

ARTICLE

From Symbolic to Substantive

The Role of Women Legislators in Local MSME Policy

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Abstract: This study analyzes the role of Women legislators of Commission II local legislative in Pasuruan city in promoting the empowerment of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME). Using a qualitative case study approach and guided by the Actor Network Theory (ANT), this research highlights structural constraints and weak interconnections among policy actors. Data was collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. Findings show that women legislators often play symbolic roles due to male-dominated power structures, limited institutional support from political parties, and minimal access to strategic forums involving local technical agencies (OPD) and MSME communities. While their advocacy style tends to be empathetic and community-based, it remains disconnected from formal decision-making processes. ANT analysis demonstrates that women legislators have not yet become strategic nodes within the policy network. To shift from symbolic to substantive representation, it is essential to enhance their political capacity, improve institutional support, and strengthen inter-actor collaboration. These efforts will contribute to more inclusive and gender-responsive MSME policies.

Keywords: Women Legislators; Actor Network Theory; Political Representation; MSME Policy.

1. Introduction

Democracy in practice requires an important prerequisite that cannot be ignored, namely, the active participation of citizens. Community participation, including women, has fluctuated along with the dynamics of the democratic system implemented in Indonesia. Women are often still seen as a group that plays a lesser role in the public sphere and are even considered second-class citizens (Azzahra et al., 2023). The meaning of democracy will be more complete when the aspirations and interests of the majority of the Indonesian population, especially women, are also fought for and accommodated. Therefore, the implementation of politics that does not involve women cannot be called a true democracy (Rodiyah, 2013).

Political equality is one of the main elements of modern democracy. In a healthy democratic system, every individual, including women, has the same rights to participate in political processes and decision-making (Rajab & Raemon, 2018). Although women comprise more than half of Indonesia's population, their representation in politics is still relatively low. Women are often considered the "silent majority", a large group that is underrepresented in political processes and decision-making (Syardillah et al., 2024).

Politics fundamentally involves struggles for power and policymaking across all levels of society. These levels range from family units up to the highest political institutions, influencing virtually every aspect of people's lives. In practice, politics also involves fundamental issues in everyday life, where women are involved directly or indirectly as recipients of the impact (Iskandar, 2016). Women's presence in politics is not meant to replace or compete with men for power. Rather, women serve as strategic partners in carrying out political functions in a more inclusive and equitable manner (Nuzula & Mujibussalim, 2017).

The political realm is often considered a man's world, while women are considered more suited to the domestic sphere. This view arises because of the public perception that identifies politics with a tough public realm, full of debate, and requires strategic and rational thinking skills (Adriani & Maulia, 2024). As a result, women are often seen as unworthy of being involved in the political process. Facts on the ground show that the number of women entering the world of politics is still relatively low, even in countries with high levels of democracy and gender equality.

Nevertheless, the political constellation in post-Reformation Indonesia provides greater opportunities for women to be involved in politics. Since the transition from the New Order to the Reformation era, Indonesia's democratization process has strengthened demands for community participation, including women's involvement in decision-making processes (Nurbayan & Tahir, 2019). As political awareness grows and the need for gender-responsive policies becomes clear, women are increasingly encouraged to take active roles across various political sectors. They are no longer as constrained by traditional gender stereotypes as in the past.

In an effort to increase women's representation in politics, the Indonesian government has issued a number of affirmative policies. Affirmative action policies or policies that encourage women in politics are implemented because feminists still believe that the world of politics is arrogant and patriarchal. As a result, the composition of women in representative institutions is not balanced with the number of women residents (Sukadi, 2015). The affirmative policy that requires a minimum of 30% women's representation is not intended as a "quota" that limits women's participation in the political space. The term "minimum" signifies a lower threshold that must be achieved, not an upper limit that would cap the number of women in

legislative bodies. In other words, the 30% quota is a floor, not a ceiling, for women's representation.

For example, Law No. 8 of 2012 requires a minimum quota of 30% women in the list of legislative candidates for each election. This policy aligns with a recommendation from the U.N. Division for the Advancement of Women (UNDAW), which states that women's aspirations and interests are more likely to be fulfilled if women hold at least 30% of legislative seats. Additionally, the government introduced a proportional representation system with open candidate lists starting in the 2009 elections. This reform was intended to increase women's opportunities to be elected as representatives (Salfa, 2022).

But in reality, the political process in Indonesia does not match what is expected in these arrangements. Although the level of awareness of gender equality is starting to grow in Indonesia, the number of women's representation in Indonesian politics has not been able to grow significantly (Ar Rafii & Jaelani, 2024). The following is a table regarding the representation of members of the Indonesian House of Representatives:

Table 1. Members of the Indonesian House of Representatives

Period	Woman	Man
2004–2009	61 (11.8%)	489 (88.9%)
2009–2014	103 (18.1%)	457 (81.9%)
2014–2019	97 (17.3%)	463 (86.3%)
2019–2024	120 (21.1%)	455 (78.9%)
2024–2029	127 (22.1%)	453 (77.9%)

Source: DPR RI, 2024

The affirmative policy on women's representation in politics shows positive progress, although it has not yet reached the national target of 30%. Since the implementation of Law No. 12 of 2003, Article 65 Paragraph (1), there has been a gradual increase: from 11.8% (61 seats) in the 2004–2009 period, rising to 18.1% (103 seats) in 2009–2014, despite a slight decline to 17.3% (97 seats) in 2014–2019. During 2019–2024, the figure rose again to 20.87% (120 seats). In the current 2024–2029 period, it reached a historic high of 22.1% (127 seats), while men still hold 77.9% of seats (453 seats).

Various efforts are made to increase the role and political participation of women. Because women's involvement in politics means opening access for women to be involved in determining public policies that should be balanced between the interests of men and women (Setiawati & Agustini, 2024).

As one of the autonomous local governments in Indonesia, Pasuruan City also implements an affirmative policy of at least 30% women's representation in legislative elections. However, low participation of women in legislative institutions still occurs in this local.

Table 2. Members of the Local Legislative of Pasuruan City

Period	Woman	Man
2009–2014	3 (12%)	22 (88%)
2014–2019	2 (8%)	23 (92%)
2019–2024	2 (6.9%)	27 (93%)
2024–2029	5 (16.7%)	5 (83%)

Source: Pasuruan KPU, 2024

Women's representation in the local legislative in Pasuruan city over several periods has remained far below the 30% quota target set by Law No. 8 of 2012. In the 2009–2014 period, only 3 women members (12%) were seated in the local legislature, while men dominated with 88%. This number declined in the 2014–2019 period, with only 2 women members (8%), and men reaching 92%. In the 2019–2024 period, although the total number of seats increased to 29, the proportion of women remained stagnant at 2 individuals (6.9%), with men still dominating at 93.1%. A notable increase occurred in the 2024–2029 term, when women won 5 out of 30 seats (16.7%). Even so, this remains well short of the ideal 30% target.

Fluctuations in the number of women's representation indicate instability in achieving inclusive and substantive gender representation. This situation reinforces the argument that local political structures remain male-dominated. As a result, efforts to empower women in politics require more intensive affirmative strategies and systemic reforms in political recruitment and policy-making processes (Argawidyanti et al., 2023).

Amidst efforts to democratize and fulfill inclusive political representation, women's involvement in legislative institutions still face various structural and cultural challenges (Sari et al., 2025). Although affirmative regulations such as a 30% quota have been mandated through the Election Law, the level of women's representation has not reached the ideal figure. This inequality raises serious questions about how effectively women legislators can help realize a democracy that responds to the needs of vulnerable groups, including women in the MSME sector.

In local political dynamics, the effectiveness of women legislators in promoting economic empowerment, particularly in the MSME sector, cannot be viewed in isolation. It is closely tied to inter-institutional relationships and networks among policy actors. In the Pasuruan City area, the main challenges faced not only come from the still masculine legislative structure, but also from the weak synergy between the local legislative, local apparatus organizations, and the micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) actor community. Although they formally have the authority and space to contribute to the legislative process, budget, and supervision, the role of women legislators is often limited to commission or faction spaces. Their involvement in sectoral policy advocacy, such as micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), is often not integrated into substantive cross-sectoral policies or long-term legislative products.

In addition, communication patterns between stakeholders are still sectoral, hindering strategic collaboration among actors in driving economic empowerment programs. Policy initiatives often come from the executive branch, while the legislature's role is limited to approval or minor input. Under these circumstances, women legislators seldom take a strong initiative. This situation weakens the political capacity of women legislators and highlights the lack of a robust advocacy network for the economic interests of vulnerable groups. In particular, women in the MSME community have insufficient support to voice their interests.

Previous literature has discussed the issue of women's representation in parliament and the importance of the involvement of women legislators in formulating gender-equitable policies. However, most research still focuses on the quantitative aspects of representation or other macro-level reviews. These studies often overlook the dynamic sectoral roles of women legislators, particularly in economic empowerment. Furthermore, few studies examine how the strengths and

weaknesses of the networks among actors in local policymaking shape the effectiveness of women's political work.

Unlike cities such as Surabaya or Yogyakarta — where women's representation in the legislature has met or exceeded the 30% quota — Pasuruan struggles with persistent underrepresentation. This makes Pasuruan a critical case for examining the structural barriers to women's substantive participation in policymaking.

Thus, this article provides a novel perspective by highlighting the role of Commission II's women legislators in Pasuruan City in empowering micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) as a form of local-level affirmative politics. It critically analyzes how weak networks among policy actors are the main factor inhibiting the effectiveness of these women's political work. This study aims to analyze women legislators' roles, challenges, and capacities in promoting MSME empowerment in Pasuruan City. It also examines the structural limitations that weaken these women's political influence in legislative processes, budgeting, and local economic oversight.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the role of Commission II's women legislators in Pasuruan City in encouraging MSME empowerment. This approach was chosen because it captures the complexity of local political practices, which cannot be fully understood through quantitative data alone (Sugiyono, 2011).

The research subjects in this study consisted of seven primary informants, namely two women legislators from Commission II local legislative in Pasuruan city, one Chair of Commission II, one Secretary of Commission II, Chair of the local legislative, one representative of the Pasuruan City Cooperative and micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) and one women micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) actor. Informants were selected purposively, considering that they held strategic positions and had direct experience in policymaking and in implementing MSME empowerment programs in Pasuruan City.

Data was collected through interviews, field observations, and documentation of policy archives such as local Regulations (Perda), Mayoral Regulations (Perwali), and minutes of local legislative commission and faction meetings. The research was conducted directly and online from March to May 2025.

The main instrument in this study is the researcher himself (human instrument), with interview guidelines prepared based on the research focus and previous theoretical reviews. Data validity is strengthened through source and method triangulation techniques and member-checking of key informants.

Data analysis was carried out using the Miles, Huberman & Saldaña technique (Miles et al., 2014), namely with the stages: (1) data condensation (data reduction through theme coding), (2) data display (presentation of thematic patterns), and (3) drawing and verifying conclusions (concluding and verifying iteratively). The researcher also identified the relationship between the findings and gender politics theory and actor network theory to build a more comprehensive understanding.

Although this study focuses solely on Pasuruan, the city is representative of many second-tier localities in Indonesia where women's representation remains far below the national target and structural gender biases in policymaking persist. Thus, Pasuruan serves as a critical lens through which to examine broader systemic challenges.

3. Results and Discussion

As a democratic country, Indonesia affirms that every citizen has the same right to participate in the political process. This principle includes recognizing the existence and contribution of both men and women in various aspects of social and state life. In the context of gender justice, women's participation in the political sphere is not only about legal equality, but also about fair distribution of opportunities, roles, positions, and access to social benefits (Holqi et al., 2024).

Political policy is an important instrument in efforts to empower women because, through legislative mechanisms and public policies, various dimensions of people's lives can be regulated and influenced. One strategic step in this regard is the one-stop policy initiative initiated by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment to coordinate gender-responsive programs. This initiative needs full support from all executive apparatuses so that it can be realized effectively at the local level.

Women legislators, as representatives of the people, are expected to be important actors in pushing the agenda of women's empowerment, including in the micro-economic sector. Women legislators are not only tasked with listening, collecting, and following up on the community's aspirations, but are also considered more sensitive to public issues (Lwamba et al., 2022). In addition, women's ability in multitasking and time management often provides added value in political dynamics and public policy making.

Women are an important component in national development because they contribute to creating a quality next generation for the nation. The state is obliged to guarantee the fulfillment of women's rights and protect them from all forms of violence and discrimination (Savitri & Sitanggang, 2022). This protection must be accompanied by active empowerment so that women are increasingly able to improve their capacity and play a role in various areas of life.

This study examines the role of women legislators in Commission II local legislative in Pasuruan city in supporting the development of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME), using the analytical framework of the actor network theory (ANT) developed by Bruno Latour.

3.1. Women's Representation Local Legislative in Pasuruan City

The Pasuruan City General Election Commission (KPU) has determined 30 elected members of the local legislature for the 2024–2029 term, with the number of women legislators increasing from 2 people (6.9%) in the previous period to 5 people (16.7%). Although there has been an increase, this proportion is still far from the 30% affirmative target. Since the 2009–2014 period, women's representation has fluctuated between 8% and 12%, and over the past five years, there has been no continuity in women's political careers. All women local legislative members in the 2024–2029 period are new faces who have never held office.

Representation is not only important quantitatively, but also has a close relationship with democratic values, gender justice, and the effectiveness of representation, especially in the strategic role of advocacy and the obstacles faced by women actors in local parliaments (Syardillah et al., 2024).

In the context of symbolic representation, gender justice is a crucial aspect that needs attention. Representation is not just about the presence of women in legislative institutions, but also about how they bring the identity, character, and aspirations of the groups they represent. This is reflected in the statement of one of

the women legislators of Commission II local legislative in Pasuruan city, who said that:

“As a woman in the local legislature, I am often given space to convey aspirations about micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), especially women entrepreneurs. But often the proposals are considered ordinary mentoring activities, not strategic policies.”

Position or standing in the council's apparatus greatly determines the room for movement and contribution of women legislators in their representation functions, especially in strategic sectors such as microeconomics and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). The power structure in the faction plays an important role in determining whether a woman legislator gets a strategic position or not (Rahmanto et al., 2021).

Women legislators who occupy the position of chair or leader of the commission have greater authority in determining the meeting agenda, setting the direction of discussion, and coordinating with work partners such as the Cooperatives and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) Service. In the Commission II local legislative in Pasuruan city, several women legislators are actively involved in activities such as entrepreneurship training, recess targeting women micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) actors, and audiences with technical services. One women legislator stated that:

“If you have a position in the council's supporting apparatus, it is easier to propose activities or ensure that the micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) program is discussed in the commission.”

Women's political rights are essentially part of human rights, and human rights are the essence of a democratic framework. Involving women and men in the decision-making process is an absolute requirement in a healthy and inclusive democratic system (Hardjaloka, 2012).

However, responses from other actors in the policy network indicate that the role of women legislators is still not optimal in strategic decision-making. A technical official from the Cooperatives and SMEs Office said that communication with the local legislative is often procedural and does not specifically involve women legislators in program preparation:

“Usually, we coordinate directly with the commission leaders. Not specifically with women members. Many programs can be directed to empowering women's businesses.”

Meanwhile, from the side of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) actors, there is appreciation for the more empathetic approach from women legislators, but this has not had a significant impact on policy:

“If you meet the council mothers, it's easier to talk, and they understand our situation. But I've never heard of them being able to fight for a program that directly reaches our group.”

These findings suggest that socially and symbolically, women legislators have strong representational capital at the grassroots level. However, in the context of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), it also shows that the relationship between human and non-human actors, such as regulations, budget mechanisms, and commission structures, still supports more masculine work patterns.

The theory of actor networks (Actor-Network Theory) put forward by Latour (2005) posits that power and influence within policy processes are shaped not only by human actors such as legislators and bureaucrats but also by non-human actors, including regulations, budgetary frameworks, institutional structures, and formal decision-making forums. Taufik (2017) ANT introduces key analytical concepts such as actants, translation, and obligatory passage points (OPPs) to articulate how influence operates within complex policy networks.

These actors interact with each other according to the relationships and roles they play in solving policy problems. The size or importance of an actor's role depends on his resources and how important those resources are in dealing with public affairs/problems.

In this perspective, an actor, including a woman legislator's power lies in her ability to build, manage and maintain relationships with these elements. The dynamic network between actors is formed from a combination of interests, power, and social sentiment or trust. In a complex public policy landscape, the presence of women legislators is not enough if it is symbolic. Women legislators need to be strategic nodes that can connect and direct the interaction between elements in the policy system.

Within the scope of this study, women legislators are positioned as actant agents possessing the capacity to shape policy direction. Nevertheless, their roles remain marginal, as they have yet to successfully engage in translation, understood here as the process of framing narratives and forging alliances capable of aligning the interests of other actors (e.g., government agencies and political parties) with the agenda of empowering women in the MSME sector. One informant from the legislative sphere said:

"We (women) are usually involved in public hearing forums or social community activities. But when it comes to technical discussions on the budget or drafting of local regulations, it is usually handed over to the leaders or more senior members."

The statement emphasized that, despite having a formal position in the commission structure, women legislators have not yet gained full access to nodes of power in the policy network.

Networks can be understood as relationships between various parties, both directly and indirectly, which are interconnected and form a dynamic social system. In a network, each actor has the potential to interact and form meaningful bonds with other actors. Although not all actors occupy equal positions in practice, the basic principle of the network assumes that each actor can be actively involved in forming strategic relations. The existence of an actor in the network will only be meaningful if he is able to connect and play a role in the circulation of interests and joint decision-making.

Moreover, in the context of MSME policy in Pasuruan, obligatory passage points include formal arenas such as local budget discussions (RAPBD), commission

deliberations, and program formulation meetings within local implementing agencies (OPDs). Regrettably, women legislators lack sufficient access to these strategic decision-making sites, which relegates their input to peripheral spaces such as community outreach or recess activities rather than integrating it into the core of policy formulation processes.

This is in line with the findings of field interviews, which show that not all actors in the policy network have equal positions and influence. A member of the local legislative in Pasuruan city said that:

“In policy discussions, those who can have a big influence often appear and have strong networks, whether because of experience, position, or closeness to the leadership. Women sometimes only listen or provide input through the faction, not directly in the forum.”

Furthermore, although the presence of women legislators in parliament has fulfilled the quantitative dimension of representation, their role has not fully developed in the qualitative dimension. The lack of access to dominant networks generally controlled by male actors means that women’s voices are not always fully channeled in policy (Hardiyanti & Saputra, 2022).

In this context, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides an important perspective to understand how the effectiveness of a legislator depends not only on individual capacity but also on their ability to establish strategic connections with various actors in the policy system. Findings in the field reinforce the view that the presence of women legislators is not always accompanied by substantive representation effectiveness. One member of Commission II local legislative in Pasuruan city said:

“We sometimes feel like we have ideas and understand the community's needs, especially the women who are micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) actors. But to channel that into policy is sometimes difficult because we are not always involved in the main decision-making forums.”

This statement reflects that the effectiveness of a political actor is not only determined by individual capacity or formal status as a member of the council but is further determined by the ability to form and maintain relationships between actors. Without a strong position in the network, a legislator will find it difficult to substantively influence the direction of policy.

The advocacy approaches used by male and female legislators on micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) issues also show differences in characteristics. Study results show that male legislators tend to be more technocratic, focus on formal and budgetary aspects, and dominate technical discussion forums. Meanwhile, women legislators use more social and communicative approaches, such as conducting informal dialogues with MSME actors, proposing training activities, and assisting small business communities.

One official at the Cooperatives Office said, “Male legislators usually ask about figures or performance targets. But the women on the council more often ask about who is involved, what the obstacles are in the field, and what the solutions are for women entrepreneurs.”

This difference shows that although women's approaches tend to be more empathetic and based on field needs, this has not been balanced with strategic access to formal policy processes such as budgeting or drafting local regulations. As a result, their voices are often only heard at the implementation level, not in the formulation of long-term policies.

In line with the challenges of suboptimal networks, the advocacy strategies used by male and female legislators show striking differences, both in the focus of issues and in how to build relationships with MSME actors. One finding is that there are significant differences in the approach between women and male legislators in fighting for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) policies in Pasuruan City. These differences are seen not only in the focus of issues and how they convey their aspirations, build relationships with micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) actors, and the advocacy strategies used in legislative forums. Women legislators tend to be more involved in micro and personal issues, such as home product packaging training, developing women's businesses, digital literacy for small-scale micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) actors, and facilitating halal certification. They are more sensitive to the social and economic aspects of the family, so their approach is often empathetic, participatory, and inclusive. This is in line with the statement of one micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) actor: "They are happy because they feel more connected and appreciated. Many say they feel more comfortable conveying their aspirations to me as a fellow woman."

In contrast, male legislators are more dominant in discussing macro policies, such as budget allocation, sectoral regulations, or cross-local cooperation. In commission meetings and plenary sessions, they are more active in debating ideas and major strategies for developing micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), for example, regarding the integration of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) into the digital market, strengthening business ecosystem infrastructure, or synergizing with national programs. However, this approach sometimes does not touch on the root of the problems faced by small and medium MSME actors. This is reinforced by the statement of the Secretary of Commission II local legislative in Pasuruan city, who said that: "Women usually focus more on micro matters, for example, home business actors, culinary, or the impact of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) on housewives. But in terms of formal participation, they still don't speak enough in open forums."

The quote confirms that although women legislators have intellectual capacity and concern for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) issues, their participation in official forums such as commission meetings or plenary sessions tends to be limited. The following is a comparison table of male and female legislators:

Table 3. Comparison of Male and Women Legislators

Approach Aspects	Woman	Man
Issue Focus	Small, social MSME	Micro policies
Communication Style	Empathetic, informative	Technical, formal
Forum access	Limited	Dominant

Source: Author, 2025

As reflected in Table 3, women legislators tend to adopt a more empathetic and participatory approach, focusing on small-scale, community-based MSME issues. In contrast, male legislators are more dominant in formal forums and prioritize technical and macro-level policies. This difference in approach also correlates with

their access to formal policymaking arenas, where male legislators are more frequently involved in budgetary and regulatory discussions.

As representatives of the people, members of the legislature are required to be able to listen to and respond to the aspirations of the people at any time, including through visits to the local legislative office or official forums. However, the acceptance of aspirations should not stop at the passive process of waiting for input. Members of the council, especially women, must also be proactive in collecting aspirations directly from the community. One of the mechanisms used is recess activities, where members of the legislature go down to their respective electoral districts to listen directly to the complaints and needs of the community in the field (Khusna, 2021).

This is in line with the statement of one of the women legislators in Pasuruan city, who said:

“If I wait for people to come to the office, the active ones are often male figures. But when I go on recess to the village, the mothers immediately tell me about their businesses, capital, permits, and production constraints. That's what I can't get if I just sit in the office.”

This statement shows that recess is a formal channel for collecting aspirations and a strategic space for women legislators to build social closeness and understand gender-based needs directly. In the context of ANT, the recess mechanism can connect constituent voices and policy agendas as long as legislators can map and articulate the issue in the decision-making process.

Furthermore, political parties are very important in encouraging women's representation as policymakers in legislative institutions. However, the magnitude of this role must be balanced with the party's internal commitment to guarantee women's political rights substantively, not just as a formality (Fariaty, 2022).

Political parties, including women legislators, are central in determining the direction, position, and room for legislators to move in legislative institutions. The hierarchical internal structure of parties, the faction assignment system, and the dominance of male elites in decision-making greatly influence the extent to which women legislators can play a substantive role in the policy process. In many cases, the presence of women in parliament is more positioned to fulfill the affirmative requirements of the 30% quota, without being accompanied by strategic support, so that they can develop politically.

The faction system in the local legislative is also the main filter for each legislative member in carrying out their political functions. The decision of the faction determines the placement of members in council equipment, such as commissions, budget agencies, or special committees. In this condition, the position of women legislators is largely determined by the decision of party leaders, who still dominate senior men. This was emphasized by one of the women legislators from Commission II, a local legislative in Pasuruan city, said:

“We are placed in the commission or special committee based on the faction's decision. Sometimes, not because we understand the field, but because we are considered suitable there. If participating in a strategic meeting or becoming a

spokesperson, those who are senior or close to the faction leader are usually chosen.”

This condition shows that the party structure is still an obstacle to the emergence of women's leadership in strategic spaces. Even in situations where women legislators have the capacity and experience, they often still do not get enough space to significantly influence the policy process.

Within the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) framework, the effectiveness of an actor in a policy network is largely determined by its ability to build functional and sustainable connections with other actors, both human and non-human (Zarkasi & Rahardian, 2022). These findings underscore that the presence of women in legislative institutions does not necessarily guarantee their influence within policy networks. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) elucidates that the effectiveness of women's political representation extends beyond numerical presence, hinging instead on their capacity to become strategic nodes able to construct, sustain, and navigate relationships among human and non-human actors in a manner that is both functional and enduring.

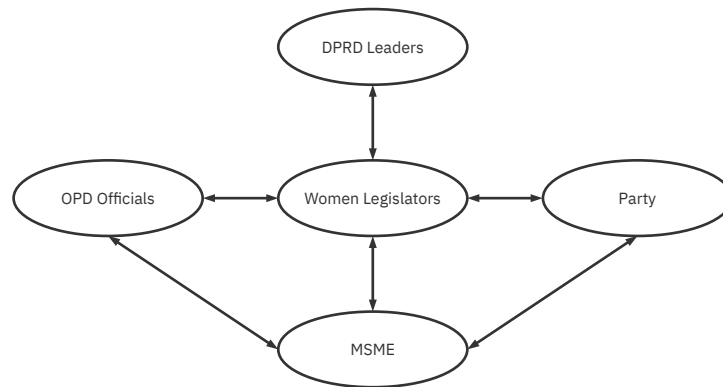


Figure 1. Inter-Actor Network Theory Diagram

Source: Author, 2025

Figure 1 illustrates the positioning of actors within the MSME policy network in Pasuruan City. It shows that women legislators occupy peripheral positions in the network, lacking strong ties with strategic actors such as DPRD leaders, OPD officials, and party elites. This suggests that while they are present in the system, they have not become strategic nodes capable of influencing decision-making within the policy network.

Moreover, the internal political culture of the party has not fully encouraged the strengthening of women's cadres. The lack of political training, leadership development, and access to wider political networks means that women legislators often work alone without adequate institutional support (Ningsih et al., 2024). In many cases, they are also not facilitated to build networks with cross-actors such as academics, local bureaucracy, or civil communities that can strengthen their political role substantively. Without structural and internal party cultural reform, women's involvement in politics will continue to be marginal, merely as quota complements, not as policy makers. A woman legislator said, "When I was just inaugurated, to be honest, I was confused about where to start. The party did not provide any direction or training. So, I learned by asking questions to seniors; even then, sometimes there was not enough guidance. In the end, I just participated in more social activities."

This statement shows that without structural support from the party, many women legislators participate in symbolic or social activities rather than become strategic decision-makers.

Thus, strengthening political capacity and structural support for women legislators is an urgent need so that the representation they hold does not stop at the symbolic level, but can transform into a transformative force in public policy. Although their approach tends to be more empathetic, participatory, and close to the reality on the ground, women's representation in the strategic decision-making process is still limited due to the structure of political parties that do not fully support it and the dominance of men in formal spaces of policy formation. By strengthening the access and capacity of women legislators through the provision of proportional space, ongoing political development, and mainstreaming of gender perspectives in every stage of policy, the voices and needs of marginalized groups, especially women entrepreneurs, can be more easily heard and answered systematically.

If the position of women legislators is successfully strengthened in the decision-making network, then the opportunity to realize micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) empowerment policies that favor small business actors, especially women, will be more open. Without these steps, women's political representation will only be symbolic and difficult to provide real contributions to the direction of fair, equal, and sustainable development.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that while the presence of women legislators in Pasuruan City has improved quantitatively, their influence in the policymaking network, particularly in the MSME sector, remains limited and symbolic. Using the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) framework, it becomes clear that the effectiveness of women's representation is not merely a matter of numbers but depends on their access to strategic nodes and ability to establish connections with both human and non-human actors in the policy system.

To ensure that women legislators can move beyond symbolic roles and become substantive actors in policymaking, a set of coordinated efforts is needed across various institutions. Political parties must provide structured training and mentoring programs, ensure fair placement of women in strategic legislative positions, and reform internal recruitment systems to support gender inclusivity. At the same time, local governments and relevant agencies such as the Cooperative and MSME Offices should adopt inclusive planning processes involving women legislators in budgeting and program development while providing gender-disaggregated data to better target policies. Women's organizations and civil society can play a key role by building coalitions with women legislators, conducting policy literacy workshops, and monitoring the impact of women's representation. Through stronger political capacity, institutional support, and cross-actor collaboration, women legislators will be better positioned to contribute meaningfully to inclusive and gender-responsive MSME policies at the local level.

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