

## Student Perspectives on Civic Engagement in Strengthening Gender Equality in Higher Education (A Study at IAIN Syekh Nurjati Cirebon and Jambi University)

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### Abstract

This research aims to identify both the similarities and significant differences in student perspectives regarding civic engagement and its role in promoting gender equality in higher education at UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon and Jambi University. Additionally, the study aims to understand the implications of these perspectives for advancing gender equality at both institutions. The research uses qualitative methods to explore student views on gender equality and its connection to civic engagement through data collection methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings indicate that civic engagement can serve as a sibereffective mechanism for enhancing gender equality in various higher education contexts. Students from both universities express an awareness of their critical roles in addressing gender equality issues, although their approaches differ due to religious and secular influences. These insights can guide universities in developing policies that better cater to student needs and foster gender equality through civic engagement. Moreover, the research suggests that a favourable student perspective on civic engagement related to gender equality may act as a catalyst for transformative change across campuses. Despite differing approaches, civic engagement at both institutions has the potential to raise awareness, shape more inclusive policies, and empower students to become advocates for gender equality within their campuses and communities. These results emphasize the necessity for institutional support and the creation of forums where students can express and explore their views on gender equality.

**Keywords:** Civic engagement, higher education, gender equality

### 1. Introduction

Students' Perspectives on civic engagement in promoting gender equality are crucial in addressing the myriad issues stemming from a lack of awareness in this area, particularly within higher education settings. Students are vital in driving change as essential members of higher education institutions. As agents of transformation, they should be attuned to various social issues. Awareness and education are pivotal in advancing gender equality and understanding its broader societal implications. Moreover, student organizations provide a valuable platform for engaging in civic activities related to this cause.

One of the fundamental issues surrounding gender inequality is the discrimination and violence that often accompany it. Legal frameworks, such as the Undang-Undang No. 12 of 2022 addressing sexual violence crimes in Indonesia, underscore the urgent need to tackle sexual violence as a significant concern. This form of gender-based violence is prevalent across various environments. Consequently, it is essential to explore student perspectives on civic engagement and its role in promoting gender equality, both in Islamic-based institutions and general universities.

Preliminary observations indicate that IAIN Syekh Nurjati Cirebon, an institution affiliated with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, is committed to enhancing gender equality on campus

through various initiatives. These efforts include establishing the Gender and Child Studies Center (PSGA), which fosters awareness and encourages active involvement in gender equality issues. Additionally, the university integrates themes of gender equality into student activities and academic curricula. Located on Java Island, this higher education institution, characterized by significant student activism regarding gender equality, provides a compelling context for examining student perspectives on civic engagement to promote gender equality within an Islamic framework.

Similarly, Jambi University, under the Ministry of Education and Culture, has a gender centre and exemplifies higher education institutions' responsibility to foster awareness of gender equality. This is achieved through education, training, inclusive policies, resources, support services, and cultivating an inclusive academic culture. Given the distinct characteristics of IAIN Syekh Nurjati Cirebon and Jambi University, this research explores students' perspectives on civic engagement in strengthening gender equality in these two universities with differing institutional backgrounds.

The feminist approach to societal analysis frequently focuses on gender. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests that gender identity is not inherent but instead constructed through repeated social actions. Gender is fluid, influenced by social norms and distinct cultural traits (Butler, 1990). In the context of sexual violence, gender bias and power dynamics continue to act as significant factors. These concepts serve as the foundation for exploring student perspectives on civic engagement aimed at promoting gender equality in both Islamic and secular universities.

## 2. Method

This research adopts a comparative case study approach, focusing on two locations: UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon and Jambi University. A comparative or multiple case study involves conducting research at more than one location or situation to compare or identify similarities and differences in the same phenomenon across different contexts. This approach allows for a more profound and valid understanding, as data is derived from multiple sources and locations (Creswell, 2013).

Data collection methods used in this study include in-depth interviews with students, lecturers, and gender equality activists, observation, and document analysis. These methods enable the acquisition of comprehensive insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The data analysis involves identifying themes, patterns, or categories from the collected data, which are then interpreted to provide a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon. Validation techniques, such as triangulation of sources and methods, are employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings.

The research sites were UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon and Jambi University. The subjects of this study were students from these institutions, selected based on their dynamic social awareness and potential to engage in civic activities related to gender equality issues. The perspectives of these students offer valuable insights into how they perceive, understand, and potentially engage in efforts to promote gender equality through civic engagement within their campus environments and surrounding communities.

## 3. Result and Discussion

Similarities and significant differences in students' perspectives on civic engagement in strengthening gender equality in higher education at UIN Syekh Nurjati Cirebon and Jambi University are described below.

### *Similarities in Students' Perspectives on Civic Engagement and Gender Equality*

Students from both universities are aware that civic engagement is essential in fighting for gender equality, with the view that active participation of students in social activities or student organizations can bring positive changes in equality. This can be concluded from the resource person, namely students who agree on the importance of civic engagement in efforts to realize gender equality. It is about Awareness of the Importance of Civic Engagement.

Both UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati and Jambi University students are motivated to get involved in activities that promote gender equality, driven by values such as justice, human rights, and equal opportunities in education and society. Various activities that have been carried out can be seen from the results of the researcher's observations in the form of activities in student organizations or student activities that are members of the Gender Study Center volunteers and activities in learning projects related to efforts to strengthen gender awareness. that mean Similar Motivation to Get Involved in Gender Equality Issues.

Then, Students at both universities can demonstrate openness to the values of gender equality, especially in the context of education, the role of women, and equal opportunities in campus organizations. However, the level of openness may vary—openness to Gender Equality on Campus.

### *Significant Differences in Perspective Based on College Background*

UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati is an Islamic college; students at UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati tend to view civic engagement and gender equality through the framework of Islamic values. Gender equality is understood in the context of rights that align with the interpretation of religious values. In contrast, students at the University of Jambi, as a state general college, may view gender equality more universally or secularly without being directly linked to religious values. This can be seen from the results of interviews with students at UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati students and the University of Jambi Participation Patterns in Civic Engagement.

Differences in university backgrounds can also cause differences in how students participate in civic engagement. At UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati, students are more involved in student organizations based on Islamic values or activities organized by Islamic organizations. Meanwhile, Jambi University students may be more engaged in general or secular social organizations or activities, such as human rights advocacy or events facilitated by national organizations or NGOs. This can be seen from interviews with sources, namely gender activists from within Uin Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon and Lecturers at Jambi University Interpretation of Gender Equality in Social, Cultural and Religious Contexts: Students at UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati have an understanding of gender equality that is linked to the local cultural or religious context, so their views on the roles of women and men in society may differ from those of Jambi University students. UIN students are more open to the role of women in education but more conservative in specific social roles. Meanwhile, Jambi University students support gender equality in all aspects without considering role limitations.

### *Implications of students' perspectives on civic engagement in efforts to strengthen gender equality at UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon and Universitas Jambi*

Their perspectives can promote greater awareness among students through discussion forums, seminars, social campaigns, and advocacy activities conducted on campus. At UIN Syekh Nurjati, these initiatives are framed within the context of Islamic values, while at Universitas Jambi, similar activities can adopt a more secular and universal approach. This illustrates how their perspectives can elevate awareness and education among students.

In addition, students dedicated to civic engagement for gender equality can initiate or become involved in campus groups and organizations that advocate for gender equality. At UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati, this community focuses on themes of gender equality within the context of Islam, allowing students to address the issue in a manner that aligns with their religious values. Meanwhile, at Jambi University, organizations prioritize advocacy and open discussions covering human rights, educational equality, and gender-neutral employment opportunities. This reflects the development of groups and communities that support gender equality on campus.

With active civic engagement from students, universities may be prompted to prioritize gender equality in their campus policies. This can encompass equal opportunities in student organizations, scholarships, and leadership development programs. At UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati, engaged students have the potential to influence the institution to adopt policies that embody the principles of gender equality in line with Islamic teachings. This includes ensuring equal access to academic and extracurricular activities without gender bias. Similarly, at Jambi University, student advocacy can motivate the implementation of policies that mandate training on gender equality and establish non-discrimination rules in the selection of organizational members and leadership positions.

The implications also include enhancing student capacity as agents of change in society. Engaging actively in civic matters not only deepens students' understanding of gender equality but also equips them to become advocates for change beyond the university setting. Students from both institutions who cultivate gender awareness will likely feel empowered to express their opinions in the community after graduation, whether through advocacy, NGO participation, or involvement in social programs promoting gender equality. This development will reinforce the role of universities as institutions that champion sustainable values of gender equality among their graduates.

While students generally hold positive views on civic engagement, there are challenges in its implementation concerning gender equality. These challenges include prevailing social norms and insufficient support from the campus community. At UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati, such obstacles may stem from conservative interpretations of gender roles in Islam, which could lead students to approach civic engagement activities related to gender issues with greater caution. At Universitas Jambi, challenges may be more related to limited resources or institutional support for activities that support gender equality.

An important implication of this initiative is that students' perspectives on civic engagement can foster a more inclusive campus environment, creating equal opportunities for all genders across various academic and non-academic domains. For instance, students may advocate for gender-inclusive mentoring programs, equitable participation in student activities, and equal access to scholarships and self-development opportunities. At UIN Syekh Nurjati, such initiatives can be integrated into religious programs that promote women's active roles within Islam. Meanwhile, at Universitas Jambi, workshops, training sessions, or seminars can focus on empowering gender equality.

## Discussion

This research draws on the theories of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault to explore how students perceive gender and how civic engagement plays a role in promoting gender equality. Judith Butler's theory posits that gender is a social construction rather than a natural or biological identity. According to Butler (1990), gender is shaped through social performance.

Gender is shaped by social practices that individuals consistently engage in, encompassing aspects such as speech, behaviour, clothing, and interaction. The relationship between civic engagement and gender reveals that students' perspectives on civic involvement can be influenced by their understanding of gender as a malleable construct. Suppose students view gender as something that can be shaped and transformed. In that case, they are likely to be more receptive to participating in initiatives aimed at altering social structures that perpetuate discrimination against specific genders. On campus, particularly at universities, students can be seen as performers of gender, whether in student organization activities, discussions, or social interactions.

Civic engagement among students can illustrate their efforts in challenging or questioning traditional gender roles through actions that disrupt societal and campus-specific gender constructions. Judith Butler asserts that social change regarding gender equality is achieved through theoretical discourse and tangible, ongoing actions by individuals and groups. Consequently, the students' civic engagement in this study may reflect their enactment of more egalitarian gender performances within the campus environment and broader society. Michel Foucault (1976) developed the concepts of power and knowledge, highlighting how power influences the formation of individual and group identities, including gender identity. He argued that power is not solely derived from external authorities but operates through social and cultural practices that regulate individual behavior via socially accepted knowledge frameworks (Foucault, 1975). The fundamental concept of feminism as a lens for analyzing society is gender. The theory of gender performativity posits that there is no inherent gender identity; instead, identities are formed through repetitive performance. Gender is a dynamic construct shaped by social norms and characteristics specific to a given society and is referred to as performance (Butler, 1990). Therefore, in the context of sexual violence, gender biases and power dynamics remain significant factors contributing to its prevalence.

Stereotypes and gender concepts are intricately connected, representing a broader set of opinions and perceptions regarding appropriate behaviours for men and women. Gender-related stereotypes, which also encompass ethnicity and sex, pertain to the perceptions surrounding individuals within these categories. Many common stereotypes are vague, particularly the distinctions between masculine and feminine traits. When individuals are categorized as masculine or feminine based on these stereotypes, it can significantly influence their social standing. Men labelled as feminine and women labelled as masculine may experience a loss of social status as a result.

The participation of young people, including students, in government can significantly benefit the younger generation and society. However, certain forms of civic engagement often correlate with social class and race, resulting in advantages for specific young people and their communities. According to the theory of social capital and civic engagement, young individuals have the potential to either mitigate or exacerbate social inequality (Augsberger, Collins, Gecker, & Dougher, 2018). Therefore, guiding the younger generation to engage in civic activities that yield positive outcomes is essential.

Citizenship and development theorists consistently argue that the values, skills, and behaviours associated with citizenship are vital for the sustainability of the state and the individual and are essential for the health of society as a whole. Notably, a study has observed significant associations between normative developmental competencies and civic engagement indices in a large, racially and socioeconomically diverse sample of young people from various geographic regions. Specifically, emotional competencies (such as empathy and emotion regulation) and socio-cognitive competencies (including prosocial moral reasoning and future orientation) were uniquely linked to different forms of civic engagement. This indicates that civic development theories should incorporate civic growth elements within a broader narrative of development from childhood to adulthood (Metzger et al., 2018). Consequently, the values, skills, and behaviours related to civic engagement contribute not only to the sustainability of the state and the individual. Still, they are also crucial for society as a whole.

In the context of this study, the civic engagement of students advocating for gender equality can be viewed as an effort to challenge existing power structures, both on campus and in the broader society. Students' knowledge about gender roles, whether through formal university education or prevailing social norms on campus, can significantly influence their involvement in gender and equality advocacy.

In his discussions on gender discourse within universities, Foucault emphasizes that discourse refers to specific ways of discussing or understanding a topic, which can shape and limit societal perspectives. At UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, a more religious approach to gender discourse contrasts with the secular perspective at Universitas Jambi. These differing discourses not only define the boundaries of knowledge regarding gender equality but also influence how students participate in civic engagement to challenge these inequalities.

Connecting Butler and Foucault's Theories in Research. These two theories can be combined in an analysis of students as a social construction (Butler) and power and knowledge (Foucault) interact in shaping students' perspectives on civic engagement and gender equality at UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon; students are more influenced by religious discourse and knowledge that shapes their understanding of gender roles by Islamic values. Through civic engagement, they may engage in activities that challenge traditional gender norms in ways that still follow their religious principles. At the University of Jambi, civic engagement is involved in challenging gender inequality based on the principles of human rights and social justice. The discourse on this campus tends to be Butler's to criticizing power structures that discriminate Foucault's. In this study, Judith Butler's theory of gender as a social construction and Michel Foucault's theory of power and knowledge are very relevant to understanding how students' perspectives on civic engagement in gender equality are shaped by social discourses and power that exist in both universities. Student civic engagement can be understood as their efforts to challenge or change the existing power structures on campus and in society, either through changes in social performance that are more gender inclusive (Butler) or through efforts to change knowledge and social practices that reinforce gender inequality (Foucault).

Individuals can change their behaviors regarding gender issues through various awareness efforts. Key concepts to understand include: a) Gender blindness, often referred to as being gender blind, describes a situation where an individual lacks an understanding of gender concepts due to their disinterest in the topic. b) Gender awareness refers to the recognition of equal rights between men and women, demonstrating an understanding of gender issues. c) Gender sensitivity involves an individual's ability to perceive and evaluate development outcomes from the perspectives of both genders, taking into account the interests of both women and men (Kartini & Maulana, 2019).

Gender awareness is a concept that peindividual's individual's understanding of gender roles, as well as the stereotypes and hierarchies associated with gender in society. This awareness can enhance one's comprehension of how the social construction of gender influences social structures, interactionsone's personal involvement. Gender equality emerges from the public recognition of the existing inequalities between women and men in both social and national contexts. This recognition leads to distinct roles and functions assigned to each gender, particularly in national development efforts. Consequently, these distinctions can exacerbate gender differences. Women are often portrayed as emotional, irrational, and gentle beings, while men are frequently characterized as rational and powerful.

Civic engagement fosters a sense of meaningfulness in individual commitments, ultimately nurturing a sense of responsibility toward the community and promoting togetherness. This responsibility, in turn, encourages civic engagement, creating a cycle that enhances community accountability. It is essential to cultivate civic engagement to establish a collective way of life that emphasizes togetherness and social responsibility (Procentese, DE CARLO, & Gatti, 2019). Civic engagement encompasses volunteerism and service-oriented activities to strengthen communities and build social networks to assist others. Key parameters of civic engagement include citizen participation, motivation, and commitment. It is intrinsically linked to social action and encompasses activities within the social sphere, allowing citizens to influence and improve societal conditions. Civic engagement can be initiated within local communities through various service programs (Melisa & Bessma, 2023). Additionally, this form of involvement can extend globally, reflecting the role of citizens as global citizens.

Matole and Muleya (2003) explain that the United Nations defined citizen engagement in 2018 as the actions taken by individuals or groups of citizens to identify and address various public concerns. This concept manifests in numerous forms of community involvement, including individual volunteerism, organizational participation, and collective citizen actions. It highlights the efforts of citizens to tackle social issues within their communities and collaborate with others to solve problems or engage with institutions and stakeholders. This underscores the significance of citizen engagement in fostering a healthy social environment. Higher education aims to prepare educated and active citizens. Higher education must be an effective instrument for preparing citizens actively involved in society (Evans, Marsicano, & Lennartz, 2019). Community involvement is the result of the knowledge provided in class.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study has effectively achieved its objective of exploring student perspectives on civic engagement in promoting gender equality at UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati and Universitas Jambi. The results suggest that civic engagement can be a valuable tool for advancing gender equality within diverse university settings. Students at both institutions clearly recognise their vital role in addressing gender equality issues. However, the variations in their approaches reflect the influence of both religious and secular backgrounds. These findings can guide universities in developing policies more responsive to student needs, ultimately reinforcing gender equality through civic engagement. Moreover, the study implies that positive student perspectives on civic engagement can catalyze change within the campus environment. Despite differing methods, student civic engagement has the potential to enhance awareness, cultivate more inclusive policies, and empower students to become advocates for gender equality both on campus and in society. In summary, these findings highlight the importance of institutional support and

establishing discussion spaces where students can articulate and realize their views on gender equality.

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