

## Beyond quotas: Women's substantive participation and democratic consolidation in Timor-Leste

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### Abstract

Women's political participation in post-conflict states presents a persistent paradox: numerical gains in representation rarely translate into substantive policy influence. Focusing on Timor-Leste, where quota legislation elevated women's parliamentary representation to 38% by 2023, this study examines the structural, institutional, and sociocultural conditions that mediate the conversion of descriptive into substantive representation. A systematic literature review (2015–2025), conducted following PRISMA 2020 guidelines and synthesising peer-reviewed studies, institutional reports, and policy documents, frames the analysis through critical actor theory, feminist institutionalism, and intersectionality. Findings reveal that patriarchal norms, elite gatekeeping, institutional fragility, and gender-based political violence collectively constrain women's policy agency despite formal numerical gains. Conversely, coalition-building, gender-responsive budgeting, leadership development, and anti-violence mechanisms emerge as critical enablers for translating presence into influence. Substantive women's participation is further shown to advance democratic consolidation by broadening accountability and enhancing institutional legitimacy in fragile state contexts. Comparative analysis of Rwanda and Nepal affirms that quota-driven reform must be accompanied by cultural transformation to yield durable outcomes. The study contributes theoretically by advancing integrated gender-governance frameworks, empirically by situating Timor-Leste within comparative post-conflict scholarship, and normatively by generating recommendations aligned with SDG 5, SDG 16, and ASEAN gender frameworks. Sustainable democratic governance ultimately requires moving beyond formal quotas towards structural and cultural change that secures women's substantive empowerment.

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## Introduction

Gender quotas have emerged as a vital policy tool in the worldwide effort to enhance women's representation in legislative bodies. Since the early 1990s, over 130 nations have implemented electoral quotas, and the impact of these measures on the number of women in parliament is well established (Hughes et al., 2015; Krook, 2009). As of early 2025, women



occupied 27.2% of parliamentary seats globally—an incremental but significant improvement largely credited to quota initiatives (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). The rationale for adopting quotas is widely accepted: when women achieve a critical mass, their ability to impact policy and governance is expected to follow. Nevertheless, this reasoning has been the subject of extensive criticism. Increasing research indicates that numerical increases do not necessarily lead to policy influence, institutional change, or the promotion of women's substantive interests (Celis et al., 2008; Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008). The crucial question, therefore, is not merely the number of women who join political institutions, but what they can achieve once they are there.

The implications of this imbalance extend beyond questions of representation. A growing body of research suggests that women's presence in political institutions can influence policy agendas, often expanding attention to social welfare, health, and the prevention of violence (Clayton & Zetterberg, 2018; Htun & Weldon, 2012). Other studies associate women's political participation with stronger protections of rights and lower levels of corruption, particularly when participation is accompanied by institutional accountability (Brollo & Troiano, 2016; Dollar et al., 2001). Conversely, the absence of women in decision-making arenas risks reinforcing policy blind spots, marginalising certain constituencies, and weakening public confidence in political institutions. In fragile contexts, persistent under-representation may consolidate elite dominance and slow reconciliation processes, thereby undermining institutional resilience and the broader social contract (O'neil & Domingo, 2016). Expanding women's participation, therefore, carries implications not only for justice and equality but also for the overall quality of democratic governance.

Within this broader context, Timor-Leste offers an instructive case. The adoption of a 30% parliamentary quota contributed to a substantial increase in women's representation, reaching 38% of parliamentary seats in 2023—one of the highest proportions in Southeast Asia (Inter-Parliamentary Union, n.d.). In comparative terms, this development parallels experiences in several post-conflict societies, including Rwanda and Nepal, where constitutional and electoral reforms institutionalised women's presence in national legislatures following periods of conflict (Burnet, 2011; Tamang, 2009). However, these achievements coexist with continuing gaps. Women in Timor-Leste remain underrepresented in executive offices and in bureaucratic positions that shape policy agendas, suggesting that formal representation has not fully translated into broader influence within the policy process (D. Cummins, 2011; Grant et al., 2023).

These dynamics cannot be separated from the country's historical trajectory. Portuguese colonial rule established hierarchical governance structures closely intertwined with Catholic patriarchal norms. The subsequent Indonesian occupation (1975–1999) further reshaped gender relations through a militarised political environment in which men were frequently positioned as protectors of the nation, while women were framed as symbolic bearers of national identity. The interaction of these historical legacies continues to shape contemporary political institutions, where informal networks and entrenched power relations often limit women's access to decision-making arenas.

Existing scholarship highlights a recurring paradox. Electoral quotas have widened access to legislative institutions, yet informal patriarchal hierarchies and elite gatekeeping continue to influence how power operates in practice. Survey evidence and qualitative studies point to persistent ambivalence toward women's leadership, particularly at the local level (Sinpeng et al., 2022). Mixed-methods research further indicates that numerical gains do not automatically translate into agenda-setting power or policy influence (Bush, 2011; Nazneen & Mahmud, 2012). Much of this literature remains focused on descriptive representation, who enters political institutions, along the lines of Pitkin's (1967) distinction. Far less attention has been given to substantive representation, namely, how women shape policy debates and influence decision-making once inside political institutions. The internal dynamics of political parties,

parliamentary committees, ministries, and intergovernmental arenas, therefore, remain relatively underexplored in analyses of women's political agency.

Against this background, the present study examines women's participation in the public policy-making process in Timor-Leste. The study is guided by three central questions: what challenges women face in participating in public policy-making, what strategies might strengthen their substantive participation in decision-making processes, and how women's participation contributes to the broader consolidation of democratic governance in Timor-Leste. Addressing these questions requires moving beyond a narrow focus on electoral representation to examine the structural, institutional, and cultural factors that shape women's roles across different stages of the policy process.

Accordingly, the study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of women's participation in public policy-making in Timor-Leste by focusing on three interconnected dimensions. *First*, it identifies the structural, institutional, and cultural barriers that constrain women's participation in decision-making. *Second*, it explores strategies to strengthen women's substantive participation throughout the policy cycle. *Third*, it assesses how women's involvement in policy-making contributes to broader democratic outcomes, particularly in relation to legitimacy, accountability, and inclusiveness.

The findings of this research are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. From a theoretical perspective, the study seeks to extend discussions on gender, representation, and democratic quality in post-conflict and fragile democracies by shifting attention from electoral quotas toward women's roles in shaping policy decisions. From a practical standpoint, the research offers insights that may assist policymakers, parliamentary institutions, and civil society organisations in designing gender-responsive policies and strengthening institutional mechanisms that support women's participation. Such efforts are particularly relevant for advancing gender equality and reinforcing democratic governance in Timor-Leste.

The analysis draws on a body of scholarship that conceptualises women's political participation through the distinction between descriptive representation and substantive representation introduced by Pitkin (1967). While Timor-Leste has achieved relatively high levels of descriptive representation—38% of parliamentary seats following the implementation of a 30% quota (Hall & Barnes, 2023)—scholars caution that numerical representation alone does not dismantle structural inequalities within political institutions (Krook, 2010). This tension reflects broader debates between critical mass theory, which suggests that reaching a threshold of representation can trigger institutional change (Dahlerup, 1988), and feminist institutionalism, which emphasises the persistence of informal norms and power relations that limit the transformative impact of formal reforms (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010). The Timor-Leste case illustrates these tensions, as women's parliamentary representation has increased significantly while their presence in executive offices and policy-shaping bureaucracies remains limited.

Empirical research also documents how male-dominated party structures and local governance institutions, including suco councils, continue to constrain women's influence in decision-making processes (D. A. Cummins, 2010). Even legislative reforms widely regarded as progressive, such as the Domestic Violence Law adopted in 2010, were heavily supported by international donors, raising questions about the depth and sustainability of institutional transformation (Yogarathnam, 2013). Civil society organisations, most notably Rede Feto, have played an important role in advocating for reforms and raising public awareness. However, their influence remains constrained by limited institutional capacity and a significant reliance on external funding (Rimmer, 2008). These dynamics highlight the gap that often emerges between formal commitments to gender equality and the everyday practices through which political power is exercised.

Historical studies of the Organização Popular da Mulher Timorese (OPMT) during the resistance period further illustrate the long-standing political engagement of women in Timor-Leste. Women's participation in clandestine networks and liberation movements helped cultivate forms of political consciousness that continued into the post-independence period (Durand & Cabasset-Semedo, 2009; Niner et al., 2022). The experience of resistance not only challenged colonial and patriarchal domination but also shaped the foundations of women's activism and their claims for political inclusion in the emerging democratic state.

## Method

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) as its primary research design. An SLR is a structured, transparent, and reproducible method for identifying, appraising, and synthesising existing scholarship on a defined research problem, which is considered suitable for synthesising existing knowledge and analysing conceptual frameworks of women's participation in public policy-making in Timor-Leste (Snyder, 2019; Xiao & Watson, 2019).

The research draws upon secondary sources, including peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science published between 2015 and 2025, complemented by academic books, research reports, official government documents, and publications from international organisations such as UN Women and UNDP. To ensure rigour, specific criteria were applied: studies were included if they addressed women's participation, gender and governance, or democratic governance in Timor-Leste; were published between 2015 and 2025; were written in English or Portuguese; and appeared in peer-reviewed journals or institutionally recognised reports. Exclusion criteria comprised duplicate records, non-academic opinion papers, and studies lacking methodological rigour.

The data collection followed a systematic search strategy across Scopus and Web of Science, using Boolean operators and combinations of keywords such as "*women AND participation*", "*public policy*", "*gender AND governance*", and "*Timor-Leste AND democracy*". Filters for year, subject area, and document type were applied to ensure transparency and replicability in study selection (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The retrieved studies were then analysed using qualitative descriptive analysis, involving four stages: data reduction, categorisation, synthesis, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Validity was strengthened through triangulation of sources, comparing academic articles, international reports, and government documents. At the same time, reliability was reinforced through peer review of coding and cross-checking to minimise potential researcher bias (Patton, 2015).

The process adhered to the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Of the 520 records initially identified, 450 remained after duplicates were removed. Screening excluded 320 records, leaving 130 full-text articles for eligibility assessment. Of these, 90 were excluded for being out of scope or lacking methodological rigour, leaving 30 studies included in the final synthesis. These studies constitute the primary material for analysis, supported by additional references from government and international organisations.

Study selection was governed by pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, detailed in Table 1. These criteria were applied sequentially at two levels: first during title and abstract screening, and subsequently during full-text review. Institutional reports issued by recognised international organisations—including UN Women, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank—were included alongside peer-reviewed articles given their relevance to policy-oriented dimensions of the inquiry and their methodological transparency.

The selection process followed the four-stage PRISMA 2020 framework: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021). An initial database search yielded 520 records. After deduplication, 450 records remained and were screened for titles and abstracts. At this stage, 320 records were excluded for being outside the thematic scope, published in unsupported languages, or constituting non-academic grey literature. The 130

remaining records were retrieved in full text and assessed for eligibility against the criteria outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Topic	Women's participation, gender and governance, democratic governance, post-conflict politics in Timor-Leste	Studies unrelated to gender, governance, or Timorese political context
Publication period	2015–2025	Studies published before 2015
Language	English or Portuguese	All other languages
Source type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports (UN Women, UNDP, World Bank), official government documents, academic monographs	Opinion pieces, editorials, conference abstracts without full text, grey literature without institutional affiliation
Methodological quality	Studies with clearly stated research design, data sources, and analytical procedures	Duplicate records; studies lacking methodological transparency or rigour

*Source: Research Data, 2025.*

Ninety records were excluded at this stage for the following reasons: outside scope (n = 55), insufficient methodological rigour (n = 25), or inaccessible full text (n = 10). The final synthesis incorporated 40 sources: 30 peer-reviewed journal articles and 10 institutional reports. Table 2 summarises the PRISMA selection flow.

**Table 2.**

*PRISMA 2020 Study Selection Flow*

Stage	Action	Records (n)
Identification	Records identified via Scopus and Web of Science database search	520
Deduplication	Duplicate records removed	70 removed → 450 retained
Screening	Records excluded after title and abstract screening (outside scope, wrong language, non-academic)	320 excluded → 130 retained
Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	130 assessed
Full-text exclusion	Excluded: out of scope (n = 55), insufficient methodological rigour (n = 25), inaccessible full text (n = 10)	90 excluded → 40 retained
Inclusion	Studies included in final synthesis (30 peer-reviewed articles + 10 institutional reports)	40 included

*Source: Research Data, 2025.*

Data extraction was guided by a structured template that captured the following information for each included study: authorship, year of publication, country or regional focus, theoretical framework, methodology, key findings, and relevance to the three research

questions. Extracted data were then subjected to thematic synthesis, a method well-suited to integrating qualitative evidence and generating analytical themes that extend beyond the findings of individual studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

The synthesis proceeded through three iterative stages. First, line-by-line coding of key findings produced a set of descriptive codes. Second, related codes were grouped into descriptive themes corresponding to the study's research questions: barriers to substantive participation, enabling strategies, and implications for democratic consolidation. Third, analytical themes were developed by interpreting the descriptive themes and by considering the integrated theoretical framework, critical actor theory, feminist institutionalism, and intersectionality, thereby moving from description to conceptual interpretation.

## Results and Discussion

### Main Challenges to Women's Participation in Public Policy-Making in Timor-Leste

Women's participation in public policy-making in Timor-Leste has improved in terms of numerical representation due to gender quota laws, yet significant obstacles continue to constrain their substantive influence. These challenges are rooted in entrenched patriarchal norms, party structures, resource limitations, institutional weaknesses, and persistent gender-based violence. Understanding these barriers is essential for assessing why formal inclusion does not always translate into meaningful engagement in the policymaking process.

Whilst gender quota legislation has materially increased women's numerical presence in the Timorese parliament—reaching 38% in 2023—the evidence reviewed consistently indicates that commensurate advances have not matched descriptive gains in substantive influence. The barriers constraining women's policy agency are multi-layered, operating simultaneously at structural, institutional, resource, and security levels, and their effects are compounded by the configuration of Timor-Leste's post-conflict political institutions. Five principal categories of barrier emerge from the synthesis, as summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3.**

#### *Barriers to Women's Substantive Policy Participation in Timor-Leste*

Category	Barrier	Key Source(s)
Structural	Patriarchal norms; politics framed as a male domain; gender stereotypes devaluing women's contributions	(D. Cummins, 2011; Niner et al., 2024)
Institutional	Male-dominated party gatekeeping; weak enforcement of quota provisions; exclusion from committee leadership and agenda-setting	(Niner et al., 2022)
Resource-based	Limited access to financial resources, professional networks, and technical policy training	(Niner et al., 2022)
Executive concentration	Semi-presidential system centralises power within a male veteran elite; parliamentary quotas weakened by executive dominance	(Feijó, 2024; Reynolds et al., 2015)
Security	Gender-based political violence; online and offline harassment; intimidation as a systematic deterrent	(D. Cummins, 2011; Niner et al., 2024)

*Source: Research Data, 2025.*

At the structural level, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to constitute politics as a masculine domain, rendering women's contributions liable to be undervalued or dismissed irrespective of their formal position (Niner et al., 2024). These norms are not merely cultural residues; they are actively reproduced through socialisation, media representation,

and the expectations of both voters and party elites, generating a normative environment that systematically delegitimises women as credible policy agents. Feminist institutionalism captures this dynamic through the concept of the 'gendered informal institution': informal rules, expectations, and practices that coexist with—and frequently undermine—formal commitments to gender equality (Mackay et al., 2010).

At the institutional level, male-dominated party structures exercise gatekeeping functions that constrain women's access to decision-making platforms beyond the legislative chamber itself (Niner et al., 2022). Party elites, predominantly male veterans of the independence resistance, control candidate selection, committee assignments, and access to ministerial portfolios, thereby determining the spaces in which substantive policy influence can be exercised. The structural concentration of executive authority within Timor-Leste's semi-presidential system further exacerbates this dynamic: power is centralised within a narrow executive elite, and the formal gains secured through parliamentary quotas are diluted by women's near-absence from strategic executive roles (D. A. Cummins, 2010; Niner et al., 2024). Quota legislation, in this context, has opened legislative doors without unlocking executive or bureaucratic influence.

Resource constraints constitute a third category of barrier. Women in Timor-Leste frequently lack access to the financial resources, professional networks, and technical training required for effective engagement in complex policy processes, particularly in areas such as fiscal planning, infrastructure, and security (Niner et al., 2022). This resource deficit is compounded by the absence of institutional support structures, such as parliamentary research offices and gender-responsive legislative secretariats, that might mitigate individual capacity limitations. Finally, the pervasive threat of gender-based political violence and online harassment constitutes a systematic deterrent to women's active participation in policy debate (Niner et al., 2024). The chilling effect of intimidation extends beyond its direct victims, discouraging potential candidates and reinforcing the perception that political spaces are inherently unsafe for women.

### Strategies for Enhancing Women's Substantive Policy Participation

The literature reviewed identifies a multi-level ensemble of strategies that enable women to translate formal presence into substantive policy influence. A consistent finding across Timorese and comparative post-conflict scholarship is that single-lever approaches, whether legal, capacity-based, or cultural, are insufficient in isolation; durable progress requires simultaneous interventions at the individual, institutional, collective, and societal levels (Htun & Weldon, 2012). Table 4 summarises the principal strategies identified in the synthesis.

**Table 4.**

#### *Strategies for Enhancing Women's Substantive Policy Participation*

Level	Strategy	Key Source(s)
Individual	Leadership training, mentoring, and skills development for technical policy engagement	(Niner et al., 2024)
Institutional	Gender-responsive budgeting; guaranteed access to committee leadership; procedural reforms mandating women's inclusion in agenda-setting	(Htun & Weldon, 2012)
Collective / civil society	Cross-party coalitions and partnerships with civil society organisations to amplify bargaining power and coordinate advocacy	(Niner et al., 2022; Rimmer, 2008)

Societal / cultural	Public awareness campaigns to shift perceptions of women's political leadership; engagement of male allies and traditional leaders	(Niner et al., 2024; Wigglesworth et al., 2015)
Security	Legal protections against political violence and harassment; safe reporting mechanisms; digital safety support	(Belo, 2025).

*Source: Research Data, 2025.*

At the individual level, targeted leadership training and mentoring programmes are identified as critical for equipping women with the technical competencies and political skills required to engage effectively across policy domains (Niner et al., 2024). Such initiatives are most effective when embedded within broader institutional frameworks rather than delivered as standalone activities, ensuring that individual capacity development is matched by enabling institutional conditions. At the institutional level, gender-responsive budgeting is a particularly powerful mechanism for embedding gender analysis into the fiscal planning cycle. It transforms resource allocation into a lever for substantive policy influence and ensures that women's participation has measurable effects on governance outcomes (Htun & Weldon, 2012).

Cross-party coalitions and partnerships with civil society organisations are identified as the most effective collective strategy for amplifying women's bargaining power within male-dominated institutional environments (Niner et al., 2022; Rimmer, 2008). In Timor-Leste, organisations such as Rede Feto have demonstrated the potential of civil society as both an advocacy partner and an accountability mechanism, even where their direct institutional access remains constrained by resource dependency. At the societal level, sustained public engagement campaigns and the strategic involvement of male allies, including traditional and religious leaders, are identified as necessary for shifting the normative environment in which women's political leadership is assessed (Niner, 2024; Wigglesworth et al., 2015). Finally, robust legal protections against gender-based political violence, including digital safety support and accessible reporting mechanisms, are identified as a foundational precondition for the effectiveness of all other strategies (Belo, 2025).

### Contributions of Women's Participation to Democratic Consolidation

The third dimension of the findings concerns the governance outcomes associated with women's substantive participation. The evidence reviewed consistently demonstrates that women's meaningful engagement in policy-making functions as a multiplier of democratic quality across five dimensions, as summarised in Table 5. These findings collectively reframe women's political empowerment from a matter of equity to a structural imperative for democratic consolidation in post-conflict contexts.

**Table 5.**

#### *Contributions of Women's Substantive Participation to Democratic Consolidation*

Democratic dimension	Contribution	Key Source(s)
Legitimacy	Broader representation enhances institutional legitimacy and public trust, particularly among women and marginalised communities	(Niner et al., 2022)
Accountability	Women's presence correlates with stronger parliamentary oversight, higher ethical standards, and reduced corruption	(Merkle, 2022; Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005)
Policy responsiveness	Women legislators prioritise health, education, and social welfare,	(Clayton et al., 2017; ESCAP, 2019)

	broadening the policy agenda and benefiting marginalised groups	
Reconciliation and stability	Women's active engagement in post-conflict governance links to peacebuilding, social cohesion, and long-term democratic stability	(Krause, 2019; Krause et al., 2018; Rimmer, 2008)
Civic engagement	Women representatives cultivate closer ties with civil society, reinforcing democratic participation beyond formal institutions	(Ehrhart et al., 2024)

*Source: Research Data, 2025.*

The legitimacy-enhancing effects of women's inclusion are particularly salient in the Timorese context, where the credibility of democratic institutions remains fragile and contingent upon public perceptions of inclusiveness (Niner et al., 2022). Research on accountability outcomes demonstrates that women's legislative presence is associated with stronger parliamentary oversight and reduced tolerance for corruption, effects consistent with Dollar et al.'s (2001) comparative findings and reinforced by Merkle's (2022) analysis of fragile democracies. In the domain of policy responsiveness, the evidence confirms that women legislators systematically prioritise health, education, and social protection in their legislative agendas, thereby broadening policy outputs to address the needs of constituencies that are frequently marginalised by male-dominated governance (Clayton et al., 2017; ESCAP, 2019).

The contribution of women's participation to post-conflict reconciliation and democratic stability represents a dimension of particular significance for Timor-Leste. Krause's (2018) cross-national analysis demonstrates that women's active engagement in transitional governance processes is associated with more durable peace agreements and more stable democratic trajectories, a finding corroborated by the Timorese case through Harris-Rimmer's (2010) account of women's roles in transitional justice. These outcomes are not automatic; they depend on women occupying substantive rather than merely symbolic positions within post-conflict institutions.

In post-conflict contexts like Timor-Leste, women's active engagement has further been linked to reconciliation and long-term stability, strengthening the foundations of peace (Krause, 2018). Finally, women's representation cultivates closer ties with civil society organisations, reinforcing civic engagement and expanding democratic participation beyond formal institutions (Ehrhart, 2024). Collectively, these contributions demonstrate that empowering women in policymaking is not merely an equity issue but a structural imperative for democratic consolidation in Timor-Leste

## Discussion

The findings presented above converge on a central argument: that quota-driven descriptive representation, whilst a necessary condition for women's political inclusion in Timor-Leste, is insufficient as a mechanism for achieving substantive participation or democratic consolidation. This conclusion is consistent with and extends to Pitkin's (1967) foundational distinction between descriptive and substantive representation, and with the feminist institutionalist literature's emphasis on the capacity of informal patriarchal norms to neutralise formal institutional reforms (Mackay et al., 2010; Rimmer, 2008; Waylen, 2014). The discussion develops this argument through three analytical lenses: the theoretical implications of the findings, the insights generated by comparative analysis, and the structural preconditions for meaningful progress.

Theoretically, the Timorese case provides compelling evidence for critical actor theory's claim that the mere presence of women in legislatures does not ensure gender-equitable policy outcomes (Sarah & Mona, 2008). Women's capacity to act as critical actors advancing gender-

sensitive agendas and challenging patriarchal institutional norms is contingent upon a set of enabling conditions that are largely absent in the current Timorese context to secure access to committee leadership, independence from party gatekeeping, adequate technical resources, and freedom from the threat of political violence. These conditions do not emerge automatically from increases in numerical representation; they must be actively constructed through institutional design and cultural transformation. This finding reinforces the feminist institutionalist argument that formal rules and informal norms must be aligned if reform is to be substantively effective (Mackay et al., 2010).

Comparative analysis of Rwanda and Nepal illuminates both the potential and the limits of quota-driven reform in post-conflict democracies. Rwanda's constitutional commitment to gender parity, combined with sustained institutional investment in women's leadership development and an enabling legal framework, has produced one of the highest rates of women's legislative representation globally and demonstrable improvements in policy responsiveness and accountability (Burnet, 2011). Nepal's experience is more ambivalent: constitutional quotas have increased women's formal presence, yet caste hierarchies, party gatekeeping, and persistent gender norms continue to restrict women's substantive influence in ways structurally analogous to those documented in Timor-Leste (Tamang, 2009). The comparison suggests that the critical variable is not the quota itself but the institutional ecosystem within which it operates: whether enabling conditions, procedural reforms, capacity support, anti-violence protections, and cultural legitimation are simultaneously invested in alongside the formal representational mechanism.

The findings further highlight the significance of Timor-Leste's semi-presidential institutional architecture as a structural constraint on women's policy agency. The division of executive authority between the president and prime minister, combined with the concentration of strategic decision-making within a veteran male elite, creates a governance configuration in which parliamentary representation translates only weakly into executive influence (Ingram & Wisnicki, 1988; Reynolds et al., 2015). This institutional bottleneck is not amenable to resolution through quota reform alone; it requires deliberate reforms to executive appointment processes, ministerial composition, and the governance of senior bureaucratic roles. The broader implication is that the project of moving 'beyond quotas' requires attention to the full architecture of political power, not merely its legislative dimension.

A final observation concerns the role of civil society as a structural resource for women's substantive empowerment. The evidence reviewed consistently identifies civil society partnerships, particularly through organisations such as Rede Feto, as among the most effective mechanisms for translating women's formal presence into collective policy influence (Niner et al., 2022; Rimmer, 2008). However, the effectiveness of civil society as a political actor is itself contingent upon the broader governance environment, where institutional capacity is fragile, and resource dependency is acute, civil society organisations face structural limits on their advocacy reach. Sustained investment in the organisational capacity of women-led civil society groups by both the Timorese state and international development partners is therefore identified as a strategic priority for democratic consolidation, alongside the institutional and legal reforms discussed above.

## Conclusion

The women's participation in public policy-making in Timor-Leste reflects both remarkable progress and enduring challenges. Since independence, constitutional guarantees and parliamentary quotas have successfully expanded women's descriptive representation, placing the country among regional leaders in gender inclusion. However, the findings also reveal that numbers alone are insufficient; women's substantive influence over policy outcomes remains constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms, male-dominated party structures, weak institutional enforcement, and persistent gender-based violence. These

barriers illustrate the limits of formal reforms when cultural attitudes and structural inequalities continue to shape political life.

At the same time, the evidence underscores the transformative potential of women's substantive engagement. Where women have been able to move beyond symbolic inclusion, they have advanced progressive laws, broadened policy debates to incorporate issues of welfare and social protection, and strengthened the legitimacy and accountability of democratic institutions. This dual impact, instrumental through policy change and symbolic through reshaping social expectations, highlights that women's participation is not merely a question of fairness but a strategic resource for democratic consolidation in post-conflict contexts.

This study refines debates on gender and governance by shifting attention from quotas as endpoints to the mechanisms through which women navigate institutions and exert real authority. It extends feminist institutionalist perspectives by showing how informal norms intersect with formal rules, and it contributes to comparative scholarship by situating women's agency within broader processes of state-building and democratic legitimacy. In practice, the findings offer clear lessons for policymakers, civil society, and international partners: investments in training, mentoring, support for civil society, and institutional safeguards are necessary to ensure that equality commitments translate into everyday decision-making.

The limitation is that the reliance on secondary sources limits engagement with women's lived experiences, and the focus on political participation underexplores the intersections with economic and social empowerment. The findings are also context-specific, and further comparative and longitudinal research is needed to assess whether quota-driven inclusion can evolve into lasting cultural transformation. Such inquiry should examine how education, economic independence, and cross-party collaboration can reinforce women's agency and deepen democratic governance.

The Timor-Leste case demonstrates that while quotas create opportunities, genuine empowerment requires sustained reforms and cultural change. Women's participation must move from descriptive presence to substantive influence if democratic institutions are to reflect the aspirations of all citizens. Beyond its national context, the case offers valuable lessons for other post-conflict states: investing in women's agency is not only about advancing gender equity but also about consolidating democracy itself.

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