

Washatiyah:**Journal of Political Islam and Society**<https://propanoramic.com/index.php/wasathiyah/index>

DOI: 10.64595/Washatiyah.v1n1.p58-72



Village Residents' Perception of Women's Leadership in Local Politics in Jatirejo Village, Jombang

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This study aims to analyze the social construction process underlying community perceptions of women's leadership in local politics, with a case study in Jatirejo Village, Jombang Regency. Despite the formal guarantee of women's political participation through affirmative policies, social perceptions at the village level continue to be shaped by gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms. Using a qualitative case study approach with purposive sampling, data were collected from seven informants through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The analysis employs Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's social construction theory, focusing on the three stages of externalization, objectification, and internalization. Results show that initial community perceptions were marked by gender-based doubt, but shifted significantly toward positive appraisal after the female village head demonstrated consistent performance and active community engagement. The objectification stage revealed that trust was built through repeated social interaction rather than formal authority. At the internalization stage, community members consistently valued competence and integrity over gender as leadership criteria. This study concludes that perception change does not occur automatically through formal regulation alone, but requires authentic leadership performance and active participation in community social networks.

Keyword: *Women's Leadership, Social Construction, Community Perception, Village Head, Gender Stereotypes*

Paper Type: *Research Paper*

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Received: 20/03/2026; **Received in Revised From:** 23/04/2026; **Accepted:** 30/04/2026; **Available Online:** 30/04/2026

Introduction

Women's participation in politics is a key indicator for measuring the quality of a country's democracy (Shofiah Nur Hikmah, 2026). Empirically, women's representation in legislative bodies remains an unresolved issue in many countries, including Indonesia. Although the gender equality movement has grown rapidly and public awareness of this issue has increased, the political arena at various levels is still dominated by men. This phenomenon does not exist in isolation; rather, it is a product of social, cultural, and institutional systems that have historically placed women on the periphery of political decision-making (Derek et al., 2026).

In Indonesia, gender representation disparities in politics persist despite a democratic framework that has formally provided opportunities for women's participation. The state has addressed this issue through affirmative action policies enshrined in election regulations. Article 245 of Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections mandates that women constitute at least 30 percent of legislative candidate lists. This regulation demonstrates the state's commitment to promoting women's political participation (Fadeli & Musyarofah, 2022). However, the existence of such regulations does not necessarily automatically guarantee changes in the structure of representation or in societal perceptions of women in politics. The gap between normative guarantees and the reality of representation, which remains far below the 30% threshold, indicates that the barriers faced by women run deeper than mere legal-formal issues (Bulan Erika Bato et al., 2025).

By comparison, Indonesia's standing in terms of women's representation in parliament still faces significant structural challenges. Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union shows that Indonesia ranks sixth among ASEAN countries in terms of women's representation (Andriza et al., 2024). This figure is not merely a statistical reflection but an indicator of power imbalances rooted in history and culture. The fact that Indonesia lags behind several other ASEAN countries suggests that the barriers women face in the political arena are not merely a matter of regulation but are closely tied to the social constructs that shape and limit women's roles in the public sphere (Erika Zahra Fitriantanta et al., 2025).

The existence of the 30% quota policy, as stipulated in election regulations, has not yet succeeded in significantly altering the gender composition of parliament (Shaw, 2020). This highlights a gap between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome: the quota merely guarantees formal opportunities, while the results remain influenced by informal structural barriers. The political arena is a space historically shaped by and for gender-biased logic, so that the social, cultural, and economic capital accumulated by women is often not recognized as legitimate capital within that space.

These structural barriers operate on at least three levels (Mufarochah et al., 2025). First, at the institutional level, political party recruitment systems tend to be gender-biased because internal patronage networks are dominated by elites who selectively distribute campaign resources and strategic positions. Second, at the cultural level, patriarchal norms that equate leadership with masculinity create invisible barriers that effectively limit women's political mobility (Wiyono et al., 2022). Third, at the economic level, unequal access to financial capital places women in a more vulnerable position in electoral competitions that are becoming increasingly expensive.

At the local level, similar conditions are clearly evident in Jombang Regency. The Central Statistics Agency reports that women's representation in the Jombang Regency Parliament in 2024 stood at only 20%, a figure that remains 10 percentage points below the 30% affirmative action threshold. This gap between normative provisions and empirical reality indicates that affirmative action regulations alone are insufficient to disrupt established power structures. Resistance to women's political leadership must also be understood within the framework of gender socialization, where the internalization of gender roles occurs simultaneously through family, religious, and community institutions. This situation underscores that the local political arena is not only statistically dominated by men but also symbolically continues to reproduce a gender hierarchy that positions women as secondary actors in the public decision-making arena (Ellyda Retpitasi & Nailal Muna, 2023). In this context, all segments of society inherently possess equal rights and opportunities to participate in politics without gender discrimination (Rusta & Hairunnas, 2022), yet the fulfillment of these formal rights remains hindered by structural conditions that have not yet been fully addressed.

Women's leadership at the local level is an intriguing social phenomenon to study, because although women formally have equal rights and opportunities in politics, public perceptions are often still influenced by gender stereotypes and patriarchal cultural norms (Luhjinggan et al., 2026). Women are often confined to domestic roles and socially constructed as being more suited to the domestic sphere, such as caring for children, rather than engaging in politics or holding leadership positions. When entering the political arena, women still face stereotypes that view them as less competent in decision-making (Sunaryo & Jatiningsih, 2021). This phenomenon becomes more complex when women serve as village heads, as their role involves not only administering village governance but also building social legitimacy in the eyes of the community.

A village is not merely an administrative entity, but a social space where values, norms, and constructions of meaning develop through the daily interactions of its residents (Yolanda & Purba, 2025). It is within this social space that gender stereotypes operate subtly yet effectively, shaping collective expectations about who is deemed worthy and legitimate to lead (Wasid & Rochimah, 2025). When a woman assumes the position of village head, she not only performs administrative functions but also confronts a system of meanings that has long defined leadership as a masculine domain.

It is this link between gender stereotypes and the legitimacy of leadership that lies at the heart of the issue regarding women's leadership at the village level. Community acceptance or rejection of female leaders does not rest entirely on formal logic, but is shaped by habitus and social constructs embedded within the community (Nasir et al., 2025). Thus, the legitimacy of women's leadership is not something automatically conferred by office, but rather something that must be continuously negotiated through daily social interactions. The case of women's leadership in Jatirejo Village, Jombang Regency, offers a unique perspective compared to existing literature. While most previous studies have focused on the barriers women face in entering the political arena, fewer have examined how the legitimacy of women's leadership is established and evolves after they assume office. This study specifically examines shifts in community perceptions from the period before the female village head took office to after her leadership began, by considering the role of local culture, social values, and community aspirations as variables shaping these dynamics.

This phenomenon is important to study because public perceptions of women's leadership are not only related to individual opinions but also linked to social legitimacy and leadership effectiveness at the local level. Perception is an individual process of evaluating, feeling, and interpreting something based on what is received or presented by the sources they observe (Monita et al., 2019). Such perceptions do not arise naturally but are formed through an ongoing social process. In local democracy, (Alfaruqy, 2025) demonstrate that community actions in village head elections are grounded in Weberian traditional rationality, where social perceptions are shaped not only by rational knowledge but also by the inherited values and customs objectified within community life. In the social construction theory proposed by Berger and Luckmann, social reality is formed through three processes: externalization, objectification, and internalization. Externalization is the process by which humans create meaning through daily actions and interactions. Meaning that is repeatedly reinforced eventually becomes a habit and forms social structures that are regarded as a shared reality (objectification). Subsequently, through the process of socialization or internalization, individuals accept and understand these social structures as natural and correct. It is through this process that society forms and continues to maintain certain views on social phenomena, including female leadership. Findings by (Ciddan et al., 2025) indicate that the process of social construction (externalization, objectification, internalization) operates within formal institutions such as the Surabaya Election Commission (KPU), where democratic values are shaped through routine practices and internalized as a collective identity. A similar process shapes gender perceptions regarding women's leadership in villages through repeated interactions.

Methods

In scientific research, the research method is a crucial component because it determines the direction and clarity of the research process. The research method serves as a guide for researchers in the process of data collection, analysis, and drawing conclusions in a structured and rational manner. This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design to understand community perceptions of female village head leadership. This qualitative approach focuses on providing detailed descriptions of the realities observed in the field, ensuring that the conditions under study are understood in accordance with the actual situation without manipulation. The research subjects are village residents selected through purposive sampling, taking into account variations in gender, age, and social status. Purposive sampling is a sampling technique conducted based on specific criteria or considerations in accordance with the research objectives. There were 7 informants consisting of community leaders, village officials, as well as male and female residents. The determination of the number of informants was also based on the principle of saturation (data saturation).

This study was conducted in Jatirejo Village, Diwek Subdistrict, Jombang Regency, in March 2026. This location was chosen because the village has a unique leadership dynamic, having been led by a female village head during two distinct terms. The first female village head served from 2007 to 2013, after which she was succeeded by a male village head from 2013 to 2019. Subsequently, a female village head was re-elected and served from 2019 to 2025. Under the revised Village Law, the village head's term of office was extended by two years, so the current leadership period runs until 2027. This situation allows the researcher to examine the construction of community perceptions in greater depth. The primary instrument in this study is the researcher themselves (human instrument), who plays a role in gathering data directly through in-depth interviews and field observations. The study employs a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the social construction theory of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), particularly regarding the aspects of externalization, objectification, and internalization. Questions for the community focused on initial views, experiences, and changes in perceptions regarding women's leadership, while those for village heads covered the nomination process, gaining trust, gender challenges, and strategies for building social legitimacy.

The research procedure began with initial observations to understand the social conditions of Jatirejo Village, followed by obtaining permits, purposive selection of informants, and conducting in-depth interviews and field data collection. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Data analysis utilized the Miles and Huberman interactive model. According to Miles and Huberman, the interactive data analysis model consists of three interrelated main components: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The analysis was conducted by grouping findings according to concepts within social construction theory to understand the process of formation and change in community perceptions regarding women's leadership. Data validity was tested through source triangulation and methodological triangulation, namely by

comparing data from various informants and integrating the results of interviews, observations, and documentation to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Result and Discussion

This study involved seven informants: one female village head (Informant 1/I1) and six residents of Jatirejo Village (Informants 2–7/I2–I7), who were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, age, and social status. The data obtained were then analyzed using Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction theory framework through three stages externalization, objectification, and internalization to understand how community perceptions of women's leadership at the village level are formed, develop, and change.

Table 1. Profile of Research Informants

Code	Identity	Gender	Age	Social Position/Role
I1	Head of Jatirejo Village	Woman	45	Village executive, served two terms
I2	Public Figure	Man	58	Head of the Neighborhood Unit, a native of Jatirejo
I3	Village Apparatus	Man	40	The village secretary interacts directly with the village head
I4	Residents (Housewives)	Woman	35	Residents actively participate in PKK activities and the village savings club
I5	Residents (Farmers)	Man	50	Ordinary residents, observing the village head's performance
I6	Residents (Traders)	Woman	42	An active resident who frequently interacts with other residents
I7	Citizens (Youth)	Man	27	Youth Organization

Public Perceptions Prior to a Female Village Head Taking Office (Externalization)

During the externalization stage, the community actively expressed their initial views on the candidacy of a female village head through daily interactions (Hilmiati et al., 2022). Based on the interview results, most informants revealed that there were initial doubts stemming from gender-related factors. The village head herself acknowledged this: "At first, some supported it, while other were hesitant. Some of the hesitation arose due to gender factors, but I consider that to be normal" (I1). This hesitation did not come from just one group, but emerged evenly among residents with

varying intensity.

On the community side, initial reactions were varied but generally open-minded. Some informants stated that having a female village head was not an issue as long as she was capable and trustworthy (I2, I3, I5). Meanwhile, other informants admitted they were initially surprised but remained open-minded (I4, I6). Interestingly, some informants also noted that their doubts actually began to fade after seeing the vision and programs offered: “At first, some were skeptical, but after seeing the vision and programs, they eventually supported her” (I7). This indicates that the community’s initial perceptions are not entirely driven by gender stereotypes but are also influenced by assessments of the candidate’s own capacity and commitment (Alaslan, 2021). The process of social value change in rural communities occurs through continuous negotiation between traditional and new values, where public perceptions are not static but are formed and evolve alongside the dynamics of social interactions within the community.

Cultural factors and social networks also play a role in shaping initial perceptions. Several informants noted that during the nomination process, the opinions of community leaders influenced residents’ perspectives, although the final decision remained a personal one (I3, I5). Social arena of a community, an individual’s social and symbolic capital, including recognition from influential figures, helps determine the position and legitimacy they attain in social interactions (Hastuti & Ahmad, 2022). Thus, the process of externalizing the perceptions of the Jatirejo Village community does not occur in a space free from the influence of social structures, but is shaped by pre-existing networks of relationships and trust.

Table 2. Summary of Interview Findings by Stage of Social Construction

Code	Externalization (Initial Perception)	Objectivity (After Taking Office)	Internalization (Forward-Looking Values)	Dominant Factor
I1	There is both support and skepticism; skepticism regarding gender is considered normal	Building trust through a hands-on approach and open communication	Women are more meticulous and communicative; encourage other women to get involved	Hard work & consistency
I2	It’s not a problem for a woman to be a village head; what matters is that she is capable and	Positive outlook; performance is rated as good and communicative	What matters is ability, integrity, gender	Competencies & social capital

I3	Community leaders' opinions are taken into account, but the decision remains a personal one	Women are more patient and detail-oriented; perceptions have shifted to a positive outlook	Ability transcends gender; ready to support women	The influence of leaders and actual performance
I4	I was taken aback, but I remained open-minded	Good performance; those who were initially skeptical eventually gave their full support	Ready to support other women	Transparency & performance monitoring
I5	A matter for public consideration, but a personal decision; transparent from the start	Evaluations are based more on actual on-the-job performance	Abilities and responsibilities are more important than gender	Direct performance observation
I6	Some are undecided; vision and platform will determine their support	Communicative performance; trust is built through active interaction	Ready to support other women; competence is the key requirement	Program vision & social trust
I7	Initial skepticism; the vision and program eventually changed their perspective	Many residents have come to believe this after seeing the results firsthand	Integrity and responsibility are more important than gender	Concrete programs & shifts in gender norms

Changes in Perception After The Village Head Takes Office (Objectification)

After the female village head took office, the process of acceptance began to emerge through a significant shift in the community's perspective (Anom et al., 2021). The village head explained that her main strategy was to build trust through direct engagement and open communication with all segments of the village: "I build trust through direct engagement and open communication. Her strategy involves going directly to the community and engaging all segments of the village" (I1). The greatest challenge she acknowledged was building trust at the beginning of her term, and she chose to address those doubts through concrete actions, not just rhetoric (Magda Ilona Dwi Putri et al., 2023).

From the community's perspective, this shift in perception is consistently confirmed by all informants. All six residents stated that after she took office, their views of the female village head became far more positive. The village head is regarded as having good performance, being communicative, and capable of building warm relationships with residents (I2, I4, I6). Several informants specifically highlighted the differences in leadership style they perceived: "There is a difference in style; women are usually more patient and detail-oriented" (I3). A similar statement was also made by another informant who observed that many residents began to trust her only after seeing her performance firsthand in the field (I5, I7).

One of the key findings in this phase is that the mechanism by which public trust is formed is not top-down, but rather grows from the grassroots through repeated and consistent social interactions. This aligns with the findings of (Rozy et al., 2020), which indicate that trust in local leaders is formed through norms of mutual aid and collective concern embedded in daily life as the foundation of community social cohesion. In Jatirejo Village, residents' trust in the female village head is formed through informal social networks, such as her active presence in community activities and direct involvement in resolving community issues. This makes the trust that is built far stronger and more sustainable than legitimacy derived solely from formal official authority (Muliyana et al., 2025).

Cultural Factors, Social Values, and Future Outlook (Internalization)

During the internalization stage, the values and experiences that have been objectified begin to be absorbed as part of the community's collective consciousness. Informants from the community consistently stated that what truly matters in leadership is ability and integrity, not gender (I2, I3, I4, I5, I6, I7). This statement reflects that the community of Jatirejo Village has undergone a significant shift in values: from a perspective originally influenced by gender stereotypes toward an assessment more grounded in actual performance and capacity. Evaluations that are more based on direct performance, as expressed by I5, serve as a strong indicator that the internalization of competency-based leadership values has taken place within the community. This finding is supported by the research results of (Maulana et al., 2025), which demonstrate that the gender variable significantly influences levels of public trust, with women tending to face higher levels of skepticism in public and political contexts. This underscores that the shift from gender-based evaluation toward competency-based evaluation is a process of value internalization that does not occur automatically but requires tangible proof through leadership performance and consistency.

The village head himself reflected on his experience by stating that women tend to be more meticulous, communicative, and prioritize a social approach to leadership (I1). This view is not isolated; rather, it is confirmed by residents who directly experience this difference in leadership style in their daily interactions. It is this shared reflection between leaders and those they lead that has gradually reconstructed the meaning of women's leadership in Jatirejo Village, transforming it from

something that was questioned into something that is appreciated and even hoped to continue (Zabrina et al., 2026).

The future aspirations expressed by the informants reflect that the process of social construction regarding women's leadership in Jatirejo Village has entered a stage of internalization—a stage in which meanings that were once debated have now become integrated into residents' worldview as something natural and taken for granted. The village head hopes that more and more women in the village will dare to get involved in politics and development (I1), an aspiration that signifies that her leadership experience has become a new social reference for the community. Meanwhile, residents expressed their readiness to support other women who run for office as long as they are competent (I4, I6), and emphasized that what matters most is ability, integrity, and responsibility, not gender (I2, I3, I5, I7).

This shift in focus from gender identity toward capacity and integrity indicates that the community of Jatirejo Village is in the process of reconstructing their social reality regarding leadership. Within the framework of social construction, reality is not a given but is shaped intersubjectively through shared experiences; the experience of living under female leadership over the past several years has served as a medium of objectification that has transformed the collective perceptions of the residents. Women's leadership is no longer viewed as an exception or anomaly, but has been legitimized as a real possibility worthy of support. Thus, these findings demonstrate that the shift in community perceptions regarding women's leadership is not merely a product of affirmative action policies, but the result of an organic social construction process unfolding through residents' daily interactions, observations, and interpretations of the leadership practices they witness firsthand (Muhamad Khoirul Anam et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the perceptions of the community in Jatirejo Village, Jombang Regency, regarding women's leadership are the result of a social construction process that is dynamic, not static, and constantly evolving as shared experiences between leaders and residents unfold. Through the theoretical framework of Berger and Luckmann (1966), the three stages of social construction are externalization, objectification, and internalization. This framework consistently illustrates how perceptions are formed, develop, and undergo transformation within the village community. During the externalization stage, most residents expressed initial doubts stemming from gender stereotypes and patriarchal culture; however, these doubts were not absolute, as some residents demonstrated openness from the outset based on their assessment of the candidate leader's capabilities and vision. Social networks and the influence of community leaders were also found to play a role in shaping these initial perceptions. During the objectification stage, community

perceptions underwent significant and consistent changes after the female village head began exercising her leadership in practice. Tangible work, open communication, and direct involvement in community life are the key factors driving a shift in residents' perspectives. The trust that has been built is not top-down, stemming from official authority, but rather grows from the grassroots through repeated and consistent social interactions in the community's daily life. During the internalization phase, the community of Jatirejo Village has undergone a profound shift in values: from gender-based assessments to assessments based on competence and integrity. All informants consistently stated that ability, responsibility, and honesty are far more important than gender in determining the quality of a village leader. The aspirations for the future expressed also reflect that women's leadership is no longer viewed as an anomaly, but rather as a fully legitimate possibility worthy of continued support. Overall, this study confirms that changes in public perception of women's leadership at the local level do not occur automatically through formal regulations alone, but rather require tangible proof through consistent leadership performance, open communication, and active engagement in community social networks. These findings contribute to the understanding that the deconstruction of patriarchal values at the village level occurs gradually through direct experience, not solely through structural policy changes. Consequently, efforts to increase women's representation and acceptance in local leadership must be accompanied by mentoring, the strengthening of social capital, and gender political literacy for all segments of the village community.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, D.W.H.P; Methodology, D.W.H.P; Formal analysis, A.A.N.I; Data turnover, K.S; Writing-original drafts, M.J; Writing-reviews and editing P.M.O.

Funding: This study did not receive external funding from any institution. The entire research process was conducted independently by the author without any specific financial support.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all the participants involved in the study.

Declaration of Generative AI: The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language editing and improving the clarity of the manuscript during the writing process. After using this tool, the author carefully reviewed and revised the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank everyone who provided support during this research process. Special appreciation is extended to the village officials of Jatirejo Village, Jombang Regency, as well as the informants who were willing to take the time to provide valuable information. The author also expresses gratitude for the administrative and technical assistance that helped ensure the smooth progress of this research.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest. No external funding or sponsor had any role in the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of data, manuscript preparation, or decision to publish the results.

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