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Women's Representation in Politics: Impression Management Strategies in Responding to Gender-Based Challenges Among Female Politicians in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Women's political representation in Indonesia continues to face gender-based challenges, including social expectations, leadership stereotypes, and pressures related to multiple roles. This study aims to explore how female politicians interpret and respond to these challenges through impression management strategies, and how they develop psychological resilience within a gender-biased political environment. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with six female politicians from various political levels and party backgrounds. The findings reveal that female politicians are aware of the conflicting expectations they face—being expected to appear *feminine* while simultaneously demonstrating assertiveness as leaders. In response, they employ various impression management strategies such as *ingratiation*, *exemplification*, and *self-promotion* in an adaptive and context-sensitive manner, aligned with conservative and religious sociopolitical settings. Despite emotional pressures stemming from gender stereotypes, they exhibit resilience through social support, emotion regulation, and strong intrinsic motivation. This study highlights that impression management is not merely a tool for maintaining public image but also a means of negotiating gender identity and roles within political spaces. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological dynamics of female leadership and support the development of a more inclusive and gender-equitable political environment.

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INTRODUCTION

Double standards against women in politics are rooted in unconscious biases and gender stereotypes, which make them negatively judged when they do not meet social expectations (Foschi, 1992; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Women are also often considered incompetent on *"hard"* issues such as defense and finance, despite having equal qualifications (Blackman & Jackson, 2024; Lawless & Fox, 2010). On the other hand, female politicians tend to emphasize social issues such as health and education and use inclusive language (Ruiloba-Núñez & Goenaga, 2024). However, Hargrave (2022) shows that voters consider the content and communication style of politicians more than their gender. In this case, gender stereotypes are not always a determining factor in public judgment and are still not fully agreed upon in the literature.

Gender stereotypes, such as the notion that women are gentle and caring while men are dominant and rational, shape society's expectations of gender-appropriate behavior (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). In turn, these stereotypes shape gender norms that emerge from the traditional division of labor between men and women. Discriminatory gender norms limit women's roles only to the domestic sphere, such as childcare and unpaid work, while men are assumed to be more suitable as leaders in the public sphere. As a result, women face structural barriers in accessing education, economic resources, and networks to enter the political arena (UN Women, 2013).

Gender stereotypes and norms reinforce each other and can create gender inequality (Omojemite et al., 2024). Stereotypes that associate leadership with masculine characteristics are a challenge for women in politics (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In order to gain public support and trust, female politicians often adjust their

communication styles and leadership patterns to match the expectations of a society that is still influenced by gender norms (Bauer, 2019; Jandevi, 2019).

One of the tactics in political communication is known as *impression management*, which involves a planned attempt to control how a person is perceived by others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Landtsheer et al., 2008). *Impression management* strategies used to display competence, credibility, and social closeness become inseparable from the influence of rigid gender norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). As a result, women politicians must manage their self-representation in the public sphere very carefully in order to remain socially acceptable without sacrificing their leadership authority (Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007).

In Indonesia, Hermawati (2015) found that female politicians in the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia use a similar strategy; she mentioned that they apply *impression management* that combines symbolic, narrative, and personal approaches. This strategy is not only used in direct interaction with the public, but also develops through digital media, which requires politicians to be more selective in shaping their own image (Hogan, 2010; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Various studies in Indonesia show the difference in approach between male and female politicians in implementing *impression management* on social media, where men tend to prioritize personal strength and strategic policies, while women more often display empathetic images and morality (Satrio, 2017; Siedharta et al., 2017; Chionardes et al., 2019; Riyanto et al., 2021). In this context, the findings are in line with Bystrom's (2018) statement that political communication is *"gendered"*, which means that the communication styles and strategies of female and male politicians are influenced by gender norms and stereotypes inherent in society and politics.

When female politicians adjust their communication and *impression management* strategies to align with the public's expected *feminine* stereotypes, this situation can trigger internal conflicts between personal identities and social demands (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which ultimately impacts their psychological and mental health conditions (Lee & An, 2024). This shows that *impression management* is not just a communication strategy, but also a form of adaptation to social expectations attached to gender identity in politics.

Therefore, it is necessary to conduct research to dig deeper into how gender-based social pressures not only affect communication strategies, but also the psychological experiences of female politicians. Research with a phenomenological approach allows for the exploration of the subjective experiences of women politicians in perceiving, responding to, and interpreting gender-based challenges. This focus allows for a more complete understanding of the relationship between aspects of gender, self-representation, and *impression management*. This study highlights that *impression management* is not merely a tool for maintaining public image but also a means of negotiating gender identity and roles within political spaces. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological dynamics of female leadership and support the development of a more inclusive and gender-equitable political environment.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research type. Data collection in this study was carried out through in-depth interviews that were semi-structured with open-ended questions. Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling techniques, taking into account variations in their backgrounds, experiences, and political positions. In qualitative approaches, especially phenomenological studies, the main focus was not on the number of participants, but on the depth of data and the richness of narratives obtained from individuals who had relevant experience (depth over breadth). Dukes (1984) suggested that the ideal number of participants in phenomenological research ranged from 3 to 10 people in order to allow for an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences without losing focus. In this study, saturation was achieved with the 6th participant, as the data obtained showed a stable pattern and the main themes that emerged were represented by most of the participants. In data analysis, interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After going through a systematic data analysis process, the researcher identified and formulated five final themes that represented the patterns of meaning in the participants' narratives. This subchapter is part of the fifth stage of thematic analysis, namely defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in which researchers review, clarify the core meaning of each theme, and develop clear and coherent definitions for each. This stage serves as the basis for formulating a final thematic structure that will be reported more analytically in the next stage.

The following table presents the five main themes along with a brief description of each theme that has been interpreted based on the depth of the interview data.

Table 1. Final Theme and Theme Description

Final Theme	Description
Opportunities, Challenges, and Negotiation of the Role of Gender in Politics	The political opportunities and challenges faced by women in the context of patriarchal structures, cultural and religious norms, finance, gender stereotypes, and the burden of dual roles include negotiations conducted to balance political tasks with domestic roles.
Impression Management Strategy and Adaptation	Various strategies used by women politicians to shape, adjust, and evaluate the impressions displayed in the public space. These strategies include ingratiation (building closeness and equalizing identities), exemplification (emphasizing morality, simplicity and exemplarity), adjustment of communication styles, adjustments to appearance and behavior that are consciously carried out to influence public perception, as well as special strategies applied in a religious environment.
Women's Leadership in Politics	Transformative and public service-oriented leadership character, with a strong motivation to empower through inclusive policies. Leadership experience grows early through family, education, and social involvement that shape vision, values, and resilience in carrying out political roles.
Consequences and Psychological Resilience	Responses to emotional stress, stress, and role loads, resilience, and support from social environments such as family, mentors, and community networks.
Self Promotion as a form of Women's Resistance and Agency to Gender Stereotypes	Conscious and active actions to reject, refute, and overcome gender stereotypes are carried out through self-capacity building, political performance proofing, strategic role-taking, and vocalizing women's issues in public forums and policy spaces. These efforts are also part of a self-promotion strategy in impression management, where participants build their self-image as competent, empowered, and trustworthy politicians.

These themes are arranged through the grouping of relevant codes based on patterns of meaning in the participants' narratives, taking into account the relationships between codes, the emergence of repetitive patterns. The following is a mapping of the main themes resulting from the relationships between the code, subthemes, and main themes based on the excerpts of participant interviews:

Table 2. Code Mapping – Subthemes – Themes

Subtheme	Code	Participants
Theme 1: Opportunities, Challenges, and Negotiation of the Role of Gender in Politics		
Political opportunities	Affirmative policies or women's quota regulations Equality of opportunity for men and women in politics	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6
Financial challenges	High political cost barriers Men are economically stronger Survival strategies in financial constraints	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5
Structural/cultural challenges	Patriarchal culture and a male-first family Cultural/religious challenges to women's leadership	R2, R3, R4, R5
Stereotypes of female leadership	Women are considered weak, related to physicality, intelligence Stereotypical attacks from political rivals	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6
Dual role	The role of wife and mother as "nature" is still carried out Conflict between domestic and public roles Feelings of guilt towards the family	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6
Theme 2: Impression Management Strategy and Adaptation		
Ingratiation	Build closeness and maintain communication Equalizing identity with community	R2, R4, R5
Exemplification	Demonstrate morality and humility Showing yourself as a role model Provide real examples of work in the community	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6
Adaptations of behavior, communication and appearance	Tailor communication to your audience Maintaining women's appearance according to social norms Control negative expressions and behaviors	R1, R2, R3, R4, R6

Femininity as a tool of adaptation	Showing gentleness, care and sensitivity Using motherhood/nurturing traits	R1, R3, R6
Adaptation of masculine/feminine traits	Adjust to a firm or gentle attitude depending on the situation Balancing feelings and rationality Reduce gender-negative behaviors	R3, R4, R6
Special adaptations in religious environments	Regulating communication/appearance in religious communities Inviting religious figures as representations Citing other female religious figures as examples	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6
Evaluasi impression management	Hearing input from family and community Assess public expressions or responses Reflection on the effectiveness of appearance	R1, R3, R4, R6
Theme 3: Women's Leadership in Politics		
Motivation and leadership orientation	Want to benefit others Motivated by challenges Pro-people and pro-women principles	R2, R3, R4, R5
Leadership experience	Involvement early in family organizations or politics Represent a youth, women, or grassroots group The process of learning from previous organizational experiences	R2, R3, R5
Theme 4: Consequences and Psychological Resilience		
Emotional burden and resilience	Confession of Tiredness and Frustration Regulation of emotions through self-reflection Turning frustration into motivation	R1, R2, R4, R5, R6
Social support as a reinforcement	Husband, children, and family support Peer support, mentor, as a counselor Moral support from constituents as encouragement	R2, R4, R5, R6
Theme 5: Self Promotion as a form of Women's Resistance and Agency to Gender Stereotypes		
Motivation and Proof against stereotypes	Proving yourself through real work Refusal to be weakened by gender stereotypes Argue with actions, not words	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5
Self-competency enhancement	Continue to learn and develop yourself Don't want to be considered a "political legacy" Prepare yourself to be equal or superior	R1, R2, R4, R5
Taking a strategic role in politics	Become a party leader or regional head Define policy direction Not only to complement the structure	R1,R2, R4, R5
Raising women's issues to official forums	Advocating for women and children issues Ensuring substantial representation Speaking up for women's needs	R2, R3, R4, R6

The table above presents the basic framework of the analysis results which will be elaborated further in the next section. Each of the main themes will be presented in detail, accompanied by verbatim quotes from the participants, as well as analytical interpretations associated with the theories and research findings in the Discussion section.

The results of this study confirm that women politicians in Indonesia still face strong social pressures, especially related to gender expectations and stereotypes about women's roles in leadership. As illustrated in the findings of the first theme, the pressure on dual roles, as public leaders and domestic figures, is still strongly embedded in political culture. This pressure requires women politicians to constantly negotiate their roles in both the public and private spheres. These findings are in line with the study of Krook and O'Brien (2012), which highlights that women's representation in politics is not only hampered by institutional structures, but also by symbolic norms that demand that women perform in accordance with conservative social expectations.

In responding to these pressures, impression management strategies become a very important adaptation tool, as seen in the second theme. The results of this study are in line with the findings of Chionardes et al. (2019) and Sitorus (2024) which show that female politicians emphasize more on exemplification and ingratization strategies. They reinforce the impression of being a moral, caring, and spiritual leader, both through a demeanor appearance, warm body language, and an empathetic and humble way of speaking. This

strategy also reinforces findings in studies by Kristina (2024), and Wibinata (2021), which show that symbols of warmth and religiosity are used by female politicians to navigate a political terrain that tends to be masculine. In addition, this study also shows that female politicians are able to flexibly manage the balance between masculine and feminine traits to present themselves in accordance with the required context. This supports the research results of Holein & Fiske (2013) and Kark et al. (2012), which stated that women can appear as warm and competent leaders.

However, the findings of this study show different dynamics from previous findings regarding self-promotion strategies. Previous studies have tended to show that this strategy is used more by male leaders than women (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007; Islam, 2018). This is in line with traditional gender norms that associate leadership and confidence with masculinity. Meanwhile, in this study, female politicians were also seen actively using self-promotion as an impression management strategy. Self-promotion strategies, such as showcasing real work and trying harder for female politicians to prove that their competence can be equated with male politicians (Heilman, 2001). Nonetheless, trying to prove that "being able to be equal" with men is not necessarily the most effective strategy. Brands and Rattan (2024) criticize an approach that focuses too much on the glass ceiling narrative that implicitly assumes that women need to be "fixed" in order to behave like men. In fact, in some contexts, it is the behavior of men that needs to be changed. For example, if men tend to make investment decisions that are riskier and potentially detrimental to the organization, then the solution is not to train women to be more aggressive in risk-taking, but to encourage the creation of a balance of behavior between genders (Brands & Rattan, 2024).

In contrast to previous studies that have generally positioned impression management strategies in politics with a focus as a communication tactic to shape public perception (e.g., in the context of campaigns or imagery), the findings in this study reveal a deeper and more personal dimension. The impression management strategies applied by women politicians in this study not only function as a means of building an impression in front of the audience, but are also rooted in life experiences, personal values, and reflections on the journey of leadership identity that has been formed from an early age. Thus, self-presentation is not only interpreted as an effort to appear convincing in front of the public, but also as a reflection of their personal motivation and identity as leaders. This is in line with the leadership identity development model proposed by Komives et al. (2005), which emphasizes the importance of initial experience and reflective processes in forming an authentic leadership identity. In addition, these findings are in line with Eagly and Carli (2003) that women need to demonstrate competence to overcome gender stereotypes and be recognized as effective leaders.

The impression management strategies used by women politicians in this study cannot be separated from the accompanying psychological consequences. Persistent social pressures, especially related to the expectation of dual roles as public leaders as well as domestic figures, create emotional burdens such as guilt, mental exhaustion, and stress (Schmader & Johns, 2003; Johns et al., 2008). Despite this, the majority of participants in this study showed a high level of psychological resilience. They develop meaning-based coping strategies, such as interpreting leadership as a form of devotion, and relying on emotional support from families and surrounding communities as a resource for recovery. This mechanism allows them to stay afloat and bounce back to carry out leadership roles and give their best performance.

These findings reinforce the coping theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which emphasizes that an individual's response to stress is strongly influenced by how they interpret that stress as well as the availability of resources to deal with it. In this context, female politicians are not only able to survive, but also actively regulate emotions by linking political pressure to spiritual values and larger social goals. These findings are also consistent with the concept of resilience according to Masten (2001), which refers to psychological resilience as abilities that arise from internal processes and daily social support.

More than just survival, the impression management strategy in this study also reflects women's political agency. This approach is in line with the idea of minority influence from Moscovici (1985), who emphasizes that minority groups such as women in politics can influence social change by maintaining consistency, credibility, and convincing communication strategies. However, in contrast to the minority influence approach that is often associated with confrontational attitudes or harsh change efforts, the findings in this study actually show that social change can be achieved in a more subtle and contextual way. Women politicians carefully insert the message of equality and competence into cultural and religious frameworks that are familiar and acceptable to society.

In this way, impression management strategies not only serve to survive or adapt, but also serve as a means to change people's views on gender roles. They do not directly oppose norms, but rather reinterpret them through actions that are consistent, trusted, and in harmony with local values.

One of the important findings in this study is that the different positions of women politicians, both as legislative and executive members, form different strategies in building impressions and carrying out their leadership roles. These differences are not only reflected in their communication styles, but also in the way they manage impressions, adjust gender, respond to religious norms, and evaluate self-image.

Table 3. Differences in Impression Management Strategies Based on Political Positions

Aspects	Making (R2, R4, R6)	Eksekutif (R1, R3, R5)
Ingratiation	Focus on building emotional closeness and equality with the people (R2.34; R4.16)	Utilizing formal media to build communication (R5.25)
Exemplification	Highlighting the value of moderation and morality based on local culture and gender (R4.22; R6.22)	Exemplify role-based roles and direct attendance (R1.13; R1.16)
Adaptasi Gender	Balancing feminine-masculine traits, adapting to the audience (R4.20; R6.14)	Relying on maternal attributes and ngemong traits to build closeness (R3.5; R3.13)
Adaptation of Religious Context	Adjusting manners in religious events (R4.21; R6.3)	Choosing partners like Kyai as a complement to gender roles (R5.8; R5.23)
Impression Evaluation	Using community expression as an evaluation indicator (R4.19)	Relying on family input and social media (R1.15; R3.10)

The table above shows that positions in political structures affect not only the functions and responsibilities of a female politician, but also the symbolic and psychological strategies used to build credibility. The legislative approach tends to be horizontal and participatory, while the executive prioritizes authority, symbols, and formal structures.

In building closeness to the community, the position of female politicians turns out to affect the impression management strategies they use. Politicians in legislative positions (R2, R4, R6) tend to choose a more relational and grounded approach. They position themselves as part of the common people to look equal and approachable. This approach is evident in statements such as, "We sit down to eat together. We are selonjor together" (R2.35) and "... I consider myself an old man" (R2.37). This strategy reflects a type of social affiliation-based ingratiation, which is when a person displays similarities with the audience in order to gain acceptance (Jones & Pittman, 1982). This strategy is also in line with the findings of Eagly & Carli (2007) who show that women in politics often use interpersonal approaches to build trust, especially in spaces full of gender expectations.

On the other hand, female politicians who serve in executive positions (R1, R3, R5) emphasize the formal service function according to the position they hold. Closeness is still built, but through more structured and institutional channels. As R1 said, "I try to always be present... provide the best solution" (R1.2), while R5 uses the official media channel as a liaison, "Radio media good morning Regent program.... can communicate two-way" (R5.25). This suggests that women leaders in structural positions tend to use a participatory approach that remains rooted in their formal roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

In the use of local cultural symbols, differences in strategy are also visible. Legislative politicians emphasize the importance of up-and-coming values and manners as part of their personal and political image. This is reflected in R4 's statement: "I think it. Why is knowledge high if it is not civilized." (R4.22) and R6: "We stick to his manners as well. We must be taken care of as we Javanese women" (R6.22). These values became a tool of moral legitimacy that was grounded in the presence of local constituents. On the other hand, executive politicians like R1 say, "I tend to behave as I am, considering the side of propriety" (R1.6), which suggests that politeness is positioned as part of the ethics of office, not just personal cultural values. This difference suggests that cultural symbolism is used both as a horizontal communication tool in the legislature and as vertical legitimacy in the executive, according to the context of their respective powers.

In terms of gender expression, legislative politicians seem to be more flexible in adjusting their leadership styles so as not to be judged too harsh or too soft. R4 states: "Too soft or too hard" (R4.20), which describes an attempt to balance masculinity and femininity in order to remain acceptable in a male-dominated political space. This is in line with the concept of gender role balancing from Eagly and Carli (2007), which shows that women often adjust their communication styles to avoid social sanctions due to deviations from gender norms. Meanwhile, politicians in executive positions are more likely to use positive stereotypes of women, such as motherhood or nurturing skills, as a political force. R3 states, "... Her mother's nature, her mother's... can listen" (R3.5), and "... with tenderness, with embrace" (R3.13). This approach suggests a gendered leadership strategy (Eagly & Karau, 2002), in which feminine values are used to build credibility and emotional connection, especially in conservative environments.

In the religious context, legislative politicians show great caution in keeping their distance from the opposite sex and maintaining politeness. R4 said, "If there is a male guest... I'm a woman, yes the meeting I ask to be accompanied" (R4.21), and R6 adds, "There are limits... like aurat" (R6.3). This statement shows a form of strategy to maintain self-image through controlling interactions that have the potential to create negative perceptions. Instead, executive politicians such as R5 choose symbolic and practical strategies by delegating religious representation to male figures who are more normatively accepted, "I am looking for a representative of a Kyai" (R5.8) and "... I even invited (representatives/kyai) to speak" (R5.23). This strategy is in line with the findings of Storie and Marschlich (2022), who show that women in conservative political systems often build coalitions with highly legitimate figures to strengthen their image without violating norms.

In the process of evaluating impression management, legislative politicians rely more on direct expressions from the public. R4 states, "We can see that the person who supports or not, likes or doesn't like it is visible from his expressions" (R4.19), showing sensitivity to affective feedback as the basis for self-reflection. On the other hand, politicians in executive positions monitor impressions more through digital channels, "... social media also comments, is it all visible, right" (R3.10) and input from the internal scope, "... also ask for the opinion of those around us, the closest of whom is the family" (R6.5). This shows that there is a difference in the source of self-reflection among politicians with different political positions. This difference reinforces the findings about self-monitoring (Snyder, 1987 in Kobayashi et al., 2018), where self-monitoring is performed by adjusting feedback from the environment that is considered important.

Differences in Leadership and Impression Management Based on Political Family Relations History

In addition to the position of office, the background of the political family is also an important factor in shaping the way women politicians build political identity and public impression. The difference can be seen in access to the political world, motivation to prove oneself, leadership style and impression management strategies used. The following table compares the differences:

Table 4. Differences in Leadership and Impression Management Strategy
Based on the history of the political family

Aspects	Have a History Political Family(R1, R5, R6)	No History Political Family(R2, R3, R4)
Early access to politics	Through family from childhood with direct exposure to politics (R5.1; R5.36; R6.5)	Through organization, education, and social experience (R2.27; R3.36)
Motivation for proof	Proving one's capacity and letting go of the family's shadow (R5.35)	Proof of self-capacity in stages and stages (R2.30)
Leadership style	Representative, symbolic, and public figure-based (R1.13)	Participatory, and community-based experience (R2.13).
Impression management strategy	Exemplification as a role model (R1.13) and ingratiation as a more needed party (R5.16)	Exemplification through exemplification of real work (R2.13) and ingratiation as a party with an equal position with the grassroots (R2.35; R4.13)

The table above shows that political legacy provides symbolic access and a strong initial network, but does not automatically guarantee legitimacy. Politicians with political family backgrounds actually show awareness to prove their capabilities personally. On the other hand, politicians without a political family background highlight grassroots work, self-actualization, and emotional closeness as a source of legitimacy.

Politicians who come from politician families emphasize symbolic positions as moral role models, while those who do not come from political families emphasize real work examples and social closeness to society. For example, R1 stated, "Especially as a public figure, who is certainly a concern as well as a role model for the wider community." (R1.13), while R2 prioritizes direct presence in important moments of citizens: "For example, there is a death... there are people who have jobs, people want those moments when they will feel us coming" (R2.13). This distinction reflects two forms of exemplification: one based on status and moral symbolism, the other based on real action and presence (Leary and Kowalski, 1990).

The ingratiation strategy is also used by all participants, but with different nuances. Politicians from politician families tend to build an image as a figure who is sought after and needed by the public, as seen in R5's statement: "I usually sleep there while I do. Later people will be able to confide in them." (R5.16). This position strengthens their symbolic authority. Meanwhile, politicians without a political family background use a more equal and blended approach. As R2 said: "There are no boundaries between us. We sit down to eat together. We're going to stick together." (R2.35) and R4: "Communication is built comfortably... Every Eid we

say..." (R4.13). Their strategy represents ingratiation based on equality and emotional engagement, in line with Goffman's (1959) view that self-presentation is an effort to build an impression that matches the social role that the audience expects in a context.

In terms of political access, politicians with political family backgrounds have the advantage of initial closeness to the political world. This can be seen in R5's statement: "I'm 5 years old, yes, I'm very attached to activities at home. For the headquarters of party activities." (R5.1)) and "I replaced all the husband's positions... I was on the Chief Advisor as well. Chairman of the Advisory Board, so the whole of Indonesia." (R5.36). This early access forms social capital that accelerates their involvement in networks and strategic positions, a phenomenon that has been widely studied in studies of elite reproduction (Bourdieu, 1991). Even their self-reflection also refers to the family as a source of legitimacy for judgment, such as R6's statement: "Before we come forward, of course we also ask for the opinions of those around us, the closest is the family." (R6.5).

On the other hand, politicians who do not have a political family background build leadership through a gradual process from the organizational space, education, to the community. R2, for example, said: "I do often... Ever since I was in high school, I've been interested in participating in the Poetry Contest." (R2.27), while R3 states: "In the past, when I was in junior high school, yes, I had to be the class president, I had to be that kind of leader." (R3.26). This experience shows the process of self-initiated leadership development, in which leadership identity develops from life experiences that shape values and skills (Komives et al., 2005).

In terms of motivation, politicians from politicians' families actually show critical awareness to prove that they are worthy not only because of the family name, but because of personal capacity. R5 stated: "Many are also politicians, just because of their father, just because... So when asked, asked to talk about simple things, I mean I don't understand." (R5.35). This suggests that "inheritance politics" is not always passively accepted, but it can also trigger self-evaluation to distinguish oneself from the negative stereotypes of political heirs. On the other hand, politicians without a political family background emphasize the motivation to prove capacity gradually. R2 said: "I just want to prove that I am a woman, at least capable and acceptable, that used to be." (R2.30). This shows that there is an internal drive to gain social legitimacy "step by step" without the help of symbolic capital from the family.

Their leadership styles are also different. Politicians from the political family present themselves more formally, maintaining an image as a representative and exemplary figure, as stated by R1: "I tend to behave as I am, considering the side of propriety." (R1.6). This approach shows high self-monitoring (Snyder, 1987 in Kobayashi et al., 2018), which is consciously regulating behavior to conform to job expectations and social norms. On the other hand, those who do not come from political families display more personal and grounded leadership, relying on real involvement and emotional presence as a form of exemplification that can be directly felt by the community.

These findings broaden the understanding of women's leadership paths in Indonesian politics. If previously a number of studies emphasized the importance of political dynasties as the main entry point for women into the political world (Wardani & Subekti, 2021), then this study shows that political legitimacy can also be built from the ground up through social, organizational, and concrete work experiences at the grassroots level. This shows that the meritocratic path remains relevant and competitive in the midst of a system that tends to be exclusive. In other words, both symbolic capital (political heritage) and personal social capital (community experience) can be a foothold for building women's leadership credibility, depending on the social context in which they take part.

CONCLUSION

The experiences and strategies demonstrated by female politicians in this study reveal that they are acutely aware of gender-based challenges rooted in social norms yet view these obstacles as opportunities for change. They respond with conscious and adaptive impression management strategies, tailored to their specific contexts, and build psychological resilience through internal motivation and social support. Their leadership is defined not just by representation, but by their ability to interpret and confront the challenges arising from gender constructions. Impression management emerges as a crucial tool for negotiating social roles and showcasing women’s capacity to survive and drive progress toward greater political equality. Future research should further explore how these strategies evolve across different political and cultural contexts, and examine the long-term effects of impression management on women’s political careers and well-being.

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