



## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN MUARA ENIM REGENCY

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Artikel info:

Submitted: 17-09-2025; Review: 11-11-2025; Accepted: 19-11-2025

### **Abstract**

*Women's participation in local government is a crucial indicator of inclusive and gender-equitable development. This study aims to analyze the roles and participation of women within the bureaucratic structure of Muara Enim Regency, as well as the enabling and constraining factors influencing their involvement in public policy decision-making. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed using literature review, policy document analysis, questionnaires, and interviews with female civil servants in local government institutions. The findings reveal that women's representation in strategic bureaucratic positions remains limited despite the presence of national and regional affirmative action policies. Structural constraints such as patriarchal culture, gender stereotypes, and restricted access to leadership training continue to impede women's advancement. Conversely, affirmative regulations, increasing levels of women's education, and strong social networks serve as key enabling factors. The study emphasizes the need to strengthen gender-responsive regional policies, expand leadership capacity-building for female civil servants, and cultivate an inclusive bureaucratic environment. These findings are expected to contribute as policy references for local governments and gender advocates in promoting women's roles in equality-oriented development.*

**Keywords:** Women's participation; Local Government; Gender Equality; Public Policy

### **Abstrak**

*Partisipasi perempuan dalam pemerintahan daerah merupakan indikator penting dalam mewujudkan pembangunan yang inklusif dan berkeadilan gender. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran dan tingkat keterlibatan perempuan dalam struktur birokrasi Pemerintah Kabupaten Muara Enim serta mengidentifikasi faktor pendorong dan penghambat yang memengaruhi partisipasi mereka dalam pengambilan keputusan kebijakan publik. Pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif digunakan melalui kajian literatur, analisis dokumen kebijakan daerah, kuesioner, dan wawancara dengan aparatur sipil negara (ASN) perempuan di lingkungan pemerintahan daerah. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa representasi perempuan dalam posisi strategis masih terbatas meskipun telah tersedia kebijakan afirmatif di tingkat nasional dan daerah. Hambatan struktural seperti budaya patriarki, stereotip gender, dan akses terbatas terhadap pelatihan kepemimpinan menjadi tantangan utama. Sebaliknya, kebijakan afirmatif, peningkatan tingkat pendidikan perempuan, dan keberadaan jaringan sosial yang kuat menjadi faktor pendorong yang signifikan. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya penguatan regulasi daerah yang responsif gender, penyediaan pelatihan kepemimpinan bagi ASN perempuan, serta pembangunan ekosistem birokrasi yang lebih inklusif. Temuan ini diharapkan dapat menjadi rujukan kebijakan bagi pemerintah daerah dan para pegiat gender dalam mendorong peran perempuan dalam pembangunan berbasis kesetaraan.*

**Kata Kunci :** Partisipasi Perempuan; Pemerintahan Daerah; Kesetaraan Gender; Kebijakan Publik

### **INTRODUCTION**

The role of women in governance has increasingly gained attention in both research and policy discourse worldwide, including in Indonesia. Women occupy a strategic position in advancing social, economic, and political development. Yet, their representation in government continues to face structural and cultural barriers. A report by UNDP and the University of Pittsburgh reveals that although women hold

approximately 46% of positions in public administration globally, they account for only 31% of top leadership roles (UNDP, 2021). The absence of women in critical decision-making positions has significant implications, as it restricts the inclusivity of recovery and limits the transition toward sustainable and green development in the post-pandemic era. Conversely, women's leadership has been consistently linked to enhanced government responsiveness, accountability, and the overall quality of public service delivery.

In Indonesia, women's involvement in politics and governance remains constrained by institutional and cultural structures that perpetuate unequal access to strategic positions. Despite affirmative action policies requiring political parties to allocate at least 30% of their nominations to female candidates, women's representation in the national parliament in 2019 reached only 20.7% (Aspinall, 2021). This suggests that existing policies have yet to achieve their intended outcomes. At the subnational level, disparities persist. For example, in Muara Enim Regency, South Sumatra, the labor force participation rate for women in 2023 was 55%, significantly lower than men at 83%. Moreover, women's representation in the regional parliament stood at only 15.5%, far below the national target of 30% (BPS, 2023). These figures illustrate the persisting gender gap in governance at both national and local levels.

A growing body of scholarship attributes these disparities to entrenched cultural and structural factors. Johannes et al. identify patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and masculine conceptions of leadership as obstacles that prevent women from advancing to higher managerial levels in local government (Johannes et al., 2022). Women often shoulder disproportionate domestic responsibilities while facing limited institutional support, such as inadequate childcare facilities, which further restrict their participation in leadership training and career advancement. Similar insights are offered by Kabeer, who argues that political decision-making is frequently exclusionary toward women due to cultural practices, bureaucratic structures, and unequal access to leadership education (Kabeer, 1999).

Despite these obstacles, empirical evidence demonstrates that women's leadership can have transformative impacts on policy and governance. Thania highlights that greater female participation in political leadership strengthens social policy outcomes, particularly in education and health (Thania, 2024). A study conducted in Brazil similarly found that municipalities led by women mayors significantly reduced COVID-19 mortality rates and improved compliance with public health protocols (Bruce et al., 2022). Beyond these specific cases, international research has consistently shown that higher female representation in governance enhances public goods provision and reduces corruption (Hessami & da Fonseca, 2020). Such findings underscore the broader developmental value of women's participation in government.

The persistence of gender bias in recruitment and promotion processes also contributes to women's underrepresentation in governance. Yeni documented the presence of gendered barriers in leadership selection processes (Yeni, 2017), while Corbett et al. noted the prevalence of pragmatic bias where women candidates are perceived as less electable despite possessing equal qualifications (Corbett et al., 2022). Similarly, Pew Research Center reported that women in politics are frequently held to higher standards and face weaker institutional support compared to their male counterparts (Pew Research Center, 2015). These biases contribute to a cycle in which women are underrepresented in decision-making bodies and, in turn, excluded from shaping gender-responsive policies.

Local-level evidence from Muara Enim Regency illustrates these broader challenges. Women remain underrepresented in leadership training programs, with only 10%

of female civil servants participating compared to 90% of men. Without equal access to education and training, women are disadvantaged in competing for strategic leadership positions (Hora, 2014). McLaren et al. further show that women in Indonesia's public sector face structural barriers in career development, including patriarchal culture and limited institutional support (McLaren et al., 2023). While initiatives such as the "Inclusive and Transformative Leadership" program have demonstrated potential, more inclusive and context-sensitive leadership training is required to empower women in local governance.

Women's empowerment is not just a technique designed behind a desk, but a social engineering effort that involves socio-political contestation among community groups, hence requiring women's emancipation (Susanti & Sinaga, n.d., 2025). Beyond education and leadership training, substantive gender equality in public decision-making remains a critical challenge. While quantitative representation of women has improved in some areas, their substantive influence over policymaking often remains limited. In Muara Enim, only 20% of policymakers are women, and their voices are frequently marginalized in strategic discussions.

Purwanti et al. found that regions with higher women's representation tend to adopt more progressive social policies (Purwanti et al., 2018). Similarly, international studies confirm that greater female participation enhances institutional quality and inclusiveness. These findings point to the need for not just numerical representation but meaningful participation that allows women to shape policies substantively. Although affirmative action and gender quotas have been implemented, their effectiveness remains questionable without systematic monitoring and strong political will.

In Muara Enim, affirmative policies such as the 30% quota for women in legislative and development planning forums exist, yet their outcomes remain limited due to weak enforcement and evaluation mechanisms (Widodo, 2020). International evidence shows that successful quota systems depend on robust implementation and institutional commitment (Dauti & Rodríguez Pico, 2024). Without such measures, affirmative action risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

Given these challenges, this study seeks to analyze women's participation in governance in Muara Enim Regency through four analytical dimensions: (a) women's participation in local government, (b) access to education and leadership training, (c) gender equality in public decision-making, and (d) gender-responsive local policies. This research also addresses existing gaps in the literature, particularly the lack of localized studies on women's representation in governance at the district level, limited empirical evaluations of affirmative action policies, and insufficient analysis linking education, leadership, and gender policy. By addressing these dimensions, the study aims to generate practical recommendations for enhancing women's representation and influence in local governance, thereby contributing to the broader agenda of inclusive and gender-just development in Indonesia.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze women's participation in governance in Muara Enim Regency. The approach enabled the researcher to capture social realities through interviews, FGDs, observations, and document analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The study was guided by feminist political theory (Lorber, 2010), patriarchy theory (Walby, 1990), social capital theory (Putnam et al., 1994), and women's empowerment theory (Kabeer, 1999).

The research site was Muara Enim Regency, South Sumatra. Participants were

selected purposively and included: (a) female officials in strategic positions, (b) civil servants, (c) members of the local parliament (DPRD), (d) academics and activists, and (e) representatives of women's organizations and NGOs. Data collection combined four techniques: (1) in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, (2) FGDs involving diverse participants, (3) participant observation in government offices, and (4) analysis of official documents and reports.

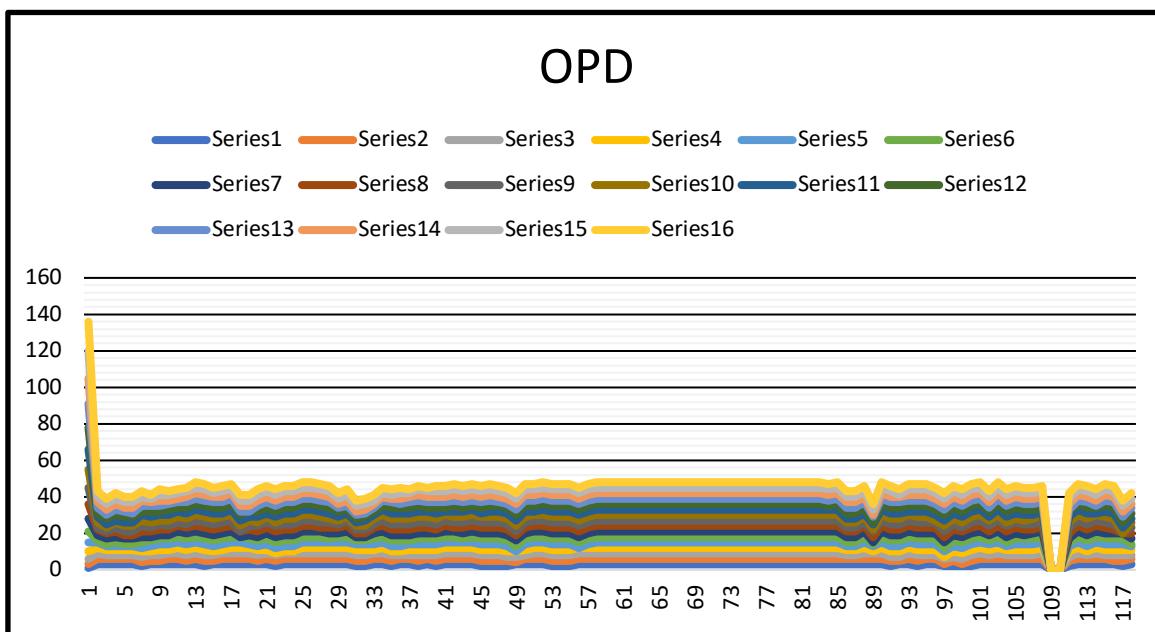
Data analysis followed thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), including data reduction, coding, thematization, data display, and conclusion drawing. Credibility was ensured through triangulation of sources and methods, as well as member checking (Patton, 2002). The study aims to produce two main outputs: (1) policy recommendations to strengthen women's representation and gender mainstreaming in local governance, and (2) scientific contributions to enrich academic discourse on gender and governance in Indonesia.

The exploration of women's participation in local governance in Muara Enim Regency is analytically framed through feminist socio-political theory to hypothesize that women's involvement in governmental decision-making both as contributors and potential leaders is shaped by intersecting structural, cultural, and institutional factors. This hypothesis is constructed by interpreting existing literature through Anne Phillips's *Politics of Presence*, which argues that equitable representation requires not only numerical inclusion but also the substantive presence of women in strategic decision-making roles. Complementing this, Iris Marion Young's reflections on gendered modalities of participation provide a critical lens to examine how patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and bureaucratic hierarchies continue to influence women's opportunities to exercise agency and authority in the public sector. Drawing on these perspectives, the hypothesis posits that affirmative regulations, women's increasing educational attainment, and supportive networks can strengthen women's political and administrative capacities, while entrenched cultural barriers may continue to impede their advancement. Additionally, narratives gathered from policy documents, regional reports, and interviews with female civil servants enrich the analytical foundation of this hypothesis by illustrating how women navigate structural constraints and institutional opportunities within local governance settings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of questionnaires, FGDs, and interviews with 117 respondents from various local government agencies (Organisasi Perangkat Daerah/OPD) in Muara Enim Regency, a comprehensive picture emerges regarding the role of women in regional governance. Respondents assessed 16 indicators related to women's representation in bureaucracy, leadership opportunities, and the barriers they encounter. The findings reveal a fluctuating pattern: initial scores were relatively high, followed by a sharp decline, and then stabilized at a moderate level. The consistency of this pattern across OPDs indicates that the limited role of women is systemic rather than specific to certain institutions.

Figure 1. Distribution of Questionnaires, FGDs, and Interviews OPD



The high scores on initial indicators reflect a normative recognition of the importance of women in development. However, lower scores in subsequent indicators reveal a significant gap between formal recognition and practical implementation. The lowest scores, particularly in items 49, 85, and 109, highlight structural barriers that restrict women's access to strategic positions, decision-making processes, and opportunities for capacity development. These findings emphasize the discrepancy between formal legitimacy and bureaucratic reality, where gender equality is recognized rhetorically but not operationalized substantively.

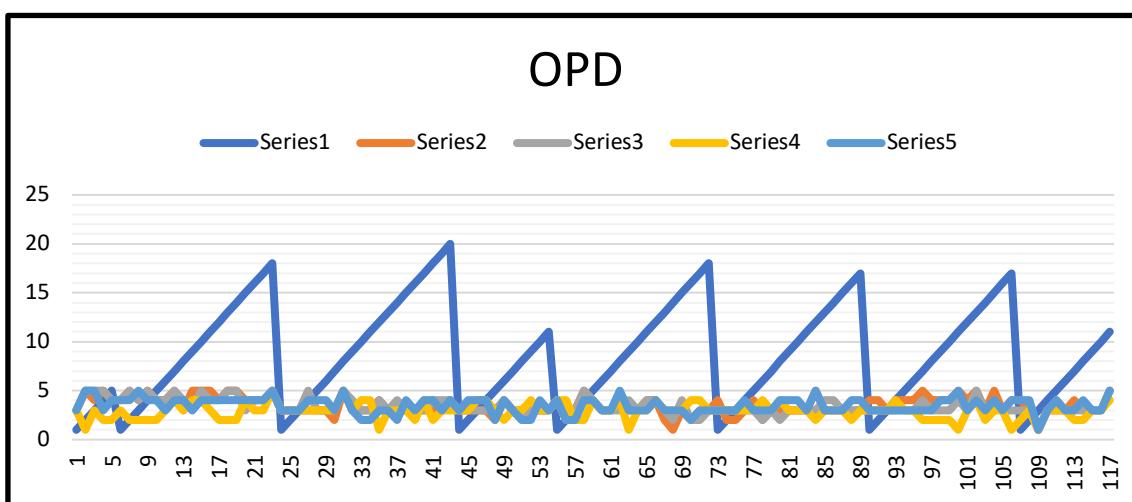
A more detailed analysis of bureaucratic structure shows that although women constitute a considerable proportion of the civil service workforce, they remain predominantly concentrated in mid-level and lower-level administrative functions. Representation in strategic posts—such as heads of agencies, divisions, or policy formulation teams—remains below 10–15%, with men continuing to dominate key leadership positions. Even when women are present in strategic forums, their roles tend to be administrative (e.g., document drafting, technical coordination), while agenda-setting and policy decisions remain controlled by male leadership. This echoes (McLaren et al., 2023), who argue that Indonesia's bureaucracy still exhibits a persistent glass ceiling shaped by masculine organizational cultures and biased promotion pathways. This finding resonates with Kushandajani & Alfirdaus, who highlight the fragility of gender institutions at the local level (Kushandajani & Alfirdaus, 2019).

Beyond structural constraints, cultural barriers also significantly influence women's participation. Interviews revealed that women's voices in high-level meetings are often less acknowledged compared to their male counterparts. Assertive communication from women is sometimes perceived as incompatible with gendered expectations of "appropriate behavior," which discourages female officials from expressing dissenting or alternative perspectives. These findings reinforce Susanto, (2015) observation that bureaucratic culture in Indonesia remains intertwined with patriarchal norms that frame leadership as a masculine attribute, relegating women to supportive rather than strategic roles.

Sectoral analysis illustrates clear variation in gender inclusivity. OPDs in social-service sectors such as Education, Social Affairs, and Civil Registry demonstrate relatively greater acceptance of women's participation, influenced by the historical alignment of these sectors with nurturing and community-oriented roles traditionally associated with women. However, agencies involved in political affairs, manpower, and youth organizations including (e.g., KPU, BKPSDM, KNPI) display sharper fluctuations

and stronger cultural resistance. These sectors are characterized by hierarchical structures and public-facing authority, reinforcing gendered assumptions about leadership suitability. Such divergence confirms (Dahlerup, 2005) distinction between descriptive representation (physical presence) and substantive representation (policy influence): in Muara Enim, women's involvement predominantly remains descriptive.

Figure 2. Distribution of Questionnaires, Interviews OPD



Domestic responsibilities further compound the challenges. Many women officials experience a double burden of professional and household duties, reducing their opportunities to engage in bureaucratic networking, leadership training, and promotion mechanisms. This aligns with Darmayanti & Budarsa, who emphasize how domestic roles limit women's structural representation in government (Darmayanti & Budarsa, 2021). The image of women as a person who also has the leadership capacity can be revitalized to bring back the gait struggles women figure very inspiring leadership (Pramitha, 2020).

Despite these challenges, several enabling factors were also identified. Many women officials possess strong educational backgrounds some holding postgraduate degrees and demonstrate high levels of technical competence. A number of OPDs have begun adopting more transparent, merit-based promotion mechanisms, and some male leaders actively promote gender-inclusive practices. Although these enabling factors have not yet transformed institutional culture, they illustrate the potential for progress where organizational commitment exists.

Taken together, the results highlight that barriers to women's involvement in governance in Muara Enim are multidimensional: structural (biased recruitment and promotion), cultural (patriarchy and gender stereotypes), and domestic (double workload). Limited representation in strategic positions diminishes the integration of gender perspectives in public policy. Yet, literature demonstrates that women's participation enhances policy quality, especially in health, education, and social welfare (Dewi, 2022; Martínez-Córdoba et al., 2023).

Therefore, the findings collectively highlight that women's participation in local governance in Muara Enim Regency is shaped by complex interactions between structural, cultural, and domestic factors. The interplay among these dimensions produces a cumulative disadvantage that limits women's pathways toward leadership and policy influence. This complexity suggests that gender inequality in local governance is not merely the result of individual-level limitations but is deeply embedded in institutional arrangements and socio-cultural expectations that have historically defined the contours of bureaucratic functioning. At the structural level, organizational procedures and promotion mechanisms remain insufficiently sensitive to gender disparities. The dominance of men in senior positions indicates that

recruitment and promotion trajectories continue to follow patterns that privilege long-term tenure, uninterrupted career histories, and extensive networking criteria that frequently disadvantage women who shoulder disproportionate domestic responsibilities. The persistence of these patterns demonstrates that formal equal-opportunity policies have not translated into equitable outcomes. Without deliberate institutional reforms, bureaucratic structures will continue to reproduce gendered hierarchies that inhibit women's career advancement.

Cultural barriers further reinforce these structural constraints. Patriarchal norms within the bureaucracy shape perceptions of leadership, often associating authority, assertiveness, and decision-making capacity with masculinity. Such norms influence not only how male leaders view their female colleagues but also how women perceive their own opportunities and limitations. Interviews and FGDs revealed that women often hesitate to participate actively in high-level discussions due to fear of being perceived as overly assertive or disrespectful toward hierarchical superiors. This cultural climate creates an informal barrier that is often more difficult to challenge than formal rules, as it operates through subtle interactions, expectations, and unwritten social codes that shape everyday bureaucratic practices.

Domestic factors add a further layer of complexity. The double burden borne by women balancing professional responsibilities with household and caregiving duties limits their ability to engage in activities that are crucial for career progression, such as attending after-hours meetings, participating in out-of-town leadership training, or building professional networks. These limitations are not simply personal constraints but reflect broader socio-cultural arrangements in which domestic labor remains heavily gendered. As long as the informal institution of household responsibility remains unequally distributed, women's ability to participate fully in governance processes will remain constrained, regardless of institutional reforms within the bureaucracy. Taken together, these multidimensional barriers produce what can be understood as a gendered governance environment in which women's participation is visible but remains largely symbolic. Women may be present within the bureaucratic structure, but their presence rarely transforms decision-making processes or policy outcomes. The case of Muara Enim demonstrates that descriptive representation alone is insufficient to achieve gender-transformative governance.

Despite these challenges, the study also identifies opportunities for progress. The existence of women with strong educational backgrounds and high technical competence indicates that the talent pool is not the primary obstacle. Some OPDs have begun implementing merit-based systems and leadership training programs that create more equitable opportunities for female officials. In addition, the presence of gender-inclusive male leaders shows that change can be initiated even within traditionally patriarchal institutions. These enabling factors signal that institutional transformation is possible when supported by committed leadership, transparent procedures, and sustained policy advocacy.

From a policy perspective, the implications of these findings are significant. First, strengthening gender institutional frameworks within OPDs is essential to ensure that gender mainstreaming is not limited to administrative compliance but becomes integrated into organizational culture and decision-making processes. This requires not only gender training but also the establishment of monitoring mechanisms to evaluate the substantive participation of women in policy formulation. Second, promotion pathways should be redesigned to account for gender-based disparities in access to professional development, particularly by offering flexible training schedules or family-sensitive work arrangements. Third, reforms must address cultural norms by promoting leadership models that value inclusivity, collaboration, and diverse perspectives qualities that research increasingly associates with effective governance.

The findings also carry broader theoretical implications. By highlighting the ways in which structural, cultural, and domestic factors intersect to shape women's participation, this study contributes to scholarship on gender and governance in decentralized contexts. The case of Muara Enim underscores the limitations of policies that rely solely on numerical targets, such as quotas, without addressing deeper institutional biases and cultural norms. It also illustrates how gendered power relations persist within local governance even after formal decentralization reforms, reinforcing the need for gender-sensitive approaches to public administration at the regional level. Ultimately, achieving substantive gender equality in local governance requires transformation at multiple levels: legal frameworks, institutional practices, leadership norms, and socio-cultural expectations. Such transformations cannot be achieved through isolated initiatives but must be supported by a coherent and sustained strategy involving government institutions, civil society, and community stakeholders. Only through comprehensive reforms can women's participation evolve from symbolic representation into a source of meaningful influence that enriches public policy and strengthens the quality of regional development.

## CONCLUSION

Women's involvement in local governance in Muara Enim Regency has shown progress in certain sectors, particularly social services and women's empowerment, yet remains limited and uneven in strategic bureaucratic positions. Women are primarily concentrated in functional or technical roles, while leadership positions of higher strategic importance continue to be dominated by men. Major barriers include entrenched patriarchal culture, gender-biased bureaucratic structures, the double burden of domestic and professional responsibilities, and limited access to leadership training and local role models.

Although affirmative policies such as the 30% women's quota and gender mainstreaming frameworks are formally established, their regional implementation remains weak and largely administrative rather than substantive. As a result, women's representation tends to be symbolic (descriptive representation) rather than transformative (substantive representation), hindering the full integration of gender perspectives into public policy, especially in education, labor, social welfare, and the protection of vulnerable groups.

To address these challenges, more comprehensive and substantive strategies are required, including: (1) strengthening affirmative action policies with substantive implementation, (2) expanding leadership training and mentoring programs for women, (3) creating gender-friendly workplaces with adequate supporting facilities, (4) building women's leadership networks and promoting role models, and (5) establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for gender representation. These strategies are expected to shift women's representation from symbolic presence to substantive leadership, thereby ensuring more inclusive and gender-equitable governance at the regional level.

## Conflict of Interest and Funding Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All research processes, analyses, and interpretations were conducted independently, and the funding institution did not influence the study outcomes. This research was funded by the Regional Research and Development Agency (Badan Penelitian dan Pengembangan Daerah-Balitbangda) of Muara Enim Regency. The funding institution provided financial support but did not intervene in the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or the decision to publish the results.

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