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Gendered Power and Bureaucratic Governance Decision-Making Inequality in West Sumatra

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ABSTRACT

This article examines gendered power relations within the bureaucracy of the Provincial Government of West Sumatra, focusing on the gap between women's capacity and their access to decision-making authority. Although women constitute the majority of civil servants and possess substantial educational and career capital, they remain underrepresented in strategic positions. This study aims to explain how institutional structures and practices shape unequal access to authority. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with civil servants across hierarchical levels and analysis of official personnel documents. Thematic analysis identifies patterns of power relations, dependence, and women's autonomy in decision-making. The findings show that authority is concentrated in senior echelons dominated by men, while women are positioned in administrative and implementation roles. Informal practices, including networks and leadership norms, reinforce restricted access to strategic arenas. As a result, women's capacity does not translate into influence over policy direction. The study argues that the limits of gender affirmative policies lie in their emphasis on numerical representation as a measure of success. This approach enables compliance without redistributing power. Advancing gender equality requires shifting the focus from representation to authority within bureaucratic systems.

KEYWORDS: *gendered power relations, feminist institutionalism, bureaucratic inequality, decision-making authority, West Sumatra*

INTRODUCTION

Gender affirmative policies in Indonesia have been institutionalized as part of broader public sector reforms aimed at addressing structural inequalities in women's access to power within the bureaucracy and local politics. These policies emerge not only from normative commitments to equality, but also from international pressures and governance standards that position gender inclusion as an indicator of democratic quality (Krook & Norris, 2014; True & Mintrom, 2001). Within this framework, gender equality is articulated as the provision of equal rights, opportunities, and treatment between women and

men across political, economic, social, and cultural spheres, forming an integral component of human rights fulfillment (UN Women, 2018; Walby, 2005).

In Indonesia, such commitments are reflected in various regulatory frameworks, including gender mainstreaming strategies within public institutions and policies that promote women's participation in decision-making arenas. Over the past two decades, these initiatives have contributed to a gradual increase in women's presence within state institutions, particularly in administrative and mid-level bureaucratic positions. National statistics indicate that women now constitute a significant proportion of civil servants, reaching nearly half of the total workforce in several regions. However, this numerical increase has not translated proportionally into women's access to strategic leadership positions, where authority over policy direction and resource allocation is concentrated.

Within public administration practice, the success of affirmative policies is often measured by quantitative indicators, particularly the increase in women's representation (Childs & Lovenduski, 2013). Such an approach, while useful, risks obscuring deeper structural inequalities embedded in bureaucratic systems. Regional civil service data illustrate this limitation. In one provincial context, all Echelon I positions remain occupied by men. At the Echelon II level, women hold only 12 out of 56 positions, while at Echelon III there are 85 women among 306 officials. Women's representation increases at Echelon IV, with 172 out of 403 positions, and is even more prominent in non-echelon roles that are largely administrative and technical. This pattern reflects a stratified distribution of power, in which women are concentrated at lower and middle levels of the bureaucracy but remain marginal in positions that determine policy agendas (Annesley & Gains, 2010).

This uneven distribution suggests that representation cannot be reduced to numerical presence alone (Pitkin, 2023). Women's growing inclusion in bureaucratic structures does not necessarily correspond with expanded authority, policy discretion, or control over strategic resources (Waylen, 2014). A critical issue emerges: gender affirmative policies appear effective at increasing descriptive representation, yet they fall short of transforming the underlying power relations that govern access to decision-making positions. This raises a fundamental question about whether such policies merely accommodate women within existing institutional frameworks or genuinely challenge the structures that produce inequality.

Scholarly debates in public administration and policy studies indicate that this phenomenon is not unique to Indonesia. Comparative research demonstrates that affirmative action and gender quotas often succeed in increasing women's numerical presence but fail to alter decision-making patterns dominated by masculine norms and informal institutional practices (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2013; Lombardo & Meier, 2016). Feminist institutionalist perspectives argue that institutions operate through both formal rules and informal norms, where the latter frequently reproduce gender hierarchies despite formal commitments to equality (Mackay et al., 2010; Waylen, 2014). Consequently, gender mainstreaming tends to remain

procedural, positioning women as beneficiaries of policy rather than as actors with agenda-setting power (Eveline & Bacchi, 2010).

At the local government level, these structural constraints intersect with hierarchical bureaucratic arrangements and patronage-based political relations that shape career trajectories and access to authority (Estes, 2013; Peters, 2014). Such dynamics limit women's autonomy, particularly in contexts where informal networks and political loyalty play a decisive role in appointments to strategic positions. These conditions suggest that gender inequality within the bureaucracy cannot be fully explained by formal institutional analysis alone but must also account for relational power structures embedded in governance practices.

The case of West Sumatra Province presents a particularly important empirical puzzle. The Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system is widely recognized as a cultural framework that symbolically elevates women's status, particularly in relation to property rights and lineage (Blackwood, 2001; Sanday, 2002). This cultural narrative often leads to the assumption that gender relations in the region are inherently egalitarian and supportive of women's leadership. Such an assumption requires critical scrutiny. Local governance operates within the institutional logic of the modern state, characterized by hierarchical authority, bureaucratic control, and patriarchal norms that may contradict or override cultural principles (Bourdieu, 2001; Chappell & Waylen, 2013).

The coexistence of matrilineal cultural norms and hierarchical state institutions generates an analytically significant tension. Women's symbolic status within society does not automatically translate into substantive power within formal governance structures. Empirical observations indicate that women's presence in local bureaucracy does not necessarily correspond with their capacity to influence policy decisions or control strategic resources (Mansbridge, 2005). Instead, power relations within bureaucracy often produce forms of dependence that constrain women's agency, particularly in decision-making arenas dominated by political and administrative elites (Kenny, 2014).

Despite growing attention to gender and governance, existing research shows important limitations. Studies on affirmative policies tend to emphasize quantitative representation without sufficiently examining how power is distributed and exercised within bureaucratic systems (Krook & Norris, 2014). Cultural analyses, meanwhile, focus on symbolic recognition and social values but often fail to connect these dimensions with institutional practices and political authority (Blackwood, 2000). As a result, there remains a lack of empirical research that systematically analyzes how gender affirmative policies operate within contexts that are simultaneously matrilineal, bureaucratic, and shaped by patronage relations.

This gap is particularly relevant in understanding how women's power is constructed, negotiated, and constrained in local governance. Without such analysis, affirmative policies risk being interpreted as successful solely on the basis of numerical gains, while deeper inequalities in authority and decision-making remain unaddressed.

Addressing this gap, this study integrates feminist institutionalist perspectives with an analysis of local socio-cultural contexts to examine the dynamics of women's power in local bureaucracy and politics. Focusing on West Sumatra Province, the study challenges the assumption that matrilineal systems inherently produce egalitarian governance outcomes (Sanday, 2002; Waylen, 2017). The research aims to analyze how gender affirmative policies are implemented within local bureaucratic and political structures, and to explain how power relations, forms of dependence, and degrees of women's autonomy are shaped in public decision-making processes.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study design to analyze the implementation of gender affirmative policies and the dynamics of women's power relations within the bureaucracy and local politics in West Sumatra Province. A qualitative approach is selected because the study aims to explain how policies operate in practice and how institutional arrangements shape women's access to strategic decision-making positions, rather than to measure relationships between variables (Creswell, 2015).

The research is designed as a case study to enable in-depth exploration of policy processes within their real-life institutional and socio-cultural context (Yin, 2018). This design allows the study to capture the interactions among formal policy frameworks, bureaucratic structures, and informal norms that influence women's authority and autonomy in governance.

The unit of analysis in this study is public decision-making practices within local government institutions. The analysis focuses on hierarchical structures, positional authority, and informal mechanisms such as patronage relations and political networks that shape access to power. This focus reflects an institutional perspective that emphasizes the role of both formal rules and informal norms in structuring gendered power relations (Mackay et al., 2010).

West Sumatra Province is selected as the research site due to its distinctive socio-cultural and institutional configuration. The region is characterized by a matrilineal kinship system that symbolically recognizes women's status, while governance practices remain embedded in hierarchical and patriarchal bureaucratic structures. This context provides a critical setting for examining the limits of gender affirmative policies in producing women's substantive power.

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of institutional practices. Primary data were obtained through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected informants, including female and male structural officials, policymakers, and local political actors involved in decision-making processes. Informant selection was based on positional relevance, institutional experience, and involvement in policy implementation practices (Patton, 2015).

Interview questions were designed to explore women's experiences in accessing structural positions, exercising authority, and negotiating power

relations within bureaucracy and local politics. Particular attention is given to identifying forms of dependence, levels of policy discretion, and constraints on autonomy in decision-making processes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Secondary data consist of official government documents, including staffing records, regulatory frameworks, and gender mainstreaming policies. These documents were analyzed qualitatively to map formal institutional arrangements and to examine discrepancies between policy design and implementation. Descriptive data on the distribution of bureaucratic positions were used as contextual evidence to support the analysis of structural inequality, rather than as a basis for statistical inference (Bowen, 2009).

Data analysis is conducted using thematic analysis through stages of open coding, theme development, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis focuses on three key dimensions: power relations, forms of dependence, and levels of women's autonomy in public decision-making. These themes are developed inductively from empirical data while being interpreted through relevant theoretical concepts.

The analysis is guided by a feminist institutionalist framework, which explains how formal rules and informal norms operate simultaneously in shaping gendered power relations within institutions (Chappell & Waylen, 2013). This framework enables the study to move beyond descriptive accounts and provide an explanation of the persistence of inequality despite formal policy commitments.

To ensure credibility, the study employs data triangulation by comparing findings from interviews and document analysis (Denzin, 2012). Interpretive consistency is strengthened through iterative engagement with the data and continuous refinement of analytical categories.

Ethical considerations are observed throughout the research process. Informants' identities are kept confidential, and data are used solely for academic purposes. The study follows established ethical guidelines, including informed consent and responsible data management (Israel & Hay, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Distribution of Positions and Patterns of Women's Representation

Women constitute the majority of the civil service workforce in West Sumatra Province. However, this numerical dominance is not reflected in the distribution of strategic positions. Women are predominantly concentrated in administrative and non-strategic roles, while men dominate leadership positions.

This pattern becomes evident when the distribution of positions is examined by echelon level, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 . Hierarchy of Positions and the Gendered Distribution of Power in the Civil Service Bureaucracy of West Sumatra Province

Level of Position	Men	Women	Total
Echelon I	1	0	1
Echelon II	44	12	56
Echelon III	221	85	306
Echelon IV	231	172	403
Non-Echelon	6226	13618	19844

Source: Sistem Informasi Kepegawaian (SIMPEG) Provinsi Sumatera Barat, 2025

The data show a clear hierarchical pattern: the higher the echelon level, the lower the representation of women. No women occupy Echelon I positions. At Echelon II and III levels, women are present but remain significantly underrepresented compared to men. A more balanced composition appears only at Echelon IV, while women dominate non-echelon positions.

To assess whether this pattern is associated with differences in individual qualifications, the distribution of educational attainment is examined in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Educational Attainment of Civil Servants in West Sumatra Province by Gender

Educational Level	Men	Women	Total
Elementary School	23	0	23
Junior High School	45	20	65
Senior High School	693	372	1065
Diploma II	8	7	15
Diploma III	8	13	21
Applied Bachelor	119	193	312
Bachelor's Degree	4353	10476	14829
Master's Degree	1061	1644	2705
Doctoral Degree	20	11	31
Total	6330	12736	19066

Source: Sistem Informasi Kepegawaian (SIMPEG) Provinsi Sumatera Barat, 2025

The data indicate that women dominate higher levels of formal education. At the bachelor's level, women (10,476) significantly outnumber men (4,353). A similar pattern is observed at the master's level, where women (1,644) exceed men (1,061).

This distribution suggests that women possess substantial educational capital within the bureaucracy. However, this advantage is not reflected in their representation in strategic positions.

Further analysis of the distribution of ranks and grades is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of Civil Service Ranks and Grades in West Sumatra Province

Rank/Grade	Man	Women	Total
I/a	0	0	0
I/b	1	0	1
I/c	6	0	6
I/d	18	2	20
II/a	59	38	97
II/b	46	10	56
II/c	236	572	808
II/d	292	276	568
III/a	1940	4272	6212
III/b	896	1527	2423
III/c	472	730	1202
III/d	1297	3102	4399
IV/a	490	908	1398
IV/b	608	1611	2219
IV/c	315	851	1166
IV/d	39	8	47
IV/e	2	0	2
Total	6717	13907	20624

Source: Sistem Informasi Kepegawaian (SIMPEG) Provinsi Sumatera Barat, 2025

Women also dominate the rank structure, particularly in Grades III and IV, which serve as the primary pool for structural positions. In Grade III/a, women (4,272) significantly outnumber men (1,940), and similar patterns are observed across other sub-levels.

However, representation declines sharply at the highest ranks. In Grade IV/d, only eight women are recorded compared to thirty-nine men, and no women are present at Grade IV/e.

These findings indicate that although women have accumulated educational qualifications and bureaucratic rank, their representation decreases significantly at the highest levels of the hierarchy.

Power Relations in the Decision-Making Process

Decision-making within the civil service bureaucracy in West Sumatra Province is structured hierarchically and closely linked to positional authority. Access to decision-making arenas is not evenly distributed across civil servants but is concentrated in higher-echelon positions. As shown in the previous section, these positions are predominantly occupied by men.

In practice, decision-making authority is centralized at Echelons I and II, which function as the main sites for determining policy direction, setting priorities, and allocating resources. Echelon III and IV positions are primarily

responsible for coordination and implementation, while non-echelon staff are largely involved in administrative and technical tasks.

This hierarchical structure is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the vertical flow of decision-making from senior to lower levels.

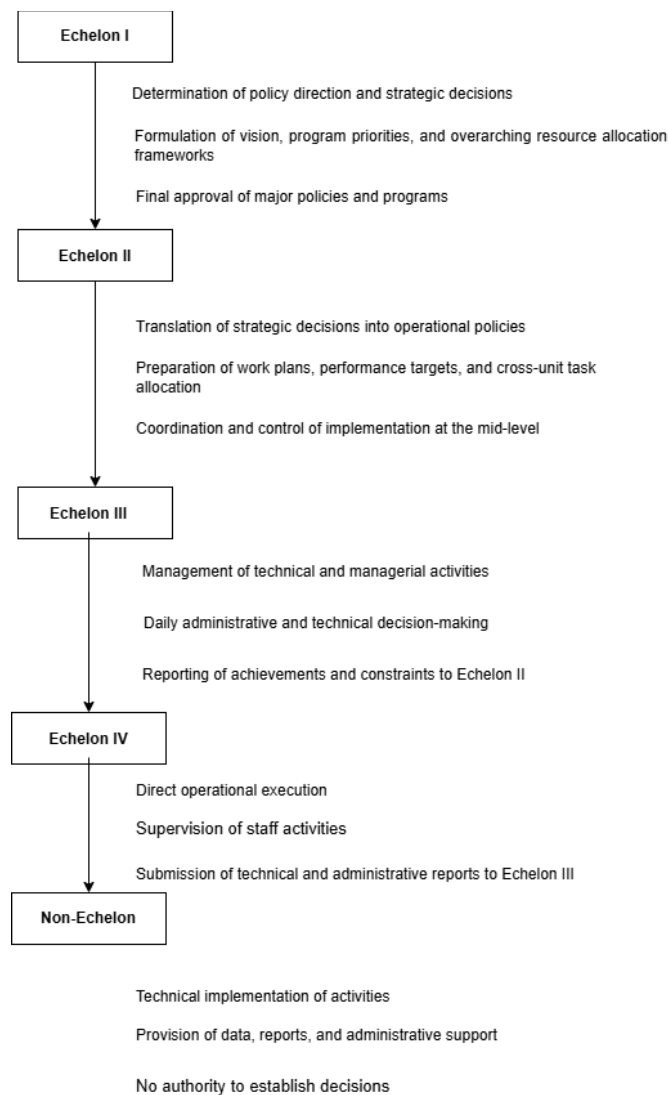


Figure 1. Decision-Making and Task Implementation Flow Across Echelon Levels.
Author's elaboration based on Indonesian civil service regulations and public administration literature.

Figure 1 indicates that authority flows from higher to lower levels, with limited upward influence. Lower-level officials contribute through reports, technical inputs, and implementation feedback, but final decisions are determined at the top of the hierarchy.

Findings from interviews indicate that participation in decision-making forums is strongly influenced by positional status. Informants at Echelon III and IV levels reported that their involvement is generally limited to providing data

and executing instructions, while strategic decisions are formulated at higher levels.

One informant noted:

"We are involved in preparing documents and technical inputs, but the final decision is made at the leadership level."

Another informant emphasized:

"Even when we have ideas, it depends on whether they are accepted by superiors. We cannot directly influence the final policy."

These accounts indicate that decision-making is not only structured formally through hierarchy, but also mediated by authority relations embedded in organizational practice.

The concentration of authority at senior levels creates a gap between those who generate information and those who define policy direction. Women, who are more represented at middle and lower levels, are more frequently positioned as providers of technical input rather than as decision-makers.

In addition, the hierarchical chain of command shapes how opinions are expressed. Informants indicated that lower-level officials tend to align their views with those of superiors, particularly in formal decision-making settings. This pattern reflects the importance of positional authority in determining which perspectives are considered in the decision-making process.

Overall, these findings show that decision-making authority in the bureaucracy is vertically structured and concentrated at higher levels, limiting broader participation in determining policy direction.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that gender inequality within the bureaucracy of the Provincial Government of West Sumatra cannot be attributed to a lack of capacity or qualifications among women. Empirical evidence shows that women dominate the civil service workforce and possess substantial educational and career capital, particularly at higher education levels and mid-level ranks. This condition challenges explanations that attribute underrepresentation to individual deficits.

Instead, inequality is produced through the distribution of positions and authority within the bureaucratic hierarchy. Strategic positions at Echelons I and II, which function as the primary sites of policy direction and resource allocation, remain dominated by men. Women, despite their numerical and professional advantages, are concentrated in Echelons III and IV, as well as at non-echelon levels, where roles are largely administrative and implementation-oriented. This structural configuration limits women's access to arenas where policy agendas are defined and constrains their substantive influence in decision-making processes.

From a feminist institutionalist perspective, this pattern reflects the interaction between formal rules and informal norms in shaping gendered

power relations. Formal frameworks promote equality through gender mainstreaming policies, yet informal institutional practices such as trust-based networks, leadership expectations, and perceptions of authority continue to structure access to strategic positions. These practices function as gatekeeping mechanisms that determine who is included in decision-making spaces, particularly at early stages where policy priorities are set.

The findings also reveal a disconnection between knowledge production and decision-making authority. Women, who are more present at implementation levels, play a central role in generating data, technical inputs, and field-based knowledge. This knowledge does not automatically translate into influence over policy direction. Interpretation and agenda setting remain concentrated at higher levels with limited female representation. This condition indicates that knowledge within bureaucratic systems is embedded within power relations that shape whose contributions are recognized and acted upon.

In addition, hierarchical career structures generate forms of dependency that constrain women's agency. Advancement depends not only on formal qualifications, but also on alignment with superiors and access to informal networks. Under these conditions, the articulation of alternative perspectives becomes contingent on positional authority and perceived loyalty. This dynamic limits the extent to which women can influence institutional outcomes.

These findings indicate that the limitations of gender affirmative policies are not only related to implementation but also to how policy success is defined. Existing policy frameworks tend to rely on numerical indicators, particularly representation, as the primary measure of progress. While such indicators are administratively convenient and aligned with governance standards, they fail to capture the distribution of authority within decision-making structures.

This reflects an institutional logic that prioritizes measurable and non-disruptive forms of compliance over substantive transformation. By focusing on what can be easily counted, such as the number of women in the bureaucracy, policy evaluation frameworks overlook more critical dimensions, including access to strategic decision-making, control over resources, and agenda-setting power. As a result, institutions are able to demonstrate formal progress without altering the underlying structures that regulate power.

From this perspective, gender affirmative policies risk being absorbed into existing institutional arrangements and function as instruments of legitimacy rather than transformation. The persistence of male dominance at senior levels, despite women's strong educational and career profiles, illustrates the limits of policies that do not engage directly with power structures.

The case of West Sumatra further challenges the assumption that a matrilineal socio-cultural context inherently produces inclusive governance. While matrilineal norms symbolically recognize women's status, bureaucratic institutions operate within a modern state framework characterized by hierarchy, formal authority, and gendered organizational practices. This tension demonstrates that cultural recognition does not automatically translate into institutional equality.

Advancing gender equality in bureaucracy requires a shift beyond representation-based approaches toward reforms that address the distribution of authority. This includes revising promotion systems, redefining leadership criteria, and expanding access to strategic decision-making forums. It also requires rethinking policy indicators to incorporate dimensions of power and influence, rather than relying solely on numerical representation.

Without such changes, gender affirmative policies will continue to produce a form of inclusion that is visible but not transformative, where women are present within bureaucratic structures but remain structurally distanced from the centers of power.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the implementation of gender affirmative policies and the dynamics of women's power within the bureaucracy and local politics of West Sumatra Province. The findings show that the persistence of gender inequality cannot be explained by differences in individual capacity, qualifications, or career experience. Women have accumulated significant educational and professional capital and constitute the majority within the civil service. However, this advantage does not translate into proportional access to strategic positions or decision-making authority.

The analysis demonstrates that inequality is embedded in the hierarchical distribution of power within bureaucratic structures. Strategic decision-making authority remains concentrated at senior echelons, where male dominance persists, while women are largely positioned within implementation and administrative roles. This configuration limits women's capacity to influence policy agendas and reinforces a separation between knowledge production and authority.

Beyond formal structures, the study highlights the role of informal institutional practices in shaping access to power. Decision-making processes are mediated by networks, perceptions of leadership, and relational dynamics that are not captured in formal regulations. These mechanisms operate as gatekeeping processes that regulate inclusion in strategic arenas, thereby sustaining gendered patterns of authority within the bureaucracy.

At a conceptual level, this study argues that the limitations of gender affirmative policies are not solely a matter of implementation failure but are rooted in how equality is defined and measured within bureaucratic systems. The reliance on numerical representation as the primary indicator of success reflects an institutional logic that prioritizes administrative compliance over substantive transformation. As a result, policies are able to demonstrate progress without altering the underlying distribution of power.

This finding challenges the assumption that increasing women's representation will automatically lead to more inclusive governance. It also questions the expectation that a matrilineal socio-cultural context necessarily produces gender-equitable institutional outcomes. Cultural recognition of

women's status does not, by itself, transform the hierarchical and gendered nature of bureaucratic authority.

The contribution of this study lies in shifting the analytical focus from representation to power. Gender equality in bureaucracy cannot be reduced to the presence of women within institutional structures, but must be understood in terms of access to authority, control over decision-making, and the ability to shape policy direction. This perspective calls for a reorientation of both policy design and evaluation frameworks.

Future efforts to advance gender equality require moving beyond representation-based approaches toward reforms that directly address the distribution of power. This includes revising promotion systems, redefining leadership criteria, and expanding access to strategic decision-making forums. Equally important is the need to develop policy indicators that capture dimensions of authority and influence, rather than relying solely on numerical measures.

In conclusion, the persistence of gender inequality in bureaucracy is not a reflection of women's absence, but of institutional arrangements that regulate who is recognized as legitimate to exercise power. Without confronting these arrangements, gender affirmative policies will continue to produce inclusion without authority and presence without power.

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ABOUT

SALASIKA etymologically derived from Javanese language meaning 'brave woman'. SALASIKA JOURNAL (SJ) is founded in July 2019 as an international open access, scholarly, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal publishing theoretically innovative and methodologically diverse research in the fields of gender studies, sexualities and feminism. Our conception of both theory and method is broad and encompassing, and we welcome contributions from scholars around the world.

SJ is inspired by the need to put into visibility the Indonesian and South East Asian women to ensure a dissemination of knowledge to a wider general audience.

SJ selects at least several outstanding articles by scholars in the early stages of a career in academic research for each issue, thereby providing support for new voices and emerging scholarship.

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SJ aims to provide academic literature which is accessible across disciplines, but also to a wider 'non-academic' audience interested and engaged with social justice, ecofeminism, human rights, policy/advocacy, gender, sexualities, concepts of equality, social change, migration and social mobilisation, inter-religious and international relations and development.

There are other journals which address those topics, but SJ approaches the broad areas of gender, sexuality and feminism in an integrated fashion. It further addresses the issue of international collaboration and inclusion as existing gaps in the area of academic publishing by (a) crossing language boundaries and creating a space for publishing and (b) providing an opportunity for innovative emerging scholars to engage in the academic dialogue with established researchers.

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All articles will be preceded by an abstract (150-200 words), keywords, main text introduction, materials and methods, results, discussion; acknowledgments; declaration of interest statement; references; appendices (as appropriate); table(s) with caption(s) (on individual pages); figures; figure captions (as a list); and a contributor biography (150 words). Word length is 4,000-10,000 words, including all previous elements.

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