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**Navigating Politics: How Non-Elite Women in Eastern Indonesia Counteract
Dynastic Power**

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NAVIGATING POLITICS: HOW NON-ELITE WOMEN IN EASTERN INDONESIA COUNTERACT DYNASTIC POWER

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Abstract

Amid the entrenched grip of dynastic and oligarchic political power, non-elite women politicians are developing innovative strategies to garner public support. This study examines how non-elite women navigate structural and cultural to confront dynastic and oligarchic politics within the Southeast Sulawesi parliament during the 2019 and 2024 elections. The research focuses on three regions – the Kendari City Regional House of Representatives (DPRD), the Konaawe DPRD, and the South Konaawe DPRD – where non-elite women have secured more electoral victories than their elite counterparts, despite the strong presence of dynastic politics at both executive and legislative levels. Data were collected through interviews with women politicians and their campaign teams, as well as documentation of campaign billboards and campaign shadowing. Using a political anthropology approach, this study reveals that non-elite women politicians strategically identify safer voter bases, build cohesive teams, and cultivate grassroots loyalty. While their overall influence remains limited, they effectively navigate and counter the intrigues of dynastic and oligarchic politics. The study highlights how their electoral success contributes to reducing class disparities and gender gaps, fostering gradual political change at both micro and macro levels.

Keywords: *Oligarchy; Patriarchy; Non-Elite Woman; Dynastic Politics; Electoral Strategies.*

A. Introduction

Indonesia's political system is characterized by the dominance of dynastic and oligarchic politics, which continue to strengthen with each election across various parliamentary levels (Aspinall & As'ad, 2016; Saputra & Sotta, 2020; Wardhani, 2024). The grip of dynastic and oligarchic politics increasingly sidelines women from fair political competition. Indonesia is one of several Asian countries—such as the Philippines (Tadem & Tadem, 2016); Bangladesh (Ruud & Islam, 2016); and India (Chhibber, 2013)—where these practices remain deeply entrenched.

Within this context, women are often overshadowed by those in power (Folke et al., 2020). Political dynasties can act as a red carpet for women entering parliament (Wardani & Subekti, 2021; Taufiq et al., 2023). With the legacy of influential families, enabling them to continue their family's historical hold on power. While dynastic politics benefit elite women, they simultaneously limit opportunities for non-elite women, who often face constraints in social, economic, and political capital (Aspinall et al., 2021; Iqbal & Rayhannafi, 2023). Even outside dynastic systems, women already encounter significant structural and cultural barriers to accessing political spaces (Teele et al., 2018; Risky et al., 2023).

In this study, *elite* refers to individuals from dynastic political families who wield significant influence over policymaking and societal values—across executive, legislative, and judicial branches—while *non-elite* women lack such familial connections (Choi, 2018). With their access to institutional power, elite women tend to dominate the primary sources of societal norms and values (Aina, 1993; Nuroniyah, 2023). In contrast, amid social and political constraints, non-elite women politicians must employ strategic tactics—ranging from mobilizing grassroots support and promoting rational political education to strengthening their bargaining power—in order to compete fairly in Indonesia's patriarchal and oligarchic political arena.

Previous studies have largely focused on women's electoral success as being driven by external support, particularly from party oligarchies (Pusat

Kajian Politik Fisip UI, 2014), dynastic politics (Prihatini, 2019b; Purdey, 2016), and the use of patronage and money politics (Aspinall & As'ad, 2016). These studies often overlook the possibility that non-elite women—those without elite family and party connections—can also successfully win parliamentary seats.

A comparative study on Indonesia and Sri Lanka conducted by Jakimow et al., (2023) examines the scarcity of elected women emerging from backgrounds in social activism and community leadership. As a solution, the study proposes four key strategies: (1) recognizing women's skills, knowledge, and experience developed through grassroots activism; (2) strengthening their symbolic capital to improve public perception; (3) expanding political constituencies, social networks, and financial resources; and (4) promoting a more inclusive and women-friendly political ethic.

Another study by Goyal (2023), focusing on India, highlights that the success of grassroots women in initiating political parties lies in recruiting female activists and mobilizing community participation. Women party activists not only integrate gender issues into party platforms and manifestos but also assert women's position as a formidable political force. This study demonstrates how women politicians provide substantive representation, despite facing challenges such as limited candidate quality, inexperience, weak political networks, and discriminatory treatment by bureaucrats. To gain the support of party activists, they employ grassroots tactics that target vulnerable and economically marginalized communities.

Though not directly related to the parliamentary representation of non-elite women, other research has examined the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). WPS is a grassroots women's organization composed of members from diverse castes, ethnic, religious, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Whetstone & Luna, 2023). This organization has effectively shaped global gender norms and contributed significantly to decision-making at both local and international levels in Nepal and Sri Lanka. The study emphasizes that grassroots women's organizations not only advocate for



gender equality but also address humanitarian and justice-related issues as part of the institutional WPS framework.

The article underscores that political struggles are shaped not only by North-South dynamics but also by tensions between elite and non-elite women. Grassroots women—including former combatants, war widows, and peace activists—play a crucial role in shaping global gender norms through their participation in armed conflicts, peacebuilding processes, and movements such as Dalit women's rights and feminist activism. This research challenges dominant narratives that often overlook the contributions of grassroots women, particularly in mainstream political and policy discourses.

A study in Indonesia by Bayo (2021) highlights the perseverance of women in politics. Grassroots women gradually build their capacity and eventually attain leadership positions within political parties in Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT). Over time, the accumulation of women's political knowledge—ranging from strategies for electoral competition and voter demographics to the increasing visibility of female candidates—has become a critical determinant of their electability. Despite facing structural barriers, grassroots women politicians demonstrate agency in shaping their political trajectories, advancing their competencies even under unfavorable conditions.

Another study on political parties in Indonesia, particularly those promoting women's and youth representation, focuses on the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI) (Savirani et al., 2021). Unlike traditional parties that rely on grassroots mobilization, PSI depends more heavily on media platforms for outreach. Nonetheless, the study highlights PSI's role in providing political opportunities for young women and in advancing the discourse on gender equality in politics. By focusing on a party that advocates for youth and women's empowerment, the research analyzes PSI as an institution, rather than examining the individual electoral strategies of female politicians.

The aforementioned studies offer valuable references, albeit with notable distinctions. Goyal, Whetstone & Luna, and Savirani primarily explore institutional and organizational strategies related to women's political participation. However, Savirani's findings indicate that campaign

strategies do not predominantly target grassroots communities, as electoral support tends to originate from the urban, educated class. Goyal underscores the role of women politicians as strategic leaders who leverage their positions within electoral hierarchies to establish political infrastructure, thereby mitigating barriers to women's participation.

Meanwhile, Jakimow's study provides an analytical assessment of the limited presence of high-caliber women legislative candidates and proposes alternative entry points for grassroots women. However, it does not explore the tactical strategies these women employ to achieve electoral success. In contrast, Bayo's research highlights the resilience strategies of grassroots women politicians who, through experiential learning, construct political identities, secure voter support, and rise as non-dynastic elites within party leadership structures.

Distinct from Bayo, this study critically examines the strategic agency of non-elite women politicians by mapping the structural and cultural constraints they face in Southeast Sulawesi across two electoral cycles. It also diverges from the works of Goyal, Whetstone & Luna, and Savirani by offering an empirically grounded analysis of the micro-level strategies employed by non-elite women politicians, rather than focusing on institutional frameworks or party-driven mechanisms. The non-elite women in this study do not engage in overt resistance against dynastic politics; instead, they construct alternative, contextually adaptive strategies to navigate and contest the prevailing political order.

This study addresses a key research gap by focusing on non-elite women politicians—referred to as grassroots pathways within the broader discourse on women's political participation (Choi, 2018), or as organic women politicians (Candraningrum, 2014). Using a political anthropology approach, the study provides a nuanced analysis of how non-elite women strategically navigate structural and cultural political barriers across two electoral cycles (2019 and 2024) in Southeast Sulawesi. Its strength lies in its detailed examination of how these women devise effective electoral strategies rooted in grassroots engagement, enabling them to build trust and political

leverage when contesting dynastic politics shaped by patriarchy and oligarchy.

Research on non-elite women politicians is critical for challenging the dominance of dynastic politics, which constrains democratic processes—particularly in Eastern Indonesia. This study asserts that women’s political strength and electoral success need not rely on external forces. By operating outside the masculine-leaning influence of political dynasties, this research highlights the potential for high-quality women candidates who transcend the expectations of mere quota fulfilment. The significance of this study lies in its demonstration that fair competition among social groups is possible—if grassroots women are granted access to opportunities within a gender-equitable support system and free from class-based disparities.

B. Method

This study focuses on three regions: the Kendari City Regional People’s Representative Council (DPRD), the Konawe DPRD, and the South Konawe DPRD. These regions were selected based on two criteria. First, the number of non-elite women politicians winning legislative seats is higher than that of elite women. Second, these regions exemplify the strong grip of dynastic politics, where members of ruling families—particularly wives and daughters—have consistently contested legislative positions since the 2014 elections (Zainal, 2015).

The research subjects include women politicians officially recognized by the General Elections Commission (KPU) as legislators in the 2019 and 2024 elections, comprising both incumbents and newly elected representatives. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: age, occupational background prior to assuming legislative office, and social engagement. Age representation includes both younger and older legislators. Occupational backgrounds span entrepreneurship, trade/business, and humanitarian or social work. Social engagement includes participation in initiatives targeting youth, women, and broader community-based programs. These criteria often overlap and

complement one another. To ensure data saturation, a snowball sampling technique was employed, allowing for a diverse range of interviewees based on age, professional background, and social engagement (Sahu, 2013).

Data collection involved interviews, observations, and shadowing during the campaign period, as well as document analysis using materials from the Southeast Sulawesi KPU, photographs, videos, and campaign billboards of non-elite women politicians. These four data collection methods were employed as part of a triangulation strategy to ensure data credibility (Sugiyono, 2013).

In-depth interviews were conducted continuously and repeatedly with women politicians, while standard interviews were conducted with their campaign teams. Each research sample area was represented by five to six individuals, depending on the number of non-elite women politicians in the region. Interviews were conducted both during and outside the campaign period, with durations that varied. The questions were semi-structured and evolved based on informants' responses, allowing for in-depth follow-up inquiries.

Observations and shadowing of campaign activities were conducted during the campaign period, focusing on how women politicians and their teams mobilized constituents, identified secure voter bases, and implemented electoral strategies. The shadowing technique involved directly accompanying and observing candidates and their teams as they executed campaign strategies in their respective electoral districts. Official election data on women's electoral success was obtained from provincial and district-level KPU documents. Document analysis included a review of campaign billboards of non-elite women candidates, both in print and on social media, to analyze campaign narratives and visual representations.

All interview subjects provided informed consent in accordance with ethical research standards. The inclusion of participants' names in the study was confirmed with them to ensure source validity. The research process – from site selection and subject identification to data collection and analysis – adhered to rigorous scientific procedures. To mitigate bias that could distort gender representation, this study does not aim to highlight or marginalize any particular gender or social class but instead presents the data objectively.

Data analysis draws on the Political Anthropology perspective of Donald V. Kurtz (Kurtz, 2018). By examining how power, authority, culture, and social structures operate within society, the analysis explores the interrelations among these elements, including correlational, causal, and contradictory relationships. Using this framework, the study investigates how the political activities of non-elite women are shaped by power dynamics, authority structures, cultural norms, and social hierarchies, and how these factors ultimately influence their electoral strategies.

Through this perspective, the study examines how social structures shape interactions among women politicians, their campaign teams, and constituents; the negotiation of political dynamics across genders; cultural factors, including gender norms within society and the symbolic role of women's participation in communities; as well as the power and authority strategies employed to secure electoral success. The Political Anthropology framework provides insights into how non-elite women politicians develop strategies, select campaign issues, structure their teams, and leverage distinct networks to enhance their electoral prospects.

C. Results and Discussion

The presence of women in parliament is crucial for advancing gender-equitable political rights and reducing social class disparities. Amid the entrenched influence of dynastic politics and oligarchy, non-elite women legislators in Southeast Sulawesi employ strategic maneuvers to navigate structural and cultural barriers in their pursuit of electoral success, as elaborated in the following analysis.

1. Results

a. Profile of women's electoral gains

The representation of women at the national level in the 2019 and 2024 elections remained relatively stable. At the Regional Representative Council (DPD) level, two women secured seats: Leni Andriani Surunuddin, daughter of the incumbent Regent of South Konawe, Surunuddin; and Wa

Ode Rabia Al Adawia Ridwan, daughter of former Muna Regent, Ridwan Bae. At the national legislature (DPR RI), only one woman was elected: Asmawati Hasan (also known as Tina Nur Alam), an incumbent from the 2019 election and wife of former Southeast Sulawesi Governor Nur Alam, who ran unsuccessfully for the gubernatorial position. At the provincial level, women's representation increased from 20% (9 legislators) to 27% (12 legislators). However, this increase continued to be dominated by women from political dynasties.

In contrast, the proportion of women elected in the three sampled regions declined between the 2019 and 2024 elections. In Kendari City, female representation dropped by 20% (7 legislators) from the previous 29% (10 legislators). In Konawe Regency, representation dropped to 13.3% (4 legislators) from the prior 27% (8 legislators). Similarly, in South Konawe Regency, the percentage declined by 14.3% (5 legislators) from the previous 20% (7 legislators). A more detailed breakdown is provided in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Women's representation in the Southeast Sulawesi Parliament

No.	Parliament Level	Total Seats	Men-Women Ratio 2019	Men-Women Ratio 2024
1.	DPD	4	Men = 2, Women = 2	Men = 2, Women = 2
2.	DPR-RI	6	Men = 5, Women = 1	Men = 5, Women = 1
3.	DPRD Province	45	Men = 36, Women = 9	Men = 33, Women = 12
4.	DPRD Kendari City	35	Men = 25, Women = 10	Men = 28, Women = 7
5.	DPRD Konawe Regency	30	Men = 22, Women = 8	Men = 26, Women = 4
6.	DPRD South Konawe Regency	35	Men = 28, Women = 7	Men = 30, Women = 5

Source: Researcher's data processing

Behind these figures, the presence of non-elite women has significantly shaped the political landscape in local parliaments across Southeast Sulawesi, as illustrated in Table 2 below

Table 2. Vote acquisition of women politicians in three sample regions

Legislative Level	Political Party	Name	2019 Candidacy	2024 Candidacy	Remarks
DPRD Kendari City	PDIP	Apriliani	√	√	New politician 2019
		Puspitawati			
	PDIP	Heti	√	√	New politician 2019
		Purnawati			
		Saranani			
	Nasdem	Andi Sitti	√	√	New politician 2019
		Rofikah			
		Hidayat			
	Nasdem	Irmawati	x	√	New politician 2024
	PKS	Fitri Yanti	√	√	Incumbent since 2019
		Rifai			
	Demokrat	Noviana	√	x	Incumbent 2019
	PKS	Hj. Rostina	√	x	Incumbent 2019
		Tarimana			(Wife of Kendari City politician)
DPRD Konawe Regency	PAN	Anita Dahlan	√	√	Incumbent since 2019
		Moga			
	PDIP	Sulitiawati	√	x	New politician 2019
		Anwar			
		Minton			
	Perindo	Hamida	√	√	Incumbent since 2019
		Sudu			
	Golkar	Rusiawati	√	x	Incumbent 2019 (Daughter of Southeast Sulawesi Vice Governor)
		Abunawas*			
	Nasdem	Rahmawaty	√	x	Incumbent 2019 (Wife of former Kolaka regent/ daughter-in-law of current vice governor)
		Buhari			
		Matta*			
	PAN	Devi Thesya	√	x	New politician 2019 (daughter of Konawe regent)
		Fariska			
		Konggoasa*			
	PAN	Sitti Nurianti	√	√	Incumbent since 2019
	PDIP	Hj. Murni	√	x	Incumbent 2019 (Died in office)
		Tombili			
	Gerindra	Ulfia	√	x	New politician 2019

Legislative Level	Political Party	Name	2019 Candidacy	2024 Candidacy	Remarks
DPRD South Konawe Regenty	PAN	Susi Sri Hartina	√	√	New politician 2019
	Gerindra	Kadek Rai Sudiani	√	x	Incumbent since 2019 (Former member of DPRD Province)
	PDIP	Hj. Suriyana	√	x	New politician 2019
	Nasdem	Selviana	√	√	Incumbent 2019 (The interim replacement of legislative members, known in Indonesia as Pergantian Antarwaktu or PAW)
	PKS	Ulfa Nur Fatimah	x	√	New politician 2024
	Nasdem	Hj. Yuli Yati*	√	√	Incumbent since 2019 (Wife of South Konawe KPUD secretary)
	Demokrat	Hj. Suriani*	√	x	New politician 2019 (Wife of DPRD South Konawe member)
	Gerindra	Hj. Hasmawaty*	√	x	New politician 2019, elected as DPRD Province 2024 (Wife of Kesbangpol Head)
	Gerindra	Haslinda J	√	√	Incumbent since 2019
	PDIP	Hj. Hasmawaty	√	x	Incumbent 2019
	PAN	Nadira	√	√	Incumbent since 2014
	Golkar	Nilda	√	√	New politician 2019
	Golkar	Nani Kalenggo	x	√	New politician 2014

*Note: *refers to dynastic women politicians*

Source: Researcher's data processing

Table 2 demonstrates that within the three selected electoral districts during the 2019 and 2024 legislative elections, the representation of non-elite women politicians either surpassed or was at least relatively balanced with that of their elite counterparts. This contrasts with the Southeast Sulawesi

Provincial DPRD, where electoral victories were predominantly secured by elite women.

In the 2019 legislative election for the Kendari City DPRD, several elected women legislators were first-time candidates, including Apriliani Puspitawati and Andi Sitti Rofikah Hidayat. Both contested again in 2024 under the same party affiliation and for the same legislative level. Meanwhile, other female legislators had served as incumbents for three consecutive terms. The electoral sustainability of non-elite women politicians across the 2019 and 2024 elections can be attributed to their accumulated political capital, strategic engagement with constituents, and cultivated public credibility, which functioned as social capital supporting successive campaigns. The majority of non-elite women elected to the Kendari City DPRD had previously held office, with many securing re-election for a second or third term, reflecting their growing influence and consolidation of grassroots political support.

However, not all non-elite women politicians in the Konawe Regency DPRD were incumbents. In the 2019 legislative elections, five out of eight elected women legislators were from non-elite backgrounds. The remaining two legislators were affiliated with political dynasties—either as the daughter of the Konawe Regent or the daughter-in-law of the incumbent Deputy Governor. In the 2024 elections, four elected women legislators were also from non-elite backgrounds. A similar trend was observed in South Konawe, where incumbent women legislators successfully retained their seats.

For first-time women candidates, active engagement in social organizations and community initiatives played a pivotal role in their electoral success. Ulfa Nur Fatimah, former Chairperson of the Student Executive Board (BEM) at Lakidende University (Unilaki), secured the fourth-highest number of votes in Konawe, outperforming several incumbents. Apriliani, a former winner in the intelligence category of the Puteri Indonesia competition and founder of the Putri Sultra Foundation, also achieved electoral success. The success of incumbent non-elite women politicians can largely be attributed to their ability to maintain a solid voter base, cultivated through sustained political engagement over multiple election cycles.

b. Challenges and electoral strategies of women politicians

Non-elite women politicians face both internal challenges—related to knowledge, experience, and character—and external challenges shaped by the social, economic, cultural, and political environment in which they operate. These challenges can be categorized into two main types: structural and cultural constraints. Structural constraints refer to barriers arising from political systems, regulations, and institutional frameworks (Aspinall et al., 2021), while cultural constraints stem from broader socio-cultural conditions (Kassa, 2015; Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019; Riwanto & Suryaningsih, 2022). In this study, structural constraints include quota regulations and ballot order, party oligarchy, political dynasties, and incumbency advantages. Cultural constraints encompass money politics, stigmatization of women, masculine-oriented political spaces, black campaigns, and religiously motivated aid distribution.

The strategies employed by non-elite women politicians to navigate structural and cultural constraints have evolved across electoral cycles, particularly as many transition from newcomers to incumbents. Victory strategies are neither rigid nor static; they shift over time—sometimes weakening, strengthening, or even taking entirely new forms compared to previous elections (e.g., the 2019 legislative cycle). These strategies are often interconnected, reinforcing, and complementing one another depending on the broader political context and local dynamics. These developments are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Challenges and strategies of non-elite women politicians in the 2019 and 2024 elections

Issue	Electoral Tactical/Strategic Response	
	2019 Election	2024 Election
Quota Regulation and Ballot Order	Approached parties by demonstrating community engagement through social activities and networks	Leveraged position as a council leader in the previous election (2019)
Party Oligarchy	Strengthened bargaining power through a solid voter base and strongholds	Increased bargaining power through party leadership roles



Issue	Electoral Tactical/Strategic Response	
	2019 Election	2024 Election
Dynastic Politics	Avoided dynastic strongholds and sought alternatives voter bases	Maintained constituents through long-term social investment
Incumbency	Emphasized youth engagement and representation to distinguish from established incumbents	Ran for re-election in the same position alongside fellow incumbents
Money Politics	Conducted door-to-door outreach and reframed compensation as “political transport” (time substitution)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued door-to-door outreach through campaign teams; Reinforced non-transactional compensation narrative
Stigma against Women	Provided practical political education, especially targeted at women	Reinforced the legitimacy of women as political representatives in society
Masculine-Dominated Politics	Emphasized fairness and professional performance	Demonstrated leadership capacity equal to male counterparts
Black Campaigning	Engaged new communities to counter negative narratives	Provided rational responses to campaign teams and local constituents
Religious Aid Distribution	Educated voters that religion should not be treated as a political commodity	Raised awareness to prevent the stigmatization and commodification of religion in politics

Source: Researcher's data processing

1) Structural challenges and winning strategies

The 30% women's representation quota, in certain respects, does not always benefit female candidates. As stated by Nadira, the [Member of the DPRD of South Konawe](#).

The 30% quota is actually unfair, and I do not agree with it. The 30% should not be calculated based on the total number of seats but rather as 30% of the total votes. For example, if the total number of voters in a district requires 7,000 votes for one seat, then women should be allocated 30% of that,

meaning that with 2,100 votes, a woman should be able to secure a seat. The quota should be adjusted to a smaller threshold so that the 30% figure has real significance (Nadira, personal communication, January 5, 2024).

This perspective reflects the broader criticism that the 30% quota represents an insufficient and incomplete effort to promote meaningful representation of women in parliament. In practice, the ballot order assignment often disadvantages female candidates, with many women placed at the bottom of the list—unless they are incumbents or hold prominent roles in community organizations. Nadira's placement at the top of the list, for instance, was a result of her bargaining power as both an incumbent and a district-level party leader.

In addition, party oligarchy plays a significant role in shaping the electability of female candidates. For new or first-time candidates, party oligarchy often presents a major structural barrier. In contrast, for incumbents, it can serve as an advantage. The experience and established status of female incumbents enhance their political leverage when negotiating with pragmatic political parties. As a result, parties are less likely to overlook candidates with strong potential to secure votes.

The strategy employed by non-elite women to counter party oligarchy involves a door-to-door approach, as exemplified by Apriliani and Murni Tombili during the 2019 elections. This tactic provided candidates with sufficient time to introduce themselves and convey their political ideas, fostering emotional connections with constituents. However, in the 2024 election, Apriliani no longer conducted door-to-door campaigning personally; instead, she delegated the task to her campaign team. Her primary focus shifted to engaging with influential community figures, including youth leaders and prominent women, who serve as key actors in shaping public opinion.

The bargaining power of non-elite female politicians not only enhances their leadership potential in parliament but also earns them respect from male colleagues, as reflected in Nadira's statement.

When serving in the council, there was almost no resistance from male politicians; in fact, they often engaged in communication and discussions

with me. This is because I also hold a leadership position in the council (Nadira, personal communication, January 5, 2024).

Aside from oligarchy, dynastic politics poses one of the greatest threats to new non-elite female politicians. During socialization and campaign activities, Apriliani was often underestimated and even mistaken for a campaign agent—unlike incumbents who already possessed bargaining power. Incumbents have tested and proven voter loyalty through strategies focused on maintaining constituent relations—not through money politics, but by actively communicating, visiting, and addressing the needs of their electoral districts.

Non-elite female politicians deliberately choose to operate outside a system dominated by dynastic politics, as acknowledged by Hj. Murni Tombili, a member of the DPRD of South Konawe, in the following statement.

... For example, a regent might allocate votes to support their child or spouse within the community. That is the system – dynastic politics operates as a system. But I chose to step outside of that system. I have done the calculations. Let's say there are 16 village officials in a single village, and that village has 500 eligible voters. Should we really be influenced by just those 16 officials? (Hj. Murni Tombili, personal communication, December 20, 2023).

Another significant challenge for non-elite women politicians is the incumbency factor. Apriliani, from Electoral District 1 of Kendari City, had to compete against the top-ranked candidate—an incumbent who also served as the Deputy Speaker of the Kendari City DPRD. Her strategy involved redirecting electoral efforts toward areas untouched by political dominance or vote-buying practices.

Incumbency enabled non-elite women to accumulate new political leverage, whether as party leaders or legislative leaders, thereby increasing their bargaining power within political parties. This strength was further reinforced through a strategy of maintaining close ties with constituents and addressing their expectations and needs during parliamentary recess periods.

2) Cultural challenges and winning strategies

Non-elite women politicians face significantly greater challenges and require substantial capital—financial, social, and political—particularly for first-time candidates. One of the most pervasive cultural barriers they encounter is vote-buying. Hj. Murni stated that during the 2019 elections, she required a minimum of 1 billion IDR to campaign for a district-level legislative seat, a figure consistent with previous elections. According to her, vote-buying practices are a legacy of earlier electoral systems, particularly in regional elections for governors, regents, and mayors. This practice has become deeply entrenched, normalized, and even encouraged by voters, who often expect monetary or material incentives from candidates in exchange for their electoral support.

To counteract the pervasiveness of vote-buying, non-elite women politicians have sought to reframe the practice by shifting public perception. Rather than presenting financial disbursements as direct electoral inducements, they have strategically repositioned such contributions as compensation for transportation costs or lost income due to participation in campaign participation. Some women politicians view this approach as a form of political education aimed at breaking the cycle of clientelism and discouraging the perception of politicians as mere financial benefactors. At the same time, this strategy seeks to cultivate voter autonomy by challenging the dependency mentality that underpins transactional electoral behavior.

Despite the increasing participation of women in politics and their demonstrated successes, skepticism and negative perceptions regarding women's political capabilities persist. When juxtaposed with male candidates, voters tend to favor men—particularly when female candidates lack widespread recognition. The sentiment, "If there are still male candidates available, why vote for a woman?", is one of many remarks frequently expressed by voters when asked about the campaign billboards displayed on street corners. Some openly admit that they would only consider voting for a woman if offered financial incentives.

Young age and perceived incompetence are significant stigmas faced by young women politicians. Fitri Rifai, a candidate from the Prosperous

Justice Party (PKS), was only 21 years old when she first ran for office in the 2014 elections. However, through persistent engagement and strategic campaigning with her team, she secured re-election in both the 2019 and 2024 elections. A similar case applies to Apriliani, who frequently encountered remarks such as, “Who is behind her?” – a comment implying skepticism about her independence and capabilities. Nevertheless, through sustained efforts, she successfully won re-election in the 2024 elections.

The stigma surrounding youth is strategically transformed by young women politicians into a source of strength and social capital, particularly among younger demographics. They reassure constituents that younger politicians possess innovative ideas, agility, and adaptability, making them more capable of representing and addressing the needs of the younger generation. In contrast, older politicians are often perceived as less responsive to change and less attuned to the evolving interests and preferences of youth.

Despite women holding prominent positions within society, local cultural norms continue to resist their presence in leadership roles. Nadira, a seasoned politician from the National Mandate Party (PAN), has served as an incumbent since the 2014 elections and previously held the position of village head in South Konawe. As a female leader and member of the DPRD of South Konawe, Nadira encountered significant barriers, particularly within the Tolaki traditional structure, where she was nearly excluded despite her formal authority. In Tolaki culture, the *kalosara* – a revered cultural symbol – is presented before leaders as a mark of legitimacy. However, her status as a woman remained a point of contention, as illustrated in her statement.

In the Tolaki ethnic group, women are considered second-class citizens. According to tradition, when sara-sara (customary deliberations) take place, they must be presented to the government. Traditional leaders protested, questioning how they could possibly present themselves before a woman. Historically, in the village, there had never been a case where an indigenous wedding ceremony was officiated by a woman. I responded by stating that there is no legal or religious regulation prohibiting women from assuming such roles. I challenged them to present any law that explicitly forbids it, and if such a law existed, I would step down willingly. In the end, they could not provide any legal basis, and they ceased their objections (Nadira, personal communication, December 15, 2023).

Women's bargaining power serves as a strategic tool to combat negative stigma by showcasing their leadership capacity and competence. The patriarchal culture that has historically marginalized women is gradually diminishing, promoting greater gender equality between men and women. Nadira's experience has inspired other women in the community to embrace female leadership. Since then, the number of women village heads has increased, with at least one or two female leaders in each district.

For non-elite women politicians who are new to the political sphere, navigating this unfamiliar terrain can be overwhelming, as illustrated by Nadira.

As the presiding officer, I convened a meeting with female legislative members in my office to assess their understanding of the regulations to be deliberated in the upcoming session. They admitted to having limited comprehension of the subject matter. When asked why they remained silent during legislative discussions, several members expressed apprehension, citing anxiety, a lack of confidence, and uncertainty about what to articulate in the formal setting (Nadira, personal communication, February 2, 2024).

For incumbents, black campaigning is as formidable a challenge as dynastic politics and money politics. Given that incumbents typically possess a strong voter base, opponents often resort to various tactics to undermine their electoral support, including defamatory strategies such as spreading allegations of vote-buying, moral misconduct, or criminal activity.

To counter these challenges, incumbents reinforce their campaign teams, as demonstrated by Nadira and Hj. Murni. These teams are entrusted with full responsibility, including the management of logistics and campaign funds. By fostering trust and emotional engagement, this strategy enhances team solidarity, making members feel deeply invested in a shared political struggle.

Additionally, non-elite women politicians assess their opponents' vote strongholds and identify alternative voter bases outside areas controlled by oligarchic or dynastic political structures. This approach allows them to build sustained emotional ties and electoral loyalty, which are continuously nurtured from one election cycle to the next.

Political candidates frequently engage in symbolic religious philanthropy, offering various forms of assistance under the pretext of religious commitment—such as donating construction materials, loudspeakers, mosque carpets, uniforms for Islamic study groups, copies of the Qur'an, or funding religious gatherings. In response, communities often strategically leverage these electoral motivations by soliciting infrastructural improvements. However, such religiously framed assistance is typically ephemeral, peaking during the campaign period and ceasing once elections conclude. As a result, every five-year electoral cycle witnesses a transactional contestation of religious aid, in which both candidates and voters engage in mutual political opportunism under the guise of religious devotion.

Non-elite women politicians respond by transforming the mosques they support into long-term community development hubs, maintaining engagement well beyond the campaign period, particularly during legislative recesses. The politicization of religion is mitigated by reframing aid as a sustainable community investment, rather than as a short-term political gesture aimed at securing votes. Unlike conventional campaign assistance, which often consists of consumable goods, non-elite women politicians prioritize productive aid, such as support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which fosters economic empowerment and enhances long-term community welfare.

Recognizing this phenomenon, non-elite women politicians counteract such tactics by promoting a more rational, issue-based political discourse. The entrenched socio-political structures and cultural complexities that constrain political participation for non-elite women are met with carefully calculated, tactical strategies. Key determinants of their success include fostering strong social relationships with constituents, gradually shifting political perspectives toward rational and programmatic discourse, leveraging bargaining power to challenge traditional cultural values, advocating for a more egalitarian cultural identity, and countering the manipulation of religious symbolism through education and awareness-building initiatives. Collectively, these factors empower non-elite women

politicians to dismantle entrenched dynastic power structures that have long dominated the political landscape.

Once non-elite women establish a stable political position, they gain the opportunity to raise public awareness about women's leadership potential, challenge prevailing stigmas, and promote a more equitable and inclusive political education. This evolution is evident in the strategic shifts undertaken by non-elite women politicians between the 2019 election and 2024 election. In 2019, women's political positioning remained relatively unstable, requiring time for public and institutional validation. By 2024, however, their established presence confirmed their legitimacy as representatives capable of articulating public concerns—not limited to gender-related issues—through refined and targeted electoral strategies.

2. Discussion

The electoral success of non-elite women hinges on grassroots mobilization, sustained team consolidation, rational political education, targeted voter and territorial mapping, and ultimately, the establishment of strong political bargaining power within political parties and among constituents.

These findings are particularly significant in the context of Southeast Sulawesi, where dynastic power dominates nearly all districts and cities, especially within the three research sample areas (Zainal, 2015; Rusdi et al., 2024). Several studies have asserted that women who secure legislative or executive positions often do so due through "political families"—a pattern prevalent in various Southeast Asian countries, where women's political representation is frequently mediated by familial ties rather than independent political agency (Purdey, 2016; Suharsono et al., 2024).

When political opportunities are monopolized by ruling groups or elite dynasties, it further entrenches the hegemony of elite family politics (Aspinall, 2014; Mun'im et al., 2025) and systematically marginalizes the rights of the broader electorate, as power remains concentrated in the hands of a select few (Tadem & Tadem, 2016). This continued dominance of power perpetuates disparities in political space, as political capital remains



concentrated within the ruling elite. In many cases, women who lack political social capital—such as financial resources, access, social, and cultural capital—struggle to compete fairly against women from political dynasties (Choi, 2018; Sevilla et al., 2024). On the other hand, the negation and skepticism toward women's political leadership abilities are often directly linked to perceived biological weaknesses and psychological vulnerabilities (Hillman, 2017; Daniela et al., 2024).

The power of political dynasties and oligarchy in Southeast Sulawesi, which began consolidating in the 2014 election, became even more entrenched in the 2019 election (Harjudin & Zuada, 2020; Masdar et al., 2024) and is expected to persist in the future. Their strategic maneuvering underscores the significance of strengthening women's bargaining power in political spaces. The ability of non-elite women politicians to carve out a role in a political landscape dominated by dynastic and oligarchic structures highlights a crucial shift—one that not only challenges entrenched structural and cultural barriers but also sets a precedent for broader female political participation and leadership (Goyal, 2023; Prihatini, 2019a). Ultimately, this progress points toward the goal of achieving substantive representation (Childs & Krook, 2009)—not merely an increase in numbers, which, to date, remains insufficient even by the 2024 election.

This study challenges earlier research that attributes women's political victories primarily to external forces. While it similarly highlights the perseverance strategies of grassroots women, as noted by Bayo (2021), This research focuses on the strategic tactics of non-elite women politicians by mapping two categories of challenges: structural and cultural, within Southeast Sulawesi across two different election periods. Whereas Goyal (2023), Whetstone and Luna (2023) and Savirani et al. (2021) focus on institutions as the locus of women activists or the strategies of the parties that support them, this research emphasizes on the strategies of the individuals—the women themselves.

The struggle of non-elite women politicians, as highlighted in this research, underscores the arduous and winding path that women must

navigate (Chowdhury, 2017; Hillman, 2018; Maimun, 2022). Even in Aceh, where women's leadership has historically been quite legendary, it has yet to consistently restore women's position in an egalitarian manner (Inayatillah, 2023; Sukti et al., 2022; Ardhanariswari et al., 2023). In comparison, the limited number of women entering politics in Latin America, is often driven by four forms of violence: physical, psychological, economic, and symbolic (Krook & Sanín, 2016). Women frequently experience demoralization and are marginalized in decision-making processes. This experience creates trauma, discouraging them from starting or continuing their political careers. Even political systems—such as quota policies—have not proven sufficiently effective in ensuring women's substantive representation (Hillman, 2017; Khoiroh & Syakur, 2023).

With a history of significant gender disparities, the victory of grassroots women politicians in India—driven by strengthened women's issues and grassroots mobilization—has opened opportunities for higher political careers in subsequent elections (Goyal, 2023; Saiin et al., 2024). The challenges faced by women, as demonstrated in many studies, exhibit distinct characteristics, particularly rooted in a history of gender inequality in which women remain marginalized by deeply entrenched social structures and cultural norms.

The grassroots women's movement, as also confirmed in the findings of Bayo (2021) and Goyal (2023) can reshape the political landscape by narrowing social class disparities and reducing gender inequality. By breaking through cultural and political ideology barriers, women genuinely emerge as subjects—rather than mere objects—of politics, marking a significant indicator of democratic progress in Indonesia.

The election of non-elite women through fair competition contributes to more rational political education, including a broader perspective on political operational costs beyond mere vote transactions. The increasing presence of non-elite women in politics plays a positive role in transforming the political landscape from a masculine-dominated sphere to one that is more inclusive and accommodating to women—particularly for non-elite

women (Zaini et al., 2024). This shift creates a political environment that is familiar and accessible to both men and women, rather than one that favors only a single gender. Beyond the parliamentary arena, however, women continue to face challenges in attaining high-ranking positions in government and corporations, primarily due to cultural and structural biases (Dzuhayatin, 2020; Choiri & Ardyansyah, 2024).

The opening of political space for non-elite women may pose a threat to the continuity of established power and political structures. These women have the potential to gradually balance power dynamics and foster a more rational voter base. The contribution of political dynasties to women's electoral success, as highlighted in many studies (Folke et al., 2020; Wardani & Subekti, 2021; Iswanto et al., 2024), may indeed benefit women in the short term—at least within the elite circles—but in the long run, it risks deepening the flaws of democracy. Moreover, it may lead to public distrust, as it exacerbates not only gender disparities but also social class divides. In this context, the opportunity to foster political maturity becomes more accessible—not only for politicians but also for political parties and society at large.

D. Conclusion

The ability to accurately assess the political landscape has enabled non-elite women to apply strategies that strengthen or shift depending on the evolving conditions of elections from 2019 to 2024. Faced with an entrenched dynastic political structure, non-elite women have adapted their winning strategies by mobilizing grassroots support, maintaining strong ties with their teams and constituents, fostering rational political reasoning, and strategically identifying potential voter bases and regions.

Amid the limited research on non-elite female politicians, this study offers a critical response to the stigma that undermines the struggles of grassroots women. The success of non-elite women serves to counterbalance—and even challenge—the entrenched dominance of political dynasties, particularly in Southeast Sulawesi and more broadly in Indonesia. The novelty of this study lies in its exploration of the survival strategies of non-elite women,

who adaptively navigate their paths to establish political bargaining power within society. The political struggle of women is not merely a gendered battle between men and women, or among women (elite versus non-elite), but rather a social class struggle between grassroots communities with limited resources and the powerful elites who benefit from entrenched privileges.

This study recommends the development of a support system to enhance the political climate and create more opportunities for grassroots women to compete fairly within Indonesia's democratic framework—both against their female counterparts and male candidates. Beginning with research in Eastern Indonesia, this study presents the possibility of a political transformation capable of eroding the dominance of political dynasties on a broader scale. Stakeholders, whether directly or indirectly involved in the issue of women's political participation, must take an active role in promoting political literacy and fostering a more gender-just political landscape, while also addressing social class disparities.

The success of non-elite women in politics, unfortunately, remains largely confined to lower levels of parliament, such as district and municipal legislatures. Meanwhile, at higher levels, women from political dynasties continue to dominate the parliamentary landscape. Further research is needed to provide a broader perspective on the struggles of non-elite women entering parliament—not only in Southeast Sulawesi but also through comparative studies across other regions in Indonesia. With a wider sample area, follow-up studies can assess whether the victories of non-elite women are limited to specific local contexts or represent a sporadic yet growing nationwide phenomenon. A comprehensive portrayal of women's representation and contributions is essential to understanding the long struggle of women in politics and to examining the nature of parliamentary politics—whether it is becoming more inclusive or continues to maintain a predominantly masculine character.

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