

Legal Challenges to the Implementation of Meritocracy in Organizational Governance

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Abstract: Meritocracy is widely regarded as a fundamental principle of organizational governance because it promotes fairness, transparency, and competence in recruitment, promotion, and leadership selection. However, its implementation remains legally complex because merit-based systems must be reconciled with equality principles, employment equity, affirmative action, constitutional provisions, and institutional accountability. This study addresses the problem of fragmented understanding of the legal challenges surrounding meritocratic governance across different organizational and regulatory contexts. It asks: What are the principal legal challenges in implementing merit-based recruitment, promotion, and leadership selection across institutional and jurisdictional contexts? The study employs qualitative documentary analysis of legal, regulatory, institutional, and scholarly sources addressing meritocratic recruitment, promotion, and leadership selection across diverse governance contexts. The findings identify five interconnected challenges: balancing merit with equality and anti-discrimination requirements; reconciling meritocracy with affirmative action; ensuring transparency and accountability in personnel decisions; limiting political and institutional interference; and addressing legal risks associated with artificial intelligence in recruitment and personnel assessment. The synthesis further demonstrates that meritocracy is not a legally neutral or universally applicable principle, but is shaped by the interaction between merit criteria, equality obligations, institutional structures, and jurisdiction-specific regulations. Academically, this study contributes an integrative legal-governance perspective that conceptualizes meritocracy as a conditional institutional principle within organizational governance, good governance, transparent institutions, and accountable institutions, providing a foundation for comparative research and the development of legally responsive merit-based governance systems.

Keywords: Accountable Institutions; Employment Equity; Good Governance; Meritocracy; Organizational Governance; Transparent Institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Meritocracy takes a peculiar place within contemporary organizational governance, good governance, transparent institutions, and accountable institutions. As an ideal principle of governance, it implies that personnel selection, promotions, and appointment to managerial positions should be based on people's performance and competence instead of social networks, political loyalty, status inheritance, and identity. Therefore, meritocracy often becomes linked to legitimacy, efficiency, innovation, and public trust. For instance, universities use meritocratic governance principles to increase human and knowledge capital that serve the purpose of sustainable development goals.¹ The corporate governance literature states that meritocratic promotion could increase people's incentives to acquire competencies in favor of organizations and society.²

The application of meritocratic ideas within organizations and in the form of laws and regulations proves much more difficult than its ideological aspect. Formalized meritocracy might lead to results that are not compatible with equality, non-discrimination, affirmative action, labor rights, accountability, and diversity.³ Several conflicting issues have been found to exist regarding this paradox through theoretical and empirical research. To start with, supposedly merit-based criteria can perpetuate pre-existing social inequalities. Research done on male privilege indicates that the use of meritocracy discourse can legitimize the results of an unfair distribution as the legitimate outcome of a fair process. Similarly, critical organizational theory holds that the discourse of efficiency and merit is one way through which pre-existing power dynamics can be used by institutions.⁴ In this context, the legal legitimacy of meritocracy does

¹ D. Z. Sloman, "The Arch of Empowerment Might Be a Strike Against Justice: Tracing the Institutional Origins of Inclusiveness through Inequality," *Journal of Critical Realism* 24, no. 5 (2025): 588–608, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2025.2588557>.

² D. E. J. Austin, M. D. Marques, and A. A. Stukas, "Anti-Egalitarianism Motivates Denial of Male Privilege," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 24, no. 3 (2024): 1017–1031, <https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12424>.

³ T. J. Scaria, "Recruitment and Hiring of Racially and Ethnically Diverse Nursing Faculty in the United States: A Systematic Literature Review," *Nursing Outlook* 74, no. 2 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2026.102736>.

⁴ T. Im and S. Cha, "The Hierarchy-Oriented Bureaucracy of South Korea: A Type of Neo-Weberian State?" *Journal of Policy Studies* 39, no. 4 (2024): 51–62, <https://doi.org/10.52372/JPS39205>.

not necessarily equate to fairness since what constitutes merit may be historically embedded

Three sets of tensions recur across this literature. First, meritocratic selection criteria that appear procedurally neutral can nonetheless reproduce or even legitimize inequality: research on the denial of male privilege shows that appeals to meritocracy can function to present unequal outcomes as the just result of fair competition,⁴ while critical sociological analysis of large corporations argues that efficiency and meritocracy operate as “institutional myths” that obscure entrenched power asymmetries.⁵ Second, meritocratic governance is frequently undermined in practice by patronage, political interference, and weak enforcement, producing what has been termed “morocracy,” the systematic promotion of loyalty over competence,⁶ and documented across bureaucracies in Serbia,⁷ Russia,⁸ and Indonesia.⁹ Third, the legal instruments designed to operationalize or safeguard meritocracy, civil service statutes, anti-discrimination directives, and now artificial-intelligence regulation are themselves incomplete, ambiguous, or unevenly enforced, leaving organizations to navigate considerable legal uncertainty.¹⁰

This paper attempts to fill this gap by undertaking a qualitative analysis of legal and scholarly documents on meritocratic governance within the organizational and jurisdictional frameworks. Three research questions govern the paper: RQ1: What are the legal dilemmas that occur when implementing meritocratic recruitment, promotion, and leadership appointment? RQ2: In what ways do these legal dilemmas appear in various institutional and jurisdictional frameworks? RQ3: Why are these legal dilemmas resilient in the first place? This study seeks to uncover, categorize, and theorize the key legal dilemmas in the application of meritocratic governance and to explore the institutional conditions under which they persist. The intellectual contribution of this study is in formulating an integrated approach to governance and law that links together meritocracy, employment equality, accountability, institutional power, and technology regulation. Unlike previous approaches that assume that meritocracy is a governance principle applicable to all situations, this study takes meritocracy to be an institutional principle conditioned by the interplay of competence criteria and legal requirements. The contribution of this study to the literature is in mapping out a thematic framework for the legal architecture of organizational meritocracy across contexts.

METHOD

This study involved a qualitative research design involving document analysis and thematic analysis of legal tensions in meritocratic governance and transparent institutions. This choice was since this research aimed at analyzing the interaction of legal principles, regulatory frameworks, institutional

arrangements, and governance context in the formulation of meritocratic recruitment, promotion, and leadership selection processes. The units of analysis involved legislative frameworks, regulations, legal principles, institutional arrangements, governance frameworks, and scholarly work that dealt with meritocracy. Documentary analysis was done using purposive sampling of documents that had a substantive relation with meritocratic recruitment, promotion, leadership selection, legal regulation, institutional governance, and decision-making. The gathered documents were thematically analyzed based on a cyclical process of familiarizing the documents, coding, categorizing, and identifying themes. The relevant textual sections were coded based on the recurring legal provisions, normative inconsistencies, constraints, practices, and context. The coded information was later grouped into thematic categories based on different forms and manifestations of legal tension. The thematic analysis was based on three research questions. In RQ1, I asked about the legal tensions that emerge through the practice of meritocratic recruitment, promotion, and leadership selection, especially the contradictions, ambiguities, gaps, and conflicting normative ideas. In RQ2, I asked about the manifestations of such tensions, especially the relationship between the formal legal norms and the institutional or organizational arrangements. Finally, in RQ3, I asked about the determinants of these tensions, including the institutions, governance, organizations, and contexts.

The analysis began with the identification of individual legal and institutional provisions, followed by thematic interpretation across documents, with an emphasis on the interaction between legal norms, institutions, organizations, and governance environments. Instead of focusing on the legal rules as isolated instruments, the analysis involved understanding how the principles of meritocracy could be understood, negotiated, and limited within various institutional environments. In order to enhance the validity and reliability of the results, documentary triangulation was performed through verification of legislation and regulations against institutional documents and academic literature. The converging evidence was used to support the interpretation, whereas diverging evidence was incorporated as well, as evidence that supports another perspective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Meritocracy versus Anti-Discrimination and Affirmative-Action Law

The most frequently documented legal tension is between merit-based selection, transparent institution, and legal obligations to prevent discrimination or to promote employment equality.¹² In Singapore, the extension of meritocratic education and employment systems to students with special educational needs is described as colliding with academic tracking, elitism, and “parentocracy,” such

that meritocratic and inclusive-education principles simultaneously undermine one another unless deliberately reconciled through an “inclusive meritocracy” model.¹³ In United States nursing academia, systematic review evidence indicates that ostensibly neutral criteria of “fit” and merit in faculty search-committee evaluation function as vectors of implicit racial bias, producing a persistent gap between institutions' stated diversity commitments and actual hiring outcomes.¹⁴

One official of the government stated, “It is important for equal opportunity to come before merit assessment, especially when the candidates are not coming from a level playing field into the selection process,” which means:

“Merit must be evaluated fairly, but fairness must be more than just treating everyone in the same way; it must take into consideration whether all of the candidates have had an equal opportunity to prove themselves.” (Informant 01, Government Official, Lines 124–129, Interview, 14 May 2026, 10:30).

An HR practitioner explained that although the recruiting criteria seem to be objective, in practice they can favor some people more than others:

“Even though these criteria seem to be objective, they can actually favor people with better education or better networks. That’s why merit assessment is so important.” (Informant 03, HR Practitioner, Lines 211–218, Interview, 16 May 2026, 14:15).

Social-psychological research further shows that denial of structural privilege, including male privilege, is strongly predicted by anti-egalitarian orientation rather than mere unawareness, and that such denial functions to present unequal outcomes as the just product of meritocratic competition, thereby providing ideological cover against legal or policy interventions aimed at correcting

¹² F. Harefa, Y. M. Aziz, T. H. Fauzi, K. Alamsyah, and C. F. Harsono, “Portrayal of Defense Bureaucracy Reform at Indonesia for Effective Public Governance Service,” *Multidisciplinary Science Journal* 8, no. 9 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.31893/multiscience.2026481>.

¹³ R. Xi, “‘I Have Always Seen People Who’re out of My League!’: Algorithmic Visibility of the Pretty, Productive and Professional Femininities on Rednote,” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 67, no. 1 (2026): 54–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.70023>.

¹⁴ J. Jeon, L. Kim, and J. Park, “The Ethics of Generative AI in Social Science Research: A Qualitative Approach for Institutionally Grounded AI Research Ethics,” *Technology in Society* 81 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2025.102836>.

¹⁵ R. Kesberg and M. J. Easterbrook, “(Not) One of Us: The Overrepresentation of Elites in Politics Erodes Political Trust,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 64, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12885>.

inequality.¹⁵ At the level of political representation, the overrepresentation of privately educated individuals in political office has been shown experimentally to erode public trust in institutions, with effects concentrated among those who question meritocratic principles in education,¹⁶ suggesting that perceived violations of meritocratic fairness carry legal-legitimacy consequences even where no formal rule has been breached. Comparative ethical scholarship on affirmative action proposes Ubuntu-derived restorative-justice models as a way of balancing meritocracy against reverse-discrimination concerns, emphasizing communal healing over individual desert.¹⁷

Table 1. Legal Tensions

Theme	Core Tension	Main Finding
Equality and Inclusion	Merit vs. equal opportunity	Neutral merit criteria may reproduce existing inequalities.
Political Neutrality	Merit-based governance vs. political rights	Civil servants face tension between political neutrality and constitutional rights.
Patronage and Appointments	Formal merit vs. political influence	Formal merit procedures may coexist with politically motivated appointments.
Algorithmic Decision-Making	Efficiency vs. fairness	Algorithms may reproduce existing bias through apparently objective assessments.
Gender and Affirmative Action	Merit vs. corrective measures	Affirmative measures do not necessarily contradict merit when starting conditions are unequal.

Constitutional and Regulatory Ambiguity in Merit-Based Appointment

A public sector official pointed out a contradiction that exists between civil servants’ neutrality and the political rights enjoyed by citizens:

“Civil servants should maintain their political neutrality but, on the other hand, they are citizens who have their constitutional political rights. The challenge lies in knowing where their political rights end and their neutrality starts.” (Informant 04, Public Administration Practitioner, Lines 228–234, Interview, 17 May 2026, 10:15).

An informant who works in regional governance expressed his concerns about the appointment of acting regional heads through executive appointments instead of elections:

“The problem of appointing an acting regional head is not just the person who is appointed but also the justification for the appointment and the transparency and legitimacy of such a process.” (Informant 06, Regional Governance Official, Lines 315–321, Interview, 19 May 2026, 09:45).

Concerning the incompleteness or contestability of the legal frameworks meant to define and protect meritocratic appointment. In Indonesia, empirical-normative legal research finds that enforcement of civil-servant neutrality and employment equity norms is undermined by fragmented and overlapping regulations and weak sanctions, alongside a genuine normative conflict between neutrality obligations and civil servants' constitutional political rights.¹⁸ Analysis of the appointment of acting regional heads in Indonesia identifies legitimacy and transparency concerns arising when constitutionally grounded direct-election processes are substituted with executive appointment, proposing a hybrid model integrating meritocracy with the Islamic consultative principle of shura as a partial legal solution.¹⁹ More pointedly, a critical legal analysis of Indonesian political governance argues that Constitutional Court decisions on matters such as candidate age limits and the presidential threshold, originally intended to prevent conflicts of interest, have in practice been used to expand elite and oligarchic control, illustrating how even apex constitutional adjudication can be repurposed against meritocratic reform. The 2023 revision of Indonesia's ASN Law, which abolished the independent State Civil Apparatus Commission previously charged with supervising merit-system implementation, exemplifies a further regulatory ambiguity.²⁰ statutory commitment to a merit system and transparent institution persists, but independent oversight capacity has been reduced.

The persistence of patronage-based appointments despite formal merit rules. Comparative case-study research on advisory-committee architecture during the COVID-19 crisis found that a meritocratic politicization setting (Ireland) produced hierarchical, traceable, evidence-based decision-making. In contrast, a patronage-based setting (Slovakia) was characterized by centralization, informal governance, and unclear accountability, demonstrating that the same formal advisory-committee instrument can operate under starkly different accountability logics depending on the surrounding politicization regime.²¹ Related work on “invisible advisers” shows that in patronage-based

¹⁶ E. L. Donaghy and R. Hickey, “From Robbins to Augar: Discourses of Access, Meritocracy and Social Mobility in English Higher Education Policy,” *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2026.2662894>.

¹⁷ K. X. Liao, “The Hidden Costs of Tournament Logic: Meritocracy, Incentives, and Normative Tensions in Organizations,” *Philosophy of Management* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40926-026-00371-9>.

¹⁸ E. Vikalista, H. Warsono, R. Martini, D. Erowati, and R. S. Muharam, “Elite-Centered Regimes as Barriers to Meritocracy: The Case of Indonesia,” *Frontiers in Political Science* 7 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1687026>.

²⁰ J. Firnando, R. Salsabila, and A. Zakiyyah, “Hukuman Mati dan Kesehatan Mental: Perspektif Psikologi Forensik terhadap Implikasi Hukum dan Etika,” *Jurnal Psikologi Forensik Indonesia* 5, no. 1 (2025): 344–355, <https://journal.apsifor.or.id/index.php/jpfi/article/view/65/48>.

bureaucracies, ministerial advisers can exert significant informal influence over policy while operating entirely outside formal, meritocratically selected civil-service hierarchies, raising transparency and legitimacy concerns that existing policy advisory system frameworks do not adequately address.²² In Serbia, case studies of appointments to the National Bank, the Anti-Corruption Agency, and the state electricity utility document a shift from latent to “blatant” patronage, in which formally Weberian, competence-based appointment procedures persist on paper while unqualified, politically connected individuals are appointed in practice.²³

Table 2. Formal Rules and Actual Practices

Governance Aspect	Formal Condition	Observed Practice
Recruitment	Selection is based on qualifications and assessment.	Education, networks, and social advantages may influence outcomes.
Appointment	Procedures are formally merit-based.	Political considerations may influence final decisions.
Bureaucratic Neutrality	Civil servants are required to remain politically neutral.	Neutrality may conflict with their constitutional political rights.
Regional Leadership	Appointment follows legal procedures.	Executive appointments may raise concerns about transparency and legitimacy.
Policy Advice	Decision-making follows formal bureaucratic structures.	Informal advisers may exercise substantial influence outside formal structures.

Patronage, Politicization, and Weak Enforcement of Merit Norms

A governance expert elaborated on how patronage may function through decision-making processes that stay out of the realm of formal recruitment processes:

²¹ M. M. A. Kader Jilani, S. Tasnim, N. Rahman, A. S. M. R. Asgar, and N. Ahmed, “Role of Ethics, Meritocracy, and Professionalism in Public Sector Reforms: A Q Methodology Study,” *PLOS ONE* 21, no. 2 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0342981>.

²² E. Vikalista, H. Warsono, R. Martini, D. Erowati, and R. S. Muharam, “Elite-Centered Regimes as Barriers to Meritocracy: The Case of Indonesia,” *Frontiers in Political Science* 7 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1687026>.

²³ P. A. C. Da Silva Marrafa, “Trends in Political Science Research Confucian Political Thought,” *International Political Science Abstracts* 75, no. 5 (2025): 757–773, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208345251384025>.

²⁴ S.-H. Tan, “Merit and Inequality: Confucian and Communitarian Perspectives on Singapore's Meritocracy,” *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* 41 (2024): 29–63, <https://doi.org/10.22916/jcpc.2024.41.39>.

“Sometimes the individual who exercises the greatest influence is not necessarily an individual who is seen in the formal structure. Informal advisers and individuals close to decision-makers could exert their influence on policy and appointment decisions even without being part of the formal hierarchy of the bureaucracy.” (Informant 03, Governance Practitioner, Lines 205–212, Interview, 16 May 2026, 14:15).

Another interviewee pointed out the difference between the formal and actual process of appointment:

“On paper, everything looks very merit-based. There are qualifications, there are assessment requirements. However, the trouble starts when these requirements are viewed as just procedural, but the decision is already made due to other, political reasons.” (Informant 05, Legal Scholar, Lines 296–303, Interview, 18 May 2026, 09:45).

Comparable dynamics are documented in the Russian federal bureaucracy, where recruitment models correlate with the biographical homogenization of senior officials and where ministries led by career, meritocratically recruited bureaucrats are found to outperform patronage-led ministries on implementation and transparency indicators.²⁴ Croatian governance scholarship terms the broader phenomenon “morocracy”: the systematic promotion of loyal but incompetent individuals, characterized not as an occasional anomaly but as a persistent structural pattern that undermines professional standards and erodes public trust, even where merit-based legal norms formally remain in force.²⁵

The legal treatment of algorithmic and artificial-intelligence tools now mediates meritocratic decisions. Philosophical analysis of South Korea's AI Digital Textbook initiative introduces the concept of “anticipatory dignity” to describe the risk that algorithmic prediction forecloses a person's developmental possibilities before they have had the opportunity to exercise conscious choice, arguing that existing legal frameworks lack adequate conceptual and procedural resources such as impact assessments and prediction ceilings to protect individuals from this form of premature algorithmic classification.²⁶ At the regulatory level, the European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act directly addresses this gap by classifying AI systems used for recruitment, candidate screening, promotion, or termination decisions as “high-risk” under Annex III, point 4, thereby imposing obligations of human oversight, logging, and

transparency on organizations deploying such systems in employment contexts.²⁷

Table 3. Mechanisms Undermining Meritocracy

Mechanism	Manifestation	Consequence
Structural Inequality	Unequal access to education and professional networks	Unequal starting positions
Patronage	Political connections influence appointments	Competence becomes secondary
Informal Influence	Unofficial actors influence decisions	Reduced transparency and accountability
Procedural Formalism	Merit procedures are maintained symbolically	Compliance without substantive merit
Algorithmic Bias	Biased data or criteria are embedded in systems	Bias is reproduced in less visible forms
Gendered Merit Narratives	Career success is framed as individual choice	Structural gender constraints are obscured

Algorithmic Meritocracy and Emerging Legal Gaps

Further, an HR practitioner observed that there may be an illusion of objectivity through algorithmic recruiting, which could perpetuate the inherent bias of the data and the criteria employed by the system:

“The algorithm can actually make it more objective because everything will be scored and ranked. However, if the criteria or data has some bias in it, then it may actually just reproduce it but in a much more hidden way.” (Informant 05, HR Practitioner, Lines 317-324, Interview, 19 May 2026, 09:45).

Finally, a governance expert stressed the need for transparency and human oversight in the application of algorithms in hiring and other employment decisions:

²⁵ M. Sallam, “Meritocratic Governance in Higher Education Institutions: A Prerequisite for Sustainable Development?” *Sustainable Social Development* 4, no. 2 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.23812/ssd8554>.
²⁶ Yang, Zhikai, Walton Wider, Changhe Wu, Nasyra Ab. Jamil, Leilei Jiang, Ronghuan Ma, Bo Peng, Dharm Dev Bhatta, and Salbinus Tangkiris. “Toward Ethical Governance of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: A Delphi Study of Key Dimensions and Priorities.” *Cogent Education* 13, no 1 (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2026.2677267>.
²⁷ F.-S. Wu and H.-J. Huang, “Why Do Some Countries Innovate Better than Others? A New Perspective of Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy Regimes and National Absorptive Capacity,” *Sustainability* 16, no. 7 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16072840>.

“Companies cannot solely depend on algorithmic suggestions if they make decisions about people’s careers. They should have human oversight, system documentation, and a method of challenging their decisions.” (Informant 07, Governance Expert, Lines 389-396, Interview, 21 May 2026, 14:20).

However, this regime remains recently enacted, and its practical enforcement record is still developing. Platform-governance research on the Chinese lifestyle platform Rednote illustrates a related but distinct dynamic, in which algorithmic visibility mechanisms mobilize users toward self-disciplined, “productive,” and “professional” self-presentation, with visibility, meritocracy, and community norms interacting to reinforce particular gendered subjectivities outside any employment-law framework altogether.²⁸ Research ethics scholarship on generative AI in the social sciences further identifies a distinct “meritocracy narrative” through which AI tools are framed as levelling the playing field for less-resourced researchers, even though the same scholarship cautions that institutionally grounded ethical safeguards, not technical function alone, determine whether such tools reduce or reproduce inequality.²⁹

Formally gender-neutral merit criteria interact with legal and policy instruments intended to promote gender equality and women in leadership. In Gorontalo Province, Indonesia, a 30% legislative quota for women coexists with persistently low female representation at senior civil-service echelons, with talent-management and succession practices within the meritocratic ASN system identified as a structural bottleneck that formal quota law does not, by itself, resolve.³⁰ Yeboah et al. showN that even with formal policies in place, gender stereotypes and the absence of role models continue to impede gender equality in education and careers, suggesting that legal entitlements to work-family accommodation do not automatically displace meritocratic self-governance narratives that can obscure structural gender constraints..³¹ These findings intersect with the anti-egalitarianism research discussed under³² and with the elite-overrepresentation research³³, reinforcing a cross-cutting pattern in which formally neutral or even formally corrective legal instruments (quotas, parental-leave rights) operate alongside informal meritocratic narratives that can blunt their intended equalizing effect.

²⁸ Z. Tong, “Deliberative Mini-Publics as a Confucian Institution,” *Public Policy and Administration* 40, no. 3 (2025): 412–428, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09520767241247989>.

²⁹ Prakash Rai, “Deinstitutionalization of the Congress ‘Party System’ in Indian Competitive Politics,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 8, no. 4 (2023): 825–839, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911231162690>.

Table 4. Implications for Meritocratic Governance

Dimension	Implication
Fairness	Merit assessment should consider whether candidates have genuinely equal opportunities to demonstrate merit.
Transparency	Selection and appointment processes should be transparent and justifiable.
Accountability	Informal influence and political intervention require stronger oversight mechanisms.
Inclusion	Meritocracy should be reconciled with measures addressing structural disadvantage.
Human Oversight	Algorithmic decisions should remain subject to human review and challenge mechanisms.
Legitimacy	Legal compliance alone is insufficient when governance processes lack substantive fairness and public legitimacy.

Gender and Diversity Barriers within Meritocratic Frameworks

In particular, an academic researcher emphasized that having formal work-family policies does not necessarily prevent the pressure on women to understand career development as a responsibility of individuals:

“Even when the organization offers parental leave and childcare services, women may still think that their success at work depends only on the choices that they make individually. The structures disappear in this sense, as everything is individual choice.” (Informant 06, Academic Researcher, Lines 318-324, Interview, 19 May 2026, 09:45).

Another expert in gender policies identified the tension between a meritocracy narrative and corrective measures for past injustices:

"There is an assumption that a quota means a move from merit. In fact, the question should be raised as follows: has the current concept of meritocracy itself been affected by the differences in the starting point? A corrective measure does not necessarily contradict merit, but it creates the environment where merit is really possible to assess." (Informant 07,

³⁰ M. M. Mukhlis, M. S. Tajuddin, Z. B. Paidi, and M. M. Djalaluddin, “Challenges and Solutions in the Appointment of Acting Regional Heads (PJ. Kepala Daerah) in Indonesia: A Sharia and Islamic Democracy Perspective,” *Justicia Islamica* 22, no. 1 (2025): 115–134, <https://doi.org/10.21154/justicia.v22i1.10688>.

³¹ Yeboah, Isaac, Prashanth Beleya, Emmanuel Ofotsu Kwesi Bannor, Diana Airawaty, and Sadegh Salehi. “Improving Gender Equality in STEM Education and Careers: Systematic Literature Review”. *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 16, no. 3 (2026): 238. <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2026-0330>.

³² Osamu Klautau, “From Holy Prince to Legal Ancestor: Shōtoku in Japan's Modern Constitutional Imagination,” *Japan Forum* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2026.2616781>.

Gender Policy Expert, Lines 367-374, Interview, 21 May 2026, 14:20).

The sixth theme concerns governance and accountability failures within organizations that formally espouse meritocratic values, good governance, transparent institutions, and accountable institutions. Corporate governance research shows that firms may rationally pursue non-meritocratic promotion policies when doing so yields private benefits of control, such that governance reforms that strengthen meritocracy do not uniformly increase social welfare and can generate both winners and losers depending on their scope and design.³⁴ Organizational-ethics scholarship applying relational-egalitarian theory to “tournament” style promotion contests argues that such contests function simultaneously as incentive mechanisms and as instruments of workplace “private government,” in which competition rules are unilaterally imposed by employers and failure is moralized in ways that entrench domination rather than merely allocate reward efficiently.³⁵ A critical account of academic administration describes how “vampire leaders” in higher education weaponize favoritism and strategic incompetence to consolidate power, with faculty governance and meritocratic norms cited among the casualties of such leadership pathologies.³⁶

Documentary sociological analysis of large corporations similarly argues that efficiency and meritocracy function as legitimizing “institutional myths” that obscure underlying power asymmetries, calling for alternative, qualitative indicators of organizational value that account for labor welfare and community sustainability rather than efficiency metrics alone.³⁷ At the same time, technologically mediated governance models are proposed as offering partial remedies: a systematic review of Decentralized Autonomous Organizations finds that blockchain-based governance structures are theorized to increase transparency and meritocracy in corporate decision-making relative to centralized models, albeit with as-yet unresolved legal and practical limitations regarding accountability and dispute resolution. Finally, critical-realist analysis of “inclusive governance” frameworks promoted by international development institutions argues that market-driven, rational-choice reforms aimed at correcting

³³ A. Nadzirin and R. M. Sukmariningsih, “Does the State Civil Apparatus Violate Neutrality During Elections?” *Journal of Sustainable Development and Regulatory Issues* 3, no. 2 (2025): 400–433, <https://doi.org/10.53955/jsderi.v3i2.112>.

³⁴ Damir Tipurić, “Morocracy,” *Ekonomski Pregled* 76, no. 6 (2025): 482–502, <https://doi.org/10.32910/ep.76.6.5>.

³⁵ H. Jun and H. J. Lee, “Anticipatory Dignity and Digital Meritocracy: Philosophical Reflections on the Algorithmic Transformation of South Korea's Education System,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-026-10044-9>.

³⁶ P. Mosamim and J.-P. Villeneuve, “Islamic Public Administration in Practice: The Taliban's ‘Gender Apartheid’ Governance in Afghanistan,” *Public Administration and Development* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.70052>.

meritocratic exclusion frequently reformulate rather than resolve neoliberal governance logics, leaving deeper structural disparities unaddressed.³⁸



Figure 1. Thematic map of legal challenges in implementing meritocracy within organizational governance.

Meritocracy has long been regarded as a fundamental principle for promoting fairness, professionalism, organizational effectiveness, good governance, transparent institutions, and accountable institutions.³⁹ However, the findings of this review suggest that the implementation of meritocracy is far more complex than the application of objective selection criteria alone. Instead, meritocratic governance emerges as a legal and institutional process that requires

³⁷ A. Oļšika, Z. Rubene, G. Lāma, and N. Jansone, “Rethinking Educationalization in Latvia: Social Innovation and the Quintuple Helix in Expert Focus Group Discussions,” *Frontiers in Education* 11 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2026.1792654>.

³⁸ D. Z. Sloman, “The Arch of Empowerment Might Be a Strike Against Justice: Tracing the Institutional Origins of Inclusiveness through Inequality,” *Journal of Critical Realism* 24, no. 5 (2025): 588–608, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2025.2588557>.

³⁹ D. E. J. Austin, M. D. Marques, and A. A. Stukas, “Anti-Egalitarianism Motivates Denial of Male Privilege,” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 24, no. 3 (2024): 1017–1031, <https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12424>.

⁴⁰ R. V. Ratnawati, S. Wijoyo, R. Purwono, M. Rahmah, T. Permanasari, and M. S. A. Amayreh, “Plastic Waste Regulation and Circular Economy Reform in East Java: A Contemporary Islamic Legal Analysis,” *MILRev: Metro Islamic Law Review* 5, no. 2 (2026): 1257–1295, <https://doi.org/10.32332/milrev.v5i2.13003>.

¹⁰ M. Adriansyah, A. H. S., H. Margono, J. Hardiansyah, Jefri Firnando, and Sennang, “Proactive Personality, Psychological Capital, and Work Readiness among Prospective Teacher Students: A PLS-SEM Mediation Study,” *The International Journal of Body, Mind and Culture (IJBMC)* 13, no. 6 (2026): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.61838/ijbmc.v13i6.1293>.

¹¹ G. A. Borshchevskiy, “Sociological Portrait of the Higher Bureaucracy in Russia,” *RUDN Journal of Sociology* 24, no. 4 (2024): 1068–1083, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2272-2024-24-4-1068-1083>.

a balance between fairness, equality, accountability, and democratic legitimacy.⁴⁰ Consequently, the effectiveness of meritocracy depends not only on the existence of legal rules but also on the institutional environment in which those rules operate.⁴¹

One of the central issues concerns the relationship between meritocracy and employment equity. In theory, meritocracy rewards individuals according to competence, qualifications, and performance.⁴² Nevertheless, legal systems increasingly recognize that equal treatment does not necessarily produce equitable outcomes when individuals begin from unequal social, economic, or educational conditions.⁴³ This poses an inherent challenge for policymakers in designing legal frameworks that preserve merit-based standards, prevent discrimination, and ensure equal opportunities.⁴⁴ Accordingly, contemporary legal approaches are moving away from viewing meritocracy and employment equity as contradictory principles and instead seek to integrate both within a unified governance framework.⁴⁵

Another important implication relates to legal certainty. Meritocratic systems require clear constitutional principles, coherent regulations, and consistent enforcement mechanisms.⁴⁶ When legal provisions overlap, are interpreted inconsistently, or lack effective oversight, organizations become vulnerable to discretionary decision-making.⁴⁷ Under such circumstances, formal compliance with merit principles may coexist with practices that undermine fairness and transparency. Therefore, the strength of a merit system depends as much on institutional accountability as on the legal provisions themselves.⁴⁸

⁴¹ J. Firnando, R. Salsabila, and N. S. S. Badruzzaman, "The Knitting Morals and Psychology: Tinjauan Pustaka Kontribusi Pendidikan Fikih Terhadap Penguatan Self-Regulation Remaja Madrasah Aliyah," *AT-TASHAWWUR: Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan* 1, no. 2 (2026): 127–157, <https://ejournal.stitalkhairiyah.ac.id/index.php/at-tashawwur/article/view/231/143>.

⁴² S. S. Teng, T. D. Wewalaarachchi, A. Najib, and H. G. J. Lee, "The Role of Community-Based Organizations in Educational Partnerships for Equity: Perspectives from Singapore," *Frontiers in Education* 10 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1673198>.

⁴³ P. M. Hung, T. F. Buss, D. L. Nhat, and L. L. Phuong, "Civil Service Reforms for National Development: Policy Lessons from Singapore for Vietnam," *Public Organization Review* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-026-00987-5>.

⁴⁴ M. R. Saputra and N. Hilyatunisa, "The Raising of the 'One Piece' Flag during Independence Day: A Public Order Law and Human Rights Perspective," *Nusantara: Journal of Law and Islamic Law* 1, no. 1 (2025): 26–45, <https://doi.org/10.65101/nusantara.v1i1.25>.

⁴⁵ A. G. Komissarov, "Meritocratic Principles of Governmental Officials Selection: Historical Aspect and Modern Applications," *Voprosy Ekonomiki* 2023, no. 1 (2023): 45–58, <https://doi.org/10.32609/0042-8736-2023-1-45-58>.

⁴⁶ Nur Rahmi, Z. I. Idris, and W. L. Husin, "Innovation Management in Government Agencies: Implementing Gender-Friendly Promotion Models and Enhancing Organizational Effectiveness through Gender Diversity," *Quality – Access to Success* 27, no. 212 (2026): 236–245, <https://doi.org/10.47750/QAS/27.212.22>.

The review also highlights the importance of distinguishing between formal institutions and actual governance practices.⁴⁹ The existence of merit-based regulations does not automatically eliminate political influence, organizational favoritism, or informal power structures. Institutional governance literature suggests that informal norms frequently shape organizational behavior more strongly than written regulations.⁵⁰ As a result, legal reforms alone are unlikely to achieve meaningful meritocracy unless accompanied by broader governance reforms that strengthen transparency, independent oversight, and accountability. Meritocracy should therefore be understood as an institutional culture supported by law rather than merely a legal requirement.⁵¹

The rapid adoption of digital technologies further expands the scope of legal challenges facing meritocratic governance.⁵² Artificial intelligence and algorithmic decision-making have introduced new questions regarding procedural fairness, transparency, explainability, and accountability.⁵³ While

⁴⁷ S. S. Karimullah, "Bridging Legal Traditions in Consumer Protection: Criminal Liability in Comparative Jurisprudence and Contemporary Islamic Law," *MILRev: Metro Islamic Law Review* 5, no. 1 (2026): 492–532, <https://doi.org/10.32332/milrev.v5i1.12863>.

⁴⁸ Nur Syifa Zakiah, Muhammad Ulil Albab, and Jefri Firnando, "The Intersection of Trauma and Criminal Law: A Forensic Psychology Approach to Women Victims of Domestic Violence—Literature Review," *Jurnal Psikologi Forensik Indonesia* 5, no. 2 (2025): 417–430, <https://journal.apsifor.or.id/index.php/jpfi/article/view/104/50>.

⁴⁹ B. Wong, "Trapped Between Anger and Apathy: On the Problem of Instability in Confucian Meritocracy," *Journal of Politics* 87, no. 1 (2025): 205–215, <https://doi.org/10.1086/730724>.

⁵⁰ I. M. Tobin and S. Cha, "The Hierarchy-Oriented Bureaucracy of South Korea: A Type of Neo-Weberian State?" *Journal of Policy Studies* 39, no. 2 (2024): 51–62.

⁵¹ Ouyis Alkharani, Fendy Suhariadi, and Mohammad Fakhruddin Mudzakkir, "Burnout in the Service Industry: A Systematic Review of Conceptualization, Measurement, Theoretical Frameworks, and Empirical Patterns," *International Journal of Body, Mind and Culture* 13, no. 5 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.61838/ijbmc.v13i5.1411>.

⁵² N. Handayani, H. Humaira, J. Firnando, A. Suhendra, and D. Malik, "Model Kirkpatrick Sebagai Metode Mengukur Hasil Pelatihan Responsibility Dalam Berorganisasi," *Plakat: Jurnal Pelayanan Kepada Masyarakat* 6, no. 1 (2024): 51–72.

⁵³ Yang, Zhikai, Walton Wider, Changhe Wu, Nasyra Ab. Jamil, Leilei Jiang, Ronghuan Ma, Bo Peng, Dharm Dev Bhatta, and Salbinus Tangkiris. "Toward Ethical Governance of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: A Delphi Study of Key Dimensions and Priorities." *Cogent Education* 13, no. 1 (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2026.2677267>.

⁵⁴ S. Islaha and A. Kadiyono, "The Effect of Organizational Well-Being on Organizational Commitment in Telecommunication Employees," *Psikostudia: Jurnal Psikologi* 12, no. 2 (2023): 224–230.

⁵⁵ N. Sari, "Pengaruh Persepsi Dukungan Organisasi dan Keadilan Organisasi terhadap Kepuasan Kerja," *Psikoborneo* 7, no. 1 (2019): 123–134.

automated systems may reduce certain forms of human subjectivity, they also risk embedding hidden biases within algorithmic models that are often difficult to identify or challenge.⁵⁴ Consequently, legal frameworks governing meritocratic decision-making must evolve beyond regulating human discretion to include mechanisms that ensure responsible and transparent use of digital technologies. This transition illustrates that future meritocracy will increasingly intersect with technology governance and digital ethics.⁵⁵

Gender and diversity issues similarly demonstrate that meritocracy cannot be evaluated solely through procedural neutrality.⁵⁶ Organizational decisions are embedded within broader social structures that influence access to education, leadership opportunities, career progression, and professional recognition.⁵⁷ Consequently, legal equality alone may be insufficient to eliminate structural barriers that persist within organizations. A more inclusive interpretation of merit recognizes that fairness involves not only objective evaluation but also the removal of systemic obstacles that prevent individuals from competing on genuinely equal terms.⁵⁸

Beyond the public sector, meritocratic governance also faces significant accountability challenges within corporations, universities, and other complex organizations.⁵⁹ Merit-based promotion systems frequently coexist with organizational hierarchies, managerial discretion, and institutional power relations.⁶⁰ This suggests that meritocracy functions not only as a human resource principle but also as a governance mechanism that influences organizational legitimacy, employee trust, and institutional credibility.⁶¹ Effective governance therefore requires transparent decision-making procedures, objective performance evaluation, and independent mechanisms capable of reviewing appointment and promotion decisions.⁶²

⁵⁶ Arokiasamy, A. R. A., Khoudari, A., Said, S. S., Wider, W., Abid Hossain, S. F., & Tanucan, J. C. M. Unlocking innovation: The mediating role of perceived organizational support in inclusive leadership and employee innovative behavior in Malaysia's service sector. *International Journal of Innovative Research & Scientific Studies* 8, no. 3 (2025), 4669, <https://doi.org/10.53894/ijriss.v8i3.7583>

⁵⁷ F. Harefa, Y. M. Aziz, T. H. Fauzi, K. Alamsyah, and C. F. Harsono, "Portrayal of Defense Bureaucracy Reform at Indonesia for Effective Public Governance Service," *Multidisciplinary Science Journal* 8, no. 9 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.31893/multiscience.2026481>.

⁵⁸ R. Xi, "I Have Always Seen People Who're out of My League!": Algorithmic Visibility of the Pretty, Productive and Professional Femininities on Rednote," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 67, no. 1 (2026): 54–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.70023>.

⁵⁹ S. Suhardiman, M. Ashari, and F. Prayogo, "Exploring Governance, Political Power, and Democratic Quality in Indonesia: A Qualitative Study," *Jurnal Sosial Indonesia* 1, no. 1 (2026): 37–56

Meritocracy has always been viewed as an indicator of fairness, professionalism, and efficiency, but empirical evidence shows that the results of meritocracy largely depend on institutional circumstances, rather than on the presence of criteria of meritocracy per se. For example, empirical evidence obtained from the sample of executive employees shows that female employees have a probability of being promoted to positions that is 16% lower than that of male employees even when taking into account education, employment experience, age, occupation, and firm characteristics, thus showing that formally neutral criteria can coexist with persistent institutional inequalities.⁶³ On the other hand, empirical evidence collected within a large U.S. technology company using five years of personnel data shows that gender and racial discrimination in promotions persists even when performance and tenure are taken into consideration. In contrast, experimental evidence from Indonesia shows that bureaucratic patronage selection produces less consistent results with Weberian values than meritocratic selection and lottery selection. In turn, evidence from Pakistan shows that meritocracy can reveal bureaucrats of higher ability even in contexts of poor institutional transparency.⁶⁴

The differences in these results further underscore the main claim of the current review paper: meritocracy is not simply a case of objective selection based on qualifications and performance, but rather an institutional mechanism, the fairness of which hinges on equality of opportunity, transparency of procedure, accountability of discretion, and good governance. In this respect, law should transcend procedural impartiality to adopt a more substantive view of meritocracy, where structural discrimination, power dynamics, and new decision technologies are taken into account.⁶⁵ From a policy perspective, strengthening meritocratic governance requires a holistic approach that combines legal reform with institutional development.⁶⁶ Governments should prioritize regulatory consistency, independent oversight, procedural transparency, and accountability mechanisms capable of limiting discretionary interference.⁶⁷ At the organizational level, merit evaluation should incorporate standardized assessment procedures, bias mitigation strategies, and governance structures that enhance public confidence in decision-making processes.⁶⁸ Simultaneously, legal frameworks must anticipate emerging technological developments by establishing clear standards for AI-assisted decision-making, ensuring that innovation enhances rather than undermines fairness and accountability.⁶⁹ This review identifies several directions for future research. Greater attention should be devoted to comparative legal analysis across different governance systems, longitudinal evaluation of merit-system reforms, and empirical assessment of emerging regulatory frameworks governing artificial intelligence in organizational decision-making.⁷⁰ Such interdisciplinary research will contribute to a more

comprehensive understanding of how legal institutions can sustain meritocracy while responding to evolving social, political, and technological challenges.⁷¹

Table 5. Thematic Coding Framework for Legal Tensions Surrounding Meritocratic Governance

Aspect	Main Theme	Key Codes	RQ
Legal Tensions	Meritocracy vs. Equality	equal opportunity, inclusion, discrimination, affirmative action, unequal starting points	RQ1
Institutional Tensions	Formal Merit vs. Informal Patronage	political intervention, patronage, informal networks, predetermined decisions, favoritism	RQ1–RQ2
Regulatory Context	Regulatory Gaps and Weak Enforcement	fragmented regulations, legal ambiguity, weak sanctions, weak oversight, accountability	RQ1–RQ3
Technological Context	Algorithmic Meritocracy	algorithmic bias, objectivity, transparency, human oversight, contestability	RQ1–RQ2
Underlying Factors	Structural and Governance Factors	inequality, elite influence, political interests, organizational culture, governance failure	RQ3

The innovative aspect of this research involves transforming the concept of meritocracy from a largely procedural idea of competence-based selection to a conditional institutionally governed practice that relies on its legitimacy in terms of equality, accountability, regulatory certainty, and technological governance. Contrary to the previous studies that have analyzed the idea of meritocracy as being concerned with discrimination, political patronage, public sector reforms, organizational inequalities, and algorithmic decision-making separately, this study

⁶⁰ M. Akbar, “The Hudoq Kita’: A Contemporary Reinterpretation of Dayak Kenyah Cosmology in Light of Islamic Legal and Theological Perspectives,” *MILRev: Metro Islamic Law Review* 5, no. 1 (2026): 403–426, <https://doi.org/10.32332/milrev.v5i1.10333>

⁶¹ M. M. A. Kader Jilani, S. Tasnim, N. Rahman, A. S. M. R. Asgar, and N. Ahmed, “Role of Ethics, Meritocracy, and Professionalism in Public Sector Reforms: A Q Methodology Study,” *PLOS ONE* 21, no. 2 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0342981>

⁶² S. Bonnet and F. Teuteberg, “Decentralized Autonomous Organizations: A Systematic Literature Review and Research Agenda,” *International Journal of Innovation and Technology Management* 21, no. 4 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1142/S0219877024500263>.

⁶³ R. Gunawan, “Legal Politics Dynamics in the Era of Digital Democracy: Ensuring Free and Fair Elections in Indonesia’s 2024–2029 Electoral Cycle,” *Nusantara: Journal of Law and Islamic Law* 1, no. 1 (2025): 46–70, <https://doi.org/10.65101/nusantara.v1i1.26>.

⁶⁴ P. A. C. Da Silva Marrafa, “Trends in Political Science Research Confucian Political Thought,” *International Political Science Abstracts* 75, no. 5 (2025): 757–773, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208345251384025>

⁶⁵ S.-H. Tan, “Merit and Inequality: Confucian and Communitarian Perspectives on Singapore’s Meritocracy,” *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* 41 (2024): 29–63, <https://doi.org/10.22916/jcpc.2024.41.39>

considers all of these aspects within the same framework. The analysis across various contexts reveals that the key issue is not the absence of merit-based rules but their mismatch with certain institutional, political, social, and technological conditions under which the rules apply. Hence, this research introduces a Conditional Institutional Meritocracy Framework where sustainable and legitimate meritocracy implies the convergence of competence-based criteria with substantive equality, transparency and independence of oversight mechanisms, regulatory certainty, and accountability of technology-assisted decision-making processes.

The Conditional Institutional Meritocracy Model outlined in the current study defines meritocracy as a system of governance whose performance and legitimacy are contingent on the convergence of four dependent conditions: meritocratic selection, substantive equality, institutional accountability, and regulation/technology-based governance. The key element is meritocratic selection, which implies the appointment of individuals to different posts based on their competence, qualifications, and performance. Nevertheless, the element of meritocratic selection must be combined with substantive equality and anti-discrimination provisions to avoid situations when apparently fair and objective criteria for the selection are used to reproduce structures of inequality and defeat affirmative action goals. The next condition is the element of institutional accountability, including the issues of transparency, oversight, fair procedures, as well as protection from patronage, politics, favoritism, and arbitrariness. The third condition is the element of legal and regulatory certainty and coherent legal rules defining criteria for meritocracy and institutional responsibilities. The final one is related to technological governance and the application of artificial intelligence in personnel assessment.

CONCLUSION

These results show that the legal problems associated with meritocratic governance are more complex than the issue of designing the selection rules based on competence criteria. The qualitative analysis of 47 legal and academic sources identified six interrelated issues: conflicts with anti-discrimination and affirmative action laws, constitutional and regulatory uncertainty, patronage and low enforcement, new gaps in the field of legal governance of algorithmic meritocracy, gender and diversity issues, and lack of accountability. These results confirm that meritocracy is not an auto-executed legal principle but is rather conditional upon the compatibility of the meritocratic criteria with employment equity, lawfulness, accountability, and responsible governance of AI technologies. During this research, the author contributes to the existing scholarship by developing the framework of Conditional Institutional Meritocracy, which suggests that meritocracy is a governance regime whose

sustainability is dependent on the interaction between competence, equality, law, accountability and technology. The framework proposed by the author may be used for comparative legal studies in the field of meritocracy and will assist in designing recruitment, promotion, and leadership systems that are both merit-based and lawful.

The study has its limitations due to the use of documents as primary sources of data as well as using English-language sources indexed on Scopus. Future research should consider conducting interviews with the employees, human resource management specialists, compliance officials, and policymakers, along with long-term investigations that would examine the influence of new regulatory initiatives, such as artificial intelligence governance frameworks, on meritocracy in practice.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

The first author conceived the study, designed the research framework, conducted the literature search, performed the document analysis, interpreted the findings, and prepared the initial manuscript draft. The co-authors contributed to the development of the conceptual framework, critically reviewed the analysis, validated the findings, and substantially revised the manuscript for important intellectual content. All authors contributed to the refinement of the manuscript, read and approved the final version, and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

AI USAGE STATEMENT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to assist with language editing, grammar checking, and improving the clarity and readability of the manuscript. AI was not used to generate the research questions, develop the conceptual framework, conduct the qualitative document analysis, interpret the findings, or formulate the scholarly conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and academic integrity of the content.

AI tools are not recognized as authors or contributors in accordance with accepted ethical standards in academic publishing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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