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Gender Transformation and Social Mobility of The Malind Women: Tradition, Affirmative Action, and Meritocracy in Papua's Bureaucracy

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Abstract

This study examines gender constructions and women's leadership in traditional Malind society and analyses the social mobility mechanisms through which Malind women attain strategic posts in the Merauke Regency bureaucracy. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were generated through in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis. Findings indicate that, although traditional Malind culture organises gender and leadership along clearly patriarchal lines, recent shifts in social paradigms have widened access to education and public leadership for women. Malind women navigate bureaucratic structures by combining educational attainment, support from family and community, strong social and professional networks, and opportunities created by Papua's Special Autonomy framework. This framework affords affirmative recognition to Indigenous Papuans, including women, to hold government posts, while the civil service's merit system continues to require high standards of competence and performance. The analysis shows that the interaction of cultural identity, affirmative action and meritocracy has enabled the rise of capable and respected female leaders in local government. These leaders demonstrate a transformative style that balances professionalism with empathy and collaboration, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable public administration in Papua.

Keywords: Gender transformation, social mobility, Malind women, Papua's bureaucracy

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji konstruksi gender dan kepemimpinan perempuan dalam masyarakat tradisional Malind, serta menganalisis mekanisme mobilitas sosial yang memungkinkan perempuan Malind mencapai posisi strategis dalam birokrasi Pemerintah Kabupaten Merauke. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meskipun budaya tradisional Malind menganut sistem patriarkal dengan pemisahan peran dan kepemimpinan berbasis gender yang tegas, perubahan paradigma sosial belakangan ini telah membuka akses yang lebih luas bagi perempuan untuk terlibat dalam pendidikan dan kepemimpinan publik. Perempuan Malind berhasil menavigasi struktur birokrasi dengan

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menggabungkan akses pendidikan, dukungan keluarga dan komunitas, jaringan sosial dan profesional, serta peluang yang diberikan oleh Undang-Undang Otonomi Khusus Papua. Undang-undang ini memberikan afirmasi bagi Orang Asli Papua (termasuk perempuan) untuk menduduki jabatan pemerintahan, meskipun sistem merit ASN tetap menuntut standar kompetensi dan kinerja yang tinggi. Studi ini menemukan bahwa sinergi antara identitas budaya, afirmasi, dan meritokrasi telah melahirkan pemimpin-pemimpin perempuan yang kompeten dan dihormati. Mereka menunjukkan gaya kepemimpinan transformatif yang menggabungkan profesionalisme, empati, dan kolaborasi, serta berkontribusi terhadap tata kelola pemerintahan yang lebih inklusif dan adil di Papua.

Kata Kunci: Transformasi gender, mobilitas sosial, perempuan Malind, birokrasi Papua

INTRODUCTION

Gender and women's leadership remain crucial and relevant issues in both global and local contexts. Quantitatively, the number of women in government is lower than that of men. This situation does not reflect the composition of society, which shows a fairly balanced number of men and women (Shvedova, 2022). Here, gender refers to the socially constructed allocation of roles, status, and opportunities to women and men across family life and wider society (Admon, 2022). Persistent patriarchal norms position women as subordinate to men, valuing male identities more highly than female ones, a hierarchy reproduced across many cultural settings (Verniers et al., 2015).

Gendered hierarchies give birth to structural injustice, oppression, and both physical and symbolic violence against women. Consequently, women are denied equal rights and opportunities across social, economic, political, and cultural dimensions (Winter, 2018). Public affairs are constructed as a male domain, while women are relegated to domestic responsibilities (Peate, 2019).

Gender injustice has catalysed global struggles for gender equality (Hinterhuber, 2023). These efforts rest on shifts in societal and self-understandings of gender that transform women's roles and positions in public and private life. Such normative change has spurred diverse movements, often women-led, advancing rights in the family, education, employment and careers, politics, bodily autonomy and health, and equitable access to economic, social, and other human-rights resources (Zamula, 2025).

In Indonesia, gender equality remains an unfinished agenda at local and national levels, requiring sustained effort from women and allies across communities, NGOs, and the state bureaucracy. Historically, women took leadership roles in anti-colonial resistance during the independence struggle. In the early twentieth century, before independence, R. A. Kartini's

letters set out a programme for women's education and public participation that later movements drew upon. After independence, women expanded their presence in politics, administration, and civil affairs, although progress was uneven. Today, women serve as ministers, regional and local heads, senior officials, and leaders in business and civil society, yet continued advocacy is needed to consolidate and extend these gains (Zara, 2024).

In Papua, especially in Merauke, significant challenges persist in the pursuit of gender equality (Suryawan, 2017). Before colonial rule, Malind society, grounded in Dema cosmology, construed gender as complementary, attributing vital roles to women and men. Dutch administration disrupted these arrangements by prohibiting key rituals that underpinned masculine socialisation and by instituting economic policies that disproportionately advantaged men. These interventions degraded women's recognised value and roles and produced new forms of gender inequality whose effects continue to shape Malind social dynamics (Sukirman et al., 2024).

The struggle for gender equality in Papua is rooted not only in colonial interventions that weakened local gender orders but also in enduring social stereotypes that restrict women's scope for action (Zimmer-Tamakoshi, 2016). For Malind women, these pressures are compounded. First, pervasive depictions present Papuans as underdeveloped, poorly educated, undisciplined, ungovernable, lazy, and uncompetitive (Zimmer-Tamakoshi, 2016). Second, within Malind cultural norms, women are positioned as subordinate to men; leadership in the social and cultural hierarchy is predominantly male. Women may lead in specific rites and women-centred domains, but such authority remains circumscribed. These dynamics constrain ongoing efforts by Papuan women to transform their conditions. This problem is a challenge for the involvement of Papuan women in the future.

The gender gap in leadership is evident in the under-representation of women in structural posts within Papua's local government bureaucracy, particularly in Merauke. Data from the Merauke Regency Regional Civil Service Agency record 163 Indigenous Papuan men and 95 Indigenous Papuan women in structural positions. (Merauke Regency BKD, 2024). Even so, the Malind women are now being trusted with echelon roles in the Merauke bureaucracy. Of the 95 Indigenous Papuan women in structural posts, 31 are Malind, about one third of the female group and roughly one in eight of all Indigenous Papuan structural officials. It is a step forward, though Malind women still hold only a small share of leadership positions (Merauke Regency BKD, 2024).

Understanding the social mobility of Malind women across community life and the local government bureaucracy is analytically and policy relevant. Mobility is shaped by shifting societal and cultural paradigms on women's roles, together with the forces of globalisation, economic change, and expanded educational opportunities. In parallel, evolving self-definitions among Malind women, including aspirations, civic identity, and perceived responsibilities, influence their capacity and willingness to enter bureaucratic careers and other public roles.

These structural shifts affect access to office, progression within the state apparatus, and the wider socio-economic contributions that support household and community welfare.

This study examines how gender and women's leadership are constructed in traditional Malind society and analyses the social mobility mechanisms through which Malind women attain strategic posts in the Merauke Regency bureaucracy. It foregrounds education and social capital as primary drivers of advancement within bureaucratic hierarchies. The study aims to inform gender equality efforts in government by identifying dynamics, barriers and enabling conditions that shape women's leadership capacity and competence. The findings will also provide a foundation for further research on gender, indigenous peoples and social mobility in Indonesia's local bureaucracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The social concept of gender has transformed significantly alongside broader cultural change (Babatunde & Durowaiye, 2014). In many traditional societies, gender identities are organised by norms that privilege men, associating them with authority, leadership, and control of public space, while assigning women to childcare, household management, and deference to men (Bettis & Ferry, 2016). Such hierarchies are not confined to patriarchal systems; in several matrilineal contexts, women may hold inheritance rights or recognised status, yet decision-making power remains predominantly male (Göttner-Abendroth, 2012). Women thus occupy central roles in kinship and domestic organisation, whereas men are the principal actors in customary politics and social affairs (Koentjaraningrat, 1994).

As society changes, ideas about gender change with it. Women and men now share more of the chances and responsibilities at home and in public domains. This transition is informed by feminist scholarship and social theory, which argue that differences in gender roles are socially and culturally constructed rather than innate (Agarwal & Arshad, 2024).

Within cultural theories of gender, identity is produced through ongoing cultural practice, not reducible to biology or generic social construction. Butler (1990) introduces the theory of *performativity*: gender is constituted through repetitive social actions and institutionalized in cultural norms. In this view, gender is both an individual identity category and a system of power relations manifested in everyday social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Bureaucratic habitus in Indonesia shows that men have a greater percentage and role than women. These perspectives are essential for studying gender in Indigenous contexts such as the Malind of Papua. In this society, gendered roles are organised by customary values and continually reproduced through cultural practices that allocate social spaces and functions. Women hold authoritative roles in domestic life and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and values, yet their participation in broader political and customary decision-making is constrained. Gender identities and relations among the Malind

emerge from the interplay of customary norms, social organisation, and the ongoing practices through which people enact gender. Treating gender as a dynamic cultural process, rather than a fixed inheritance, provides a framework for tracing how roles are made, maintained, and sometimes reworked, and for exploring how socio-cultural constructs sustain power relations within the community.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design and was conducted in Merauke Regency with a focus on Malind women employed in the local government bureaucracy. Participants were selected purposively to include women with relevant bureaucratic experience, especially those who have held designated posts. To provide a broader view of affirmative policies shaping women's career mobility, several government officials were interviewed as key informants.

Primary data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews. Observation focused on day-to-day dynamics within the Merauke Regency bureaucracy involving Malind women. In-depth interviews elicited experiences and perspectives from Malind Echelon II and Echelon III officials in the regional government. Named informants included the Head of the Women's Empowerment Office (Delsiana Gebze), the Head of the Division for Improving Prosperous Families at the Women's Empowerment Office (Regina A. Yanggunada), the Secretary of the Industry, Trade and Cooperatives Office (Paulina Mahuze), and the Assistant Inspector for Region III at the Inspectorate Office (Maria Viola Boyen).

The study explored Malind women officials' experiences of affirmative policies within the Merauke Regency bureaucracy. It examined how these measures shaped their opportunities to secure specific posts and to progress to higher grades, and how they leveraged such openings in building their careers. In addition, the study also explored the constraints they face in male-dominated bureaucratic settings and document their contributions to ongoing bureaucratic development in Merauke.

Secondary data were gathered through document analysis of policy texts, regulations, and administrative records on women's participation in the Merauke Regency bureaucracy. Interview, participant-observation, and documentary data were analysed using descriptive qualitative techniques. Following Miles and Huberman (2009), analysis proceeded through three stages, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, aligned to the aims of the study. Particular attention was given to how affirmative policies shape women's career mobility and participation in local government.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Gender and Women's Leadership in Traditional Malind Society

Gender refers to the culturally specific roles, behaviours, attributes and social identities expected of women and men within a given society (Wagle et al., 2020). In Malind culture, gender identities are ascribed from birth through cultural attributes that signal roles, positions and duties. At childbirth, the immediate question concerns these attributes rather than a generic label, where *keraghwik* designates a female child, and *mih* designates a male child.

Among the Malind, gender terminology is eponymous with key implements. *Keraghwik* is both the name of the main sago-processing tool and as a feminine marker. It is used with *bobo* for pounding, *bakum* for striking and *kebo* for crushing or smoothing sago. *Mih* is both the term for bow and arrows and the masculine marker. Other masculine implements include *iwa* (pig trap), *kupa* ("turkey stone"), *ito* (shovel), *hwakla* (machete), *nggim* (gloves) and *imbazom* (axe), which are also used to cut and prepare sago stalks.

According to Isaias Yanggel Ndiken, a Malind cultural expert, these attributes depict a gendered division of labour that, in traditional Malind society, is neither interchangeable nor substitutable. Tasks considered menial and those requiring physical strength are assigned to men, such as cutting sago, hunting and fighting. Lighter work that calls for perseverance, precision and patience is assigned to women, including sago smoking, processing sago and meat, and caring for children. Malind culture values women's roles in shared life as aligned with gendered dispositions. This division of labour reflects the classical separation of roles found in many patriarchal societies. Even so, within Malind understandings, it is framed as complementarity rather than as inequality, with explicit respect for women's contributions to the community.

The Malind recognise both clan communities and clan communions. There are seven great clans: *Gebze*, *Mahuze*, *Samkakai*, *Ndiken*, *Kaize*, *Basik-Basik* and *Balagaize*. Within each great clan are sub-clans that form community units known as *otih*. These clan communions remain active today. *Wakinotih* is the *otih* of the Balagaize clan, while *Behomotih* is an *otih* comprising the Mahuze and Yolmen clans. Each *otih* is headed by a man called the *binaghol*. The Malind people also know the existence of communities, both clan communities and clan communion communities.

Isaias later explained, male leadership among the Malind is formed within these community structures. Within an *otih*, men are educated in a men-only dormitory (*nggotad*), where they learn custom, etiquette and ritual law until they are prepared for leadership as *Miakim*. Progression follows a staged initiation sequence: *Patul '! Aloy la Patul '! Wanghasis '! Ewati '! Miakim*. Upon graduation and recognition as *Miakim*, a Malind man is considered a candidate for leadership in the family and broader society and is regarded as ready to establish a new household.

According to Isaias Y. Ndiken, principal leadership at both the clan level and the clan-communion level is male. In the Gebze clan, for example, the leader is customarily a man bearing the Gebze name. In an otih, which gathers several clans, a man from one clan serves as leader. Accordingly, Malind society locates its highest leadership positions with men.

“Malind anim leadership is collective and vested in authoritative men (pakas anim). The authority of these warrior-leaders stems from particular achievements and personal qualities. The pakas anim are respected for their commitment to custom, their roles in ritual, and their prowess in pengayauan [headhunting raids]..” (Samkakai, F.O. et all. p.239).

Pakas means “fangs”, symbolising persistence, agility, authority, obedience and honesty within a normative order that is measurable, tested and accountable. *Anem* refers to a fully realised Malind person. In leadership contexts, women play vital roles. Around a male leader stand the *nakali*: women closest to him, typically sisters and daughters. The leader’s wife is not counted among the *nakali*, as she comes from another clan and is considered an outsider.

The *nakali* are central to leadership. They prepare the leader’s regalia and other required attributes, offer counsel, prompt what should be said and done, and caution against what ought to be avoided. They also reinforce and legitimise the leader’s decisions. As the primary support network for a male leader (*binaghol*), the *nakali* play a decisive role in sustaining his authority. That authority is often publicly signalled by the number of *nakali* who accompany him, indicating broad support and respect (Samkakai, F. O. et al., p. 142).

Table 1. Women’s leadership in Malind Society

Scope	The Role of Women's Leadership	Role Description
Community	<i>Kunamai</i> (Women’s Leader)	Women who lead women's groups in the community, especially in terms of family welfare and natural resource management. The <i>Kunamai</i> plays a central role in sustaining community stability.
Religious Rituals	Ritual and Spiritual Leader	Malind women lead fertility, initiation and healing rites. They are widely regarded as possessing strong spiritual power, and they help maintain balance among nature, people and the spiritual realm.

Social Conflict	Mediators of Social Conflict	Malind women frequently mediate disputes within and between families, clans, and tribes. Trust in women's wisdom and gentleness often makes them the first choice for conflict resolution.
Community Education	Educators in the Family	Women are responsible for family education, especially the transmission of moral, social and cultural values to children. They play a vital role in shaping the next generation's understanding of Malind culture.
Ritual Leaders and Guardians of Tradition	Guardians of Tradition and Social Wisdom	As ritual leaders, Malind women have the authority to advise the community. They also serve as custodians of traditions, rites, historical knowledge and mythologies that underpin local wisdom.
Influence in Social Structure	Women as Social Pillars	Women manage domestic affairs and contribute substantially to social and political organisation, even though men continue to dominate formal political leadership. Their positions in community and ritual life support cohesion and collective well-being.

Source: Primary Documentation

The Malind community also recognises women's leadership, although women are not collectively trained in women-only dormitories. Daughters remain with their families and learn leadership from senior women in the household and community. In both single-clan communities and clan alliances, there is a female leader called the *kunamai*, who leads other women in the community. The *kunamai* is usually the oldest woman and is expected to have broad and deep knowledge of women's roles in Malind society. She directs women's work in gathering, gardening, and sago harvesting, and provides guidance and task allocation within the group.

In certain cultural and religious rites, Malind women hold special and irreplaceable roles. Some literature notes that in some ceremonies, women lead, organising and directing the ritual sequence (Sankar, 2015; Haque, 2023). In initiation rites in the Mayo area, women have authority to manage proceedings and to teach social norms and moral social wisdom. The same applies in the Imo and Esam-umusim regions, where women preside over rituals and provide spiritual guidance to the community.

The appointment of women as ritual leaders reflects Malind beliefs that women are more closely connected to the spiritual realm. Women are regarded as possessing greater spiritual potency than men, which grants them authority and a recognised social role in guiding the community. On this basis, Malind women are respected and entrusted with custodianship of wisdom and with mediating relations with the *Spiritual One*.

The Malind recognise a structured division of leadership by gender. Men preside over public, social and political affairs, whereas women lead in family life, within women's groups and in spiritual or ritual contexts. In public social matters, women's leadership is concentrated in mediating community conflicts. Although men remain predominant in formal leadership and public life, women's roles are acknowledged, indicating a gendered hierarchy in which men occupy dominant positions and women subordinate ones.

2. The Mechanism of Social Mobility of Malind Women in Government Bureaucracy in Merauke Regency

The traditional Malind society adheres to a patriarchal culture that places men in dominant positions in various aspects of life, including politics, economics, and family. In this system, women's roles are often limited to domestic and family affairs, making them a *supporting system* for Malind men. This clear division of gender identity plays a role in shaping the social norms that govern the position and duties of each gender in society.

During the Dutch rule in the Netherlands New Guinea, the otih-otih system was merged into pilot villages, which paved the way for the Malind people to become acquainted with education. Education, including Malind forms of instruction and Western-style schooling, was introduced by the colonial administration as a tool of social control and to promote Western notions of civilisation. Although access was initially limited, Malind women and men now have equal opportunities to pursue education.

Along with the change in society's paradigm, some of the social and cultural norms that used to hinder gender equality are now starting to change. Norms limiting women's roles in public life began to shift, providing room for Malind women to thrive and improve their social mobility. On the other hand, although the patriarchal culture is still ongoing, the Malind society now understands that women have the same potential and rights as men in all aspects of life, be it education, work, and politics.

A clear sign of this change is the growing presence of Malind women in key positions within the Merauke Regency government. Under Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages, Malind women have been elected as village heads in Malind-majority areas, signalling a shift in community views of women's roles.

Many Malind now recognise that women have the same abilities and rights to take part in social and economic development. Fairer, more positive views are slowly replacing old stereotypes that kept women in limited roles. As a result, doors to higher public positions are opening. With better education, Malind women build careers in government, sit in legislatures and work in social organisations, and they lead projects in their communities. Overall, these changes show women gaining the freedom to shape their own futures. Their roles are stretching beyond the home into public life across social, political, and economic spheres. This shift in outlook is creating space for social mobility, both vertically and horizontally.

Shifts in the Malind community's paradigm regarding women's roles and positions mark a significant step toward gender equality (Iqbal et al, 2023). However, social and cultural norms that are deeply embedded in everyday life continue to pose challenges. Even so, Malind women are increasingly afforded opportunities to engage in a variety of public roles and to take part in policy-making and leadership at the local level. Wider access to education, employment and politics is opening opportunities to improve their capacity and competence in the face of an increasingly complex world. Crucially, these gains cannot be separated from affirmative policies that provide pathways for women to access strategic positions, both within bureaucratic structures and across other sectors.

Figure 1 illustrates how the social mobility mechanism for Malind women within the Merauke Regency bureaucracy operates. It maps the steps and determinants of mobility, ranging from education and family background to social support and affirmative policies. A clearer grasp of this pathway can guide efforts to help Malind women make the most of available opportunities, both within the bureaucracy and in other spheres of life.

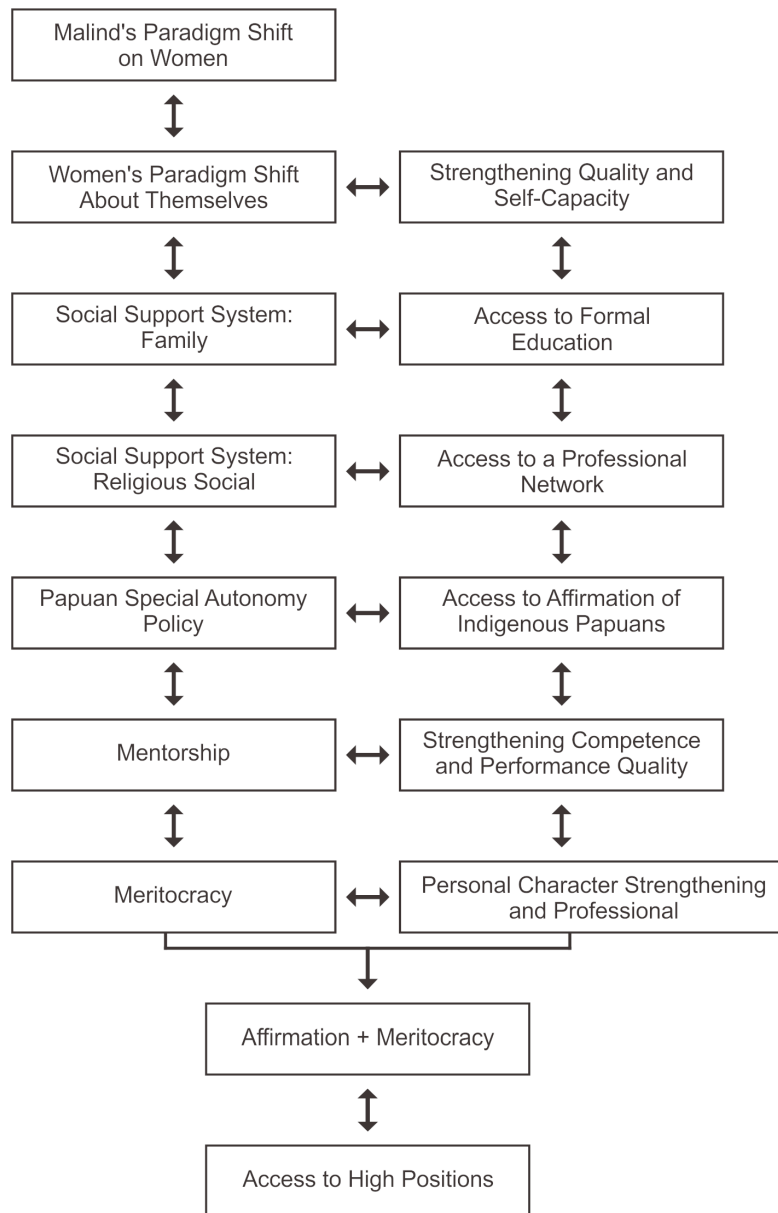


Figure 1. Malind Women's Mobility Mechanism Chart in the Merauke Regency Government Bureaucracy
Source: Research Analyst

As the community perspective changes, Malind women also need space to make subsequent changes in themselves. When women reshape how they see their abilities, their gender and social identities, and their place in the world, social mobility becomes possible. This new sense of self and belonging becomes a springboard for wider, more active participation in community life.

Malind women need to navigate and resist stereotypes and social constructs that have constrained them so that they can develop fully and on an equal footing with men. Common stereotypes about Papuans depict them as unwilling to be guided, undisciplined, prone to breaking rules, reluctant to study, unintelligent, easily taken advantage of, and unwilling to work or exert effort. To succeed, women should manage and counter these views by demonstrating leadership qualities that meet established standards while also leveraging their strengths, even when those strengths diverge from traditional norms.

Malind women need to recognise and develop their potential and capacity to claim equal rights with men across all spheres of social life. They should extend themselves beyond traditional domestic roles and build the confidence to succeed in higher education, professional careers and public office. Women with strong self-confidence, the ability to assert their rights and keen social awareness are better positioned to challenge constraining norms and to pursue fairer opportunities in their working lives.

Malind women should maximise equal access to formal education as foundational capital for social mobility. Quality schooling cultivates habits of diligent study, discipline, sustained effort, constructive competition, and effective self-management, alongside planning for a better future. A good education shapes behaviours, habits, and attitudes that support success, career advancement, and the ability to maintain positions once attained.

3. Education and Social Capital in Malind Women's Social Mobility

The social mobility of Malind women within the bureaucracy emerges from complex dynamics shaped by structural and cultural factors. Two elements are especially significant: access to education and supportive social capital. Education provides the foundation for capacity-building, habits of thought and opportunity structures that enable Malind women to navigate bureaucratic careers on more equal terms. Complementing this, social capital drawn from families, religious communities and professional networks strengthens their position through emotional support, network ties and social legitimacy. The following section examines how education acts as a catalyst in this mobility process.

The Importance of Education in the Social Mobility of Malind Women

Changes in the Malind's paradigm of gender and social identity are evident in the provision of equal opportunities for boys and girls to study from primary through to tertiary education. Mrs Paulina Mahuze, Secretary of the Merauke Regency Industry, Trade and Cooperatives Office, recalled: "After graduating from high school, I wanted to find a job to help my family's economy. But my mum said, 'No, not that. If you do not look for a job, you must go to college.' I complied with my mother's request. I studied at STIA Karya Dharma Merauke and graduated in 2005."

The same point was made by Mrs Regina A. Yanggunada, Head of Empowerment for Improving Prosperous Families at the Merauke Regency Women's Empowerment Office, who expressed gratitude that:

"My parents were the first people to receive a Dutch education (to become a tailor). They moved from the koteka era to the age of dressing (clothes). They see that education is good, education can change our lives that may have been cultivated, moved into a settled society and built a better community. Parents always advise that nowadays women and men must go to school, both build this land of Malind."

In Mrs Regina's description, the change in Malind attitudes to education is slow and gradual. Some families of her parents' generation retained a patriarchal view that school was for boys while girls stayed at home. Others, including her own parents who had received education and training during the Dutch period, recognised changing times and treated the education of both sons and daughters as urgent for a better future. The same point was emphasised by Mrs Maria Viola Boyen (IRBAN III, Merauke Regency Inspectorate) and Mrs Delsiana Gebze, Head of the Merauke Regency Women's Empowerment Office.

Across the success stories of Malind women now serving in Echelon III and Echelon II posts, education has been pivotal in enabling social mobility within today's bureaucracy. Schooling, together with formative social experiences, reshapes dispositions, skills, and practices in community life (Bourdieu, 1984). Through this reconfigured habitus, Malind women are better positioned to attain the mobility they seek, including advancement to strategic bureaucratic positions.

Education is central to societal development and progress. In Bourdieu's terms, it constitutes a form of cultural capital for Malind women, enabling fuller participation in social life and community development. Through education, Malind women acquire internalised cultural capital: knowledge, skills, and ways of thinking (Bourdieu, 1984). The Malind community now provides equal opportunities for women to access quality education. Such access creates greater scope for women to contribute across fields. Quality education underpins women's social mobility.

The Role of the Family in Supporting the Social Mobility of Malind Women

In patriarchal cultures, women are often expected to prioritise domestic caregiving as housewives. In Malind society, views of women's roles, status, and identity are shifting. Malind women are gaining opportunities for education and access to bureaucratic careers on a par with men. The family, as a primary support system, shapes at least two key dimensions of women's mobility, namely, access to education and support for career development (Tan et al, 2020).

First, shifts in parental and natal-family paradigms regarding women open broad opportunities for Malind women to secure the basic capital of mobility. In the narratives of Malind female officials, mothers (mama) play a decisive role in educational trajectories. Mothers encourage their daughters to stay in school rather than being limited to housewifery as they themselves once were. They are the closest source of support when daughters lose motivation or hope during their studies. By modelling perseverance, tenacity, discipline and hard work, mothers sustain a determined commitment to advancing their daughters' aspirations.

Second, support from family and spouse is crucial. In traditional Malind society, a woman's success was measured by her management of household affairs, and her role was largely confined to the domestic sphere. Today, Malind women officials describe two significant shifts, namely, women can attain senior government posts, and spouses and families actively support their careers. Husbands back their wives' professional development and the discharge of official duties. Domestic responsibilities, once central to women's identity, are now more fairly shared, with men taking on a portion of care and household work. Because office work often demands substantial time and energy, the encouragement of husbands and children is a decisive enabling factor for Malind women pursuing bureaucratic careers.

The Role of Religious Organizations in Social Mobility

In Bourdieu's terms, this is social capital, which refers to networks of relationships that give individuals access to resources and opportunities through interpersonal ties and professional connections. In respondents' accounts, such capital is built through Catholic social and religious organisations, including the parish Altar Servers' Group, Catholic Youth at parish and deanery levels (*dekenat/kevikapan*), the Catholic Women of the Republic of Indonesia (branches, DPC and DPD), and the Parish Pastoral Council.

In these socio-religious organisations, participants meet and build relationships with people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences, thereby widening their social networks. Working with others to plan and manage shared activities teaches collaboration and teamwork, and provides opportunities to develop social skills such as adaptability, communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution. They gain confidence alongside practical communication skills. By serving together, they also form character and work ethic, including discipline, responsibility, and commitment to organisational goals. In this way, the organisations become training grounds where participants learn to develop themselves as leaders.

Participation in these organisations also facilitates access to bureaucratic networks within the Merauke Regency local government. Some fellow members now serve as officials. Through strong relations and regular communication in Catholic organisations, members

provide references and sponsorship, drawing the attention of superiors to one another's quality and capacity for designated posts in the current administration.

Affirmation Policy and the Challenges of Meritocracy in the Papuan Bureaucracy

Indigenous Papuans possess a form of symbolic capital affirmed by Papuan's Special Autonomy framework (Law No. 2 of 2021, the Second Amendment to Law No. 21 of 2001 concerning Special Autonomy for Papua Province). In Bourdieu's terms, the affirmative provisions recognising Indigenous Papuans constitute social recognition and status that create specific pathways to office and authority. This symbolic capital, as Indigenous Papuans, often assists Malind women in securing posts and exercising influence within social and professional networks.

There is no special provision in the Papuan Special Autonomy Law on the affirmation of women in the bureaucracy or legislature. The affirmative policy or quota of women in the government structure, according to the Papua Special Autonomy Law, is determined by the policy of the Papua Provincial Government. Regional leaders who have an awareness of gender equality will provide equal opportunities for Papuan women to be able to achieve high positions according to their capacity and capabilities. Affirmative policies of women's representation, anti-discrimination, and the promotion of gender inclusion in higher bureaucratic positions could be decisive factors in Malind's women's career. This gender-affirming policy creates a professional work environment that is more conducive for women to develop.

Malind women officials have leveraged Special Autonomy and associated affirmative measures as opportunities for social mobility in bureaucratic careers. They also stress that success in leadership requires building personal qualities and capacities aligned with role demands. They recognise the need to balance Indigenous affirmative pathways with the meritocratic requirements that govern the civil service under Law No. 5 of 2014 on the State Civil Apparatus and PAN-RB Regulation No. 40 of 2018 on Guidelines for the Merit System in ASN Management. Accordingly, Malind women must demonstrate appropriate qualifications, records of achievement, proven competencies and strong performance to be promoted to suitable positions.

Professional Networking and Mentorship Patterns in Malind Women's Careers

Professional networks and workplace relationships play an important role in the success of Malind women in the government bureaucracy. In performing their duties, they are expected to cultivate ties with influential actors who can open access to promotions and provide recommendations. As noted by Maria Viola Boyen, IRBAN III at the Merauke Regency Inspectorate, only about 40 per cent of knowledge comes from schooling, while the remaining 60 per cent is gained through direct work experience. Constructive relationships with

experienced colleagues and mentors are therefore pivotal, providing ongoing learning opportunities and pathways to strengthen competencies.

In addition, Malind women officials often practise a family-oriented leadership model, treating colleagues and superiors as family. They cultivate empathetic relationships grounded in emotional support and mutual trust across professional and personal spheres. In leading, they prioritise accountability and the achievement of organisational goals while attending to staff well-being.

Malind women do not rely solely on such support; they also optimise opportunities by undertaking professional education and training as they assume new posts. Inter-agency rotations require rapid adaptation and continuous learning. Their success in these transitions is strongly shaped by the social and professional networks they have cultivated and by direct guidance from superiors. Professional education and training programmes, together with mentorship for capacity building, are key enablers of Malind women’s social mobility.

Table 2. Aspects of Malind Women’s Social Mobility

Aspects	Description
The Importance of Professional Networking	Professional networking opens up opportunities for promotion and access to higher positions. It also helps to get recommendations and relevant information in the work environment.
Practical Knowledge and Experience	60% of on-the-job knowledge comes from practical experience, while 40% comes from formal education. A good social network is essential to support learning from more experienced colleagues.
Learning and Mentoring	Malind’s female officials learn from mentoring provided by their superiors and professional colleagues, including about workplace regulations and procedures.
Family-Based Leadership	Malind’s women’s leadership prioritizes a family approach, with empathetic communication and mutual support between fellow colleagues.
Communication and Collaboration	Malind women’s leaders build balanced communication between professional and personal, reinforcing solid and collaborative teamwork.
Mobility and Career Development	The career mobility that occurs in Malind women is supported by social and professional networks, which help them thrive in new positions through training and mentorship.
The Influence of Social Support and Mentoring on Career Success	Mentoring and social support help Malind women improve leadership skills and overcome challenges in the bureaucracy.

Source: Primary Documentation

Based on the table above, professional networks and mentoring play a decisive role in Malind women's bureaucratic careers. Networks that women have cultivated open substantial opportunities for promotion and for trusted recommendations to specific posts. Constructive relationships with superiors, peers and staff also strengthen professional capacity-building. The family-oriented leadership style they practise helps create a collaborative and supportive work climate. Within this environment, guidance through professional education and training is critical for developing skills and competencies. Consequently, Malind women advance not only through broad social networks but also through mentoring that guides them to succeed across government roles. This underscores the importance of synergy between networking and mentorship in facilitating Malind women's social mobility within the Merauke Regency government bureaucracy.

4. Malind Women's Leadership in Affirmation and Meritocracy Synergy

Malind women officials realize that they have obtained the same affirmation rights as Papuan men in regional leadership, as stipulated in Law Number 21 of 2001 and its amendments through Law Number 2 of 2021 on Papuan Special Autonomy. Article 28 paragraph (3) states that *"The government, provincial and regency/city governments provide priority opportunities for Papuan Indigenous people to occupy positions in the government in accordance with the provisions of laws and regulations."* This provision provides an affirmative space for Indigenous Papuans (Orang Asli Papua-OAP), including Malind women, to obtain opportunities for promotion to positions in the bureaucracy. However, this affirmation is still subject to the conditions specified in the State Civil Apparatus management system.

The implementation of the affirmation policy must be in line with the provisions of Law Number 5 of 2014 on Civil Apparatus, which emphasizes the importance of a professional, neutral, and integrity bureaucracy. In this framework, the filling of structural positions is carried out based on the principle of the merit system, namely promotion based on qualifications, competencies, performance, and appreciation for work achievements. Although affirmations open early access, recognition of abilities remains determined by the individual's professional accomplishments and integrity.

Malind women who occupy strategic positions show high awareness of the importance of building capacity and self-quality (Arfiani, 2015). They not only make use of affirmative spaces, but also actively form professional characters oriented towards work ethic and integrity. In the face of cultural stereotypes that place women in subordinate positions, they affirm their existence through discipline, perseverance, honesty, loyalty, and commitment to the implementation of their main duties and functions. The empathetic and collaborative leadership approach that they have built has become a force in transforming the face of the bureaucracy which has tended to be masculine and hierarchical.

Furthermore, they actively participate in various capacity building programs through technical training and position-based leadership. Participation in the program not only enhances competencies but also encourages recognition of their performance by direct superiors. Mrs. Paulina Mahuze, for example, is known as a role model in her professional environment for discipline, completeness, and accuracy in completing tasks and reporting activities.

Malind women integrate the affirmation of Indigenous Papuan identity with the fulfilment of competency standards required by the civil-service merit system. This alignment strengthens their position in the bureaucracy and demonstrates their capacity as professional leaders. The synergy between cultural legitimacy and proven competence underpins women’s leadership that is inclusive, competitive and transformative in local governance.

Table 3. Elements of Synergy of Affirmation and Meritocracy in Malind Women’s Leadership

Element	Description
Issues	Malind women integrate the right to affirmation as an OAP with the demands of the merit system in the bureaucracy.
Affirmation Policy	Law No. 2/2021 on Papuan Special Autonomy gives priority to positions for OAPs, including women.
Meritocracy's Demands	Civil Apparatus Law No. 5/2014: promotion of positions based on competence, qualifications, performance, and achievement.
Malind's Female Response	Increase self-capacity through training, discipline, loyalty, and work ethics; avoid reliance on mere affirmations.
Leadership Style	Empathetic, collaborative, professional; different from the masculine-hierarchical style.
Impact	Malind's women's leadership has become more recognized, building an inclusive and transformative bureaucracy.

Source: Primary Documentation

The Malinds’ experience of women’s leadership shows that affirmation is not just about providing access, but a mechanism to open up fair opportunities for marginalized groups. Their success is not only born from policy support, but also from professional capacity, integrity, and commitment built consistently. The synergy between affirmation and meritocracy creates space for the emergence of female leadership that is not only competitive, but also able to color the bureaucracy with the values of inclusivity, collaboration, and sustainable social transformation.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The Malind culture has historically adhered to a patriarchal system that placed men at the center of social and customary leadership, while women were limited to domestic and spiritual roles. This gender-based division of roles has been passed down from generation to generation in a strong customary structure. However, in the development of contemporary society, this paradigm began to shift. Malind society is now increasingly open to the principle of gender equality, especially in public spaces and government bureaucracy. Malind women now have wider access to education and other resources, which are important in their social mobility process. This access allows women to appear as leaders at various levels, both at the community level, such as Village Heads who are directly elected by the community, and in the Merauke Regency government bureaucracy, where many Malind women now occupy echelon II and III positions.

The transformation of Malind women's roles rests not only on changing societal views but also on women's own agency. They leverage access to education, draw support from families and partners, build professional capacity, expand social and religious networks, and cultivate strategic professional ties. Affirmative measures within Papua's Special Autonomy provide formal space for Malind women to enter local power structures. Yet recognition of their leadership does not rest on identity alone: they demonstrate capacity through performance, integrity, and professionalism in line with the civil service merit system. Accordingly, Malind women's mobility is driven by the synergy of affirmative policy and meritocracy. This combination both enables entry into authority and strengthens inclusive, collaborative, and transformative leadership in a bureaucracy once dominated by men. This research provides insight that women's involvement needs to be increased and strengthened through structured, pro-women policies. The implications of women's involvement and participation in government will provide gender balance.

As a next step, the local government should strengthen affirmative measures by widening Malind women's access to leadership education and training, ensuring a prepared pool for strategic appointments. It should also build cross-agency support and mentoring networks among women in the bureaucracy to foster collaboration. For further research, it is important to identify the structural obstacles that still impede advancement and to evaluate the impact of Papuan Special Autonomy on women's empowerment, so policies can be refined to promote gender equality more effectively.

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