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Government & Resilience

Journal Homepage: https//journal.dealingsfoundation.com/index.php/GR/
ISSN: 3032-2820 (Online) / 3032-7601 (Print)

Female Legislators and Social Inclusion: Representing the Unheard for Resilient Communities in Majalengka Regency

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Received: 19 June 2026; Revised: 15 July 2026; Accepted: 5 August 2026

Abstract

Majalengka Regency constitutes a particularly relevant case for this study because it reflects the gap between descriptive representation and substantive representation. Despite the existence of female legislators and various local policies aimed at protecting women and children, cases of violence against these groups remain significant, while women occupy only 12 percent of seats in the local parliament. This combination makes Majalengka an appropriate setting for examining the extent to which female legislators can influence policy agendas and advocate for women's and children's rights within a male-dominated local political structure. The study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation studies, then analyzed using Hanna Pitkin's theory of political representation. The results show that female legislators play a role in bringing women's perspectives into the political process and strengthening the legitimacy of women's and children's issues on the regional policy agenda. However, their influence on policy priorities and resource allocation is still limited by a patriarchal culture, male political dominance, unequal distribution of strategic positions, and limited political resources. This research contributes to the development of studies on women's political representation by showing the gap between representation and influence (representation–influence gap), so that the quality of representation is not only measured by the number of women in parliament, but also by their capacity to influence public policy.

Keywords: Women's political representation, Social Inclusion, Resilient Communities, Local politics.

How to Cite: Adilah, A. N., Rahmatunnisa, M., & Herdiansah, A. G. (2026). Female Legislators and Social Inclusion: Representing the Unheard for Resilient Communities in Majalengka Regency. *Government & Resilience, 4*(2), 197-218. https://doi.org/10.62503/gr.v4i2.96

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Introduction

Increasing women's representation in political institutions has become one of the key priorities for advancing democratic inclusive governance in many countries (Clayton, 2021; Folke et al., 2021). Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union shows that the proportion of women in parliaments worldwide has risen from about 11.3% in 1995 to 27.2% in 2025 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025b). This progress has been driven by various affirmative measures, including gender quotas, electoral system reforms, and global commitments to gender equality as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 on gender equality, which serves as a baseline for sustainable community resilience (Badal, 2025; Clayton, 2021; Tambe & Jormfeldt, 2025). In fact, a number of countries have succeeded in achieving or exceeding 50% female representation in parliament, such as Rwanda (63.8%) (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022), Bolivia (50.8%) (Tula, 2023), as well as Mexico (50.2%) and Nicaragua (55.0%) (Báez Carlos, 2022). These achievements demonstrate significant progress in efforts to increase women's participation in the political arena and public decision-making (Báez Carlos, 2022). However, the growing presence of women in parliament has generated an important academic debate regarding the relationship between representation and administrative influence. While descriptive representation emphasizes the importance of increasing the number of women in political institutions, scholars argue that substantive, inclusive governance depends on whether female legislators can effectively advocate for women's interests and shape policy outcomes. This debate raises crucial questions about the extent to which women's presence in legislative bodies translates into meaningful protection frameworks that preserve the resilience of women and children at the grass-roots level.

Nevertheless, the increase in the number of women in legislative bodies does not fully guarantee that the interests of women and children will be accommodated in the public policy process, which often weakens systemic community resilience (Anumo & Pacificah, 2019). Various studies indicate that female politicians in many countries still face barriers such as patriarchal culture, the dominance of the political elite, gender-based violence in politics, and limited access to strategic positions within government institutions, all of which hinder the realization of truly inclusive governance (Martínez-Córdoba et al., 2023; O'Brien & Rickne, 2016; Prodip, 2022). In the Asia-Pacific region, for example, more than three-quarters of female parliamentarians have experienced gender-based psychological violence, while six out of ten female legislators have been targeted by hate speech and disinformation in digital spaces (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025a). These hostile conditions indicate that the success of women's political representation is determined not only by the number of women holding political office (descriptive representation), but also by their ability to leverage public administration to advocate for the interests of groups that have historically been underrepresented in regional risk-mitigation and decision-making processes (substantive representation) (Gilas, 2022; Miranda-Leibe et al., 2022).

According to Hanna Pitkin, political representation is not merely a matter of who occupies political office, but also concerns how representatives act on behalf of those they represent to foster inclusive governance (Pitkin, 1967). Pitkin distinguishes between descriptive representation, which emphasizes the similarity of characteristics between representatives and represented groups, and substantive representation, which focuses on the administrative actions taken to advance the interests of those groups (Anumo & Pacificah, 2019; Pitkin, 1967). This distinction highlights an important theoretical argument: the presence of women in legislative institutions does not automatically guarantee that women's interests will be effectively advocated in public policy or translated into social protection frameworks. While descriptive representation may increase the visibility and legitimacy of women's voices in political institutions, substantive representation depends on the capacity of female legislators to influence policy agendas, public management

decision-making processes, and resource allocations designed to absorb social shocks and build local community resilience. Therefore, examining the relationship between women's numerical presence and their actual political influence becomes essential for understanding the systemic effectiveness of institutional representation.

In Indonesia, efforts to increase women's political participation have been institutionalized through affirmative action policies, particularly the requirement that political parties nominate at least 30 percent women in legislative candidacies to drive inclusive governance at sub-national levels (Adi Muliana, 2024; Irawan et al., 2023). At the national level, this policy has contributed to a gradual increase in women's representation in the House of Representatives (DPR RI), rising from 8.8 percent in 1999 to approximately 22 percent in the 2024 election period. Similar trends can also be observed in several provincial and district legislatures, indicating that affirmative action has expanded women's access to formal political institutions. However, public administration scholars have questioned whether the success of affirmative action should be measured solely by the number of women elected. A growing body of literature argues that increasing descriptive representation does not automatically lead to substantive representation because female legislators often continue to face institutional barriers, patriarchal political cultures, limited access to strategic positions, and unequal influence over public policy agendas and budget allocations meant for securing community resilience (Greene & O'Brien, 2016; Martínez-Gómez et al., 2022). Consequently, although affirmative action has improved women's numerical presence in legislative institutions, its ability to generate meaningful, inclusive policy outcomes for women and vulnerable groups remains a subject of ongoing academic debate.

This issue is also evident in Majalengka Regency. Although the local government has implemented various policies to protect women and children, data shows that cases of violence against women and children remain a significant problem (see Figure 1).

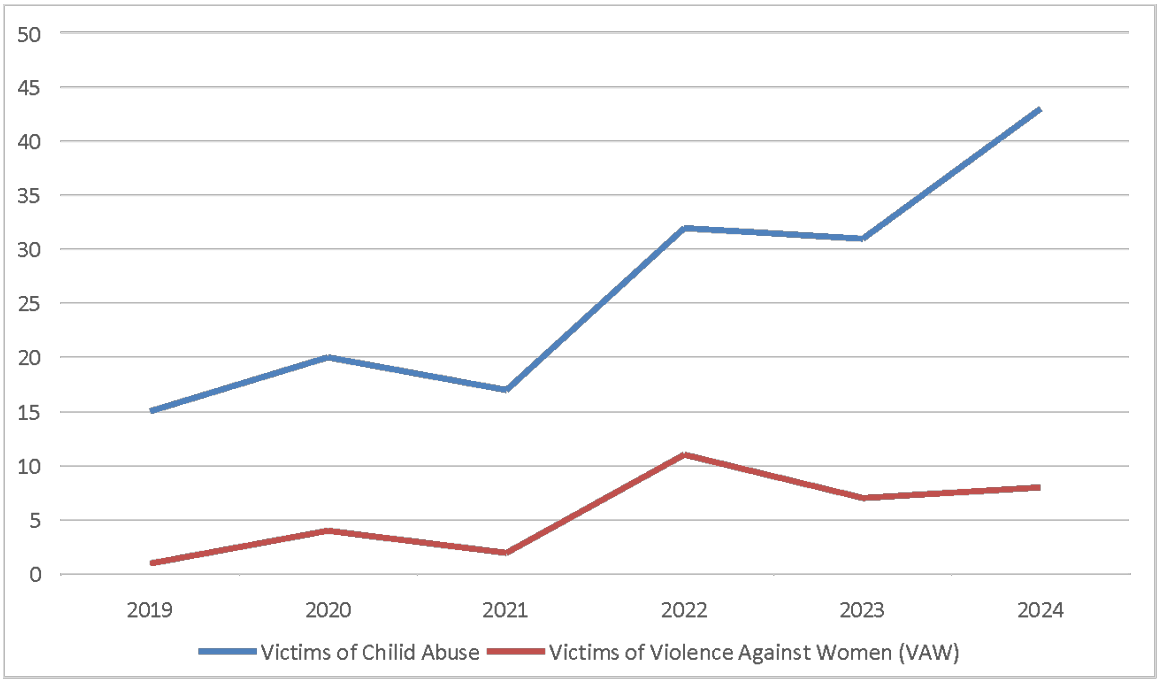


Figure 1. Trends in Child Abuse and Violence Against Women (VAW) Cases in Majalengka Regency (2019–2024). Source: Majalengka Police Department and Majalengka Regency DP3AKB (processed, 2026).

As illustrated in Figure 1, ensuring women's and children's rights to protection from violence, neglect, and exploitation remains a significant challenge in the region. On the other hand, women's representation in the Majalengka Regency Regional People's Representative Council for the 2019–2024 term stands at only 6 out of 50 seats, or approximately 12 percent, far below the 30 percent affirmative action target (see Figure 2).

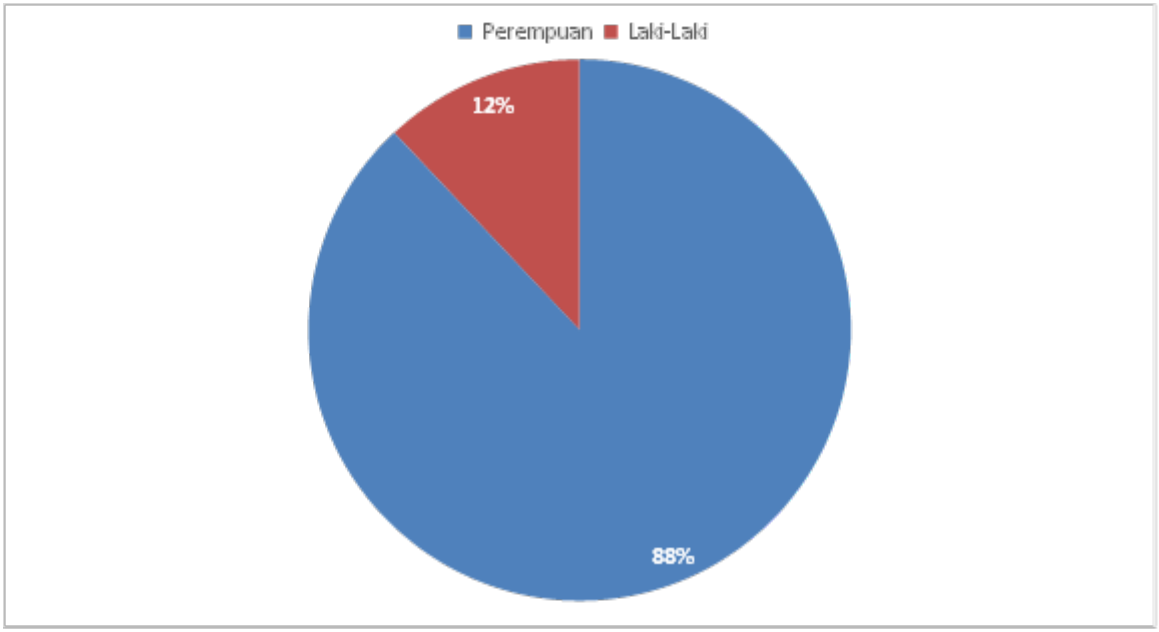


Figure 2. Composition of the Majalengka Regency Regional People's Representative Council by Gender for the 2019–2024 Term. Source: 2022 Overview Document of the Majalengka Regency Regional People's Representative Council, compiled by the researcher, 2026.

Beyond the issue of violence against women and children, challenges related to inclusive political representation also remain evident in Majalengka Regency. Despite efforts to strengthen democratic participation, the local political structure continues to be dominated by male actors, including within the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD). This condition limits opportunities for women to occupy strategic decision-making positions and raises questions regarding the extent to which women's interests can be effectively represented in local policymaking processes to foster inclusive governance (Numajalengka, 2024). Consequently, the issue of women's political representation in Majalengka is not only about increasing the number of female legislators but also about understanding their capacity to influence policy agendas concerning women's and children's rights (Antaranews, 2024). This situation directly impacts the quality of public administration and has the potential to erode public trust in the state's capacity to build local community resilience through the electoral process.

In addition, internal political dynamics within parties and legislative institutions shape the opportunities available for women's representation in local policymaking. Although women secured seats in the Majalengka Regency DPRD, their presence remained limited, accounting for only 12 percent of total members. Moreover, access to strategic positions within the legislature remained largely dominated by male legislators, including in commissions responsible for discussing social welfare and public service issues, creating a bottleneck for inclusive governance (Putra, 2024). This situation raises important questions regarding the extent to which female legislators can influence

policy agendas and advocate for women's and children's rights within a political environment characterized by unequal power distribution and persistent patriarchal norms, making it vital to examine how female legislators exercise their representative roles to support grass-roots community resilience.

On the other hand, challenges to inclusive democracy are also evident in the suboptimal fulfillment of the political rights of vulnerable groups, particularly people with disabilities, as well as the persistence of a patriarchal political culture within legislative bodies, both of which undermine the ideals of inclusive governance. In the 2024 Regional Elections, 4,892 people with disabilities were registered on the Permanent Voter List (DPT) for Majalengka Regency; however, various accessibility barriers, such as a lack of disability-friendly facilities and limited access to inclusive political information, persisted throughout the electoral process. At the same time, the local political structure remains dominated by men, including in the composition of the Majalengka Regency DPRD for the 2024–2029 term (Syaripudin, 2025). This dominance results in strategic decision-making processes, including those related to the protection of women and children, being more heavily influenced by the political interests of the elite and the majority of male legislators. Consequently, female legislators often face limited political space to advocate for gender-responsive agendas, ultimately weakening the structural safety nets needed to maintain long-term community resilience. This situation indicates that the challenges to democracy in Majalengka are not only related to electoral procedures but also concern access, representation, and the distribution of power, which remain insufficiently inclusive for groups that have historically been underrepresented.

Studies on women's political representation and the role of female legislators in advocating for the interests of women and children have been widely conducted in various contexts. Research by Sari et al. (2025) examines women's representation and role in the appointment of legislative members to committees within the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) and its impact on the policy-making process. Meanwhile, Pramudita and Lestari (2023) examined the role of female legislators in the revision of the Regional Regulation on Child Protection in the Surabaya City Council, particularly regarding legislative functions, participation, and oversight of gender-responsive policies. Other studies also highlight women's political strategies in electoral contests (Samsa, 2020), the challenges of implementing affirmative action policies to strengthen women's representation in the legislature (Tias et al., 2023), women's representation in local legislative bodies (Rosieana, 2013), and female legislators' strategies in supporting women's empowerment programs through advocacy and policy oversight functions (Ramadhan, 2024). Overall, these studies indicate that women's representation plays a crucial role in strengthening political participation, promoting inclusive governance, and increasing attention to women's issues in public decision-making processes.

Although previous studies have demonstrated the importance of women's representation in politics, they have largely emphasized descriptive representation, electoral participation, and affirmative action mechanisms. Consequently, there is still limited understanding of how female legislators exercise substantive representation in advocating for women's and children's rights within local political institutions to safeguard community resilience. Furthermore, few studies have examined the gap between women's formal presence in legislative bodies and their actual influence on policy priorities and resource allocation, particularly under the framework of inclusive governance in district-level legislatures. By focusing on female legislators in the Majalengka Regency DPRD, this study contributes to the literature by explaining how representation is translated into political influence and identifying the institutional barriers that constrain this process.

Based on these various issues and research gaps, it is clear that women's political representation is not only related to formal representation in legislative bodies but also concerns their ability to advocate for the interests of the groups they represent through the public policy

process. In this context, it is important to understand how female legislators fulfill their roles in advocating for the rights of women and children amidst the various existing local political dynamics to build a more equitable public administration. Therefore, this study seeks to answer two main questions within the paradigm of inclusive governance and community resilience: (1) what is the role of female legislators in advocating for the rights of women and children in the Majalengka Regency Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) for the 2019–2024 term, and (2) what factors influence the optimization of female legislators' roles in this context?.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design to understand how female legislators in the Majalengka Regency DPRD (2019–2024) advocate for the rights of women and children. Majalengka Regency was deliberately selected due to a critical paradox that sets it apart from other regions. While the district faces an escalating crisis of gender-based vulnerabilities marked by a continuous spike in child abuse and violence against women, female legislative representation actually declined to a mere 12% (6 out of 50 seats). Furthermore, following a faction reshuffle, Commission IV (which directly oversees women and children's affairs) was left completely vacant of female legislators. This severe gap between a pressing social crisis and heavily restricted female political agency makes Majalengka a compelling "strategic laboratory" to analyze the representation–influence gap under tight structural constraints.

The study adopts Hanna Pitkin's theory of political representation as both a theoretical and analytical framework. Specifically, the dimensions of formalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representation were operationalized as analytical categories to guide data collection, coding, and interpretation. Formalistic representation was used to examine the legitimacy and institutional authority of female legislators; descriptive representation to assess the extent to which legislators reflected the characteristics and experiences of women constituents; symbolic representation to explore public perceptions regarding female political leadership; and substantive representation to analyze concrete actions undertaken to advocate for women's and children's rights.

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field observations as shown in Table 1. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure data validity and depth. For informants, the inclusion criteria required participants to be:

1. Active members of the Majalengka Regency Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) during the 2019–2024 term, or formal representatives from key institutions directly involved in local policymaking and advocacy for women and children (such as DP3AKB, gender-focused NGOs, and local political analysts).

2. Actively engaged in, or possessing direct knowledge of, legislative drafting, budgeting, or oversight processes related to regional regulations on women's and children's protection.

Conversely, the exclusion criteria disqualified individuals who were:

1. Newly elected DPRD members for the 2024–2029 term with no operational experience or involvement in the 2019–2024 legislative cycle.

2. Administrative staff or structural officers within government agencies who did not hold decision-making power or have direct involvement in gender-responsive policy formulation and implementation.

Documentary sources were systematically selected to complement the interview data, comprising a total of 18 official documents analyzed during the study. These included:

1. **Regional Regulations (3 documents):** Specifically, Majalengka Regional Regulation No. 14 of 2021 on the Protection of Women and Children, along with two relevant amendment drafts and local implementing guidelines.

2. **DPRD Meeting Minutes (5 documents):** Official transcripts (*risalah rapat*) from legislative plenary sessions and internal faction hearings concerning the deliberation of gender-protection agendas during the 2019–2024 term.

3. **Commission Reports (4 documents):** Strategic progress reports and performance evaluation documents issued by Commission IV and related legislative committees.

4. **Budget Documents (3 documents):** Official regional budget reports, specifically focusing on the Majalengka Regency Gender-Responsive Budget (GRB) documents for the fiscal years 2022–2024.

5. **Institutional Policy Documents (3 documents):** Annual strategic planning documents, performance reports (LAKIP), and integrated data overviews on women and child abuse cases obtained from the Majalengka Regency DP3AKB and local law enforcement.

Table 1. Mapping of Research Informants

Category of Informants	Total	Spesific Type of Data Obtained	Specific Type of Data Obtained
Female Legislators of the Regional People's Representative Council	6 people	Data on substantive representation practices, legislative actions, budgeting constraints for gender programs, oversight activities, and experiences with institutional barriers (patriarchal culture and AKD distribution).	Data on substantive representation practices, legislative actions, budgeting constraints for gender programs, oversight activities, and experiences with institutional barriers (patriarchal culture and AKD distribution).
Male Legislators (for comparison)	2 people	Comparative data on legislative priorities, dominant institutional norms, perspectives on gender-responsive policies, and political party dynamics within the DPRD.	Comparative data on legislative priorities, dominant institutional norms, perspectives on gender-responsive policies, and political party dynamics within the DPRD.
Regional Office for Women's Empowerment, Child Protection, Population Control, and Family Planning (DP3AKB)	2 people	Technical data on executive-legislative collaboration, implementation challenges of Regional Regulation No. 14 of 2021, and synchronization of the Gender-Responsive Budget (GRB)	Technical data on executive-legislative collaboration, implementation challenges of Regional Regulation No. 14 of 2021, and synchronization of the Gender-Responsive Budget (GRB).

Women's Activist/NGO	3 people	Data on grass-roots public aspirations, external evaluation of the DPRD's performance, community trust in legislative representation, and actual trends in child and women abuse cases.	Data on grass-roots public aspirations, external evaluation of the DPRD's performance, community trust in legislative representation, and actual trends in child and women abuse cases.
Academic/Political Analyst	2 people	Analytical data on local political structures, critical evaluation of women's political agency, and systemic structural barriers in Majalengka's local governance.	Analytical data on local political structures, critical evaluation of women's political agency, and systemic structural barriers in Majalengka's local governance.

Source: Data processed by researchers (2026).

Data analysis followed a systematic thematic analysis procedure involving data reduction, coding, categorization, and interpretation:

1. Data reduction was performed by filtering out raw interview transcripts, extensive field notes, and institutional documents that did not directly relate to the public policy functions of the DPRD. The remaining essential text was subjected to open coding to identify specific statements and events regarding legislative actions, budgeting disputes, and cultural barriers.

2. These open codes were categorized and grouped into broader themes corresponding directly to Hanna Pitkin's dimensions of representation. Specifically, information regarding electoral legitimacy and structural authorization was categorized under formalistic representation; data on numerical composition and committee placement under descriptive representation; public trust and symbolic leadership under symbolic representation; and concrete policy outputs or budget battles under substantive representation.

3. Patterns and relationships among these categories were examined to understand how female legislators navigated structural constraints within legislative processes.

4. Empirical findings were interpreted by comparing these emerging themes with the theoretical expectations derived from Pitkin's framework. This interpretive stage focused on evaluating the exact nature of the representation–influence gap, allowing the study to transparently assess both the presence and structural limitations of substantive representation in the Majalengka Regency DPRD.

To enhance credibility, source and method triangulation were employed by comparing evidence obtained from interviews, observations, and documentary sources, ensuring that the final interpretation was grounded in multiple forms of empirical evidence.

Results and Findings

Beyond Presence: Female Legislators and the Advancement of Women's and Children's Rights

Formalistic Representation as the Foundation of Women's Political Agency

This research is fundamentally motivated by a critical governance paradox in Majalengka Regency: despite the formal establishment of child and women protection policies, local cases of violence against these vulnerable groups continue to rise significantly, while women remain severely underrepresented by occupying only 12 percent of legislative seats. Reconnecting these grim grass-roots realities with the study's objective requires a deeper examination of how inclusive political governance and local resilience can be structurally championed within a male-dominated local parliament. Within this analytical context, formalistic representation constitutes the institutional foundation through which female legislators obtain the legal legitimacy to participate in policymaking processes. According to Hanna Pitkin, formalistic representation concerns the mechanisms of authorization and accountability that connect representatives to those they represent. Authorization refers to the legitimate process through which representatives obtain political authority, while accountability concerns the obligation to explain and justify political actions to constituents. In the context of the Majalengka Regency DPRD, female legislators obtained political legitimacy through democratic elections and were formally granted the same legislative, budgeting, and oversight authority as their male counterparts. Interview findings indicate that female legislators maintain accountability through regular constituency visits (*reses*), public consultations, community meetings, and the collection of aspirations from women's organizations and community groups.

These mechanisms provide institutional channels through which women legislators receive public mandates and communicate policy priorities related to women's and children's issues. Within this study, political agency refers to the capacity of female legislators to utilize their formal authority, political resources, and institutional positions to influence policymaking processes and advocate for the interests of women and children. Political agency therefore serves as a bridge between formalistic representation and substantive representation. While formalistic representation provides political legitimacy and institutional access, substantive representation depends on how effectively female legislators transform that legitimacy into concrete political influence and policy outcomes to foster more inclusive governance and resilient communities.

The structural friction between formal legitimacy and substantive influence is most acutely examined through budgetary decision-making processes, which dictate the practical boundaries of inclusive governance. Rather than merely comparing isolated line-items across different sectors, the analysis focuses on the relative priority given to women's and children's issues within regional development spending. Budget allocations for women's empowerment and child protection programs provide a direct diagnostic metric of the extent to which these issues are authentically woven into the state's risk-mitigation priorities. Consequently, this structural analysis of budget allocation is not intended to claim a simplistic, direct causal link between individual women legislators and fiscal outcomes; instead, it illustrates the broader institutional constraints and gatekeeping mechanisms within which female legislators must operate to advocate for vulnerable groups. These findings suggest that while formal political legitimacy provides an indispensable statutory foundation, formal access alone does not guarantee a gender-responsive public administration. The systemic capacity of female legislators to secure the rights of women and children remains heavily mediated by exclusionary institutional arrangements, asymmetric access to strategic leadership positions, partisan political coalitions, and deeply entrenched male-dominated decision-making structures within the DPRD, all of which present severe bottlenecks to fostering long-term community resilience.

Table 2. Comparison of Budget Allocations for Women and Children Programs with Programs in Other Sectors in Majalengka Regency in 2023

Program/Activity	Budget Allocation (IDR)
Prevention of Violence Against Women	50.000.000
Referral Services for Women Victims of Violence	25.000.000
Fulfillment of Children's Rights	50.000.000
Special Protection Services for Children	75.000.000
Gathering and Addressing Community Concerns	3.236.758.500
Support and Development of Sports Organizations	4.859.750.000
Waste Management	6.545.361.000

Source: Majalengka Regency Gender-Responsive Budget (GRB) Document for 2023 (processed by researchers, 2026).

The empirical data presented in Table 2 reveals a stark, deeply disproportionate budgetary imbalance that critically mirrors the internal political incentives within the legislature. While specific, high-stakes protection programs such as the Prevention of Violence Against Women and Referral Services for Victims are heavily underfunded, ranging from a meager IDR 25,000,000 to IDR 75,000,000, the budget allocated for "Gathering and Addressing Community Concerns" reaches an overwhelming IDR 3,236,758,500. Critically and objectively evaluated, this extreme fiscal disparity indicates the presence of pork-barrel politics (locally operationalized as *dana aspirasi* or constituency development funds). From a political economy perspective, budget allocations for specialized protection services are often viewed by politicians as low-visibility technical outputs with diffuse electoral returns. Conversely, funds allocated under the umbrella of "Gathering and Addressing Community Concerns" are highly discretionary and fluid, allowing legislators to directly distribute resources, facilitate local clientelistic networks, and secure immediate electoral capital during constituency visits (*reses*). This structural dynamic demonstrates that even when female legislators achieve formalistic and descriptive presence, their capacity for substantive representation is heavily constrained by an entrenched institutional culture that prioritizes electoral survival over targeted social protection. Consequently, the budget structure in Majalengka remains transactional rather than transformational, leaving the financial teeth of Regional Regulation No. 14 of 2021 severely weakened while substantial public resources are funneled into politically lucrative, broad-spectrum constituent services. As stated by one of the informants based on the interview:

> *"Female legislators reported difficulties in securing support for women- and child-related programs during budgeting discussions because priority was often given to infrastructure and other development sectors."*

From the perspective of political agency, this situation demonstrates that formal legitimacy does not always result in sufficient political capacity to influence the distribution of public resources. While formalistic representation has indeed succeeded in granting women access to power structures, this access has not yet been fully accompanied by the ability to shift local development priorities to make them more responsive to the needs of women and children. In other words, the

formal authority held by female legislators still faces various institutional and political mechanisms that determine the development agenda and regional budget priorities. In this context, formalistic representation serves as a foundation that allows women to enter the political arena, but the effectiveness of the struggle for women's and children's rights is largely determined by their ability to convert that formal legitimacy into tangible influence in the policy-making process.

Descriptive Representation and the Expansion of Women's Voices

Descriptive representation constitutes a critical dimension that shapes women's political agency, serving as a structural determinant for inclusive governance and the promotion of community resilience. While formalistic representation provides the political legitimacy to enter legislative bodies, descriptive representation concerns the extent to which women's physical presence in parliament is able to systematically integrate gendered experiences, perspectives, and vulnerabilities into the formal policymaking process. From Hanna Pitkin's perspective, descriptive representation occurs when the characteristics of a representative align with those of the group they represent. Therefore, the presence of women in the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) is structurally crucial; they bring distinct lived experiences that are vital for designing risk-mitigation frameworks and protective policies concerning violence against women, child protection, reproductive health, and various forms of gender-based injustice. However, research findings indicate that the relationship between women's descriptive presence and the advancement of inclusive local governance is neither linear nor automatic.

Although national affirmative action policies require political parties to nominate at least 30 percent female candidates, the final results of the 2019 General Election in Majalengka Regency paradoxically showed a decline in female legislative presence—dropping from eight seats in the 2014–2019 term to just six seats in the 2019–2024 term. Occupying a mere 12 percent of the total DPRD composition, women's representation remains far below the critical mass threshold necessary to challenge dominant patriarchal norms. This structural deficit severely limits their collective bargaining power to redirect public resources toward social protection agendas, ultimately weakening the institutional foundation required to build long-term community resilience against escalating local social crises. To clarify women's position within the descriptive representation structure of the Majalengka Regency DPRD, the longitudinal trend is detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Women's Representation in the Majalengka Regency Regional People's Representative Council

Period	Number of Female Members Total	Members of the Majalengka Regency Regional People's Representative Council	Percentage
2014–2019	8	50	16%
2019–2024	6	50	12%

Source: Compiled by researchers from data provided by the Majalengka Regency Regional People's Representative Council, 2026.

The data indicates that the descriptive representation of women in the Majalengka Regency DPRD actually declined during the study period. This situation is highly significant because the decrease in the number of women signifies not only a reduction in numerical presence but also a diminished opportunity for women's perspectives to be incorporated into the decision-making process, thereby undermining the principles of inclusive governance. In the context of political agency, the decline in the number of women narrows the collective capacity of female legislators to build strategic political coalitions, influence the local policy agenda, and consistently advocate for the structural protection of vulnerable groups.

These institutional limitations become even more apparent when the distribution of women within the Council's Supporting Bodies (AKD) is analyzed further. Research findings indicate that following the party faction reshuffle, not a single female legislator was placed on Commission IV—the committee serving as the primary partner to local government agencies responsible for women's and children's affairs. Consequently, issues related to the protection of women and children are discussed within an institutional body composed entirely of men. This structural exclusion demonstrates that descriptive representation cannot be adequately measured solely by the number of women who have secured parliamentary seats, but must also be assessed based on their distribution across strategic positions that control policy formulation. In terms of public administration, isolating women from these critical portfolios severely paralyzes gender-responsive budgeting and risk-mitigation planning, directly weakening community resilience against the region's escalating social crises. This reality is reflected in the statement of one informant who explained that:

> *"It's true that at the top leadership level, there is a female Deputy Chair of the Regional People's Representative Council who strongly supports us, but in Commission IV—which serves as our daily partner—the position has been completely vacant of female representation following the factional reshuffle. As a result, our bargaining position during budget discussions is very weak. The commission members, who are all men, often view programs for the protection of women and children as merely routine administrative matters that are not urgent, so that funding for these programs is consistently overshadowed by physical infrastructure projects."*

This statement indicates that the structural bottleneck of descriptive representation lies not only in the limited number of women but also in the unequal distribution of power within the legislature. The presence of a woman in a council leadership position indeed holds significant symbolic value; however, that influence is heavily bottlenecked when women are systemically absent from the committees that directly handle specialized social welfare portfolios. In other words, descriptive representation in the Majalengka Regency DPRD remains highly fragmented. While it has succeeded in introducing a degree of demographic diversity within the formal institution, it has failed to secure a democratic mandate in the strategic arenas where public budgets are formulated, thereby restricting the realization of truly inclusive governance. Interestingly, although the numerical presence of women is relatively small, their strategic agency has nonetheless had a profound impact on the regional agenda for protecting vulnerable groups. A prime indicator of this is the enactment of Regional Regulation No. 14 of 2021 on the Protection of Women and Children.

Crucially, the subsequent spike in reported cases of violence against women and children should not be interpreted merely as a worsening social crisis; rather, it reflects a critical milestone in strengthening community resilience. The establishment of a robust legal anchor has fostered institutional trust, empowering historically marginalized victims to break their silence and actively seek legal remedy. This finding demonstrates that descriptive representation holds significant value as an institutional gateway for incorporating gender-responsive risk mitigation into the political process. However, the experience of the Majalengka Regency DPRD also underscores that a nominal

increase in numerical representation does not automatically guarantee broad policy influence. As noted by Childs and Krook, the success of advocating for women's interests is determined not solely by the number of female bodies in parliament, but by their systemic capacity to convert that presence into tangible leverage during policy formulation. In this context, descriptive representation serves as an initial catalyst for political agency, but its long-term efficacy in securing inclusive governance remains strictly dependent on the redistribution of institutional power, access to strategic committee chairs, and the collective bargaining capacity of women within the legislative body.

Symbolic Representation and the Construction of Legitimacy for Women's and Children's Issues

In addition to descriptive representation, symbolic representation plays a pivotal role in strengthening women's political agency, serving as a socio-political bridge toward inclusive governance within the Majalengka Regency DPRD. According to Hanna Pitkin, symbolic representation refers to the meanings, values, and psychological connections that constituents attach to the presence of representatives. Representatives are not merely political actors performing formal institutional functions; they operate as symbols that embody the hopes, identities, and collective aspirations of specific social groups. In the context of this study, female legislators carry immense symbolic significance because their very presence signals a democratic commitment to recognizing marginalized voices, thereby laying the groundwork for a more inclusive local public administration. Interview findings indicate that grass-roots women's groups, community organizations, and vulnerable constituents perceive female legislators as more empathetic, approachable, and responsive to issues affecting women and children. This localized perception creates an essential layer of institutional trust—a core component of community resilience—which encourages citizens to directly communicate raw concerns regarding domestic violence, sexual abuse, child protection, and structural gender inequality. Consequently, female legislators transcend their basic legislative roles to become vital human intermediaries, linking localized social vulnerabilities with formal public governance structures.

The significance of symbolic representation extends beyond public perception because it actively facilitates adaptive political action. Several informants explained that aspirations collected through constituency meetings (*reses*), public consultations, and continuous dialogues with civil society were systematically channeled into legislative debates, oversight activities, and policy deliberations. In this regard, symbolic legitimacy functions as an informal political resource that enables female legislators to map community risks and advocate for their inclusion in macro-level policy agendas. Therefore, symbolic representation contributes not only to the visibility of women in local politics but also to the creation of responsive channels through which urgent social protection needs can enter formal governmental workflows. The symbolic value attached to female leadership is also evident in transforming public perceptions regarding women's participation in strategic political positions. The presence of women in leadership roles within the DPRD conveys a powerful institutional message that regional governance is not exclusively a patriarchal domain. Such symbolism fundamentally challenges traditional assumptions regarding gender roles and political authority while cultivating broader public acceptance of women's stewardship in public decision-making. Consequently, symbolic representation contributes to the gradual transformation of deep-seated social attitudes, fostering a civic culture that values inclusive political participation.

However, symbolic representation possesses an inherently ambivalent character within public administration. On one hand, it enhances the visibility and legitimacy of vulnerable groups' rights in the public sphere. On the other hand, it often generates populist expectations that far exceed the actual institutional authority of female legislators. Many constituents expect a handful of female legislators to single-handedly resolve systemic socio-economic crises affecting women and children,

even though final policy outcomes remain heavily restricted by broader legislative dynamics, clientelistic party structures, and severe resource constraints within the DPRD.

These findings demonstrate that symbolic representation should not be dismissed as mere tokenism or political image-making. Rather, it serves as a functional mechanism that catalyzes substantive representation by generating trust-based networks between governing elites and the governed community. Through this symbolic legitimacy, female legislators mobilize social capital, champion the rights of the unheard, and strengthen their advocacy within legislative institutions. Nevertheless, its ultimate efficacy in achieving sustainable inclusive governance and long-term community resilience depends entirely on the capacity of these legislators to transform social legitimacy into concrete legislative influence and equitable resource allocation.

Gender, Institutions, and Political Constraints

The efficacy of women's representation in advocating for the rights of women and children within the Majalengka Regency DPRD is fundamentally shaped by the institutional environment in which they operate, directly influencing the district's capacity for inclusive governance. Although women have gained access to legislative institutions through formal electoral mechanisms and affirmative action policies, research findings indicate that their ability to systematically influence policymaking remains restricted by broader political and institutional dynamics. This finding suggests that true political inclusion extends far beyond gaining entry to legislative seats; it dictates the degree of structural influence, authority, and genuine participation in decision-making processes. Interview findings reveal that while female legislators formally possess the same legislative, budgeting, and oversight authority as their male counterparts, the actual policy priorities within the DPRD are routinely determined through informal political negotiations among male-dominated factions, commissions, and party elites. Consequently, the ability of legislators to advance risk-mitigation frameworks depends heavily on their strategic positioning within institutional networks and dominant decision-making structures.

The findings further indicate that the structural underrepresentation of women severely cripples the institutionalization of gender-responsive policies. This numerical deficit heavily restricts the ability of female legislators to build winning political coalitions and secure broader support for vulnerable groups. Several informants noted that strategic proposals related to women's empowerment, child protection, and gender-responsive budgeting must constantly compete with conventional infrastructural development priorities that receive greater political attention.

> *"In short, when it comes to budgeting in Indonesia, women's issues have not always been a priority in decision-making. It has never crossed the minds of decision-makers that these issues are solely women's concerns. In fact, even those who have daughters should develop the sensitivity to understand these issues and then provide greater budgetary support. In meetings and other decision-making forums, men also still tend to dominate, both in expressing opinions and in various decision-making processes"*

This reality exposes a severe gap between formal equality and substantive influence. While all DPRD members formally enjoy equal rights, their capacity to shape public policy is heavily gatekept by asymmetric power relations. Under the analytical lens of Feminist Institutionalism, political institutions operate not only through formal rules but through informal patriarchal norms that marginalize women's agency. In Majalengka, this institutional friction restricts female legislators from transforming formal authority into substantive influence, thereby slowing down the governance tools required to build sustainable community resilience against escalating local social crises.

The deep-seated dominance of the male political elite remains a key structural bottleneck affecting the quality of local representation. The small proportion of female legislators drastically limits their bargaining leverage in critical decision-making processes. In most legislative scenarios, the policy direction is determined by the majority group, which maintains absolute control over the deliberation processes, the distribution of strategic positions, and the allocation of regional development priorities. These conditions underscore that numerical representation does not automatically correlate with the distribution of genuine political influence held by women, creating an institutional environment that remains transactional rather than inclusive.

In addition to the constraints of low numbers, the highly skewed distribution of strategic positions within the Council's Supporting Bodies (AKD) directly paralyzes women's capacity to advocate for comprehensive social safety nets. Positions that wield significant structural influence over legislation and public spending—such as commission chairs and budget committees—are still predominantly captured by male legislators. As a result, while women are nominally involved in policy deliberations, they are systematically excluded from the centers of power that determine the final direction of resource allocation. From a governance perspective, this structural exclusion means that policies aimed at strengthening grass-roots community resilience are continuously deprived of adequate financial teeth and administrative priority. To clarify the complex institutional barriers affecting women's representation in the Majalengka Regency DPRD, the research findings are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of Political Constraints on Women's Representation in the Majalengka Regency Regional People's Representative Council.

Institutional Barriers	Manifestations in Political Practice	Impact on Women's Representation
Patriarchal Culture	A masculine perspective remains dominant in policy discussions	Issues affecting women and children are often viewed as secondary
Male numerical dominance	There are more male members in decision-making forums	Women's limited political power in building support and advancing policy agendas
Uneven distribution of strategic positions	Key positions in the AKD are predominantly held by men	Women's limited influence over legislation and budgeting
Limited political resources	Budgetary support and political networks are not yet optimal	The difficulty of translating women's aspirations into sustainable programs
Competing development priorities	Issues concerning women and children must compete with other development priorities	Gender issues are often not a top priority in local policies

Source: compiled by the researcher, 2026.

The systematic mapping of these institutional barriers demonstrates that the constraints faced by female legislators do not exist in isolation; rather, they are deeply interrelated, forming a structural matrix of exclusion that severely compromises the effectiveness of inclusive governance. An entrenched patriarchal culture continuously reinforces the hegemony of the male elite, which directly leads to the highly unequal distribution of strategic positions across the Council's Supporting Bodies (AKD). This structural gatekeeping ultimately dictates regional development agendas, ensuring that substantial public resources are diverted away from vulnerable groups. Simultaneously, heavily restricted political and fiscal resources further cripple women's capacity to translate critical grass-roots aspirations into legally binding protection programs that can secure stable, institutionalized state support.

Consequently, these findings reveal that the primary bottleneck for political representation in the Majalengka Regency DPRD has shifted from formalistic access to a deeper struggle over institutional transformation. To build genuine community resilience against localized socio-economic risks, the local public administration and the legislature must move beyond cosmetic compliance. Increasing the number of women in the legislature remains a vital prerequisite, but it is fundamentally insufficient to catalyze substantive representation unless it is accompanied by a radical restructuring of power relations, an equitable redistribution of budgetary resources, and a dismantling of the patriarchal institutional culture that has long marginalized women's political influence.

Discussions

Women's political representation in local legislative bodies demonstrates that the issue of representation cannot be reduced solely to the success of increasing the number of women holding parliamentary seats. For decades, discussions regarding women's representation have been heavily influenced by the assumption that an increase in descriptive representation will gradually lead to stronger substantive representation (Mechkova & Edgell, 2024). This assumption has formed the basis for various affirmative action policies implemented in many countries, including Indonesia, with the expectation that greater female participation in political institutions will strengthen the advocacy of policies addressing the needs of women and other vulnerable groups. However, developments in contemporary literature suggest that the relationship between numerical representation and political influence is not as straightforward as previously assumed. Within public administration, this non-linear dynamic directly challenges the implementation of inclusive governance, as nominal demographic shifts do not automatically translate into institutionalized social equity.

The debate over women's representation has increasingly shifted from questions about the number of women who enter parliament to questions about how women exercise influence once they are inside political institutions (Bäck & Debus, 2019; Greene & O'Brien, 2016). This shift is particularly relevant to studies examining women's and children's rights because the effectiveness of advocacy depends not only on legislative presence but also on the ability to shape policy agendas, participate in decision-making processes, and influence budgetary priorities to foster structural community resilience. From the perspective of Feminist Institutionalism, political institutions are not neutral arenas but are shaped by formal and informal rules, organizational cultures, and power relations that influence whose interests receive political attention (Akbar et al., 2023; Kantola & Lombardo, 2019). In this context, the presence of women in parliament does not automatically translate into an equal ability to advocate for women's and children's rights. Access to legislative seats and access to political influence are distinct matters. A legislator may formally participate in policymaking while still facing structural constraints in shaping legislative agendas and policy outcomes.

Consequently, recent studies have begun to critique the limitations of critical mass theory, which has traditionally treated the number of women as the primary determinant of successful representation (Anumo & Pacificah, 2019). While increasing the number of women remains important for improving political inclusiveness, numerical representation alone cannot explain why some female legislators are able to advance gender-related policy agendas while others face severe barriers in creating an inclusive governance ecosystem. Criticism of critical mass theory has contributed to the emergence of the critical actors approach, which emphasizes the importance of position, capacity, and coalition-building in achieving policy change (Abels & Mushaben, 2020). This perspective argues that the advancement of women's and children's rights—and by extension, the strengthening of local community resilience—is often shaped not by the number of women in

legislative institutions but by the ability of particular actors to mobilize political support, gain access to decision-making arenas, and influence legislative and budgetary priorities. Therefore, the effectiveness of women's representation should be assessed through the distribution of political influence rather than merely through the distribution of seats.

Developments in the literature further indicate that strategic positions within legislative institutions play a significant role in determining policy influence (Miller, 2023). Political influence is not distributed evenly across parliamentary structures but tends to be concentrated in positions that possess authority over agenda setting, legislative deliberation, and budget allocation. This perspective is particularly important for understanding how female legislators advocate for women's and children's rights, as the ability to dismantle exclusionary local state structures and introduce inclusive governance depends largely on access to these decision-making centres. Women's representation also highlights the importance of budgetary politics as a crucial arena of substantive representation. While the success of women's representation has often been measured through legislative participation and regulatory achievements (Miruka et al., 2021), recent scholarship suggests that substantive representation is more clearly reflected in the ability to influence public resource allocation. For issues such as women's empowerment, violence prevention, child protection, and social welfare, policy commitments require not only legislative recognition but also adequate fiscal support to absorb social shocks.

Therefore, examining how women's and children's issues are prioritized within policy and budgeting processes provides an important indicator of whether a sub-national government is capable of maintaining systemic community resilience. In the context of the Majalengka Regency DPRD, these theoretical debates provide an important framework for understanding the relationship between representation and influence. The central question is not merely whether women are present within legislative institutions, but whether they possess the political capacity and institutional access necessary to advocate effectively for women's and children's rights under an inclusive governance paradigm. Accordingly, this study examines how formalistic, descriptive, and symbolic representation are translated into substantive representation through legislative action, policy advocacy, and efforts to influence policy priorities related to the protection and advancement of women's and children's rights.

This discussion ultimately points to what the literature describes as a representation–influence gap. Although women may gain access to legislative institutions through electoral mechanisms and affirmative action policies, such access does not automatically guarantee influence over policy direction and decision-making processes. Understanding this gap is particularly important in the context of women's and children's rights because the effectiveness of representation depends not only on women's presence in parliament but also on their ability to transform that presence into meaningful policy influence, thereby closing the gap between formal administration and the empirical realization of inclusive governance and sustainable community resilience for the groups they represent.

Conclusion

The struggle for women's and children's rights in regional legislative institutions cannot be understood solely through the increasing number of women who successfully occupy parliamentary seats. The case of the Majalengka Regency DPRD demonstrates that women's political representation is a process shaped by the interaction of formal legitimacy, descriptive presence, symbolic recognition, and institutional power structures that regulate the distribution of political influence. In this context, the presence of female legislators has opened up space for the articulation of women's and children's interests, but the ability to translate these aspirations into policy and the allocation of

public resources is still influenced by the power dynamics that develop within political institutions. The findings of this study indicate that the relationship between women's representation and the advancement of women's and children's rights is neither automatic nor linear. Political legitimacy gained through democratic mechanisms provides women with access to participate in decision-making processes, but this access does not necessarily result in equal capacity to shape policy direction. Therefore, women's political representation is better understood as a transformation process from presence to influence—namely, how women's presence in political institutions can be converted into tangible influence in policy formulation and the distribution of public resources. From a conceptual standpoint, this study strengthens the argument that the quality of women's representation cannot be measured solely through numerical representation but must be analyzed through the distribution of power, access to strategic positions, the ability to build political coalitions, and influence on regional development priorities. Ultimately, the primary challenge to women's representation at the local level no longer lies in how women enter legislative bodies, but rather in how political institutions can create the conditions that enable this presence to develop into substantive representation that truly contributes to the advancement of women's and children's rights.

Theoretically, this study advances the framework of Feminist Institutionalism and Pitkin's representation theory by operationalizing the "representation–influence gap" within sub-national legislative structures. It provides empirical nuance to the critique of critical mass theory, proving that structural distribution within internal parliamentary bodies (AKD) dictates substantive policy outcomes far more than mere numerical quotas. Practically, these findings serve as a strategic roadmap for political parties and legislative managers to evaluate internal reshuffling mechanisms, ensuring that female legislators are strategically placed in core legislative commissions and budgeting bodies rather than being marginalized into token roles.

In terms of government implications, this study provides highly substantial and contextual insights into local governance and community resilience:

- First, the stark disparity in the Gender-Responsive Budget (GRB) highlights the urgent need for executive-legislative synchronization in regional development planning. Local governments must transform the GRB from a bureaucratic formality into a robust fiscal instrument that actively minimizes welfare losses and mitigates social risks for vulnerable groups.

- Second, from a governance perspective, the findings imply that building resilient communities in Majalengka requires a structural shift toward inclusive political governance. The local government and the DPRD must co-participate in establishing statutory guarantees that embed protection agendas for women and children into the core of regional macroeconomic planning and long-term stability frameworks.

- Finally, institutionalizing gender perspectives within public organizations is critical to breaking the patriarchal political culture that labels social protection programs as non-urgent, routine administrative matters. Local public administrations must foster institutional trust and enhance collaborative communication between government agencies (such as DP3AKB), legislative bodies, and civil society networks to build a reliable governance regime capable of protecting the unheard and maintaining systemic social stability.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its insights, this study is subject to certain limitations. Methodologically, as a qualitative case study focused exclusively on the Majalengka Regency DPRD during the 2019–2024 term, the empirical findings may reflect localized political dynamics that are not fully generalizable to areas with different electoral behaviors or higher percentages of female representation. Furthermore, the study relies primarily on qualitative interviews and manual document tracking, leaving room for further exploration of digital adoption and policy information flows. Future research directions should expand toward comparative studies across multiple districts to examine how different levels of digital adoption and information technology in local governance affect the relationship between governed citizens and governing elites. Additionally, future studies could incorporate quantitative metrics to analyze the long-term statistical correlation between the exact percentage of women in legislative committees and the fluctuation of budget allocations for community welfare and risk-mitigation initiatives.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-Assisted Technology

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript. All aspects of the research, including data collection, interpretation, and manuscript preparation, were carried out entirely by the authors without the assistance of AI-based technologies.

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