NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND AUTONOMY: THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGION, CULTURE, AND SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE POLITICAL PREFERENCES OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN NORTH SUMATRA

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Abstract. This study analyzes the formation of political preferences among Muslim women in North Sumatra during the 2024 General Election, focusing on the dynamic intersection of religion, culture, and social networks. Drawing on data from 152 respondents collected through online surveys and in-depth interviews, the study finds that culture, particularly through family norms, domestic responsibilities, and spousal influence, emerges as the most dominant factor (93.4%) in shaping electoral decisions. Religion (77.6%) functions as a source of moral legitimation but is often actualized within cultural contexts and channeled through social networks. Social networks (42.1%) act as conduits for political narratives, primarily via social media and religious figures. This research challenges the simple dichotomy between agency and structure, demonstrating that women's political autonomy does not always equate to individual independence but often manifests as a form of reflective obedience—wherein choices are forged through a negotiation between religious values, familial demands, and personal aspirations. These findings indicate that women are not merely passive recipients of influence but actively interpret and assign meaning to their political choices. To enhance women's substantive participation, empowerment strategies must be holistic, addressing the transformation of family norms, the reinforcement of an inclusive religious identity, and the strengthening of social capacity. Consequently, the domestic sphere can be transformed from a restrictive space into a political power base for Muslim women.

Keywords: political preferences; Muslim women; identity politics; North Sumatra; 2024 General Election.

I. INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of Indonesian democracy over the past two decades have shown significant progress in women's political participation. Electoral data consistently record an increase in the number of female voters at both national and regional levels, signaling an increasingly inclusive political system. North Sumatra, as a province with considerable ethnic diversity and a large, influential Muslim community, serves as a strategic locus for observing the evolution of women's political participation. In the 2024 General Election, the General Elections Commission (KPU) reported a total of 10,771,496 voters in the province, comprising 5,468,815 women and 5,302,681 men. The number of female voters in this province surpassed that of male voters, with a participation rate that was also reportedly higher than their male counterparts [1], [2].

Behind these encouraging participation figures, however, lies a more complex social reality. The formation of political preferences among Muslim women in North Sumatra is not solely determined by rational choice or objective political information but is strongly influenced by potent sociocultural dynamics. Deeply rooted patriarchal values, power structures within the family, and the influence of religious figures are

significant factors that shape electoral decisions [4], [5], [6]. In many cases, women's political choices are not fully autonomous but are frequently the result of negotiation or even deference to a collective will—be it that of a husband, parents, or community leaders [5]. This condition indicates that formal participation does not always correlate with substantive autonomy in the political sphere, as articulated in Taylor's concept of the 'politics of recognition', where political acts can be an effort to gain social recognition rather than an expression of full autonomy [7].

Previous studies indicate that women's political preferences in Indonesia are often shaped by family, community, and limited political education [4], [5], findings that are also relevant in North Sumatra. This phenomenon was evident in the 2018 Gubernatorial Election, where certain candidate pairs intensively mobilized support through religious networks and Islamic symbols [6], [8]. In such a sociocultural space, women's political preferences often do not reflect individual independence but rather mirror the intersection of various social, religious, and symbolic power structures that have long been internalized.

However, amidst these structural pressures, women are not merely passive victims. Islamic history records the active involvement of women in the political sphere since the era of

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), including in political allegiance (*bai'at*), proselytizing (*da'wah*), and even armed struggle (*jihad*) [9]. Such religious narratives have the potential to become a foundation of legitimacy for women's political participation, provided they are actualized in an inclusive, contemporary context. In this framework, women are not just recipients of direction but are also active agents in reproducing, interpreting, and even negotiating the values that influence their decisions. The reproduction of patriarchal values, for example, does not solely stem from external pressures but also from women's own participation within families and religious communities that internalize these norms [4]. This situation is exacerbated by a lack of substantive political education and women's limited access to in-depth political information [10].

On the other hand, there is a potential for transformation through women's social networks. Several successful female candidates in Indonesian elections have utilized women's organizations such as Fatayat NU and the Family Welfare Movement (PKK) as a basis for mobilizing votes [5]. This strategy demonstrates that women can become a collective political force when organized around shared identity and cultural solidarity. In this context, religious symbols function not only as tools of legitimation but also as a means to build emotional proximity with female voters. However, the use of religious symbols in campaigns is often instrumental, exploited by political elites to gain support without a genuine commitment to women's issues [11], [12].

Identity politics in North Sumatra reveal that religious and ethnic dimensions are central axes of electoral mobilization. In the 2018 regional election, for instance, outreach to religious figures and the use of Islamic symbolism were primary strategies for candidate pairs to win the sympathy of Muslim voters [8], [13]. This context underscores that women's political preferences cannot be understood separately from the contestation of meaning and symbols occurring within the local socio-political space. Female voters, especially those active in recitation groups (*pengajian*) or religious organizations, often receive political recommendations from revered figures, either directly or through narratives disseminated in places of worship.

Although extensive research exists on women's political participation, most studies still focus on formal aspects such as parliamentary representation or quantitative participation factors. While studies by Ahmad et al. and Aspinall et al. highlight patriarchal structures and a lack of institutional support as major obstacles [4], [5], few have delved into the negotiation of Muslim women's identity within the multicultural context of North Sumatra, where religion, Batak-Malay culture, and identity politics uniquely intersect.

This research fills this gap by analyzing how Muslim women in North Sumatra formed their political preferences in the 2024 General Election. The primary focus is on the influence of local cultural values, social structures, and religious norms on electoral decisions. The study also unpacks the role of family networks, social communities, and religious leaders in mediating—or even suppressing—

women's political autonomy. Through a qualitative and contextual approach, this study aims to holistically understand the relationship between political consciousness, religious identity, and gender dynamics.

The novelty of this research lies in its approach, which rejects a simple dichotomy between agency and structure. Instead of viewing women as victims of social pressure or as fully autonomous rational actors, this study positions them as agents in a continuous process of negotiation between personal desires and collective demands. Furthermore, this research contributes empirically by analyzing the relative weight of the three main factors—culture, religion, and social networks—in shaping women's political preferences. Based on a thematic analysis of 152 respondents, culture emerged as the most dominant factor, not merely because it is repressive, but because it serves as the primary arena for the internalization of values and identity negotiation. By taking North Sumatra as its locus, this study offers empirical and theoretical contributions to the study of identity politics, gender, and religion in a region with complex sociocultural characteristics [14].

The scope of this research covers the North Sumatra region, specifically cities and regencies with a Muslim-majority population such as Medan, Deli Serdang, Binjai, and Langkat. The temporal focus is the 2024 Legislative Election, with a study population of active Muslim women voters, including both those involved in religious or social organizations and those who are non-organizational. The main variables analyzed include cultural factors, social dynamics, and religious orientation, which collectively form an interpretive framework for a more complete understanding of women's political preferences. By integrating approaches from political sociology and gender studies, this research not only describes voter behavior but also uncovers the meaning behind their choices. Through in-depth interviews and participatory observation, this study seeks to give a voice to women who are often seen merely as numbers in vote recapitulations but whose political narratives are seldom heard.

Identity Politics

The political preferences of Muslim women in North Sumatra cannot be understood as neutral, rational choices, but rather as outcomes of an identity process continuously negotiated within social and political spaces. The theory of identity politics, particularly Charles Taylor's concept of the politics of recognition, posits that individual and group identities are formed through recognition—or the lack thereof—from the social environment and political institutions [7]. In a pluralistic society like North Sumatra, where religion, ethnicity, and customs converge, Muslim women often experience misrecognition—being represented merely as symbols of morality or guardians of traditional values, without being acknowledged as autonomous political agents [15]. This condition reinforces unequal power relations and limits their substantive participation in the democratic process. Taylor emphasizes that recognition is not just a moral necessity but a prerequisite for distributive and representative justice [16]. In this context, the dominance of masculine

narratives in local politics places women in a subordinate position, where their existence is more often constructed by others than by themselves.

Meanwhile, Stuart Hall rejects an essentialist view of identity, asserting that it is an "unfinished business," always in a state of "becoming" [17]. The identity of Muslim women, within this framework, is a historical and cultural construct continuously negotiated through media, religious communities, and political representation. When political elites or religious figures represent women solely as "homemakers" or "symbols of piety," they place women in a specific discursive position that inhibits the expression of their political agency [18]. Hall refers to this as the position of enunciation—the position from which one speaks—which is never neutral but is laden with power [19]. In the 2024 General Election, many campaigns symbolically utilized the image of Muslim women without creating space for them to become subjects of policy. However, Hall also offers a space for hope: a dynamic identity means that women can reclaim political narratives through community mobilization, social media, or religious organizations. This approach allows for an analysis that not only uncovers domination but also reads resistance and identity transformation at the grassroots level.

Political Representation

The presence of women in politics is often measured quantitatively through the concept of descriptive representation—the extent to which women are present in legislative bodies or as candidates. However, physical presence does not guarantee policy alignment. The representation of women in political and state institutions remains low and tends to be symbolic [20], [21]. This reflects the limitations of descriptive representation, which fails to capture the power dynamics within decision-making processes. In many cases, elected women lack a strong bargaining position within their parties or the legislature, rendering them unable to push for substantive policies such as the protection of women, equal access, or the elimination of gender-based violence [22]. This condition is exacerbated by the patriarchal culture within political parties and gender-biased recruitment systems.

Conversely, substantive representation emphasizes political output: the extent to which women can advocate for the interests of their constituency [23]. Its success is highly dependent on party ideology, coalition support, and the strength of women's networks. In Indonesia, parties with a religious or conservative base often use women as tools for electoral legitimation without providing genuine space for political agency [11]. In contrast, progressive parties or faith-based women's movements like Fatayat NU and the Family Welfare Movement (PKK) have successfully mobilized female voters through a communitarian approach [5]. In the context of North Sumatra, networks of mothers' recitation groups (*pengajian*), Islamic study circles (*majelis taklim*), and Muslim women's organizations are crucial arenas for shaping political preferences. However, if this mobilization only leads to collective support for male candidates, then the representation remains cosmetic. Therefore, an analysis of

representation must go beyond numbers and investigate how women become subjects or objects in the political process.

Symbolic Power Structures

To understand why women often occupy a subordinate position in local politics, Pierre Bourdieu's approach to political sociology offers a critical framework for analyzing the symbolic reproduction of power. The concept of habitus explains the system of dispositions ingrained through social experience, which reflexively shapes thought and action [24]. For Muslim women in North Sumatra, their habitus is formed by patriarchal family environments, religious traditions, and Batak customs that position men as leaders. Their political choices are often not the result of rational deliberation but are a reflection of long-internalized values [25]. In many cases, women vote for candidates recommended by their husbands, parents, or religious figures, rather than on the basis of a political platform.

The concepts of field and capital further clarify the competitive dynamics of local politics. The political field in North Sumatra is dominated by religious figures, politicians, and traditional leaders who possess symbolic capital such as religiosity, charisma, and traditional legitimacy [26]. Women, who rarely have direct access to such capital, are more easily mobilized than becoming mobilizers themselves [27]. Political campaigns that use Islamic symbols—such as images of mosques, headscarves (*jilbab*), or sacred phrases (*kalimat thayyibah*)—are a form of converting symbolic capital into electoral support. In this context, women are not the owners of capital but the medium for its distribution. More profoundly, Bourdieu describes doxa—norms that are considered natural and go unquestioned—as a tool of subtle domination. The subordinate position of women in politics is often considered "natural" or "in accordance with sharia," when in fact it is a historical construction [24]. By uncovering these mechanisms of symbolic power, this research seeks to critique the normalization of inequality and open up space for women's transformational agency.

Islam, Equality, and Justice

The argument that Islam restricts women's political participation requires critical re-examination. Normatively, Islam does not prohibit women's involvement in public affairs. History records the active roles of women like Khadijah, Aisyah, and Nusaibah in proselytizing, trade, and even on the battlefield [28]. The Qur'an affirms the spiritual equality between men and women (QS. Al-Hujurat: 13), while authentic hadith record the political allegiance (*bai'at*) of women to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). However, in classical jurisprudence (*fiqh*), interpretations influenced by patriarchal social contexts have often limited women's political space [29]. The primary obstacle is not Islam itself, but biased interpretations and social structures that impede progressive reinterpretation.

Over the past two decades, Islamic movements have emerged that affirm the principles of *al-musāwah* (equality) and *al-'adālah* (justice) as the basis for women's political legitimacy. The Musawah movement promotes a collective jurisprudential reasoning (*ijtihad*) that connects Islamic

values with human rights, rejecting gender hierarchies in *fiqh* [30]. In Indonesia, the Indonesian Congress of Women Ulama (KUPI) strengthens the principle of *al-'adālah* by involving women as subjects of interpretation, not merely objects of law [31]. Scholars like Yusuf al-Qaradawi also support women's political participation as long as it does not cause harm (*kemudharatan*) [32]. Empirical evidence shows that arguments based on religious texts are more persuasive to Muslim communities than secular narratives [33]. Thus, Islamic feminism is not a contradiction but an effort to reclaim Islamic teachings from repressive interpretations.

Analytical Framework of the Research

This study integrates three major frameworks: (1) identity politics (Taylor & Hall) to read the construction and representation of Muslim women's identities; (2) Bourdieu's political sociology to analyze the reproduction of symbolic power through habitus, field, and capital; and (3) progressive Islamic thought (*al-musāwah wa al-'adālah*) as a normative and theological foundation. These three frameworks are unified by the logic of intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which rejects the reduction of identity to a single dimension [34]. In this context, Muslim women in North Sumatra cannot be understood simply as "women," "Muslims," or "Batak/Malay citizens," but as subjects situated in a field of negotiation between agency, structure, and religious interpretation. An intersectional approach allows the researcher to capture the complexity of their political experiences without reducing them to a simple dichotomy of victim and perpetrator.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-exploratory design to deeply understand the social, cultural, and religious dynamics that shaped the political preferences of Muslim women in North Sumatra during the 2024 General Election. A qualitative approach was chosen for its capacity to explore the meanings, subjective experiences, and processes of social interaction that cannot be captured by quantitative data alone [35]. The research focuses on the construction of identity, the negotiation of agency, and the influence of symbolic power structures on electoral decisions, which necessitates a contextual and in-depth methodology.

The research is grounded in the intersectional methodological framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw. This approach rejects the reduction of women's identity to a single dimension (such as gender, religion, or ethnicity) and instead emphasizes that their political experiences are formed through the dynamic intersection of religion, culture, and social networks [34]. By adopting Crenshaw's logic, this study not only describes the influence of each factor but also analyzes how these three elements converge, conflict, and are negotiated in the formation of women's political identity. This allows the researcher to uncover a complexity of autonomy that cannot be confined to a simple dichotomy of "victim" versus "rational actor."

The research locus is North Sumatra Province, with a focus on regions with significant Muslim populations, such as Medan, Deli Serdang, Binjai, Langkat, Tebing Tinggi, and Mandailing Natal. The selection of this locus was based on its demographic characteristics, the dominance of identity politics, and its strategic ethnic and social diversity for understanding the dynamics of women's political preferences. The study population consists of Muslim women of active voting age (17 years and older) who participated in the 2024 General Election, including both those affiliated with socio-religious organizations and those who are non-organizational.

The sampling technique utilized was purposive sampling, which involves the deliberate selection of subjects based on characteristics relevant to the research focus [36]. A total of 152 respondents completed an online survey, with a distribution reflecting a diversity of urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. From this group, 25 informants were subsequently selected for in-depth interviews based on a diversity of backgrounds (education, occupation, organizational involvement), until a saturation point was reached—the condition where data no longer yield significant new information [37].

Data were collected through two primary, complementary methods: an online survey and in-depth interviews. The online survey was designed with a combination of closed, semi-open, and open-ended questions to obtain a broad yet detailed overview of the dynamics shaping the political preferences of Muslim women. This method allowed the researcher to identify general patterns from the 152 respondents, covering demographic aspects, participation levels, and voting considerations. To delve deeper into the meaning behind these choices, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 selected informants representing diverse backgrounds. These interviews provided a space for the women to share their personal narratives, explore their identity negotiation processes, and reflect on the influence of family, religious figures, and social structures on their political decisions. The combination of these two methods ensures that the data are not only descriptive but also rich in context and subjective meaning.

The survey was designed based on theoretical indicators from Taylor's identity politics, Bourdieu's sociology (habitus, capital, doxa), and the concepts of *al-musāwah wa al-'adālah* (equality and justice), with a focus on the influence of family, religious figures, local culture, and campaign narratives. The interviews were used to deepen the findings from the survey and to excavate richer personal narratives, particularly concerning the processes of identity negotiation and autonomy.

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, modified intersectionally to capture the complexity of the formation of Muslim women's political preferences [38]. The analysis process began with the transcription and in-depth familiarization of all data from the surveys and interviews, followed by the application of codes categorized into three main dimensions: religion, culture, and social. These codes were then grouped into core themes, such as "family influence

as cultural legitimation" or "Islamic symbolism as political capital," before being reviewed to identify areas of overlap. The final stage involved defining and naming themes that captured the essence of the identity and autonomy negotiation process. This approach enabled the researcher not only to identify individual themes but also to analyze how these themes converged and mutually constituted one another—for instance, how religious legitimation was actualized through the support of religious figures within a patriarchal family context.

To enhance the validity of the findings, triangulation was performed between the survey data, the results of the in-depth interviews, and normative documents such as the Qur'an and hadith, allowing the findings to be situated within a relevant religious value framework. Inter-method triangulation was also conducted to ensure data consistency and richness. The trustworthiness of the research was ensured through four primary strategies: credibility was enhanced via *member checking*, which involved clarifying key findings with several informants; transferability was achieved through *thick contextual description*, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings; dependability was secured through an *audit trail*, which systematically documented every stage of the research; and confirmability was strengthened through *reflexivity*, involving the researcher's critical reflection on their position and influence throughout the data collection and interpretation process. Through this combination of comprehensive methods and strong methodological rigor, this study aims to produce findings that are not only descriptive but also analytical, reflective, and contributory to a more holistic understanding of gender politics in North Sumatra.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

High Participation and Low Autonomy

The political participation of Muslim women in North Sumatra during the 2024 General Election recorded encouraging numbers. Of the 152 total respondents, 90.79% (138 individuals) stated that they voted in the election, while 9.21% (14 individuals) did not. This figure aligns with data from the North Sumatra General Elections Commission (KPU), which indicates that the number of female voters in the province reached 5,468,815, surpassing the number of male voters [2]. Quantitatively, this phenomenon can be interpreted as an indicator of women's strong engagement in the democratic process. However, upon deeper examination, high participation does not necessarily reflect political independence or substantive autonomy.

In-depth interviews revealed that for a number of respondents, their participation was more ritualistic, collective, or even a form of social conformity rather than an expression of autonomous political agency. One respondent, YN from Deli Serdang, stated: "I voted because my husband and in-laws also voted. If I didn't, people might think I wasn't loyal" [39]. A similar statement came from RR in Langkat:

"We usually just follow the *ustaz* (religious teacher) when we vote" [40].

These two statements uncover a deeper reality: women's participation is often driven by social pressure, not by free personal choice. Within Taylor's framework, this act can be read as an effort to gain recognition from the family and community environment, rather than as an expression of political sovereignty [7]. Women vote not because they are convinced by a candidate, but because they do not want to be ostracized or seen as deviating from the norm.

This phenomenon reinforces the findings of Aspinall et al. that women often serve as a medium for political mobilization, rather than as mobilizers themselves [5]. In the context of North Sumatra, religious figures, husbands, or traditional leaders are the primary actors in determining the direction of support, while women play the role of passive implementers of collective decisions. Survey data support this finding: 43.4% of respondents cited their husband/father/family as the most influential party in their choice, while 25.0% named religious figures. Only 55.3% stated that the decision came from themselves (without pressure).

Furthermore, the data show that the freedom to choose is not always fully experienced. A total of 34.2% of respondents admitted to being partially influenced by family or their environment, and 1.3% stated they had no freedom at all. One respondent, AY from Deli Serdang, explicitly mentioned needing "permission from the husband" [41] as a primary obstacle. This indicates that women's political autonomy is still constrained by patriarchal structures within the family, where the husband or father is considered the leader with the right to grant approval. Nevertheless, it is important to note that many women still feel that women are fit to be leaders. A significant 90.8% of respondents stated that Muslim women are highly worthy of being political leaders. However, structural and cultural barriers—such as domestic responsibilities, the double burden, and gender stereotypes—still hinder the realization of this potential. As expressed by EKN: "Women have to divide their time between career and family" [42]. This statement illustrates the structural dilemma faced by women: they are expected to be socially and politically active, yet they remain the primary caretakers of household affairs. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of the double burden, where women face dual pressures from the public and private spheres [43].

Thus, women's participation must be interpreted critically: although numerically encouraging, it is substantively still largely driven by social pressure rather than autonomous political agency. This reinforces the findings of Aspinall et al. that women often serve as a medium for political mobilization, not mobilizers [5]. However, amidst these limitations, seeds of resistance exist. A portion of women are choosing to become subjects, not objects, in the political process. They use religion, symbols, and social networks not just to comply, but to negotiate their autonomy—a process that will be further explored in the next subsection.

The Intersection of Religion, Culture, and Social Networks in Shaping Political Preferences

Analysis of data from 152 respondents indicates that the political preferences of Muslim women in North Sumatra are not shaped by a single factor, but by a dynamic intersection of religion, culture, and social networks. These three dimensions are mutually influential, forming a complex and contextual decision-making framework. In contrast to reductionist assumptions that separate these factors, this study finds that their relative dominance must be understood through an intersectional approach that acknowledges the overlap and interdependence between structures [34]. In this process, women are not merely objects of external influence, but subjects who consciously choose, interpret, and legitimize their decisions through their own value frameworks. This study supports Saba Mahmood's argument that agency does not always manifest as resistance, but often as a form of reflective obedience—where political choices become an expression of piety and loyalty to family [44].

The following Venn diagram illustrates the intersectional patterns between religion, culture, and social networks in shaping the preferences of women in North Sumatra during the 2024 Election.
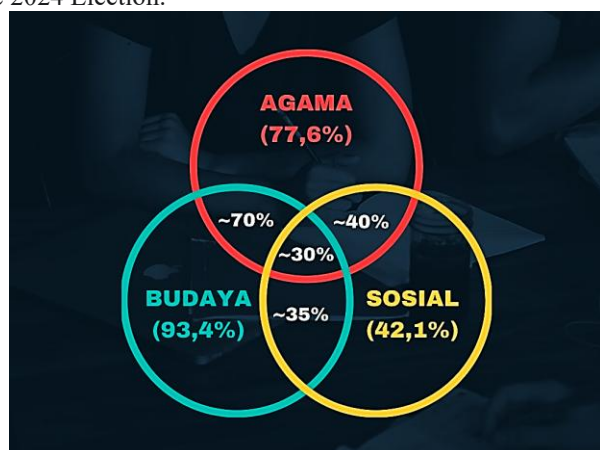

Fig. Venn Diagram of the Intersection of Religion, Culture, and Social Networks

Based on thematic and frequency analysis, culture emerges as the most dominant factor, with 93.4% of respondents citing at least one cultural indicator as a primary influence. These indicators include patriarchy, gender stereotypes, domestic responsibilities, and family influence (husband/father). Within this study's framework, the family is categorized as a cultural institution, not merely a social one, as it is the internal environment where normative values are formed and internalized. This aligns with the argument that the domestic sphere is not just a private space but a primary arena for the reproduction of social structures [44]. In the context of North Sumatra, kinship systems like *Dalihan Natolu* not only regulate social relations but also serve as a mechanism of control over women's autonomy in the public sphere. Patriarchal culture, reproduced through custom and family norms, becomes a "habitus" that shapes women's disposition to prioritize family interests over personal political ambitions [24].

The dominance of culture is reflected in statements from respondents such as ZN: "Because women should not be outside the home for too long and neglect their duties as a wife" [45]. Other similar sentiments included: "Women must divide their time between career and family" [46], and the need for "Permission from the husband" [41]. These statements reveal the structural dilemma faced by women: they are confronted with the dual demands of domestic duties and public aspirations. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of the double burden, where women who work outside the home remain primarily responsible for domestic affairs [43]. In Bourdieu's framework, this structure is not only material but also symbolic—where the authority of the husband or father is considered "proper" and "natural," and thus is rarely questioned. Consequently, culture is not merely an obstacle but a form of symbolic capital that regulates what is considered "fitting" and "correct" in political action [24].

The second factor is religion, which influenced 77.6% of respondents. Religion functions as a source of moral legitimation and a filter for candidates, particularly concerning their Islamic background, the support of religious figures, and the use of Islamic symbols (e.g., headscarves, *syar'i* terminology). However, religion does not operate autonomously; it is actualized within cultural contexts and channeled through social networks. As the study found, 65.8% of respondents admitted to being influenced by religious figures, but this influence was often conveyed through family forums or religious study groups (*pengajian*), resulting in a fusion of religion and culture. In many cases, political campaigns utilized religious symbols—such as images of mosques, sacred phrases (*kalimat thayyibah*), or *syar'i* appearance—as a form of converting symbolic capital into political support [27]. However, for the women themselves, these symbols were not merely tactical but an expression of active religious subjectivity. Choosing an "Islamic" candidate was not a sign of passivity but a form of piety politics—where piety becomes the basis for legitimizing one's choice [44].

The third factor is external social networks, which include social media, religious figures as public actors, and communities outside the family. This factor influenced 42.1% of respondents, primarily through the influence of social media (18.4%) and the support of religious figures as a key determinant (25.0%). Social networks act as conduits for messages rather than as the primary source of values. In this context, social media often becomes a platform where religious and cultural narratives are reproduced, sometimes in the form of hoaxes or emotional campaigns [24]. However, social networks also serve as spaces of resistance. Islamic study circles (*majelis taklim*), social gatherings (*arisan*), and WhatsApp groups become arenas where women not only receive but also interpret, verify, and reproduce political narratives. As noted by Aspinall et al., strategies based on women's networks like Fatayat NU and the PKK have proven effective in boosting participation, though they carry an ambivalence: on one hand, they are empowering; on the other,

they can reinforce women's traditional role as followers rather than leaders [5].

The Venn diagram constructed from the data visually demonstrates this intersectional complexity. The central intersectional area (Culture ∩ Religion ∩ Social) covers approximately 30% of cases, indicating that nearly a third of respondents were influenced by all three factors simultaneously. The intersection between Culture and Religion is particularly strong, at 70%, illustrating the tight link between family norms and religious legitimation in the decision-making process. The intersections of Culture ∩ Social (~35%) and Religion ∩ Social (~40%) show that external influences often reinforce values already instilled in the domestic sphere. This finding strongly supports intersectionality theory, which posits that women's experiences cannot be understood through a single identity marker [34]. In this context, being a woman, a Muslim, and part of a specific family are not three separate influences but a single, mutually constructing reality. Moreover, this finding reinforces Saba Mahmood's argument that women's agency often emerges not through defiance of structures, but through a reflective adherence to religious practices [44]. Choosing a candidate because she is supported by a female religious teacher (*ustadzah*), approved by her husband, and aligns with Islamic values is not a sign of passivity, but a form of active participation within a framework they deem legitimate.

These findings indicate that women's political empowerment cannot be achieved through partial approaches. Programs aimed at training female candidates must understand that these women are not only competing in the public arena but also negotiating in the private realm. Therefore, empowerment strategies must address all three dimensions: strengthening capacity (social), reinforcing an inclusive religious identity (religion), and transforming family norms (culture). In doing so, women are not just asked to "leave the house," but are also supported to transform the home into a political power base. In Taylor's framework, this is the arena for the "—where women strive to gain acknowledgment as political subjects, even as they are often constructed as objects [7]. In the framework of progressive Islam, this is an effort to reclaim religious teachings from repressive interpretations and move toward those that support *al-musāwah* (equality) and *al-'adālah* (justice). Thus, the political preferences of Muslim women are not the result of coercion, but a projection of an active subjectivity, albeit one shaped by complex structures.

Generational Differences in Navigating Pressure and Autonomy

The political preferences of Muslim women in North Sumatra are not only shaped by the intersection of religion, culture, and social networks, but are also significantly influenced by age and generational factors. Analysis of data from the 152 respondents reveals that the younger generation (21–30 years old), which constitutes the largest group (42.1%), demonstrates markedly different patterns of participation and consideration compared to older generations. This difference is not merely a reflection of age, but a product of social shifts, access to information, and changes in symbolic power structures.

The younger generation tends to be more critical of traditional authority and more open to information from non-traditional sources. A total of 58.6% of young respondents stated that they were interested or very interested in following political issues, and 71.9% of them use social media as their primary source of information. Social media is not just a tool for information delivery but an arena for political debate, narrative verification, and collective mobilization. In an interview, a university student, FA from Medan, stated: "I first check on TikTok and Instagram, then I read the news. If everyone says candidate X is corrupt, I find out for myself" [47].

This statement illustrates a growing cognitive independence among the younger generation—they no longer passively accept information from religious figures or family but actively evaluate and verify it. However, this independence does not equate to freedom from pressure. Many young respondents acknowledged that they still have to align their choices with their families, especially if they live with their parents. As expressed by KP, a university student from Tapanuli: "I vote for whom I want, but if my husband or parents disagree, I might end up following them" [48]. This indicates that the autonomy of the younger generation is relational: they possess the capacity for critical thinking but still negotiate within the framework of family and community values.

Conversely, the 31–40 age group (38.2% of total respondents), who are mostly housewives or professional workers, demonstrate a fragile balance between domestic responsibilities and political involvement. A significant 82.9% of this group cited "domestic responsibilities" as a primary obstacle, and 43.4% stated that their husband or family was the most influential party in their choice. For them, politics is often a secondary priority after family matters. However, this group also exhibits high political awareness—90.8% stated that women are highly worthy of being leaders. The tension between the desire to be involved and the obligation to family creates a real structural dilemma.

On the other hand, the >50 age group displays more stable political loyalty, though it tends to be symbolic and normative. They vote not based on policy platforms, but on emotional attachment to religious figures or Islamic symbols. A statement such as, "I always vote for whomever our *ustadz* supports," indicates that their preferences are shaped by a Bourdieusian habitus—deeply ingrained social dispositions that are no longer actively critiqued [24]. In this case, advanced age reinforces symbolic domination rather than expanding deliberative space. However, some respondents from this group also showed strong support for women's involvement, even if they themselves would not want to run as candidates. As expressed by RA: "They are very worthy. But I vote for the man because he is stronger" [49]. This statement reveals a generational ambivalence: they support women in general but maintain patriarchal assumptions in their personal choices.

Overall, these generational differences show that the process of negotiating identity and autonomy is not static but dynamic and contextual. The younger generation shows potential for transformation through informational independence and criticism, while older generations demonstrate the resilience of symbolic structures. However, all groups remain in a field of negotiation—between personal desires and collective demands. Thus, change in women's political participation will not occur through generational shifts alone but requires a transformation of family structures, religious understanding, and access to social capital.

The Duality of Religiosity in Women's Politics

Religion plays a central and ambivalent role in shaping the political preferences of Muslim women in North Sumatra. On one hand, it serves as a source of moral legitimacy and a normative foundation for their political choices. On the other hand, it can also function as a mechanism that constrains autonomy and active engagement, especially when its interpretations are patriarchally constructed. Data analysis shows that 77.6% of respondents cited an Islamic background as a primary consideration, and 68.4% stated that Islamic symbols (e.g., the headscarf, *syar'i* terminology) were very or quite influential. However, it is crucial to note that only 8.5% of respondents routinely made religion their sole consideration, indicating that religion is not a singular factor but part of a broader network of meaning.

For a majority of women, religion functions as an ethical filter. They choose candidates they perceive as "Islamic" not out of blind obedience, but because they desire leaders who fear God, are trustworthy (*amanah*), and uphold Islamic values. As expressed by ST from Deli Serdang: "I choose those with a religious background because I want a leader who fears God" [50]. A similar statement came from AWA, a lecturer in Deli Serdang: "An Islamic background is a primary consideration because I want a leader who has integrity and is not corrupt" [51]. In this context, religion becomes a form of symbolic capital that women use to legitimize their choices [24]. An "Islamic" leader is considered more trustworthy, just, and concerned about the community (*umat*). This phenomenon aligns with the findings of Aspinall et al. that Islamic symbolism is often used to build emotional proximity with Muslim voters [5]. However, for the women themselves, these symbols do not merely function as campaign tools, but as an evaluative framework that they actively employ.

Conversely, religion can also be a tool for suppressing autonomy. In some cases, religious interpretations are used to limit women's space in politics. For instance, some respondents stated that women are unfit to be leaders because "in Islam, leaders should be men." Although only 9.2% of respondents stated that women were "less worthy" of being leaders, religious arguments are often used implicitly to justify male dominance in the political sphere. One respondent, FA from Medan, explicitly stated that women were "less worthy" to be leaders [47], although she did not directly cite a religious reason. This suggests that religious patriarchy is often not expressed explicitly but is internalized as doxa—a norm that is considered natural and goes unquestioned [24]. Within this framework, women are constrained not only by external pressures but also by their internal construction of gender roles.

Interestingly, however, religion also serves as a basis for resistance. A number of respondents used religious arguments to support women's involvement. As expressed by SY from Simalungun: "It is very important [for women] to be mobilizers, because women's votes are equal to men's; they have the right to vote in decision-making. Moreover, there are more women than men in Indonesia" [52]. This statement illustrates an inclusive understanding of Islam that emphasizes spiritual equality (QS. Al-Hujurat: 13) and acknowledges the active role of women in Islamic history. Movements like the Indonesian Congress of Women Ulama (KUPI) and Musawah have successfully reinforced the argument that gender justice (*al-'adālah*) is an integral part of Islamic teaching, not a foreign secular concept [30], [31].

Thus, religion is not a homogenous entity but a contested arena of meaning. For Muslim women in North Sumatra, religion is not only a source of limitation but also a potential for liberation. The power of religion lies in its ability to grant legitimacy, both to maintain the status quo and to drive transformation. In the process of negotiating their identity, women do not merely accept religious interpretations; they actively interpret, select, and reclaim the teachings of Islam from repressive authorities.

Social Networks: From Religious Study Circles to Social Media

Social networks, both traditional and digital, play a crucial role as arenas of negotiation where Muslim women in North Sumatra form, reinforce, and sometimes challenge their political preferences. In this study, social networks are not viewed as homogenous entities but as dynamic fields where religious values, cultural norms, and personal aspirations converge, conflict, and are negotiated. The two most dominant forms of networks are religious study circles (*majelis taklim*) and recitation groups (*pengajian*) (traditional networks), and social media (digital networks), both of which have become vital spaces in the formation of women's political identity.

Majelis taklim, social gatherings (*arisan*), and family recitation groups serve as primary social spaces for a majority of respondents, particularly those aged 31 and above. A total of 59.9% of respondents stated that they were members of religious or women's community organizations. In these spaces, women not only receive religious teachings but also discuss social and political issues, often in the form of informal chats. However, these spaces also function as mechanisms of social control, where a political choice that is "not in line" with the recommendations of a religious figure or husband can trigger social pressure. As expressed by JN from Deli Serdang: "[The community is] very supportive, but with limitations" [53].

This statement illustrates the ambivalence of social support: although the environment supports women's involvement, that support is circumscribed by collective norms. In many cases, political recommendations from religious figures are

conveyed indirectly through recitation groups, thereby becoming narratives that are considered valid and not to be questioned. The data show that 65.8% of respondents admitted to being influenced by religious figures, either directly or indirectly. However, it is important to note that only 25.0% of them cited religious figures as the party that influenced them the most, suggesting that this influence is structural rather than purely individual.

Yet, amidst this structural dominance, the *majelis taklim* can also become a space for resistance. Some respondents used these forums to discuss, verify, and even reject political narratives they considered unjust. As expressed by SL from Serdang Bedagai: "[We must be] more active in voicing our political rights. If we support a candidate, show off their vision and mission too. Learn about politics and religion" [54]. This statement demonstrates that women do not just receive information but also actively disseminate and critique it. In this context, the *majelis taklim* is not merely a tool for elite mobilization but an arena for inclusive political participation.

On the other hand, social media has emerged as an increasingly important autonomous space, especially for the younger generation. A total of 18.4% of respondents cited social media as their primary source of information, and 28% stated that social media was very or quite influential on their choice. For young women like KP from Tapanuli: "I first check on TikTok and Instagram, then I read the news" [48].

Social media provides them with direct access to information, reducing their dependence on religious figures or family. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become spaces for rapid and widespread discussion, verification, and mobilization. However, social media is also an arena for the spread of hoaxes, emotional campaigns, and identity politics. Many respondents stated that they must be cautious in receiving information and often have to re-verify it through other sources. As an interesting addition, social media has also become a tool for empowerment. Some women use social media to voice their political opinions openly, despite the risk of criticism. As expressed by SL: "[We must be] more active in voicing our political rights" [54].

Thus, social networks—both traditional and digital—are not merely channels of information but arenas for the negotiation of identity and autonomy. Within them, women not only receive but also interpret, select, and create political meaning that aligns with their values. In Hall's framework, social networks become the position of enunciation—the place from which women speak and assert their political existence, albeit within the limits defined by power structures [17].

A Critical Reflection within the Frame of Islamic Politics

The findings of this study indicate that the political preferences of Muslim women in North Sumatra are not formed in a vacuum but are the result of a complex negotiation between religious values, social structures, and individual consciousness. Amidst the dominance of patriarchal structures and the instrumentality of religious symbols, women are not merely passive objects of domination but are also agents undergoing a transformation of their political identity. In this context, Islamic political theory offers a crucial normative framework for evaluating whether contemporary political practices reflect the spirit of justice (*al-'adālah*), equality (*al-musāwah*), and consultation (*shūrā*) that lies at the core of Islamic teachings.

Textually, Islam does not restrict women's participation in public affairs. Qur'an, At-Tawbah [9]:71 states: "And the believing men and women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong..."
The equal placement of "men and women" in the verse's structure indicates that socio-political responsibility in Islam is collective and not discriminatory based on gender [55]. This verse is not merely a moral call but a normative recognition of women as public subjects. In the context of modern democracy, voting, running for office, or critiquing policy are forms of actualizing this religious mandate (*amanah*), not just expressions of political liberalism.

Furthermore, Qur'an, Al-Mumtahanah [60]:12 records that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) accepted a political allegiance (*bai'at*) from women, with conditions that included social and political commitments. This verse signifies the validity of a social contract between women and their leader, which in a modern context can be read as the basis for the constitutional legitimacy of women's participation [9]. The *bai'at* was not just a symbol of support but a form of political accountability and a recognition of women's authority as citizens.

The hadith of the Prophet (PBUH), "Each of you is a shepherd, and each of you will be asked about your flock" (Narrated by Bukhari and Muslim), also affirms that social responsibility is universal, without distinguishing by gender. Within this framework, a woman's political preference is not merely a choice but a moral and religious responsibility inseparable from her identity as a believer. However, the research findings show a wide gap between Islamic norms and social reality. Although 77.6% of respondents cited religion as an important consideration, only 8.5% stated that religion was routinely their primary consideration in voting. A total of 68.4% stated that Islamic symbols (the headscarf, *syar'i* terminology) were quite to very influential, yet only 21.1% admitted to being directly influenced by religious figures.

This phenomenon indicates that religion is often used symbolically by political elites and religious figures to mobilize votes, not to strengthen women's critical consciousness [24]. In Bourdieu's framework, religious authorities hold symbolic capital that can be used to establish political legitimacy. However, if this capital is used to reinforce dependency rather than independence, a deformation of Islamic ethics occurs. As found in this study, many women vote because it is "recommended by the *ustaz*," not because of an analysis of a candidate's platform or track record. This suggests that religion is no longer a source of liberation but a tool of domination that suppresses critical agency.

More profoundly, culture—particularly through the family and custom—emerged as the most dominant factor (93.4%) in shaping political preferences. Many women cited

"permission from the husband" or "domestic responsibilities" as primary obstacles. In this context, religion is often actualized through a patriarchal culture, where the authority of the husband or father is considered "natural" or "in accordance with sharia," when in fact it is a historical construction [24]. The subordinate position of women in politics is often considered doxa—an unquestioned norm—making it difficult to challenge.

In a multi-ethnic region like North Sumatra, where religion, ethnicity, and custom converge, Muslim women often experience misrecognition—being represented merely as symbols of morality or guardians of traditional values, without being acknowledged as autonomous political agents [15]. This condition reinforces unequal power relations and limits their substantive participation in the democratic process. Taylor emphasizes that recognition is not just a moral necessity but a prerequisite for distributive and representative justice [16]. In this context, the dominance of exclusive and masculine religious narratives becomes a barrier to just recognition.

This condition is not caused by Islam itself, but by patriarchal interpretations that ignore historical context and the higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-syarī'ah*). Amina Wadud refers to this process as a patriarchal reading, where texts are read through a gender-biased cultural lens [55]. She asserts that Islam, as a monotheistic religion, must place human beings equally as moral and political subjects.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini adds that if politics is part of *mu'āmalāt* (social affairs), then women's access must be guaranteed as long as the principles of justice and public interest (*maslahah*) are fulfilled [56]. Yusuf al-Qaradawi also states that women have the right to run for and hold public office as long as they meet religious and professional qualifications [57]. This view affirms that women's political participation is a necessity, not a deviation. The Prophet's hadith, "The one who seeks guidance (istikharah) will not be at a loss, and the one who consults will not regret" (Narrated by Thabrani), reinforces the principle of *shūrā* as an ethical mechanism in decision-making. Excluding women from this process is not only exclusionary but also contrary to the Islamic spirit that emphasizes collective participation in communal affairs.

Thus, Islamic political theory cannot be detached from social reality. The principles of *al-'adālah* and *al-musāwah* must serve as the foundation for assessing whether women's political preferences reflect a substantive Islamic ethic or are merely a response to power structures. If their preferences are still constrained by narrow interpretations that ignore agency, then the intellectual task of Muslims and socio-religious movements is to open new spaces for interpretation based on public good (*maslahah*), not domination.

Scholars like Asma Barlas call this process unreading patriarchy—dismantling the dominant interpretations that ideologically subjugate women [58]. In the context of North Sumatra, this can be done through progressive, faith-based political education that not only teaches the obligation to vote but also builds critical agency grounded in Islamic values. Spaces like religious study circles (*majelis taklim*), social

gatherings (*arisan*), and women's networks can become vessels for transformation, where women not only receive narratives but also reformulate their political identities based on justice and equal recognition.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the political preferences of Muslim women in North Sumatra are shaped through a complex negotiation between religion, culture, and social networks, rather than by a single, monolithic factor. Analysis of 152 respondents reveals that culture, particularly through family norms and domestic responsibilities, emerges as the most dominant factor (93.4%), positioning the domestic sphere as the primary arena for the formation of political identity. Religion (77.6%) functions as a source of moral legitimation, yet it is often actualized through cultural and social structures. Social networks (42.1%) act as conduits for narratives, primarily through social media and religious figures. The dominance of culture does not signify female passivity but rather reflects a process of reflective agency, wherein obedience to family and religion becomes a meaningful form of participation. The political autonomy of women, therefore, is not synonymous with individual independence but lies in the ability to negotiate between collective demands and personal aspirations. These findings support an intersectional approach and reject the simple dichotomy between agency and structure. To strengthen the substantive participation of women, empowerment strategies must be holistic, integrating capacity building (social), the transformation of family norms (cultural), and the reinforcement of an inclusive religious identity (religious). Only then can the home be transformed from a restrictive space into a political power base for Muslim women.

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