Women's Political Leadership Traits through the Lens of Rational-Legal Authority: A Concept

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ABSTRACT

Women's political leadership requires an explanation of how personal capabilities become consequential within formally constituted offices. Occupying an elected position does not necessarily provide effective access to information, administrative cooperation or recognition as a legitimate decision maker. This article develops a conceptual framework for exploring women's political leadership through rational-legal authority. It uses a theory-led integrative approach supported by purposively selected empirical journal studies identified in supplied Scopus records and through Consensus, with bibliographic details and reported findings checked against publisher or institutional records. The framework distinguishes traits, competencies, leadership practices, institutional conditions and attributed characteristics. It proposes six analytical dimensions: institutional competence, procedural orientation, accountable exercise of office, reasoned judgement, impersonal exercise of responsibility and adaptive institutional agency. Capabilities are expected to inform practices, while institutional arrangements and gendered informal norms condition whether those practices translate into recognised and enacted authority. Public perceptions constitute a separate evaluative pathway. Six conditional propositions specify relationships for subsequent investigation. The article contributes a vocabulary and research agenda that avoid treating women as inherently more competent, ethical or effective than men. International evidence informs the conceptual argument, while its relevance to Malaysian political leadership requires local empirical examination. The resulting framework supports exploration of leadership characteristics without claiming empirical validation or a universal female leadership personality.

Keywords: women's political leadership; rational-legal authority; institutional competence; gendered institutions; conceptual framework

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's political leadership involves more than access to representative institutions. Elections and appointments establish an entitlement to occupy office, but exercising that entitlement requires relationships with administrators, parties, colleagues and citizens (Gupta & Pandey, 2026; Spary, 2007). A political leader must understand responsibilities, obtain relevant information, evaluate competing demands and secure implementation through institutional processes (Asmorowati et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). These activities make leadership characteristics relevant to political authority. They also raise a central conceptual difficulty: characteristics visible in political action cannot automatically be attributed to an individual independently of the conditions under which she works. Evidence concerning learning, accountability and bureaucratic constraints reinforces the importance of considering individual capabilities alongside institutional circumstances (Afridi et al., 2017; Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018; Gupta & Pandey, 2026).

Empirical research provides several reasons to distinguish political presence from practical authority. Gupta and Pandey (2026) examine women deputy mayors in Nepal and identify constraints involving bureaucratic relationships and access to information. Folke and Rickne (2016) investigate political promotion in Sweden and show that women's presence in political organisations does not eliminate barriers to advancement. Research on quota laws similarly indicates that institutional design affects entry into elected office (Schwindt-Bayer, 2009). Taken together, these studies direct attention to different stages of leadership: gaining a position, developing capacity, being accepted as entitled to decide and influencing institutional action.

This article addresses the research objective of exploring women's political leadership characteristics through the rational-legal authority approach. The proposed lens centres authority on recognised office, defined jurisdiction and rules governing legitimate action. It asks how leaders exercise responsibilities attached to positions rather than explaining influence exclusively through personality, family connections or personal devotion. Its analytical usefulness lies in connecting leadership characteristics with the practical demands of public office. However, it also requires caution: formal authority does not guarantee equal treatment. Gupta and Pandey (2026), for example, demonstrate how gendered bureaucratic relationships can constrain women's exercise of formally assigned responsibilities. Within the proposed framework, compliance with procedures is therefore distinguished from the fairness and effectiveness of the resulting decisions.

Three distinctions organise the conceptual problem. First, leadership characteristics differ from institutional conditions. Knowledge of legislative procedures is a competency, whereas a transparent committee appointment system is an organisational arrangement. Research distinguishing legislators' policy priorities from their legislative activities illustrates why individual orientations and institutional opportunities should be examined separately (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). Second, formal authority differs from practical influence. A politician may possess a lawful mandate while being excluded from information needed to exercise it (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Third, demonstrated characteristics differ from attributed characteristics. A candidate may be perceived as a credible corruption fighter, but that perception does not establish how she behaves when administering resources (Bauhr et al., 2025). Public evaluations of misconduct can also vary across audiences, cautioning against assumptions about uniform gender expectations (Eggers et al., 2018). These distinctions prevent the article from interpreting institutional advantages, constraints or stereotypes as individual personality traits.

The empirical literature also discourages a simple celebratory account. Bauhr et al. (2025) examine anti-corruption stereotypes, while Afridi et al. (2017) investigate experience, corruption and learning in Indian local government. Their studies concern different objects: perceptions in the former and administrative outcomes associated with political leadership in the latter. Comparing them conceptually reveals why positive expectations about women cannot substitute for evidence about competence, practices or accountability. Likewise, an unfavourable outcome cannot establish an enduring personal deficiency when experience, resources and implementation arrangements remain relevant explanations (Afridi et al., 2017). Cross-national evidence further indicates that the relationship between women's representation and corruption depends on accountability conditions, reinforcing the importance of institutional context (Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018).

The contribution is an integration rather than a claim that previous scholarship has ignored women's leadership. Existing empirical studies illuminate representation and promotion (Folke & Rickne, 2016; Schwindt-Bayer, 2009), policy priorities and legislative activity (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006), bureaucratic organisation and relationships (Alberti et al., 2022; Gupta & Pandey, 2026), and public evaluations of political candidates and officeholders (Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018). Research on e-leadership also highlights innovation and adaptation in local governance (Asmorowati et al., 2025). This article brings those domains into a common vocabulary organised around authority enactment. It proposes relationships that can guide qualitative exploration and later comparative testing. It does not attempt an exhaustive account of all leadership theories or a statistical synthesis of gender effects.

Four questions guide the argument. Which characteristics are relevant to exercising rational-legal authority? How can traits, competencies, practices and institutional conditions be separated? How do gendered institutional relationships influence the expression and recognition of leadership characteristics? Which

conditional propositions can support subsequent research? Answering these questions yields six proposed dimensions and a framework in which capabilities inform practices under enabling or restrictive institutional conditions. The framework is particularly intended to inform exploration in Malaysia, where its applicability must be established through evidence rather than assumed from international examples.

2. CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

The article adopts a theory-led integrative conceptual approach. Its purpose is to define constructs, connect them logically and formulate relationships that are open to investigation. Empirical studies supply illustrations, constraints and competing explanations concerning leadership development, institutional relationships and public evaluations (Afridi et al., 2017; Bauhr et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). These studies do not function as direct tests of the complete framework because their original research questions, units of analysis and operational definitions differ from those proposed here. The conceptual work therefore proceeds through explicit interpretation rather than treating every cited association as confirmation of rational-legal authority.

The supplied Scopus search document provided the initial literature pool, including studies of Indonesian mayors (Asmorowati et al., 2025), Nepalese deputy mayors (Gupta & Pandey, 2026) and European candidate evaluations (Bauhr et al., 2025). Consensus was used as a supplementary discovery tool for original empirical journal articles addressing political promotion (Folke & Rickne, 2016), legislative priorities and activity (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006), quota design (Schwindt-Bayer, 2009), and accountability and corruption (Afridi et al., 2017; Eggers et al., 2018; Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). Consensus is an evidence discovery service rather than a journal indexing database equivalent to Scopus. Inclusion through Consensus does not by itself establish Scopus indexing. Accordingly, the article uses studies identified through these two routes without claiming that every reference appeared in the supplied Scopus results or that a complete Scopus database search was conducted.

Selection was purposive. Eligible supporting sources presented original empirical analysis, examined women in identifiable political roles or evaluations of political candidates, and addressed mechanisms relevant to capabilities, practices, constraints or recognition. The selected literature encompasses political leadership trajectories (Spary, 2007), local bureaucratic organisation (Alberti et al., 2022), adaptive governance practices (Asmorowati et al., 2025), and constraints on the exercise of political authority (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Contrasting evidence was considered alongside supportive examples. In particular, research on learning and administrative performance qualifies assumptions that leadership capabilities are fixed (Afridi et al., 2017), while studies of candidate credibility and misconduct evaluations distinguish public perceptions from demonstrated conduct (Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018). The reference list consequently contains empirical journal articles only. Books, theoretical essays, reviews, working papers and unverified records are excluded from the supporting evidence corpus. The rational-legal lens is articulated here as a conceptual formulation; the empirical references are not presented as the original theoretical sources of that tradition.

Bibliographic details, research designs and central reported findings were checked using Consensus records and publisher or institutional sources. Where full text was unavailable, interpretation was restricted to information explicitly available in the verified abstract or record. Such verification establishes a basis for the specific claims used, but does not constitute a full methodological appraisal of every study. No PRISMA diagram, pooled effect estimate, quality score or exhaustive screening count is claimed. Publication years follow the final journal issue where identifiable, rather than mixing issue dates with earlier online publication dates.

The analytical sequence comprised defining the authority problem, separating relevant constructs, examining empirical evidence for conceptual compatibility, developing six dimensions, and specifying propositions with boundary conditions. For example, evidence concerning bureaucratic constraints informed the distinction between formal office and practical authority (Gupta & Pandey, 2026), while candidate evaluation research informed the separation of attributed credibility from observed leadership practices (Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018). Evidence on accountability conditions also informed the treatment of institutional context as a potential influence on leadership relationships (Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). Throughout the article, reported findings are attributed to their original authors. Connections to rational-legal authority are the present

article's interpretations, and predicted relationships are labelled propositions. Maintaining these three layers makes the contribution assessable and distinguishes conceptual development from the generation of primary empirical findings.

3. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

3.1 Political Leadership and the Meaning of Traits

Women's political leadership is defined here as the exercise of representative, executive or organisational responsibilities by women holding political office. The framework can encompass legislators, ministers, mayors, local representatives and party leaders, although responsibilities differ substantially across these positions. Relevant empirical research examines legislative priorities and activities (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006), mayoral governance and bureaucratic organisation (Alberti et al., 2022; Asmorowati et al., 2025), and women's political leadership trajectories (Spary, 2007). Candidates enter the discussion only where empirical studies investigate anticipated leadership or public evaluations, such as perceptions of anti-corruption credibility (Bauhr et al., 2025). Candidate perceptions are not treated as observations of officeholding behaviour. This population definition also separates elected politicians from career administrators, a distinction particularly relevant to research examining relationships between women deputy mayors and bureaucratic authority (Gupta & Pandey, 2026).

The title retains "traits," but the evidence requires a broader and more precise vocabulary. For this framework, a trait is understood as a relatively enduring disposition across situations; a competency is knowledge or skill that enables action; a practice is observable conduct in a particular setting; an institutional condition is an arrangement that facilitates or restricts conduct; and an attributed characteristic is a quality assigned by an observer. These are working analytical definitions rather than constructs directly validated by the selected studies. Nevertheless, the empirical literature illustrates the importance of distinguishing them. Research on learning in political office directs attention to capabilities that develop through experience (Afridi et al., 2017), while research on women deputy mayors demonstrates how institutional relationships can constrain the expression of expertise and political agency (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Studies of candidate credibility and responses to misconduct further illustrate the need to distinguish observer evaluations from demonstrated conduct (Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018). Accordingly, a single interview statement about persistence cannot establish a stable trait; a documented sequence of decisions may support an account of leadership practices without establishing an enduring personal disposition.

Table 1. Working Distinctions among Constructs

Construct	Definition	Illustrative evidence
Trait	Relatively enduring disposition	Repeated patterns of persistence across circumstances
Competency	Knowledge or skill supporting action	Accurate interpretation of a statutory responsibility
Practice	Observable exercise of leadership	A documented request for budget information
Institutional condition	Arrangement shaping opportunities for action	Administrative access rules and staff support
Attributed characteristic	Quality assigned by an observer	A voter's judgement that a candidate is trustworthy

These distinctions are consequential for explanation. If a politician does not challenge an administrative decision, the observation may reflect limited procedural knowledge, an inaccessible review mechanism, an anticipated sanction or deliberate strategic restraint. Coding the behaviour immediately as submissiveness would collapse several explanations into a personality judgement. Conversely, successful policy implementation may depend on a capable team or favourable mandate rather than individual brilliance. The framework therefore directs researchers to investigate the relationship between actor and institution before classifying leadership characteristics.

3.2 Rational-Legal Authority as an Analytical Lens

Rational-legal authority is understood here as authority grounded in recognised rules and formally constituted office. Its central elements are defined jurisdiction, specified responsibilities, procedures for decision and implementation, and a distinction between the public position and its occupant. Recognition attaches to the entitlement to act within an office's remit. Individual popularity may help secure cooperation, but it does not itself determine lawful jurisdiction. This formulation makes the institutional location of leadership central to analysis. Its empirical relevance is illustrated by research showing that women's formal inclusion in local government does not necessarily translate into substantive authority when bureaucratic relationships restrict their participation in decision-making (Gupta & Pandey, 2026).

The lens does not imply that every political decision is a mechanical application of rules. Elected leaders interpret priorities, negotiate competing interests and make choices where evidence is incomplete. Research on legislators' policy priorities and activities highlights the importance of distinguishing political preferences from their expression through institutional action (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). Studies of women mayors' e-leadership also illustrate the relevance of innovation and adaptation within administrative settings (Asmorowati et al., 2025). Within the proposed framework, rules establish who may decide, how decisions are reached and which responsibilities follow. Competence concerns the capacity to navigate those obligations; reasoned judgement concerns how alternatives are assessed within them. Political responsiveness remains compatible with formal authority when representative demands are addressed through publicly defensible processes.

Accountability, transparency and evidence-informed judgement are treated as connected governance dimensions rather than interchangeable definitions of rational-legal authority. Accountability concerns answerability and possible correction or sanction. The importance of its institutional context is supported by evidence that the relationship between women's representation and corruption varies with accountability conditions (Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). Transparency concerns access to relevant information, an issue made particularly salient by evidence of informational gatekeeping in women deputy mayors' relationships with bureaucrats (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Evidence-informed judgement concerns the use and interpretation of knowledge. Each dimension may strengthen the quality or credibility of rule-governed leadership, yet each requires a separate explanation. Analytically, a transparent decision can remain unlawful, a lawful decision can lack public explanation, and a technically informed decision can neglect legitimate disagreement.

Legality also does not establish justice. Formally valid arrangements can distribute opportunities unequally or protect concentrated power. Research on quota design demonstrates that the details of formal institutional arrangements affect women's electoral inclusion (Schwindt-Bayer, 2009), while evidence from Swedish politics indicates that substantial representation can coexist with barriers to women's advancement (Folke & Rickne, 2016). Bureaucratic expertise and claims of neutrality may also operate within relationships that constrain elected women's authority (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). These findings reinforce an important qualification when interpreting women's political leadership: effective recognition of authority cannot be assumed simply because an office exists. The analytical task is to examine how formal provisions are enacted, contested or circumvented in practice.

3.3 Gendered Institutions and Plural Legitimacy

Gendered institutions provide a complementary account of why equivalent mandates may produce unequal opportunities. Informal expectations can affect whose expertise is respected, who receives information and whose intervention is interpreted as legitimate leadership. Gupta and Pandey (2026) provide an empirical illustration of these tensions through their analysis of informational gatekeeping, bureaucratic loyalties and gendered narratives of incompetence. Research on political promotion also demonstrates the importance of examining barriers within political organisations rather than treating numerical representation as evidence of equal opportunity (Folke & Rickne, 2016). The conceptual implication is that institutional conditions include informal norms alongside written arrangements. Their effects require observation; they should not be inferred solely from the sex of an officeholder.

The framework also accommodates plural sources of political legitimacy. A leader may command personal admiration, benefit from family connections or mobilise community identities while holding a formal mandate. Spary's (2007) comparative analysis of women's political leadership in India helps situate leadership within varied trajectories and gendered interpretations. Public evaluations introduce another dimension: candidate gender can influence perceived anti-corruption credibility, while responses to misconduct may vary across audiences (Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018). Such evaluations concern attributed credibility and should be distinguished from the legal entitlement to exercise office. The present framework asks how personal standing, political relationships and public perceptions interact with office-based authority. It treats personal networks as resources whose implications depend on whether they support public responsibilities or displace accountable procedures.

Gender therefore locates the inquiry without supplying a predetermined personality explanation. The selected studies direct attention to leadership trajectories, learning, institutional opportunities and public evaluations rather than establishing a uniform female leadership profile (Afridi et al., 2017; Bauhr et al., 2025; Spary, 2007). Evidence that accountability conditions shape aggregate relationships between representation and corruption further cautions against attributing political outcomes exclusively to individual characteristics (Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). The proposed competencies and practices are consequently not assumed to be exclusive to women. The relevant question is how women's capabilities are developed, expressed and recognised under particular political conditions. This orientation preserves the research objective while avoiding a claim that rational-legal characteristics belong uniquely to women or that all women exercise authority similarly.

4. EMPIRICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

The selected studies illuminate different parts of the authority process. Asmorowati et al. (2025) examine two women mayors in East Java through qualitative cases of e-leadership. Their analysis connects innovation and resilience with technology-enabled governance practices while identifying implementation constraints. For the present article, these findings inform the examination of adaptive capacity and public administrative practices; they do not establish that all women leaders innovate or directly validate the proposed six-dimensional framework. Gupta and Pandey (2026), drawing on qualitative material from 15 Nepalese municipalities and rural municipalities, identify information gatekeeping and gendered bureaucratic relationships alongside women's use of expertise, alliances and procedural engagement. Taken together, these studies inform the framework's emphasis on leadership practices within institutional settings rather than presumed feminine qualities (Asmorowati et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026).

Bauhr et al. (2025) report a conjoint experiment involving 48,080 respondents across 25 European Union countries, finding that women candidates were perceived as more credible corruption fighters. This finding concerns attributed credibility rather than audited conduct in office. Eggers et al. (2018), using a British vignette experiment, find no overall evidence that women politicians receive significantly greater punishment for misconduct, although the relationship between politician gender and punishment varies with voter gender. These findings caution against assuming that favourable stereotypes or harsher standards operate uniformly across audiences and contexts (Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018). Within the proposed framework, public evaluations therefore constitute a distinct analytical domain rather than a direct measure of competence, integrity or authority enactment.

Afridi et al. (2017) examine women's political leadership, corruption and learning in an Indian public programme, using variation associated with reserved leadership positions and audit evidence. Their findings connect initial performance difficulties with inexperience and show improvement over tenure. The conceptual relevance is developmental: leadership capabilities can change, while observed outcomes may reflect learning opportunities and vulnerability to capture rather than enduring personal dispositions. Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer (2018) analyse cross-national evidence and find that the relationship between women's representation and corruption varies with accountability conditions. These studies inform the framework's attention to experience and institutional context, although their different research designs and levels of analysis require separate interpretation (Afridi et al., 2017; Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). In particular, an aggregate

relationship between representation and corruption cannot establish an individual woman's integrity or identify the mechanisms operating within a particular office.

Other studies locate leadership within organisational structures and political career processes. Alberti et al. (2022) use close-election analysis in Chile to investigate differences in local bureaucratic size and gender composition under women mayors. Their evidence concerns organisational outcomes rather than direct measurements of impartiality or administrative competence. Schwindt-Bayer (2006) examines legislative preferences and activity in Argentina, Colombia and Costa Rica, informing the distinction between policy priorities and opportunities to translate those priorities into institutional action. Schwindt-Bayer (2009) investigates how quota design affects women's election to office, while Folke and Rickne (2016) examine barriers to advancement in Swedish politics. Spary (2007) adds a comparative perspective on women's political leadership in India, highlighting varied leadership trajectories and gendered interpretations. These studies address organisational change, legislative action, political entry, promotion and leadership trajectories. Their conceptual contribution lies in identifying distinct processes through which leadership opportunities and influence develop; they should not be collapsed into a single measure of individual performance.

Table 2. Evidence Domains and Conceptual Uses

Empirical Domain	Selected Studies	Conceptual Use And Inference Limit
Local governance and bureaucracy	Asmorowati et al. (2025); Gupta and Pandey (2026)	Examine adaptive practice and authority constraints; avoid universalising case findings
Candidate evaluations	Bauhr et al. (2025); Eggers et al. (2018)	Separate perceived credibility from conduct; recognise audience variation
Performance and accountability	Afridi et al. (2017); Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer (2018)	Consider learning and institutional conditions; avoid individual inference from aggregate associations
Organisational and legislative action	Alberti et al. (2022); Schwindt-Bayer (2006)	Distinguish priorities, opportunities and organisational outcomes
Entry, promotion and trajectories	Schwindt-Bayer (2009); Folke and Rickne (2016); Spary (2007)	Locate leadership within career and legitimacy processes

The evidence base is heterogeneous by design. Case studies reveal processes, experiments isolate responses to candidate attributes, and observational or quasi-experimental analyses examine institutional outcomes. Their differences help identify conceptual boundaries. They do not justify averaging findings into a universal gender effect. The framework consequently treats empirical studies as sources of plausible mechanisms and counterexamples, while requiring new research to establish whether its proposed relationships operate together within a defined political setting.

5. PROPOSED DIMENSIONS OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

The following dimensions are proposed analytical constructs. The selected empirical studies inform their development and illustrate relevant mechanisms, but do not directly validate the six dimensions as a unified framework.

5.1 Institutional Competence

Institutional competence is defined here as the knowledge and skill required to interpret mandates, policy responsibilities and administrative procedures. It includes identifying jurisdiction, understanding how decisions move through an organisation, and recognising the evidential requirements of a proposal. Its empirical relevance is illustrated by women deputy mayors' use of professional expertise and procedural engagement when navigating bureaucratic constraints (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Institutional competence differs from educational credentials or confidence. A highly qualified leader may lack knowledge of a particular office, while an experienced representative may possess substantial practical competence without formal specialist qualifications. Assessment should therefore examine demonstrated reasoning and action within responsibilities.

Its connection to rational-legal authority is functional: authority attached to office must be exercised within defined institutional arrangements. Competence helps a leader identify what she can decide, what requires consultation and what falls outside her remit. However, knowledge alone cannot create access to withheld documents or compel administrative cooperation. Evidence of informational gatekeeping and gendered narratives of incompetence demonstrates why expertise and opportunities to exercise authority require separate examination (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Researchers should therefore investigate institutional obstruction before interpreting restricted action as an individual competency deficit.

Possible observations include explaining the lawful route for a decision, identifying relevant policy provisions and responding accurately to procedural challenges. Repeated examples across different tasks would support a stronger competency judgement than a general self-description. Researchers should also document available induction, staff advice and learning opportunities. Afridi et al. (2017) identify learning and improvement over tenure, informing the framework's treatment of competence as potentially developable. Institutional competence is consequently proposed as a capability that can change through experience rather than an immutable characteristic associated with sex.

5.2 Procedural Orientation

Procedural orientation is defined here as a tendency to use recognised processes when initiating, reviewing or challenging political action. Examples include requesting records formally, submitting proposals through authorised channels, using committees and invoking review mechanisms. Women deputy mayors' use of procedural engagement to assert agency provides a relevant empirical illustration (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Procedural orientation differs from passive obedience. A leader can challenge an unfair outcome through institutional procedures or seek to change the rules through legitimate political action. The relevant characteristic is engagement with the grounds and processes of authority rather than unconditional acceptance of existing arrangements.

This dimension connects leadership practices with rule-governed office. Yet frequent procedural activity does not necessarily demonstrate substantive effectiveness. Requests may be ignored, committees may lack powers and processes may be manipulated. Research on legislative preferences and activities reinforces the importance of distinguishing political priorities from opportunities to translate them into institutional action (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). Evaluation should therefore examine whether a procedure offers a meaningful route to decision or correction. Procedural orientation may also become excessive formalism if documentary compliance displaces consideration of consequences or deliberation. The proposed construct requires attention to purpose, context and use.

Empirical investigation can compare the leader's stated approach with meeting records, correspondence and decision histories. It should examine routine and contested episodes, including circumstances in which procedures are unavailable or ineffective. Gupta and Pandey (2026) offer an illustration of procedural engagement under institutional constraint. The present conceptual interpretation extends that evidence into a conditional expectation: procedural practices are more likely to support authority enactment where institutional actors recognise the procedures and implement them consistently. This relationship remains a proposition for subsequent investigation.

5.3 Accountable Exercise of Office

Accountable exercise of office is defined here as practices through which leaders explain decisions, identify responsibilities, accept scrutiny and respond to justified requests for correction. It is distinct from reputation for honesty and from publicity. Research on anti-corruption stereotypes illustrates why perceived credibility should be separated from demonstrated conduct (Bauhr et al., 2025). A public statement may communicate achievements without permitting meaningful challenge. Conversely, a documented response to an oversight inquiry may demonstrate answerability even when it attracts little attention. The construct concerns how responsibility is made examinable rather than whether a leader receives praise.

Its theoretical connection is that formally assigned powers imply identifiable obligations. Accountability makes it possible to examine whether actions remain within mandate and whether their stated reasons

withstand scrutiny. However, the availability of sanctions is an institutional condition, while willingness to explain is a leadership practice. These should be measured separately. Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer (2018) demonstrate the relevance of accountability conditions to the relationship between women's representation and corruption. Their cross-national findings inform the framework's attention to institutional context without directly measuring the individual practices proposed here.

Potential indicators include accessible decision explanations, documented responses to audit findings and clear allocation of implementation responsibilities. Researchers should distinguish voluntary transparency from compliance with mandatory disclosure and investigate whether audiences can obtain relevant information. They should also distinguish accountability practices from audience reactions: responses to political misconduct may vary with voter gender, indicating that public judgement is not a uniform measure of conduct (Eggers et al., 2018). A defensible assessment therefore examines answerability across favourable and unfavourable episodes without assuming that either criticism or approval establishes the quality of accountability.

5.4 Reasoned Judgement

Reasoned judgement is defined here as the capacity to evaluate information, alternatives, uncertainty and implementation consequences when making decisions. It includes identifying the limits of evidence and explaining why a particular option is preferred. It is broader than technical expertise because political decisions involve conflicting values and distributional choices. Research distinguishing legislators' priorities from their political activities provides a related basis for examining how preferences are translated into action, although it does not directly measure the construct proposed here (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). Reasoned judgement requires attention to the relationship among evidence, mandate, values and consequences.

Within this framework, rational-legal authority is strengthened when decisions can be connected to institutional responsibilities and examined through stated reasons. The selected empirical studies do not establish evidence-informed decision-making as a stable trait of women or directly validate this dimension. Asmorowati et al. (2025), for example, examine innovation and technology-enabled governance among women mayors. Their findings inform questions about institutional adaptation, but evidence of innovation alone cannot establish that all relevant alternatives were evaluated. Reasoned judgement therefore requires direct investigation of decision processes rather than inference from a favourable outcome.

Subsequent research can analyse decision episodes rather than rely on general assertions that a leader uses evidence. Interview questions should ask which sources were consulted, what uncertainty remained and why an alternative was rejected. Documentary evidence can help examine whether stated reasons preceded the decision or were developed retrospectively. Researchers should also investigate unequal access to information and expertise, given evidence that informational gatekeeping can restrict women's participation in decision-making (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Limited information may constrain the exercise of judgement without demonstrating weak reasoning, while abundant information does not itself establish careful interpretation.

5.5 Impersonal Exercise of Responsibility

Impersonal exercise of responsibility is defined here as applying publicly stated criteria and distinguishing obligations of office from private relationships or personal benefit. It does not require emotional detachment or indifference to constituents. A leader may respond empathetically while allocating resources through legitimate criteria. The core question is whether decisions are justified by public responsibilities and relevant reasons rather than preferential treatment rooted solely in personal loyalty. Gupta and Pandey's (2026) findings concerning bureaucratic loyalty and hierarchical alignment illustrate why formal claims of neutrality require examination against institutional practices.

This dimension reflects the separation of office from its occupant. Nonetheless, impartiality should not be confused with treating every person identically irrespective of need. Targeted assistance may be justified by law and explicit distributive principles. Researchers must therefore investigate criteria and consistency rather than assume that differentiated outcomes establish favouritism. Similarly, research documenting changes in bureaucratic size and gender composition under women mayors does not, by itself, establish that appointments

followed merit-based or impartial criteria (Alberti et al., 2022). Organisational composition and the justification of appointment decisions are distinct analytical objects.

Possible evidence includes documented eligibility criteria, treatment of comparable requests, management of conflicts of interest and explanations for exceptions. Self-reported integrity provides limited evidence unless examined alongside conduct. Candidate credibility research makes this distinction especially important because favourable anti-corruption evaluations concern perceptions rather than proof of impartial administration (Bauhr et al., 2025). Furthermore, the relationship between women's representation and corruption depends on accountability conditions, cautioning against attributing integrity to gender alone (Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). The framework consequently directs attention to practices and institutional safeguards rather than assigning women an inherent ethical disposition.

5.6 Adaptive Institutional Agency

Adaptive institutional agency is defined here as the capacity to respond to constraints through learning, negotiation, coalition building and legitimate innovation. It concerns action within imperfect institutions, including efforts to alter obstructive arrangements. The construct draws interpretive support from research on women mayors' innovation and resilience and women deputy mayors' mobilisation of expertise, alliances and procedures (Asmorowati et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). It differs from unconstrained creativity because adaptation must be assessed in relation to public mandate and accountability. Informal negotiation may enable a lawful decision, but bypassing oversight cannot automatically be classified as constructive agency.

The concept explains how leadership may remain possible when formal procedures are incomplete or unevenly implemented. A politician might obtain specialist advice, build support for a documented request or introduce a more accessible reporting system. Such actions can connect individual capacity with institutional change. The Indonesian and Nepalese studies provide context-specific illustrations of innovation and negotiated action, while evidence from India highlights the relevance of learning over tenure (Afridi et al., 2017; Asmorowati et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). These findings inform the proposed construct without establishing that similar strategies will succeed across political systems.

Assessment should distinguish adaptation that expands accountable authority from accommodation that entrenches patronage. It should also examine the resources and costs associated with adaptation. Evidence of institutional constraints and political promotion barriers indicates why leadership difficulties should not be reduced to a lack of individual persistence (Folke & Rickne, 2016; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Researchers should investigate whether responding to exclusion requires additional time, effort or reliance on particular allies. Successful adaptation does not remove the need to examine the underlying barrier. Accordingly, assessment should identify which constraint was addressed, what resources were required, and whether the response changed institutional opportunities or produced a temporary arrangement dependent on the individual leader.

6. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

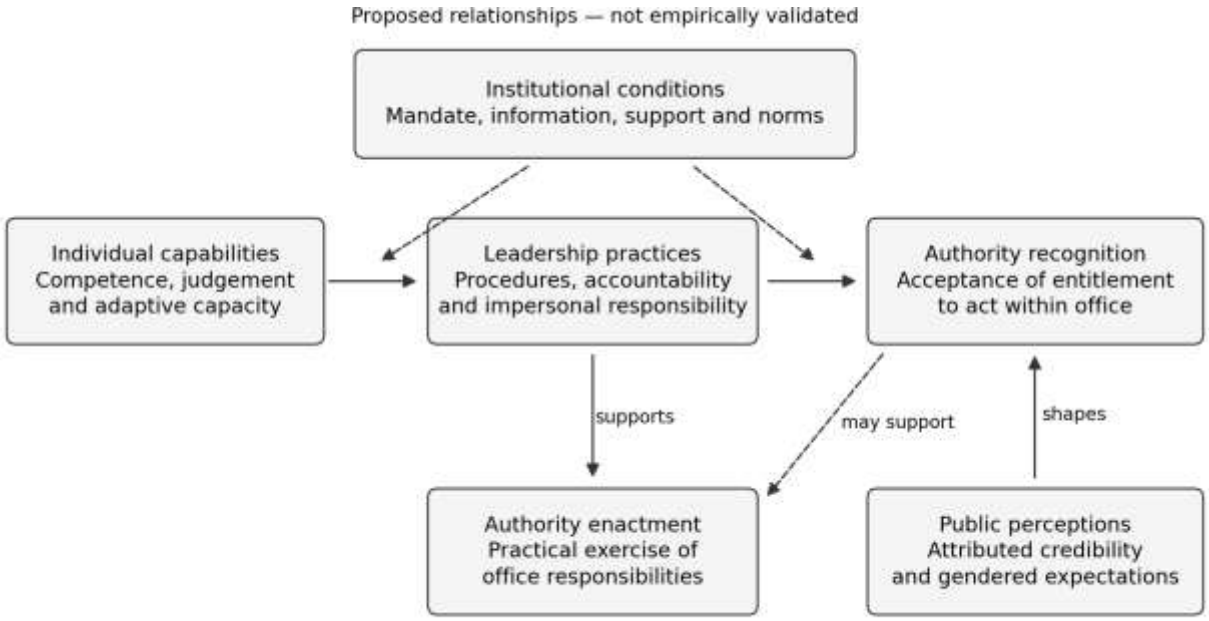
6.1 Components and relationships

The proposed framework links four components: individual capabilities, leadership practices, institutional conditions, and authority recognition and enactment. Institutional competence, reasoned judgement and adaptive capacity belong primarily to capabilities. Procedural engagement, accountable action and impersonal responsibility belong primarily to practices. These categories are analytically distinct but connected. Evidence concerning learning over tenure informs the framework's developmental perspective, while studies of innovation and procedural engagement illustrate how capabilities may be expressed through institutional action (Afridi et al., 2017; Asmorowati et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Building on these observations, the framework proposes that repeated practices may develop competencies and that competencies may support different practices depending on circumstances. The six dimensions are therefore organising concepts rather than a validated scale or mutually exclusive personality categories.

Institutional conditions include formal mandate, access to information, administrative support, enforcement of procedures and gendered informal norms. Their inclusion is informed by evidence that information gatekeeping and bureaucratic relationships can constrain women's exercise of authority, while accountability arrangements condition the relationship between women's representation and corruption (Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). The framework proposes that these conditions shape whether capabilities can be expressed and whether practices produce consequential action. Authority recognition is defined here as acceptance of the leader's entitlement to act within jurisdiction, whereas authority enactment refers to her practical ability to exercise that entitlement through decisions and institutional cooperation. Recognition and enactment can diverge: formal inclusion may coexist with restricted participation in decision-making (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). An office's recognised mandate should consequently be examined separately from its occupant's practical opportunities to secure cooperation and implementation.

Public evaluation constitutes a separate pathway. Observers interpret leadership through information, experience and gendered expectations. Research on anti-corruption credibility demonstrates that candidate gender can influence attributed qualities, while experimental evidence on misconduct shows that evaluations may vary with voter gender (Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018). Such interpretations may influence political support, but they do not constitute direct evidence of competence or conduct. The framework therefore treats attributed credibility separately from demonstrated leadership practices. It also proposes that recognised legitimacy does not automatically produce policy success. Evidence concerning learning, implementation constraints and political–bureaucratic relationships informs the need to investigate the additional conditions through which authority translates into outcomes (Afridi et al., 2017; Asmorowati et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). These relationships remain conceptual expectations for subsequent testing rather than findings established for the framework as a whole.

Figure 1. Proposed pathways between leadership capabilities, practices, institutional conditions and authority.



6.2 Conditional Propositions

The following propositions extend the conceptual interpretation of the selected empirical studies. The cited research informs their rationale but does not directly test the proposed relationships in their entirety.

P1: Institutional competence supports authority enactment more strongly when leaders have access to relevant information and decision processes. The proposed mechanism is the opportunity to apply knowledge. Gupta and Pandey (2026) identify informational gatekeeping alongside women deputy mayors' mobilisation of professional expertise, illustrating why competence and opportunities to exercise it require

separate examination. Procedural expertise may have limited practical effect when essential information is withheld or a leader is excluded from the relevant forum. This proposition therefore predicts differences between similarly knowledgeable leaders operating under different access arrangements, rather than assuming that competence alone determines influence.

P2: Procedural engagement supports authority enactment where recognised procedures are consistently implemented. The proposed mechanism is institutional responsiveness. Women deputy mayors' use of procedural engagement under bureaucratic constraints provides an empirical starting point for this relationship (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Research on quota design also demonstrates that institutional rules and enforcement arrangements matter for women's electoral inclusion, although electoral entry differs from authority enactment (Schwindt-Bayer, 2009). Building on these observations, the framework proposes that formal requests and review procedures support authority when they generate acknowledged obligations and credible institutional responses. Where implementation is selective, procedural activity may produce records without consequential action. Testing this proposition requires evidence about both the leader's conduct and other actors' responses, including delays, refusals and compliance.

P3: Accountable leadership practices contribute to recognised legitimacy when oversight arrangements make those practices visible and credible. The proposed mechanism is evaluable responsibility. Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer (2018) demonstrate that accountability conditions shape the relationship between women's representation and corruption. Their findings inform the framework's emphasis on institutional context, but do not directly establish that individual accountability practices generate recognised legitimacy. The present proposition extends that reasoning by predicting that decision explanations can strengthen recognition when observers can inspect supporting information and challenge inconsistencies. Disclosure may have limited influence where communication channels lack credibility or oversight arrangements provide little opportunity for independent scrutiny. These are proposed boundary conditions for investigation. The proposition concerns the relationship between accountable practices and recognition; it does not predict that every accountable leader will become popular.

P4: Gendered informal norms can weaken the relationship between formal office and authority enactment. The proposed mechanism is selective acceptance of entitlement. Evidence from Nepal identifies gendered narratives of incompetence, informational gatekeeping and bureaucratic loyalties that constrain women deputy mayors despite their formal positions (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Research on political promotion in Sweden further indicates that women's representation can coexist with barriers to advancement, although promotion and authority enactment are distinct outcomes (Folke & Rickne, 2016). These findings inform the expectation that formal inclusion may not secure equivalent opportunities to exercise leadership. The proposition does not assume that every institutional conflict is gendered. Researchers must investigate whether comparable actions receive different responses and whether alternative explanations, including party hierarchy, jurisdiction or tenure, better account for the restriction.

P5: Adaptive institutional agency can mitigate constraints when leaders possess usable resources and institutions remain responsive to change. The proposed mechanism is the conversion of available opportunities into legitimate action. Research on women mayors' e-leadership illustrates innovation and resilience, while research on deputy mayors identifies the use of expertise, alliances and procedural engagement under institutional constraints (Asmorowati et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Evidence of learning over tenure also informs the possibility that leaders develop their capacity to respond to administrative challenges (Afridi et al., 2017). Building on these findings, the proposition anticipates that learning, negotiation and coalition building may help leaders navigate obstruction. Their effectiveness is expected to depend on available resources, supportive relationships and opportunities for institutional adjustment. These conditions require direct testing. The proposition consequently avoids assuming that women can overcome exclusion through persistence or resilience alone.

P6: Gendered public evaluations can influence attributed credibility independently of demonstrated competence and conduct. The proposed mechanism is interpretive expectation. Bauhr et al. (2025) show that candidate gender influences perceived anti-corruption credibility, while Eggers et al. (2018) demonstrate that responses to misconduct vary with voter gender rather than following a uniform pattern of greater punishment

for women. These findings inform the distinction between attributed qualities and observed leadership behaviour. The framework proposes that gender may operate as an informational cue when audiences evaluate political leaders, with its influence varying across audiences and evaluative contexts. Research should therefore compare public assessments with independently documented practices. Favourable credibility should not be treated as evidence that competence, accountability or authority enactment has been demonstrated.

6.3 Boundary Conditions and Feedback

Office type is a principal boundary condition. The selected studies examine different institutional settings,

including legislators' policy priorities and activities, mayors' relationships with local bureaucracies, and deputy mayors' exercise of authority (Alberti et al., 2022; Gupta & Pandey, 2026; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). These settings involve different responsibilities and opportunities for action. Legislators may exercise authority through committees and collective votes, while executives may direct administrative units. Party leaders can hold organisational powers that do not correspond to public statutory duties. Local and national offices may also differ in resources, visibility and proximity to constituents. The framework therefore requires specification of responsibilities and jurisdiction before its concepts are operationalised. Comparing positions without considering these differences risks interpreting unequal institutional opportunities as differences in leadership quality.

Other proposed boundary conditions include tenure, party support, administrative capacity, political competition and intersecting social positions. Evidence concerning learning over tenure highlights the relevance of experience, while research on political promotion and leadership trajectories directs attention to organisational opportunities and career contexts (Afridi et al., 2017; Folke & Rickne, 2016; Spary, 2007). Feedback is also plausible within the proposed framework: successful authority enactment may create opportunities for further learning and recognition, while obstruction may restrict opportunities to demonstrate competence. Gupta and Pandey (2026) illustrate institutional constraints relevant to the latter possibility, although their findings do not directly establish the complete feedback process proposed here. These potential relationships complicate causal interpretation based on a single interview or cross-sectional survey. The framework consequently favours research tracing how capabilities, practices and institutional conditions interact over time, while treating policy outcomes as a subsequent domain for investigation.

6.4 Alternative Explanations and Disconfirming Cases

The framework must remain open to explanations that do not centre gender or leadership characteristics. The selected evidence already indicates the relevance of learning, accountability conditions and organisational arrangements to political outcomes (Afridi et al., 2017; Alberti et al., 2022; Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). Additional possibilities for investigation include administrative resistance arising from ambiguous jurisdiction, competing legal obligations or scarce resources. A politician's limited influence might reflect party discipline rather than doubts about competence, while public approval might respond to economic conditions rather than accountable conduct. These are alternative explanations to be examined, rather than findings established by the cited studies. Researchers should specify plausible alternatives before interpreting an episode and assess which explanation best fits the sequence and available evidence.

Disconfirming cases are equally important. Hypothetically, a leader may possess strong institutional knowledge and reliable information access yet fail to enact authority because coalition support collapses. A politician may use procedures consistently while remaining ineffective because those procedures govern only a minor part of the decision. Transparent explanations may reduce approval when they reveal unpopular choices. Research showing that public evaluations vary across candidate attributes and voter groups reinforces the need to avoid assuming a uniform evaluative response, although it does not directly test these hypothetical scenarios (Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018). Such observations would require reassessment of the relevant propositions, potentially through narrower claims, additional conditions or rejection of a proposed relationship. Conceptual development depends on allowing evidence to challenge predictions.

Researchers should therefore identify the outcome and time frame in advance. Recognition by administrators, recognition by constituents and electoral support are related but different outcomes. This distinction is

important because the selected studies examine different objects, including candidate credibility, electoral inclusion, political promotion and political–bureaucratic relationships (Bauhr et al., 2025; Folke & Rickne, 2016; Gupta & Pandey, 2026; Schwindt-Bayer, 2009). Enactment during a committee negotiation differs from implementation over an entire term. Evidence that a leader obtained one document should not be treated as proof of broad authority. Similarly, institutional reform should be distinguished from a temporary accommodation granted to a particular person. Specifying scale and duration makes comparisons more meaningful and supports transparent interpretation of evidence.

The framework also permits successful leadership under restrictive conditions. Studies of women mayors' e-leadership and women deputy mayors' strategic responses illustrate innovation, alliances and procedural engagement within challenging institutional environments (Asmorowati et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Such findings inform investigation of how adaptation and supportive relationships may enable action. Nevertheless, an apparently successful case could also indicate underestimated institutional flexibility or an incorrectly classified restriction. Research should trace the mechanism rather than assume that resilience explains the outcome. The propositions consequently describe conditional expectations that evidence can challenge; successful and unsuccessful cases must both inform their assessment and refinement.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Theoretical Contribution

The framework's contribution is conceptual separation coupled with relational explanation. It replaces an undifferentiated catalogue of desirable leadership qualities with an account of how capabilities become practices and how practices acquire institutional consequence. Rational-legal authority supplies the organising question: how does an individual exercise responsibilities attached to recognised office? Evidence of gendered bureaucratic constraints informs the framework's explanation of why that exercise may be uneven (Gupta & Pandey, 2026), while research on candidate credibility and misconduct evaluations informs its distinction between public judgements and demonstrated conduct (Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018).

This separation changes how evidence should be interpreted. Legislative priorities do not necessarily establish influence, electoral inclusion does not directly establish practical authority, and a favourable stereotype does not prove integrity. Research on legislators, quota design and candidate evaluation examines distinct objects that require separate interpretation (Bauhr et al., 2025; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006, 2009). Studies of bureaucratic organisation and political promotion likewise address organisational outcomes and career opportunities rather than interchangeable measures of individual leadership quality (Alberti et al., 2022; Folke & Rickne, 2016). The proposed integration preserves these differences while allowing inquiry into the relationships between them. Its contribution is a more precise explanation of leadership processes rather than an aggregate conclusion that women govern better.

The framework also broadens the analysis of leadership development. Afridi et al. (2017) highlight learning and improvement over tenure, supporting attention to capabilities that develop through experience. Research on innovation and strategic responses to bureaucratic constraints further informs investigation of how leaders adapt their practices within institutional environments (Asmorowati et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Building on these findings, the framework proposes that institutional feedback and organisational support may shape leadership development and authority enactment. These relationships require direct testing. The selected studies have not validated all six dimensions, and reasoned judgement and impersonal responsibility remain especially dependent on future observation of decision processes and criteria.

7.2 Hybrid Legitimacy and Nonessentialism

Within the proposed framework, office-based authority may coexist with personal appeal, organisational loyalty and community recognition. Spary's (2007) analysis of women's political leadership in India illustrates varied leadership trajectories and gendered interpretations, informing consideration of legitimacy beyond formal position alone. Gupta and Pandey (2026) also identify strategic alliances among the resources women deputy mayors use to exercise agency under constraint. These observations suggest that relationships and personal standing can be examined alongside formally assigned authority. A politician may use public standing

to secure attention for a formally justified request or rely on relationships to negotiate implementation. The analytical question is whether those resources support accountable public responsibility or displace it. Hybrid legitimacy should therefore be assessed through its practical operation rather than classified automatically as a failure of rational-legal authority.

Malaysian historical scholarship provides a complementary perspective on the ideological and organisational dimensions of political leadership. Sabtu et al. (2025) examine the contributions and challenges of Ahmad Fuad, Abbas Alias and Burhanuddin al-Helmy in shaping PAS's political development. Their analysis highlig-

hts the importance of leadership in establishing ideological direction and developing a political organisation. For the present framework, this provides contextual grounds for investigating how ideological commitments and party relationships interact with responsibilities attached to formal office. However, the study does not examine women's leadership or directly test rational-legal authority; its contribution is to contextualise the discussion of political leadership in Malaysia.

This approach also resists essentialist interpretation. Evidence that women candidates are perceived as more credible corruption fighters concerns gendered expectations rather than proof of an inherent ethical disposition (Bauhr et al., 2025). The framework does not treat expectations of honesty, care or conciliatory behaviour as natural characteristics of women. Observed political outcomes may instead involve learning, institutional incentives and unequal opportunities to act (Afridi et al., 2017; Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Experimental evidence showing variation in misconduct evaluations further cautions against assuming a universal pattern of gendered judgement (Eggers et al., 2018). The framework consequently examines variation in women's experiences without assuming a singular female political personality.

7.3 Implications for Malaysia and Practice

For Malaysian research, the framework offers sensitising concepts for interviews and document analysis. Researchers can examine how women understand jurisdiction, obtain information, use procedures, justify decisions and respond to institutional challenges. International research identifies relevant areas of inquiry, including information gatekeeping, procedural engagement, innovation and public evaluations of credibility (Asmorowati et al., 2025; Bauhr et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). These findings provide questions and possible mechanisms for investigation rather than evidence that equivalent relationships operate in Malaysia. Local research is required to establish their relevance across political offices and organisational settings. No Malaysian prevalence, causal effect or institutional diagnosis is inferred from the selected studies.

Practical implications operate at individual and organisational levels. Evidence concerning learning over tenure informs consideration of leadership development focused on mandate interpretation, policy analysis and procedural knowledge (Afridi et al., 2017). Findings concerning bureaucratic constraints also direct attention to the institutional opportunities required to apply those capabilities (Gupta & Pandey, 2026). On this basis, the framework proposes mentoring centred on concrete responsibilities and decision episodes, alongside organisational measures addressing induction, information access, staff support and consistent recognition of office. These are prospective applications. Individual training should be considered together with reforms to the arrangements that enable or restrict the exercise of leadership.

Evaluation systems should similarly distinguish institutional support, observable behaviour and outcomes. Research separating candidate perceptions from conduct highlights why favourable public evaluations should not substitute for evidence of leadership practices (Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018). Evidence concerning accountability conditions also reinforces the importance of examining the institutional setting in which conduct occurs (Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). The proposed framework therefore encourages evaluators to examine reasons, procedures and opportunities for action alongside results. Visible confidence alone may provide an incomplete account of competence; disclosure counts may not establish meaningful answerability; and successful adaptation may coexist with persistent institutional obstruction. These are considerations for future assessment design, rather than interventions whose effectiveness has been demonstrated by the present article.

8. FUTURE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

8.1 Exploratory Qualitative Design

An initial study could use purposive interviews with women politicians across defined office types, supplemented by institutional actors and relevant experts. Qualitative research on women mayors and deputy mayors provides substantive examples of the leadership practices and institutional relationships that such inquiry could explore (Asmorowati et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Sampling should consider tenure, political affiliation, level of government and social background. Evidence concerning learning, political prom-

otion and leadership trajectories informs the importance of examining variation in experience and career context (Afridi et al., 2017; Folke & Rickne, 2016; Spary, 2007). The proposed study would refine constructs and investigate variation rather than estimate national prevalence. Researchers should specify inclusion criteria and distinguish accounts from officeholders, colleagues and external observers because each group may have different access to leadership behaviour.

Interviews should centre on concrete episodes. Findings concerning information gatekeeping, procedural engagement and strategic alliances identify relevant subjects for episode-based questioning (Gupta & Pandey, 2026), while research on e-leadership suggests examining innovation and implementation challenges (Asmorowati et al., 2025). Asking a participant to describe a difficult decision could reveal information sources, procedural steps, competing interpretations and responses from others. Follow-up questions should distinguish what she intended, what she did and what subsequently occurred. Researchers should seek examples supporting general descriptions of competence or accountability and ask about unsuccessful and ordinary episodes alongside celebrated achievements. These are proposed interview strategies for examining the framework, rather than procedures whose effectiveness is established by the cited studies.

Document analysis could triangulate interview accounts through meeting minutes, formal requests, decision explanations and publicly accessible oversight material. Research distinguishing legislators' policy preferences from their legislative activity informs the substantive importance of comparing stated priorities with evidence of action (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). Disagreement between sources should be examined rather than removed through selective interpretation. A claimed practice may be undocumented because records are incomplete, while documentary compliance may provide limited evidence of deliberation. Context-sensitive comparison is therefore necessary. Confidentiality arrangements should enable participants to discuss institutional relationships while preserving the distinction between a participant's account and independently corroborated evidence.

8.2 Comparative and Longitudinal Tests

Comparative research should separate differences between people from differences between offices. The selected studies examine distinct institutional settings and outcomes, including legislative activity, local bureaucratic organisation and political promotion (Alberti et al., 2022; Folke & Rickne, 2016; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). This variation informs the need to specify mandates and opportunities before comparing leadership characteristics. Leaders with similar responsibilities could be compared across information-access arrangements, while comparable institutions could be examined across tenure or party support. Including men where appropriate could help investigate whether constraints are gendered, although the research objective may remain centred on women. Such comparisons would require consideration of alternative explanations and would not automatically eliminate unobserved differences in career selection or institutional context.

Longitudinal designs could investigate competence development and feedback. Afridi et al. (2017) provide an empirical rationale for examining learning and change over tenure. Repeated interviews and records across a term could assess whether procedural knowledge increases, administrative cooperation changes and recognition follows successful authority enactment. Such designs could distinguish initial difficulties from persistent patterns and examine institutional change following adaptive action. Research documenting innovation and strategic responses to constraints identifies relevant processes to trace over time (Asmorowati et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). However, the proposed feedback relationships require direct testing, and findings from existing studies should not be assumed to transfer unchanged across programmes or countries.

Studies of recognition should use separate measures for public perceptions and observed practices. Experiments examining anti-corruption credibility and responses to misconduct demonstrate how candidate attributes and audience characteristics can shape political evaluations (Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018). Future surveys or experiments could extend this approach by examining responses to information about office responsibilities, documented practices and decision explanations. Evidence of conduct should be drawn separately from independently coded episodes or records. Combining these sources would permit investigation of correspondence or divergence between credibility and conduct. Moreover, accountability arrangements should be examined as institutional conditions rather than inferred from public approval alone (Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). This distinction would preserve the framework's separation of perceived legitimacy, accountable practices and authority enactment.

Table 3. Proposed Observation Strategy

Dimension or condition	Possible material	Key interpretive safeguard
Institutional competence	Policy explanations and procedural problem-solving	Separate knowledge from credentials and access
Procedural orientation	Requests, committee actions and review episodes	Record institutional responses as well as actions
Accountable office	Decision explanations and scrutiny responses	Distinguish publicity from answerability
Reasoned judgement	Evidence use and alternative-option accounts	Examine uncertainty and retrospective justification
Impersonal responsibility	Criteria, exceptions and comparable decisions	Separate legitimate targeting from favouritism
Adaptive agency	Learning, negotiation and change episodes	Distinguish reform from private workarounds
Institutional conditions	Mandates, information access and cooperation	Avoid coding restrictions as personal deficits
Recognition	Public evaluations and acceptance of entitlement	Keep perception separate from performance

8.3 Construct Refinement

Measurement should follow conceptual refinement rather than begin with an assumed leadership scale. The selected studies examine different objects, including learning in office, bureaucratic relationships, organisational outcomes and candidate evaluations, reinforcing the need to distinguish the constructs being measured (Afridi et al., 2017; Alberti et al., 2022; Bauhr et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). For future investigation, researchers could develop a coding guide specifying inclusion criteria, exclusions and ambiguous cases for each dimension. Independent coding of selected episodes could help identify overlap between competence, judgement and adaptation. Negative cases would be particularly valuable: a capable leader who cannot exercise authority, or a highly regarded leader whose conduct lacks accountability, could challenge simplified relationships. These are proposed analytical strategies rather than measurement procedures validated by the cited studies.

Later quantitative work could examine conditional relationships if suitable measures and comparable samples become available. Such work should consider the structure of observations within parties, offices and jurisdictions and distinguish individual from aggregate variables. For example, cross-national relationships between women's representation and corruption concern a different level of analysis from individual candidate evaluations or local bureaucratic relationships (Bauhr et al., 2025; Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). The aim would be to test the proposed relationships while retaining distinctions among capabilities, practices, conditions and recognition. A general leadership model would require evidence of construct coherence, distinctiveness and relevance across contexts. The selected empirical studies inform this research agenda but do not establish those measurement properties.

9. LIMITATIONS

The argument rests on purposive empirical selection and therefore does not represent the entire literature. Its sources span countries, political offices, periods and research designs. They include qualitative investigations of local leadership and bureaucratic relationships, candidate evaluation experiments, and analyses of organisational outcomes and political promotion (Alberti et al., 2022; Asmorowati et al., 2025; Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018; Folke & Rickne, 2016; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). This heterogeneity supports conceptual comparison but limits direct comparison of findings. The article neither estimates a general gender effect nor claims that the selected studies establish the six dimensions as a complete description of women's political leadership.

The rational-legal lens also imposes an interpretive emphasis. It highlights office, procedure and responsibility while giving less attention to emotion, identity mobilisation and informal representation. Research on women's leadership trajectories and gendered interpretations indicates the relevance of political experiences that extend beyond formally assigned responsibilities (Spary, 2007). Some leadership activities may therefore be important without fitting neatly within the proposed categories, and complementary perspectives would be needed for a fuller account. Moreover, the empirical-only reference corpus does not provide a conventional review of foundational theoretical texts. The formulation of rational-legal authority is a declared conceptual premise; the empirical articles inform its application rather than establish its intellectual origins.

Verification was constrained by source accessibility. Where claims relied on abstracts or publication records, detailed evaluation of measurement and identification strategies was not possible. Consultation of the full articles would strengthen methodological scrutiny and positioning before journal submission. Finally, the proposed indicators and relationships remain unvalidated. International evidence supplies plausible questions about learning, institutional constraints and public recognition (Afridi et al., 2017; Bauhr et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026), but it does not establish the framework's applicability to Malaysia. Local investigation is required to assess relevance, identify omitted dimensions and determine whether the propositions require revision.

10. CONCLUSION

Women's political leadership can be explored more precisely when personal capabilities, observable practices, institutional opportunities and attributed characteristics are distinguished. Evidence concerning learning, bureaucratic constraints and candidate evaluations informs the importance of maintaining these distinctions (Afridi et al., 2017; Bauhr et al., 2025; Gupta & Pandey, 2026). Rational-legal authority directs attention to how responsibilities attached to office become practical action. The proposed framework identifies institutional competence, procedural orientation, accountable exercise of office, reasoned judgement, impersonal responsibility and adaptive institutional agency as analytical dimensions. It links these dimensions to conditions that may enable or restrict authority recognition and enactment.

The empirical studies inform this argument without validating its complete structure. Research on electoral inclusion and bureaucratic authority supports distinguishing entry into office from opportunities to exercise influence (Gupta & Pandey, 2026; Schwindt-Bayer, 2009). Studies of candidate evaluations reinforce the separation of perceptions from conduct, while evidence on accountability conditions cautions against explaining political outcomes through individual characteristics alone (Bauhr et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2018; Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). The framework consequently avoids treating women as uniformly competent, ethical or effective. Its contribution to the research objective is a theoretically organised basis for exploring leadership characteristics, accompanied by conditional propositions and an empirical agenda. Investigation in Malaysia can assess these concepts through decision episodes, institutional records and comparative accounts, refining the framework in response to evidence.

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