

Substantive representation of female legislators advocating women's issue in East Nusa Tenggara

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality in politics remains a pressing challenge in Indonesia, particularly in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), the province with the highest rates of poverty and violence against women in the country. Although affirmative action policies stipulate a 30 per cent quota for female candidates, their presence in parliament does not automatically lead to substantive advocacy. This study employs a qualitative case study approach that combines interviews, analysis of policy documents and a review of media content, whilst integrating Pitkin's (1967) concept of substantive representation and Lasswell's (1948) communication model. The findings of this study indicate that there are tangible advocacy efforts, yet communication strategies remain dominated by technocratic language, symbolic rhetoric and a reliance on masculine bureaucratic structures. Lasswell's framework highlights weaknesses across all dimensions: female political actors are often viewed merely as quota-fillers; messages focus on bureaucratic obstacles; communication channels are limited; the audience is narrow; and the impact is largely normative. This study further shows that women's substantive representation is still hampered by the technocratic and symbolic patterns of communication inherent in masculine bureaucratic structures, thereby limiting their ability to transform their descriptive presence into substantive advocacy. This study contributes by demonstrating that concrete action on behalf of constituents requires effective political communication in order to challenge patriarchal structures. In practical terms, this study suggests that female legislators should not rely solely on state institutions, but should also strengthen their alliances with social movements and institutionalise gender issues within public policy, so that advocacy can bring about sustainable structural change that is responsive to women's needs.

Keywords: *East Nusa Tenggara; Technocratic Communication; Symbolic Rhetoric; Substantive Representation*

INTRODUCTION

Women's representation in the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Legislative Assembly (DPRD NTT) continues to fall short of the 30% quota mandate stipulated in Law No. 7 of 2017 and General Elections Commission (KPU) Regulation No. 10 of 2023. Historical data reveal that in the 2014–2019 period, only 7 women secured seats (10.7%), rising to 12 women (18.5%) in the 2019–2024 period, and further to 15 women (23.1%) in the 2024–2029 period. This gradual increase, while notable, remains significantly below the mandated threshold. At the same time, Statistics Indonesia records that the female population of NTT reached 2,827,853 individuals, slightly lower than the male population but still constituting nearly half of the province's demographic composition. The discrepancy between women's numerical strength in the population and their limited legislative presence highlights a structural inequality in political representation. This imbalance suggests that women's participation must be strengthened beyond symbolic fulfilment of quotas, advancing towards substantive advocacy that ensures

legislative agendas and budgetary allocations genuinely address the needs of women. Such conditions resonate with Jovani's (2020) findings that affirmative policies have not yet been fully effective in enhancing women's legislative representation in this region, thereby underscoring the urgency of more robust institutional mechanisms and enforceable guidelines to translate formal commitments into tangible outcomes.

This underrepresentation was also uneven across political parties. From the 18 national parties that contested the election, only seven managed to seat female legislators. While major parties secured a limited number of seats for women, including the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), Golkar Party (Golkar), Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra), National Democratic Party (NasDem), Democratic Party (Demokrat), National Awakening Party (PKB), and the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI), smaller parties had almost no female representation. Tiran et al., (2023) argue that the dominance of patriarchal culture in East Nusa Tenggara (hereinafter NTT) hinders women from entering the political arena, thus often reducing their representation to mere formal quota fulfillment rather than genuine outcome of political equality. Given this demographic reality, women voters' dominance should serve as political leverage to promote policies that are genuinely responsive to gender-specific concerns and capable of substantively articulating women's interests.

This inequality raises a fundamental question has the presence of women legislators in the DPRD NTT translated into substantive representation that actively advances women's interests, or does it remain confined to merely descriptive, symbolic presence. Stuart (2023) emphasises that substantive representation requires not only the presence of women in legislative seats but also strong institutional support, such as gender responsive regulations and adequate budgetary mechanisms, alongside strategic political communication through evidence based advocacy, counter patriarchal narratives, and sustained cross actor coalitions.

Women's position in social and political life remains constrained by structural inequalities rooted in entrenched gender stereotypes, functionalist views that perpetuate male superiority, and socially constructed barriers to access and skill development. Despite demonstrating leadership capacity, whether as journalists, communication activists, or legislators championing pro-women policies, women are frequently positioned within subordinate gender hierarchies. This condition is further complicated by the persistence of gender-related issues, such as gender-based violence, child marriage, discrimination in economic access, and limited political participation, all of which demand a more inclusive policy response.

Theoretically, this inequality can be explained through the lens of Lasswell's communication model and the concept of representation. Lasswell (1948) formulates communication as a linear process: "Who says What in Which Channel to Whom with What Effect." Within this framework, female legislators are not merely symbolic actors; they function as strategic agents who construct inclusive narratives, challenge patriarchal discourse, and negotiate their political identities in a political space still dominated by masculine norms. Their effectiveness can be assessed through the dimensions of who (female legislators as communicators), what (gender responsive messages), channel (formal institutions and public discourse), to whom (constituents and policy actors), and effect (the substantive impact of advocacy). To complements this, Pitkin (1967) theory of representation is employed, distinguishing between descriptive representation ("standing for") and substantive representation ("acting for"). Substantive representation positions female legislators to genuinely advance women's interests through policy and advocacy. Thus, this study explicitly draws upon

Lasswell's communication model and Pitkin's concept of representation, interpreted through a gender sensitive perspective.

In East Nusa Tenggara, the urgency of this issue has become increasingly pronounced. The Women and Children Protection Information System SIMFONI PPA (2025) recorded 556 cases of violence against women in the first five months of 2025 alone, a sharp increase from the 368 cases reported throughout 2024. The severity of this situation led the Governor of East Nusa Tenggara to formally declare a state of emergency in response to the escalating violence against women. This crisis underscores that women's representation in the DPRD must move beyond symbolic presence toward substantive advocacy.

Another finding reveals that the implementation of Regional Regulation No. 5 of 2022 on Gender Mainstreaming has been obstructed by the absence of technical guidelines in the form of a Gubernatorial Regulation, thereby rendering the regulation unenforceable at the operational level. This bureaucratic bottleneck is increasingly problematic given that the majority of voters in East Nusa Tenggara are women, providing women's legislators with a powerful political mandate to advocate for gender-specific issues. The core problem lies in the disconnect between this representational mandate and the reality of advocacy. Specifically, the challenge remains how women's legislators articulate women's interests within public policy to ensure that the interests of the largest voter group are translated into gender-responsive programmes and budgetary allocations.

In her seminal work on political representation, Pitkin draws a foundational distinction between descriptive representation ("standing for") and substantive representation ("acting for"). In this sense, substantive representation demands that women legislators actively champion the interests of their female constituents through meaningful policy interventions, advocacy, and strategic political communication. Substantive representation encompasses not only policy outcomes, but also the processes, actors, and institutional contexts through which those outcomes are negotiated. The concept of critical actors Childs & Krook (2009) further highlights this dynamic, underscoring that the influence of women legislators depends on their strategies and positions within power structures, rather than their mere physical presence.

Substantive representation of women in the Regional House of Representatives of East Nusa Tenggara Province can be understood through four interconnected dimensions: legislation, oversight, budgeting, and communication, which together serve as a conceptual lens to assess how female legislators act on behalf of their constituents while negotiating institutional constraints. In the legislative domain, substantive indicators are reflected in the initiation and quality of policies addressing gender equality and social protection, while oversight highlights their role in monitoring government performance on issues affecting women and children. Budgeting demonstrates their capacity to advocate for equitable resource allocation, and communication underscores their ability to articulate and channel constituents' voices into the political arena.

Although international studies on women's political communication are growing, critical gaps remain in non Western contexts shaped by patriarchal culture. Aiganyam & Bolatova (2025) show that quotas do not guarantee substantive representation, as women face a double bind between femininity and competence. Pettersson & Sakki (2024) highlight how female politicians use gendered rhetoric but remain trapped in stereotypes, a challenge mirrored in NTT. Carpio Walker (2025) further reveals

psychosocial barriers from perceptions of women as “good” but less “competent.” Together, these studies underline that women legislators’ struggles are structural, cultural, and perceptual, and situating the NTT case enriches global discourse on substantive representation and women’s political communication strategies.

The study employs Lasswell’s (1948) Communication Model as a historical entry point, framing political communication through the classical formula “Who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?” While this model provides the foundation, the analysis advances by integrating contemporary perspectives. Framing Theory (Snow et al., 2018) explains how female legislators construct policy narratives that render gender issues publicly salient, with recent studies confirming its impact on opinion and policy acceptance (Caiani, 2023; Berk, 2025). Counter-Narrative Theory (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004) highlights strategies to challenge patriarchal discourses, crucial in contexts like East Nusa Tenggara. Complementing this, Social Movement Theory (Tarrow, 2022) underscores the role of cross-actor coalitions in advancing gender-responsive policies, with contemporary literature stressing gender mobilization as a driver of substantive representation (Aulia et al., 2024; Grasso & Giugni, 2025; Peralta-Jaramillo, 2025). Together, these perspectives show that political communication is no longer linear transmission but a dynamic process shaped by identity politics, digital media, and collective mobilization (Ariel & Elishar, 2025; Saleem et al., 2025).

The novelty of this research lies in the communication science perspective applied to the advocacy of female legislators. Rather than focusing on institutional structures or numerical representation, it highlights issue framing, public interaction, and the use of digital media as a means of reaching constituents and grassroots groups. This analysis demonstrates that substantive representation of women in the NTT Provincial Parliament is carried out through political communication dynamics that shift women’s issues from sectoral to strategic. The research problem addresses how substantive representation is enacted by female legislators and the communication strategies employed to strengthen advocacy on women’s issues.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to develop an in-depth understanding of the substantive representation of women legislators in advocating for women’s issues in the 2024-2029 term of the DPRD NTT. In accordance with Yin’s (2018) framework, a single-case study design was selected because the research focuses on one unit of analysis that is considered unique and critical: women legislators serving in the DPRD NTT.

The unique features of this study that qualifies as a Yin-style case study is how women legislators in the DPRD NTT fight for women’s substantive representation amid the reality of structural poverty in East Nusa Tenggara, which ranks third among the poorest provinces in Indonesia. Thus, their advocacy is not only about gender equality but also about framing gender issues within the broader agenda of poverty alleviation. One of the most prominent features of this case is that, despite the dominance of male representation within the institution’s structure, women have succeeded in occupying strategic positions as Chairperson of the Regional People’s Representative Council and Deputy Chairperson of the Regional People’s Representative Council. Consequently, women legislators are required to articulate women’s interests through public policies

that address limitations in access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities while simultaneously navigating patriarchal cultures, stonng customary laws, and gender-biased political resistance.

Purposive sampling was used to select the study's primary informants: female legislators of the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Legislative Assembly (DPRD). Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: direct involvement in women's issues, strategic institutional position, and relevance of experience. To facilitate interview access, the researcher submitted a formal research application letter to the Administrative Secretariat of the East Nusa Tenggara DPRD.

Supporting informants from Hanaf and the Flobamoratas Organisation were included not only because of their consistent advocacy work but also because of their representative role in amplifying marginalised voices. Therefore, their demographic background, institutional affiliations, and advocacy achievements are presented detail in the table to ensure transparency and research credibility.

Academics also contributed to the triangulation of perspectives, by providing an analytical lens on media framing rather than just representing the media itself. Their inclusion was particularly important because local media play a strategic yet limited role in framing women's issues. An academic perspective helps assess how media contribute to shaping public opinion, strengthening advocacy efforts, and identifying tendencies to foreground individual cases over structural issues.

In this study, the identities of all informants were carefully protected in accordance with research ethics principles. To protect privacy and minimise potential confidentiality risks, the actual names of informants were withheld. The author anonymised only the identities of the legislator who participated in the study, while the identities of organisation ans institutions were retainedto preserve contextual validity. Numerical codes (e.g., Informant 1 and Informant 2) were used consistently throughout the manuscript. This approach ensured that the information remained academically analysable without compromising the rights or confidentiality of the informant's.

Table 1. Informant Categories

Category	Information	Number of Informants	Role in the Research	Informant Type	Socio-demographic	Institutional Affiliations	Advocacy Achievements
Female Member of the Legislative Assembly (DPRD) of East Nusa Tenggara	Active member of the Regional People's Representative Council of East Nusa Tenggara for the period 2024–2029	2	Legislators with direct advocacy experience	Principal Informants	±30 years of experience in political engagement	Regional People's Representative Council of East Nusa Tenggara	Advocacy for gender-responsive policies; Regional Regulation No. 5/2022

Gender Activist (Hanaf, woman from Flobasmo ratas Organizat ion) Pastor Adi Amtaran, and Pastor Emmy Sahertian	Civil society organization members with demonstrated advocacy track record and humanitarian mission	2	Activist s with represe ntative experie nce	Supporting Informants	Emmy Sahertian: ±10–13 years of advocacy experience in women's issues, ±62 years old, Female, Theological education (GMIT), Married, GMIT Pastor. Adi Amtaran : ±50s; Female, Theological education (GMIT), Married, GMIT Pastor.	Emmy Sahertian : Hanaf, a woman from Flobamora tas. Adi Amtaran : Disaster Risk Reduction Board GMIT,	Emmy Sahertian : Author of Publications on domestic workers; Anti-Trafficking Advocacy. Adi Amtaran : Active in humanitarian missions; Disaster response for Lewotobi eruption; Strengthening congregations in Flores Timur
Academic ian (Nusa Cendana Universit y) Maria Rossy Swan	Lecturer in Communicati on Science and local media observer	1	Academ ic expertis e in media framing	Expert Validators	Female, ±15–20 years years of exp erience in jo urnalism an d media, communicat ion studies background (Undana), married, ±40 years old	Nusa Cendana University	Coordinator of MAFINDO Kupang (Indonesian Anti-Defamation Society)

Source: Author-processed Data (2025)

The case study method was chosen because it is suitable for researching phenomena in their real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomena and its context are unclear. Yin (2018) asserted that case studies are an appropriate research strategy to addressing "how" and "why" questions in complex socio-political contexts. Recent literature further emphasises that case studies allow researchers to integrate multiple data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding (Annamalah et al., 2026; Brantner et al., 2026)

The analysis applied three techniques. Pattern matching compared empirical evidence with theoretical expectations of substantive representation. Legislators emphasised institutional functions of the DPRD NTT, while activists focused on grassroots mobilisation, verified through audit trails and inter-coder checks. This

reflects Pitkin's theory of acting for constituents, highlighting a gap between formal advocacy and community initiatives. Explanation building traced causal links between communication strategies and policy outcomes. Legislators relied on lobbying and rational arguments, while activists provided direct support, with reflexive notes addressing researcher bias. Findings indicate that advocacy success depends on regulations, communication strategies, and collaboration, consistent with Mansbridge's concept of public deliberation. Finally, source triangulation integrated interviews, observations, and documents, supported by verification and reflective notes. Results show that women's issues are recognised as urgent, yet regulatory implementation remains weak, reinforcing Childs & Krook's theory of institutional barriers and Lasswell's communication framework on channels and effectiveness of representation.

Data collection was conducted through a triangulated combination of observation, interviews, and documentation, ensuring both the depth and validity of the findings. Observation was conducted during the first year of the 2024–2029 legislative period of DPRD NTT. The researcher directly observed and documented the dynamics of policy discussions related to women's issues, and the findings were subsequently corroborated through interview data.

Furthermore, interviews were conducted in a semi structured format with women legislators, gender activists, and academics. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed for analysis. This technique allowed researchers to explore the experiences, communication strategies, and barriers encountered by women legislators in policy advocacy. Documentation included minutes of DPRD NTT plenary meetings, draft policy documents, and local media coverage relevant to women's issues. The inclusion criteria required all documents to directly address gender-related issues within legislative or policy context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Substantive Representation of Women Legislators

Substantive representation foregrounds action as the primary criterion of representational quality, not just the presence of actors in the legislature. Pitkin's (1967) emphasised that political representation becomes meaningful only when representatives actively advance the interests of those whom they represent. In practice, women legislators in the East Nusa Tenggara DPRD have engaged with urgent issues including feminised poverty, gender-based violence, human trafficking, and the protection of migrant workers. Regarding the issue of women's poverty as a substantive agenda, Informant 1 stated the following:

"Poverty in the face of women is the root of the problem that must be immediately overcome through partisan policies, equal access to education, economic empowerment, and social protection." (DPRD Informant 1, interview January 07th 2026)

The narrative of "poverty in the face of women" raised by DPRD EN is indeed an effective diagnostic framing rhetorically. It constructs a metaphor of suffering, shifting poverty into a structural gender condition rather than merely a general economic problem. Through this framing, DPRD EN positions women as the most structurally vulnerable group, thereby requiring policies to take their side. This strategy articulates

women's experiences into the public agenda, allowing them to be read as a form of substantive political communication. The language used exemplifies Pitkin's (1967) notion of acting for, actively advancing women's substantive interests rather than merely symbolic presence. These findings align with the expanded framework proposed by Celis et al. (2008), which incorporates processes, actors, and institutional contexts, while reinforcing O'Brien & Piscopo's (2023) concept of critical actors, highlighting the importance of female legislators' strategies and positions within power structures. Thus, the narrative functions not only as moral rhetoric but also as a political communication strategy that operationalises the substantive representative role of female legislators.

Subsequent findings reveal bureaucratic constraints and budget limitations as significant obstacles. DPRD EN emphasised that women's programmes often compete with other development priorities, such as infrastructure and basic services, despite funds being allocated within the Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD):

"We in the DPRD NTT realise that women's issues are increasingly urgent and require regulatory attention. The obstacles we face are mainly related to budget constraints and other urgent development priorities. Programmes aimed at expanding women's access remain available within the Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget, although they are distributed across education, health, and social protection programmes. For example, in 2025, the state budget of East Nusa Tenggara was recorded at Rp22.02 trillion, with a surplus of Rp2.53 trillion, part of which was allocated through the Special Allocation Fund (DAK) to the health, education, and social protection sectors. However, allocations specifically addressing women's issues are therefore not always explicitly recognised as 'women's budgets'. Therefore, we remain committed to strengthening gender responsive budgeting so that it becomes more transparent and measurable in supporting women's access." (DPRD Informant 1, Interview, 7 January 2026).

Interview findings show that technocratic vocabulary such as APBD, DAK, and fiscal surplus dominates political communication, shifting women's issues into administrative lists, far removed from everyday experiences. As a result, female legislators allow masculine development narratives, such as infrastructure and basic services, to overshadow women's issues. Budget constraints are consistently used as justification, reflecting excessive bureaucratisation of gender mainstreaming, where masculine bureaucratic structures delay policy implementation under the guise of technical reasons.

The success of substantive representation cannot stop at normative frameworks. Courage is required to push implementation even without complete technical regulations. The substantive implication of this condition is the need for female legislators to construct bold and organic advocacy narratives, challenging masculine political culture and bureaucracy, and articulating women's interests in tangible ways. "Until 2022, the issue of Gender Mainstreaming, currently ranked fifth, still lacks technical regulations from the Governor's Regulation. Therefore, Regional Regulations cannot be implemented because there are no clear rules and technical guidelines. When asked, the Provincial Government provides endless excuses, which we continue to push against. Recently, we have discussed it. Hopefully this year there will be technical regulations to execute the regulations we have made." (DPRD AWK Informant, Interview, 5 January 2026).

This condition illustrates that women's issues are not yet considered urgent in regional policy agendas. Female legislators do play a role in producing regulations, but critical analysis shows they do not consistently monitor implementation to ensure regulations are executed promptly. This reflects a passive stance, waiting for the executive to prepare technical guidelines rather than building strong political pressure or public communication. From the perspective of substantive representation, female legislators should act as critical actors (O'Brien & Piscopo, 2023), monitoring regulations through to implementation. However, findings show a gap between normative and substantive representation: regulations exist, but lack tangible impact because they are not followed by advocacy for implementation. Consequently, women's issues remain marginalised in policy, overshadowed by other development priorities such as infrastructure and basic services. Female legislators in DPRD NTT need to shift from reactive and procedural stances towards organic advocacy narratives that pressure local government, build cross actor coalitions, and mobilise local media so that women's issues truly become public policy priorities.

Gender disaggregated data is also crucial to strengthen substantive representation, providing a clear empirical basis for legislators to develop policies responsive to women's needs. Without data, women's issues risk being trapped in narratives of suffering or anecdotal cases. With data, legislators can demonstrate patterns and urgency, thereby reinforcing advocacy and pressuring bureaucracy. The main benefit of gender disaggregated data is to strengthen policy legitimacy, shifting women from being viewed as "victims" to active subjects of development, and ensuring gender mainstreaming strategies are genuinely integrated into public policy.

DPRD AWK also emphasised the importance of gender data, suggesting that female legislators should highlight technocratic legitimacy in advancing women's issues:

"Women's issues must be seen with data... If violence is very high then we still allocate advocacy budgets." (DPRD AWK Informant, Interview, 5 January 2026).

Research findings reveal that female legislators rely heavily on technocratic language, emphasising budgetary and administrative procedures. Gender data, which should serve as a public advocacy instrument, is instead treated as administrative legitimacy, waiting for technical guidelines or budget allocations before acting. This weakens substantive representation, as data is not articulated into advocacy narratives capable of mobilising the public or pressuring government, but merely used as procedural justification.

These findings confirm Carpio Walker's (2025) gender stereotypes, which stress that women are often perceived as "good" but less "competent." Similarly, gender data is treated as administrative legitimacy rather than a public advocacy instrument. Female legislators are seen as "good" for caring about women's issues, but less "competent" for failing to consistently pressure bureaucracy. This weakness becomes clearer when viewed from the perspective of gender activists, who argue that female legislators' approaches remain reactive and case based, failing to meet women's needs holistically. As activist Emy Sahertian stressed: "The most important issue in NTT is female migrant workers. Almost 90% of migrants from NTT are women now. Human trafficking has become an emergency, with 127 bodies returned last year, compared to around 80 the year before, which is very high. This shows that female migrant workers and non procedural migrants remain a serious problem. The question is: where are the voices of female legislators? Because most of these women come from rural districts.

That is our concern now.” (Activist Emy Sahertian, Interview, 6 January 2026).

This critique highlights that although female migrant workers and human trafficking have reached emergency levels, female legislators have not consistently articulated these issues as strategic agendas. Emy further emphasised:

“Large scale dialogue and communication need to be carried out... But anticipating the needs of society, especially women, has not yet been done well. They are only at the stage of responding to cases when they arise.” (Activist Emy Sahertian, Interview, 6 January 2026).

These findings confirm public evaluations in Springer Political Behavior (2023), which show that the public perceives female politicians as “friendly” but less rational. This is reflected in activists’ critiques above: the public views female legislators as insufficiently rational or strategic in articulating migrant worker issues, rendering advocacy reactive. As a result, substantive representation expected from female legislators remains weak, unable to shift women’s issues from incidental concerns to systematic, gender responsive public policy. Consequently, strategic issues such as female migrant workers and gender based violence continue to be treated as secondary, despite data showing their increasing prevalence.

Thus, this study demonstrates that substantive representation of female legislators in DPRD NTT remains trapped in normative logic and technocratic language, preventing women’s interests from being fully integrated into public policy. Although there are efforts to frame issues such as the feminisation of poverty and protection of migrant workers, the political communication strategies employed tend to be reactive, procedural, and reliant on administrative legitimacy, rather than building organic advocacy narratives that challenge bureaucracy and masculine political culture. As a result, regulations produced are often not followed by consistent monitoring of implementation, leaving women’s issues at the margins of development agendas.

Political Communication Transformation Strategy

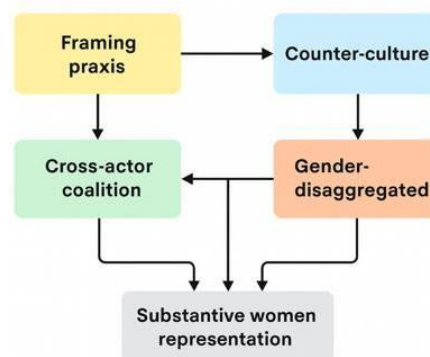


Figure 1. The Political Communication Transformation Strategy Framework
Source: Author (2026)

The political communication strategy proposed in this study combines global theory with local practice to evaluate the effectiveness of female legislators in advocating for women's issues. It employs strategic framing and counter-narrative construction as critical approaches against dominant cultures, which in turn foster

cross-actor coalitions to expand advocacy support. These coalitions are strengthened by the use of gender-disaggregated data as the cornerstone of gender-responsive policy. Together, these strategies directly contribute to advancing women's substantive representation through inclusive public policy. Each strategy is elaborated upon in the following sections:

Framing as An Advocacy Strategy

The first strategy is the use of framing as advocacy, which refers to framing theory in socio political communication Snow et al., (2018). This strategy aims to connect women's lived experiences with policy language in ways that render gender issues more politically relevant and actionable. Findings from this study reveal that female legislators apply this approach by articulating violence and poverty not as abstract statistics, but as experiences embedded in women's everyday lives. DPRD EN emphasised women as role models:

"In my view, a true leader is a woman, because at home she organises well, listens, and ensures everything is safe and fair. Men may bang on the table, but I can turn the table. Women's strength is accommodative, being good listeners, not necessarily angry or banging the table. If you want to debate with me, go ahead, you use books, I use experience."

This quotation illustrates how domestic experience is employed to identify the problem of limited female leadership representation. It underscores that women's lived experiences can be translated into substantive policy foundations, rather than remaining merely symbolic. The narrative invites audiences to value women's leadership strength rooted in shared social values, while simultaneously challenging patriarchal norms. This is also supported by gender rhetoric highlighted by Petterson & Sakki (2024), who note that right wing populist female politicians employ gendered rhetoric for legitimacy, yet remain trapped in the stereotype of "gentleness versus competence." The narrative above represents a form of gender rhetoric that negotiates legitimacy, though it risks being reduced to "gentleness" rather than substantive competence. Thus, it demonstrates how advocacy framing through lived experience, leadership styles distinct from masculinity, and collective support can strengthen women's substantive representation in politics.

DPRD AWK further emphasised the importance of budget allocation for the Integrated Service Centre for the Empowerment of Women and Children (P2TP2A):

"Women's empowerment and child protection services are considered 'unsexy', even though everyone in this world is born of a woman." She also linked women's needs to infrastructure policy: "If you build public toilets, do not make them squat toilets because they are not friendly for pregnant women." (Informant DPRD AWK, Interview, 5 January 2026).

The communication strategies employed by DPRD EN and DPRD AWK demonstrate how framing praxis can align women's lived experiences with policy language. DPRD EN emphasised women as role models and connected issues such as migrant workers and domestic violence with everyday narratives, thereby building collective awareness that women are entitled to safe spaces, education, and leadership. Conversely, DPRD AWK

highlighted the importance of budget allocation for women's and children's protection services, as well as the need for gender friendly infrastructure such as toilets for pregnant women and accessible facilities for persons with disabilities.

Both legislators show tangible efforts to move beyond technocratic language by using narratives grounded in lived experience, emotion, and shared social values. This aligns with Snow et al.'s (2018) framing theory, which emphasises diagnostic framing (problem identification), prognostic framing (solution articulation), and motivational framing (collective awareness building). Their communication practices transcend symbolic politics, functioning as substantive strategies aimed at challenging patriarchal culture and ensuring that women's and vulnerable groups' interests are integrated into political decision making processes.

Based on Snow et al.'s (2018) framing theory, the effectiveness of women's substantive representation in politics can be understood through three key dimensions: diagnostic framing, as seen when female legislators such as DPRD EN and DPRD AWK identify concrete problems faced by women, including domestic violence, migrant worker vulnerability, and the need for gender friendly infrastructure; prognostic framing, evident in their policy solutions such as advocating budget allocations for P2TP2A and inclusive public facilities; and motivational framing, which operates through narratives that foster collective awareness, emphasising family pride in women's leadership and reminding audiences that everyone is born of a mother.

Thus, these framing practices demonstrate that women's substantive representation grows stronger when legislative communication moves beyond technocratic formalities towards language that challenges patriarchal culture, nurtures collective awareness, and translates women's and vulnerable groups' interests into actionable policy.

Counter-Narrative Strategies

The second strategy is counter narrative theory, which in this study is primarily drawn from (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004), they define counter narratives as stories that resist the "master narrative" or dominant discourse. This approach is also rooted in feminist movements, which employ counter narrative strategies to construct alternative accounts that challenge patriarchal culture, reframing politics not as an exclusive domain for men but as an arena of justice that must be open to women.

In East Nusa Tenggara, counter narratives are crucial for dismantling the stigma attached to vocal women, who are often perceived as conflicting with traditional norms, while simultaneously affirming that women's voices are a legitimate part of the political process. Female legislators in East Nusa Tenggara, such as DPRD EN and DPRD AWK, have also developed counter narrative strategies as a form of political praxis that challenges patriarchal culture through inclusive advocacy. DPRD EN emphasised a style of female leadership distinct from masculinity:

"Women make decisions with sincerity... A true leader is a woman because, starting from within the household, women can manage by turning the table, not merely by banging on it." (Informant DPRD EN, Interview, 7 January 2026).

This narrative constructs new legitimacy for female leadership by highlighting domestic experience as a source of political authority. Within the framework of substantive representation, as formulated by Pitkin (1967), this practice illustrates a

form of acting for: female legislators represent women's interests through a distinctive leadership style. Women are regarded as true leaders because, from the private sphere (the household), they are accustomed to organising, listening, and ensuring fairness. This demonstrates that substantive representation does not solely depend on descriptive presence, but on how women's lived experiences are translated into political strategies (Celis et al., 2008).

This narrative also aligns with the concept of critical actors proposed by O'Brien & Piscopo (2023), whereby women employ different communication strategies to challenge masculine structures in politics. Counter narratives are frequently used to contest masculine symbols in politics. The metaphor of "turning the table" becomes a symbol of creative resistance, distinct from the masculine style of "banging on the table." It emphasises accommodative rather than aggressive strength, while illustrating how women construct counter narratives against the patriarchal master narrative. This has demonstrated the transformation of women's political leadership from the domestic sphere into the public arena, while affirming new legitimacy grounded in empathy, management, and resistance to masculine domination.

Supporting this, DPRD AWK also underscored the importance of argumentation in parliamentary space, stating:

"I opposed 12 people in Commission IV. What matters most is how we debate what we want to fight for." (Informant DPRD AWK, Interview, 5 January 2026).

In sum, the counter narrative strategies employed by female legislators in East Nusa Tenggara represent a transformative form of substantive representation: by drawing upon women's everyday experiences and translating them into political communication and policy advocacy, these actors challenge patriarchal norms, legitimise women's voices as rational and authoritative, and open sustainable substantive space for gender issues within the legislative process.

Cross-Actor Coalition

The third strategy is cross actor coalitions, as explained in social movement theory (Tarrow 2022; Keck & Sikkink, 2014). uch coalitions serve as a bridge between the aspirations of grassroots women and the formal legislative process, including Special Committees (Pansus) and regional policy forums. The cross actor coalition strategy in advocating women's issues in East Nusa Tenggara demonstrates that female legislators, gender activists, civil society, and religious institutions collaborate to strengthen political legitimacy while simultaneously promoting formal regulation.

The cross actor coalition undertaken by female legislators in East Nusa Tenggara indicates an effort to reinforce political legitimacy through cooperation with women's organisations, civil society, and religious institutions.

Findings from interviews with Emy Sahertian emphasise that advocacy on women's issues in East Nusa Tenggara cannot be conducted in isolation, but rather through cross actor coalitions. She stated:

"...the handling has been fairly good because many institutions, including the church, are involved. But what we want to highlight is that these matters should also be raised in the DPRD, both at district and provincial levels, as strategic issues... Large scale dialogue and communication need to be carried out... Legislators do

respond to cases, but anticipating women's needs holistically has not worked well." (Activist Emy Sahertian, Interview, 6 January 2026)

Activist Emy Sahertian also revealed that cross actor coalitions between gender activists, civil society, and female legislators in East Nusa Tenggara remain limited and have not yet been systematically established. She stressed that:

"large scale dialogue and communication need to be carried out... but we feel it is not yet holistic, it is only at the stage of responding to cases." (Activist Emy Sahertian, Interview, 6 January 2026)

This demonstrates that substantive representation by female legislators in the East Nusa Tenggara DPRD through cross actor cooperation tends to emerge reactively in response to major cases, rather than as a sustainable advocacy strategy. Within the framework of Tarrow, (2022), social movement theory, this condition indicates that women's advocacy in East Nusa Tenggara remains at the initial stage of network mobilisation. It therefore requires transformation towards a more sustainable and integrative political communication strategy, so that women's issues genuinely become part of the public agenda and strategic policy.

Role of Local Media in Advocacy for Women's Substantive Representation in the East Nusa Tenggara Legislative Council

Lasswell (1948) communication model, the media acts as a messenger of women's issues—who says what—to the public and policymakers (to whom) through newspapers and online platforms (in which channel), with the aim of shaping public opinion and strengthening advocacy (with what effect). The role of local media in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) in raising women's issues demonstrates a complex dynamic between documenting social realities and attempting to influence public opinion. Media outlets have actively reported cases affecting women, such as gender-based violence, migrant labour, and feminised poverty. As Rossy Swan emphasised:

"Local media in Nusa Tenggara Timur have been quite active in documenting and reporting cases that befall women. For instance, research by the Indonesian Women's Legal Aid Association for Justice, NTT 2025, was covered by 32 online media outlets with 56 cases of gender-based violence and 16 cases of domestic violence. Media also frequently highlight issues of migrant workers, caregiving procedures, repatriation of bodies, and poverty that triggers social tragedies." (Rossy Swan, Interview, 10 January 2026)

This illustrates that the media functions as a primary channel for voicing women's problems in the region. Within Lasswell's framework, local media act as message conveyors (who), reporting on violence, migration, and poverty (says what), through online and print outlets (channel), to the public (to whom), with the effect of shaping opinion and legitimising advocacy (effect). Yet, media framing continues to portray women predominantly as victims. Swan noted:

"Many reports still depict women as victims. However, there has been a shift: women are also presented as active subjects, such as female leaders in labour policy

or women's vision as agents of change."

Media also contribute to strengthening the role of female legislators. Swan explained:

"Female legislators use media to publicise programmes and political communication strategies. Examples include press releases on handling violence against women, call centres for reporting abuse, and interviews highlighting legislators' perspectives."

Differences in communication strategies among female legislators in NTT reveal intriguing dynamics in their use of media as a representational arena. Legislator EN stressed:

"I am one of those who disagree. I use WhatsApp; I choose not to be vulgar in the media. That is why you rarely find me making noise in the media, because I choose not to do so. My way of resolving issues is, for example, with the Governor—I send a WhatsApp message, say I disagree, we meet, we talk. My colleagues may not be very familiar with this, but they know I do not like resolving matters through the media. Politicians are expected to be vocal, but for me, I no longer need validation, even if criticised. I do not need validation to prove that I am working and fighting." (Legislator EN, Interview, 07 January 2026)

For her, political validation need not be sought through noisy media coverage but through direct communication with policymakers. This strategy reflects a focus on policy substance and advocacy effectiveness rather than public image. Emy's approach demonstrates caution in maintaining political credibility while rejecting the media logic that often demands vocal and controversial performances. Conversely, legislator AWK views media as a crucial political communication strategy, emphasising the importance of cultivating close relations with journalists:

"Yes, every politician must tell themselves they need to be a media darling, a sweetheart of the media, to ensure their work and societal contributions are reported. When, for example, the media writes that a woman was assaulted by seven men, this is highly inappropriate and tendentious against women. Such cases must be addressed and advocated. By becoming a media darling, colleagues also understand what should be written. Headlines alone—whether in newspapers, online, or mainstream outlets—can shape public opinion. Therefore, besides being a media darling, we must carefully manage every sentence we deliver to the media." (Legislator AWK, Interview, 05 January 2026)

AWK positions the media as a strategic partner that must be managed carefully. Becoming a media darling means building positive relations so that women's political messages are effectively conveyed while avoiding harmful framing. She underscores that headlines alone can shape public opinion, requiring legislators to be cautious in their communication. These contrasting strategies highlight the diversity of approaches to political communication: some legislators, such as EN, prefer personal communication with policymakers and avoid overt media exposure, focusing on substantive policy advocacy. Others, like AWK, stress the importance of close

engagement with media as a strategic partner, recognising its power to shape public opinion and influence perceptions of women.

Thus, female legislators have utilised media as an advocacy tool, albeit with limitations, as strategies remain varied and often confined to programme publicity and case responses. Within the framework of gender mainstreaming Handayani (2023), gender perspectives must be integrated into all public policies as a core element of development. The use of media by female legislators must evolve beyond image-building and reactive case responses towards data-driven advocacy strategies capable of advancing gender-responsive policymaking.

Local media in NTT remain constrained by a victim centred framing and weak data driven advocacy, leaving women's issues at the level of case reporting rather than policy influence. Swan underscores the need for transparent data publication, grassroots collaboration, and reporting that supports regulations such as the Sexual Violence Bill (UU TPKS), while positioning media as both watchdog and policy bridge. Female legislators adopt divergent strategies: some prioritise direct communication with policymakers to safeguard substantive focus, while others cultivate close ties with media to amplify representation. This variation highlights media's dual role as communication channel and political negotiation arena. Yet, dominant framing still depicts women as victims, underscoring the urgency of inclusive communication and data based advocacy to ensure women's issues progress from temporary discourse into long term policy agendas, thereby realising substantive representation.

Challenges in Policy Advocacy and Women's Issue Advocacy

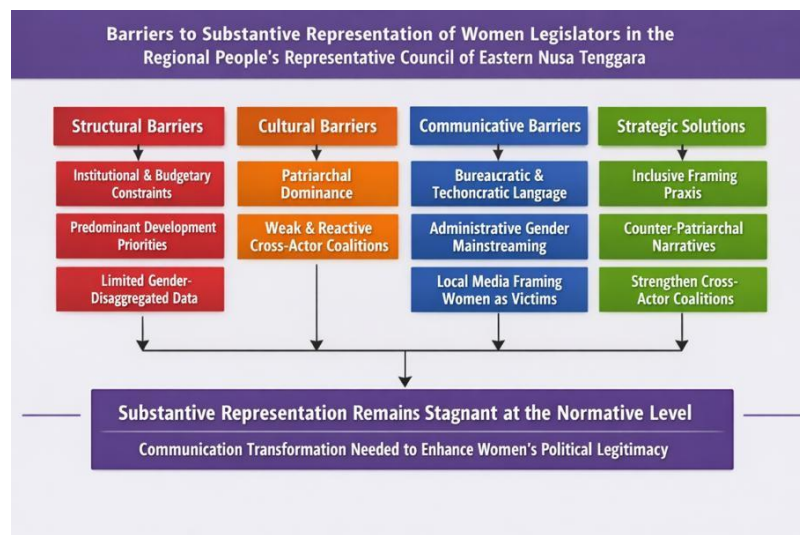


Figure 2. Research findings

Source: Author (2026)

The obstacles encountered by female legislators in the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) in advocating for women's issues as a form of substantive representation emerge from structural, cultural, and communicative dimensions. First, institutional and budgetary constraints constitute the primary challenge. Programmes designed to expand women's access often compete with other development priorities such as infrastructure and basic services, thereby obscuring women's issues within a masculine development narrative. This indicates

that women's interests have not yet been positioned as a strategic priority in regional policymaking.

Second, political communication remains trapped within bureaucratic and technical language. Female legislators frequently employ technocratic terms such as Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD), Special Allocation Fund (DAK), and Governor's Regulations, which makes it difficult to translate women's lived experiences into a communicative public narrative. Consequently, advocacy remains confined to a normative level, as legislators tend to wait for technical regulations before taking action.

The third constraint lies in the excessive bureaucratisation of gender mainstreaming. Rather than being pursued through advocacy, gender mainstreaming is implemented administratively, rendering female legislators dependent upon masculine bureaucratic apparatuses. This dependency hampers the real-world implementation of policies, reducing gender mainstreaming to a mere compliance checklist.

This condition resonates with the findings of Yildirim et al. (2021), who highlight the backlash faced by female legislators, whereby political communication practices that typically benefit men prove detrimental to women, as they are perceived to violate gender stereotypes. The situation in NTT reflects this pattern, with female legislators' political communication trapped in technocratic and bureaucratic language, thereby failing to construct a communicative public narrative. These findings extend Pitkin's (1967) seminal framework of substantive representation by showing that "acting for" constituents is constrained when political communication is trapped in symbolic rhetoric. Applying Lasswell's (1948) classic model, "who says what, through which channels, to whom, and with what effect", clarifies that although female legislators are visible political actors, their leverage remains restricted.

The findings of this study enrich the literature by demonstrating that the local context of NTT presents unique challenges, such as fragile cross-actor coalitions and the dominance of patriarchal culture, which remain underexplored in existing scholarship. Thus, this research not only reaffirms the limitations of affirmative action policies but also opens new avenues for understanding how transformative strategies in political communication—through strategic framing, counter-narratives, and cross-actor coalitions—may strengthen women's political legitimacy at the local level.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the strategies of female legislators in the East Nusa Tenggara DPRD are manifested through framing praxis, counter narratives against the dominant patriarchal culture, and efforts to build cross actor coalitions. However, their communication patterns remain essentially technocratic, symbolic, and bound to masculine bureaucratic structures. Female legislators tend to rely on formal institutional legitimacy, such as budget allocations and technical implementation guidelines, rather than constructing advocacy narratives that are organic and assertive. From the perspective of political communication, this dynamic fails to effectively shift representation from descriptive presence to substantive representation, leaving women's representation in the DPRD confined to a normative level. This stagnation is further exacerbated by the limited use of gender disaggregated data as an advocacy tool, compounded by local media framing that continues to portray women as passive victims rather than active agents of structural change.

Substantive representation of female legislators cannot be sustained solely by the presence of state institutions; rather, its success depends on the extent to which these

institutions can build coalitions with social movements and institutionalise women's issues within public policy. Such synergy strengthens the legitimacy and momentum of gender advocacy, ensuring that women's issues do not remain at a symbolic level but are genuinely integrated into responsive and sustainable policy agendas. This study is temporally limited to the early phase of the 2024–2029 legislative period and involves a relatively narrow set of informants. Future research is therefore recommended to adopt a longitudinal design covering the full legislative term, broaden the informant base to include male legislators and local government executives, and conduct comparative studies across provinces in the Global South with similarly high levels of gender-based violence. These expansions would enhance the generalisability of the findings and sharpen the comparative analysis of institutional gender communication within diverse political contexts.

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