provision of affirmative action is implemented through the Village Act.

The model for the selection/formation of VRC Members is adjusted to the position of the Village. As the organizer of the Village Government and Decision Makers, the VRC Members are representatives of the concerned Villagers based on regional representation

determined by Deliberation and Consensus. The method of selecting/determining VRC members can be through direct election, chosen by the village/hamlet region, or chosen by deliberation.

The results of the election/deliberation were sent to the Village for village representation. The selection/determination of VRC members is chosen in the Village with consideration and agreement on the results of the deliberations. The number of VRC members in the past was determined by an odd number, at least 5 (five) people and at most 11 (one) person, taking into account the area, women's representation of at least 30% of the total VRC members, population, and Village Finance capabilities. In Law No. 6/2014 is regulated that the number of Members of the Village Representative Council is determined by the amount of odd, at least 5 (five) people and a maximum of 9 (nine) people, taking into account the territory, women, population and financial capacity. This representation design is not based on descriptive representative whereby the representativeness is based on the shared similarities between the representative and the represented. But instead, the design is principally based on substantive representative whereby the representative is ought and bound to advocate the voices and agenda of the people they represented.

The political system of village administration policy-making and bureaucracy as stipulated in the Village Law shows characteristics that are in accordance with the customs and traditions of the village as a unified society [17]. The process of deliberation in policymaking is designed to be as accommodative as possible, where communication between representatives and constituents - villagers and interest groups - is responsive and sensitive to the needs of villagers. Given the democratic objectives of the Village Law, the design of political systems is intended not only for community-based development but also for the advancement of disadvantaged and marginalized groups, such as women [19].

##### **Women Participation in Village Election of Semarang Regency**

In 2018, the government and the regional house of representatives of Semarang Regency enacted two legislations; the Regional Law of Semarang Regency No. 4/2018 which regulates village governance and the Regent Decree of Semarang Regency No. 21/2018 which regulates mechanisms of village election. As for the VRC's membership, these legislation has set their own membership formats such as: a) the VRC shall consist of either 5, 7, or 9 members depending on the population size, and; b) the VRC's memberships shall be elected based on representations of women and region through either direct election or communities' deliberation, with a caveat that all VRCs shall have only one female member who represents women representation.

The formats above explained that there is a sort of designated seat for certain purposes, which in this case are two; region and women. As for women representation

seat, its electoral mechanism is specific and targeted to women population of the village, thus the entire election for women representation seat is done by and for women only. Although such seat is only designated one for each VRC, women can still become a VRC member but without such designated procedure.

This is shown in steps as following [16]: 1) The candidacy for designated women representation seat can only be proposed through deliberative affirmation from representatives of local women groups; 2) The election for designated women representation seat can be using two methods; direct election by legally available women voters or a deliberation which involves approved female social figures of the village.

According to the Regent Government Regulation of Semarang No. 4/2018 and Regent Decree No. 21/2018, the election of woman representatives in VRC only includes female villagers – who have the right to vote and are authorised through citizen recognition – to ensure the representation of women not only in a physical sense, but also in interest alignment between the prospective representatives and the constituents. The election procedure starts with the selection of prospective female candidates. The two regulations stipulate that, under territorial consideration, there can only be one female prospective candidate to be delegated as the female candidate of that territory's constituents. The delegation is determined by a deliberative consensus of women's constituents of the community group and neighborhood. The forum of this deliberation consists of two members of the Family Welfare Programme, one representing the community group and the other representing the neighborhood group, and two women's interest figures. Subsequently, the selected prospective candidate officially becomes the women's representation candidate from that territorial constituency. The next and final step is the village-level election, where one female candidate is selected as the women's representative of the Village Representative Forum. There are two mechanisms of election available, namely a consensus forum and a direct voting system. In either of these, the election of women representatives will be undertaken by village-level women's constituents, including one member of the village branch of the Family Welfare Programme, one member of the community group branch of the Family Welfare Programme and two women's interest figures.

The two legislations further expanded women's role in village politics beyond the electoral competition. The policymaking in the village does not only focus on executive and legislative deliberations but also involves communities in these meetings. Such debate sites are referred to as the Village Consultative Forum, which has the following functions; 1) allows the government to consult with the community - through constituent representatives - regarding policies and regulations, and 2) enable the government to report actions and actions taken during the administration period. Therefore, the Village Consultative Forum is a type of public meeting in which the village government, VRC, and community constituent representatives can meet and negotiate on

village affairs. This forum also manifests VRC rights to question the village government about government affairs. Regarding women's participation, women's constituents can also be involved in the forum, as mandated by the Village Law. Therefore, there are two ways for women to participate in village policy-making, both internally as VRC members or externally through the Village Consultative Forum.

We analyzed that these legislations (Regent Government Regulation of Semarang No. 4/2018 and Regent Decree No. 21/2018) employs two as to women empowerment in politics; self-participation and self-representation. Self-participation means that the village election mechanism encouraged a full involvement from women villagers in every step of the election. Whereas self-representation means that this designated mechanism is purposed for the designated seat as well that is women representation, thus only women who is committed for and supported by women constituents that can win the election.

#### CONCLUSION

The idea of gender equality in Indonesian politics has been extending beyond the state level into much smaller administrative levels along with the wave of decentralization policy. The affirmative action for women representation has been adopted in regional politics as well, including the village. Helped with the autonomy of self-legislate as a part of decentralization, regional governments are able to enact their own policies and legislations, which means that they can take such freedom to develop a more effective method to realize gender equality in regional politics and village. This is shown in our research which held at Semarang Regency whereby the government has passed two legislations, Regent Government Regulation of Semarang No. 4/2018 and Regent Decree No. 21/2018, regarding village election and its mechanism. As for affirmative action, these legislations mandated a designated seat for women representation in every Village Representative Council in Semarang Regency. The electoral mechanism of which is apparently exhaustive as well by employing two values; self-participation and self-representation whereby women villagers are the center of the whole electoral mechanism for the designated women representative seat, whether as voters, candidates, political supports, etc. This mechanism respects and adopts the living custom of deliberative politics, mixed with modern democracy. Therefore, these legislations indicated a goodly intended enactment of not only democratic system of government, but also progressive political and social cultures which are inclusive to women issue and as a vital part of gender mainstreaming in village life.

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